



Any place, any time technique to de-stress

1 March 2019

In this newsletter I am going to talk about a quick and easy technique you can use to manage stress and anxiety in the moment. Stress is something that almost everyone has. And to be overstressed or extremely anxious is to be in a horrible place. You don't want to stay there. You want to do something about it.

Firstly, let me give you some research findings. In 2007 at the University of Toronto, Normal Farb and a group of scientists found our brains have two ways of interacting with the world. One way is called the default network, also known as the narrative circuitry, which becomes active when you are not paying much attention to what is going on around you. Instead you are focused on what is going on in your head. You are thinking about yourself, others, problems, the future etc. In other words you are thinking a lot, ruminating and just generally spending your time in your head. Experiencing the world through the narrative circuit means you take in information from the outside world and pass it through all your filters of meaning in your brain and add your interpretations. You have a narrative going on in your head.

The second way to interact with the world is via the direct experience circuit. When this network is active, you are not thinking too intently about much, you are instead experiencing the sensations coming into your senses in real time – the sounds, the smells, the colours, how things feel, etc.

As an example, if you were sitting in the sun on the beach, with a breeze blowing your hair and a cold drink in your hand, and you were thinking about what you were going to prepare for dinner, and whether the kids would be home in time, and what activities you need to plan for the next day, you would be engaging the narrative circuitry. If you were focused on the sensations of the sun beating down on you, the breeze gently blowing past you tossing the leaves about the beach, the colours of the flowers around you or the feeling of the cold from the cold drink in your hand, you would be engaging the direct experience circuit.

Research has shown that the narrative and direct experience circuits are inversely correlated. The more you use one the less you use the other. And from this research a number of techniques have arisen that address stress and anxiety, which is largely a result of spending too much time overthinking in your head. In fact this research has also shown why a number of techniques already in use, such as grounding and mindfulness, work. When you are overthinking and getting yourself overwhelmed with your thoughts, focus instead on using the direct experience network to stop thinking and planning and deciding and problem solving. This is often referred to as grounding. And it means to stop thinking in your head – take your focus away from all the overthinking you are doing – and pay attention to the sensory experiences around you.

The Technique

1. If you find yourself feeling stressed, anxious or panicky then stop what you are doing if you can stop doing it safely. If you are driving don't just stop. Find a safe place to pull off the road and stop.
2. Apply some form of grounding method where you focus on experiencing what is going on around you with your senses. Notice your surroundings. Using your eyes, describe the environment around you in detail, keeping your eyes moving. Describe the trees, the buildings, the plants, the people, the roads etc. Notice the smells and sounds around you. Feel the sun or the cold on your skin. Feel the breeze or lack of one on your skin. If you are standing notice how your feet feel on the ground. If you are sitting notice how the material the chair is made of feels to you. Take note of the colours around you. Identify the smells wafting in your direction. You can feel how parts of your body feel, and which feel tense and wound up. Practice relaxing those tense body parts. Give yourself 15-20 minutes to do this. If you have less time available to you, then even 5-10 minutes will help. Then go back to what you were doing.

When you give your narrative circuit a break, not only does it help to calm you down, it also helps with creative problem solving. If you are struggling to solve a problem, then stop with the task, engage the direct experience circuitry, and later come back to the problem you were trying to solve.

Have a wonderful March. And if you get stressed you know what to do.