

Stressed or Distressed? Either way it has an impact on depression.

I have not written a blog in a while. My blog is about depression and the reasons we get depressed and what to do about it. And I know there are so many different causes of depression that I could continue to write almost on any aspect of how your brain makes you depressed and what to do about it, so it should be easy to get something written. Yet I found motivation to write was elusive, and I did not have the energy to press myself hard on this. And that sounds something like depression.

But I thought about the reasons I haven't written much lately and the possible connection to depression, and I realized: I haven't been silent on this site because of depression but rather because of stress exhaustion. I had, as the saying goes, too many irons in the fire and I was out of energy. My usually active mind was out of ideas and I had no motivation to write.

I was mentally tired. What I needed to do to recuperate was rest. I didn't need to rest my body but I needed to rest my mind for a while. What looked like depression - lack of motivation and energy and falling behind on work - may have been a depression for some or even triggered a depression if it was not handled, but it caused me to reflect on the differences - and similarities - between what I was feeling and what it might have been like for someone else.

There is a definite connection to depression here. When stress goes on for too long most anyone can eventually become depressed as we become less and less able to bounce back from the toll that stress takes on the body. It is a neurological challenge that exhausts the supply of calming neurochemicals in the brain. Then people will more easily become either depressed or anxious. That is especially likely if they are not just stressed, but also have situations creating distress. I see this frequently in clients who are stressed by caretaking and the distress of seeing loved ones sick coupled with the stress of the work involved creates vulnerability to depression.

I was speaking with a young woman in my therapy practice recently, who wants help with persistent mild depression. She had recent blood work showing several indicators of stress were extremely elevated. And then she said, "But my mind isn't stressed. Why should my body reflect stress when I do not emotionally feel *distressed*?" However, she has been working 7 days a week for an extended period of time and when she's not actually at her workplace she is busily preparing in her mind the list of tasks to do. That constant level of mental and physical activity focused on work can be very stressful even when it is not subjectively distressing. If this goes on too long, it will be harder to maintain a positive outlook and the things that bother her now - trouble in a relationship and some financial worries - will loom larger.

Persistent stress reduces resilience. Not only is the bounce-back more difficult but the stress is more stressful. A demanding life will create stress and without a break, can break you down. But if you add emotional or mental distress, the breakdown happens faster and depression can hit hard. Distress makes the likelihood of developing anxiety or depression significantly higher.

This leads to the direct need to take charge of distress whenever you feel it and to be careful of your wellbeing when you are generally stressed.

In my case, I resolved my stress by taking a break and doing some good self-care, and thus avoided falling into depression. I practiced what I know:

1. Get enough sleep. This is more important than most people will admit to. Our U.S. culture seems to admire people who do not sleep when in fact loss of sleep leads directly to anxiety, depression and cognitive problems.
2. Get enough exercise. A fit body is resilient to stress - it bounces back far more readily.
3. Eat well - stress gobbles up nutrients and those need to be replenished. Try supplements if you think you cannot eat nutritiously. Check out Dr. Terry Wahls, Dr. Daniel Amen, or Dr. Andrew Weil for common sense advice about nutrition and mental health.

But if you also have emotional distress it is very important to have support while going through a tough time. What are some things to try that will reduce stress/distress?

1. Let others know you are having a hard time. Hiding distress will cheat you out of potential compassion or help and make your stress more prolonged.
2. Tell others directly what you might need, whether it is a listening ear, a ride to the doctor, financial advice or someone to make you a meal. Often people who want to help you do not know what to do yet would be happy to help out.
3. Get some problem-solving help. Stress can blind us to solutions and distress is especially confounding. Often consulting a therapist can help you sort out what could relieve your distress.
4. Practice mindfulness - easier said than done, so try a class, a meditation group or get some instruction for mindfulness-based stress reduction. Mindful awareness can even eliminate distress from stress, and lead the way to a calmer life.
5. Even if you do not develop a mindfulness practice, take some downtime for yourself - even 10 minutes a day - to let your mind wander without looking at your phone or actively thinking.

The notion of eliminating distress won't seem so far-fetched if you try some of the above ideas, and you will manage your stress more effectively overall so that depression won't be the inevitable outcome of stress.