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## People Stress

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**O**ther people can be a big source of stress in our lives. We all have times when we feel that others are controlling our lives, making demands on our time, are being unusually difficult or hostile, don't do what we expect them to, or don't care about us and our feelings. We can probably all think of particular people who cause us stress, people we prefer to avoid if we can but often can't because we live with them or work with them or have obligations that have to be met. In fact, many of the people who cause us the most stress may be people we love very deeply. We all know that love relationships can occasion deep emotional pain as well as joy and pleasure.

Our relationships with other people provide us with unending opportunities for practicing mindfulness and thereby reducing "people stress." As we saw in Part III, our stress cannot be said to be due solely to external stressors, because psychological stress arises from the *interaction* between us and the world. So in the case of people who "cause us stress," we need to take responsibility for our part in those relationships, for our own perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and behavior. Just as in any other unpleasant or threatening situation, we can react unconsciously with some version of the fight-or-flight reaction when we are having a problem with another person, and this usually makes matters worse in the long run.

Many of us have developed deeply ingrained habits for dealing with interpersonal unpleasantness and conflict. These habits are often our inheritance, molded by the ways our parents related to each other and to other people. Some people are so threatened by conflict or angry feelings in others that they will do anything to avoid a blowup. If you have this habit, you will tend not to show or tell people how you are really feeling but will try to avoid conflict at all costs by being passive, placating the other person, giving in to them, blaming yourself, dissimulating—whatever it takes.

Others may deal with their insecure feelings by creating con-

flict wherever they go. They see all their interactions in terms of power and control. Every interaction is made into an occasion for exerting control in one way or another, for getting their own way, without thinking or caring about others. People who have this habit of relating tend to be aggressive and hostile, often without any awareness of how it is perceived from the outside. They can be abrasive, abusive, insensitive out of sheer habit. Their speech tends to be harsh, both in their choice of words and in their tone of voice. They may act as if all relationships are struggles to assert dominance. As a result they usually leave a wake of bad feelings behind them in other people.

As we saw in Chapter 19, the deeply automatic impulse for fight-or-flight influences our behavior even when our lives are not in danger. When we feel that our interests or our social status is threatened, we are capable of reacting unconsciously to protect or defend our position before we know what we are doing. Usually this behavior compounds our problems by increasing the level of conflict. Or alternatively, we might act submissively. When we do, it is often at the expense of our own views, feelings, and self-respect. But since we also have the ability to reflect, think, and be aware, we have a range of other options available to us that go well beyond our most unconscious and deeply ingrained instincts. But we need purposefully to cultivate these options. They don't just magically surface, especially if our mode of interpersonal relating has been dominated by automatically defensive or aggressive behavior that we have not really bothered to look at. Again, it is a matter of choosing a response rather than being carried away by a reaction.

Relationships are based on connectedness. When people communicate, an exchange of perspectives takes place that can lead to new ways of seeing and being together for the people involved. We are capable of communicating far more than fear and insecurity to each other when our feelings become part of the legitimate scope of our awareness. Even when we are feeling threatened, angry, or frightened, we have the potential to improve our relationships dramatically if we bring mindfulness into the domain of communication itself. As we saw in Chapter 15, the motive of affiliative trust, for instance, which got stronger in people who took the stress reduction program, might be a healthy alternative to the relentlessly one-pointed pursuit of power in relationships.



The word *communication* suggests a flow of energy through a common bond. As with *communion*, it implies a union, a joining or sharing. So to communicate is to unite, to have a meeting or union of minds. This does not necessarily mean agreement. It does mean seeing the situation as a whole and understanding the other person's view as well as one's own.

When we are totally absorbed in our own feelings and our own view and agenda, it is virtually impossible to have a genuine communication. We will easily feel threatened by anyone who doesn't see things our way and we will tend to be able to relate to only those people whose view of the world coincides with our own. We will find our encounters with people who hold strongly opposing views to be stressful. When we react by feeling personally threatened, it is easy to draw battle lines and have the relationship degenerate into "us" against "them." This makes the possibility of communication very difficult. When we lock in to certain restricted mind-sets, we cannot go beyond the nine dots and perceive the whole system of which we and our views are only a part. But when both sides in a relationship expand the domain of their thinking and are willing to consider the other side's point of view and keep in mind the system as a whole, then extraordinary new possibilities emerge as imaginary but all-too-limiting boundaries in the mind dissolve.

