



Guiding Ourselves Through Stressful Times

Sometimes when we are under stress, we narrow our focus and lose sight of what's most important to us. Rather than keeping the big picture in mind, we focus exclusively on our stressful circumstances. Self-care, work-life balance, and other things we value fall by the wayside as we become absorbed in our stressful thoughts. But we can respond differently. Follow this multi-step exercise to guide yourself through stressful feelings.

Pay Attention

When stress narrows your focus, you can expand it by mindfully paying attention to the here and now. Here's a simple practice you can do with your eyes closed or open.

1. Observe your breathing as your breath flows in and out.
2. Tune into the sounds in your environment.
3. Notice the sensations where your body makes contact with the surfaces around you.
4. Look around and observe the colors, shapes, and objects in your visual field.
5. Turn back to your breathing and watch as your breath flows in and out.

Connect to Your Values

When stress shows up, your values provide a compass to guide your actions, no matter what your stressful thoughts say. Below is a list of domains in which our values play out. Circle ones that are important to you or add your own.

family	community	health	adventure	_____
work	spirituality	fun	creativity	_____
career	citizenship	learning	self-care	_____
relationships	justice	growth	friendships	_____
teamwork	love			

We can't choose when stress shows up, but we can choose our actions. How do you want to behave on an ongoing basis, even when you're stressed? Pick some action words that resonate with you or add your own.

adventurous	strong	focused	energetic	_____
open	empathic	friendly	persistent	_____
curious	loving	fun-loving	engaged	_____
hardworking	caring	humorous	thoughtful	_____
steady	passionate			

Hold Your Thoughts Lightly

You can change your relationship with your thoughts by simply noticing them without letting them run your life. The goal isn't to make them go away; it's to get some freedom to make better choices. Here's how:

- Remember that thoughts are not facts.
- Remember that you are not your thoughts. They are simply experiences you have.
- Say to yourself, "I'm having the thought..."
- Say to yourself, "My mind is saying..."
- Examine the utility of the thought. Is it the right tool in this situation, or is it a hammer when you need a screwdriver?
- Watch your thoughts like they are clouds in the sky.

- Treat your thoughts like spam. You don't have to click.
- Sing your thoughts.
- Make objects of your thoughts (e.g., 3 x 5 card, sticky note, stuffed animal).
- Practice meditation.

Each of these strategies allows you to hold a thought lightly so that it doesn't take charge.

Take Action

What's one action you can take right now that is in line with your values? Remember that you are in charge of your behavior, not your stressful thoughts. Pick something small and let it be the beginning of an ongoing, evolving pattern of action guided by your values.

One small thing I can do right now:



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