Inner Peace University - Module 5, Lesson 4

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[00:00:00] In this lesson, we're going to talk about stress. Specifically, how our unmanaged attention or attention deficit actually creates unnecessary stress and overwhelm and anxiety in our lives, and exactly what we can do about it.

Let's start with a definition of stress. Stress is the nonspecific response of the body and mind to any demand for change. This is a definition that was coined by a neurobiologist named Han Salia back in, I think the forties or the fifties, and what this really points to is that stress is the organisms, your body-minds attempt to cope with circumstances while ensuring its survival. Stress is the body and the mind reacting to your environment in a way to stay alive.

Now to do this, [00:01:00] we have a whole division of the nervous system called the autonomic nervous system. It's further divided into two divisions, the parasympathetic nervous system and the sympathetic nervous system, each with very different jobs.

The parasympathetic is responsible for rest and recuperate. It's the part of the nervous system that helps you to sleep and to rejuvenate and to nourish yourself. The sympathetic nervous system on the other hand is responsible for responding to threats by fight, flight, or freeze.

Whenever we're faced with a threat, let's take it back into the caveman days, let's say a saber tooth tiger, the sympathetic nervous system would turn on. And when it did, our heart rate would increase, our blood pressure would increase, [00:02:00] our muscle tone would increase, our pupils would dilate, our respiration would increase all in preparation with dealing with the tiger, dealing with the threat. And then once that threat passed, then we would toggle back into the parasympathetic state to rest and recuperate.

So you can kind of think of this nervous system, this part of the nervous system as a big pendulum. And it's designed to swing back and forth from sympathetic to parasympathetic and sympathetic and parasympathetic, from fight or flight to rest and recuperate. And so long as it does that naturally and evenly, there's really no problem.

Where we get into a problem, however, is when we get stuck more and more in the sympathetic mode. And the pendulum, rather than swinging fully back into the parasympathetic mode, only gets partially there or sometimes not there at all. And we get caught in [00:03:00] what we might think of as the chronic stress zone.

Now I described a little bit earlier that the sympathetic nervous system raises the heart rate, it raises the blood pressure, it raises the tension and the tone in the muscles, it dilates your pupils, it gets you ready to fight. And so think about living in that state all the time. It takes a terrible toll, not only on the nervous system, but on every other part of the body, because every other part of the body and mind is run by the nervous system.

So this means that when we are caught in the chronic stress zone, we are going to experience significantly increased intensity of negative and unhelpful emotions and feelings

and decreased capacity. That is, the ability to relax with emotions and feelings. Exactly what we don't want.

Now, with that said, [00:04:00] there are various different types of stress, not all of which are bad. The first kind of stress we want to be aware of is called eustress. Now eustress is good stress. It's the kind of stress that we need to develop over time. I mean, you think about learning. Learning is something that stresses the mind and makes it stronger, or going to the gym or distressing our muscles, which ultimately makes them stronger, or even catching a cold, which stresses the immune system to make it stronger.

So stress, and particularly eustress, is a really important part of our development. However, if the stressor or the demand for change becomes too much or is prolonged for too long of a period, this eustress can turn into [00:05:00] distress. This is not a big calamity just yet, because distress is just a little bit more intense and it can be countered quite easily by the parasympathetic coming back into play. But when we get into chronic stress or worse, post-traumatic stress, the stress level has gotten so severe or so prolonged that it is having more lasting effects on the brain and the nervous system that keep us in that sympathetic mode more and more of the time, if not all of the time. Which as we've already talked about has a debilitating effect on our wellbeing.

I came across this particular statistic way back when I was first creating the bootstrap stress management system for our troops and veterans. And when I first read that 90% of primary care physician visits were related to stress in the US, to be honest, [00:06:00] I thought it was a typo, but I did a little bit more digging and it's actually true.

Now, this is not to say that 90% of primary care physician visits are for stress, they're related to stress. And it's easy to see why that's so if we think about it just a little bit. The nervous system is central headquarters for everything else in the body, including the immune system, including the digestive system, including the respiratory system and on and on and on it goes.

And so when central headquarters gets out of whack, It's not surprising that everything else gets out of whack as well. And we end up having more mental dis-ease, more emotional dis-ease, and actually even more physical dis-ease as a result.

The good news is the bulk of optional stress derives from disintegration,or we could also say it comes from attention deficit or unmanaged attention. And as we're about to [00:07:00] see, that's definitely something we can do something about.