

Curatio Connects podcast with Madeleine Eames

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[00:00:00] (Robert) Hi and welcome to Curatio Connects.

[00:00:08] On this episode, we'll hear from Madeline Eames on how to deal with stress and anxiety, particularly now, as we grapple with the realities of the Covid-19 pandemic.

[00:00:18] (Madeleine) So if you didn't have anxiety before. You probably do now just from picking up what's happening around us in the world. But along with this pandemic of the Corona virus, we also really have a pandemic of fear.

[00:00:32] (Robert) Madeleine Eames will be here to talk about things you can do to help lower your stress and anxiety - in these very anxious times.

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On to our guest...

Madeleine Eames is a psychotherapist who specializes in anxiety, trauma and chronic pain. I reached her at her practice in Kelowna, British Columbia.

[00:01:17] (Madeleine) I had been a psychotherapist for quite a long time, probably twenty five years or so. And so my practice has mainly focused over time. First of all, general mental health of people, kids and adults. And then I just became more focused, more interested in anxiety and stress and also trauma. Post-Traumatic stress disorder and how that affects us physically. So over time, I sort of, I focused more on that. And also I started to work with a lot of people who really suffered with chronic illness and chronic pain.

[00:01:58] And what I found was, as we treated the anxiety, and I know this makes complete sense now, but this is many years ago, the anxiety and the stress and the trauma, that the physical condition really became so much more manageable, at least more manageable, people coped better. And so, I really started to investigate why that was. And then I did a difficult and Mind-Body medicine and all the things that I've been finding out in my office were being validated now by research around stress and anxiety and the effects on pain and the immune system. So, I just think it's a real it's a crucial part of medical treatment to help people to cope better and deal with their anxiety.

[00:02:51] (Robert) So you were seeing that relationship or that connection firsthand with the people you were working with before you really sort of dug into it as a as a field?

[00:02:58] (Madeleine) Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah. And then I started to learn more about the conditions and chronic pain itself and started to treat that more directly in the way that I was working with people.

[00:03:08] (Robert) Can you talk just sort of in general like why is it important to, I think most of us understand that stress affects you mentally, but how does it also then affect you physically? Can you make that connection for us, so we understand how that works?

[00:03:20] (Madeleine) Well, there's very real reasons why we get anxious and why we get stressed. And, you know, it turns out that our brain and our nervous system are wired. They're not particularly wired for happiness. They are wired for protection. And so we really from, basically from our ancestors, we are the ones that survived because we protected ourselves.

[00:03:45] And so our brains are wired to pick up any type of threat in our environment.

[00:03:51] (Robert) So that's the good part of stress. It's there to protect us and keep us safe.

[00:03:55] (Madeleine) Totally, yeah, yeah. That's why we're here, because our ancestors were able to identify the stresses and, you know, either fight or flight or freeze in a protective response in their nervous system.

[00:04:09] (Madeleine) But nowadays it's a little bit different because we're not so much being chased by grizzly bears or, you know, we don't have oncoming traffic all the time. And in fact, very rarely are we actually under an immediate threat. But the threats nowadays are just as potent because it comes in the way of thoughts, of fears, of fears about the future, fears about our health. And with that comes a whole nervous system response that our bodies can't actually tell the difference between a real threat; and our imaginations and I'm certainly not saying we make these threats up in our imagination. They are real concerns about ourselves, but they create this physiological response that involves stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline, that in the old times our ancestors would be running away or fighting and that adrenaline had somewhere to go. The cortisol had somewhere to go. And nowadays we're sitting in front of our computers having these surges of stress hormones and they don't have anywhere to go. So they get stuck in our system, stuck in survival stress and we don't realize this sometimes until we actually do get sick or we become very anxious because it has nowhere to go. And it compromises our immunity because our body is spent spending energy and protection. When we are we have to remind ourselves if we're sitting in front of a computer, we are in fact safe in this moment.

[00:05:50] (Robert) So that has an effect on our bodies. And I guess if we're healthy, you know, it's having an effect on us. But then now if we're not healthy or we're having some of our bodies trying to fight some other issue, then that adding that stress and anxiety obviously has a detrimental effect for our physical health.

[00:06:09] (Madeleine) Absolutely, and you know, Robert it's a bit of a double edged sword because the people who are more vulnerable, certainly and people that I'm talking with nowadays who are the more vulnerable populations, they are naturally going to have more anxiety about this and about Covid and what's happening in the world.

[00:06:29] So it's even more important for them to recognize and start doing some practices to help to bring down their stress levels.

[00:06:40] (Robert) Yeah. So if I'm a naturally anxious or stressed person under normal circumstances, it's work to manage that. But now we've added this sort of we've

heightened we've turned it up. We've turned the heat up quite a bit on that because everything now is a stressful situation even for people who are normally suffering from stress. Right?

