

Yale CANCER CENTER *answers*

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Stop Stress this Minute

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Yale Cancer Center Answers is
a weekly broadcast on **WNPR**
Connecticut Public Radio
Sunday evenings at 6:00 PM.

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Welcome to Yale Cancer Center Answers with your hosts Drs. Francine Foss, Anees Chagpar and Steven Gore. Dr. Foss is a Professor of Medicine in the Section of Medical Oncology at the Yale Cancer Center, Dr. Chagpar is Associate Professor of Surgical Oncology and Director of the Breast Center at Smilow Cancer Hospital and Dr. Gore is Director of Hematological Malignancies at Smilow. Yale Cancer Center Answers features weekly conversations about the research, diagnosis and treatment of cancer and if you would like to join the conversation, you can submit questions and comments to canceranswers@yale.edu or you can leave a voicemail message at 888-234-4YCC. This week you will hear a conversation about relieving stress during a cancer diagnosis with James Porter and Bud Wassell. Jim is an author and founder of stresstop.com and Bud is coordinator for the employee and family resources program at Yale New Haven Health System. Here is Dr. Anees Chagpar.

Chagpar Maybe we can start with you Mr. Porter. Tell me a little bit more about yourself and what you do.

Porter I have been producing stress management training materials now for over 25 years and we have workbooks and CDs, pamphlets and brochures that help people figure out how to manage stress. We distribute these products to hospitals, corporations, government agencies, and military bases throughout the United States.

Chagpar This is really stress management for life more than simply for cancer.

Porter Correct. Yes.

Chagpar What got you interested in cancer particularly?

Porter I am not specializing in anything in particular. I was asked to do a program on mindfulness here at the Smilow Wellness Workshop and my background is mindfulness and talking about stress management and we are going to figure out how it can be applied to cancer by sort of common sense, because what I would tell a cancer patient is no different than what I'd tell somebody with heart disease. Managing stress is kind of the same thing for everybody.

Chagpar Bud, maybe you can tell me a little bit more about who you are and what you do here at Yale?

Wassell I coordinate the Employee and Family Resources Program which is an employee assistance program and work-life services as part of the benefit package, but I am here as part of the Wellness Workshop Committee. We have a committee that puts together these free workshops for people with cancer and their family and the whole Smilow Community, and that is how we got Jim involved. We look for topics that are complimentary and kind of unique. We have done 'Laughter is the Breast Medicine' 'Intimacy at any Stage' and we have done a Tai Chi workshop. We had an author of a book called 'Cancer's Gifts With Love and Hope' and so, we really look for different things to help the patient and the family with a kind of holistic way of responding to the diagnosis and the treatment process.

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Chagpar And these are free workshops that any cancer patient can avail themselves of?

Wassell Any cancer patient, their families, the staff of the hospital, the community. We really put it out there as open to the public and they are free.

Chagpar How do people find out about these programs?

Wassell We have our own mailing list, and we are happy to be here today. Hopefully, this will bring some folks into the workshop. We do some publicity within Yale-New Haven Hospital in Smilow in particular, so there are things in the internal newsletter and on the LCD screens.

Chagpar But this is open to anybody, regardless of where they got their treatment, right?

Wassell Exactly.

Chagpar I think that is really important, and Jim maybe you can speak to this more, stress affects everybody, doesn't it?

Porter It really does. On every level. People who are in college, people who are in high school. I have 3 kids, 2 are in college now and they manage stress that they are subjected to just with the level of homework for college-bound kids. It was really phenomenal. Of course, people have stress in their working life. There is stress involved in just worrying about the Ebola virus. And for cancer patients, we know that the top 3 stressors in a person's life are typically divorce, dealing with the death of a spouse and dealing with a major illness. Anybody who has gotten a diagnosis of cancer is going to be dealing with a lot of stress from a lot of different standpoints, just going for treatment, dealing with chemo, not being able to do the things that you used to do and so understanding how to manage stress, I would think would be very important for cancer patients.

Chagpar Not only understanding all of that, but also the fear of the diagnosis. Can you talk a little bit about how fear and stress interplay? Are they different, and how do they feed into each other?

