There is a well-known connection between excessive, chronic stress and physical illness. But even if we manage to avoid becoming physically ill because of stress, there is a high emotional toll when the level of stress we experience outpaces our normal coping capacity.

We may find ourselves in just such a time—many people are feeling buffeted by waves of intense and relentless stress. In addition to the pandemic, many are feeling the pernicious and heartbreaking stress of ongoing racial and economic injustice along with political upheaval and division.

By inoculating ourselves or building up our body’s capacity to protect against the adverse effects of stress, we address our health proactively and become an active agent in our well-being. While our usual coping skills are generally sufficient to get us through difficult situations, we must acknowledge when our daily, weekly, and monthly stress accumulations overwhelm these routine coping skills. This is the first step to stress inoculation during challenging life experiences: acknowledging the source(s) and degree of our distress provides a chance to begin to respond constructively, versus simply reacting in an unconscious or emotionally disorganized manner.

Allow Feelings to Rise
Perhaps the most malign aspect of unrelenting stress is the feeling of helplessness and loss of control that accompanies the phenomenon. For this reason, it is important to engage in the practice of sensing and allowing ourselves to feel just how much, and where in our bodies, we are experiencing stress. This type of mindfulness exercise goes against our natural instincts, because we naturally try to avoid, ignore, or distract ourselves from feelings we find uncomfortable or disturbing. Ironically, purposefully getting close enough to the metaphorical hot stove is often the only way to know what we are truly up against.

Take a Breath
On a pragmatic level, conducting a daily or twice daily “body scan” is a good starting place. Begin with three slow and deep cleansing breaths. Inhale smoothly and deeply through the nose, which engages the sympathetic (activation) nervous system. Allow your chest and diaphragm to rise. Pause for a moment and breathe out through the mouth, engaging the parasympathetic (relaxation) nervous system. Exhale gently and slowly, as if blowing through a straw. The key is to extend the out breath to attain a ratio of 2-1 to the in breath. For example, if you breathe in for a count of four, try to make sure you exhale for at least a count of eight. This is important, because we want the parasympathetic nervous system to signal the body to relax in preparation for sensing the location and degree of stress being experienced in that moment.

Attend to the Signal
Start at the top of the head and imagine a “healing light” in the color of your choice gently discerning the location and intensity of distress in your body. Then identify the feelings associated with feelings we find uncomfortable or disturbing. Ironically, purposefully getting close enough to the metaphorical hot stove is often the only way to know what we are truly up against.

SLIconnect.org has a variety of free resources for managing stress and building resiliency. Visit SLIconnect.org/resiliency to learn more.

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Father John knew that, like many others living through our current times, he was under more stress than he could manage. The pandemic was dragging on longer than expected, and he felt increasingly helpless knowing that many of his parishioners were hurting due to the loss of a job or a loved one. His distress was exacerbated watching nightly news coverage of the effects of racial injustice in the country.

Father John took stock of his depleted emotional reserves and decided to contact a psychologist acquaintance who had helped some of his parishioners in the past. The psychologist validated what Father John was feeling. He affirmed him for seeking help, noting that it is often hard for those in a helping role to seek assistance themselves. Father John found the therapist easy to speak with, and they decided to start weekly teletherapy sessions, focusing on stress reduction.

Although Father John had always maintained a good prayer and spiritual life, he appreciated the therapist’s emphasis on body awareness and the untapped power of emotions. Father John responded well to the concept that the only stress/feeling that could truly hurt us is that which we fail to acknowledge and learn more about.

Father John had always prided himself on his ability to tolerate a great deal of stress, a frequent occurrence for a pastor and administrator of a large parish, and as the child of two alcoholic parents. What he came to understand through weekly therapy was that just “tolerating” stress really meant he was ignoring important signals his body was giving in the form of feelings. As a result, he would frequently overlook these signals and end up working even more.

Father John and the therapist worked to develop what the therapist called stress-inoculation skills, referred to by Father John as “intentional self-listening skills.” They began with a remarkably simple “body scan” technique. Father John felt immediate relief just by purposefully shifting into the mindset that he has a right to know/learn about his own feelings in the moment.

He practiced the body scans daily, starting at the top of his head and moving slowly to the tip of his toes. Father John found that the associated deep, cleansing breaths—four counts in through the nostrils, holding to a count of seven, and then exhaling through the mouth to a count of eight—initiated a relaxation state, making it easier to determine the location and degree of stress/other feelings he was experiencing. Father John listened closely to the “new” feelings he found within and embraced the concept of feelings as signals. He felt restored, imagining God’s healing, non-judgmental light addressing the stress in the moment and accepting his feelings as they were, versus minimizing, ignoring, or trying to rationalize them away.

