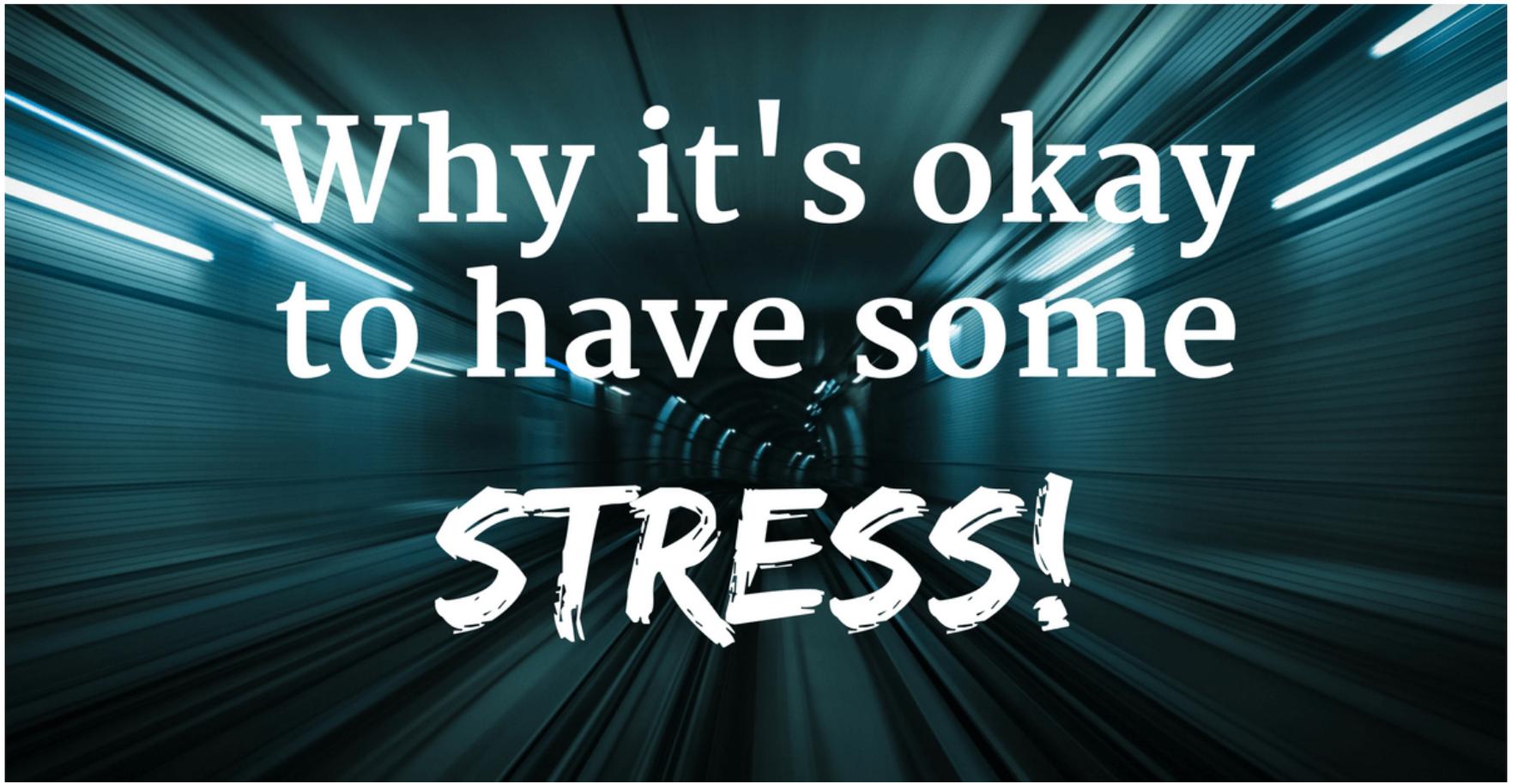


Stress is a given. Being “stressed-out” is optional.



The truth is, we need a certain amount of “stress” and nervous system activation to do what we need to do every day. It’s what prompts us to move and act in the world. In fact, one of the prominent symptoms of depression is the lack of this inner drive or motivation.

We love stress that is mild and transient and occurs in a benevolent context. The stressful menace of a roller-coaster ride is that it will make us queasy, not that it will decapitate us; it lasts for three minutes, not three days. We love that kind of stress, clamor for it, pay to experience it. What do we call that optimal level of stress? Being engaged, engrossed, and challenged. Being stimulated. Playing. The core of psychological stress is loss of control or predictability. But in benevolent settings we happily relinquish control and predictability to be challenged by the unexpected — a dip in the roller-coaster tracks, a plot twist, a difficult line drive heading our way, an opponent’s unexpected chess move. Surprise me — this is

fun.”

Sapolsky describes stress as an inverted “U” —

The complete absence of stress is aversively boring. Moderate, transient stress is wonderful— various aspects of brain function are enhanced.... And as stress becomes more severe and prolonged, those good effects disappear.”

So unless you live in a world where you control EVERY THING that happens, you’re not going to avoid stress (and, frankly, you’d be totally bored).

