

Mental Fitness: Hit the Pause Button for a Healthy New Year

Health and wellness often take front-and-center stage as we enter January. QB asked Dr. Cheryl Borst, a long-time Barrington based mental health professional, to share her thoughts and offer some insights for a happy and healthy New Year.

WITH THE ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA, divisive politics, violence, and diversity, it seems essential, to work on mental resilience. Studies show that there are general skills that can be learned to improve our ability to navigate life's journey.

Emotional resilience can be enhanced at a very young age. We can teach infants how to self-soothe by developing good sleep habits—the structure of regular nap and bedtimes and sleeping in their own room. Adapting to caretakers other than Mom or Dad also can reduce separation anxiety or social anxiety in preparation for preschool and elementary school.

TODDLERS

With toddlers and young children, we know the importance of learning to “delay gratification” or the “marshmallow effect”, as described by Walter Mischel. In his studies, a child is presented with a marshmallow and given a choice: Eat this one now, or wait and enjoy two later. What he found was the ability to delay gratification could predict future emotional health. As he followed his young 4 and 5 year olds through adolescence and adulthood, those that could delay gratification exhibited better interpersonal skills, better self-esteem and concentration, and were better able to resist negative influences. We can teach our young children self-regulation and ways to defuse anger—to hit the “pause” button, take a break, and relaxation techniques such as deep breathing, stretching, and physical exercise.

ADOLESCENCE

Fostering emotional resilience becomes even more challenging with adolescence—raging hormones, mood swings, self-focus, and “impression management” (worrying about impressions of his/herself and beliefs about the impressions others have of

him/her). Recently, a young friend of the family shared that he was practicing daily with the hopes of making the school basketball team. As tryouts grew closer, he told me he knew he could make the team, but was most worried about how he would perform across the season based on his perceptions of himself or how his teammates would view him if he did not perform well. We discussed how important it was to not only work on physical skills, but “mental toughness” in competitive sports and also the idea of having fun, rather than the “what if” or merely “winning” mentality.

THE TECHNOLOGY BASKET

Social media has also increased the difficulties for adolescents in dealing with impressions of themselves and the judgments from others. With a text, an instagram, or email we can't see body language or tone of voice or sometimes know the context of the message being sent. Just a lack of an immediate response to a text can cause a teen to feel upset or rejected. And teens will often text with no filters and a stream of consciousness that they would never do in a face-to-face interaction. As parents and adults, encourage your teen to take a deep breath, hit the pause button and ask, “Is your message true, is it the right kind of message, and is it “kind”? In this age of instant communication, the “need to know” and “peer pressure” are a strong part of the “subtle bullying” culture and “group think” that contribute to emotional pain, anxiety, and depression with teens. We can also limit the number of hours our teen can use social media and encourage more face-to-face interactions and community-based activities. At dinner time, have family members take a media holiday by placing all technology in a basket at the dinner table. Have an interactive discussion with each person having talk time to ask questions and share about his/her day. This type of activity helps teens transition to young

adulthood from the mode of “self-focus” phase to being “other-directed.”

FOR ADULTS

As adults, we are mirrors to family members, friends, and colleagues. Have you ever noticed that your stress, depression, or anxiety is contagious or causes others to respond to you in negative ways? Time management issues and the stress of balancing work and family can cause us to bathe the heart and body with stress hormones and plunge us into a chronic state of hyper-arousal. Our immune functioning can be lowered, as well as the “feel good” chemicals of serotonin and norepinephrine. While medications can be helpful in modulating mood swings, there are also other tools that enhance mental equilibrium. Whatever is affecting your mental health, it is important to identify the problem and who has the problem. Whether you are feeling upset as a couple, individual, or an adolescent, ask yourself “what is my contribution to the problem?” Often, we blame others for our problems or stress, rather than working on self-exploration and avoiding projecting our anger or anxiety onto others. If an adolescent comes in blaming Mom for not getting him/her up in time for school, I will ask—WHOSE problem is this? I often respond with my favorite therapy phrase “If it is to be, it is up to me”. When we work on self-responsibility, we mirror this to others as well. We can't change others, only ourselves.

As we accept that the problem is ours, we can take action. Physical exercise is a well-know strategy that decreases anger, improves mood and body image, and improves blood pressure and cardiac health. Mindfulness meditation has come to the forefront as a proven strategy for battling stress, depression, anxiety, and addiction. We can often have “hurry sickness”, hurrying from one activity to another, multi-tasking for ourselves or others or what we call “monkey mind”, or racing thoughts, often scheduling more and more in less time. With this lifestyle, we can become “mindless” rather than “mindful”. When we work on mindfulness or “moment to moment awareness”, we deepen our concentration, we are better listeners, and we can truly enjoy the present moments rather than focus on the should/have or could/haves of the past or the what-ifs of the future. Mindfulness meditation can deactivate the section of our brains that brood on the past or obsess on the future.

Other cognitive strategies focus on “how we think determines how we feel”. We can make it a bad moment or an entirely bad day. Ask yourself, if a flat tire is worth a 10 on the Richter scale? Our reaction to a stressful situation is directly related to the meaning we assign to an event. When we can keep things in perspective, laugh, or make “lemons out of lemonade”, we are better able to manage the ups and downs of life.

NUDGE THERAPY

A significant obstacle to mental equilibrium is black and white, or polarized thinking, which increases depression, anxiety, and stress, and is usually related to perfectionism or rigidity. Remember, a mistake is an opportunity for learning. Emotional resilience requires an open mind, adaptability and flexibility, and the ability to tolerate uncertainty and change. These are learnable skills if one is willing to take the risk to get out of one’s comfort zone and embrace change—I call it “nudge therapy”. Lighten up and practice doing something new. Wear a new color, call an old friend, light a candle for a romantic dinner, get a massage, enjoy a new song, or try a new food or activity. Because new things can refresh our soul and stimulate our brain!

FOR SENIORS

As we move on to senior status or retirement, meaning and purpose become more important as a way to feel young, think young, and live longer. Seniors are often grieving the loss of a spouse or friend, or dealing with the adjustment to retirement or a chronic health problem. With this can come isolation or a feeling that they have lost meaning or a sense of purpose to their lives. “The Blue Zone” and The Harvard School of Adult Development’s research conclude that people in secure or strong social relationships with family, friends, and the community are healthier overall, see less memory decline, and maintain sharper and more active minds and simply live longer.

Finally, emotional resilience is enhanced by working on “self-compassion”—being kind to ourselves when we fail or suffer or feel inadequate. When we are self-compassionate, we take a humanistic view of ourselves. We can accept our imperfections and failures which enhances our ability to view others with compassion and in a nonjudgmental way and know that we are all in this together with our imperfections, failures, and suffering. This feeds into the most important formula for promoting a “wise mind”. When we emanate kindness, respect, integrity, self-compassion, and love,

we can let go of negativity, emotional volatility, and judgment to accept diversity, and allow room for differences and imperfections with both self and others. Using these tools can better equip us for the challenge of life’s journey and our global world. 

Dr. Cheryl Borst is a health psychologist and senior partner with The Barrington Center for Counseling and Psychotherapy. Call 847-304-0770 to learn more.



PHOTO: JIM PRISCHING