“Listen to your body”. For those of you familiar with our Center, these words may be still resonating deeply in your mind, bringing to life the voices of our instructors, reminding you to be aware during exercise or yoga classes or other Lifestyle Medicine programs.

That “mantra”, the idea, of simply paying attention to what’s going on in your body is brought up so often, primarily to help you transition to healthier lifestyle practices and to ensure that you are exercising, stretching or breathing in a safe way. Being aware is the first step to overcoming impulses and overriding automatic behaviors. Awareness enhances the acceptance of emotional states, softens the resistance to changing life-long entrenched beliefs, habits and attitudes.

The results of a new study show that cultivating that awareness, by paying attention to sensations coming from our bodies right here, right now, may help us deal with stress more effectively and recover faster, both physically and emotionally (1). That is, listening to your body may help you become more resilient. From everyday experiences we know that after a stressful event some of us return to a normal state of being much quicker than others. Now it seems that this depends on how much we are aware of our bodies.

When studying trained athletes and Special Forces soldiers, researchers had noticed the parts of the brain that receive signals from the body, such as changes in breathing and heart rate, were very active just before they became aware of a potential stressor. Yet, under stressful conditions, the stress signal, sent to other parts of the brain to intensify the arousal of the body were minimal. That is, the brains of these professionals excelled at monitoring the onset of stress placed upon the body. In this case it was when researchers hinted that they would make it difficult for the subjects to breathe through the face masks they were wearing (to induce periodic moments of breathlessness) while in the MRI machine scanning their brains. The response to such a panicky event was minimal when breathing was indeed difficult. This is stress resilience.

To determine whether similar events take place among us regular mortals, 48 healthy adults were divided into three groups (low, average and high resilience) based on their score on a self-perceived emotional and physical resilience questionnaire. The subjects in the high and, to a lesser degree, average resilience groups, responded similarly to the elite soldiers and athletes.

But the brains of those who self-reported low resilience behaved differently. When they received the cues that their breathing masks were going to close, they had little activation in parts of the brain that monitor signals from the body. However, when their
breathing became difficult, the “red alarm lights” were blinking intensely in parts of their brains that increase physiological arousal, that is, they overreacted when the threat occurred, unlike the more resilient subjects. Those changes would make it more difficult for the body to return to a relaxed state, thus, showing decreased resilience.

It appears that being resilient means being aware of your body. If you aren’t aware of your body, it may be more difficult to recover quickly from adversity and stress. These findings confirm what has been known for a long time. Eliciting the relaxation response by breathing and/or meditation practices are well-established ways to enhance resilience; the ability to thrive despite stress and adversity. Improving “listening to our bodies” may be as simple as sitting quietly and paying attention to the breath coming in and going out of the body without trying to change it in any way. Simply observe. Simply “listen to your body”! Pay attention to your breath during the day. Notice how it changes with the unfolding of daily events to increase awareness and enhance the communication pathways between your body and brain. Maybe you can try to do the same by paying attention to the rhythm of your heart beat?

Being aware of your breath and body in general is the cheapest, always available, relaxation tool that can help you a) increase your resilience and b) decrease healthcare costs for you and society (2). Paying close attention to bodily signals is not only for Special Forces and elite athletes. Bodily awareness can be practiced by all of us. Give it a try. And do it often.


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