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## A SOMATIC RESPONSE TO STRESS

We are all affected by stress whether in our personal or professional lives. If not managed, stress can take a big toll on our health, sense of well being, and our ability to be effective as leaders.

We've been taught to manage our stress through exercise, nutrition, time management and other similar strategies. These are all great, however, many of these strategies suggest that we should manage our stress from the outside in versus the inside out. By inside out I mean learning to identify our patterns of responding to stress, growing more comfortable with the feelings and sensations that arise within us during stressful times, and using those feelings to help move us forward.

Stress takes us out of the moment and into the past or the future. It's like an out of body experience in which we are literally not connected to our bodies, feelings, and sensations. We typically try our best to either control these feelings or avoid feeling them. When doing this we are using old conditioned responses, learned as children, for dealing with difficult situations. For example, when in difficult situations as a child, I learned to raise my shoulders, tighten the muscles in my face, and collapse my chest thereby restricting my breathing and leading to more tightness and stress. I also learned that expressing my feelings in the moment was not ok.

Doing this, I literally shut off the feelings that were arising within me. So, I couldn't stop the feelings, and I couldn't express them. Stuck with them, I deadened myself and was left with no way of engaging, in the moment, with the cause of the stress. These patterns of deadening, holding, and frustration follow us into adult life affecting our communication, relationships and productivity. A more effective process is to become aware of our feelings, identify where in our bodies we hold them, become more comfortable experiencing them, and learn to accept them and allow them to pass. The shelf life of feelings felt is much shorter than those that are stuffed away.

In my opinion, Leadership is about being present and being able to respond fully to difficult situations, make decisions, and communicate effectively with colleagues, co-workers, and clients in a way that engages them, promotes confidence, and suggests that you are in control. Not being in control during difficult times leads to more stress among those that we engage with compounding the difficulty. Being in control, in the sense that I'm using it, is counter-intuitive to the way we usually think of control. Here, being in control means being comfortable with the feelings that arise in us and using them to learn, grow and move through difficult situations. For leaders, I call this Being Leadership.

Hans Selye, the father of stress research, said that one of the ways to reduce the negative effects of stress is to change our attitudes about the situations that we find ourselves in. It is not so much the events that take place in our lives that create stress within us but rather our responses to the situations or stressors. I would add that we can change our attitudes about what we feel during times of stress and rather than avoiding or controlling our feelings, learn to move into and through them. In facing stress this way we give ourselves important information, that is, what lies within us. And so the quote from Oliver Wendell Holmes, "What lies behind us, and what lies before us, are tiny matters compared to what lies within us." takes on new meaning. Rather than reacting from a stressful place and projecting our own feelings of fear or anger etc. onto others, we can move into and through our feelings, recognize what message our feelings are offering to us, and respond in a way that allows the situation to move forward creatively and collaboratively rather than reactively.

The method I'm referring to for dealing with stress is based on somatics. Somatics views the body, the mind and our feelings in a holistically. We can deal with issues in our lives cognitively, physically, and emotionally as all three are interrelated. Being aware of what led to my feelings, knowing where in my body I hold my anxiety, fear, anger and releasing it, leads to the possibility of a different emotional response and a new understanding of ourselves and others.

When we learn to identify our old patterns of shutting down our feelings and the strategies that we've used to deaden ourselves we can then release ourselves into a calm place, our center. We become aware of our patterns, allow our feelings to arise and pass and use new strategies to return us to our center. From our center we are able to choose our response to situations.

Learning to do this is like strengthening a muscle. At first you have to use strategies and practices to center yourself. After enough practice you can learn to feel calm and present naturally. After sufficient practicing, this calm centered place becomes a more natural and pervasive part of who we are and we can, in the face of stress, begin there, rather than having to return there. As you progress you will be able to notice when you are "off" center and bring your self back. The process of being able to embody this centered place means practicing daily as often as possible. We practice many skills but rarely ones that provide us a sense of peace and centeredness.