The possibility of attaining harmony in communication applies to large collections of people, such as nations, governments and political parties, as well as to individuals. How else to explain that countries that were only a short time ago enemies, such as the United States and Germany and Japan, are now closely allied, and that the United States and the USSR are beginning to see and communicate about common interests and problems in ways that acknowledge the paradigm of wholeness and interdependence rather than just self-interest and mutually assured destruction?

Even when one party takes responsibility for thinking of the whole system and the other does not, the whole system is altered and new possibilities for conflict resolution and understanding may emerge. Of course these possibilities can also be damaged by unilateral reversions to an older way of thinking and acting, the massacre of Chinese demonstrators in Beijing by the Chinese army in June 1989 and the subsequent crackdown on the new democracy movement being one poignant example.



When we come to the topics of people stress and difficulties in communication in the stress clinic, sometimes we have the whole class break up into pairs to do a number of awareness exercises originally adapted from the martial art of aikido by the author and aikido practitioner, George Leonard. These exercises help us to act out with our bodies, in partnership with another person, the experience of responding instead of reacting in threatening and stressful situations. We get to simulate different possible energy relationships between the two people and to look at these relationships and feel how they feel “from the inside.”

In aikido, the goal is to practice maintaining your own center and calmness under physical attack, and to make use of the attacker’s own irrational and imbalanced energy to dissipate his or her energy without getting hurt yourself and also without harming the attacker. This involves being willing to move in close to the attacker and actually make contact with him or her while at the same time not placing yourself directly in the path of greatest danger, that is, right in front of the oncoming person.

The way we do these exercises in class, the partner who is “attacking” always represents a situation or person who is “running you over,” in other words, causing you stress. The attacker comes at the other person with arms outstretched in front and going straight for the other person’s shoulders, to give that person a significant “hit.”

In the first scenario, as the attacker comes at you, you just lie down on the floor and say something like, “It’s okay, do whatever you want, you’re right, *I’m* to blame,” or “Don’t do it, it wasn’t my fault, someone else did it.” We observe what that feels like with a partner, with each of us taking each role in turn. People invariably find this scenario distasteful in both roles but admit that it is frequently acted out in the “real” world. Many people share their stories of feeling like the doormat in the family or feeling trapped in their own passive behavior, intimidated by powerful others. The attackers usually admit feeling pretty frustrated by this scenario.

Then we proceed to a scenario in which, when the attacker comes at you, you move out of the way *at the last minute* as fast as you can so that he or she goes right by you. There is no physical contact. This usually causes the attackers to feel even more frustrated. They were expecting contact and they didn’t get it. The people who got out of the way feel pretty good this time. At least they didn’t get run over. But they also realize that you can’t relate

like this all the time or you will be constantly running away and avoiding people. Couples often get into this kind of behavior with each other, one pursuing contact, the other rejecting or avoiding it at all costs. These aggressive and passive (and sometimes, as when you are always avoiding contact as a way of getting back at another person, passive-aggressive) roles, when they become deep habits, can be very painful for both parties because there is no contact, no communication. It is lonely and frustrating. Yet people can and do live out their lives relating to other people through these basic passive and aggressive stances, even toward those they are closest to.

In another exercise, you push back when you are attacked instead of getting out of the way. You dig in your heels and resist. Both parties wind up pushing against each other. To intensify the situation and make it more emotionally charged, we might have people yell “I’m right, you’re wrong” at each other as they are doing this. When we stop action, close our eyes, and bring our attention to our bodies and feelings, people invariably say, after they have caught their breath, that this scenario feels better than the one in which one person was being passive. At least in this one there is contact. They discover that, while struggling is exhausting, it can also be exhilarating in its own way. We are making contact, standing up for ourselves, letting our feelings out, and that feels good. When we do this exercise, it always seems a little clearer *why* so many of us are virtually addicted to—and stuck in—this way of relating. It can actually feel good, in a limited way.

But this exercise leaves us feeling empty too. Usually both people in a struggle think they are right. Each is trying to force the other to see it “my way.” Both know deep down that the other person is not likely to come to see it differently, not out of forcing and intimidation and struggle. What does happen is that either we adjust to a life of perpetual struggle or one person submits every time, usually claiming that he or she is doing it to “save the relationship.” We can even get caught in thinking that these patterns in our relationships are the way things have to be. Even if they are painful and exhausting, in some ways we might tend to feel comfortable and secure with what we already know, with the familiar. At least we don’t have to face the unknown risks of choosing to see or do things differently and thereby threaten the status quo.