Porter What I know about fear and stress is that it is all coming from the amygdala, that part of the brain that is the center for vigilance and the stress response starts in the amygdala and so does fear. And one of the ways we can learn to control it is with mindfulness meditation, which is what we are going to talk about more later on in the program. What mindfulness meditation is, is prefrontal cortex training; in other words, we are treating the front part of the brain to control the emotional part of the brain and that is where you can really benefit and deal with fear by learning these techniques.

Chagpar I do want to get into how that all works, but do you find that these kinds of techniques, when Jim was talking earlier about how stress affects everybody and you certainly are involved in employee

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programs at Yale as well, do you find that these kinds of programs help with stress in the everyday workplace as well?

Wassell Absolutely. In fact, the beauty of something like what Jim is talking about is that there are plenty of quick and easy stress management techniques and that is kind of how I know Jim. It is through his business and purchasing some of the tools that he sells, and then bringing them to the frontline caregiver. That is really the challenge and that is where we have discovered we have to bring quick and easy techniques for stress management, relaxation and self-care techniques, and mindfulness is right at the heart of that.

Chagpar Because I would imagine that being a caregiver, whether it is the spouse or family member of a patient with cancer, or you are a nurse on the floor who gets very close to a patient or a physician, there is that emotional stress associated with that and you have to, as they say on the airlines, put your own oxygen mask on first before you help others.

Wassell That is exactly right. And then there is compassion fatigue and there is a possibility of longterm burnout and secondary trauma, so all these techniques can really help focus a person on the here and now.

Chagpar Yeah.

Wassell And what they can control.

Chagpar That primes us very nicely. Jim, talk a little bit more about these quick and easy techniques with mindfulness and other things that we can start using today in dealing with stress.

Porter Good question. When I teach people about what to do to lower stress, mindfulness is one of the techniques that I teach. I tell people, especially somebody dealing with a cancer diagnosis, to first consult their doctor and then choose from any one of the things that are popular for managing stress and one thing would be exercise, it is a great way to manage stress, and for a certain kind of person, it is the only way to manage stress. I have met a lot of people where that is their No. 1 way to manage stress, but meditation is another great way to manage stress. For somebody who is sedentary, that might be the thing for them, but for somebody who is kind of in between, yoga would be a great way to manage stress. We talked about meditation. There is cognitive restructuring which is changing the way you think during a stressful situation. It is a beautiful way to manage stress. It is the work of Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck, the guys who kind of created cognitive therapy. So, that is another way to manage stress. Social support is absolutely a key aspect, especially for cancer patients, as a way to manage stress and there are more. Some of the easiest, I would say, the easiest thing to do, would be just a couple of deep breaths. What we are really teaching people is how to self-regulate their nervous system, and 25 years ago, western

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scientists would have told you that you can't self-regulate your nervous system, that is why it is called the autonomic nervous system, but now we know that simple techniques like what I am talking about are ways that can help you learn how to do that.

- Chagpar Some people might be thinking about this and saying, I have never meditated. I do not know how to meditate. It seems kind of out there. How do you teach that?
- Porter Mindfulness meditation is really easy. You can just sit in a corner and listen to whatever it is that is coming into your senses. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is an expert on mindfulness, wrote a book called *Coming Back To Your Senses*, and what that implies is that when we are being mindless and I want to talk more about that, we are not in our senses. We are not a thinking mind, we are lost, we are gone, we are not here in the room, and we will talk more about that later, but just right now, I am thinking about how the chair feels on my body, how my clothes feel on my body, how this room looks right now. And when you come back into your senses, then you are being in the moment and there are lots of benefits from being in the moment that we will talk more about.
- Chagpar When Jim was talking about social support, Bud, can you tell us a little bit more about the social support that the wellness series provides? Is that something that is there or do people go to support groups? How does that work?
- Wassell I think support groups are of great benefit, but certainly, and again, I am also not an expert in cancer treatment, but I know involving the family is key and in fact, they have a patient and family resource center at Smilow and that is geared towards having a separate place that patients and family members can go that is very quiet, very serene. There are computers if you want to look up information on the internet and there are relaxation tapes and a lending library of books, and so it is a resource center and I think that is the kind of thing we want to give those folks and the circle of loved ones, lots of resources so they can learn and hopefully what we will teach through this seminar is not to get too far into the future.
- Chagpar Yeah.
- Wassell Not to project all your fears down the road, but to stay in the present and the family and patient resource center is one way to do that.
- Chagpar And I think a lot of patients might get the concrete, I can read a book, I can go on the internet, I can talk to my family, I can go to support groups, I can do things that can keep me in the here and now, but getting back to you Jim, I think there may be people who when they listen to you talk about getting back to your senses and understanding paying attention to how the chair feels and how your clothes feel, that may seem kind of out there for some people. Tell us more about how that works? How people can use these techniques to really calm their stress? Because that is really what you are talking about is it not?

