

Stress Management Recommendations - Part Three

Cultivating pleasure is perhaps one of the most under-recognized ways to mitigate the impacts of stress. There are so many studies, such a large body of evidence now showing that pleasure is perhaps best understood as the antidote to stress. It releases endorphins and other chemicals that mitigate the stress response. They take us out of the fight-or-flight response and put us into the rest-and-digest response, especially pleasurable activities that don't have a specific purpose or end goal tend to be even better for this. Getting in any activity in which we lose a sense of time or getting into this what researchers now call the flow state, or the zone, as it's called popularly, is a really important way to relieve stress. For me, surfing is probably the most important activity that does that. No matter how I'm feeling, how stressed out I am, or what is going on in my life, if I go surfing, there is a 100 percent chance that I'm going to feel better afterwards. It doesn't matter if the waves are good or conditions are good. It could be raining. It could be sunny. Just being in the water, feeling that connection to nature, the ocean, and then the physical activity involved with that, being on my own, it's a really powerful thing, and I encourage everyone to find something that plays that role in their life.

Playing often is also important. We talked—if you've read my book, you'll know that play from an evolutionary perspective is important to human development. It's crucial for kids, but it is also crucial for adults. There are a lot of studies that have been done on the positive effects of play and what happens if we're deprived of play. In fact, I forget the name of the researcher—it might be Stuart Brown—who did a survey of death row inmates. One of the things that they shared in common, almost more than anything else, is that they had childhoods that were deprived of play. It's a very powerful influence. Play can be solo, but when it is with friends, family, or groups, it is even more powerful. Competition can be fun. It can be a part of that, but if it becomes extremely stressful, of course, it's not going to mitigate the impacts of stress. It's going to add stress.

Stress Management Techniques

Meditation

Yoga

Tai Chi

Massage

Feldenkrais

Mindfulness based stress reduction

Acupuncture

Biofeedback

Journaling

Spiritual/religious practice

Volunteering

Here are some ideas for getting started with stress management techniques. There are a wide variety of these. What the research shows is that it is not so much important what technique is chosen but that you do it. You commit to something, you stick with it, and you make it a regular part of your routine. This could be anything from meditation, yoga, tai chi, massage, Feldenkrais, mindfulness-based stress reduction, acupuncture, biofeedback, journaling, of course prayer or any other kind of spiritual or religious practice that your faith prescribes, and volunteer work.

Encourage your patients to choose a strategy that works best for them, whatever it is. Some really important tips in terms of how to get them started would be to tell them to start very slow, more slowly than they think they should, and then increase incrementally over time. This is a key aspect of behavioral change. We know from many studies on behavioral change that this is the best way to implement a new behavior is slowly incorporating it into your life. What will happen with most people, particularly high achievers, is they will—if they're going to learn meditation, they say, "Okay. I'm going to meditate for an hour every day for the next week" when they are just starting. For 99.9 percent of people with no experience with meditation, that's just not going to work. They are not going to be successful. They are going to get frustrated, and they're going to stop doing it entirely. It's much better for that person to commit to meditating for two minutes a day for the following week. What happens is, as they are successful with those two-minute sessions, they start to experience some of the benefits of that, and they can increase by another minute or two the

next week and go up to three minutes or four minutes. That has a cumulative effect and builds over time to where they are eventually meditating for 20 or 30 minutes a day, and then they have successfully incorporated that into their life, and it becomes a habit like any other habit.

Another recommendation is to choose a mix of practices. Day-to-day life will affect our ability to engage in certain practices. For example, if you've been sitting and having a really stressful day, and you're really keyed up, doing a sitting meditation practice that day or that evening might not be the best approach, although if you have a committed practice, I think there is something to be said for doing it every day no matter what is going on. That's, for me, something that is really important, and it has been over the years, but especially if you are just getting started, on a day like that, it may be better to do yoga, tai chi, or some kind of moving meditative practice either in addition to your sitting practice, before your sitting practice, or instead of your sitting practice, depending on where you are and what your goals are, because that might be a more effective means of stress management at that time. Invite patients to experiment with different things, and then, just as a clinician, use your own intuition in terms of what might be best for people. I will frequently make specific recommendations based on my assessment of the patient, what their personality type is, and what I think they would benefit from most, initially, at least. Over time, I might also guide them in another direction as they begin to heal and shift.

