

You are your best resource

Marianne Dwyer

The most recent science is now demonstrating that stress can also strengthen us, build emotional resilience and mental toughness, help us forge deeper relationships, and teach us profound lessons [...] the newest studies have opened a door to understanding stress as multidimensional – a destroyer of mental and physical health and a life-affirming and healing force. It's all a function of our perception in the moment.'
(Davidji, 2015: xix)

Introduction

The workshop at the 2017 IFCA national conference titled *You are your best resource*, on which this paper is based, introduced the possibility of recognising what a wonderful resource the human being is. Acknowledging our own selves as resources, and understanding how to balance our mind, body, spirit and heart, can help to ensure resilience and an ability to cope in stressful times. Certain life events, decisions, and circumstances are out of our control. All any of us can do is learn to manage how we respond to situations, people and events, rather than to react blindly. What was offered in this workshop was an understanding of this response, with the hope that participants would learn what wonderful resources they already have, existing within themselves.

Learning to be more compassionate with yourself is a strength, which can help you to communicate authentically and to speak from your truth. In everyday life it can help you to stay calm, balanced and on-task in the face of change and challenges. When this happens, you can be true to who you are, as well as a true advocate for children in care.

The key areas included in this article are:

1. Understanding what a wonderful resource the human being is: we have a mind, body, spirit and heart.
2. Understanding the stress response.
3. Understanding the relaxation response.
4. Techniques to help us respond rather than react.
5. Emotional intelligence, a key component of resilience.

6. Self-compassion.

The human being is a wonderful resource

You have a physical body, a mind, a heart and a spirit. This means the resources available to you are physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Understanding and balancing the needs of your body, mind, heart and spirit is the key to a calmer, less stressed life. When you learn to do this for yourself, you can then empower those you share your life with to learn the same.

BODY	MIND	HEART	SPIRIT
(PHYSICAL)	(MENTAL)	(EMOTIONAL)	(SPIRITUAL)

Figure 1. You are a powerhouse of resources (Devised by Marianne Dwyer)

Imagine a house with four rooms, and each room contains one resource. What would happen in a house if you shut the door to a room, and never went in there? How would that room look and feel to you? If you shut the door to an area of your life, what do you think that would be like? Each resource needs to be looked after – our physical, mental, emotional and spiritual resources are there to be nurtured. When these are in balance, we can cope better in life.

Suggested exercise 1

For a moment, bring your attention to your body. Moving from your head to your toes, move your attention slowly from the top of your head, to your forehead, eyes, nose, mouth and neck. Relax your shoulders and bring your attention down your left arm to your left hand and fingers, and then down your right arm to your right hand and fingers. Now become aware of your chest, stomach and pelvic area. Now bring your attention to your upper back, the middle of your back and your lower back. Continue moving your gentle attention down your right leg to your toes, and then down your left leg to your left toes. Imagine all the processes that are happening in our bodies without our being conscious of them – we can move, we are breathing, we are digesting our food, there are hormones and chemicals flowing throughout the body, we are sensing and feeling everything in our environment, externally and internally.

In this exercise we have become aware of our physical body. We are much more than

this, as these functions are affected by how we think and feel. All our resources are interconnected. Here are a few facts to help us further understand what an amazing resource the human being is.

There has been a growth in studies on positive psychology and neuroplasticity in the past decade, led by researchers such as Daniel J. Siegel and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Neuroplasticity refers to the flexibility of brain tissue and structure. Nowadays scientists have confirmed, by studies of brain scans, the brain's ability to continue to grow, change and become more flexible over time. There are many research-based studies emerging to show that relaxation, positive attention, meditation and mindfulness, and present moment awareness have positive effects on our mental well-being.

Your emotions are energy in motion – it is OK to experience all ranges of emotion from anger, frustration and sadness through to joy, and hope. You are not only your thoughts, feelings or emotions. Your body and its sensations, the content of your thoughts, and the emotions you experience are all a part of you, but they are not the whole of you. Who you are is beyond all that. This is open to interpretation by each individual. Do we have a spiritual aspect to ourselves and, if so, what does that mean? To some it can mean a deeper sense of connection to others, and a deeper connection to and awareness within ourselves. To some it can mean our soul, our deepest self. To others it can mean peace, calm or nature.

Understanding and balancing these resources is the key to reducing stress in your life, along with choosing to have a calmer approach to situations and people. This is possible, no matter how overwhelming things may seem. When you learn to respond from a calmer perspective, the choices you make are clearer and more proactive. You can honour who you really are and give yourself the courage to work through your emotions and responses.

