

Angry Pickles

“Stress level: extreme. It's like she was a jar with the lid screwed on too tight, and inside the jar were pickles, angry pickles, and they were fermenting, and about to explode.”

Fiona Wood

What would it be like to just be? What would it be like not to agonize about something left undone at work, the pile of unpaid bills on the table, the state of your bank account, or the plight of the nation, the environment or the universe? What would it be like not to worry about navigating through complicated office politics, delicate social relationships or family troubles? What would it be like to not to hear the ranting of a vicious inner critic, shredding your psyche to pieces? What would it be like to get enough sleep that you woke up feeling rested, refreshed and ready for the day? In short, what would it be like to not be stressed out?

Stress – that’s what you feel when your fight or flight motion shifts into gear. Some stress is good. It makes you more alert and energized so that you perform better. Stressful situations can even be exhilarating because they cause dopamine, the feel good neurotransmitter, and adrenaline and cortisol, the energy boost hormones, to flood the body. This is why so many people think that it’s fun to watch horror movies, jump out of airplanes and/or have sex in risky situations. The catch is that stress is only useful if it’s short-lived. Chronic stress can leave you feeling exhausted, overwhelmed and/or immobilized. It can make you feel like a jar of angry pickles, ready to explode.

When stress becomes the norm, the body doesn’t have a chance to discharge the added energy or rebalance itself and cortisol levels in the bloodstream rise causing a host of physical problems. Elevated cortisol levels lead to impaired cognitive functioning, suppressed thyroid functioning (which can slow your metabolism and cause you to pack on pounds), blood sugar imbalances (which not only cause hyperglycemia but also lead to sugar cravings which can also lead you to pack on the pounds), decreased bone density (which can lead to osteoporosis), decreased muscle tissue, weakened immune system response, increased inflammatory problems such as fibromyalgia, slower wound healing, and increased abdominal fat (which can lead to heart attacks and strokes). At the emotional level, chronic stress can lead to anxiety, fear, anger, frustration and depression. Chronic stress can also cause people to withdraw, become indecisive or inflexible and/or irritable or aggressive. It can also lower your libido and who wants that?

Chronic stress seems to be endemic to modern life. We have too much to do and too little time to do it and we want to fit it all in. We constantly worry about work, finances, and relationships and any time we miss the mark, we hear the tyrannical voice of an angry inner critic.

So what can we do about this? The simple answer is to relax, but this is challenge given the fact that we have adrenaline and cortisol racing through our veins. A strenuous work out can help discharge some of the excess energy, but the bigger issue is in our heads – the way we think and the “rules” we think we have to live by.

Think about your “To Do” list. Whether you’ve actually written it down or just have it stored in your brain, it’s pretty long isn’t it? You probably have a number of basic living tasks you need to do now – buy a card for your father’s birthday, call Syl to make sure she’s OK, get milk, change the litter box, vacuum the living room, dust the mantle. And then you probably have a list of things you are expected to do at work that you haven’t done – or you have to search for a job. And then you think about the balance in your checking account relative to the expected incoming bills. And if you’re really on the ball, you might even take time to worry about your retirement account. This list is probably driven by those rules you think you must live by to be an acceptable human being. Some of these are probably a little over the top. Rules like, “Never leave the house in a mess,” are probably fine in moderation, but taken to an extreme, you’ll find it almost impossible to get out of the house because you are so busy dusting, washing dishes and putting things away. Rules like, “Family always comes first” also sound good. But what if you have six brothers and sisters who all have kids? If they live nearby, there might be a family function requiring gifts or at least some potluck item every weekend – which can put a damper on your social life and make it difficult to get your house cleaned. Likewise, expectations you put on yourself to help out – whether it’s volunteering for your favorite charity or cause, or helping out friends in need can leave you feeling overwhelmed and burned out. In the meantime, the milk doesn’t just magically appear in your refrigerator just because you went to your nephew’s soccer game or helped your best friend move. And working late night after night to complete the next big project is unlikely to improve your relationship with your partner. Add to this, those things on your list that don’t get done add fuel to your inner critic’s litany about how much you suck.

The test for these sorts of rules and expectations are, “Will this make me feel more energized and alive or will it make me feel more depleted and overwhelmed?” And conversely, “What will the consequences of not doing this be?” Perhaps you can live with coming home to a house that’s not perfectly tidy. Perhaps you can ask for help on that project or ask for an extension. Perhaps you can skip one or two birthday parties or say no when someone asks you to volunteer for yet one more thing. Perhaps you can look at downsizing so that you aren’t constantly trying to make miracles happen with your paycheck.

Finally, at the end of the day, being present is the best way to manage your stress. Most of the stress we are dealing with is focused on worries about the future. Letting yourself be here now lets the pressure out of that pickle jar – at least temporarily. Even if you are

losing your house. Even if you and your partner are breaking up. Even if your father is dying. Take a moment to tune into your breath. Feel it move through your body. Better yet, take a walk in the woods or by the river or dig in your garden. Feel the ground beneath your feet and the breeze on your face. Breathe in the scents of the season. Be in the now. The lists will wait. Time in nature might not change your finances or your relationship or your father, but it will give you space to think about things differently and respond to them from a more grounded place. And it will calm down those angry pickles.

To ask Regina a question, check out upcoming workshops, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com . This Column originally appeared in Outlook Columbus.