

Choosing Our Responses

David Belford, LISW

In the last post, we looked at some of the ways our stress response can impact our relationships. In this issue, we will shift our focus to exploring ways in which we can begin to move from reactive to more intentional ways of responding.

The opportunity to change our response begins with noticing that when the stress response is activated, we live in the lower, reactive parts of our brain. Our ability to think clearly and flexibly is compromised and our ability to reflect and gain insight is challenged. And as Moche Feldenkrais says, “you can’t do what you want until you know what you’re doing.”

We can begin to know what we are doing (increase our level of awareness) by paying attention to our emotional state. When we are activated, even mildly, we can ask ourselves if we feel frustrated, angry, depressed, powerless? And what does that emotion feel like in our body when it occurs? Does our chest feel constricted? Does our stomach feel like it is tied in knots? Does it feel like a fog is descending on us making your head feel heavy? We pay attention to our emotional states and the associated feelings in our body for at least a couple of reasons. First, even the process of noticing how we feel, and putting words to it, can begin to shift us from the more reactive, lower portions of our brain, to the higher, “thinking” part of our brain that has the capacity to be more aware. Second, the feelings and emotions can remind us that our stress response is activated and that we need to find ways to jump-start our calming response to begin to re-engage with the external world.

It may also be helpful to notice that part of our automatic or reactive response includes repetitive thought or rumination. Often these repetitive thoughts include blame that may be directed at another person or at our self. A “thoughtful” response does not include any type of blaming, as blame tends to maintain the reactive, repetitive thinking. Instead, a thoughtful, or intentional response is more likely to occur if, for example, we look at a situation from another perspective, especially the perspective of the person we have a disagreement or conflict with. The more effective we become at acknowledging our desire to blame and choosing not to run with it, the more we can create opportunities for fresh and flexible thinking. Any type of blaming shuts down rather than opens up possibilities. This is another benefit of shifting our awareness to our body (by noticing what emotion is coming up and where we feel it) as we often get stuck in our head, especially when we are caught in thought loops.

Using our “thinking” brain to help us regulate our stress response is known as top-down processing. We can also recruit the calming response by starting with the body, or bottom-



up processing. As we become aware that we are in a reactive mode, we can enlist a variety of bottom-up processing tools to begin to calm the stress response.

We often hear the phrase, “remember to breathe” when we are upset or feeling stressed. When we are in a stressed state, our breathing tends to be shallow and rapid, and our heart rate elevated. When we slow down and breathe more intentionally so that our entire rib cage expands in each direction when we inhale, and our exhale is as long or longer than our inhale, we can begin to slow down our heart rate. This type of breathing, particularly the out breath, recruits our calming or relaxation response. It is helpful to breathe in this manner for at least a minute, and to do it in a way that is comfortable for you.

Breath is the only tool we have in our control that can directly access our autonomic nervous system, which includes all those functions that are normally automatic like heart rate. In a similar way, frowning, a worried expression and very focused vision (laser vision) are also associated with the stress response. Smiling, on the other hand, or even pretending to smile, and a soft gaze (peripheral vision) are associated with the calming response. These are simple and easy to access ways to begin to decrease our level of stress from the bottom (body)-up.

In general, rhythmic sound and movement, quieter and less visually stimulating (uncluttered) environments, soft lighting and firm or deep (but gentle) pressure on the body, tend to be bottom-up ways of encouraging the calming response. This is one reason that walking can be so calming; it is rhythmic movement that also stimulates receptors in our joints and muscles (proprioception) that play such an important role in regulation.

It may be useful to also consider that stress is not necessarily harmful or undesirable. Low levels of stress can make us more alert and open to learning. When we get excited about something, the feeling of excitement is also associated with our stress response. When we notice higher levels of stress, we are being provided with information that lets us know it may be helpful to take a look at what we are doing in our personal or professional lives. It could be a signal that a belief we hold closely does not serve us well, or an indication that we need to be more flexible in our thinking and more compassionate in our relationships, including our relationship with our self.

*If you are interested in exploring the theme in this issue of Reflections further,
or for professional and personal growth opportunities,
please contact me through the link to my website below.*