Making stress management a priority is crucial for success. I ask patients to actually schedule it into their calendar. I still schedule it into my own calendar, so today I have time blocked off for yoga and meditation, sitting practice. There are apps that can help with this now, Headspace and other apps that help remind patients when to do their practices. Patients can set reminders on their phone and their calendar so that they are notified. They can use visual reminders such as Post-it notes. Then, they can eventually just create a consistent morning or evening routine where these things are just baked in, and reminders aren't even necessary, kind of like brushing your teeth. When you've been doing something for long enough, that is what naturally happens.

Again, being gentle with yourself, being empathic and compassionate is really important. This means not beating yourself up if you miss a session. Don't try to turn this into something that is like other things in our life, goal oriented and accomplishment based. Realize that this is for your own development of your own awareness and your own evolution and growth as a person. Part of that involves, hopefully, learning to be more empathic and compassionate with yourself. Love yourself and not be so hard on yourself. These practices should feel like a peaceful, restorative break from your routine. They should be an opportunity to increase your awareness and connect with yourself and the world around you, not a chore or another thing that you have to excel in or do well in.

You'll see that this is an obstacle for people with meditation. When I was teaching meditation, one of the most common questions I would get, complaints, or issues, people will say something like, "Oh, I tried meditating, but I couldn't get my mind to stop thinking, so I quit." I'm chuckling because this is a concept of meditation that is mostly Western and has done a tremendous disservice in terms of people getting started with it and sticking with it.

The idea of meditation is not to have a completely empty, clear mind where you are not having any thoughts. I would venture to say that even people who are meditation teachers and who have been meditating for 50-plus years don't have that experience, at least not often. I know this because my teacher falls into this category, and I've interacted with many meditation teachers in many different traditions. The idea with meditation is not to create a particular experience. It is to increase your awareness of what is and what you are experiencing. One day meditation might be your mind is very busy, and you are sitting there being aware of your busy mind. Another day your experience might be that your mind is quiet, and you're sitting there being aware of your quiet mind. Admittedly, that is probably more pleasant, but meditation is not about creating pleasant experiences. It is about increasing your awareness of what is going on and learning to cultivate that witness attitude so that you are not controlled by what is going on, and you're not identified with what is going on as you. You're able to see your thoughts, your feelings, and your sensations as a stream of experiences that are occurring that you are aware of but that the you who is watching those thoughts, sensations, and experiences—that is who you are, not those ephemeral, fleeting moments in time.

Finding a teacher can be really helpful. I always encourage my patients to do that. Regardless of where they live, there are going to be teachers of various practices available, and working with an experienced instructor, whatever the tradition is, can really advance learning and help to develop a deeper practice and also help us to not get stuck and avoid the pitfalls that are easy to fall into with these kinds of practices when you're only doing them on your own.

Apps, Tools and Resources



Apps: Headspace, Calm and Insight Timer



Resources: 14Four, YouTube

(Search for deep breathing exercises, yoga, guided meditation, Yoga with Adriene)

Finally, as I've discussed in this presentation and also throughout the ADAPT program, there are numerous apps, tools, and resources that are now available. Some of my favorites for patients—I don't typically use these myself, maybe simply because I've had a meditation practice for almost 25 years, actually 25 years now, so I don't find that I need them, but patients seem to respond really well to them. I often recommend Headspace, Calm, Insight Timer. They are all slightly different. Patients can check them out and see which one they are drawn to. Then, 14Four, as you probably know, I teach a standing qigong moving meditation routine. I talk about mindfulness practice and sitting meditation. I have some guided audio meditation programs in there for teaching people to do that. YouTube has an enormous amount of resources for this. Yoga with Adriene is a very popular series of free yoga videos on YouTube. DoYogaWithMe, I think I'm getting that right, is another popular yoga resource. It's not on YouTube. I think if you just Google that, you'll find it. There are so many resources, free resources now, for YouTube with all kinds of different stress management techniques and practices. We have a handout for your patients that you can generate in the handout generator with a list of these resources.

Okay, that's it for now. Thanks for listening. Talk to you next time.