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Porter Absolutely, and it is funny to hear you talk about it because I forget, it sounds a little airy fairy right now and I hope I can bring this ship into the dock because the way I try to teach it is anything but airy fairy, so let's describe it so that people can understand it, and when I ask people what they think of when they think about the term mindfulness, usually people say, being in now or being in the present moment, but then I sort of tell myself, most people must say, what the heck does that do for me? Why would that be important for me and what about thinking about the future? Don't you need to do that? I mean, being in the present moment could actually be detrimental if you were that way all the time. So, what I would like to do is maybe when we come back from the break is talk about this concept of mindlessness, which I think everybody is going to understand easily.

Chagpar I would love to do that. We are going to take a short break for a medical minute and when we come back what I hope to do is not only talk about mindlessness, but maybe get a little tutorial on mindfulness and how we can use it in our everyday lives, whether we are just under stress from life or whether we are in fact a cancer patient.

*Medical
Minute*

Smoking can be a very strong habit that involves the potent drug nicotine and there are many obstacles to face when quitting smoking, but smoking cessation is a very improvement lifestyle change, especially for patients undergoing cancer treatment. Quitting smoking has been shown to positively impact response to treatments and decrease the likelihood the patients will develop second malignancies. Smoking cessation programs are currently being offered at federally designated comprehensive cancer centers such as Yale Cancer Center and at Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale-New Haven. The smoking cessation service at Smilow operates on the principles of the US public health service clinical practice guidelines. All treatment components are evidence based and therefore all patients are treated with FDA approved first line medications and smoking cessation counseling. This has been a medical minutes brought to you as a public service by Yale Cancer Center and Smilow Cancer Hospital at Yale-New Haven. More information is available at yalecancercenter.org. You are listening to the WNPR, Connecticut's public media source for news and ideas.

Chagpar Welcome back to Yale Cancer Center Answers. This is Dr. Anees Chagpar and I am joined tonight by my guests James Porter and Bud Wassell. We are talking about relieving stress during a cancer diagnosis and right before the break, Jim Porter was talking to us about all of the techniques that can be used to relieve stress, one of which was mindfulness and I kind of pushed you a little bit into a corner because for a lot of us, the whole concept seems a little bit, as you put it, airy fairy. Feel what the chair is like and what your clothes are like and for some of us who are not in mindfulness, we do not quite get it. You said that the contrast was really to mindlessness. So, tell us more about what that is?

Porter For an example, you are up in your bedroom and you realize you need something from the kitchen. You come down to the kitchen and by the time you get to the kitchen, you have no idea what you

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came down for and you actually have to go back upstairs to figure it out, or you are driving across town, you get to where we are going, and you have no idea how you got there. It is amazing. You go to the mall, you park your car, you go shopping and have no idea where you have parked your car. We are doing things mindlessly all the time and think about this simple example; we put on our seatbelt after we start to drive, that moment where you are thinking more about putting on the seatbelt than driving, what happens if a little child walks across the street? You know, there are big benefits to mindfulness if you want to look at it from just paying attention to what you are doing while you are doing it, but there are stress management benefits as well, and my favorite example of this is when you are in the shower. I do not know about you, but every once in a while I have been in the shower 5, 10, 15 minutes and at the end, I have no idea whether I shampooed my hair or not. So, where is my mind going during that time? Well, it could be on the dentist appointment I have next week. It could be on the argument I had with my spouse last week and what is happening is when you are being mindless, you are suffering, you are thinking about things that are causing you pain, but when you are being mindful and staying in the moment, and the shower is a great place to be in the moment because it is the spa in a box and everybody has one in their house and yet we take that time and we are thinking about things that cause us to feel bad. So, mindfulness represents liberation from thinking about the future where a lot of our anxiety comes from and thinking about the past where much of our anger comes from. There is real benefit and a stress management benefit from being mindful and thinking about the shower while you are in the shower, thinking about driving while you are driving, thinking about doing the dishes while you are doing the dishes instead of the bills you have to pay or the things that make you upset. Does that help, do you understand now, does it sound a little less airy fairy now?

