

Managing Multiple Stresses During Troubled Times

By
Jay Uhler

Yesterday was quite a day. I had been having some tightness in my chest. A friend who I played tennis with in the morning told me about having two heart attacks. Later as I was driving to New Beginnings in Wellesley, we talked on the phone. I mentioned the tightness in my chest. He said emphatically, I should be proactive and go to a hospital to have it checked. I was on the Rt. 128/95 at Rt. 3A near a Clinic, so he said to go there.

Several years ago I was in a hospital for five days with them telling me that I had a heart attack. At one point they said an enzyme test indicated that I had a heart attack. I told them that they either had the wrong name on the test or they did the test wrong. I knew I did not have a heart attack.

I called my doctor who said, they're crazy. "You never had a heart attack." A nurse at the hospital came in two days later and said that I did not have a heart attack. The doctor who later did the stress test that my doctor ordered said, "I never saw anyone run like that who had a heart attack." They concluded that it was intense gastritis. A chiropractor discovered that the gas had come from a reaction to milk and onions.

When the nurse told me that the enzyme test showed that I had a heart attack, she brought in two pamphlets, "Life After a Heart Attack" and "Sex After a Heart Attack." I started to read the one on "Life After a Heart Attack" first, because everyone knows that you have to be alive to have sex. I started to get anxious reading it, so I threw them both in the trash, turned on the television with "I Love Lucy" and "Laverne and Shirley" and laughed away my anxiety.

After I signed in at the Clinic last evening, I felt tremendous pressure in my head. I was filled with fear that I would not just get clarity about the tightness in my chest, but would have to, once again, defend my health. They took my blood pressure which was 190 over 90. A half hour later it was 155 over 84. I am sure that a few hours later it was 120 over 80, which it was as recent as three weeks ago and is standard for me.

Four hours later, a doctor spoke with me. (I did get to watch "Seinfeld" and laugh with some of the other people in the waiting room.) They found nothing and said that it did not seem to be heart related, but the doctor wanted me to stay over night. I left against doctor's orders.

Today I talked with my PCP who is a wonderful M. D. and knows me well. He said that he would sign me up for a stress test. He said that the tightness in my chest is probably from some recent new exercises and from having food that I usually do not eat.

Yesterday my retirement fund was reduced by several thousand dollars.

I was not able to get to New Beginnings to meet with the group that I facilitate.

This is not to complain. I am grateful for my health and my life style. **It is to say that we have many stresses in a day.** Then consider the stress in a week or a month.

Jay Uhler is an Organizational and Clinical Psychologist, Ordained Minister, Professional Speaker and the author of *How to Make Friends With Your Feelings*. He provides individual, couple and family therapies in offices in North Andover and in Quincy, MA. He assists corporate executives in the U.S. and Europe to resolve conflicts in their organizations and facilitates conflict resolution for multi-party and multi-racial disputes. You can reach him at 978-685-8550

Everyone has stress. The question is not, “Do you have stress? The question is, “What are you doing with your stress?”

Another question is, **what type of stress you are experiencing?** Is it stress that motivates you or is it stress that drains you? Some stress for a brief period can be a good thing—even exciting! Too much of a good thing can destroy you.

In this article I want to clarify stress. What it is.

The second part of the article explains the many ways we can reduce stress.

Hans Salye wrote a book on what he called “stressors. His point was that there can be many things that put stress on us, many stressors. An individual has a point at which they can **not** handle one more. Life seems overwhelming.

How many stressors a person can handle at any point in their life can vary depending on their situation. One person may be able to handle six. Another person may be only able to handle two. The person who can handle six stressors may at another time in their life be able to handle two and the person who could handle two stressors at a different time can handle six.

There can be many reasons for this. It can depend on a person’s strengths and on their vulnerabilities. It can be influenced by past experiences, especially childhood experiences. A lot of a person’s ability to handle stress depends on their life style, such as the amount of water a person drinks, the amount of sleep they get, the kind of food they eat, the amount of exercise they get. It can depend on other aspects of life style, such as smoking, alcohol consumption, work environment, joy or resentment in one’s family.

Let’s be sure that we are using the same language.

Stress can come from the outside and from the inside. Stress is a lot easier to deal with when we are in control of our inside. This will be more clear later. Let me now simply say that **if you are being bombarded from the outside and you do not manage what is inside, you are surrounded.** When you are able to be in charge of what is inside, it is much easier to be in command of what is occurring outside of you.

My understanding is that much internal stress is related to emotions. When we accept them as part of being human and manage them well we can cope with outside stressors. The emotions that are often unacceptable are fear and possibly pain. The emotion that people can most easily experience is anger. The one that is most common during tough times, and often the least recognized, is **helplessness.**

In troubled times, we feel helplessness, because the perception is that we are helpless to change the source of our stress. We may even experience a sense of hopelessness that things will never change—that the present circumstances will go on forever.

A feeling of helplessness often occurs when it seems as though others have control over our lives and we are helpless to do anything about it.

It is easy to feel helplessness when people in government or the business world have great influence on our lives in issues of health care, finance, war and peace, our environment. We feel helpless when the quality of roads we must travel are unsafe and the type of vehicle propulsion we use to get to work detracts from our family income.

