

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and its Relevance in Women's Health and Self Care: February 19th, 2018

It is increasingly clear that many health challenges, including heart disease, are largely preventable and that there are lifestyle changes and practices that we can integrate into our lives that can make a big difference.

What I hope to do this evening is to explore the emotional and physical impact of **stress**, how the practice of mindfulness is one way in which we can support ourselves in enhancing and maintaining our well-being.

We know that the pressures of contemporary society and the juggling between our many roles and commitments both in the realm of work and our personal lives accompanied by the ongoing barrage of technology we are exposed to, place significant demands upon us, both physically and emotionally. Burnout and stress related illnesses have increasingly prevalent.

Along with that is the pressure we experience to be in productivity and achievement mode and forget who we are not only as human beings but as human beings.

So what is Mindfulness? A term that that has become so popularized in the last decade or so.

Mindfulness is about waking up, waking up to our lives in the present moment. We go through so much of it in a dream like state, moving through our set routines and often lost in the trance of our minds and its dramas and its stories. The mind loves its stories. We can move through our entire lives in that trance like state and then at the end look over our shoulder and ask ourselves, where was I for that?

Mindfulness can be defined as a quality of awareness that is:

1. Grounded in the present moment
2. We are paying attention on purpose
3. It is free of judgement.

A tall order because when we really begin to bring attention to where our minds actually are, we can see that it is rarely in the present moment and it is filled with judgement which only serves to compound the stress that we are already feeling.

So we find ways to distract and anesthetize ourselves and we live in a world in which we have a large buffet of ways to do that.

Technology being one way in which we can escape, logging in to our favorite devices stimulating our nervous systems which has been shown more recently to actually raise stress levels and increase anxiety. And then of course, there are the old familiar ones such as over eating, oversleeping, drinking, over doing, over working, even over exercising..whatever distances us from that which is.

However as we know, **these only serve as a quick fix, a false refuge that provide only temporary relief.** The issues still remain and ultimately require of us, our full attention and care.

We now have known for quite some time that emotional stress contributes significantly to raising the risk of various health conditions, such as:

heart disease, hypertension, chronic headaches and pain, depression and anxiety, disruptions of the digestive and nervous systems and a suppressed immune system making us more vulnerable to infection.

So what we do to manage our stress will have a significant impact upon the state of our health, first in the realm of prevention and if already experiencing a stressful state, enhance our capacity to minimize its impact and regain a sense of balance and well-being..

Stress:

In taking a look at stress, I have found it useful to refer to its definition coined by **Hans Seyle**. Hans Seyle, who was a professor and scientist at both McGill and L'universite de Montreal was interested in the physiological response the body produces in dealing with a stressful trigger.

He defined stress as:

“the nonspecific response of the organism to any pressure or demand”

This is important as it highlights the understanding that it is not the triggers themselves that are the cause of the stress we experience but rather how we respond that makes all the difference.

It has been said that Pain is a given and that suffering is optional

There will continue to be all kinds of difficult circumstances and triggers in our lives, loss, illness, conflict, which we may not be able to control but where we Are Empowered is in our freedom to choose how we will Respond to whatever we are faced with.

This helps us to release feelings of powerlessness and helplessness, both of which are extremely stressful to feel.

A central idea in understanding our relationship to stressful triggers is the distinction between

REACTING VERSUS RESPONDING

When we REACT to a trigger, we are on automatic pilot, engaging in conditioned, habitual behaviour, lacking awareness and clear seeing which also puts our nervous system into a state of fight, flight or freeze most often driven by fear.

This results in a surge of stress hormones released throughout the body, primarily adrenaline and cortisol, resulting in profound

emotional and physical dysregulation..anxiety, digestive disturbances, increased blood pressure, muscular tension etc.

RESPOND

However, when we RESPOND to a trigger, and we introduce mindfulness into the equation, although we may still become aroused and the initial fight or flight reaction is activated, we are better able to bring present moment awareness and clear seeing to what is occurring in our bodies and our minds and therefore in a much better position to respond with greater wisdom and effectiveness.

Having said all this, the capacity to move out of reactivity and in to response mode as many of us know, is not second nature. In fact, being on automatic pilot is our default mode.

So this is where a contemplative practice such as Mindfulness Meditation which calms the central nervous system and brings us into present time can be very useful in developing our ability to pause, to come into the moment more fully and make skillful choices for ourselves and for others.

Research continues to demonstrate the benefits of mindfulness meditation practice which include:

- decreased anxiety levels and depressive symptoms
- improved concentration
- greater mental stability and peace of mind
- enhanced immunity,
- decrease in pain
- improvement in sleep patterns
- lower blood pressure

With regards to Heart Disease in particular, the British Heart Foundation has made reference to a 5 year study that asked 201 patients with coronary heart disease to meditate 15 minutes per day.

The researchers found that this reduced the risk of death, heart attack and stroke decreased by 48 percent. The changes were associated with lower blood pressure and lower stress levels.

The researchers concluded that this practice can be clinically useful in the secondary prevention of cardiovascular disease ie. The prevention of further heart or stroke events for people who already have the condition.

So even with Meditation having these wonderful benefits, the practice itself is non-goal oriented. And that is the paradox. There is no intention we set to become anything than we already are or experiencing anything other than we are already experiencing. It involves allowing ourselves to be just as we are as we focus our attention on one object of focus and return to that focus each time the mind wanders. Simple but not Easy!!

Guided practice of stretching followed by a focused attention on the breath and the body.