Chagpar I totally get it and I loved the concept of not being in the past where your anger comes from and not being in the future where your anxiety comes from, because I think that for many cancer patients in part that is very true, they think about the past and what did I do to deserve this diagnosis and why did I get this, and then they are worried about, oh my gosh, do I need chemo now and what if this spreads and what if I get a recurrence? But for many cancer patients, just to push back on behalf of all of the patients who may be listening, they may say, but every day I am living with a cancer diagnosis and so even when I am in the moment, I am still in a moment where I am a cancer patient. How do you take that and turn it into something that is as you call it, liberating?

Porter That is a really good question, and is kind of hard to answer, but let me just start by saying there are a couple of other pieces to the mindfulness puzzle that I think would help, and one is just practicing gratefulness, just being grateful for what you do have. You are a cancer patient, but you are alive, you are breathing. Jon Kabat-Zinn says, there is more right with you than wrong with you if you are still breathing, and so focusing on the breath and people always say, let it go, let it go, but how do you let it go? Well, being in the moment, thinking about how you are feeling right now usually is a good place to be, not always, but usually, and I think more often than not where you are right now can be a kind of a tonic, but when it is not, there is practicing gratefulness and there is another aspect of mindfulness that we should talk more about and that is self-compassion.

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- Chagpar Tell me more about self-compassion.
- Porter There is a book by Dr. Kristin Neff, she is from the University of Texas, and the title of it is *Self Compassion* and the whole thing comes from a mindfulness background and self-compassion is really part of mindfulness and it is kind of based on a concept called Ahimsa, which is nonviolence and nonviolence is not only to other people, but to yourself. We here in the west, we just beat ourselves up all the time and we beat ourselves up because we do not have as good a car as the next door neighbor or we beat ourselves up because we could not get to the school play because we had to go to work, and we beat ourselves up for reasons that we really should not, and so self-compassion teaches us how to not do that.
- Chagpar I think that is so critical, but you mentioned in the earlier segment about caregivers suffering from compassion fatigue and I think that that might be something that they could really benefit from, self-compassion and understanding that they too matter and they too need to take care of themselves and they too do incredible work.
- Wassell Absolutely, that is a big part of it and I am familiar with some of that work as well that Jim is talking about and if you want to put it in a nutshell ask, how would you treat your best friend? What would you say to your best friend about that incident that just occurred? And unfortunately what most of us do is we do not treat ourselves that well. So, part of what we do, we actually do some mini workshops and one of them is on gratitude to try to help people kind of get their gratitude quotient up a little bit and start focusing on that a little bit more.
- Chagpar I think that is so critical to have an attitude of gratitude. It makes all the difference in the world. I have patients who come in and I say, how old are you? And they say, well I have these aches and pains and I am getting older and I say, yes, but isn't that great? It is so much better than the alternative. I do think that turning things around and really looking at the positive and being grateful for everything that you have, and there is so much that we have and so many blessings, that we need to be grateful for. Sometimes just being aware of that and being mindful of that is really important.
- Porter I agree.
- Chagpar Tell us more about other means in which we can practice mindfulness. I mean aside from trying to be present and not focus on the past or the future and being grateful and practicing self-compassion, are there tips and tricks that we can use to reduce our stress?
- Porter There are lots of tricks for reducing stress. If we are going to stick to the topic of mindfulness, which is what I am going to be presenting about at the wellness seminar, from the tradition of mindfulness there are lots of different ways to meditate. Meditation is kind of the fundamental basis point for practicing what is called formal mindfulness practice. There is formal mindfulness

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practicing, everyday mindfulness practice, just thinking about what you are eating while you are eating, and it is a wonderful mindfulness thing. There is mindfulness walking, but getting back to the eating, there is an exercise where you take 5 minutes just to eat one raisin.

Chagpar Oh my gosh.