Too often we forget the physical and psychological costs of living like this, not only for the two parties in the relationship but for others who are connected to it as well, such as children and

grandparents, who may be observing this kind of relating day in, day out, and even taking the brunt of it. In the end, our lives can become bogged down in a very limited view of ourselves, our relationships, and our options. Perpetual struggle hardly seems a very good model for communication or for growth or change.

The last exercise in this series is called *blending* in aikido. This option represents the *stress response* as opposed to the various stress reactions we have just reviewed in the other scenarios. It is based on being centered, on being awake and mindful. It requires that we be aware of the other person as a stressor without losing our own balance of mind. We are grounded in our breathing and in our seeing the situation as a whole without reacting totally out of fear, even if fear is present, which it very likely is in our real-life stressful encounters with people. Blending, or responding, involves stepping into the attacker, positioning your feet so that you step toward but also slightly to the side of the attacker at the same time that you take hold of one of his or her outstretched wrists. This movement is called *entering* in aikido. By entering the attack, you manage to sidestep the brunt of it at the same time that you move in close and make contact. The very positioning of your body is making a statement that you are willing to encounter and work with what is happening, that you will not be run over. You don't try to control the attacker with brute force. Instead you take hold of his or her wrist and "blend" with the attacker's energy by turning with his or her momentum so that you are both facing in the same direction, still holding on to the wrist. At this moment you are both seeing the same thing because you are looking in the same direction. In blending, you avoid a head-on impact, in which you might be badly hurt or overwhelmed by the sheer momentum of the other person, yet you do make firm contact and also show, by moving *with* his or her momentum and turning, that you are willing to see things from his or her perspective, that you are receptive and willing to look and listen. This allows the attacker to maintain his or her own integrity, but at the same time it communicates that you are not afraid of making contact nor are you willing to let his or her energy overwhelm or harm you. At this moment you become partners rather than adversaries, whether the other person wants to or not.

You don't know what will happen in the next moment, but you have a lot of options. One possibility is to turn the attacker as his or her energy winds down and show that person how *you* see things now by both of you facing another direction. What happens next becomes a dance. You are not totally in control and neither is the

other person. But by maintaining your center, you are at least in control of yourself and much less vulnerable to harm. You can't have much of a plan for what to do next because so much depends on the situation itself. You have to trust in your own imagination and your ability to come up with new ways of seeing right in that moment.

I once had an immediate supervisor whose way of relating was to say things like "you son of a bitch" with a big smile on his face. He caused me a lot of stress because his hostility prevented us from having an effective working relationship. But I came to realize that he had no idea that he was being hostile. He would drive many of the people he supervised to distraction and often they would have terrible arguments with him and go away feeling angry, hurt, and, above all, frustrated at not being supported. One day, when he smiled as he said something hostile to me, I decided to call him on it. Very gently but matter-of-factly, I asked him if he was aware that every time he related to me he put me down. I also told him how it looked from my perspective, that I felt he really didn't like me and disapproved of the work I was doing. His response to this was utter amazement. He genuinely had no idea that he had been calling me names and had been giving me the feeling that he didn't like me and disapproved of the work. As a result of this conversation, our working relationship improved a good deal and became much less stressful for me. We had come to understand each other better, in part because I chose to blend with his attacks rather than resist them and mount an all-out assault of my own in return because I felt angry, hurt, and frustrated.

The path of blending obviously involves taking certain risks, since you don't know what the attacker will do next nor how you will respond. But if you are committed to meeting each moment mindfully, with as much calmness and acceptance as you can muster and with a sense of your own integrity and balance, new and more harmonious solutions often come to mind as you need them. Partly this requires being in touch with your feelings and accepting them, even acknowledging them and sharing them as appropriate. When one person in an adversarial relationship takes responsibility for doing this, the entire relationship changes, even if the other person is completely unwilling to engage in this way. The very fact that you are seeing differently and holding your own center means that you are much more in control than if you were merely reacting and forcing. Why let the momentum of another person's agenda catapult you into your own imbalance of body and mind just at the

moment when you need all your inner resources for being clear and strong?

The patience, wisdom, and firmness that can come out of a moment of mindfulness in the heat of a stressful interpersonal situation yield fruit almost immediately because the other person usually senses that you cannot be intimidated or overwhelmed. He or she will feel your calmness and self-confidence and will in all likelihood be drawn toward it because it embodies inner peace.

