**Identifying Your Stress Triggers**

Imagine that you and four people are working together in an office. Ben, the boss, and Mary are very talkative and seem cheerful most of the time. The other man and woman, Michael and Jane, are more quiet and serious workers, but are polite and pleasant to talk to. On the surface all four appear to be happy and content in their lives in general, and you would have no idea that your colleagues might be suffering some degree of unhealthy stress.

When Ben gets angry, and criticizes Jane for some small mistake, you think he is just acting with authority, even when he is seen to behave this way frequently. When you see Jane seem to shrink every time Ben comes near her, you think she is merely afraid of her boss. Michael often mentions in a casual way that his son is not studying or paying attention in class, but you just see him as a concerned parent with a rebellious son. When you hear Mary expressing her impatience with her husband’s absent-mindedness, the traffic jams, her daughter’s slowness in getting ready for school, and the clients who phone her with silly questions or requests, you see her as a highly efficient and focused woman.

We get so used to the behaviours of others that stress-induced actions become normal to us, so much so that we don’t even recognize the unhealthy signs in ourselves.

There are two primary triggers for stress: anxiety and irritation. Irritation is a signal that some uncomfortable experience is beginning to grow in you, and if you don’t pay attention to it, the stress will build up, leading you to become angry, impatient, critical or frustrated. The more stress inside you, the quicker your anger, impatience, criticism and frustration will appear.

If anxiety is causing the stress it can lead you to worry more, feel guilty more easily, be less trusting of others, and be more nervous. It’s important to emphasize that stress is not a problem unless it is ignored, in which case it could lead to many more serious problems in your work, marriage, family or social life. For instance, people who worry a lot about money are more likely to take financial risks that do not succeed. People who are unaware of their frequent anger or impatience could create more difficulties in their personal and professional relationships.

Today’s lesson is not only about noticing the outer signs of stress but some hidden signs as well. First decide if you are likely to react to irritation by becoming angry, impatient, critical, or frustrated. If so, are you aware that you put high expectations on others that they can’t live up to, to your satisfaction?

Expectations put stress on everyone, but expectations that are too high or even unrealistic not only create a strain on you or others, but actually create mental roadblocks to fulfilling those expectations. People with unrealistic expectations are so often prone to be angry, impatient, critical and frustrated. Maybe you could examine yourself to determine what unrealistic or impossibly high expectations you have on others and yourself.

People with high expectation on themselves or others are often perfectionists. The tendency of perfectionists is that they seldom feel happy with the results they achieve so they will drive themselves to be better and to do more regardless of how successful they are.  Are you a perfectionist who doesn’t live up to your own standards and expectations? If your standard is set to be a perfectionist, you will rarely feel satisfied with your performance and will put more and more pressure on yourself and others.

Tomorrow’s lesson will deal with the stressful effects of anxiety.

**Assignment:**

Let’s start by examining the kinds of expectations you might have put on yourself in the past. The first way to explore this possibility is to look at any disappointments you might have toward previous goals, life situations and past results with which you are unsatisfied, or see as “failures”. Don’t try too hard to remember; it’s easier to do this exercise if you trust your imagination, intuition, and your body to give you signals. Are there any disappointments you might have in the following areas?

Relationship with mother or father \_\_\_\_\_

Career goals and dreams \_\_\_\_\_

As a Parent \_\_\_\_\_

School goals and results \_\_\_\_\_

Other personal goals \_\_\_\_\_

With your partner, past or present \_\_\_\_\_\_

Everyone faces disappointments and setbacks in their lives. The biggest challenge for perfectionists is to consider that mistakes are okay. It may not cause you to miss out on amazing opportunities, in fact, by allowing yourself to make mistakes, you may actually discover solutions in another direction that you never noticed before. Even if you can just try considering the possibility that “it’s okay to not be perfect”, you maybe surprise yourself with the relaxation you feel in your body and who knows what inspiration will come when your body and mind are not racing to be perfect.