Porter You hold it in your hand and then you hold it up to your ear and you listen to it and then you smell it and then you put it on your tongue and you roll it around the roof of your mouth and then you put it between your teeth and then you hold it there for a couple of seconds and then you bite down on it and just the juice pushes out and it is absolutely glorious. Now imagine if we were to eat our whole meal that way.

Chagpar It would take a very long time.

Proter It would, but I think there would not be so many problems with emotional eating, for example.

Chagpar True enough.

Porter If we really thought about what we were eating while we are eating it. That is my definition of mindfulness. Think about what you are doing while you are doing it. It is surprisingly rare that we do that, especially with the everyday activities we can do without thinking about them.

Chagpar Tell us more about this formal mindfulness. Is that something that you advocate, is that something that we should be doing, and if so, how do we do it?

Porter Formal mindfulness practice is what we in the meditative world call sitting. In other words, you are sitting to do a meditation practice. Now, there are 3 ones that I teach to people. One is just watching your breath. This is the meditation, anybody could take this, listen to this right now and go to a corner where it is quiet and just meditate, so you would notice your in breathe, notice your out breathe and then notice the gap between the out breathe and the next in breathe and that is all there is to breathe awareness which is the No. 1 way to teach formal mindfulness practice. Now some people count their breaths, 1, 2, might be in and out and then go 1, 2, 1, 2 or count up to 10. You really can do anything that sort of helps you to focus your attention, keeps you in the present moment. What you are doing is you are training your brain and there is lots of research from the University of Wisconsin at Madison where Richard Davidson works, and he has put a lot of meditators into an MRI machine and what we know from this from putting monks into MRI machines, when they meditate for 90 seconds on, the whole image changes and then they do 90 seconds off and Davidson said the picture is like the difference between night and day when they are meditating and when they are not, but here again, 8 weeks of mindfulness meditation increases the gray matter in the left side of the prefrontal cortex and that is the center for happiness and contentment. So, 8 weeks of mindfulness meditation actually changes the structure of the brain and that is why we are teaching people formal mindfulness practice.

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Chagpar Interesting.

Wassell Can I add to that?

Chagpar Sure.

Wassell There is a piece that you touched on, and I wanted to add to it, and that has to do with somebody dealing with cancer and the whole feeling of why it is happening to me, the very negative part of that.

Chagpar Yeah.

Wassell In formal meditation mindfulness is not going to get to that, but if you do it formally week after week and you really train, as Jim says, that part of the brain, what you then begin to learn is that you take the world in nonjudgmentally.

Chagpar Hmm.

Wassell So that means the ability to be able to sit with negative things in the present moment, and when you can do that, you realize that all kinds of negativity, all kinds of things that come to us are tolerable. In some ways, you can get through that, but it does take a little while. It does take some of the formal mindfulness meditation as well.

Chagpar Because I do think that that is incredible when you can actually say, yes I have a cancer diagnosis and that is okay, and yes, I may need treatment and that is okay, because I am here now and move on with that. So, you said that there were 3 different types of formal mindfulness and that was one of them. Tell me about the other 2.

Porter Just listening to the sounds in the room is the second one. I remember the day that I went on a 6-day retreat with Jon Kabat-Zinn and we came in one day and he was opening up all the windows. It was in a retreat area in the woods in the upper Catskills and I was thinking, man it is cold. It was November. Why you are opening up all the windows? It was so we could hear the sounds coming in from the outside and we just sat there for half an hour and it was absolutely mesmerizing. Just listening to the crickets, water in the stream, and you get a different concept of time when you do that and I know this must sound airy fairy, but I did this. And about 2 weeks later after I did that, I went to motor vehicles in Norwalk and it was one of those 2-hour lines and I just closed my eyes and I started listening to the sounds in the room and the time went by like that.

James Porter is an author and founder of stresstop.com and Bud Wassell is coordinator for the employee and family resources program at Yale-New Haven Health System. We invite you to share your questions and comments. You can send them to canceranswers@yale.edu or you can leave a voicemail message at 888-234-4YCC and as an additional resource, archived programs are available in both audio and written format at YaleCancerCenter.org. I am Bruce Barber and hoping you will join us again next Sunday evening at 6:00 for another edition of Yale Cancer Center Answers here on WNPR, Connecticut's Public Media Source for news and ideas.