



Focusing on the Forgotten, Me!

The topic for this presentation is, "Focusing on the Forgotten...Me!"

I want to start by giving you a bit of an overview describing how we will focus our time today.

We know that with the tremendous daily demands that you deal with and the intense focus caregiving requires, it can be very easy to become so absorbed with others that you lose sight of focusing on yourself. We will begin with an exercise today that will help bring your attention back to you.

We will then explore and identify some of the signs that you may notice that let you know when you are stressed and not keeping up with your own needs.

We also want to take a look at some of the beliefs that you may be operating under that may contribute to maintaining a strained system.

And finally, we want to begin to think about ways you might pay closer attention to yourself by finding opportunities to connect to the people, places and experiences that can restore your balance and vitality.

Let's get started!

We are going to begin our presentation today with an exercise that we hope will help you bring your attention back to yourself.

Brief Body Scanning Meditation Activity

When a person is feeling stressed, it can be typical to carry the stress in your body. Shoulders can feel tense, the neck can feel tight and stiff, or there might be knots in your stomach. Sometimes you might not have any awareness of physical discomfort at all because you are too busy to notice.

A body scan activity can help you identify the places in your body where you carry your stress. The body scan is a way to help you focus your mind on yourself, tune out things around you, and maybe help you reduce the busy thoughts that may be swirling in your mind.

During a body scan, there are no expectations on what you should be sensing and no worry about doing it right or wrong. We are going to spend a few minutes

VA Caregiver Support Line 1-855-260-3274



having you do a body scan for yourself. If you notice any uncomfortable sensations, put your focus on them. Don't judge them as okay or not okay. Breathe into them and notice what happens.

Make sure you are seated in a comfortable position with your body, arms, legs, and head supported. Make sure your legs are uncrossed. If it is safe for you to do so, close your eyes.

We are going to start with a deep breath. Take a slow deep breath. Slowly breathe in and fill your lungs with as much air as possible. Hold for a moment and slowly breathe out.

Pay attention to your feet and legs. How do your feet and legs feel? Do you notice any physical sensation? Do you notice any particular tension, tightness or discomfort? Do you notice if your feet or legs are relaxed? If you notice any discomfort, focus on the discomfort. Don't judge it as okay or not okay. Breathe into the discomfort and notice what happens.

Pay attention to your abdomen. How does your abdomen feel? Do you notice any particular tension, tightness or discomfort? Do you notice if your abdomen is relaxed? If you notice any discomfort, focus on the discomfort. Don't judge it as okay or not okay. Breathe into the discomfort and notice what happens.

Pay attention to your chest and arms. How do your chest and arms feel? Do you notice any particular tension, tightness or discomfort? Do you notice if your chest or arms are relaxed? If you notice any discomfort, focus on the discomfort. Don't judge it as okay or not okay. Breathe into the discomfort and notice what happens.

Pay attention to your neck and head. How do your neck and head feel? Do you notice any particular tension, tightness or discomfort? Do you notice if your neck or head is relaxed? If you notice any discomfort, focus on the discomfort. Don't judge it as okay or not okay. Breathe into the discomfort and notice what happens.

You have now scanned your body and noticed where there may be tension or discomfort. You may open your eyes.

How did this body scanning activity feel to you? Did you learn information on where stress physically appears in your body? How might this understanding help you with your self-care?



We completed this activity in a few minutes today, but you can take as long as you want. You can scan particular areas of your body or your entire body. If you find a place of tension or discomfort, you can use deep focused breathing to release the tension or discomfort.

For example, if you find that stress causes tightness in your abdomen, every time you experience a situation that causes you to tense up you can close your eyes, focus your attention on your abdomen and take a few deep breaths to remove the tension from your abdomen.

If you have trouble falling asleep because of not being able to still your mind, you can use the body scanning activity to quiet your mind and let go of the tension you locate in your body.

This activity allows you to focus on yourself, benefits your body, can be done in short time increments, and can be done almost anywhere.

This tool can be such a helpful means of stopping and taking notice of your body and what you need. This is oftentimes where we can run into trouble - we don't notice the stress until it has really reached unhealthy levels. We don't notice it because we don't stop to notice it! And again, the more that is coming at you, the easier it is to not stop and pay attention to yourself.

Many Caregiver studies confirm that Caregivers' health and wellbeing is often compromised. The warning signs of stress are often neglected and go unnoticed.

