

## HOW WE CREATE STRESS FOR OURSELVES

A man was telling me about his problems at work. Together, we devised a plan of action: he would speak with his boss to discuss his grievances and request changes to improve the situation.

It worked. His boss was receptive and supportive, and made changes to address his concerns. Problem solved, right? Well, not exactly.

He continued to focus on one issue that wasn't totally resolved. He also ruminated over what had happened in the past and worried about whether the improvements would last.

I gently reflected back to him that there was so much good news and so many positive signals to be pleased about. But he continued to struggle and suffer. I then suggested that he was actually making things harder for himself, that the source of his stress was no longer the workplace situation, but the voice in his head that was talking to him.

If you ask folks where their stress comes from, most will identify external sources such as deadlines, noisy neighbours, sitting in traffic and other stressors which I wrote about last week. However, it may surprise you that the most common source of stress is actually inside ourselves.

The majority of the stress that most of us have is self-generated. That is, we create most of our own distress. When I share this thought with patients, I usually get one of two reactions. Most of them nod in agreement and say, "Yeah, I know. I'm my own worst enemy." But some take this observation as a blaming statement. It's almost as if they're saying, "Oh, I see, not only am I feeling crummy, but now you're telling me it's all my fault. Thanks for the uplift!" I assure them that my comment is meant in a positive and constructive way. The good news is that if we create much of our own distress, then we can do something about it. We don't control other people's behaviour, the weather or the economy. But we do have control over ourselves. So addressing our internal stressors is a great starting point for reducing our overall stress.

We all have a little voice in our head that talks to us. (You may be relieved to know that you're not the only one hearing voices!) It's the voice that may be saying to you at this moment, "What's he talking about?" or "Oh, yeah, I know what you mean." It's a combination of editorial board, Greek chorus, cheering section and TV commentator. Also called "self-talk" or "internal tapes", the voice comments on everything that goes on. Some of its messages are positive: "This shirt looks really good on me" or "What a beautiful day. I can't wait to get outside." However, a lot of our self-statements have a negative tone. "Well, I blew that sales call!" or "These people are really boring."

We react stressfully to certain situations through our internal conversations: "The service in this restaurant stinks" or "Who does he think he is talking to me that way?" But, we also react stressfully to what might happen - called "anticipatory stress" - such as worries about the stock market or who will win the next election.

We even react to things that don't happen - a party invitation that never arrives or an unreturned phone call. We can also get upset just thinking about something that happened long ago,

triggering a stress reaction similar to the one that occurred at the time. Sometimes we feel stressed not because what happens is so bad, but because it was less than we expected. For example, a patient felt lousy after giving a speech. She told me, "My presentation went fine, but not nearly as well as I'd hoped. I counted on hitting a home run and only hit a double." These are all examples of the little voice in our heads stirring up trouble and unease.

Add these internal conversations to things like drinking too much caffeine, overloading our schedules and getting into too much debt and you begin to understand how much of our stress is self-created.

If this list seems daunting to you, don't be discouraged. First of all, realize that you're not alone. Secondly, recognize that awareness is the first important step to dealing with these problems. And thirdly, appreciate that, if we're the ones creating the stress, then we're in the best position to do something about it. We have more control than we think.

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