

Embodied Awareness

How Paying Attention Can Reduce Stress

By Amy Andrews McMaster

Most Americans have a long-distance relationship with their bodies. They pay the most attention when they are in pain or when something goes awry. If we try to reduce the disconnect between our minds and our bodies, however, we can reduce the stress in our lives and increase well-being instead.

The body constantly offers us valuable information in the form of sensations, feelings, and intuition. But we are so busy thinking and digesting all the stimulation outside our bodies that we habitually forget to go inward, to turn down the volume of the world around us, and to turn up the volume of the awareness within us. One of the best tools we have for managing and reducing stress is listening to our body.

Let's face it, stress happens. It's part of being human. In today's PADI (Pressure, Always On, Distraction, and Information Overload) culture, it requires effort and skill to take care of ourselves in ways that minimize stress, ensure we truly enjoy our precious free time, and enable us to make and maintain meaningful relationships with friends and family. When we experience stress—including acute stress such as

important work deadlines, being stuck in traffic, or suddenly slamming on the brakes to avoid an accident—our brains trigger the release of stress hormones into our bloodstream. After a stressful situation, it can take anywhere from half an hour to a couple of days to return to a normal resting state. Chronic, elevated levels of stress hormones can lead to serious issues. For example, too much cortisol can suppress the immune system, increase blood pressure, decrease libido, produce acne, contribute to obesity, and more.¹

LEARNING TO LISTEN

How can we reset our body and return to the desired resting state, free of stress hormones? Embodied awareness is the first step. Our body can give us signs right away that our

physiology has changed. Often, our heartbeat and breathing changes; we can feel heat in our body or sweaty palms. Eating and drinking patterns can change when we are stressed. We may feel the fight-or-flight response. Our body is our best ally. Learning to listen is a practice. An easy way to start is simply to slow down.

Meditation is one great way to slow down. But if that's not your thing, no worries. There are plenty of other ways to slow down, reset, and recharge your body and nervous system. Here are a few ideas: a saltwater bath, journaling, a peaceful walk engaging the five senses, gardening, a heartfelt talk with a friend who is a good listener, listening deeply to your favorite music, playing music or singing, hiking somewhere beautiful, or taking time to prepare a special meal. We can slow down just about anything we do so we are doing it more mindfully, with deliberate focus.

Take eating as an example. Many times we rush a meal or multitask while we eat. What if we slowed down and noticed, savored, and appreciated our meal, smelled the aroma, and noted the colors on the plate before even taking a bite? Explore simple ways to incorporate mindfulness and a sense of ease into your day.

By practicing embodied awareness when we are not stressed, we become better at detecting when stress arrives. When we acknowledge what is happening in our body, we can stop those stress hormones sooner. Movement, exercise, and drinking plenty of water are critical when we are stressed. Shake it off, literally. Shift the state in your body by interrupting the stress pattern so the chemicals stop being produced. Find a way to stop thinking about the stressful event; even thinking about it once it's over can continue the stream of stress hormones.

Movement, like dance, yoga, or tai chi, can help. Running or biking, as long as you can clear your mind while you do it, are beneficial. Play Frisbee, soccer, tennis, or basketball. If you have a family, get them moving with you. It will be great for everyone.

Of course, another helpful way to manage stress is with massage and bodywork. I have a massage therapist, a chiropractor, and an acupuncturist to help support my wellness. These bodyworkers are healers, as they support my body's natural ability to recover from the stress of being human.

There are so many benefits. Bodywork helps me manage headaches, reduce muscle tension, and relieve stress. It is easy to feel the difference in my body and mind after a session of bodywork. I think of it as a wise investment in my health.

Amy Andrews McMaster offers integrated mindfulness programs through Conscious Time (www.conscioustime.com). She is dedicated to helping people reduce stress, improve relationships, and live empowered lives.

CHECKING IN TO WELLNESS

Some people are good at treating their body like a temple, but most of us need practice. We only receive one body in this lifetime. We don't need to wait until we are stressed or in pain to take care of it. Instead, we can learn to check in with, rather than check out of, our bodies. Increase the body's awareness by slowing down, moving, exercising, and including bodywork in your health-care plan. Cheers to wellness! 

Note

1. Sarah Klein, "Adrenaline, Cortisol, Norepinephrine: The Three Major Stress Hormones, Explained," accessed June 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/19/adrenaline-cortisol-stress-hormones_n_3112800.html.

