

The Fastest Way out of Stress

Scanning

Data comes in via the 5 senses + inner awareness - the inner sense from within the body. It will do it from many angles. When have I smelled this before? Tasted? Seen? Touched? Heard? Emotionally experienced? Felt this way in my body? The amygdala sends the info to Hippocampus for reference and recording, which checks past similar situations to the data and lets the body know what to prepare for.

Associations

Our past associations create our present experience to a large extent because the things that happen at the same time become associations. Pavlov's dogs – a bell rings, they get fed. My dog, I put on tennis shoes – she gets excited because she associates that with being taken on a walk. **The circuits that fire together – wire together.**

If that feeling was dangerous in the past – we may prepare for battle – fight/flight/freeze Which is a state **like shock**. The unconscious mind and conscious mind disconnect. The survival brain takes over and our "adult brain" is no longer calling the shots.

Stress and the Brain

Our responses to life are based on the wiring in our brain which is formed by our **experiences and how we interpret them**.

Stress is when we feel **overwhelmed** = this is more than I know how to handle. I don't have enough resources for this. If we have \$2000 in the bank, a \$2 service charge is no big deal. If we only have \$1 then it could be a \$200 charge because we don't have enough.

The brain reads all the stressors the same = life or death

- A lion chasing us
- Deadlines at work or angry boss
- A loved one who looks at us angry (parent, spouse, best friend...)
- Strong feelings: sadness, anger, fear, pain, shame, joy, loneliness
- Physical pain
- Trigger: something reminds us of a past trauma – a smell, sight, sound, physical sensation, emotion, etc.
- We have an expectation/need that gets thwarted
- **When we want connection and can't get it**

Core Motivations

The Mindful Therapist by Daniel Siegel

p. 159 In the womb most of us had the experience of being in a state of “being at one with” at some point before birth.

p. 160 The contrast between the ground of being¹ and working for a living **sets up a drive to “make things okay again.”** This is the way we try to create some sense of balance in our lives, some assurance inwardly that everything will work out.

-some of us are more prone to experience **fear** in response to events in life;
- others experience distress, especially at social disconnection, (**sadness**)
- and still others readily feel **anger**.

Which is yours?

Where do you yourself first go in your emotional response to such experiences?

- Do you generally first feel fear (anticipatory anxiety or vigilance for danger),
- distress (especially sadness over loss of connection), or
- anger (especially in response to limitations to feeling in control)?

We organize our life around our primary feeling

Generally, we may have a tendency to live with one of these as a predominant modality of being—a **way in which we tend to first focus our attention in new situations**, patterns in which we prioritize our **emotional evaluations**, and **ways in which we engage with others socially**. Some people have more than one type.

p. 163 With therapy, the type does not disappear; rather, it seems to move to a more adaptive, flexible, and coherent flow.

Yet if people had insecure attachment histories ... they appeared to be imprisoned by their own temperament, irritated by their own personality. When you are insecurely attached, you may not be able to have kindness and compassion toward yourself.

p. 164 With the development of security—with both **interpersonal attunement** in relationships and **internal attunement** with mindfulness practice, which each promote neural integration—people don’t lose their personality; **they become more at ease** within it. In fact, they seem to come to take pleasure in their own makeup rather than feeling compelled to try to jettison it. This is the goal of therapy and it is the outcome of integration. We come to treasure our traits.

So our default emotion: Fear, distress or anger becomes a constant feeling.

¹ what Leanne Payne and Frank Lake call *the sense of being*

Subconscious vs. conscious mind

Dr. William Tiller, Stanford physicist **When the conscious mind is pitted against the subconscious mind, the subconscious will win every time.**

1st six years

Most of the reference system was established **in the first six years of life**, when there was no ability to filter information, everything was important.

Our brains have different brain states. Alpha, beta, gamma, delta and theta. During the first six years of life – and only during the first six years of our life – we are in a delta/theta brain state. In the delta/theta brain state, **we don't have the ability to filter out information**. It's very **difficult to deprogram** something once it's programmed during this age – big or small events.

During those first six years our brains need to find out **what is safe** as quickly as possible. The measuring stick is: pleasure = safety, good, desirable and **pain = not safe**. If it's not safe we need to escape quickly. This wiring is the dominant one until about age six, after that it only kicks in only in life threatening situations.

We are hardwired our first six years to see pain as bad and pleasure as good.
So pain stresses us out.

The number one job of our fight of flight or stress response is to **protect us**, not to make us happy. Our stress response would much rather **overreact** than underreact, and it will often set off the fight-or-flight reaction "just in case."

Many of us go into fight or flight ten, fifteen, or twenty times a day, to the point that stress is where we *live*. When it's 100 times a day "I hate my life!" kicks in. It has become the norm when it should be the rare exception. We are living in stress, and we don't even know it.

Our brain eventually becomes addicted to stress and it feels normal.

Peace can actually feel uncomfortable as if we aren't being responsible or safe.

A fear-based thought is one that **increases** stress when you are not in imminent mortal danger.

Every destructive feeling we experience is based in fear.

