



## **Seeking Center: How to Find Calm in the Midst of Chaos**

So much has been written about stress and how to cope with it. When you are confronted with stress how often are you able to manage it in a way that doesn't diminish your physical, mental and emotional wellbeing? It sure is one thing to talk about being calm and quite another to find that calm when you are faced with the stresses and strains that life may present.

In this presentation we want to explore some of the characteristics of stress and try to identify approaches that may diminish its destructive outcomes. There are some basic approaches that can help to offset its ability to diminish you. We will identify some skills or approaches to managing stress that can serve you no matter what stresses arise. There is an ancient Chinese saying by philosopher Confucius that says, "The green reed that bends in the wind is stronger than the mighty oak that breaks in a storm." How can you become that reed that bends rather than breaks when the storms of life arise? That is what we hope to explore in this presentation.

Recently the whole world has been flung into the storms created by the Coronavirus outbreak. This particular storm has had far reaching impacts and has disrupted and challenged many aspects of our lives. This virus has created a perfect storm of potential stress and uncertainty. It has disrupted so many fundamental aspects of our daily lives. It has created dramatic shifts in our daily functioning and has aroused fears for the safety and stability of our health, relational connections, employment, financial security, and the wellbeing of our government and society as a whole.

For you, Veteran caregivers, this storm added a whole new layer of challenging dimensions and greater strain to your already demanding role as a caregiver. This new world challenge has all the ingredients necessary to provoke fear, anxiety, uncertainty and stress, and the potential to undermine your personal stability and wellbeing.

Aside from the pain that stresses deliver, life's challenges also always provide an opportunity. These challenges provide you the opportunity to grow as a human being, develop new strengths and deepen or expand relationships with others. Painful, challenging stressful life events have the potential to provide some of the most meaningful and powerful experiences of your life. Recognizing those benefits will depend on your ability to see the opportunity in these experiences. They are there if you seek them out.



So, as you all are trying to adapt to a wide array of individual life challenges what better time than now to explore strategies to help you cope with the changes that life is throwing at you. Make use of this opportunity to develop your ability to weather adversity and bring this newfound strength, learning, resilience and enhanced relationships into your life moving forward.

To begin lets us first look at the qualities that most individual stresses have in common. Some particular characteristics are evident in many of the stressful experiences that you face. Three qualities that we will explore here encompass uncertainty, loss of control, and the experience of being unable to keep up with the pace of demands on you. While stress may come in many different individual forms these qualities are often present. Think now of the issues and aspects in your life that are causing you the greatest stress. Are some of these overall characteristics at play?

How has uncertainty contributed to your stress reactions? As caregivers you have had to face the uncertainty that comes when a loved one is ill, when and if they will get better, and how this impacts your relationship, your future, your finances, your goals. Have you experienced changes in your family or intimate relationships that have left you unsure of their stability or unclear where you stand? Has financial or employment uncertainty contributed to your stress?

The unknown is often hard to tolerate. You want to know where things stand as it gives a feeling of security. Knowing that your health is ok, your relationship, job or financial security is intact, can give a feeling of safety. Without that security of knowing all is well, you can feel vulnerable or insecure. Change and uncertainty are a constant despite all the efforts made to avoid or avert the distress they may bring. Uncertainty is a fact of living. Coping with the uncertainty may benefit from specific skills that target this particular aspect of stress.

Another common characteristic that contributes to stress is the lack of, or loss of, control. Think of the times in your life when you were faced with a difficulty that you had no control over something that mattered to you. A family member becomes ill and you can't change that fact. You lost a job or were unable to find a job. Maybe you experienced a significant other that decided to end the relationship and you are unable to change their mind. You may have felt a loss of control over struggles that your children or significant other were experiencing. Many aspects of the coronavirus have resulted in a loss of control.