We want to become more aware. We need to pay attention. What do our individual warning signs look like? Hopefully, we can intervene before our stress symptoms become a health problem.

There are potentially a number of areas where we might look in order to notice that we are stressed. Let's take a look at some categories we might think about and notice.

What are our own personal warning signs?

First, hopefully you just took notice during the guided exercise of your physical state. How do you notice when your stress is manifesting itself physically? What happens to you?



Everyone is different and prone to different warning signs. Do you start getting headaches, stomach distress, or muscle tension? These signs are an important message that your physical well-being is being stressed and potentially compromised.

Next, what do you notice about your emotional state when you are stressed? Do you get irritable, impatient, or maybe tearful? Again, not everyone is the same. Some people get quiet while some people may become grumpy.

What happens to your thinking or cognition when you are stressed? Are you more forgetful? Do you have more worried thoughts? Some people get scattered, some get negative or self-critical, and some ruminate or think over and over and over the same things. What happens for you?

What is your behavior when you're stressed? Do you become lethargic, like you don't want to do anything? Maybe you start racing to do more. Sometimes people get more impulsive and don't think things through before they act. Do any of these behaviors sound familiar?

Next, let's look at the social changes that happen when you are stressed. Do you isolate yourself and withdraw from others? Some people may even get more social and not want to be alone for more than a few minutes.

Finally, what happens to you spiritually? Do you begin to question what matters? Do you wonder if you matter? Do you lose sight of your sense of purpose?

Everyone manifests feelings of stress differently. If we can at least stop to notice that in fact we are stressed, then we are more able to make decisions to address it before it reaches levels where illness may result.

Sometimes we do notice that we are stressed, but certain beliefs keep us stuck and pushing forward despite the consequences. What are some of the beliefs that keep us from stopping to take care of ourselves?

What are some of the beliefs that keep us from being open to alternatives? What stops us from exploring all the potential options that may be available to take better care of ourselves? Some beliefs are like barriers. They keep us from setting fair limits about what we can do and may stop us from asking for help.

Listen to some of these beliefs and see if any of them sound familiar to you.



“There is no time to take care of myself. There is no money to take care of myself. It is selfish to focus on myself. If I focus on how I feel, it could be too painful or overwhelming. If I don’t do it, it won’t get done or it won’t get done right. There is too much at stake. I have to be in control. I need to control the outcome. I just cannot say no! If I say no, I run the risk of others being angry, maybe even losing the relationship. It’s my role, my job, my identity. I am socialized to be the Caregiver.”

Did any of these beliefs ring true for you? Have these thoughts kept you pushing forward even when you really needed to stop?

The external demands can be so great. We can be so busy responding to all the demands coming at us that we don’t even notice some of the beliefs that keep us stuck. If we can at least stop for a moment, and notice what these beliefs are that keep us neglecting ourselves, then we can begin to test them out. We can test them and challenge whether in fact they are really true.

For instance, we know, “there is no time” is a common belief but really, is it true that there isn’t even 10 minutes in any given day to care for you? Have you ever noticed that if in fact you did say no to someone, it isn’t as catastrophic as you imagined?

So again, we can stop. Pay attention in the present. Notice our signs of stress. Notice the rigid beliefs that keep us stuck.

Now, I want to move on to one of the tools that I have found helpful myself. I learned this in a Caregiver training some years back. Do you have a pencil and paper handy? It is most helpful to really see it on paper, but if not, you might just visualize this as I am walking you through it, and you can put it to paper at a later time if you like.

Take your pencil and paper and draw a large circle. Inside the large circle draw a small circle in the center. This small circle represents you. Now, I want you to draw an arrow going out from the center circle. Make an arrow to represent each person, activity, and responsibility where you expend your energy on a daily basis. Each arrow that you draw out from your center represents an activity or person where you are giving of yourself. Think about all of the people you care for, your work, household responsibilities, and all of the many ways you give of your energy.



Now, I want you to draw arrows from the large circle coming in towards you to represent that represent all the sources of support, the positive energy and connections that come back to you from outside sources. What relationships, activities and support restore you?

Now sit back and notice. What do you see? Is there more going out than coming in? Is it easier to notice all that you do, than to notice all you receive? Are the arrows out of balance?