- Anger when what we fear is happening right now
- Anxiety and worry when we believe our fear will happen in the future
- Sadness and depression when we fear has already happened, we believe we can't undo it
- And our lives are changed forever → hopelessness and helplessness
- We feel unforgiving when we fear something is not right and fair and may never be right again.
- We feel rejection when we fear that someone isn't going to love or accept us, and we can't fix it

Truly every negative internal experience in your life comes, in some way from fear. Fears of being abandoned or found unlovable are **fundamental human fears**. They are so basic and so profound that they can trigger very severe reactions in our nervous systems. Sometimes they may even cause some major depressive responses and panic attacks.

The antidote

So what is the antidote to our fear? *Love* is the antidote.

In contrast to fear-based, *loved-based* thoughts, beliefs, and memories are those that **decrease stress**.

Fear dominates all emotions, except love.

The amygdala expresses all emotions, especially fear. (Evaluates what is scary.)

There was a study done on sexual abuse survivors who were fearful most of the time (amygdala overactive) the only emotion that actually over-rode the fear was love. Then the amygdala calmed down to a settled state. ²

So if we don't want our thoughts based on the past – what do we need to do?

Tune into Love

You can control your focus, you can choose where you “tune” your station.

How it works physically³

Let's take a moment to look at how “tuning into love” chemically works in us. Oxytocin is often called the “love hormone.” In addition to being released in our brain when we feel “in love,” it is also released by sex, eating ice cream, or any enjoyable activity. It is quite literally, both physically and nonphysically, the diametrical opposite of the fear/stress response.

*Remember, **we are built and designed to live in love, not fear – living in fear is a malfunction.** Nevertheless, you're not going to engage in these enjoyable activities constantly, and it wouldn't be good for you if you did.*

However, Dr. Margaret Altemus and Dr. Rebecca Turner, in a study on oxytocin, found that recalling a love relationship memory can cause oxytocin to be released in the brain. Similarly, Dr. Amen found that recalling fear-based memories can cause the same negative, fear-based hormones and chemicals to be released in the brain as when the event originally happened.

A fear-based memory turns on the stress response, which releases cortisol in the brain, which results in all the symptoms on the left. A love-based memory that has been activated can release oxytocin in the brain, which results in all the symptoms on the right. Here's the great news: you get to choose which experience you have! You can decide to keep your fear-based programming and constantly turn on the stress, cortisol... or reprogram with love, focus on living in love in the present moment, and turn on the love, oxytocin...

² Dr. Todd Frey (dean of counseling at Mid-America) quoted a Neuroscience Journal in a lecture

³ *Beyond Willpower* by Alexander Lloyd

Contrasting Cortisol and Oxytocin

The clinical effects of the stress/fear response and those of oxytocin when released in the brain include the following:

Clinical Effects of Cortisol (Released by Fear/Stress)	Clinical Effects of Oxytocin (Released by love)
Dumbs us Down	Enhances relationships
Makes us sick	Increases parental bonding
Drains energy	Results in love, joy and peace
Suppresses the immune system	Increases immune function
Increases pain	Reduces stress
Raises blood pressure	Lowers blood pressure
Closes cells	Opens cells
Destroys relationships	Counteracts addiction and withdrawal
Causes fear, anger, depression, confusion, shame and worth and identity issues	Stimulates human growth hormone
Causes us to approach everything from a negative perspective (even if we put on a happy face)	Increases trust and wise judgment
	Modulates appetite, healthy digestion, and metabolism
	Promotes healing
	Stimulates relaxation
	Stimulates non-stress energy
	Stimulates higher neurological activity

*The ultimate source of both are our **fear-based and love-based memories.***

...I believe that when we are deprogrammed of fear and reprogrammed with love, and then choose to live in love, focusing on the present moment, we also create a steady release of oxytocin in the brain... my clients feel as if they're twenty years old again, full of energy, thinking more clearly, healthier, and more positive.

- 1) *In addition to consciously tuning in to love, a second helpful technique you can use is to focus on what I call a "love picture," or love memory, which is what Drs. Altemus and Turner found can cause a release of oxytocin in the brain.*
- 2) *Imagine a memory where you felt completely and utterly loved, and visualize that love picture. If you don't have any love memories, you can create one, as long as it is in truth and love, it will typically work great. We are creating and editing memories constantly anyway; plus, your memory of what happened and what really happened may be two very different things.*

Paul: If you have love, you have everything; if you don't have love, you have nothing.

This isn't affirmations

p. 74 University double blind study – found that the people who already had strong self-esteem felt even better about themselves after repeating positive affirmations. But those who did not already have strong self-esteem (the great majority of people in the study) and repeated the same positive affirmations felt even worse.

When I tested affirmation in my practice with the heart rate variability (the medical test for stress) I found that when people said affirmation that they did not believe, their stress level spiked. The person has to believe the affirmation.

Laying a new foundation

Parenting was meant to build a bond with God. When it has failed we have to form that attachment bond. Receiving is a way to do that.

Returning to mother's arms and receiving the loving gaze.