Feeling as if there is little to nothing you can do to change the reality of a particular challenge you may face can lead to feelings of tremendous frustration, anger, helplessness, and despair. It is an instinct to want to take charge when our wellbeing or that of someone we love is threatened. That desire to change the unchangeable can lead to furthering the stress you experience. You have all heard the description of hitting your head against a brick wall, well not being in control can lead you to that very experience. Finding ways to recognize and cope with a lack of control can prevent the added pain that comes from hitting your head against that wall.

Finally, another characteristic that contributes to stress is when the demands on you or the pace of those demands is just too much. When you feel pressured to meet a growing number of demands it can wear you down and create a stress reaction. You have a limited number of hours in a day and limitations regarding your physical mental and emotional capacity. When the pace of demands coming at you and the degree to which they are taxing your physical, mental, and emotional capacity become more that you can manage, stress responses occur. Your ability to cope is going to depend on your capacity to slow the pace and lighten the load.

Now that we have described some of the characteristics that contribute to stress arising let's consider what happens to you when you are stressed. Do you realize when you are stressed? Stress is an experience in which your physical, mental, emotional being reacts to a threat. Think of our human fight or flight instinct that is biologically hardwired to react to a given stress. Your sympathetic nervous system floods your body with a chemical called adrenaline which is intended to give your body the boost it needs to either fight or run. Your body speeds up, heats up, your heart beats faster, you breathe faster and shallower, thinking races, stomach tenses, and in general you are revved up full throttle to fight or flee. Now while this response is helpful in safeguarding you in the short run if an emergency strikes, running on full throttle in the long term is going to take a toll on your engine.

What is the long term affects of running on full throttle for extended periods of time? What do you notice when you have been gunning it for days, weeks, months or years? You notice maybe headaches, muscle tension in your shoulders and neck, grinding your teeth, stomach and intestinal distress, raised blood pressure, and increase vulnerability to illness. The list goes on. Not only does this kind of stress make you more vulnerable to chronic illness but also impacts your mental, social and emotional wellbeing.



You may not have learned to pay attention to how you are feeling or to what you may need and tolerate ongoing stress without even realizing just how bad it is. Pay attention to what some of the clues may be for you that stress may be taking its toll. Are you experiencing increased vulnerability to becoming ill, are you having tension headaches, tight muscles, intestinal issues? Are you short tempered and irritable? Are you aware of feeling overwhelmed and unable to think clearly or get anything accomplished? Are you isolating from others or have you lost your spark or interest in the things you normally enjoy? Pay attention to these warnings! You cannot continue to ignore these signs as they will eventually take an even greater toll on your health and wellbeing.

Not only is it important to pay attention to yourself to be able to notice that you are in a stress reaction, it is also helpful to consider and notice if there are certain stressors that are more apt to trigger a stress reaction in you. While certain events may generally be stressful for everyone, you are also unique in what triggers are likely to create the most pronounced reactions in you. Sometimes particular triggers may be due to personality style or may be related to certain hurts you experienced growing up. Some life stresses for one person may not impact another depending on these and other factors.

Think about what some of your particular triggers are that make you more prone to an exaggerated stress response. Let's say for example you grew up having really high expectations placed on you to be perfect or right and you make a mistake and maybe fall short of your imagined expectations? That is going to be far more stressful for you than someone who doesn't feel the pressure to uphold these standards. Let's say your sense of yourself depends on being a great breadwinner and you find yourself out of work? What if you grew up feeling unsure of being loved or cared for and your relationship ends? Maybe you get great comfort from having your life or your environment well organized and something happens to disrupt your order? You may have been a great athlete and spent your time in physical activities and then aging or illness compromises your fitness or healthy body.

There are many ways in which we all are uniquely vulnerable to particular stresses and it can be helpful to take into consideration why one particular stress may be harder on you than the next person. It can also help you to understand these triggers because it may point to how you may need to target these areas and build skills to cope with these vulnerabilities. When you are able to identify your particular areas of vulnerability it can help you to be more understanding of yourself and find ways to talk



to yourself and target building more flexible and resilient approaches when these stresses occur.

