

## Five Questions That Can Save Your Life

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The stress of living in the Twentieth Century leads many of us to conclude that we cannot really control our lives. Events seem to inundate our senses and change becomes the only constant. Knowing who or what can be relied upon is difficult. The rules by which we were taught to live seem somehow antiquated and the institutions that once stood as the vanguards of ethics seem to crumble with the revelations of each nightly news broadcast. We remember, fondly, a simpler time, while sending our children into a world of peer pressures that is incomprehensible to most of us. One moment of peace seems to be the most elusive prize to capture.

The toll has been costly. Most standard medical textbooks indicate that fifty to eighty percent of all illness in the United States is stress-related. Stress-related illnesses occur when our mind perceives something or someone as a stressor. The brain then sounds an alarm, which alerts the body to prepare to help us. In an effort to prepare us to interact with the stressor, muscles tense, adrenalin flows, blood pressure elevates, heart rate increases, and palms sweat. If the stress is successfully dealt with, the body returns to normal. If the stressor is not successfully confronted the body remains in a state of agitation, which can lead to exhaustion and a host of illnesses. Repeatedly turning on the alarm and initiating the stress response can, very simply, wear out the body.

The issue becomes how not to turn on the alarm needlessly. There are five questions that can be asked before you choose to sound the alarm.

### QUESTION ONE: Whose Problem is it?

Before setting off the alarm, make sure that the problem is yours. Don't let a misplaced sense of responsibility put you in the position of solving everyone else's problems for them. Not only will this strategy cost you in terms of your own health, but it also cripples those people you are trying to help by discouraging them from designing their own coping strategies.

## QUESTION TWO: Whose Value is it?

Are you wearing your body out pursuing goals and values that you don't genuinely embrace? Are you striving for symbols of success that were set by others and hold little meaning for you? Whose sense of direction are you following? Pursuing your own values can cost you, in terms of stress, but pursuing others' values can cost you dearly.

## QUESTION THREE: What is the Worst Possible Thing That Can Happen?

Many times, it's the small stress encounters that take the largest toll on the body. We imagine that consequences will be insurmountable when, in reality, they may be inconsequential. After close examination, we may discover that the worst possible thing that can happen is very tolerable and certainly not worth the debilitating cost of stress. It's a simple matter of perspective.

## QUESTION FOUR: Is it Worth the Price I'm Paying?

Many times people want to assume the responsibility of others' problems, please everyone, or live life in the fast lane and pay no price for the choices they have made. This is not a realistic scenario. Everything costs, even our values. If we continue to choose stressful behavior, our bodies will pay for these decisions. It is important to examine the choices we make with regard to achievement, life styles, and values, and then assess if the reward for that choice is worth what it will cost us in physical, emotional and spiritual well being.

## QUESTION FIVE: Is What I'm Doing Making it Better?

It is important to look at the strategies we are using to cope with stress and ascertain if those strategies are making the situation better. For example, does worrying about a problem make it go away? Rumination and problem solving are two very different phenomena. Rumination leads to exhaustion; problem solving leads to resolution. A careful examination of coping mechanisms can help discard strategies that cause sickness and replace them with techniques that can bring relief.

In the motion picture, Places In The Heart, the question is posed as to how to choose wisely between what matters and what seems to matter. Successfully coping with stress involves the same proposition. There are times in all of our lives when we will choose to turn on the alarm that signals the stress response. The secret is to choose wisely.