I believe that is the point of our connecting time with God. Learn to rest and receive.

Letting that love feed the adult.

Building the root system to draw the love into ourselves. We need love continually. We are really meant to have love as our fuel, so we need to be filled continually. **When we are utterly convinced** we are adored by someone who delights in taking care of us then we are able to let go of stress, because there is someone who will handle the stuff that is too big for us. But if we **doubt we have a loving caretaker**, of course we will feel stressed – we have to handle it ourselves.

For those who felt responsible for the grown ups when they were children, this is a very new idea. It will feel strange and unnatural but the more time you spend soaking in it the more your brain will make room for it.

Withdrawal - Our cells can be addicted to feelings

As the feelings of calm and peace become more familiar, the receptors will look for those chemicals instead of the stress ones and the extra receptors that were created to receive the stress chemicals will start to fade away. But we do go through withdrawal we might feel bored and life feel flat as we get used to being "off" the chemical rush. It takes awhile to come back to balance.

Learning to change your focus

Calming exercise: Put one hand on your heart, the other on your abdomen. Hold them there for a while. Try switching hands to see if you prefer one over the other. Most people do.

I am loved

When I feel stressed, close my eyes and think of a moment when I felt loved. Stress hormones like cortisol can sabotage the prefrontal cortex, causing you to lose focus and control. So when you find yourself stressed, close your eyes and reflect on a time you felt truly loved. "This will reduce damaging stress hormones immediately. Changing both your brain and your body in a healthy way." ⁴

Receive the loving gaze of God – like a baby in Mama's arms. Let yourself be a helpless small baby receiving the maternal gaze of a God who adores you. There is nothing you need to do to earn that love. He has chosen to love you.

Pray

Studies have shown that when the mind enters a prayerful state, activity in prefrontal cortex increases – and stress-hormone levels decrease by 20% after just 3 minutes.

Blessing

A new study in Psychological Science had participants channel loving thoughts and compassion and direct the positive energy toward both themselves and those in their immediate social circle. Researchers then measured subjects' vagal tone (a key indicator of heart health and emotional well-being) and found that each period of well-wishing to loved ones set in motion an upward spiral of physiological changes, leading to reduced anxiety, sunnier moods and improved physical health.

Practicing God spotting – looking for His love expressed, throughout the day.

What have I received today?

Instead of evaluating your performance/behavior and stimulating shame, reflect on: *What have I received from You today?* He is taking care of me all day long.

Shame separates us from God.

We have to learn how to deal with failure. *Here I am again, I have wandered too far from you. This is where I will always end up without You.* We have a choice to let our failure lead us back to God in dependence or away from Him into a stressed, paralyzed, shut down place. The enemy loves to use it, do we want to agree with it? Humility is honest and precious to God. He delights to be needed.

⁴ Daniel Amen *Daniel's Fast*

Contemplative Knowing of God's Love

Gerald May calls the sort of knowing of love that is essential for transformation "contemplative knowing". It comes from sitting at the feet of Jesus, gazing into his face and listening to his assurances of love for me. It comes from letting God's love wash over me, not simply trying to believe it. It comes from soaking in these verses, observing how He looks at me. Listening to His kind words. (*Psalm 23, Psalm 91, Psalm 131, Is. 43:1-4, Is. 49:14-16, Hosea 11:1-4, Matthew 10:29-31, Romans 8:31-39. Step in: Matthew 19:13-15, Matthew 22:1-14, Mark 6:45-52, Luke 12:22-32*)

*p. 6 I identified a few people who seemed to have overcome serious addictions to alcohol and other drugs, and I asked them what had helped them turn their lives around so dramatically. All of them described some sort of spiritual experience. They kindly acknowledged their appreciation for the professional help they had received, but they also made it clear that this help had not been the source of their healing. **What had healed them was something spiritual.** Something about what they said reminded me of home. It had something to do with turning to God.⁵*

Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer by Richard Rohr

The nature of the ego is that it tries to fix, name, control and insure everything for itself. We want predictability. The religious version of egocentricity is wanting to be right and wanting to be in control.

But when we live in God's presence, we await reality's demands on us. In the now, fully aware of the present moment Spirit. Receiving. I am His.
Be still and know that I am God

As soon as we are in a judging mode (higher/lower, superior/inferior), we can't love.

Manipulating, changing, controlling and fixing – **even self**. We need to be in charge which moves us deeper and deeper into **anxiety**.

My mother's eyes tell me I'm the beloved.

Infants see themselves entirely mirrored in their parent's eyes, especially the mother's. What her eyes tell us about ourselves, we believe and become. It's a mirroring game. Prayer is much the same; **we receive and return the divine gaze**.

Real relationship with God returns us to the primal experience of **knowing we are held lovingly. Therefore, we do not need to be afraid**. Scarcity is not the primary experience, but abundance. Knowing this, we can relax and let go.

We can relate to God only according to the level of our human development and the level at which we relate to everyone else. Most don't know how to surrender to God. **How can we surrender unless we believe there is someone trustworthy to surrender to?**

⁵ Gerald May: Addiction and Grace