“*As humans, we forget that we have a built-in mechanism to self-regulate and self-soothe. One of the ways we can activate the relaxation response in our bodies is to slow down and become aware of our breath.*”

Understanding the stress response and the relaxation response

You can become aware of your stress and change how you react to a situation. When

you are stressed, you are out of balance. If you can reframe stressors as challenges, rather than threats, it becomes possible to respond in a balanced way, rather than to simply react.

Suggested exercise 2

Take a moment to reflect on how you feel when you are stressed. Do you experience anger, anxiety, fear, or sleeplessness? How do you treat yourself and others when you are stressed? How do you feel when you are relaxed? Think of a time when you were on holidays, or walking in nature, and how it felt to be stress-free. Did you feel calm, joyous, accepting, spontaneous?

Now, here is the choice point: We have two responses available to us in our bodies:

1. **The stress response** is activated by the sympathetic nervous system (the accelerator). This is our fight-or-flight system. It is an involuntary physiological reaction that occurs in response to a *perceived* harmful event, attack, or threat to our survival. It can be helpful in the short-term for dealing with a crisis, but chronic stress wreaks havoc with our health. When everything is perceived as a stressor, this is what happens in the body:

- Adrenalin increases
- Cortisol increases (to reduce inflammation in the body)
- We feel more alert
- The heart beats faster and blood pressure rises
- Muscles tighten
- Glucagon increases and insulin decreases
- Blood supply to vital organs increases, but decreases to others (this can feel like shock)
- Blood thickens (platelets become stickier).

If we don't take action to relieve the stress and look at our responses, **stress will accumulate**. This leads to chronic physical, mental, and emotional issues. We can't avoid stressful situations. Stress is part of life. However, we can avoid the long-term effects of chronic, unhealthy stress if we are proactive.

2. **The relaxation response** is activated by the parasympathetic nervous system (the

brake). This is the rest-and-digest system. It is activated when you are relaxed and feel safe. It allows the body to operate optimally, creating an opportunity for healing and restoration. These are some features of the relaxation response:

- It is more responsive than reactive
- Oxytocin (the cuddle hormone) and serotonin (the happy hormone) increase
- Our heart rate and blood pressure normalise
- Muscles relax and tension eases
- The 'youth hormone' (DHEA or dehydroepiandrosterone) increases
- Our perception of life becomes clearer.

As humans, we forget that we have a built-in mechanism to self-regulate and self-soothe. One of the ways we can activate the relaxation response in our bodies is to **slow down and become aware of our breath**.

The breath is an immediate pathway for bringing our attention back to the present moment, and can immediately help us to feel calm, for example, by reducing our pulse, and easing the tension in tight muscles.

Suggested exercise 3

Find a comfortable place to sit, with your feet firmly on the ground. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable. If not, you can rest your eyes on a spot in front of you. Bring your attention to your breath and its natural rhythm, in... and... out. In through the nostrils, out through the nostrils. Continue this for about five minutes, in and out, gently bringing your attention back to your breath every time your mind wanders (which it will!).

“*We can't avoid stressful situations. Stress is part of life. However, we can avoid the long-term effects of chronic, unhealthy stress if we are proactive.*”

Techniques to achieve balance and help us respond in a more pro-active way

The following are some ways to help you bring balance into your life and activate the relaxation response in your body, thereby reducing stress.

The physical body

- **Sleep** is the number one requirement for health and de-stressing. Research studies described in Newberg and Waldman (2009:150) show that if we regularly sleep less than five hours a night, cognition significantly declines. However, a good night's sleep is dependent upon many variables, especially the amount of stress you've experienced when awake.
- **Exercise** increases flexibility. Walking in the open air is great, keeping us in tune with nature. Commit to at least 30 mins a day exercise – experiment and enjoy. Gentle exercises such as yoga and T'ai Chi are great for blending movement with mental relaxation. Yoga means *unity* – balancing mind, body, and spirit.
- A healthy balanced diet is important for nourishing our body.

Mental well-being

It is the nature of our mind to think. We may have between 50,000 and 70,000 thoughts a day!

It is our attachment to our thoughts and the beliefs around them that cause us stress. If you can imagine your thoughts are like clouds gently passing overhead, they will pass. In her book *Loving What Is* (2002), Katie challenges our thinking process with the following:

- Don't believe everything you think!
- Ask yourself: "Is this really true?"
- "Who would I be if I didn't believe this thought?"
- "How would I live my life without this thought?"

