

Equanimity - serenity within the chaos

"So nothing is ever good or bad unless you think it so, and vice versa. All luck is good luck to the man who bears it with equanimity." - Boethius (Anicius Manlius Severinus), Consolation of Philosophy

It seems most everyone I know is experiencing life these days caught up in some flavor of crisis or conflict either at work, at home, at play or in relationship. They're experiencing a form of conflict and stress around issues, for example, like leading and managing, or processes, deadlines, budgets and job security, or personal relationships and unresolved conflicts, or how to resolve health and education challenges, or whether what they are doing is what they really want to be doing with their life.

Stress is the wrapper surrounding their lives - consistently experiencing racing heartbeats, shortness of breath, tight jaws, facial frowns, rigid postures, negative emotions and feelings, critical and judgmental inner dialogue, illness and dis-ease. A life defined by automated, robotic reactivity to conflict and crisis. But, it doesn't have to be this way.

What is equanimity?

"Philosophy teaches us to bear with equanimity the misfortunes of others." - Oscar Wilde

Merriam-Webster defines equanimity as an evenness of mind under stress - a habit of mind that is rarely disturbed under great strain; a controlling of emotional or mental agitation through will and habit; a steadiness when facing strain.

Equanimity is a practice, most often discussed in Buddhist and Sufi traditions. Equanimity is the foundation for wisdom and freedom and for compassion and love. Equanimity is not, as some have mistaken, a "dryness," coolness, indifference or aloofness, suppression/repression of feelings, apathy or inexpressiveness. The Buddha described equanimity as a mind that is abundant, immeasurable, and without hostility or ill-will.

"Few people are capable of expressing with equanimity opinions which differ from the prejudices of their social environment. Most people are even incapable of forming such opinions." - Albert Einstein

What does equanimity look like?

Equanimity is the capacity to remain neutral, to observe from a distance, and be at peace without getting caught up in what we observe. It's the capacity to see the big picture with understanding and without reacting, for example, to another's words, ideology, perspective, position, premise, or philosophy. In essence, we take nothing personally; refuse to get caught up in the drama our own or others'.

Equanimity allows us to "stand in the midst," of conflict or crisis in a way where we are balanced, grounded and centered. Equanimity has the qualities of inner peace, well be-ing, vitality, strength, and steadfastness. Equanimity allows us to remain upright in the face of the strong winds of conflict and crisis, such as: blame, failure, pain, or disrepute - the winds that set us up for suffering when they begin to blow. Equanimity protects us from being "blown over" and helps us stay on an "even keel."

How do we develop equanimity?

There are several mind/body qualities that support the development of equanimity. One is integrity. Doing and be-ing in integrity supports our feeling confident when we speak and act. Being in integrity fosters an equanimity that results in "blamelessness," feeling comfortable in any setting or with any group without the need to find fault or blame. Another quality that supports equanimity is faith (not necessarily a religious or theological faith) - a faith based on wisdom, conviction or confidence. This type of faith

allows us to meet challenge, crisis or conflict head on with confidence, with equanimity. A third quality is that of a well-developed mind a mind that reflects stability, balance and strength. We develop such a mind through a conscious and consistent practice of focus, concentration, attention and mindfulness. A well-developed, calm mind keeps us from being blown about by winds of conflict and crisis.

A fourth quality is a heightened, cultivated sense of well-being which we develop by engaging in practices or activities that take us out of our robotic ego-driven life and focus on a higher or deeper sense of consciousness, such as meditation, martial arts, self-reflection, the arts, and right-brain focused actions and activities. A fifth quality that supports equanimity is understanding or wisdom which allows us to accept, be present and aware to our experience without our mind or heart resisting or contracting. In this place we separate people from their actions; we agree or disagree while being in balance with them. We take nothing personally. Another quality is knowing that others create their own reality so we are able to exhibit equanimity in the face of others' pain or suffering and not feel we need to take responsibility for their well being in the face of their conflict or crisis.

