

Stepping Away from the Cliff

Here's an illustration of how this stress-effect works: Imagine you are walking down the sidewalk and you trip. There would be a mild reaction and you'd recover quickly. Now imagine you were walking 2 feet from the edge of a cliff and you tripped. You would be terrified and your body would go into complete panic. Now imagine a time when you were feeling pretty good—things were going well—and someone you love left dishes on the table or you were stuck in traffic. They were mild irritants. Now imagine you had a horrible day at work and you'd been feeling sick and your back was hurting and you were behind on your bills and you walk into the bathroom in your socks and step right into the soggy puddle your kid (or spouse) left on the floor—again—after his or her shower. Steam comes out of your ears and you restrain yourself (or don't) from screaming like a banshee. The difference in your reaction in each case was the difference in the level that the stressor affected you. The stressor didn't change in intensity—you were closer to your cliff.

You see, stress is cumulative both in your emotions and in your body. Stress from your work and family and traffic and environmental pollutants each add a layer of stress. Feeling uncertain or insecure creates an undercurrent of stress, and then as you face additional stressors throughout your day you begin to feel weighed down, overwhelmed, frustrated and you become more and more sensitive to each additional stressor. You're on edge, stressed out, anxiously. Our bodies are bombarded by an assault of stress hormones and increased hypertension, put our bodies in a less-than-optimal state, impacting our health, heart, digestion, energy levels and more, depleting our reserves and further adding to our stress through our ailing bodies. All of these stress sources accumulate a "stress-effect" in the body, eventually leading to dis-ease.

So, what can you do about it? Back off the cliff! Actively practice techniques for reducing your stress.

Venting and Other Stress-Reduction Techniques

The Stress Balloon: One of the best ways to reduce stress is to express your emotions or "vent". Stress building up happens in the same way a balloon inflates as you continue to blow into it. Each new stressor is like blowing another breath into your stress balloon. If you just keep adding to it, eventually it will pop. In order to reduce the pressure in your balloon, or step away from the cliff, you need to use the release valve. You need to let it out—vent—express what you're feeling.

Venting is different than talking about it. When you're feeling stressed or anxious, it can be tempting to talk about it. A majority of people spend most of their social time complaining about what stresses them out. But, the problem with this is that:

- 1) Most people don't really express what they're feeling; they complain at a surface level, masking what's really going on.

- 2) Talking about it makes it worse because it gives the stressors more time and attention. For example, if you had a stressful day at work, complaining about it over cocktails for 2 hours just added 2 hours to your crappy workday.
- 3) Most of the time the people they talk to either feed the fear or take it as an opportunity to vent about their stressors too, often competing to see whose is worse.

In contrast, venting it solely for the purpose of “getting it out.” Rather than holding your stress or anxiety or fear inside (increasing your pressure or pushing you toward the cliff), venting or expressing how you feel helps reduce your stress. There are 2 ways to vent:

- 1) **Express how you feel to yourself.** Vent to yourself by stating how you feel, either into the mirror or out loud to yourself. You can also do it silently, if necessary, or even write it down. Then, acknowledge how you feel, just like you would if someone else were venting to you. “I understand. I’m glad you expressed how you feel. Thank you for sharing.”
- 2) **Express how you feel to a trusted support person.** Before you vent, make sure you tell the person that you are venting for the purpose of getting it out and not because you are asking for advice or trying to solve a problem. Make sure they are okay with that. Pick someone who will be supportive, not critical. Pick someone who won’t be dramatic or try to compete with their own stories. Pick someone who is good at listening more than talking. You can even give them the “acknowledgement” phrase above as an example of what you are looking for in return. If you don’t have a friend or family member who can play this role for you, consider seeking support from a counselor, life coach or even a support group. (Be warned though, most support groups focus more on complaining than venting.)

Below are additional actions you can do to reduce your stress levels:

- Develop a gratitude practice, such as journaling. Focusing on what you appreciate and what is going right in your world helps put you in a better mental/emotional state and makes you less susceptible to stress.
- Spend time doing what you love, relaxing, or doing activities that get you into a state of flow.
- Distance or remove yourself from stressors whenever possible. Are there people, places, or situations in your life causing you stress that you can step away from or minimize?
- Make the changes you've been putting off that are nagging at you and hanging over your head. Then there is one less thing to worry about.
- Explore stress reduction programs, such as yoga, massage, and acupuncture.
- Learn a “skilled relaxation” process, such as meditation, and practice it for 20 minutes (or more) per day.

The Tribal Ceremony “It’s Only a Story”:

I heard once of a tribal ceremony that illustrates the importance of releasing our emotions while acknowledging that the source of our stress doesn’t have control over our lives—it’s only a story we tell ourselves.

In this tribe, when a community member is experiencing stress or anxiety or fear or anger over a perceived grievance or undesirable situation, the entire tribe comes together to support this person.

The tribe gathers in a circle and the person with the grievance stands in the center. He or she is asked to express how they feel and to tell their story, 3 times. The first two times, the tribe encircling the individual responds with words and gestures of affirmation and support. They show that they understand how the person feels and that they are justified for feeling that way.

However, after the 3rd telling of the story, the entire tribe remains silent and turns their backs away from the individual at the center. This turning away signifies their acknowledgement that the individual has spoken his or her truth, that they have all affirmed this truth, and that now they are acknowledging that it is only a story. The story has already been told, and now it is time to move on. The individual in the center of the ring is forbidden to speak of it again.

For the individual who expressed their story, they feel supported and gratified and relieved. They have released their emotions and made a public commitment to let them go. They’ve reduced their internal pressure. They’ve backed away from their cliff.

Some people may believe this practice to be extreme, but it perfectly illustrates the point that in order to reduce our stress we need to express it, release it, and move on.