Gradually he let go of the excessive guilt accompanying his feelings of helplessness engendered by the number of hurting people around him. He was also able to employ the signals to plan some achievable action steps to help others, without giving more than he was truly able, as was his habit in the past. He felt less overwhelmed and more balanced overall as a result.

Within a relatively short period of time, practicing the body scans in and out of therapy sessions, Father John observed a recurring pattern. His tension and stress were almost always related to feelings of guilt and/or anxiety that he was not doing enough for others.
By engaging in the daily body scan practice—systematically asking himself “what, where, and how intensely” he was encountering a feeling—he was better able to utilize his feelings as intentional signals to take action instead of letting them trigger his impulse for overwork. With his therapist’s help he made the connection that his habitual self-sacrifice and responsibility issue was rooted in his history of family alcoholism. While he had always been acutely aware of his parents’ alcoholism, he had never experientially connected his present-day feelings of excessive guilt with his family dynamics growing up.

Father John feels grateful he can now respond in a healthier way to stressful situations. He is more confident in his ability to manage external events he cannot control with personal and pastoral effectiveness. And, while the pandemic and upheaval around him still certainly feels overwhelming at times, he has begun to see how his family history magnified these feelings, making it harder to respond constructively. Father John is looking forward to continuing to act and respond based on his feelings as signals as opposed to reacting out of old, unconscious triggers.

For confidentiality reasons, names, identifying data, and other details of treatment have been altered.

Stress Inoculation
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a helpful response. This intentional slowing down is quite different from what we usually do with feelings—typically we allow them to “trigger” us into reacting in order to discharge the energy inherent in our emotions.

As the body scan continues, you can choose to “leave” a portion of the healing light with any identified spot of stress. This exercise has a threefold benefit:
1. Relaxation through breath work
2. Listening and responding to feelings as a signal versus allowing them to become a trigger; and
3. Energetically/spiritually attending to distress right on the spot.

All three aspects should help us feel less helpless and out of control. And, truly sitting with our feelings to suss out signals will be especially helpful in connecting our cognitive problem-solving abilities. For example, it might be that you are feeling alone or isolated and therefore need to reach out to a friend or family member. Or, perhaps you are feeling confined and anxious, which reminds you to get outside and exercise. Maybe anger or frustration signals a need to assert yourself in some way to better your own circumstance or that of society. And, sometimes just knowing what we are feeling in the moment is sufficient to help us integrate and accept a situation as it is.

Be Still in the Moment
Stress inoculation can take many forms. But it starts with an intentional practice of slowing down, listening to our feelings, and utilizing the signals found therein to take meaningful action, thus restoring some sense of balance and control. The mindfulness technique described above is only one way to access our innate abilities to cope with stress. There are many other iterations of meditation and prayer that may work equally well or better. The key is to intentionally practice what works best, especially when our standard coping practices prove insufficient to keep pace with our current realities.

Steven Alexander, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and therapist in the Halfway House program at Saint Luke Institute.
SLI Annual Benefit: Forging ahead Virtually

It is with careful consideration for the well-being of our friends, guests, and staff that we announce the 23rd Annual SLI Benefit will be celebrated online and not in-person as is our custom. We will miss the opportunity to gather with you at the Nunciature and share our heartfelt gratitude for the difference our donors make in the lives of SLI clients and the Church.

Instead we look forward to greeting you online, in a Virtual Benefit, Tuesday, October 20, 2020 at 6:30 p.m. This user-friendly and flexible format will allow us to share our mission in a new and creative manner, convey the Saint Luke Award to Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D., and hear from our special guests.

Detailed information will be communicated in August and September through our website (sli.org), e-mail, and print mailings. Please make sure we have your updated contact information (especially e-mail) so that you do not miss out on this exceptional event.

Please contact Kathy Carver (kathyc@sli.org) if you are interested in a sponsorship opportunity.

Making Meaning: Resilient Responses to Trauma

The traumatic impact of the pandemic crisis is reverberating across our society, and we are likely to feel its effects for a long time to come. Rev. Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, D.Min., Ph.D., explores healthy ways to manage our own response and offers strategies for effective pastoral care for others. The discussion includes insights from Msgr. Rossetti’s latest study on the effects of trauma on clergy resiliency.

This free webinar is available on Thursday, September 10, 1:00-2:00 pm ET at www.sliconnect.org.

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