Lecture Series: A CAM Approach to Finding Balance

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Part 3: Stress Reduction with Meditation

**Introduction:**

* Recap of personal Introduction
* Recap of Part 1 and Part 2
* Part 3 of this lecture series will outline what I believe to be the third core principle: Utilizing Meditation to combat stress
* We will discuss in this series

1. The Nature of Stress
2. The Physiological Aspects of Stress
3. The Psychological Aspects of Stress
4. Dealing with Stress: Coping Strategies
5. Relaxation Techniques: Breathing, Meditation, and Mental Imagery

**What is Stress**

* Can be defined as the physical and mental strain that is caused on our body due to certain situations from the outside world. The body will respond with a “Fight or Flight” response. (Eustress-The Positive Stress, 2013)

**Types of Stress**

* There are different kinds of stress:

1. Eustress: A type of positive stress that is actually good for the body. Examples are:
   * 1. The thrill of riding a roller coaster
     2. The excitement of winning a race
     3. The feeling you may get when watching a horror movie
        + Human beings need Eustress, without it one would never feel excited or strive to do more at a particular task
        + Eustress gives life meaning, without it one would not have a reason to get up every morning
        + If used properly Eustress can help combat negative stress. Eustress is positive and can help change the way one looks and reacts towards things. This can help change mental attitude towards situations in life and helps to steer clear of negative stress.

(Eustress-The Positive Stress, 2013)

* 1. Neustress: This is a neutral form of stress. It is neither good nor bad and has no consequential effect. Example:
     1. Watching the news and hearing of an earthquake that has happened in another part of the world. Although the event itself is stressful it has no impact on an individual living in another part of the world.

(Eustress-The Positive Stress, 2013)

* 1. Distress: This is the bad stress.
     1. When stress exceeds a desired level it can harm the body
     2. Distress is commonly referred to as just “stress”
     3. Can be further categorized to include:
        + Acute Stress: stress that appears and disappears over short periods of time and can be very intense. An example would be having to take a pop quiz
        + Chronic Stress: may not appear to be as intense as acute stress but this type of stress lingers for much longer periods of time. An example would be worrying about finance, marital problems, job stress.

(Types of Stress, Distress, Eustress, and Neustress, 2010)

**The General Adaptation Syndrome**

* There are 3 stages the body uses to accommodate stress by adapting to it
  1. Stage 1: Alarm reaction
  2. Stage 2: Stage of resistance
  3. Stage 3: Stage of exhaustion
* Understanding that stress can affect the body to the point of exhaustion is a key point

(Seaward, 2009)

**Occupational Stress**

* For many their occupation is one of the biggest stressors in their life
* Main reasons for job related stress are:
  1. Too much responsibility
  2. Unrealistic expectations
  3. Lack of appreciation
  4. Too much to do with too few resources

(Seaward, 2009)

**Personal Stress Inventory**

* **Identifying your top Stressors: (refer to hand out 10,** (Life Stress Test, n.d.)
* **Identifying the areas of your life that is causing stress in the first step of stress management**

**The Physiological Aspects of Stress**

**The way the body responds to stress**

* Every individual has a primitive survival mechanism known as the “Fight/Flight” response. This response is initiated in the respond many situations from life threating to the sound of an alarm going off in the morning.
* Every individual has a response to stress that is either learned or genetically implanted
* In life or death situations this response will be trigger by survival to help you to fight off or flee this danger
* Every individual has a unique response to how they deal with stress, some fight, some flee, regardless becoming aware of how you respond is half the battle of controlling stress
* Physiological responses to stress include:
  1. Increased heart rate: blood begins to pump throughout the body giving oxygen and sugars to cells. Symptoms that can be associated with this stress response include: Rapid or irregular heartbeats
  2. Breathing usually becomes more rapid: This allows for more oxygen for the body. Symptoms may include: hyperventilation and some forms of asthma
  3. Stress hormones are released: Adrenalin also called epinephrine is released by the adrenal glands. This hormone helps to maintain increased heart rates and stimulates the liver to release stored sugar for energy. Symptoms include: high blood pressure, panic or anxiety
  4. Increased Blood pressure: This is triggered by the release of stress hormones. Symptoms include high blood pressure
  5. Muscles that you would use to fight or flee may become tight until released by relaxation, massage, stretching or exercise. This is one of the most common responses to stress. Symptoms may include; tension headaches, tight jaw, neck/shoulder pain/tension, back pain, insomnia, fatigue, loss of concentration, learning disabilities, poor communication (listening and speaking)
  6. Changes in blood flow/circulation: Blood is directed toward the brain and major muscles for survival. As a means for the body to survive the present threat blood is directed away from surface of the skin in the hands and feet. Blood is directed away from digestive organs and reproductive organs. Symptoms may include: high blood pressure, cold hands and feet, upset stomach, migraine headaches, pre-ulcerous conditions, increased colitis, constipation, and 70% of sexual dysfunction in both men and women can be linked to this stress response
  7. All of the senses are heightened. Increased sensitivity to noise, light smells and touch. Because the thinking part of the brain shuts down and the survival mechanisms in the lower and middle parts of the brain take over you react to things and do not think things through as well. Basic emotions take over; fear, anger, sadness and joy (nervous laughter) Symptoms include: emotional irritability, substance abuse to escape stress, anxiety, depression, poor impulse control, poor problem solving and reduced communication abilities
  8. Perspiration/sweat: this cools the body’s increased metabolism down. Symptoms include: hyperhidrosis (which can lead to dehydration due to over sweating)
  9. Imbalances in normal hormone levels: Long term unresolved stress can affect the immune system. Symptoms include: frequent colds or flus, infections, cancer or tumor development, increased allergic responses, auto immune disease
* Because everyone responses to stress in one or more of these above mentioned ways it is important to identify how your body responds to stress and then learn ways to release the physical tension.

