Cultivating Calm in Chaos - Strategies and Personal Reflections

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David Lowry: 0:30

Hello, everyone, and welcome to Peaceful Life Radio, your place on the internet for cultivating inner peace. This is David Lowry, and with me today is Don Drew. Don, how are you?

Don Drew: 0:40

I'm doing great today, David.

David Lowry: 0:41

We've got a show about how to cultivate peace when we're in a crisis. Nobody will relate to that, will they?

Don Drew: 0:49

No, absolutely not.

David Lowry: 0:51

Well, if there's nobody listening who can relate to it, then this will just be a cathartic experience for you and me.

Don Drew: 0:57

I can always use this. So, David, before we start, let's be sure and remind our listeners to download, share, and listen to our podcast. It'll help us out a lot.

David Lowry: 1:07

Nearly everybody's going through some sort of a crisis or another, and before we start, just talk about some crises you and I have had in our lives. We won't bore the listeners with every single one of them, but when I turned 40, my wife came home from visiting her parents and something happened to her. We don't even to this day know exactly what happened. But suddenly she could not stand. She had excruciating chronic pain that would last the rest of her life. And she was wheelchair bound when I came to get her at the airport. Our lives were turned upside down. We were raising two young sons. We both had jobs. We had a great life in Los Angeles. Suddenly it ground to a stop and our lives were in crisis.

Don Drew: 1:53

David, the greatest crisis that I experienced was the death of my first wife. Marsha and I were married for 39 years. We'd been together since college. And we found out she had ovarian cancer in 2016. And for the next two years, I changed from being a husband to

a nurse, a full time nurse. And I could say so much about that, but in terms of personal crises, I had to fall back on a lot of different coping mechanisms.

David Lowry: 2:21

All of us face crises at one time or another. It could be the loss of fortune, a job, loss of a loved one. There's innumerable amounts of crises you can find. Today, Don and I want to suggest some things from our experience and the experience of others about how we might cultivate peace in our life, in the midst of a crisis. Because one of the things that we don't want to do is add to the suffering, right? It's one thing to be in something bigger than you are, swallowing you up, taking up your time. It's another thing to add mental anguish and suffering to it.

Don Drew: 2:55

David. I want to point out that this is not a comprehensive list of things to do. It's not like a reader's digest, go to this, do these and everything will be okay. This isn't about making it okay. This is about coping mechanisms for helping you get through a tough time when maybe there is no good outcome possible.

David Lowry: 3:13

It's a way to cultivate as much peace as you can in these very, very trying situations. We're going to start with our first one, which has to do with, believe it or not, breathing. Just taking a breath. Don, can you walk us through this?

Don Drew: 3:28

Deep breathing exercises are often a simple but powerful way to help us calm the mind and body. A lot of this has to do with body position, the way we breathe. Oftentimes in normal life, we breathe rather shallow and we're not getting a lot of oxygen into our bodies. In a crisis, one of the things that somebody can do is find a comfortable position and learn to try to slow and deepen their breaths.

David Lowry: 3:54

We can't stress enough, your breath is the key. I took karate for a couple of years. And one of the first things they taught us was don't lose your breath. Don't become winded. When you're in a crisis or especially when you're in a fight, maybe even a fight for your life, learn to slow your breathing and take those nice deep breaths. It stimulates your parasympathetic nervous system and that's what we're going for. Instead of being in this fight or flight mode, it puts you where you can calmly face what's before you. One technique I'll add to that, Don, is take a deep breath and then take another deep breath on top of the first breath you took, then slowly exhale. That's one way of stimulating that vagus nerve in your body.

Don Drew: 4:40

Not only does it stimulate the nerve, but it helps increase your oxygen supply, which brings more energy to your brain, which actually has a calming effect. It helps your brain function better, allows you to shift your focus, and it also helps to release muscle tension.

