

Stress Management

If I've learned anything over the past few years, it's the power of the saying "Don't worry about things you can't control." It's taught me to pay attention to all the things I fret about that are totally out of my control, such as my adult son's driving habits. He likes to speed.

Stress can come from any event or thought that makes us feel frustrated, angry, or nervous. In small doses, it helps me get things done. In large doses, it negatively affects my health and happiness. Stress often comes from worrying—feeling uneasy or concerned about something.

I once heard a speaker explaining stress management to an audience. He raised a glass of water and asked, "How heavy is this glass of water?" Answers ranged from 8 oz. to 20 oz.

He replied, "The absolute weight doesn't matter. It depends on how long you try to hold it. If I hold it for a minute, that's not a problem. If I hold it for an hour, I'll have an ache in my right arm. If I hold it for a day, the pain will be excruciating. In each case, it's the same weight, but the longer I hold it, the heavier it becomes."

He continued, "And that's the way it is with stress management. If we carry our burdens all the time, sooner or later, as the burden becomes increasingly heavy, we won't be able to carry on."

Recently I started a **stress journal** as a way to identify stressors in my life that I could eliminate.

By focusing on what I worry about that leads to stress, I am learning about two important distinctions. How often do I worry about uncontrollable things? And, do I worry about things happening in the present moment or something that has happened in the past or may happen in the future?

I've discovered that many of my worries have to do with stories I tell myself about the past or the future.

For example, I worry about making a presentation because I'm not the greatest public speaker. I worry about my family getting together for dinner next week because we have personality conflicts that might flare up.

Sometimes four words are powerfully helpful, "It's not about you." A focus on other people helps us remember that our own concerns are not the biggest in the world.

This saying helps me too: "Worrying is like rocking in a rocking chair. You can rock and rock and rock, but you never get anywhere."

The more we worry, the worse we feel. So getting anchored in the present moment is one way I try to interrupt the worry loop.

The other stress management technique I'm trying to make a natural habit is NOT to try to control the uncontrollable. Certainly we have enough things to worry about that we *can*

control to some degree such as our jobs, relationships, physical fitness, and bills. Why do we pile on uncontrollable things such as the thoughts or behaviors of other people?

So what stressors can I take a break from? Those totally outside my control—such as what other people think of me—and those that are non-immediate, based on what I remember or what I imagine, such as what I'll look like in another decade.

It's never easy to change habits, and how we worry is definitely a habit. I might need to buy myself a set of Chinese stress balls or Baoding balls which are made of metal and painted in various designs. This ancient way to reduce stress involves using repetitive motion to bring one's attention into the present moment and engage a different place in the brain, giving worry centers a break.

I'm starting with a week-long stress break that hopefully I can turn into a habit all next year.

I hope I don't worry about that.