As we mentioned earlier there is a range of physical indicators that your fight or flight or sympathetic nervous system has kicked into gear. All of these can be a physical warning that you are under stress. Also, how you respond to stress or how you act it out may look differently for each person and it can help to know how you tend to respond as this can be another way to notice that stress is at play.

Do you tend to respond to being stressed by becoming overly excited or agitated? Do you get keyed up, your mind going a mile a minute rushing even harder to cope? Do you get irritable, angry, impatient, fretful, impulsive and louder? Or on the other hand are you someone who tends to stick their head in the sand, become withdrawn, spaced out, frozen, quiet, or depressed? Are you a worrier using all of your mental energy trying desperately to pretend you can control outcomes just by thinking repetitively about something you have no control over? You may find when you are stressed that you engage in certain activities for example eating, drinking, spending to the extreme in order to find relief and comfort but then run the risk of creating further problems for yourself. What are your typical stress reactions? What behaviors do you find yourself engaging in to offset the stress? Pay attention to your go to reactions.

To review we have identified three characteristics that contribute to a stress reaction. These are uncertainty, a loss of control and the rate and amount of demands that may overwhelm your system. We have talked about the importance of recognizing and noticing the stress response and attending to it so that it doesn't become a chronic state of operating. We also took a bit of a look at potential stress triggers to consider being aware of for you. Finally, we discussed some of the ways that you may react when stressful situations hit. Now let's get down to the business of discussing what can you do when the stress storm touches down on you.

Let's first talk about potential strategies for coping with uncertainty. Uncertainty leaves you up in the air, so the trick is how do you land back on some solid ground so that you feel more secure. It can help to first get all the facts. Learning more about what you are dealing with can provide solid information based in fact rather than fear. Instead of letting your mind spin out of control imagining and catastrophizing about what may happen in the future, focus on what is happening now in the present. Interrupt your negative fears of the unknown and bring yourself back to managing what is at hand. You can also decide to shift the focus of attention if you find yourself spinning out of control. Focus your attention on something that is more productive. For example, with



the Corona virus, learn what you can and engage in all the preventative measures available.

What is the worst-case scenario that you fear in the uncertain times? What are you imagining? It may actually help to actually face that worst-case head on and ask yourself, "OK so if this happens then, what will I do?" What can or will you do if the worst case you imagine happens? Let yourself strategize how you could actually manage it. Plan and take control of what you can. This isn't intended to have your head spinning in a whirl of fear but to just actually let yourself face the monster, so to speak, head on. Sometimes it can help to simply recognize and feel your fears. Allow yourself to just sit with the feeling and you will find it will pass or that you become more comfortable or accepting of the uncertainty.

Finally remember your strengths. When facing uncertainty, you can seek certainty from recognizing what is solid in your life. Find comfort in what and who are stabilizing factors. Remember that you don't have to manage this uncertainty alone. No matter what the situation there is support from family, friends and help from a multitude of community supports. This isn't the first time in your life you have faced challenges so consider what helped you get through tough times in the past. You have internal and external resources to draw on to get you through uncertain times. Seek out all the avenues that provide information, comfort, and security that you are needing to get you through this tough patch.

Next what about when you are faced with a stress in which you have little to no control. Your significant other becomes ill, your child is grappling with drug and alcohol addiction, the stock market plunges, and you lose a large portion of your financial investments. Certainly, with the Corona virus many families have had to cope with letting go, as loved ones were transported to the hospital ill having no control over being with them during a critically important time. Many have suffered both in and out of hospitals due to having no control over physical connection as their cherished loved one lay ill or dying. These are the most tragic and painful experiences in which loss of control brings you face to face with such helplessness.

