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Develop Stress Resilience by...

Expanding Your Awareness

Strange as it may sound, one way to improve the quality of your life is to think about your death. We are all going to die; our time in this existence is finite. But we have a tendency not to think about this—even to the point that we don't really accept our own mortality. This may seem natural, but it is actually a denial of our human nature. By not letting ourselves recognize and accept that our time here is limited, we conceal from ourselves the value of our time, which is a precious resource. We sometimes find ourselves wishing away time, or merely passing time, rather than really living. When we do that, we don't appreciate or really experience what is going on around us and inside us.

Lessons from the Dying

People who work with the dying say they learn some valuable lessons from them. Particularly, they learn to live in the present. People who are facing death focus on the little things—nature, the seasons, a beautiful sunset—and they really experience these. They don't put things off. Many put more living into a few months or a year than some of us do in an entire lifetime.

But you don't have to wait until you are dying to learn to appreciate living. You can choose to experience more of your life right now, rather than waiting until you are actually confronted with a now-or-never situation. By learning to take advantage of all the beauty and pleasure available to you in your daily life, you can begin to enjoy life more. You will find yourself feeling more calm and relaxed, happier, and more capable of coping with the problems that come up in your life.

Living in the Moment

To fully enjoy the pleasure and beauty in your life, you must expand your awareness. Often you are unable to really be in the present because your mind is focused on the future or the past, rather than on the moment. For example, if you are eating a fragrant, juicy orange, and at the same time are worrying about a phone call you have to make, or the argument you had with a friend yesterday, you are missing most of the pleasure you could be getting from the orange. You could be focusing on the delicious smell and taste of that orange, but instead you are almost unaware of the orange as you focus on your worries.

Here are some other examples of ways you may be cheating yourself from experiencing the present:

- Walking without seeing what's around you;
- Overlooking the change of seasons;
- Hearing music without really paying attention;
- Listening to someone without really hearing;
- Working on a project while focusing only on getting the job done.

You can change this by teaching yourself to put your attention on what you are doing. Put your worries aside for a while. If you are washing dishes, try doing it the way a young child would by enjoying the feeling of the soap and warm water on your hands and the sparkling look of the clean dishes. As long

as you are going to do the dishes anyway, you may as well let that job serve you as a relaxing break rather than wishing you didn't have to take the time to do it in the first place.

If you are walking along the street remind yourself to be aware of yourself walking, to be aware of the wind or the sun, to be aware of the sights and sounds around you. By doing this you can arrive at your destination relaxed and refreshed. Awareness helps you stay calm and alert.

When you truly open yourself to the moment, you find happiness right in front of you. You suddenly discover that nothing has to go right for you to be happy, you just have to decide to enjoy what you are doing.

Activities to Expand Awareness

Here are some activities to help you expand your awareness of the present. Once you have tried these you will be able to come up with plenty of new ones.

1. **Eating Fruit.** Choose a piece of fruit. An orange is especially good because of its spicy odor, but an apple, grape, peach, or pear will do. A ripe strawberry would be terrific! Now take the fruit and sit down in a quiet place. Hold the fruit in your hands, turn it around, feel its weight and texture. See how it reflects light. Take some time to smell the fruit and enjoy the fragrance. Look carefully at the fruit, and observe its form, size, and color. Peel the fruit, if that is necessary before you can eat it. Now you are ready to taste the fruit. Close your eyes and slowly take a bite. Let yourself fully experience the taste. Now, slowly finish eating the fruit, and while you are eating, let yourself be aware of the pleasure you are getting from the experience.
2. **Being With Someone.** Take ten or fifteen minutes to sit down with someone and talk. This person might be your wife or husband, your child, a friend, a relative. While

you are with this person, don't be doing anything else. Just be with the person. Let yourself really look at the person, really see him or her, and experience how much you really care about this person. This doesn't need to be a heavy conversation. Just talk about whatever interests you both. Be aware of the other person and really hear what he or she is saying. If you find yourself thinking about what you will say next instead of listening to the other person, remind yourself to be aware of the person you are talking with. Enjoy yourself and experience the pleasure you are getting from just being together.

- 3. Waiting Mindfully.** When you find yourself stuck waiting for someone or something, waiting in line or in a waiting room, slow down and discover your surroundings. Look around at whatever you can see, and become more aware of what is there. Imagine you are taking a picture with your mind. Listen to the sounds you hear. What images do these sounds bring to your mind? What do you see and hear that you find pleasant? What do you find unpleasant? Next, focus on yourself. What thoughts are running through your mind? How does your body feel? Can you adjust your position or change your thoughts to make yourself more comfortable? Let yourself be in the moment, focusing on your surroundings. Find ways to enjoy being where you are, rather than wasting time feeling irritated about waiting.

Exercises such as these will allow you to realize the potential for joy that is present in all the activities of your daily life. You can practice expanding your awareness of the present as you simply go about the business of living. Because you are probably not in the habit of experiencing your life this way, it might be difficult at first. But, if you keep working on it you will find that it becomes easier to see and fully enjoy what is around you, and you will find the rewards tremendous.

