

An Introduction to Stress

Parenting is one of the most consuming and responsible tasks in a lifetime, yet parents do it with love, joy, pride and a sense of fulfilment whenever they can. Wanting to do it so well, to be the best possible parent may be a source of stress in itself.

Many other challenges and obstacles along the way may make parenting stressful. In taking care of children and managing and organising the balance of family life and work life we may forget to take care of ourselves.

Sound familiar?

When our inner resources get depleted we may become exhausted, irritable or depressed in mood, fatigued, anxious, somatic complaints and eventually mental or physical disorders may appear.

Evidence tells us that when under stress parenting skills are found to collapse. Strategies we may have learned from books, course, TV or social media become inaccessible to us as the stress reaction effects parts of the brain that hold that information!

Mindful parenting offers another way of approaching parenting in stressful times. Mindfulness practice allows us to look at our own inner reactions to stress rather than focus on the behaviour of our child.

This gives us a very different way of approaching the stress that arises between parents, carers and children and offers a great gift to our children. By turning our attention towards ourselves and our stress reactivity we can begin to change the patterns that keep us in loops of stress.

So how do I begin looking at my own stress signature, perhaps some of the below are familiar, have you ever:

- Felt stressed and wondered why your neck and shoulders started to feel tense and then sore?
- Felt anxious and wondered why your heart and thoughts were suddenly racing, or why you suddenly needed the toilet?
- Lose sleep lost in thoughts trying to fix things and solve problems but just end up exhausted and more stress?
- Felt angry and wondered why your chest was tight, and why you couldn't stop yourself from lashing out?
- Had a panic attack and wondered why it felt like you were having a heart attack, or like you were losing your mind?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, you are very normal and very human, and this article is for you.

Your brain has evolved to keep you safe above all else. It is constantly on the lookout for danger. Once it finds something potentially dangerous it steps in

and initiates a stress reaction. This means it takes away your conscious control of the situation and prepares you to run or fight freeze or fawn for your life.

Think for a second what your body would need if it was going to fight or run hard. Let's imagine you have stumbled into an animal enclosure, a scary animal enclosure...

Your body becomes like a coiled spring. The tension increasing dramatically so that you are ready to respond like a bullet from a gun.

How?

Your heart beats faster and your breathing gets quicker. You feel your blood flowing faster. It does this so that your body has the oxygen and energy it needs. This energy is sent to your arms and legs as these will be used to fight or run. Your muscles tense in preparation. Your vision changes. You lose peripheral vision so that you can focus on the danger right in front of you. Any area of your body that is not needed in the upcoming fight is shut down so that all energy in the body is diverted to the necessary muscles.

You are ready for one single purpose: to fight or run for your life. Or you freeze and become immobilised in an attempt to disappear, be 'unseen' or 'invisible' or 'play dead' or not have to feel anything if the worst happened. Or fawn response otherwise known as please to appease.

If you really are staring into the eyes of a tiger, this is very useful. In fact, If you are in any life-or-death situation you will be grateful to your brain for this. When you step out into the road without looking and suddenly hear a car, your brain takes over and you respond by jumping out of the way without any conscious thought. Once you fight or run and survive, this system shuts off and you go back to having control over your actions.

Unfortunately, your brain cannot tell the difference between life-or-death situations and perceived threats. Therefore these responses can occur when they are not necessary. When the stress reaction happens in parenting we disconnect from ourselves and our children and react in ways we later regret.