[00:07:00] (Madeleine) Yeah. So if you didn't have anxiety before, you probably do now just from picking up what's happening around us in the world or just watching the news and hearing about, you know, this pandemic. But along with this pandemic of the Corona virus, we also really have a pandemic of fear. So even those people that are not particularly affected right now are feeling the pandemic of fear.

[00:07:26] So the other thing that's happening at the same time is that the normal ways that we had of getting busy, of being at work, of distracting ourselves, for a lot of people I'm talking to now, those things have come to a halt. So it's almost like the train has stopped and the train kept going, and we have the same patterns and the same kind of stress happening with nowhere to go. And it's kind of a bit of a double whammy for some people.

[00:07:57] (Robert) Sure. And it's also it's just awkward. We don't know even things we could do yesterday suddenly we can't do or we don't know how we're gonna do X because X is changed now. So it's not just the idea that it's hard to do the things or use the management tools that we had before, but we don't even know what the outlets are anymore.

[00:08:17] (Madeleine) Yeah, exactly. It's a real time of uncertainty for humans and our brains typically don't, we don't like uncertainty. We were geared to be safe and predictable. And a lot of our you know, there's a lot of losses. There's there's financial and and health concerns and unpredictability about the future for a lot of people. So, yeah, I really empathize with people right now.

[00:08:44] (Robert) So how do we start to manage that? How do we, what are the tips you give people as they navigate through that and try to figure out a way to manage their stress or anxiety in those situations?

[00:08:56] (Madeleine) So the first thing I find is that people need to recognize when they actually are experiencing stress. So getting an idea of yourself in your body and everybody is a little bit different. Does your chest tighten? Do your shoulders get tight? Do you tend to avoid or flight and go to bed or get distracted and Netflix? Or do you tend to get angry and more in the fight or do you actually freeze? So the fight, flight, freeze is really just recognizing what they are like when they're under stress. So the first key is really to start to notice that. And what I work with people around is noticing your thoughts, noticing your body, what's happening? Does your stomach start to get upset? How do you know? And the third tool that we really are using a lot lately is using our breath because when we're under stress, we're not breathing.

[00:09:53] If I clench my fists really hard, my body is tight and I'm bracing against the world. My breath automatically stops. So starting with that, one tool of being able to start to take deeper and deeper breaths automatically sends a message to your fight, flight, freeze response that, you know, I'm okay right now. You know, let's turn the alarms off here and belly breathing, putting your hands on your belly and breathing into your hands is probably one of the best tools you could use right now to flip that switch.

[00:10:27] (Robert) So it's recognizing the physical signals that your body is stressed. And for anybody who hasn't recognized that, those signals might be confusing.

[00:10:38] Yes. Yes, very. So, yeah, starting to pay attention really to, what are you doing? Who were you talking to? Are you watching the news or is it thoughts that you're having that's causing it? And sometimes I mean, I sometimes work with people who have been under stress and didn't know it for decades. Until they burned out or became sick. And I want to make it clear that people with who are compromised in autoimmune disorders, they're not causing their their illness or the disorder, or their condition. But stress can absolutely make it worse. So noticing this and then going to practice, well, first of all, using the breath for sure. Noticing what your worries are. So even for some people writing it out, like actually writing out what they are worried about right at this moment. And so just putting it out there, but also recognizing that this is really key for people. And I just I see people change when they realize this. When you're breathing and you look around you and you notice that in this moment, even though my mind and my body tell me something different, I am in fact safe and there is no immediate threat in my environment. And sometimes when people come to that place, they're like, oh, right, right, I'm getting these messages, but I'm here in front of a computer and I'm okay. A lot of the thoughts right now are what ifs: What if I get sick? What if I get the virus? Like, these are very real concerns. And it's one of the things that can be helpful is to write down what your what ifs are and to know that that's the way our brains work, we will naturally look for the worst case scenario, which very rarely in my practice ever happens. So your brain's doing what it's supposed to do, but it's not that helpful. One thing that can be helpful is to actually write a plan. Write out a plan. You know, these are the things that you're gonna do. You're going to maybe call your doctor, have a telephone conversation. You're going to eat well, sleep well, and then put that plan away. And now you know what you're gonna do.

[00:13:02] (Robert) So you're saying that just by identifying that and writing it down, I'm going to feel better because I've now made a plan and I have an action or have an outlet, should that come up.

[00:13:12] (Madeleine) Yeah. Exactly. Yeah. So you have a plan and not to just wipe away your thoughts like don't be silly or don't, you'll never get it, you know, because that never works. When we try to push away worrying thoughts, what do you think tends to happen, Robert?

[00:13:27] (Robert) Right. Of course, if somebody says, oh, don't worry about that, because that's the last... That's a that's not helpful at all. Of course, I'm going to worry about it. I'm worried already!

