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For a happier, less stressful life, mind your own ... mind

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Stress.

The word itself makes one anxious. Stress is a natural part of our lives, and while stress in short duration can have positive effects, chronic stress is well known to have a wide range of deleterious effects. Short durations can motivate us to accomplish tasks at the limits of our physical or mental capacity. Chronic stress, however, results in damaging physiology such as chronic elevation of cortisol, blood pressure, respiratory rate, blood glucose levels, and chronic inflammation, as well as in impaired immune response and vagal tone, leading to acute and chronic illnesses and, ultimately, a shorter life span.¹ Chronic stress negatively affects our mind, body, longevity, level of happiness, job performance, and relationships.

Radiology has undergone a lot of change, and much of it has added more work and stress to our lives. The drive to produce more RVU's while maintaining or improving our work quality in a limited number of work hours causes quite a bit of chronic stress, the bad stress; the type that shortens our lives and is counterproductive to our goal of providing quality work. What can we do to mitigate the potential damage of the stresses we face?

I pondered this after developing pneumonia, which I believe was the result of stress from long, intensive work hours. It was the first time in my life (34-plus years of practicing medicine) that I missed a day of work. Scientifically proven methods to reduce the effects

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of chronic stress included things I already did: exercise, a good diet, plenty of sleep, fulfilling work, and a rich and supportive social environment. An additional potent method that I recently discovered is practicing mindfulness.

Mindfulness is generally defined as being full in or aware of the moment.²⁻⁴ It is when we are tuned into our experiences in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future. When our mind wanders to a past or future event, living in regret or anticipation, we lose our awareness of the present moment. Whether it be the MR image or the flower in front of us, when our mind wanders, we lose focus of the MR image or flower. The result: We are likely to perform worse on our MRI interpretation and miss the relaxing esthetic experience of the flower.

Our mind wanders about 47 percent of our waking day.⁵ In their paper, “A Wandering Mind Is An Unhappy Mind,” Matthew Killingsworth and Dan Gilbert suggest that

we are less happy when our mind wanders than when we are in the moment—even if that moment consists of such mundane tasks as commuting to work or dictating a report.

Research has shown many possible benefits of mindfulness training, including enhancing our ability to deal with stress, protecting against dementia, improving our focus, work performance, and well-being, and even increasing our longevity.^{4, 6-11} Mindfulness exercises have been shown on EEG and functional MRI to alter our brain’s structure and function through neuroplasticity in relation to these benefits.^{4, 12, 13}

Take the time to look into the practice of mindfulness and live a less stressful, happier, healthier, and longer life.

Stop and smell the roses.

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