

Mindful Medicine Corner With



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Taking Aim at Stress and Suffering

Right now, one can't argue that things feel heavy in our world. Ranging from international strife to job security to interpersonal and/or health struggles, stress is a constant in our lives. With so much to hold at once, it may seem like our suffering is too much to bear. We can't always control the situations that fall on us, though we can control our relationship with them and potentially lighten the load we carry.

How can we do this, you ask? I use an exercise that seems somewhat counterintuitive to many. I challenge myself to "lean into" the stress. But wait... that sounds crazy. Shouldn't we try to run away and escape the stress in our lives to be happier? This is not the case. Instead, we should become more aware of how our bodies hold this stress and be curious about this relationship. In other words, FEEL or NOTICE the stress, but don't BE the stress.

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We also should be mindful of managing the unhelpful narratives that our minds create around stressful situations. The “Two Arrow Buddhist Metaphor” sums this up nicely. We can think of the first arrow that pierces us as the Initial hurt; this first arrow is a circumstance that life throws at us - physical or emotional. The second arrow is what our mind does to perpetuate and intensify the suffering - self-blame, negative thoughts, or judgement. The first arrow is usually unavoidable, though the second arrow is under our control. So how do we dodge the second arrow?

Start by being curious about the initial stress (or the first arrow) and scan what may be happening in our bodies in response to this. You will likely notice a physiological response (your heart can race, you may start to sweat, and a pit can form in your stomach). This response is meant to get our attention. Think of it as a quick tap on the shoulder. Suffering arises when our mind takes over and starts to catastrophize or when our inner critic brings about shame. Awareness and curiosity can offer a pathway to avoid getting caught in our thoughts.

This is what is meant by leaning into the stress. Notice the first arrow. Feel the changes in the body. What is my body trying to tell me? Can we meet the feelings with compassion and kindness instead of fear and dread? The act of this alone can stop the mind from falling down its rabbit hole of ruminations (the second arrow). I am not saying that this is easy, but that’s why we practice. We practice a lot. We fall down and get back up. Ultimately this exercise builds resilience, and with this, a possible escape from much of our suffering.