

An Ever Present Help

The American Psychological Association does an annual survey of attitudes and perceptions of stress among the general public. Last year's survey revealed that 77% of Americans experienced stress-related physical symptoms and 73% reported psychological symptoms. Issues related to work and money topped the list of major stressors. Things have not improved since this last survey; in fact, the economy has significantly worsened and the daily headlines proclaim housing foreclosures, increase in gas prices and even failing banks. According to an Associated Press poll released in June, debt stress is 14% higher this year than in 2004. How, then, are we to cope with this enormous pressure? Some stress is manageable, even helpful in channeling our energy and resources but multiple stressors can feel overwhelming, especially those over which we have little control.

Most of us already know something about stress management. We're told to identify the sources, understand how we are personally affected by stress, modify our behavior, exercise, and spend more time in leisure activities or with family and friends. We know about healthy eating, sleep hygiene and work-life balance. If all else fails, we may seek the services of a professional or ask our physicians for some medication but that is usually a small percentage. A billboard by a freeway proclaims that it is better to buy an expensive sports car than to seek therapy. We are a nation that is independent-minded and we prefer to handle things on our own.

How well do these tools work for us in the midst of overwhelming circumstances? How much can we reasonable expect to handle? There is another source of help during difficult times and that is what we believe exists *outside* of ourselves. It is our spirituality and it is an important source of strength, meaning, direction and hope. It is through the cultivation of spirituality that we feel connected to the larger universe. It fosters a perspective that takes us away from everyday difficulty and enables us to envision a better future.

Spirituality is complex and hard to define. It can take the form of religious observance, nature, music, art or some other personal experience. Alcoholics Anonymous practitioners subscribe to a "Power greater than ourselves" and turning chaotic lives over to "God as we understand Him". However we define it, it is a powerful force for good. Psychologist Viktor Frankl, after surviving a concentration camp, noted that those who had found meaning in life were the ones most able to withstand the incredible hardships there. Research continues to document greater health benefits including decreased stress for those who cultivate their spirituality. Prayer is

cited as the most common spiritual practice and some recent studies on intercessory prayer have provided provocative evidence for benefits to those praying that were superior to the subjects (those prayed for).

Meditation is another form of spiritual practice that can be used to enhance spiritual communion. Reading and studying religious or spiritual writings and journaling of experiences can deepen faith journeys. However, attempting too much too soon is a common recipe for failure in the building up of spiritual habits. Many choose to explore different faith traditions to see what fits. Sharing spiritual discovery and expression with others helps to build relationships and connects us to a larger world of believers. Having an “accountability partner” whom we trust and regularly meet with can enhance spiritual discovery and growth. The ability to surrender control, peace of mind, feelings of tranquility, gratitude and contentment often stem from regular spiritual practice. Serenity, an important concept in 12-step recovery programs, characterizes those who have cultivated their spiritual selves over long periods.

Mind, body and spirit are interconnected and important dimensions of optimal health and well-being. To neglect one part is to negatively affect the whole. Quality of life, especially in an era of higher and more chronic levels of stress, is hard to maintain without the benefits of spiritual belief and practice. Keep it in mind when all the other tools come up short, as they invariably will.

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