



All In The Mind

By Kate Farr

Stress relief through hypnosis and mindfulness

Stress. It's a buzzword for our times, and everyone is susceptible to it, from students to CEOs. To learn more about dealing with stress, we sat down for a calming chat with leading clinical psychologist, DR MELANIE BRYAN of **Mind Matters**.

At its most elemental, stress is the way that the body responds to demanding or threatening situations – the “fight or flight” instinct. However, the flood of adrenaline and cortisol that results from on-going stress can, over time, cause serious psychological and even physical harm. But how do we distinguish between temporary periods of heightened stress and anxiety, and a longer-term issue?

Dr Bryan explains: “If you're experiencing chronic stress, you may display symptoms that include daily fatigue, a short temper, increasing interpersonal conflict, a heightened sense of tension or anxiety – especially in anticipation of certain activities – mood swings, sleep problems, declining productivity, frequent headaches, weight gain or loss. If these symptoms persist over time, they may well be signs of incipient burnout.”

If this is sounding all-too familiar, there are ways to tackle your stress head-on. “Identify the sources of your stress and then target action to resolve each issue specifically. Calming your body and mind will leave you better equipped to cope with potential stressors in the future.”

And while stress relievers such as sport, cooking, yoga or travel may temporarily distract you from your anxieties, Dr Bryan focuses on stress *reducers* – techniques that, over time, may permanently help to change the way you react to external stressors and build mental resilience.

One such stress reducer is **hypnosis**, a technique in which an individual enters an altered state of consciousness, accessing their unconscious thought processes in order to achieve change. “Hypnosis assists an individual to tap into those inner resources of the unconscious mind, enabling them to react differently when dealing with difficult situations that may arise in the future.”

Dr Bryan continues: “One example among many, might be a person that suffers with extreme social anxiety. During hypnosis, I might guide them to create a full sensory experience of responding confidently and capably to a stressful situation – for example, confidently giving a speech, or attending a party where they're relaxed and having a great time. Once out of a hypnotic state, the individual can tap into that feeling of confidence and calm to help them overcome what would previously have been an intolerable situation.”

Mindfulness can also be helpful. Often misrepresented as simply focusing attentively on the here and now, mindfulness actually encompasses many different techniques that can increase a person's ability to be present when dealing with their stress. “Mindfulness meditation allows a person to ‘be with’ their stress in lieu of turning to drugs, alcohol or any excessive behaviour as a means of avoidance,” says Dr Bryan. “The practice is designed to increase the capacity to bear such experiences by becoming at ease with whatever arises, and – from a place of calm – a person can then make more effective choices and decisions about just how best to handle their situation.”

And, just as no two people are the same, no two treatments will produce the same results. Dr Bryan stresses the importance of an individualised approach: “Hypnosis and mindfulness are just two approaches in a whole toolkit of potential treatment options available to achieve beneficial change. It's important to be aware that they may not always be appropriate for every client.” **AM**

To find out whether hypnosis and mindfulness could help you, visit mindmatters.hk.