

Slowing Down to the Speed of Life

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Many of us fall into the trap of believing that the stress we experience on a day-to-day basis is caused by outside forces – the job that demands a ridiculous amount of our time, or the kids who need our nonstop attention and care. It's easy to think that if we could just eliminate or handle the external factors, we'd find the peace of mind we long for. But, how many times have you completed your to-do list, sent the kids off to camp, or finished a project at work, only to find yourself right back in the same stressful place again ruminating over all that needs to get done?

The truth is this: our stressful feelings are always generated by our thinking, not external circumstances. Your busy schedule or endless to-do list may seem to be the culprit, but in fact it's how you "think" about them that creates your feelings of overwhelm. For example, when you start to worry about not having enough time to finish your daily work, your thinking speeds up and you start saying things to yourself like: "I can't possibly get these phone calls completed by the end of the day. How will I ever write that report with all the meetings I have to attend? I can see I'm going to have to work through dinner again."

As these thoughts start to generate stress, it often escalates to even more unproductive thinking like: "I never have enough time to meet my deadlines. I'm always behind schedule. My office is a mess and I'm so disorganized." These "low quality" thoughts start to affect your mood, and you naturally begin to feel annoyed, resentful and overwhelmed. By this point it seems like the whole world is out to get you.

So what to do? First, understand the cycle. Your thoughts are directly linked to your feelings. If you think angry thoughts, you'll feel angry. If you think about a past relationship that ended in a painful way, you'll start to feel depressed. Your emotional state always "follows" your thought patterns. So, if you want to eliminate stress, you'll need to eliminate your stressful thoughts. Here's how:

1. Let your feelings be your guide.

Check in throughout the day and pay attention to how you feel. The moment you notice uncomfortable feelings, take note of your thought patterns. For example, if you're feeling hurried, you might notice that you're thinking about all the things you need to do within the next two hours. Your feelings will serve as a powerful barometer for the quality of your thoughts.

2. Shift your thinking.

Once you notice that your thoughts are creating uncomfortable feelings, stop thinking those thoughts. While this sounds simplistic, oftentimes the act of noticing your thoughts in and of itself will break the cycle. If not, shift your thinking by using a phrase like "I'm peaceful and calm," or, focus on a relaxing image. Trust me, the moment you shift your thoughts, you'll enter into a more resourceful state and you'll be in a much better position to handle challenging situations.

3. Slow down and stretch time.

As soon as I start to feel rushed or anxious, I've learned to actually stretch time by turning away from my hurried thinking. Instead, I make a conscious choice to focus on the one thing in front of me that needs to get done. Too often we make the mistake of believing that we can get everything done well by working faster or harder. But, this usually creates more frustration (not to mention a bad mood). Your most productive and enjoyable experience will come from bringing your consciousness into the moment and operating from a place of presence and grace.

So, the next time your mind is tempted to run ahead to all that needs to be done, gently bring it back to the present by saying something to yourself like: "I'm going to do this one thing right now with joy and ease." You'll not only get everything done, you'll wind up in a much better mood!

Learning to eliminate stress by managing your thoughts takes time and practice. Start with this week's "Take Action Challenge" and let the peace begin!

Take Action Challenge

This week, notice when you start to feel stressed and immediately shift your mind away from your stressful thoughts.

For example, don't beat yourself up for being late, don't create a mental list of the things that are driving you crazy, or don't get caught up in blaming outside circumstances for your frustration.

Gently shift your focus away from these unproductive thoughts and allow yourself to step back into the present moment.

To remind yourself of this stress busting practice, put the words "High Quality Thinking" on your bathroom mirror or somewhere in your home or office and start enjoying your life!