Thinking that you **shouldn’t** have stress, that you **shouldn’t** be feeling this way... will only make you **MORE** stressed out!

The key is figuring out how to stay in that “**stress sweetspot**,” between the extremes of boredom and overwhelm.

For me, it is **MINDFULNESS**.

Mindfulness — my ability to “drop in” to my breath and my body throughout the day, to observe what is happening without getting all wrapped up in it — creates the container, the “benevolent context” in which I can experience stress. Even a loss of control can be met with the routine of breathing in and breathing out, and its predictable effect on my nervous system.

As an example, let me share with you how I worked through some stress during a silent retreat a few years ago.

Though my surroundings on this particular retreat were beautiful, and, of course, SILENT, my mind was *anything* but quiet!

In particular, my thoughts kept wandering to my daughter’s dance audition. Certainly, in the grand scheme of things, this was not a huge deal, but when you have several days alone with your thoughts, EVERYTHING IS A BIG

DEAL.

I thought about how hard she had worked during audition workshops, about how hard she had worked over the last year (years, actually), about how badly she wanted to dance on a competition team, about how terrible I felt that I wasn't there to take her to auditions and be there for her.... and I started feeling LOTS OF MOM GUILT and LOTS AND LOTS OF STRESS. *Racing heart, shallow breath, queasy tummy...*

I realized that my “silent retreat” experience was not looking anything like the lovely pictures on the retreat center website.

As it turned out, I wasn't the only one struggling with this; several participants asked questions during our daily Q&A about the busy mind, the worried mind, the sleepy mind, the stressed mind.... Our teacher addressed our universally human experience and **asked if we could accept everything that had travelled on retreat with us.**

Is it okay to be tired? Is it okay to be stressed and worried?

Why do we tell ourselves that it's NOT okay?

Can we create space for our stressful feelings, our worried thoughts, and our exhausted bodies?

Can we notice the things we didn't necessarily invite and say,

“Ah, yes, this too....”?

When we take this approach, we realize that **it's not about eliminating** our stress, or our fatigue, or our chattering mind, but about **changing our relationship to them.** It's about creating a bigger container to hold them.

We cannot change the thoughts we're having **right now**, or the nervous system activation that's occurring **right now**, ***but we can change how***

we experience them.

We can white-knuckle our way through the roller coaster ride, tense and nauseous and fighting against our experience, or we can soften and say, ***“This, too.”***

“I’m scared and excited and sick and exhilarated and tense and free and worried and hopeful. This, too.”

As my worries bubbled up amidst moments of peace on my retreat, I whispered to myself, “This, too.”

And I found a bit of calm. I found space.

And when I returned home and asked my daughter how the audition went, she smiled and said, **“Mom, I did AWESOME.”**

I felt a visceral sense of relief, a loosening and draining and letting go. She was fine. I was fine.

And then a few days later as I nervously awaited the results of the audition (checking my email about 382 times and compulsively refreshing the results website like a rat in a Skinner box), I told myself, “This, too. I am terribly anxious and I am fine.”

“She auditioned before and didn’t make it and she was fine. I want this so badly for her. I don’t want to see the devastation on her face if she doesn’t make it. She is tough and resilient. I’ll cry if she doesn’t make it. I am fine. This, too.”

As I have many times before, **I relied on my practice.** I took deep breaths in. I felt the knots in my stomach, and felt them loosen with each breath. I noticed my worries and did my best to not get wrapped up in my stories.

There was stress. There was nervous system activation. But I was not stressed

out.

This, too.

Allow me take a slight detour into the research on this....

In one particularly fascinating study, two groups of people had to do **SOMETHING THAT IS FEARED BY ALL HUMAN BEINGS: give a speech in public**, on a topic about which **they had little knowledge**, in front of **experts** ... while being **videotaped** and **evaluated** on their competence and speaking style. EEEK! (*kinda makes a dance audition look like child's play...*)

Here's the interesting thing: **EVERYONE** got freaked out by the experience — heart racing, rapid breathing, feeling like they were going to vomit, etc. **BUT...** the people who had been practicing **mindfulness** in the eight weeks prior to the study.... they “came down” from that terrifying experiment within a few hours. **Their nervous systems were healthy enough to experience a stressful event, and then return to normal. They had created their safe container and benevolent environment to hold even the most dreaded of human experiences.**

And what about those poor folks who hadn't been practicing mindfulness? They remained jittery and stressed-out for the rest of the day... and some of them even showed physiological signs of stress activation the day after... and the day after that...

The people in the mindfulness condition had **learned how to work with their stress** — they didn't fight it, they didn't try to avoid it. *They knew how to recognize stress in their body, they knew how to experience it without feeling overwhelmed, and they knew what to do to get back to “normal.”*

Those who hadn't learned mindfulness **remained in that nervous, fight-or-flight state for hours, if not days.**

And isn't that how **we** live most of the time, treating **EVERY DAY AS AN EMERGENCY?**

Pretty soon all that stressing out just feels normal — miserable, but normal.

And that's not how we were meant to be.

So let's ride the roller coaster. And let's allow the stress and the joy and the worry and the ease to ride along, too.

Yes, these too.

The power to do all of this is right here, right now, with our body and our breath.