(John Mason, 2008)

**The Psychological Aspects of Stress**

**The Death of Unmet Expectations:**

* Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s Psychological Stages of Grieving:
  1. Denial
  2. Anger
  3. Bargaining
  4. Depression
  5. Acceptance
* These stages of grieving are not only seen by individuals that have experienced death or an illness, but are seen among people who go through other losses such as a failed relationship, loss of possession, failed exam or poor athletic performance etc. The stress associated with these mental stages is a way to provide a greater mental awareness of unresolved emotions (Seaward, 2009)

**Lessons of Self-Love**

* Love is now recognized as a powerful inner resource and healing tool.
* The importance of the statement “To love others, you must first love yourself” was illustrated by Leo Buscaglia. Buscaglia has found through his research that most people are deficient in their capacity to love themselves unconditionally.
* This type of thinking is associated with chronic stress and low self-esteem.
* It is found that people that are able to achieve self-acceptance and self-love are well centered, and balanced and enjoy life.
* Self-love is a tool that can be used to effectively deal with stress.

(Seaward, 2009)

**Creative Anger Strategies**

* The most successful strategies to deal with anger involve cognitive coping strategies, relaxation techniques, and behavior modification.
* Suggestions to help manage anger more creatively include:
  1. Know your anger style
  2. Learn to monitor your anger
  3. Learn to deescalate your anger
  4. Learn to out-think your anger
  5. Get comfortable with all your feelings and learn to express them constructively
  6. Plan ahead
  7. Develop a support system
  8. Develop realistic expectations of yourself and others
  9. Learn problem-solving techniques
  10. Stay in shape
  11. Turn complaints into requests
  12. Forgiveness; make past anger past

(Seaward, 2009)

**Fear and stress**

* Many situations can promote anxiety, but there are only a handful of basic human fears;
  1. Fear of failure
  2. Fear of rejection
  3. Fear of the unknown
  4. Fear of dying
  5. Fear of isolation
  6. Fear of loss of self control
* Author Rhonda Britten has outlined ways to help deal with fears
  1. Fine tune expectations: stop looking at the world to make you happy
  2. Stop making excuses; Don’t let past predict the future
  3. Stop complaining
  4. Don’t beat yourself up

**Dealing with Stress Coping Strategies**

* Identify the sources of stress in your life
  1. The true source of stress is not always obvious
  2. To identify the true source of stress look closely at your habits, attitude, and excuses
  3. You must accept responsibility for the role you play in creating or maintaining your stress
* How do you currently cope with stress
  1. A stress journal can help identify your coping mechanism
  2. Many people cope with stress in an unhealthy and unproductive manner. These include:
     1. Smoking
     2. Drinking
     3. Overeating or undereating
     4. Endless hours spent in front of the television or computer
     5. Withdrawing from friends, family and activities
     6. Using drugs to relax
     7. Sleeping to much
     8. Procrastinating
     9. Filling up every minutes of the day to avoid facing problems
     10. Taking out your stress on others
  3. Healthy ways to manage stress but they all require change. You can either change the situation or change your reaction. Using the four A’s when making your decision
     1. Avoid: not all stress can be avoided, and it is not healthy to avoid a situation that needs to be addressed, although you can eliminate many of life stressor.
     2. Alter: If you cannot avoid a stressful situation, try to alter it. Determine what you could change about the situation so that in the future it is not reoccurring. This may mean you have to change the way you communicate and operate in your daily life.
     3. Adapt: If you cannot change the stressor, you may need to change yourself. This can be accomplished by changing your expectations and attitude towards a stressful situation
     4. Accept: Sometimes you may not be able to prevent or change a stressor. The best way to cope with this situation is to accept things as they are.

(Segal, 2013)

**Relaxation Techniques: Breathing, Meditation, and Mental Imagery**

* Throughout our lecture series we have viewed several different CAM approaches. A very popular and effective CAM approach to stress management is through the process of meditation.