When you are willing to be secure enough in yourself to listen to what other people want and how they see things without constantly reacting, objecting, arguing, fighting, resisting, making yourself right and them wrong, they will feel heard, welcomed, accepted. This feels good to anybody. They will then be much more likely to hear what you have to say as well, maybe not right away, but as soon as the emotions recede a little. There will be more of a chance for communication and for an actual communion of sorts, a meeting of minds, and an acknowledging and coming to terms with differences. In this way, your mindfulness practice can have a healing effect on your relationships.



Relationships can heal just like bodies and minds can heal. Fundamentally, this is done through love, kindness and acceptance. But in order to promote healing in relationships or to develop the effective communication such healing depends on, you will have to cultivate an awareness of the *energy* of relationships, including the domains of minds and bodies, thoughts, feelings, speech, likes and dislikes, motives and goals—not only other people’s but also your own—as they unfold from moment to moment in the present. If you hope to heal or resolve the stress associated with your interactions with other people, whoever they may be, whether they are your children or your parents, your spouse, your ex-spouse, your boss, your colleagues, your friends, or your neighbors, mindfulness of communication becomes of paramount importance.



One good way to increase mindfulness of communication is to keep a log of stressful communications for a week. We have people do this in the week preceding the class on communication (fifth week). The assignment is to be aware of one stressful communica-



tion per day at the time that it is happening. This involves an awareness of the person with whom you are having the difficulty, how it came about, what you really wanted from the person or situation, what the other person wanted from you, an awareness of what was actually happening and what came out of it, as well as how you were feeling at the time it was happening. These items are recorded each day in a workbook and we then share and discuss them in class. (See the sample calendar in the Appendix.)

People come in with many rich observations about their patterns of communication that they had not been very conscious of before. Just keeping track of stressful communications and your own thoughts, feelings, and behavior while they are happening provides major clues about how you might behave differently to achieve your ends more effectively. Some people come to realize that much of their stress comes from not knowing how to be assertive about their own priorities when interacting with others. They may not even know how to communicate what they are really feeling, or they feel that they don't have a right to feel what they are feeling. Or they may feel afraid about expressing their feelings. Some feel absolutely incapable of ever saying no to other people, even though they know that to say yes means that their own resources will be taxed to the limit or beyond. They feel guilty doing something for themselves or having plans of their own. They are always ready to serve others at the expense of themselves, not because they have transcended their own physical and psychological needs and have become saints, but because they believe that that is what they "should" do to be a "good person." Sadly, this often means that they are always helping other people but feel incapable of nourishing or helping themselves. That would be too "selfish," too self-centered. Thus they put other people's feelings first, but for the wrong reasons. Deep down they may be running away from themselves by serving other people, or they may be doing it to gain approval from others or because they were taught and now think that that is the way to be a "good person."

This behavior can create enormous stress because you are not replenishing your own inner resources nor are you aware of your own attachments to the role you have adopted. You can exhaust yourself running around "doing good" and helping others and in the end be so depleted that you are incapable of doing any good at all and unable to help even yourself. It's not the doing things for others that is the source of the stress here. It is the lack of peace and harmony in your own mind as you engage in all the doing.

If you decide that you have to say no more often and define certain limits in your relationships so that you might bring your life into balance, you will discover that there are a lot of ways you might do it. Many ways of saying no cause more problems than they solve. If you react to demands upon you from others by saying no in an angry way, you create bad feelings all around and more stress. Often when we feel put upon, we automatically attack the other person in return, making them feel blamed or threatened or inadequate. The use of abrasive language and tone of voice contribute to this attack. Usually the first thing we do is to *react* by saying no. Adamantly. In some circumstances you might even find yourself calling the other person names. Here is where authentic assertiveness training can be very useful. What assertiveness training amounts to is mindfulness of feelings, speech, and actions.