Where attention goes, energy flows!

It's helpful to practice letting go of the negative thoughts (unhooking) and creating and welcome positive affirming thoughts instead. By paying attention to the negative, we can become stressed and drained of energy. On the other hand, by turning our attention to what is positive in our lives, we can become energised and uplifted. In her book *Flourishing*, Gaffney (2011) describes the importance of the 5:1 ratio – that we need five positive experiences for every one negative experience, in order to counteract our built-in 'negativity bias'. The positive and negative systems are our twin pillars of survival. That tendency – to immediately go to high alert, to stop what you are doing and pay full

attention to the possible threat – this is the negativity bias at work. ‘The relative independence of the positive and negative emotional systems means that even when you are feeling negative, you are capable of experiencing positive feelings at the same time. This means that to maintain the right ratio, you have to learn to manage both emotional systems independently – to actively build up the positive and to contain and reduce the negative!’ (Gaffney, 2011:47).

Monotasking creates less stress for the brain than multitasking. If we can slow down and enjoy the process of doing one thing at a time, it’s more efficient and satisfying (Paolo Cardini, 2012).

Eight good ways to exercise your brain:

1. Belief in a common purpose/connection.
2. Dialogue with others.
3. Aerobic exercise.
4. Meditate.
5. Yawn.
6. Consciously relax.
7. Stay intellectually active.
8. Smile.

These are research-based and described by Newberg and Waldman (2010).

Emotional well-being

Emotions are ‘energy in motion’.

- If you are stressed and feel anxious your focus may be in the future
- If you are stressed and feel grief or depression, your focus may be in the past
- When you feel angry or critical your focus may be outside yourself
- When you feel ashamed or embarrassed you may not be seeing yourself clearly (Newberg and Waldman, 2010).

It can be helpful to visualise the above as a crossroads, with each road taking us on a different emotional journey. Even though we travel each of these roads, we can keep coming back to the centre point, which is the present moment, and to the possibility of

peace and clarity. It's okay that we will travel each of these roads, probably all of them in the space of 24 hours. Know that we always have the choice to come back to the centre point of peace and well-being.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence, a key component of resilience, is about understanding, expressing and regulating our own emotions, and understanding and responding more effectively to the emotions of others. It's possible to enhance our emotional intelligence by increasing self-awareness, harnessing our attention, improving mental agility and managing unhelpful thoughts and emotional reactions better (Goleman, 1997).

Emotional intelligence consists of:

- **Self-awareness:** the ability to recognise your own emotions and how they affect your thoughts and behaviour, to know your strengths and weaknesses, and have self-confidence.
- **Self-management:** being able to control impulsive feelings and behaviours, and to manage your emotions in healthy ways.
- **Social awareness:** this means connecting with others and having an understanding of the emotions, needs and concerns of other people.
- **Relationship management:** knowing how to develop and maintain good relationships, communicate clearly, inspire and influence others, to work well in a team, and manage conflict. (Goleman, 1997)

Self-compassion

The practice of self-compassion is scientifically proven to act on the anterior cingulate part of the brain (Newberg and Waldman, 2009). The anterior cingulate regulates our reactions and our emotions, and it bridges the left and right sides of our brain – our logical brain and our creative brain. All evidence shows that having self-compassion also leads to developing a relationship with others that is more compassionate. It can be very supportive to connect with yourself and your experience in a compassionate way (Neff, 2011). Practicing self-compassion can help to strengthen:

- Resilience
- Wisdom and insight

- Strength and courage
- Non-judgemental acceptance with a desire to help
- Warmth and kindness.

In relation to our hearts

Our hearts do much more than pump blood through our veins. McLean (2012) tells us our hearts inform us with their intelligence and wisdom. There are as many neurons in the heart as in some sections of the brain. The heart's magnetic field is actually stronger than the brain's – 5,000 times more! The heart sends signals to the brain that change the entire nervous system, reducing stress hormones, and enhancing the immune system. When you pay attention to your heart, you enliven its intelligence and its qualities of peace, love, compassion, joy, gratitude and inclusiveness.

Finding joy and re-igniting passion

Joy and passion are important inner resources for our lives. We all have inner sources of energy and healing power. When we identify the things that fuel us, the things that we have true passion for, we may find we have more energy. Balancing our lives involves putting the things that we value and have passion for in our schedule. Tapping into our creativity, with a playful attitude, can lead us towards joy and passion.

