Being kind to yourself when stress is high

Stress is of all times, but certainly now many people experience a lot of stress regularly. Life as we knew it has changed dramatically. Our routines have been disrupted. Every day requires adjustments, small or large. Under pressure we have to learn new skills. And generally, we manage. But sometimes stress peaks.

When stress is high, we are encouraged to flee, fight or freeze. Thinking and acting logically is more difficult. These are automatic processes that take place largely outside our consciousness. If a lion is chasing you, it is great that this automated behavior increases your chance of survival. But now the threats are invisible: a virus, infection, financial insecurity, social isolation. And that which calms and offers us comfort, being with someone in person, is only possible to a very limited extent.

It means that you see yourself doing things that you may be ashamed of or bothered by: You lash out to your partner or children, you cannot bring yourself to do something useful, you eat more than is good for you , you are emotional without always knowing what you are feeling, you can no longer find peace. In such cases, as if it wasn’t difficult enough, self-criticism puts its head around the door: "you are so unkind, lazy, selfish, weak, etc., etc."

My self-critical voice thinks I should do more for others. "Go shopping for people who can't do that themselves," she says. And I agree with her, but I don't do it. "Egoist," she says to me. She's gagging my throat. Only when I manage to take some distance and take her less seriously, I see that I have worked hard in recent years and have taken little free time. That this period offers me the opportunity to recover a bit. And that there are other ways to be meaningful. That I can be kind to myself.

Being kind to yourself is not that easy. It starts with allowing yourself to have needs and allowing yourself to meet those needs. Can you see yourself as human among humans, just as vulnerable, with the same emotions and with the same needs as others? Can you give yourself what you need: peace, understanding, a kind word? Can you accept that you make mistakes, right now, now that the stress makes it so much harder to do it right? Can you look yourself in the eye, with compassion?

The following exercise may help you with that. It is based on an exercise from the book "A liberated mind" by Steven Hayes. (a book worth reading if you would like to know more about Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and how it can help you deal with the difficult sides of life)

To do this exercise, you could record your own voice so that you can listen to the instructions afterwards. Read the instructions calmly in a gentle, relaxed voice. Pause for a moment after each sentence and pause a little longer between two paragraphs. Sit or lie down in a position that is comfortable and alert. Alert means that you can keep focus. It works well for many people to sit upright, with feet flat on the floor and hands on the chair, or in your lap. Comfortable means you have to be able to keep it up for a while. Try to sit or lie as relaxed as possible, but not so relaxed that you (almost) fall asleep. In the exercise you will focus your attention inward. In order not to be distracted by what is happening around you, it is helpful to be in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. It also helps to focus your gaze on 1 point and keep it there, or close your eyes. However, you start with your eyes open.

“Notice something you can see. It doesn't have to be anything special, look at something and take the time to see it. Notice that you are seeing. See your own seeing. Now notice that you can touch something, touch it and notice how it feels. Notice that you feel. ‘See’ your own feeling. Then close your eyes, if you like, and notice something you can hear. Notice that you are listening. ‘See’ your own hearing. While you notice that you notice, touch for a moment that you are the one who notices. You are there behind your eyes and ears and in your skin, to notice.

(pause)

Think back to how you looked into the eyes of someone you know well and who cares about you. That can be a good friend, a partner, a loved one, a child. Maybe in real life, you wouldn't be looking in their eyes as long as in this exercise, but now imagine it's okay to look at each other for a long time. Imagine the other person's eyes and look at them.

As you remember what it is like to look into these eyes, notice that not only did you see someone's eyes, but you saw them as they saw you. To experience what that is like, imagine you would look at yourself from behind the eyes of the other person. Take a moment to notice what your face looks like, and then see your eyes looking.

These eyes that you are looking at now, your eyes, are also aware. Your eyes see the other person looking at them. See if you can see that consciousness in your own eyes. The eyes you imagine are not just objects we call "eyes." You see eyes, that see. See if you can see that, if you can notice that. And when you see that, go back behind your own eyes. Now you are back in "yourself", looking at someone's eyes, looking at you.

(pause)

Get behind the eyes of the other person again and see yourself. Feel the love and affection this person feels for you. Feel this love in the eyes with which you look yourself in the eye. Feel how you, being this person, look at you and see a whole person. A person with mistakes and flaws. Look from behind the eyes of this person and see someone who is allowed to be exactly as you are. You may notice that your self-critical voice presents itself and tells you why you are not worthy of that love. Maybe it feels awkward, uncomfortable and even a little tense. Don't let that stop you from seeing yourself through the loving eyes of the person opposite you.

(pause)

Return behind your own eyes, that look into the eyes of the other person, opposite you. See in those eyes the love and acceptance of who you are. Open yourself to that look. Notice being seen with loving eyes.

(pause)

If you want, you can switch perspective a few times. Sit for a while behind the eyes of the person opposite you and experience the love with which you look. And then return behind your own eyes and experience the love with which you are seen. Decide for yourself when you want to end the exercise. You can do this, for example, by zooming out and looking at the image in which you see yourself and the other person, looking at each other, both with loving eyes. Imagine that you end the exercise together by thanking each other for the exercise. Maybe by a nod, or a hug. Do it in your own way. Then bring your attention back to yourself in your own room.”