All these can generate the emotion of helplessness.

How can we manage helplessness? First is to realize that when we feel helpless, it does not mean that we are helpless. It means that we must look at our options. It may appear that the only options are ones that we do not like. That may be true, yet if we do not consider the ones that we do not like, we often miss ones that we may like.

It is interesting to notice that when we pick an option and act on it, even one that we do not like, we create momentum and others that are better show up.

So what are some of the options that we can pick to improve our situation or offset our feelings of helplessness?

One is to **look at your lifestyle**. Tough times can be a time to simplify our lives and what we value most. It can be easy when things seem to be going well to drift from what is important in our lives. This can be especially true when money has become our priority. In times when money has diminishing returns, it can be easy to panic.

There can be much value to shift our energies to our relationships. This can be especially true when we have children. I personally have chosen during my life to pass up opportunities for more money and professional visibility in order to spend time with my children. They grow up so quickly. If you don't spend time with them as they grow up, you will never have the same opportunity again and you can miss a lot of fun. One of the benefits of being with children is that you get to play and be a child again. If you focus only on adult responsibilities, you miss a lot.

I believe **balance is important. Play provides balance and reduces stress**. You don't have to have children in order to play like one. I was at a meeting in Boston near the Public Garden. I had to walk past the Swan Pond to get to my car. I had never been on the Swan Boats. There were people in line with their children waiting to go for a ride.

Since no one was willing to quickly adopt me, I got in line with my three piece suit and tie without the benefit of a child's hand to hold and bought myself a ticket. I enjoyed it so much that I did it a second time. What fun!

This Tuesday I was in Quincy where my second office is located. As I was leaving I drove by Wollaston beach. After parking my car I went for a walk on the walkway next to the beach. I decided to walk back in the sand, so I took off my shoes and socks, rolled up my dress pants and enjoyed the sand between my toes. The beautiful, blue water added to my joy as I returned to my car.

There is a wonderful sense of freedom when I ride my bicycle, Blue Lightening. It is great to breathe the fresh air as you ride. When I ride, I breathe **lots** of air!

Deep breaths are a key to reducing stress. When we tense our bodies in response to stress, we tend to stop breathing. Often when I am with clients as they talk about difficult or traumatic life experiences, I remind them to take a deep breathe, because they are holding their breath without knowing it.

People think that smoking is relaxing. It can seem that way because when you smoke you have to breathe. If you breathe deeply without a cigarette, you will relax.

Water is important for your body anytime, but especially during tough times. Many people only drink water with their meals, which is the worst time for your body. The water is used to wash down their food. When you drink fluids with your meals, it dilutes your digestive juices and when you wash down your food, you are interfering with

an important part of the digestive process, because the food is partially digested by saliva as you chew. My advice is, let your digestive system do its work effectively.

Don't drink and eat. Do drink lots of water between meals. Your body, your digestive system and your immune system will thank you for it. You will also alleviate a stressor.

During tough times it helps to be kind to your body and your pocket book by **eating lots of fruit, vegetables and fish.** Beef has many ways of harming your system and it is expensive for the family budget and the environment.

Speaking of saving money, **exercise can cost little and be a big benefit.** You don't have to join a health club. You can walk, which cost a pair of shoes. I do exercises in my bedroom in the morning without shoes or nifty exercise clothes. You can do stretching exercises which are free. For a few dollars you can buy big rubber bands with different tension levels or you can get a few light weights. It doesn't take much money, but the benefits last a life-time.

As you get your priorities in line, you might find that you have some cash available. A massage or some energy work that releases tension in your body is a great way to take care of yourself during stressful times.

Many body workers have done good things for my body, but by far the best is a **massage** therapist who does energy massage. Her name is Kim Dasilva in Newburyport, MA, 978-257-9011. I have friends in Boston who go to her. A plus is that after your body is renewed, you can go to Plum Island to relax on the beach or take a salad to the boardwalk on the Merrimac River to enjoy the boats or let your eyes feast on the ocean as the river flows into it.

Sitting quietly can be very relaxing. Even a few minutes of sitting and focusing on your breathing or on your stomach as it moves with every inhale or exhale can be very relaxing. Some people call it meditation, but that can seem like work. I just sit and refocus my mind which gives it a rest. The quiet time can reduce stress and also can give you ideas or revelations about how to handle your trouble times.

For me counting exercise repetitions is a form of meditation. The rhythmic counting relaxes my mind as my breathing relaxes my body and the exercises provide strength, flexibility and renewal to my body. All this is good for my soul.

Anything we can do to support our mind, body and soul helps us to manage multiple stresses during troubled time.

Blessings and Peace to you and to all those you love.

Jay Uhler

(Copyright © Jay Uhler, 2008. May be copied when used to benefit others)

(This article was written for listeners to the Jordan Rich Show, WBZ, 1030AM, Boston, on October 10, 2008. Share your comments by e-mail at radiospots@aol.com or mail them to Jordan Rich, c/o WBZ, 1170 Soldiers Field Rd., Boston, MA 02134.)