

DEALING WITH STRESS
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At this time of year, magazines start running articles on dealing with holiday stress--a very worthwhile topic. These articles discuss simplifying the holidays and doing as much planning and work in advance--both useful for managing holiday stress. But my article is not going to be like the traditional ones you read in November and December.

I had an experience Friday that prompted me to write this newsletter, using my own situation as a teaching tool for stress management, both during the holiday time, and throughout the rest of the year.

On my way to a consulting job in Hollywood, I received a call asking me why I wasn't at the seminar I thought I was going to be teaching NEXT week. Fifty people had been waiting for me for 20 minutes, and the manager was IRATE!

Guess what my topic was? Stress Management.

I was horrified! I couldn't believe I'd mixed up the date. I was also ashamed. It's not like me to make mistakes like this. And, I hadn't even studied the material I'd be presenting for four hours. Shaken, on the verge of tears, I called in to cancel the Hollywood job. Luckily there were others there who could take my place. I turned around and headed home to pick up the powerpoint program and the training and student manuals.

I called the irate manager (who by then had calmed down a bit) and profusely apologized. I told him I'd be there in about 45 minutes. I was a little relieved to learn they could move a part of their program that was supposed to come after my talk into the morning time, so they weren't sitting around twiddling their thumbs and waiting for me.

I was also upset because this was only the second job I'd done for this consulting company, and I figured I'd just blown the opportunity for future work.

On the race back to my house, and then to the site, I knew I'd have to apply all the stress reduction techniques I was scheduled to teach my students, or I'd arrive at the hotel a frazzled mess, and have lost any credibility I had left. Plus, I knew I'd potentially alienated everyone who'd be listening to

me, and I knew I'd have a lot of ground to regain--not something I'd be able to do if I was stressed and anxious.

Here's what I did to decrease my stress level:

1. I began to take deep centering breaths. Centering breaths are when you breathe to the bottom of your lungs, pushing your belly out when you inhale, and pulling your belly in when you inhale.

2. I prayed. I knew I needed all the help I could get, so I asked for Divine guidance for the situation to turn out in a positive manner.

3. I began to list what I had control over and what I didn't have control of.

I didn't:

- * Have control over going back in time and fixing my mistake.
- * Have control over the traffic.
- * Have control over what was happening at the hotel, and what the people involved currently were feeling or thinking about me.
- * Have control over the fact that I hadn't even glanced at the materials.

I did:

- * Have control over my attitude--negative or positive thoughts.
- * Have control over my body--taking deep breaths.
- * Have control over remaining panicked or preparing myself to teach a class by deciding what to do, and how I could use what I already knew about the topic, along with what was in the actual program from my consulting company.

4. I focused on letting go of the circumstances I didn't have control over, and concentrated on what I did have control over.

Letting go meant not dwelling on them, and especially not magnifying the negative situation by building up more fearful fantasies in my mind.

By doing these four steps, I became more (although not completely) relaxed, and my mind started working on creative solutions. I was able to gear up my energy, knowing I had to go in and give the best teaching performance of my life. So when I arrived at the hotel, an hour and 15 minutes after I was supposed to have started my presentation, I was ready to hit my mark.

And I did.

What followed was an amazing experience, one that taught me more than I taught my class. I walked in, apologized publicly to the audience, and used my own example--what happened, all my reactions, and how I handled them--as the opening to the class. They were laughing and relating, and in five minutes, I knew I had them hooked. Even the manager (who'd greeted me politely, but had silently made it clear that he was mad) relaxed his stiff body language and joined in the laughter.

So I relaxed, too. I put the negative experience behind me, and rode the wave of laughter into a positive, energy-filled presentation. I was able to navigate through the material, maybe not the way I would have if I'd been prepared, but in a way that still worked. And we ended up having fun. They were a close-knit group with a sarcastic sense of humor, and that helped. We laughed a lot.

At the end, when we were discussing how to learn from our mistakes, I again used myself as an example. "One," I said, "was that I'd learned to triple check future speaking engagement dates. But two, was that I have learned I can make a spectacular mistake, be VERY upset about it, yet meet the challenge and turn it around. How valuable is that to know about myself?" As I was speaking I could feel the positive boost I'd given to my self-esteem. And I laughed and told the class, "I'll have to fill out an evaluation form for myself."

The class evaluations came back very positive, and my consulting company was very pleased.

What a lesson. (One I'd prefer not to have to learn again.) I'd stepped up to a challenge and mastered it. If I'd given up and avoided the situation, this experience would be forever branded in my consciousness as a shameful failure. But instead, I have a positive experience that I can always use to motivate myself when I'm confronted with a new challenge.

So, as the holidays approach and you're dealing with challenging situations, remember to take deep breaths, pray, decide what you have control over and what you don't, then release the anxiety about what you have no control over. Focus on the positive--especially love and gratitude for all the wonderful people and things you have in your life.

I hope your holidays are relaxed, filled with special family and friends, laughter, love, and joy.

Dr. Debra