**What’s the Worst That Could Happen?**

***(What Centenarians Can Teach Us About Mindfulness)***

*By: Roger Landry, MD, MPH*

Award-Winning Author of:

***Live Long, Die Short: A Guide to Authentic Health and Successful Aging***

What if I told you that the single most destructive component to our physiology is our stress response? Would you believe me? It’s true. Stress rots us from within. Unfortunately, the chronic stress that we accept as part of living in our modern world is destructive to our cognitive function; it raises our risk for dementia, impacts learning and memory, suppresses our immune systems leaving us vulnerable to disease, causes weight gain – which leads to other conditions, drains our energy, ages us more rapidly, stunts creativity, and negatively impacts our relationships. Stress is worse than the long list of side effects in small print on the side of a medicine bottle. Dr. Robert Sapolsky, professor of biology, neuroscience and neurosurgery at Stanford University and internationally renowned expert on stress tells us, “Most of us will long enough and well enough to get seriously ill with a stress-related disease.”

*Why do we do this to ourselves?*

**How Our Bodies Respond to Stress**

As humans, we are hard-wired with a “fight or flight” response. When our ancestors experienced a life-threatening situation, the amygdala in their brains kicked into high gear releasing epinephrine, cortisol and norepinephrine, enabling them to exhibit strength and speed to outmaneuver and outrun the lion that was chasing them down. Unfortunately, humans are the only mammals capable of self-inducing this response with our thoughts. There’s no lion about to eat us, but our bodies can’t tell the difference and will respond as if in danger. Furthermore, we are capable of sustaining that state of hyper-response long after whatever threatened us is gone.

**What’s Stressing Us Out?**

As we age, our stressors change – or, at least – how those stressors express themselves. When we are young, we want to be competent and successful in work and in relationships. We are not as concerned about our health, but highly focused on being self-sufficient and earning a decent wage. However, for older adults, those stress factors have changed. Older adults seek relevance and fear invisibility. Their risk factors for illness and injury go up substantially, and they worry about their ability to remain healthy enough to meet the demands of work and life. They face ageism in the workplace and struggle with retirement and having their finances carry them throughout the remainder of their life. Let’s face it, old or young, stress affects us all.

*What can we do about it?*

**What Centenarians Can Teach Us About Mindfulness**

Ask a centenarian how they handle stress, and they’ll likely tell you, “I know nothing by what I have in front of me at this moment.” They’ll go on to explain that fear of the worst case scenario will drive you crazy, and this moment is all we have. Here are a few more things these wise men and women can teach us:

1. **Choose Optimism.** Pessimism and giving into fear set us up for failure and leaves us paralyzed, unable to take action. A positive attitude not only reduces our stress and gives us greater clarity, but [studies](http://www.health.harvard.edu/heart-health/optimism-and-your-health) link optimism to longevity and better health. And, let’s face it, it makes us more enjoyable to be around. One way to begin choosing optimism is by rephrasing negative self-talk into something more positive. For example, instead of saying, “I can’t believe I *have* to do this,” try, “I’m excited that I *get* to try something new.”
2. **Plan Ahead.** Putting your head in the sand like an ostrich is no way to embrace the inevitable challenges of life. What is it that you’re concerned about? If it’s health, be proactive about seeking out preventive measures and knowing what your risks are. If it’s retirement planning, talk to a qualified professional who can help you determine a course of action. If it’s fear of competence at work, determine if there is more training that you could benefit from. Get ahead of the problems as much as possible, instead of simply reacting to them.
3. **Focus on What’s in Front of You.** Don’t let tomorrow’s problems or yesterday’s regrets destroy your peace of mind today. Certainly, clean up messes from the past as much as possible (i.e. You may need to apologize to a colleague for a negative comment you made that’s been eating you up ever since.), and plan ahead as well as you are able. But, once that’s done, return your attention to this moment. If you find your thoughts wandering, gently guide yourself back to the present. One way to train yourself to do this is by setting a timer. If you have a project you’re working on, can you commit to focusing on just that for Twenty minutes? Thirty minutes? One hour? The more you practice focused attention, the easier it will become.
4. **Pick Your Battles.** In our ever-changing world, complete control of our environment is not possible. Likewise, we cannot control the thoughts and opinions of others. I always advise that we should “give up the need to be right.” That’s not to say that we’re *wrong*, but that we don’t need to control what other’s do or become affected by it. Maybe your best friend is voting for a candidate you hate and think will be harmful; but is it worth potentially losing a friendship over? Is stress, heart disease and other illnesses worth it simply to get your way? Probably not.
5. **Say “No” More Often.** We are a time-focused lot, and we’re constantly trying to micro-manage and squeeze every ounce of opportunity possible as quickly as possible. When we do that, we lose that balance between our professional and personal lives. Take an honest audit of how you spend your time. Are there some things that are really necessary? If not, try saying “no” more often.

Centenarians didn’t get to enjoy health and longevity by being chronically stressed all the time. Listen to their wisdom. They know a thing or two. *Live long; live well!*