David Lowry: 4:56

Our next point is finding some practical ways to ground ourselves and stay present in the moment. Two things can happen when we face a crisis, we want to say, I'm not going to think about it. I'm not going to think about it. And we really do need to be thinking and acting. And the other one is to be so panicked that we can't think straight and we're so overwhelmed that people can't reason with us and we can't make good decisions. We really have to find a way to not jump forward to panic, or go into denial. So, to stay grounded, practice sensory grounding. One of the ways you can do this is to notice where your hands are, your feet are, touch things and feel the sensation in your hands. Practice your breathing as you walk in your backyard with your shoes off and feel the ground underneath. We call it sensory grounding. And then, of course, pay extra special attention to people as they talk to you, maybe more than you usually do, because the goal is to stay focused in the moment.

Don Drew: 6:01

David, a lot of folks today are talking about this as mindfulness or meditation, or mindfulness meditation. These are ideas about being more present in the moment. Quite often when we are in a situation where we're feeling a lot of stress or there's a crisis of some kind, we want to immediately react. There are occasions where an immediate reaction is demanded. But mentally, one of the things that can help is to become increasingly focused on that moment. And , as you're saying, pay attention, it helps reduce anxiety and stress. It helps us with something called emotional regulation. Emotional regulation is simply slowing down observing what you're feeling, observing how your body is reacting to the stress, and that will help you also enhance your awareness and decision making in these critical times.

David Lowry: 6:50

These are important, but another one is learning how to maintain a routine for normalcy and structure. I had a mid -level management job one time, and one of the things that I learned, when people get sick or ill, one of the things that they really want more than anything is to come back to work and their homes and be with their families again. They want their normal life back, right? Sometimes our lives can seem boring and routine, but when crisis comes, we'll want it back. Here's some things we can do to re institute some normalcy in our life.

Don Drew: 7:27

The routine you're talking about brings us more familiarity and comfort. It provides structure and helps us organize our lives. It gives us a greater focus. And routines allow our brains to calm down some. When we are in a crisis situation, our brains, our emotions, they're all over the place. And getting back into routines help reestablish a state of normalcy.

David Lowry: 7:50

Crises tends to interrupt our routines. But our goal is to create as many as we can so we can have the sense of normalcy as much as possible. So, get up at the same time every day. Go to bed at the same time each evening. Set routines for when you go grocery shopping. Take time to relax somewhere.

Don Drew: 8:14

You make a really great point here. It's common to think of a routine as something we've done in the past, but we can create new routines to help us especially when old routines are no longer feasible. And by creating new ones, we align with our current situation. And this can include specific times for checking news updates, virtual social gathering, self-care activities, all these things that are going on in our lives. And we can organize them and it gives us some feeling of control, which is an important thing when you're in a crisis.

David Lowry: 8:44

Set up a schedule and follow it. If you've been a person who goes to church every Sunday, then make sure that you go every Sunday. If you're a person who takes a walk in the park schedule it in. The main thing is to find a way to create a little structure in your life to maintain some normalcy.

Don Drew: 9:03

David, something else we might want to do, is limit our consumption of news and social media, especially if it's causing us distress.

David Lowry: 9:10

Right. When we're in crisis, we're feeling overstimulated as it is. And if you're overstimulated and then you pick up social media and read about your politician that you hate, and you find your blood pressure rising, your anxiety level goes up. I mean, this is too much stimulation. There's times when you have to say, I'm not going to look at those things. I'm not going to listen to any of them. If I see their face, I'm going to flip on by it. I'm only going to use Media that can make me feel more positive and in control of my life. Learn to say no and move on from some of it. Use it wisely in times of stress.

Don Drew: 9:50

Let's combine a couple of these in fact. Let's look back at the idea of mindfulness. Okay. So, we can take an approach of mindful consumption so that when consuming all this news and so forth, at least we're mindful of how it affects our mental and emotional state and prioritize what it is we want to let into our lives. And then maybe this mindfulness, this awareness makes us better, more healthful consumers of this kind of information.

David Lowry: 10:15

Exactly. And we can set a time when we'll look at news and get information. Trust me, Don, there have been times when I've cut it out entirely. And you know what? You're not going to miss out on anything of great significance or important.

Don Drew: 10:29

Yeah, I don't know if you noticed this or not the other night, David. Our families had dinner together, and I left my phone in the car. We were celebrating Christie's birthday and I really didn't want to be interrupted. That's a new thing for me, by the way.