It is easy to fool ourselves into believing we have far more control than we actually have. It preserves a sense of security to operate as if your significant relationships and what matters most to you in your life is protected until something occurs to disrupt that illusion. The Corona virus hits, or your spouse has an affair, or your child drops out of school and is abusing drugs; any number of calamities can shake up the security and stability that you have relied on. Its human nature to want to



avoid the possibility that anything that matters to you could be at risk. But reality is, there is only so much control you actually have regarding yourself and even less over others.

It is important when dealing with stress related to a loss of control to ask yourself, “What is in my control?”, “What is my responsibility and what belongs to the other person?” Many times, natural caregivers who are prone to focusing on others can struggle sorting out the boundary between what is your responsibility or in your control, and what belongs to the other person. Trying to rescue or direct what others should do to keep them safe doesn’t respect their own need to take ownership for their life and often results in alienating them or interfering with their own capacity to take control of themselves.

What is within your control and what isn’t? Sorting this out and facing what you can and cannot control is an important step in relieving the stress of trying to control something you can’t. For example, you can control making sure you wear a mask, wash hands and social distance and do what you can to protect yourself from the virus. You can ask your spouse to join you in counseling to sort out why your marriage is failing. You can relate your concerns for a loved one’s drug use and set limits to avoid supporting their habit. You cannot however make others do as you wish and cannot protect yourself completely from the potential that life does not always go the way you wish.

So, identify what you can control and what you can do to care for yourself and your loved ones and recognize the reality that your control is, and should be, limited. Coming to some acceptance over what you cannot control can be a real process of letting go. Accepting what is and letting go of your fight to control or change what is not within your control is not easy but there is relief from the stress when you are able to get to this place. Acceptance doesn’t mean that you won’t have to feel hurt, sad, regretful or other painful feelings but it will relieve you of the stress of fighting against something you cannot change.

Sometimes loss of control can be a struggle if you are holding yourself to standards of perfection and find yourself in a situation that challenges these standards. Maybe you have held yourself to be the perfect caregiver to your spouse and commit to never placing them in a nursing home but now their dementia makes it impossible for you to manage the intense physical care needs they require. Letting go of your perfection and your commitment may mean accepting they need to go into a nursing



facility. Facing this loss of control can be so painful and coming to forgiveness for yourself a process of accepting your own limitations.

There are many ways that you can confront challenges to your desire to control and uphold certain expectations of yourself and others. When these expectations are not met it can be very difficult to come to terms with the reality that you or they are not perfect. Moving towards recognition of yours and others' limitations, mistakes, imperfections, and learning to accept these limitations is a critical step in letting go of the stress that results from holding up standards of impossible perfection. Forgive yourself and forgive others for being the imperfect beings they are. Sure, you want to do your best, but you are also human. Recognizing your own human imperfections can not only relieve the burden of stressful perfectionism it also can allow an opening for real human understanding and connection as you step off your pedestal and join the imperfect human race.

One of the aspects that we touched on earlier is considering if you are someone that reacts to stress by increasing your energy, intensity, activity, irritability, loudness. If this is you, then you will then need to offset your stress reaction with the opposite response. Slow down, calm down, soothe yourself with relaxing activities. Bring yourself into the moment and consider using meditation or relaxation exercises to bring that energy level down. Notice your tone of voice and interrupt yourself when you notice you are barking orders and becoming irritable with others. Breathe deeply until you calm down.

On the other hand, if you are the type of person that responds to stress by retreating, zoning out, withdrawing from others, avoiding reality, becoming depressed, then you will need to do the opposite. Get moving physically. Taking walks or exercising can get you engaged with your own energy and power. Face the facts and explore problem solving solutions either yourself or with someone that can help. Reach out and share your feelings instead of keeping them bottled up. Your problem is not going to disappear because you avoid it and avoiding can actually make matters worse. So, dig in and awaken your strengths, reach out, move, share your feelings, and face the facts.