Assertiveness is predicated on the assumption that you can be in touch with what you are actually feeling. It goes far beyond whether you can say no when you want to. It concerns your deepest ability to know yourself and to read situations appropriately and face them consciously. If you have an awareness of your feelings *as feelings*, then it becomes possible to break out of the passive or hostile modes that so automatically rear up when you feel put upon or threatened. So the first step in becoming more assertive is to practice knowing how you are actually feeling. In other words, practice mindfulness of your own feeling states. This is not so easy, especially if you have been conditioned your whole life to believe that it is wrong to have certain kinds of thoughts or feelings in the first place. Every time they come up, the reflex is to go unconscious and lose your awareness completely. Alternatively, you may condemn yourself inwardly, feel guilty about what you are feeling, and try to hide what you are really feeling from others. You may get stuck in your own beliefs about good and bad and end up denying or suppressing your feelings.

The first lesson in assertiveness is that your feelings are simply *your feelings!* They are neither good nor bad. “Good” and “bad” are just judgments that you or others impose *on* your feelings. To act assertively really requires a non-judging awareness of your feelings as they are.

Many men grew up in a world in which there was an overriding message that “real men” don’t have—and therefore should not show—certain kinds of feelings. This social conditioning makes it very difficult for boys and men to be aware of their true feelings a lot of the time because their feelings are “unacceptable” and there-

fore very quickly edited out, denied, or repressed. This makes it particularly difficult to communicate effectively at highly emotionally charged times, such as when we are feeling threatened or vulnerable and when we experience grief or sorrow or hurt.

Our best chance of breaking out of this dilemma is for us to suspend the judging and editing of our feelings as we become aware of doing this and instead, to risk listening to our feelings and accepting them because they are already here. But, of course, this means we have to want to be more open, at least with ourself, and perhaps, also, to communicate differently.

Even in situations that are not threatening, men can have a hard time communicating their feelings. We have been so conditioned to devalue communicating our true feelings that we often forget that it is even possible. We just plunge ahead with what we are doing and expect people to *know* what we want or what we are feeling without our having to say it. Or we don't care; we do what we do and let the consequences fall where they may. It can threaten our autonomy to tell other people our plans or our intentions or our feelings. This behavior can be a source of endless exasperation to women.

When you know what you are feeling and have practiced reminding yourself that your feelings are just feelings and that they are okay to have and to feel, then you can begin to explore ways of being true to your feelings without letting them create more problems for you. They create problems both when you become passive and discount them and when you become aggressive and inflate and overreact to them. To be assertive means to know your feelings *and* to be able to communicate them in a way that allows you to maintain your integrity without threatening the integrity of others. For example, if you know that you want to or need to say no in a particular situation, you can practice saying it in such a way that you are not using it as a weapon. You might try first telling the other person that you would be glad to fulfill the request if the circumstances were different (if this is in fact the case), but . . . , or you might in some other way acknowledge that you respect the other person and his or her needs. You do not have to tell the other person why you are saying no, but you can choose to if you want to.

When being assertive, it is very helpful to remember to say how you are feeling or seeing the situation by making "*I*" statements rather than "*you*" statements. "*I*" statements convey information about your feelings and views. Such statements are not wrong; they

are simply statements of *your* feelings. But if you are uncomfortable with your feelings, you might wind up blaming how you are feeling on the other person without even knowing it. Then you may find yourself saying things like “*You* make me so angry” or “*You* are always making demands on me.”

Can you see that this is saying that the other person is in control of *your* feelings? You are literally handing power over your feelings to another person and not taking responsibility for your end of the system, which includes you both.

The alternative is to say something like “I feel so angry when you say this or do that.” This is more accurate. It says how *you* feel in response to something. This leaves the other person room to hear what you are saying about how you see and feel without feeling blamed or attacked and without being told that he has more power than he actually has.

Maybe the other person won’t understand. But at least you have made the attempt to communicate without doing battle. This is where the dance begins. What you do or say next will depend on the particular circumstances. But if you maintain mindfulness of the entire situation and of your own thoughts and feelings, you will be much more likely to steer your way through to some kind of understanding, or accommodation, or agreement to disagree, without losing or surrendering your own dignity and integrity, either through being passive or being aggressive.

The most important part of effective communication is to be mindful of your own thoughts, feelings, and speech as well as of the situation. It is also crucial to remember that you and your “position” are part of a social system. If you expand the field of your own awareness to include the whole system, this will allow you to see and honor the other person’s point of view as well. Then you will be able to listen and really hear, to see and comprehend, to speak and know what you are saying, and to act effectively and assertively, with dignity. Most of the time cultivating this approach—which we might call *the way of awareness*—will resolve potential conflicts and create greater harmony and mutual respect. In the process, you are much more likely to get what you want and what you need from your encounters with other people. And so are they!