[00:13:36] (Madeleine) I'm worried more about it more just thinking about it! So acknowledge what you are worried about. And at the same time, practicing the breathing and the one of the really effective tools right now that people are using is actually doing a focused relaxation practice. There's lots of things online that you can listen to. Some people practice mindfulness or actually progressive muscle like body relaxation because worry shows up in our body. It might start in our mind, but it shows up right here. And it's very hard to be worried when your body is completely relaxed. Anxiety is tricky because you might think that when you get distracted or involved in Netflix, that you're no longer worried. But you can still have a stress response going on and you're just distracted from it. So I encourage people to actually go inwards and make sure that they are doing a relaxation practice and drink lots of water, because when we're in a fight or flight, we tend to get dry mouth and there's a lot of research around spending time in nature. If you are in

a place where you're able and you have the ability to get out to spend time, all the time you can, in nature, walking, movement. And if you can't, if you are in you know, if you are locked down to just even looking out, your window is proven to be helpful and reaching out like this, even on Zoom and having some social interaction actually can put, it puts you in a different part of your brain as well. So you're not stuck in that very small part of your brain, that is the fight, flight, freeze response.

[00:15:19] (Robert) So what can someone with chronic, you know, with a chronic illness do if some of the physical things that you're suggesting that they aren't actually capable of doing?

[00:15:28] (Madeleine) Yeah, that's a that's a great question. And certainly in my work with people who have chronic pain, it's not easy to move or to get out or do even the activities of daily living. So what I always tell people is that where you need to start is exactly where you are, not where you think you should be or you could be or where you were even yesterday. But even on a daily basis, noticing where you are that day and breathing is one of the things that we all do. And I call breathing a movement in itself. So whether you are sitting or lying down, being able to just notice your breath in that moment and putting a hand on your belly or your chest is going to be healing in itself. And it may seem like a very small thing to do, but it actually is a very healing action. The other thing that anybody can do, because we're all thinking beings, is to notice your thoughts and like we were talking about earlier, to notice your thoughts and just pick a better feeling thought for that moment. That can get you out of the worst case scenario. The other thing that some people find very, very useful is as you're breathing, doing perhaps some muscle relaxation, if that's possible, to notice where you are and bring to mind something in that moment that you, despite everything and everything you're able to cope with and manage, something that you are grateful for. And when we're able to do that, we're we're able to shift our brains for a moment to what is already here, because our brains will go to everything that's not here. Everything that we wish was here, but to notice what is actually here. And even as I say that, I find my shoulders just kind of relaxed down a little bit when I realize what is already good. And it's not positive thinking. It's not just erasing everything that we do struggle with on a daily basis but noticing that it's both. And there's always something else that is here. Whether it's a child or some food or your computer to shift your brain that way to the present moment.

[00:17:54] (Robert) So is there something you can do with your family as well? So we've been talking really about you as an individual doing this and recognizing things. But is this something that together you can do either with a partner or with family or maybe friends?

[00:18:06] (Madeleine) Certainly just having that connection with other people while you do it, is for a lot of people, it's even better. You know I'm doing a lot of groups online and that practice of coming together and knowing that you're not alone, that other people are worried too. And there's nothing wrong with you that you have anxiety. Your brain and your nervous system are doing what they should be doing. But they're doing it too well and it's not always helpful. So absolutely with kids right now, if they're picking up on anxiety, you can do relaxation activities or read together, breath work or walking together and within your families. Because I mean, everybody benefits from this. You know, in a Covid time or not, I believe and what I've seen over the years is these practices are healthy, no matter who you are or what you're what you're dealing with.

[00:19:08] (Robert) Is there an odd golden moment here, that because we're a lot more confined, we have a little bit more time to think about stuff? Do we have an opportunity?

Like, is there a door opening here for us to start thinking about this stuff and maybe act upon it in ways that we can now because we have the time?

[00:19:27] (Madeleine) It does give us the opportunity, because a lot of things have come to a stop. A lot of the busyness has for a lot of people come to an end and we're really forced back on ourselves, to really pay attention. And a lot of people are taking this opportunity to really identify what is really important to me here and who is important. What do I really value? Where do I feel and with whom do I feel my best? And it's an opportunity to practice just what we've been talking about, to deal with that anxiety and that stress that may have been around for a long time. We're creating new pathways, but we have to kind of clear a bit of the brush first and then it's a dirt road and then it eventually becomes a road. But when we've had it, you know, when the forest has been there for decades, we're building new roads. And it takes what we call a one degree course correction over time, just simply a one degree course correction of a breath, a thought or an awareness of your body can actually send you on a different trajectory to a different destination.

[00:20:45] (Robert) Madeline Eames, you can find out more about her work at www.mindfullivingnow.com.

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For the team at Curatio and the Stronger Together app, I'm Robert Ouimet. Thanks for listening.