Are you someone that worries when stress arises? Remember if you think you are controlling, preparing, or predicting the future with worry you are wrong. Worry is a stress inducing waste of time and energy. Worry is always in the future and no amount of worrying is going to have the slightest impact on what happens on the future. You cannot control any outcome by worrying about it. You may think you can, but it is an



illusion. It is something that you will have to take note of when you are doing it and tell yourself to cut it out. Interrupt those thoughts. Return yourself to being in the present moment. Shift your attention. Focus on what you can do in the moment.

Finally let's discuss what you may try to do to cope with the stress that comes when you are faced with being overwhelmed by the pace or the amount of demands placed on you. So often we hear caregivers say there is no time for them to do anything for themselves. We know you may contend with significant demands on your time caring for your loved one. Managing the care of another, along with caring for your home, financial obligations, work, and family can become easily overwhelming.

One important aspect of these demands or pressures is also looking at the expectations you are placing on yourself to do it all and do it perfectly. These high expectations contribute considerably to the stress. Are your expectations of yourself unmerciful or unforgiving? Are you placing everything and everybody ahead of you and expecting more from yourself than what is reasonable? This is an important factor to consider. You may even want to talk this over with an objective person because you may not have a balanced view of what is actually reasonable. Consider how you can be more forgiving of yourself and challenge those perfectionistic or too high standards.

Once you can open your mind up to the ideas that you don't have to be all things to everybody or that you have to be perfect then you can begin to look at what can you let go of. How can you cut back either by not seeking perfection, delegating some of your demands, or setting some limits? Learning to say no in a direct and caring way can diminish the demands and alleviate some of the stress you are under. If you can set aside your need to do it all and be all, you can open yourself up to the idea of asking for help, delegating or sharing your responsibilities with others. Asking for help is not always comfortable or easy but if you can set aside your pride you can open yourself to some relief. By reaching out for help you are giving someone else the opportunity to be there for you and that can make your connection stronger.

When demands are great it can be very helpful to approach what is needed in an organized and purposeful way. You may need to look at the tasks at hand and sort out how to approach them in the most efficient and orderly fashion. You can set up schedules managing your time as efficiently as possible. Make lists to manage what needs to get done and break down tasks into smaller more manageable steps and chip a way at it. Again, stay in the moment. You can really only properly do one thing at a time. You can always look at ways to cut back on what you are doing to only what is essential. Listen for those stress inducing internal dialogues that are barking at you



about what you should, or would have, or could have done. Dismiss that useless noise and have some compassion for the fact that you are doing the best you can.

There are many ways to bring soothing into your experience of stress. It will require that you pay attention to yourself and decide to put your self-care on your own priority list. Although time may be limited there is in reality always time in any given day to bring this attention to you. There are many ways to develop habits of daily self-care that can keep you nourished during the storms of life. The options for inviting this into your daily life are as endless as your imagination. The problem really is that most don't realize how much making the decision to invest even minutes of your day in these practices can make a major investment in your well-being.

Make a habit to move every day; stretch, walk, dance, exercise, even minutes a day can change your outlook. Releasing the stress and invigorating your body can help you cope and improve your physical wellbeing more that you may realize. Invite all of your senses in to bring comfort; enjoying sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touch. Get outside or observe the beauty of nature around you. Unplug the phones and computers and TV's for a moment of quiet, reflection or meditation. Mindfulness meditations and visualization relaxation exercises are available to help you slow down and find some compassion for yourself and release from the stress you are feeling. Make use of these tools. Take a moment to reflect each day on what and who you are grateful for. Reach out for support and give your support. Share your feelings and needs and make a place for you in your life.

Stresses and life challenges are inevitable. Each challenge you encounter provides the potential opportunity to learn a new lesson and build new strengths and skills. Your ability to build your resilience and manage your life stresses will depend on your ability to be like the reed that bends with the wind. Remember you are not alone as you learn to become comfortable with uncertainty, find acceptance for your loss of control, act purposefully to slow your pace and soothe your spirit. These will all serve to keep you strong and resilient as you ride out the inevitable storms that life presents you.