

"By definition, stress reactions happen automatically and unconsciously. As soon as you bring awareness to what is going on in a stressful situation, you have already changed that situation dramatically, just by virtue of not being unconscious and on automatic pilot anymore. You are now fully present while the stressful event is unfolding. And since *you* are an integral part of the *whole* situation, *by increasing your level of awareness, you are actually changing the entire situation, even before you do anything.* This inner change can be extremely important *because it gives you a range of options for influencing what will happen next.* Bringing awareness to such a moment only takes a split second but it can make a critical difference in the outcome of a stressful encounter. In fact, it is the deciding factor in whether you go the path of the "Stress Reaction" in Figure 10 or whether you can navigate over to the path of the "Stress Response."

.....If you manage to remain centered in that moment of stress and recognize both the stressfulness of the situation *and* your impulses to react, as we have said, you have already introduced a new dimension into the situation. Because of this, you don't have to suppress all your thoughts and feelings associated with heightened arousal to prevent yourself from going out of control. You can actually allow yourself to feel threatened or fearful or angry or hurt and to feel the tension in your body in these moments. Being conscious in the present, you can easily recognize these agitations for what they are, namely *thought and feelings and sensations.*

This simple momentary shift from mindless reaction to mindful recognition can reduce the power of the stress reaction and its hold over you. In that moment you now have a very real choice. You can still go the route of the stress reaction, but you no longer have to. You no longer have to react automatically in the same old way every time your buttons get pushed. You can *respond* instead out of your greater awareness of what is happening.

.....The capacity to respond mindfully develops each time we experience discomfort or pain or strong feelings during meditation and we just observe them and work at letting them be there as they are, without reacting. As we have seen, the practice itself grounds us in alternative ways of seeing and responding to reactive states within ourselves, moment by moment. It introduces us to an entirely different kind of control. We come to see from our own experience that effective control can come out of inner calmness, acceptance, and openness; that we don't have to struggle with our thoughts and feelings or force things to be as we want them to be.

One thing is certain. We know where the fight-or-flight reaction will lead if it is left to play itself out automatically. We have been on that route most of our lives. The challenge now is for us to realize that at any moment we are in a position to actually decide to do things differently.

Choosing to go the route of the stress response obviously does not mean that you will never feel threatened or fearful or angry or that you will never do anything silly or self-destructive. What it does mean is that you might be more aware of those feelings and impulses more of the time when they are present. Your awareness may or may not temper the intensity of the arousal you feel. That will depend on the circumstances. But in general, awareness either reduces arousal at the time or it helps you to recover from it more quickly afterward.

In many situations, emotional arousal and physical tension are totally appropriate. At other times they may be inappropriate. In either case, how you handle them will depend on your degree of awareness.