David Lowry: 10:43

It's important. We can't allow ourselves to be on call 24 seven. I mean, we need to take our roles seriously but we have to have some boundaries as well so that we can function and be at our best.

Don Drew: 10:54

So, we've been looking primarily at mental and emotional issues, things like mindfulness and so on. What are the connection between exercise, for instance, and stress relief and recommend some endorphin boosting activities?

David Lowry: 11:06

Oh, absolutely. For some people, this is no big deal. Some people love their sports. They love their exercise. So, this is a retreat. One of my friends says he loves to go to the gym because he gets out of his head. He's in his zone. Don, I've never been that person. Every bit of exercise seemed like drudgery to me. But for people like me, it's even more important that we do it. It's important that we make our bodies go out and walk, run, jump, or do yoga and stretching. Believe it or not, I taught yoga for about 10 years. As a yoga instructor, I know all kinds of good things that yoga does for our body. But the main, thing is it helps us relieve the stress we feel. And in times of stress, we've got to find as many things as possible to help relieve that stress that's good for us. There's so many things that aren't good for us, like drugs and alcohol and addictions and so forth. But exercise is a good thing for us. So get out there and run. You've heard Don talk about his walks in nature and how much that relieves him of stress and helps make his life more manageable and important to him. And I second all of that. It improves our mood. It'll help your sleep. It helps with your tension. It'll boost your confidence and self esteem. It's a distraction. I mean, we could just go on and on.

Don Drew: 12:29

For our listeners that don't have established physical activities, in order to really get exercise into your life, you have to develop a routine for it. Build a habit of it, and then you get the benefit of both the mental, emotional, and physical aspects. One of the things that I do there is walking meditation, which is a mindfulness exercise while I'm physically walking. So, I get the benefits of both, and I find it is very useful. We started off this conversation talking about some crises you and I had. The thing that carried me through that 20 months that Marsha was ill and dying was that I would go walking every morning for about a half an hour. And that half an hour of time just to think and to move gave me the energy that was necessary for me to be able to continue to care for her properly.

David Lowry: 13:20

Don, I listen to books on tape when I'm exercising. I get my walking pace going, and I've listened to countless audio books. And I just love learning new things as I walk. It helps me get my exercise and I can find something fun or humorous to listen to but I enjoy doing that.

Don Drew: 13:38

David, I want to go back to the importance of sleep in our lives. Science says that most of us don't get enough sleep, right? I have heard different numbers, seven to eight

hours being adequate. I'm sure that is based on a number of different things, such as age and so on. Some of us just seem to naturally do better on less sleep than others. But it's still a very important part of a healthy lifestyle and of course, when we're faced with crisis, sleep can serve a valuable physical and mental aid. Can you tell us more about sleep and elaborate on the value of sleep?

David Lowry: 14:12

Right. Let me talk about a thing that many people don't know about. It's called your amygdalae. And it's two little glands inside your head behind your eyes and near the ears. I call them your MIGs but this is the thing that stimulates your brain when you're in crisis. This is the fight or flight gland and they need to be rested. When you're in crisis, those things are really fired up, right? Maybe you're arguing with a medical provider or an attorney or who knows what your crisis situation is. But you've got to be able to rest your amygdalas. Also, sleep helps you think better. It regulates your brain and your emotional processing. It also regulates your neurotransmitters. You can't function without good sleep. And Don, if you're in a crisis, sometimes that brain gets in a core of thought and it interrupts our sleep or causes us to wake up several times in the night. It's very important before you go to sleep that you take those deep breathing exercises you and I started off the program talking about. Maybe 10 really slow, deep breaths, maybe doing a little bit of light stretching, so that the body can be prepared to go to sleep. And if at all possible, try to avoid bringing any more mental stimulation such as your social media, smartphones or whatever. You need to prepare your body for rest.

Don Drew: 15:35

So, we've been looking at mental, emotional, and physical things we can do to help regulate ourselves when we're feeling a lot of stress. But we can also do things outside of ourselves. For instance, reaching out to our support system, whether they be friends or family or some cases a therapist to help us process our feelings, right? Can you tell us more about that?

