

KEEPING AN OPEN MIND: COPING IN DIFFICULT TIMES

By Dr. Joyce Nicholls-Goudsmid

If someone else hadn't used the title first, I would have called this "When bad things happen to good people." Because I am here today to talk with you about how to cope when the universe challenges you in ways that are out of your control. As you have heard earlier today, as a world, as a country, as a province, and as individuals we have to find ways of dealing with new economic realities. Some of you will have lost hours of work, or entire jobs. Some of our citizens have lost a sizable portion of their pensions. Some of us are still working and saving for retirement, only to find that **that** day is further away than we thought. Many of us have make difficult choices about how to spend less – on our homes, on ourselves and on our children.

We are affected every day by reports in the media – more jobs cut, more businesses closed. If it hasn't happened to us, we wonder if and when it will. Even those of us fortunate enough to have some job security have to keep reminding ourselves of that fact; otherwise we start to feel some of the worry and panic that we know people more burdened than us are feeling.

Some people are finding themselves reacting to all of this physically and mentally: not sleeping so well; eating more or less...or differently; stomach aches, head aches, neck aches; palpitations or chest pains; drinking more,

smoking more, taking more; more short-tempered; less motivated.....all kinds of stress responses.

The Canadian Mental Health Association website is a great resource that explains stress and ways of handling it, in much more detail than I can here. So I'll be brief: We are used to talking about stress as something that happens TO us. But stress doesn't happen TO us; life events happen to us. And some of those events do cause us stress. So stress is a response, or a collection of responses – physical, emotional, psychological, and behavioural.

But that's not all of it either. Between the thing that happens, or stressor, and the stress reaction, is you. And more than anything, that YOU in the middle determines your stress reaction far more than anything else. Take me for instance: there's the event – being asked to do this presentation; there is my stress reaction – breaking out in a sweat; and there's the person in the middle - ME. For some of you there would be no stress reaction – no sweating. For others of you there would be a huge stress reaction – you might still be in a stall in the washroom! And for some of you, even though you may feel nervous, you look forward to the challenge in a positive way. The event is the same, but the reactions are different depending on who you are.

And what determines that “who you are” part? Lots of things – your genetics, your upbringing, where you've been, what you've done.....a huge number

of factors. I'll give you another example, more to the point of this topic. I am not being sexist here, but males tend to be WAY more stressed by changes in employment and by financial challenges. Maybe it is nature, maybe it is nurture. But men take these things more personally and generally see themselves as more responsible for their family's well-being. And when confronted with unemployment or other changes in their "breadwinner" role, they tend to feel more guilty and less worthy. Men are also less likely to share how they are feeling. Therefore they are more likely to use coping strategies that are less healthy, for example isolating themselves and using alcohol more, driving aggressively, or engaging in violence. A recent article states that:

Data going back decades shows that, like clockwork, economic downturns push more men over the brink.... Men draw much of their identity from their careers, and when unemployment rises, that underpinning falls away. Many men at that highly vulnerable age for suicide — the early 20s — may struggle simply to begin a fulfilling career in a sharp economic downturn. The feeling of being a burden doesn't apply only to people failing at life. Even the most successful, driven men, the ones we perceive as being on top of their game, can buckle under a heavy load.

And, while the research indicates that women are proportionally more impacted by economic downturns by, for example, job losses in part-time work and the service industry, “women are happy to talk over their feelings with friends or partners, and are more likely to see their GP when they feel anxious or stressed, rather than waiting for a physical problem to develop.” (www.channel4.com/health). That study also found that men and women are equally likely to become depressed, but it is less likely to be diagnosed in men.

I hope that you will see from my example that even when people have the same thing happen to them, say, job loss, they are likely to handle it differently. The important point here is that even if you have no control over what happens “out there” – recession or H1N1 flu – you do have some control over how you deal. Now of course, we are not always completely helpless. People do find other employment, economies do turn around, interest rates do go up (great for investors, not so much for those of us with debt!), and we do go on. It is how we cope in the meantime that is important here.

And may I say, not only cope, but do okay. Sometimes when I think of coping I think of that picture of that kitten barely hanging onto a branch with its little claws, you know, and underneath it says “Hang in there”. Sometimes I prefer to use the word “manage”. To me it has more of the flavour of handling things, and handling them well.

Now, since I have only about 20 minutes left, I have to cut to the chase. And there is a saying that comes to mind:

YESTERDAY IS HISTORY, TOMORROW IS A MYSTERY. TODAY IS A GIFT.
THAT'S WHY THEY CALL IT THE PRESENT.

What this speaks to is the wisdom of staying in the here and now. Our fears and worries come from that place inside us that reminds us of all the mistakes and unwise decisions we made that still haunt us. And it taunts us with the “what ifs” about the future. We are rarely kept awake nights thinking about the great choices we made in the past, or about how well everything is going to work out in the future. Well, I don't anyway. No, my stress comes from regrets and fears. And I think that yours does too.

It may not surprise you to know that some of the techniques that psychologists now use to help people manage their stress responses have been around for a long time, and come from other traditions. Some of you may have already heard about the concept of “Present Moment Awareness” or MINDFULNESS. If you've ever done the “raisin exercise” you will have practiced mindfulness. Mindfulness comes out of the recognition that, as I mentioned earlier, our psychological stress is most often a reaction to what has already happened or what we fear is going to happen. Mindfulness is really about “minding ourselves” in the same way that we “mind” children, or “mind our manners.” It teaches us that calming our minds and

our bodies comes from being aware of what is going on with us right here and right now. (We already know about that here in Newfoundland and Labrador – we even have a news program called “Here and NOW”!) Mindfulness is NOT telling us (here’s an expression I HATE) “build a bridge and get over it” or even some kind of fatalistic “trust in the universe or God and everything will be okay.” This is not about ignoring our pasts. And certainly we can’t ignore the demands of our day-to-day lives while living in some blissful state of denial.