Some healthy choices to help us balance our mind, body, heart and spirit may include:

1. Changing our perception of stressors, viewing them as challenges rather than threats.
2. Activating our relaxation response to self-soothe and self-regulate.
3. Spending time in nature.
4. Taking 20-30 minutes of activity and exercise every day.
5. Feeling your emotions as they arise and acknowledging how you feel.
6. Expressing yourself honestly.
7. Incorporating the 'attitude of gratitude' into your life. Write down five things that you are grateful for at the end of every day. This can really help a shift to a more positive mindset.
8. Using positive affirmations, starting with "I am... (happy – peaceful – calm)". And a gentle way of talking to yourself is to say, "*May I be happy; May I be calm*".

9. Introducing meditation into your life.
10. Slowing down.
11. 'Monotasking' instead of multitasking.
12. Saying 'No' to people and events that drain your energy and increase your stress (it can be helpful to think of this as saying 'Yes' to what energises and nourishes you).
13. Finding your joy and re-igniting your passion.
14. Practising self-compassion and incorporating more self-care into your life.

Conclusion

To summarise, Davidji (2015) informs us that 'decompressing' occurs on many levels:

- **Physical** decompressing is reflected in our physical health and conditioning, our diet, exercise, hygiene, sleep patterns, and our body's flexibility, balance, endurance and strength.
- **Emotional** decompressing is reflected in our ability to self-regulate our emotions and reactions to the world around us, temper our highs and lows, cultivate our emotional intelligence, elevate our ratio of positive to negative emotions, muster our courage, heal our heart, and deconstruct our conditioned, knee-jerk responses.
- **Mental** decompressing is reflected in our resilience, our thoughts, our perseverance, our attention span, our ability to stay focused, our mental flexibility (finding new, creative solutions to problems), and our level of optimism.
- **Spiritual** decompressing is reflected in our core values, our intuition, our awareness of something bigger than the self, our purpose, our acceptance of differing values and beliefs, and our self-actualisation, which includes being of service to others.
- **Relationship** decompressing is reflected in enhancing the quality of our relationships, winding down those that don't serve us, and redirecting our attention to those that are nourishing.

Einstein suggests that the most important question we must answer for ourselves is, 'Is the world a friendly place?' When you reduce stress, you are more likely to see the world as a friendly place. Your attitude can change to 'Life is happening **for** me' instead of 'Life is happening **to** me.' It allows you to be more welcoming to people and circumstances.

About the author

Marianne is a mother of four. She has 22 years' experience in nursing and nurse management. She holds a Master in Counselling and Psychotherapy and now works across a variety of settings, providing emotional support around grief, loss and life changes. She facilitates workshops in self-care, self-compassion and stress management. For a number of years she provided one-to-one support and supervision to IFCA helpline volunteers and national support volunteers.

References

- Katie, B. (2002) *Loving What Is*. New York: Harmony Books.
- Cameron, J. (1994) *The Artist's Way*. London: Pan Macmillan.
- Cardini, P. (2012) *Forget multitasking, try monotasking*. TEDGlobal. https://www.ted.com/talks/paolo_cardini_forget_multitasking_try_monotasking
- Davidji (2015) *Destressifying – The Real-World Guide to Personal Empowerment, Lasting Fulfilment and Peace of Mind*. California: Hay House Publications.
- Gaffney, M. (2011) *Flourishing – how to achieve a deeper sense of well-being, meaning and purpose, even when facing adversity*. London: Penguin Books.
- Germer, C. (2009) *The Mindful Path to Self-compassion*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Goleman, D. (1997) *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam.
- McLean, S. (2012) *Soul-Centered: Transform Your Life in 8 Weeks with Meditation*. California: Hay House Publications.
- McLean, S. (2017) *The Power of Attention*. California: Hay House Publications.
- Newberg, A. and Waldman, M.R. (2009) *How God Changes Your Brain*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Neff, K. (2011) *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ornish, D. (1998) *Love and Survival: 8 Pathways to Intimacy and Health*. London: Vermilion.
- Smalley, S. and Winston, D. (2010) *Fully Present: The Science, Art and Practice of Mindfulness*. Boston: Da Capo Press.
- Southwick, S. and Charney, D. (2012) *Resilience: The Science of Mastering Life's Greatest Challenges*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, M. and Penman, D. (2011) *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*. London: Piatkus.