



Stress Reduction

Justin's soccer game starts fifteen minutes after Emily's, but the games are on two different fields on the opposite side of town. Or, you've had a long taxing work week with (pick one) toxic coworker drama, management chaos, looming layoffs, increased work loads. Or, marital tension is heating up as the two of you (pick two or three) juggle two full time jobs, three kids in sports "every" season (soccer, basketball, baseball), in-law interference, zero couple's time together, and sleep and sex deprivation.

Stressed out, anxious, wrung up, panicked. We've all been there. The reasons for being stressed out can be teased out in therapy—by poking and prodding through current life issues, past triggers, self defeating patterns, and anything more complex that might be going on.

On the surface, stress can be managed by relaxation skills, anxiety management, cognitive-behavioral techniques. Deep breathing can offer some quick results: breathing in through the nose, out through the mouth, at a very slow pace, pulling it up from the diaphragm. Therapy can guide you in the use of imagery—placing yourself on that beach you like in the Outer Banks or that hiking trail you enjoy in the Shenandoah Valley. And therapy can help press the stop button on those video replays in your head, the ones you rewind over and over, with all that catastrophic narrative in the background that spikes up your anxiety. Or therapy can help you pick a cueing device to anchor in a relaxation response when you need it, say in the middle of the work day, by touching a band on your wrist as you repeat a soothing mantra to yourself. And then there's progressive deep, muscle relaxation, meditation, hypnosis....

Most people stoically plow on when stressed, the "Get over it syndrome," the "pretend it's not happening" fantasy, "Wake up and smell the coffee." So the very act of trying to be strong in the face of stress can high-jack an important emotional process: the need to 1.) label stressors, 2.) process, break down, chew over, and metabolize feelings, to then be able to 3.) problem solve and develop coping skills. You can't skip to "3" without going through "1" and "2." Skip "1" and "2" and you may under-react or over-react--eventually resulting in (pick your thing) yelling at the boss/spouse/kids, that migraine, stomach upset, tossing and turning at 1:00 A.M. etc. After the flood waters from the amygdala have subsided, the Executive Functioning part of the brain can start to surface. Then the action plan and coping skills can begin—assertiveness skills, problem solving, communications skills, conflict resolution, parenting skills.

And then, if you like, stick around for act two of therapy—analyzing why current boss who looks like (pick one—father, mother, that "ex") makes you cringe. Or why that self defeating pattern or mood or emotion, or use of food/ alcohol/ drugs as self-medication keeps rearing its annoying head, even as you try to bravely pretend-- that "that" is all behind you.