

Your Personal Coach
Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

I'm constantly stressed out by my job, my kids, my finances etc. etc. etc. It seems like my mind is always racing to the next thing I have to do. My friends have told me to try meditation or exercise to reduce my stress but, frankly, I don't have time for these. What do you recommend?

-- Beverly C.

Dear Beverly,

Slow down, girl! Your friends have given you some excellent suggestions to reduce your stress but you don't have time to even try them! You may want to ask yourself just how serious you are about changing your life.

I'm not being hard on you, Beverly, but some things will have to change. Your question is a good one and I know lots of readers will relate. Most of us recognize how easy it is to become stressed out in today's swirling world where we have so many responsibilities, so many important activities that seem to fill every waking moment.

We can't control all the events or situations in our lives, but we can control our responses to stressful things. Not only can we reduce stress but also we can live richer and happier lives by making some relatively simple changes.

Let's start with a simple exercise that will only take about ten minutes. Sit in a quiet place, free from interruptions, and have a pen and paper handy. Then close your eyes for a moment. Take a few deep breaths and follow your breath with your mind. Focus your attention on the breath going in and going out. This is one of the simplest forms of meditation and is a good way to start self-reflection.

Make three columns on your paper. At the top of the first column, write the word "Identify" and then list all the ways you know you are stressed out. Look at your behavior, your body, your thoughts, and your emotions.

Label the next column: "Analyze." Look at each symptom of stress you listed and do your best to try to specifically understand where each one is coming from.

For each of the symptoms of stress – now with a better understanding of what might be causing it – think of something to do about it. Be creative but stick to solutions that you can realistically implement.

The most effective stress management tools come from common sense. We all know the importance of eating wholesome foods and getting enough rest and exercise but how many of us actually practice those good health habits on a regular basis?

Most of us are aware of the importance of putting things in perspective and having the right priorities. Many wise people have reminded us about the dangers of sweating the small stuff but still most of us spend a great deal of psychological and physical energy doing exactly that – sweating the small stuff!

After you've made your list of symptoms and their causes and brainstormed solutions, pick out JUST ONE of these. Then begin to put your plan into action.

Only after you've seen progress on your first goal, should you strive for your second goal. Take each goal in turn.

It should go without saying that nothing will really change until we alter our behavior and begin to do things and look at things in new ways.

But, we both know that the world is filled with very intelligent, well-meaning people who have lots of insight but cannot effect change in their lives because they are stuck in ruts and don't try the things they know they should.

Don't be one of these people, Beverly. Make a decision that you can change your life and then have the courage to do it.

Here's one very simple yet challenging tool to help you. Make a decision to become more mindful about your life. Mindfulness is about being present, about living in *this* exact moment, this here and now.

In your letter, you talk about your mind racing from one thing to the next. In Eastern traditions, these rushing thoughts and inner chatter are called "Monkey Mind" and they are a huge source of stress and unhappiness.

When you are shuttling your kids to school, really be there with them. Listen to what they are saying. Enjoy their company. Don't let your mind be wandering to all the things you have to do later that day.

When you are mowing the lawn, stay present. Take in the earthy smell of newly cut grass, the sound of birds, the feel of the air on your skin. Resist the urge to let your mind roam to the pile of bills that need to be paid by next week.

Follow the advice of the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, Rumi: "Stay here, quivering in this moment, like a drop of mercury."

Learning to stay in the present, to really live in the moment, is one of the most important ways of being in the world and it is a superb stress-buster but it's a different way of thinking for most and it takes commitment and practice.

You can do it!

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2005 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.