What mindfulness does teach us is that, taking care of ourselves right now, in this minute, helps us to deal with the next minute, and the next, and the next. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a doctor in the U.S., teaches mindfulness to patients with stress, anxiety, pain, and illness. And he tells them “You have only moments to live.” Of course he is not telling them that they are going to die! He is telling them that to manage their stress or anxiety or pain they have to focus on living in this moment, and then the next, and then the next. You may have seen Dr. Kabat-Zinn on a Bill Moyers tv special in 1993, called “Healing and the Mind”.

So I invite you now to join me in a little mindfulness exercise. I will tell you now that some of you will enjoy this, some of you will dislike it, and some of you won’t feel one way or the other. If you don’t want to participate, that’s okay too. I just ask that you sit quietly while the rest of us do it. It will take only a few minutes, and no one will know if you are participating or not. It’ll just be your little secret!

Now, get comfortable in your seats; this usually works better if you don't have a full bladder or something like that! You might want to take the opportunity now.....Take off your coats, or glasses, whatever feels most comfortable, given where you are. Uncross your legs, feet on the floor, sitting up straight. Now, take a deep breath. At this point you may close your eyes if you feel to do so. If not, just focus your eyes on something up at the front, the wall behind me.....

Take another medium deep breath. And just notice what happens. Notice what it feels like to have the air go in. Notice if it comes in through your mouth or your nose. Notice what the air feels like going out. Notice where it comes out of. Notice how your head feels. Notice if you feel dizzy. Some people do. It's because of the increase in oxygen intake and perfectly normal. Take another breath. Notice what your other senses are taking in – what you hear, what you feel (the seat under you, your clothes touching your body, any sensations in your body – tingling – also normal, discomfort – just adjust what is not comfortable), what you smell, maybe even what you are tasting in your mouth right now.

Notice how your mind is wandering. Notice how you have started to have other thoughts and images in your head. When you notice that, bring your awareness back to your breathing, and what that feels like. Notice how your thoughts stray again, the chatter in your head: What am I doing here? What is she trying to prove? How long will this go on? Hope I can leave before the traffic gets bad.

What time is it? My nose is itchy. Did I turn off the iron before I left home? I should call mom later.

Pull yourself away from that chatter, gently; just remind yourself to return to noticing your breathing. You may find it helpful to say to yourself, “Breathe in, breathe out” or count, “In two three, out two three.” We start by focussing on our breathing because it is something that our bodies do anyway, without having to remind ourselves to do it.

It’s like you are on a train, or a passenger in a car, watching the scenery go by. You are not trying to do anything to the scenery, you are merely observing, noticing, not holding on to it; and when that scenery is gone, oh, look, there is more scenery. An image I find useful is imagining those thoughts and feelings as though they are written on big white fluffy clouds, and they just keep moving through my mind, not stopping or hurrying, just slowly moving through.

In these few moments, allow yourself to be kind to yourself. Just accept what this exercise is like for you – easy, hard, relaxing, boring. Whenever that thought or feeling comes to you, bring your awareness back to your breathing. And when you do that, you are being mindful. The other thing that you may notice is that when you are focussing on your breathing, you aren’t focussing on those other things.

Now, another deep breath, and you may start bringing your focus and awareness back to the room, being aware of my voice, and your surroundings. Open your eyes if they are closed. You may feel a desire to stretch or move your body around and you can feel free to do that.

And now you may be thinking, well, this is all well and good. But I have real problems to deal with. And I can't deal with them by sitting and noticing my breathing all day. This is true. We start with breathing because it is automatic. Our bodies do this anyway, without our input. We may also practice mindfulness when we are doing other ordinary day to day things. Think about brushing your teeth. Where does your mind go? Think about brushing your teeth in a mindful way, noticing how the bristles of the brush feel on your teeth and gums; the feel of the toothpaste, the smell of it and the taste, the movement of your arm as you move the brush around.

Think about driving in a mindful way. Think about NOT going on automatic pilot as you drive from here to your home this evening. Or distracting yourself with the radio, or conversation. Think about getting to your car, feeling the door handle in your hand, getting into the car and the feel of the seat under you, how the seat belt feels as you pull it across you, how it feels to turn the key in the ignition, the feel of the gas pedal on the bottom of your foot. As you drive, notice the other cars, the road in front of you, the process of checking your rear view mirror and looking over your shoulder as you change lanes.

Now, what does this have to do with managing during difficult times? It is that if you practice this strategy during ordinary tasks, when the time comes for one of those anxiety attacks, or your mind racing and feeling overwhelmed, you will already know what to do to help you feel calmer. You know yourself, it's no good to try to learn something in the moment when it counts. A hockey team doesn't train AT a Stanley Cup game, it trains FOR a Stanley Cup game. You learn how to do things by practicing them over and over again in less stressful situations, so that when you ARE in a stressful situation, you already know exactly what to do. And although I don't have time to review it here, there is a lot of research that tells us that stress management in general and mindfulness in particular have helped with lowering blood pressure, better pain management, better health recovery.....In other words, it can have effects on other parts of your life as well.

Listen. No coping strategy will change the challenges that the universe throws at us. Some we can change, some we cannot. (And I am put in mind here of the serenity prayer.) But we can be better prepared to manage ourselves once they happen. It requires only that you invest in yourself, and keep an open mind.