I found it so helpful to just visually see all the ways I am spending energy. I found it helpful to see just how much energy is going out, whether it is Caregiving, work or children. It's also really important to notice the people, neighbors, friends, family, and hobbies that bring positive energy. Sometimes it may be enlightening to look at where the energy give and take was out of balance; where relationships, work, or other activities were out of balance.

As Caregivers, you may feel invisible and unrecognized. You may be afraid, angry or resentful. You may fear the caregiving will go on indefinitely. Maybe you fear the day it will end.

How often have you heard, "I hope you're taking care of yourself?" How often have you heard this and felt frustrated, even angry maybe, thinking, "Sure, that's a great idea but who has the time, or money, or help, so I can take care of myself?" And you are absolutely right. It is so understandable that you would feel burdened by the expectation to take care of someone else, even if it is you!

I do believe there are ways that we can begin to address this need for self-care even in light of the demands placed on us. We can first start by bringing our attention back to ourselves. We can validate all the ways that we are spending energy.

We can notice the impact of what we are giving and how it may be stressing our system. We can recognize the beliefs that keep us stuck and how we may not be open to alternatives. Finally, we can develop realistic strategies that can restore some energy and balance.

When we look at developing strategies that will feed, nurture, and restore us, we want to develop strategies that will actually work and that are realistic. What might we need to consider in making them workable and realistic?



To begin with, I think the strategies need to be flexible. We need self-care options that can change over time, as the conditions of our lives change. For example, if I used to run to relieve stress but now my knees can't tolerate it, maybe I need a new activity such as biking. The strategies need to be personal.

Everyone has their own preferences about what might give comfort or vitality. Sometimes though, we can also learn from others. What do you do that helps?

These strategies need to be low or no cost. Sometimes we make finances a barrier. Sure, maybe it makes it easier to have the financial resources to do something nice for ourselves, but really many of the ways we can care for ourselves doesn't cost a penny.

The strategies need to address the ever-challenging crunch for time. Time sensitive strategies are vital. We want to come up with self-care tools that take only a few minutes.

The strategies need to be used consistently. Really, we want to have daily activities and rituals that restore us. Even having one activity a day can have a huge impact on our functioning. Again, don't wait for that week off that's coming up. Do something each day. Goals are reached one day at a time so by practicing a bit each day, giving attention to yourself can make a big difference in your overall well-being.

Sometimes even changing a routine is one way to shake things up in a positive way. If life has gotten too routine, maybe a change would be helpful.

Sometimes we become so stressed that we resort to survival instincts of what's called the "flight or fight response." We may retreat or withdraw. Sometimes we may withdraw so much that we cut ourselves off from the very sources that give us a feeling of vitality. It may be helpful at times to just withdraw or rest, but it is important not to withdraw so much that you become cut off from the very sources of support and nurturing that may be available to help you.

There are many ways we can grow the resources and the connections that can help us restore ourselves, in the here and now, that are realistic, time sensitive, no or low cost, and can be incorporated into daily life. The only requirement is a commitment by you.



What are some of the potential connections that you may invest in to bring more energy back to you? Remember, you don't need to look for the life altering event. Look for the many small ways you may bring a greater appreciation of living back to your day.

You may wish to make more social connections. Maybe you want to write a letter, make a phone call, or greet a stranger passing by. Look to all of your senses when developing strategies: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. Notice your body as in the exercise we did earlier. Move, walk, dance, listen to music, slow down and enjoy a meal. Learn something new, read something new, make or create something. Draw a picture, make a pie, make time for your emotions, journal, have a good cry, let some joy in, enjoy nature, plant some seeds, enjoy the changes in season, feed the birds, maybe develop a daily ritual or plan for a holiday. Take the time to remember what gives your life meaning and honor your memories.

If you pushed towards expending the bit of energy it may take to reach out to one of the vital connections, whether a person or an activity, the effort may just be the medicine you are looking for to restore your energy and zest for living.

Remember our guide for developing self-care interventions? We talked about self-care interventions that are reasonable, flexible, personally developed, low or no cost, time sensitive, daily or somehow consistent, and provide you with the feeling of reconnection.

Consider as we end today, what options, what small steps, and what investment would you like to try making to bring some vitality into your day. You can do this. You deserve this. Make another commitment, as you did by listening to this presentation, to bring your attention back to yourself this week. Be creative, have fun with it, and see how it helps.