

Three Stress Reducers for Good Decision Making

By Marilyn Suttle



I promised to proofread a sixty-page manuscript for my husband yesterday. He needed to send it out before the end of the day. I figured it would take me about an hour. What was I thinking? I was only a quarter of the way through after an hour of reading. My

tension rising, I was impatient thinking of all the other things I wanted to do. My chest tightened. "Breath Marilyn," I coached myself. Ahh, a moment of relief.

But a quick minute later that tense feeling was back and amplified. I felt agitated and with every paragraph I found myself thinking, "This is taking too long. I have other things I want to do. I want this to be over." My mind just wouldn't shut up about it.

I had an unexpected memory from my college days. Back then, I had a part time job as a computer counselor. I would help students discover and fix errors in their computer programming code. I'd find even the most hidden programming bugs. But whenever I had a tough bug in my computer code, I could not find it for the life of me. I always had to go seek someone else for help.

I got stuck one night around midnight in the computer lab, and couldn't find a soul to help me. Not knowing what else to do, I sat down at my counseling desk and looked at it as if it was somebody else's code. All of a sudden, the error popped out at me. I solved the problem. "That was weird," I thought. But, from that time on, anytime I'd get stuck, I would use that method to solve my programming problems.

My thoughts had something in common with computer code. They seemed to be programmed in an endless loop of stressful thinking about the task I had promised to complete and I didn't know how to change it.

The more I noticed my thoughts and the way those thoughts made me feel, the more I realized I had mental programming that needed updating. Is it possible to reprogram my way of thinking? My first thought was, "No leave me alone. I want to be miserable about this."

It's kind of shocking to notice those thoughts. There were two parts of me - the part that was thinking and the part noticing what I was thinking. My thoughts didn't like being noticed. But I wanted to feel better. I

gave myself a moment to decide if I was really willing to complete this job or if I would be better off to break my commitment to do the other things on my to-do list.

I chose to complete the proofreading and try to stop resisting the time it was going to take to finish it. I looked at the clock and said to myself, "I am going to accept that for the next hour I will be doing this task." Again I felt resistance. If I accepted it for an hour, I'd have to stop complaining about it for an hour. I'd have to let go of accomplishing some of the other things that were more enjoyable to do. I decided that I'd test it out and only accept it for the next ten minutes of proofreading. Oh, what a beautiful feeling of relief. I even started to enjoy the words I was reading.

I'd love to say that I read the rest of the manuscript completely free of stress. Almost. Tension would still creep in every now and then, but when I noticed what I was thinking, I was able to redirect my thoughts and relax again. Hey, I just had a thought - I'm going to ask my husband to proofread this article for me.

Do you make your best decisions when you're feeling centered and peaceful or stressed and fearful? Most people agree that good things result from decisions made from a stress-free mind. So, what can you do to reduce stress and restore balance? Try these three tips.

1. Notice what your body does when you're feeling stressed. Do you find yourself breathing shallow? Take a few deep breaths. Do you notice that your shoulders tense, your stomach or teeth clench, or your brow furrows? Take a moment to release the tension from the areas of your body that holds your stress.

2. When you have a problem that you don't know how to solve, ask yourself what solution you might give to someone else who had that problem. Sometimes by depersonalizing the problem, you become more objective. This can help you get past the areas in life that hold you back. If it was someone else's problem you might tell them: Go after that promotion, or take a walk instead of plopping in front of the television or buy the car you can afford instead of trying to impress people with a car that puts you into debt. Imagine what might change for you if you start taking your own advice.

3. Referee your thoughts. Research shows that people have over 50,000 thoughts a day and most of those thoughts are repetitive. Some thoughts are helpful. Others are not. Start to notice what you think. People develop patterns or styles of thinking that

either make them resilient or distressed. When you start noticing your patterns you have a better chance of redirecting yourself, lowering your stress and making more productive choices.

As strange as it might sound, sometimes you can become friends with feeling bad. That's the kind of friend that leads you into trouble. When I was running an activity for a workshop recently, I asked the group to identify a self-limiting thought that most often reoccurs for them. People came up with thoughts such as, "I'm too old to start a new career." "I'll never be my ideal body size." "When my kid does poorly on a test I feel like I'm the one who failed."

I asked them: If I clapped my hands and that thought would be gone, would you want me to clap? Several of the participants admitted to having a moment of doubt. One person said, "If I stopped thinking that thought, then I'd really have to start doing something to become more financially independent." Her next comment was, "Wow, that's an eye opener!"

What's your self limiting thought? Which is more stressful for you, keeping that thought around like an old friend or letting it go? "But who would I be without that thought?" you might wonder. You would be free. Try it on. You can always go back to thinking those old thoughts if you choose to. Just for today, try making friends with more supportive thoughts.

Marilyn Suttle presents programs that help people enjoy productive relationships at home and at work for happier, more balanced lives. Email her at Marilyn@MarilynSuttle.com or visit her website at www.MarilynSuttle.com.