

Break Your Stress Default Patterns

One of the challenges people face when making change in their life is that when stress, time pressure and external demands are high, they crash back into our old unwanted patterns of behaviour. They think that if they just put their priorities on hold and get through this challenging time it'll eventually be over and all can return to normal. They suffer through the period relying on their default patterns and living exactly how they *don't* want to be.

The problem with this coping strategy is that the impact of the stressful situation is exacerbated by the ineffective behaviour, thoughts and habits they fall back into. As a result, they feel even more exhausted and run down once the stress is over than they could have had they stayed true to their balanced lifestyle choices. To add to the trauma, it can make change seem impossible and leave them giving up their belief that they can create the life they really want.

The most obvious stress-slip is with exercise and eating habits. During stressful times, people often turn to comfort food and reward themselves by slothing out and failing to engage in exercise. Although there is an immediate reward of comfort, the longer-term impact (sometimes as little as hours afterward) is feeling low on energy, depressed, lethargic, and guilty for overindulging. Sometimes this is added to further by feeling 'bloated', gaining weight and a drop in self-esteem.

On the other side, when people are able to maintain their priorities and habits in challenging times it enables stress to create less of a ding in their health, mood and life. Being able to cope in this way provides them with re-enforcement of their personal strength and capability, and feels unbelievably empowering. Just one instance of coping effectively with stress in a way that is in alignment with who they want to be is often enough to motivate them to commit to this as a regular behavioural response to stress.

Everyone has unique signs of impending stress and habitual patterns of dealing with those signs. One of my coaching clients, Terri, starts to withdraw socially as soon as stress lands on her plate. She starts to feel like her social life is too much of an effort, pulls back from her partner and feels the urge to stay at home, watch videos and eat food. She stops exercising and often escalates to feeling depressed.

By identifying this pattern, she now takes note as soon as this desire to withdraw begins. She has created a 'self-indulgence' process to rejuvenate and comfort herself without withdrawing from exercise and socialising, and without running to comfort food. Instead she has a 'spa savings budget' throughout the year and any time she identifies stress signals, she takes the Saturday out and spoils herself thoroughly at the day spa. This puts her into a healthy mind frame despite the stressful circumstances around her and allows her to make healthier, more balanced choices throughout.

The key to maintaining your new habits and choices is identifying ahead of time signs that a stressful period is coming on. Sometimes this is obvious like in anticipation of taking on a new job. But in most areas of your life, the stress creeps upon you and you don't realise how stressed you've been until it's taken over.

How to Break Your Stress Default Patterns?

1. Identify your own signs of impending stress

Look back over recent stressful periods. What were the first changes you experienced in your mood, social behaviour, diet and exercise patterns, energy levels, desire for intimacy, sleeping patterns? Did you experience any physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches or loss of appetite?

2. Decide ahead of time what you will do when signs of stress appear.

Pick a few of your favourite activities that rejuvenate and refresh you, bring you back to the present and shift your perspective. Set the intention ahead of time to partake in these activities when stress raises its ugly head.

3. Listen to Your Body.

When signals of stress emerge stop and listen to what your body needs. Most people ignore stress signs, try to push them aside or escape from them rather than simply sitting with them and allowing them to dissipate. The more you are able to be with the feelings the faster they will pass as you're not repressing any emotion.

4. Nip it in the bud immediately.

As soon as you notice signs of stress indulge in your chosen activities. Don't wait until you're riddled with stress before you start. The sooner you nip it in the bud, the sooner you'll shift your perspective and see the most effective ways to deal with the current situation. It will also increase the likelihood that you'll make choices in alignment with who you want to be rather than get caught up in the clouded emotion of stress.

The better you get at anticipating stress and putting mechanisms in place to help deal with it immediately and effectively, the easier it will be to truly live with balance, happiness and success. Tame that wild tornado and start to respond stress in ways that surprise and empower you...

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