**Meditation**

* Meditation is a state of “thoughtless awareness”
* True meditation is a state of profound, deep peace that occurs when the mind is calm and silent yet completely alert.
* Research has shown that meditation is one of the most effective forms of stress reduction
* Meditation has the potential to improve quality of life
* Meditation enables one to focus on the present moment rather than dwell on the unchangeable past or undetermined future

(What is Meditation, 2013)

* Just as yoga has many different practices so does meditation

**Diaphragmatic Breathing**

* The most basic relaxation technique; breathing from the lower stomach or diaphragm rather than the thoracic area
* This relaxation technique can be done anywhere, and at any time
* When you first begin practicing this technique do so in a comfortable position, preferably lying down on your back with your eyes closed. Place your hands over your stomach and feel the rise and fall of your abdomen with each breath. Once you are able to do the technique with proficiency it then can be performed just about anywhere and under any circumstances
* Concentration is required when performing this technique
* Focus your attention towards the breathing
* Diaphragmatic breathing is more conscious decision to redirect your attention to the physiologic function and turn off the autonomic response that normally controls it
* Each ventilation is said to be composed of four distinct phases
  1. Phase 1: Inspiration, taking air into the lungs through the nose or mouth
  2. Phase 2: pause slightly before exhaling
  3. Phase 3: Exhalation, releasing the air from your lungs through the passage it entered
  4. Phase 4: another slight pause before the next inhalation

(Seaward, 2009)

**Meditation**

* Due to the non-stop chatter around us on a daily basis (TV, radios, cell phones, traffic, etc.) our mind spends little time in the presence of silence.
* The human mind becomes saturated with sensory stimulation
* The mind needs time for much needed calmness in order to maintain a sense of mental equilibrium.
* The length of time spent meditating is much more important than the time of day in which you meditate
* One should spend at least 20-30 minutes a day in quiet meditation
* With practice one will find that meditation has many layers and can create many profound effects of relaxation

(Seaward, 2009)

**Mental Imagery**

* A technique that one uses their imagination to picture a person, place or time that makes them feel relaxed peaceful and happy.
* This technique relies on all the senses; in your imagination you hear the sounds, see the images, feel the sensations, smell the fragrances in the imagined situation you have created in your mind.
* Using your senses is what creates such a powerful relaxing experience
* The technique can be done by creating a setting of your own and visualizing it in your head, or by Guided Imagery where one will listen as someone guides you through the setting, explicitly explaining the setting.
* Research has shown that using imagery can significantly reduce blood pressure, lower stress in patients suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, abuse, depression and other conditions, including occupational stress.

(Imagery, 2013)

**Preparing the Ground**

* Meditation although very beneficial, can be difficult for many to achieve such a peaceful state.
* I believe that to accomplish a true meditative state of mind, one must be able to find inner peace. Elliot Dacher’s Book Integral Health The Path to Human Flourishing is an excellent resource to help one prepare their minds and guide towards inner peace.
* According to Dacher there are principle foundation that must be followed.
* We must have faith that will motivate us to rechannel our energy
* This is accomplished by reminding ourselves about the unique and precious opportunities of human life.

**Preparation 1: Loving Kindness**

* Dacher states “nothing can more effectively stabilize our mind and lessen the grip of self-centeredness than the embrace of others. This is the most powerful antidote to destructive emotions like anger, intolerance, jelousy, pride, and greed that agitate our mind and make it unavailable for further development”. (Dacher, 2006)
* In order to show loving-kindness to others we must begin by showing it to ourselves, we cannot give to others what does not yet exist within ourselves.
* Next we must show love and kindness to those who are closest to us, practicing opening our hearts with kindness, care, patience, and generosity toward their needs.
* Finally we must show love and kindness to others

**Preparation 2: Skillful Action**

* Restrain unskillful behavior and encourage skillful behavior.
* The three gates through which we act in the world are our body, mind, and speech; the actions we take, the content of our thoughts, and the character of our speech.
* It is important to know what constitutes skillful action and what constitutes unskillful action
* Reflect on whether your attitude, words, or actions are skillful

**Preparation 3: Silence and Stillness**

* There are three aspects of silence and stillness:
  1. The outer; refers to the stillness and calm of our physical environment
  2. The inner; this occurs when we achieve an initial calming of the mind
  3. The innermost; arises when our mind effortless rests in its natural state of peace and ease.
* Ask of each activity each day “how does this affect my mind? Does it cause inner peace or a more agitated mind?
* Take inventory of your life and ask the singular question: What supports and what detracts from the development of inner stillness and silence
* Start by identifying and then reducing or eliminating one unnecessary outer activity a week

**A Visualization: Meeting Asclepius**

* Know that there is a wise healer within each of us who will guide us through the preparations
* Refer to Handout 11 for a guided visualization of Dacher’s meeting Asclepius

**Conclusion**

* Stress can impact our lives in many ways, finding ways to appropriately cope with life’s stressor will help lead you to a happier and more fulfilling life.
* Meditation is an excellent way to relax and release the built up stress, and open your mind.
* Meditation is a process that can be self-taught or studied with an experienced teacher.
* There are currently no laws that require someone that teaches meditation to be licensed or certified. It is always best when looking for a CAM practitioner to research their experience, and professional training to ensure you are receiving adequate care.
* Remember that stress can cause severe health problems. Stress management techniques have shown to have a positive effect on reducing stress, and should be used for guidance. If you have concerns over stress-related illnesses, or if stress is causing significant or persistent unhappiness you are urged to speak with a qualified health professional
* Please refer to Handout 12 for Resources available on stress management, mediation and local resources.

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