So, how do we do this? Coming into the present means coming into sensation. We can focus on our breath, ground ourselves, and strengthen our attention and balance as a means of becoming more skillful in dealing with difficult situations. The good news is that you can do these exercises anywhere and anytime. I would recommend starting with a foundation of doing the centering exercise fully multiple times a day and then adding other times as you remember, while stopped at a stoplight, in line at the market etc. However, begin wherever feels doable.

As we get better at this we are able to withstand more intensity and, when we don't resist what we are feeling, even our aggressive energy, we become open to changing our typical responses to situations. As we will see when we get into communication, the more centered we are, the less that we are operating from a reactive stance, the better able we are to communicate from a place that leads to trust, commitment, and mutual learning.

## PRACTICES

Each of these exercises will help you deal with stress and allow you to be more present. The more you do the more natural it becomes. Each is a skill that is part of the Centering exercise at the end. Learning to find your Center, as I've noted above, can be a powerful tool in stress management and in developing your presence as a leader.

**Breathing** - Focus on your breath. Let yourself breath naturally following the breath as you inhale and then exhale. Relax your abdominal muscles and allow your stomach to fill up like a balloon and let the in breath continue to expand filling the chest cavity fully and then when it feels appropriate, release the breath making a vocal sound slowly exhaling and following the breath until you have fully exhaled and it is time to take another and repeat

the cycle. When exhaling, imagine the breath traveling either to a spot about 3 inches below your navel (your center) or down through your feet into the ground.

**Body Scan**– begin to notice the places in your body where you tense yourself in response to stress or difficult situations. Throughout the day, or during difficult situations, scan your body and when you find tension send a breath there and release the tension. Remember to check your shoulders, chest, hands, face and jaw.

**Let Go, Let Gravity** – While sitting, feel yourself sink into the surface you are sitting on. Feel the back of your legs, buttocks and back against the surface and feel the weight of your body sinking you deeper into the seat. Allow yourself to feel the sensation of gravity in your arms, legs, face and head.

**Grounding.** A simple strategy is to place both feet on the floor and feel your grounded ness. Doing this during difficult situations is a simple method of bringing yourself into the present and providing a solid foundation for your responses. You can do this while sitting or you can do it standing by feeling your feet firmly on the ground.

**Centering** – Stand with your arms at your sides relaxed. Place your feet approximately shoulder width apart finding a distance that is comfortable. Bend your knees just slightly while straightening your back and feeling your body lifting skyward as if a thread was pulling you upwards. Allow your head to tilt downward slightly releasing the stress on your neck. You may do this exercise with your eyes open or closed. If you do it with your eyes open, allow your gaze to focus slightly downward a few feet in front of you. Feel the bottoms of your feet touching the ground rocking backward and forward and side-to-side finding a comfortable grounded position to stand in. As you stand there scan your body and release any tension that you feel. Take two or three deep breaths as described above remembering to make a sound with your exhale focusing your attention on the breath/sound until it is fully exhaled and allow your natural rhythm to lead into the next breath.

Next, focus on gravity. See if you can feel the effects of gravity in your arms, legs, face, and head. Allow your face muscles to relax and your jaw to drop and remain open slightly. Now begin to study the energy field around you. As a culture, we are very forward oriented and rarely sense anything else around us. Ask yourself if you can sense the same amount of space in front of you as in the back, right and left, and above your head and below

your feet. Spend a few seconds on each space sensing and imaging the space around you. When you go into difficult situations with this sense of wholeness you are more available and more present. Lastly, feel the sense of gravity throughout your body and this felt sense of presence and move on.

Doing this fully can take a couple of minutes but you can do briefer versions throughout the day. Ideally, doing this 10 times a day is most effective. You can also do this while sitting, or while lying down. This is a practice like learning to play golf or learning to meditate. It will become second nature after awhile and you will sense this feeling at other times even when not practicing. At times when you notice yourself tensing allow yourself to move back into center. It does get easier!

Enjoy!