David Lowry: 15:54

A support system is very important and It's important to begin thinking about who might be in that system. You need emotional support, maybe with your church family or with a set of friends in a social setting that you normally meet with. Nearly all of us have a confidential friend we can talk to, and that's good. But remember they're not therapists and they can't solve our crisis and as you mentioned, it might be necessary to process things with a therapist. I look back when I was 40, I had never been to a therapist. But I certainly needed to have done it back then. It would have been so good for me to talk to a therapist who understood things like trauma and crisis, who could have told me more of what my wife was going through, what I'm going through, help provide me with a roadmap. But I was oblivious to it all and kind of bumbling through. And Don, I'm not really proud of the way I've bumbled through a lot of that. I just thought, Oh, well, this will probably get better. We'll move through this. We're tough. We'll get through it. Everybody has stuff that comes their way. And all of that can be true, but sometimes you really need to talk to somebody who's seen a lot of things,

Don Drew: 17:01

There's some real benefits that come from professional support in terms of a therapist or a psychologist A number of different options there. One of the things they can do for you is provide an objective perspective. Mental health care professionals are trained to listen. They are trained to create a relationship and understand you. Therapists have specialized expertise in specific needs individuals have and so on. They work with you to try to develop a treatment plan that will help you get through whatever challenges you have. Lastly, and probably one of the most important things to understand, is what you say to your therapist is completely confidential. When you tell your therapist something, and there are a couple of exceptions, confidentiality is absolutely the rule. I mean, that's the law. So, you're safe talking to a therapist.

David Lowry: 17:51

Don, one of the things that I'm sort of embarrassed to admit on this program, but it's true, I was raised to believe that you didn't need a therapist. You just needed to pray a lot more. We thought a therapist as the last resort. I'm here to tell you that kind of thinking was all wrong. There are times when you need good, objective advice from people who've seen so many things. When something happens to you, it'll be the first time that you've ever run across it, but to a therapist, it might be the 100th time they've run across it. They can tell you things they know have been helpful and a few things that they can warn you about. I wish I had done it. I would have been a better husband back then if I had have done it. So if you're one of those people who have been reticent about seeking help from a therapist, don't be because they can help you.

Don Drew: 18:45

I've heard a lot of people lately talking about practicing gratitude. Tell us more about that. What does practicing gratitude actually mean?

David Lowry: 18:54

One of the things it means to me is that we take stock of all the good things we have. When we're in a crisis, everything is colored in a bad way. It's like your life is just turned upside down. You're in the storm and we lose sight of things in our life that's really good. Maybe we're in pain, but maybe we have a faithful friend who checks in on us, or people who have done their best to be a supportive system for us. We should never take those for granted. One of the ways that we don't take people and our situations for granted is a gratitude journal or a gratitude meditation. I have a lot of different rosaries. I roll one bead for one thing I'm grateful for. I just roll one bead after another. And I don't stop until I've done 72 things that I'm grateful for. I'm not saying I do that every day, but there was a time when I was doing it every day in a crisis because it was important for me to remember, look, not everything is bad here. I don't want to forget how beautiful the sky and nature is. I don't want to forget how I love my pets. Just go through the smallest and the biggest of things that you can think of and just roll that bead over your finger one after the other until you've made it all the way around and see if you don't feel a little bit better.

Don Drew: 20:11

I do think it's important to incorporate gratitude into our daily routines and to find ways to weave gratitude into our life, such as expressing thanks before meals or during a

particular meditation or prayer, or also as part of our bed bedtime routine. Maybe one of the best ways is to develop a practice of telling people, telling people that we're grateful.

David Lowry: 20:31

Oh, my goodness. Yes. I love that. I wish I had thought of that first. Well, it's almost time to go, Don, but there's one thing I want to add to the list that I don't think you and I talked about, but if you're a prayerful person or you're a person of faith this is the time to. Go to your simple, humble roots, your simple prayers of childhood can be very helpful to you. Asking for help, praying for peace. Asking for guidance, talking in your own way to a power greater than yourself. I'm a big believer that we can find great solace in those things that are meaningful for us spiritually. It could be something as simple as nature or something specific to your religious faith, but whatever it is, this is the time to bring it to bear to help you get through the crisis.