

The Stress-Less Side

“I’m so stressed!” How often do you find yourself saying this in your mind or to family and friends? Stress, as a modern term, arose from physiological studies in the 1930s, becoming the commonplace term as we know it today during the 1950s. Not that our ancestors didn’t have stress – they most certainly did (think disease, invasions, wars, natural disasters) – and who’s to say if theirs felt more or less intense to them than ours does to us today. We don’t want to be too quick to label our stress as the exclusive domain of the “modern” world. Maybe it’s more about the choices we make around the activities, events, and people we find stressful rather than the century that we occupy in history.

What if, while we are suffering our stress and becoming intimate with its ramifications in terms of health, peace of mind, and quality of life, we were to consider that there just may be another side to the tapestry that is our life? And what if that other side is actually the “front” where the threads are smooth and the colors bright, and we’ve been living on the “back” where the picture is vague and the threads full of knots? What if it were possible to reduce the stress in our lives so that we began experiencing life as taking place on that smoother, brighter side? On the more stress-less side?

We’re all familiar with the notion that it isn’t a particular situation that’s stressful, but our response to it, especially our thoughts about it. Granted, sometimes stress is an autonomic response – a sudden shock or fright, but sometimes stress is about the choices we make. But the habitual thoughts we think in response to stress can sometimes exacerbate the accompanying stress we feel in our minds and bodies. For example:

There’s a deadline for a project, or a set time for an appointment and the calendar or clock says we’re cutting it close. We can:

- a) tighten our jaw and say, “It’s all so-and-so’s fault!”, or
- b) yell, hit something, and say, “I always wait to the last minute – what’s wrong with me?”, or
- c) pause, consciously relax our muscles, take a deep breath, close our eyes for a few minutes (if not driving!) and reframe the moment by stating, “I have all the time I need to (fill in the blank).”

For each stressful situation, there are responses that soothe us or make things worse. When we are stressed or fearful, we don’t make good decisions. This often creates a spiral of negativity and stress that, worse case, can literally be fatal.

When we can lessen our stress, sometimes just a notch or two, things begin to swing the other direction and the stress begins to ebb. That pivot point is where stress management kicks in. And having the tools and techniques *in place* to make that shift can make all the difference in our lives.

“Stress is basically a disconnection from the earth, a forgetting of the breath. Stress is an ignorant state. It believes that everything is an emergency. Nothing is that important. Just lie down.”

-Natalie Goldberg

