

The Stress Response: A Window Into Understanding Relationships

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Relationships are the foundation of human existence. From time to time relationships can also be stressful, whether they are relationships with friends, family, colleagues or others. We disagree on household finances, a child's behavior irritates us, we feel devalued by a colleague. Although we can't change the other person, we can change how we respond to them. Changing our response can begin with an awareness of what happens when we experience conflict in a relationship, or even feel uncomfortable in a social situation. Part of how we experience this conflict has to do with our sense of safety.

Our brain is constantly scanning our environment to determine whether we are safe. This sense of safety is based on our perception of a situation; how we see and understand, or make meaning of, the situation. How predictable our immediate environment feels is one way we define safety: the more familiar (predictable), the safer we feel, even if that familiar environment doesn't serve us well. The less information we have about what is happening, the more out of control we feel, the less safe we feel. Our perceptions, and as a result, our sense of safety, is also impacted by people and situations that present conflicts to our belief systems. These belief systems, usually rooted in our early experiences, include beliefs about our sense of self worth, our values based on the cultural systems we grew up with, and our expectations of how we relate to one another. Many of these beliefs also operate outside of our awareness.

Anytime we sense a lack of safety, our stress response is activated. And each time our stress response is activated, it can impact how we think, what we say and how we act. This occurs because whenever we perceive that a situation is unsafe, we rely on the lower, more reactive, or automatic parts of our brain. This serves us well when we are faced with the possibility of harm; we need to react (often fight or flee) quickly and not waste time thinking about it. This may not serve us well when there is conflict in a relationship that we value because our ability to think before we respond diminishes as our level of stress increases.

When we experience conflict in a relationship, sometimes even a mild disagreement, we tend to interpret that as a potential threat, which activates our stress response. Typically, when our stress response is activated, we see things in terms of opposites (black and white thinking). This translates into statements that the other person "always" or "never" does the offending or desired behavior, for example. There is little room for anything in between. We also interpret what we see and hear differently when our stress response is activated, and are much more likely to perceive what people say and do as at least potentially



threatening. Even neutral facial expressions may be interpreted as a potential threat. At the milder end of the safety continuum, new social situations may feel uncomfortable until we see someone we know or begin to forge relationships, often by finding something we have in common (familiarity) with someone.

As our level of stress increases, we become even more impulsive (we react without thinking about what we say or do) and it becomes more difficult to pay attention to or remember what the other person is saying. Because we are operating primarily out of our lower, more reactive brain, our attention is drawn to anything that could be perceived as a threat. We might be particularly sensitive to what we see as faultfinding, or physical actions that could be sensed as dismissive. We also forget what we know, such as the positive qualities that the person we are in conflict with embodies. We forget to think.

Making choices to change how we respond begins with an awareness of what happens when we feel unsafe, as well as a desire to respond differently. The next *Reflections* will explore how we can calm our stress response (move from reactive to intentional) so that we can begin to change how we respond to others.

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