A sixth quality that supports equanimity is seeing reality for what it is, for example, that change and impermanence are a fact of life. We become detached and less clingy to our attachments. This means letting go of negative judgments about our experience and replacing them with an attitude of loving kindness or acceptance and a compassionate matter-of-factness. The more we become detached, the deeper we experience equanimity. The final quality is freedom letting go of our need to be reactive so we can witness, watch and observe without needing to get caught up in the fray, the winds - maintaining a consistent relaxed state within our body as sensations (e.g., strong, subtle, pleasant, unpleasant, physiological, or emotional) move through.

Equanimity, thus, has two aspects: the power of observation and an inner balance, both of which support one to be mindful, awake, aware and conscious. The greater the degree we are mindful, the greater our capacity for equanimity. The greater our equanimity, the greater our ability to remain steady and balanced as we navigate through the rough waters and gusty winds of change, challenge and conflict.

What happens when we're out of balance lacking equanimity?

In our everyday physical world, when we lose our balance, we fall. In our emotional world, we stuff our feelings and emotions, deny them or contract around them. Or we identify with a particular thought, feeling or emotion, hold on to it rather than allow it to flow through us or pass like a cloud in the sky. The middle ground is equanimity - the state of non-interference.

Equanimity allows for a deeper, more fulfilling experience.

"When force of circumstance upsets your equanimity, lose no time in recovering your self-control, and do not remain out of tune longer than you can help. Habitual recurrence to the harmony will increase your mastery of it." - Marcus Aurelius

As we develop our capacity for equanimity, we can begin to notice when we drop into a "state of equanimity." Being aware of our experience, we can explore the state and this practice will lead to more frequent and deeper states of equanimity. What we find with such practice is that people, events, and circumstances that once caused us to be reactive no longer have any "charge" and we are more and more able to let go and feel less "bothered." We suffer less.

Equanimity allows for a safe harbor in the center of the storm - when we are caught up in the stresses of life at work, at home, at play and in relationship. In this place, we are more capable of meeting life with inner aplomb, without giving in to the underlying currents of tension and turmoil, and more able to respond effectively instead of reactively. Our responses take place in the conscious context of acceptance and equanimity.

Equanimity allows us to live a life of true and real achievement free from the trap of ego-based likes and dislikes, and emotional reactivity. The beauty of equanimity is that it supports us to live our life at work, at home, at play and in relationship - in such a way that we can experience a heightened sense of well-being regardless of our external events or circumstances, crises or conflicts, in a way that we experience clarity, alertness and ease in the moment.

Equanimity allows us to feel relaxed, make clearer, more honest, sincere and self-responsible choices and decisions, engage in more effective communication with others, speak the truth, be genuinely interested in listening to others, and be more trusting and trustworthy.

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- To what extent do I experience quiet confidence, equanimity and calmness in my life at work, at home, at play and in relationship?
- Am I generally free from stress, worry, fear, hate, anger, irritation, or confusion?
- What keeps me from experiencing equanimity?
- What attachments do I have that cause me constant anxiety, fear, or stress?
- Would my close friends, family, spouse/partner describe me as calm?
- Do you feel you are living a life of real achievement? Why, why not?
- Do you engage in a practice that brings you inner peace, or a sense of calm, balance, harmony and well-being? If not, what "story" do you tell yourself or others to justify or rationalize your not doing so?
- Who in your life exhibits equanimity on a consistent basis?
- What was your experience of (your own or others') equanimity like when you were growing up?
- Can you visualize a world where you can experience equanimity on a regular basis. What would be necessary for that to happen?

"For want of self-restraint many men are engaged all their lives in fighting with difficulties of their own making, and rendering success impossible by their own cross-grained ungentleness; whilst others, it may be much less gifted, make their way and achieve success by simple patience, equanimity, and self-control." - Smiles