You may find that you feel a little guilty at taking this pleasure in life when you live in such a serious, problem-filled world. If you do, ask yourself whether maintaining your own gloomy, worried or rushed attitude will really help to make the world a better place. Remember, happiness is contagious and you can pass along to others the joy you find around you.

How This Technique Works For Others

The process of learning to expand your awareness, and the benefits from doing so, will be clearer when you hear how this technique has worked for others.

Carole: Richer on the inside

“I was at a very low point in my life when I first learned these awareness exercises. I felt depressed and overwhelmed by the immensity of my responsibility as a working single parent, and in despair at the meagerness of my strength. I felt alone—unable to give or receive anything meaningful.

“Practicing the awareness exercises had a startling effect on me. I was bombarded with sensations and realizations. It had been so long since I had felt the hot soapy water, been aware of the texture of the dish cloth, and felt the smooth clean surface of the cleaned plate. As I concentrated on all these sensations, I was aware of other thoughts tugging at my mind—‘I should plan the work schedule for the kids;’ ‘If you start the laundry now, It will be done when the dishes are done.’ I realized that much of the time I had been trying to do three things at the same time! That was supposed to justify my existence or increase my value as a person.

“Being efficient and getting lots of things done quickly certainly has merit, but when my whole life seemed to demand that intensity of activity, there was never any time to tune in to what was going on right now. As I began to slow down and be aware of what I was doing, feeling, and saying, and of what was going on around me at the moment, I found I could listen easier, concentrate better, and understand more

quickly. It was easier for me to ‘be’ with my kids and my friends.

“Now I feel richer on the inside. My senses are sharpened, colors are brighter, sounds clearer, tastes and smells more satisfying. I have noticed that I spend more time hugging my kids (something that I always felt I should do but was somehow difficult). Now it comes naturally and is very enjoyable. It isn’t something I do or make happen. It’s just there. I don’t feel so alone with my kids.”

Larry: Experience every moment

“It’s very difficult for me to practice awareness, but I’m struggling along, taking one step at a time. So much of my life has been spent hurrying from one place to another, ignoring everything that happens in between. Another problem is that once I reach my destination, I often continue to think of what is coming up instead of focusing my attention on the present. I’m finally realizing that I’m letting life slip by without experiencing it in its totality.

“Now, when I’m walking alone I try to say to myself, ‘I have just taken a step and it’s great to be alive.’ While I’m doing this I also like to look around, to be more aware of where I am and how beautiful everything really is. I’ve also been trying to carry this over to my other activities. For example, when I’m sitting in a meeting, I think to myself, ‘I’m here, I feel relaxed, and there is no place I’d rather be.’

“I am learning how to ‘be’ with other people when I am with them. I work on keeping eye contact with the person, staying in the present, and experiencing right in that moment all that I can about that person—really listening and tuning in to all the things they are communicating. This practice is not easy. It takes more concentrating, more energy, and more time. I do find though, that the more I practice, the more aware I become. And the rewards are great as I experience myself and my relationships with others more fully. It’s like we’re each discovering the other again.

“I find it challenging and exciting to have the opportunity to expand my awareness of life and its specialness. Even though keeping myself aware is difficult, the effects are truly remarkable. The way I feel now is that I don’t want to let a moment go by without enjoying it, because I can never have that moment back again. To me, the saddest thing in life would be to come to the end and realize that I never really experienced life itself.”

Michelle: Feeling like a child again

“Before I practiced this technique I was extremely caught up in my busy schedule. I felt overwhelmed. All I thought of was what I had to do. I am still very busy, but at least once a day I make a conscious effort to experience a new awareness.

“I have had many wonderful experiences. For example, one cool fall day when I was out walking, auburn leaves were falling off the trees and floating through the air. I stopped and watched them drift. Then I sat in the leaves, listened to them crunch, and felt them. I was aware of the pleasure I got out of this experience. What a renewing and joyful adventure that was!

“Since I have started working on expanding my awareness, I personally can tell a difference in how I interact with others and with my environment. Since I am usually a positive person, no one has told me they have noticed a difference in me, but I know I am different. When I expand my awareness it makes me feel like a child again. I feel more sensitized, stimulated, alert and enthusiastic! I am seeing the world and its beauty through different eyes and it sure makes living more meaningful.

“A month ago I discovered a lump in my neck that gave me a tremendous scare. Luckily, it was not abnormal, but it certainly made me think about death. It made me realize that our time is limited, and that if we don’t appreciate and really experience what is going on around us and inside us then we are not fully living.”

Your Challenge

Don't wait for a life-threatening scare. Wake up to the world around you today. Experiences like the ones these people describe are available to you whenever you choose to take the time for them. They don't cost anything, they don't have undesirable side effects, and they give you the best that life has to offer—the experience of living. Let yourself be aware. Experience now!