**“The EPPP adventure: Maintaining your sanity, developing wisdom and conquering more than “just” your license”**

*by Rosa Di Lorenzo, PsyD, 2011*

So the big day has arrived. I am talking about the Big E triple-P Exam Day. You’ve studied as much as you could, and feel reasonably prepared. You get yourself up, have a light breakfast (cause you know you should, for better performance), some coffee but not too much (to control the anxiety and try to be on the right spot on that famous Yerkes-Dodson curve) and head off to the testing site. While you drive, you feel thorn by the unanswered questions that still percolate in your overburdened mind, and all those knowledge holes you never got to fill. Perhaps you have a last minute critical question and frantically search its answer in the exam-prep book laid next to you on the passenger seat, while driving. Your heart beats fast, your stomach is tied up, your legs are tense, and your palms are sweating. You feel this close to having a full blown panic attack.

You can’t think about it anymore. You cannot entertain the possibility that you might fail it, because you are not quite sure what you would do in that case. You can’t bear the idea of doing it all over again. No way. However, in your mind, you just want to appease the particular anxiety coming from the thought of the eventuality of failing the EPPP (after all you are a realistic person, with plan n. 2 and even 3). So you tell yourself that you will wait a couple of months, then study again, with a fully new study plan, perhaps with a different prep program. But you know very well that this will be a horrible situation to be in. Which means you have to pass. This time. You have been telling yourself that all along, right? I will pass; I will pass the EPPP with a comfortable margin. I will pass.

You get to the testing site, wait to be accompanied in, sit down in front of your assigned computer, evaluate your position in the room, look up to the cameras they say are there, read the instructions, and then press the “start” button on the screen. Ready? Go!!

Stress and Anxiety have reached levels in your system you did not know possible; as you read the questions and silently comment “what the heck….?” “where is this coming from?” “haven’t seen this..??” your stress-response is at its peak, your HPA axis is working incessantly, pumping you full with adrenaline and corticosteroids. You have no idea what you can name your pitiful physical-emotional condition any more, as it has surpassed in intensity any other stressful situation you had experienced before in your life. Stress? Anxiety? Panic? Horror? The Royal Nightmare? A mix of it all?

The soup of excitatory chemicals you are flooded with makes you feel all but lucid. You are answering the questions but feel instead like you should run for your life, like the stereotypical gazelle trying to escape from the stereotypical lion in the savanna. And of course, you are right. Your prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain you need more than ever, and NOW, has been kidnapped by the amygdalae -those two little almonds in the limbic system that are all about anxiety and fear response- which won’t set it free. Those muscles of yours, glucose-impregnated and ready to flee, are instead frozen and glued to the chair in front of the computer where the EPPP questions appear sequentially, one after the other, merciless, and utterly unconcerned of your miserable mental and physical state.

When it is all over, you get up, exit the examination room, get to your car, and leave the site. You are a mess. You secretly believe you should have earned a medal, like a soldier in the field, who has overcome some difficult battle. You feel exhausted and begin to get some respite from the cascade of stress hormones and catecholamines that have flushed you insane for weeks, months, peaking in the last few hrs. You feel relieved, but not “well”. In fact you observe, with a drained disenchantment, that your mood really sucks. You wonder why, after it is all over, only the quality of the stress has changed, but not the intensity of its nasty grip! Why in the world don’t you feel light, happy and serene, like you have felt after just about every other exam, presentation, or defense, all the times before? Because you think you failed! And, of course, because the chronic stress that has kept you in a constant, relentless agitation for months, has left a mark in your system, which won’t really disappear just like that. No, you have no real evidence you passed; besides, you did not know half of the answers, right? Actually, you felt confused and overwhelmed with about 2/3 of the material that presented in front of you on the computer screen.. All in all, you just feel that the chance you passed is slim.

The next day you feel a bit better, the following day better yet, and finally you feel sensible improvement, a renewed, mature philosophical attitude toward the results, which you do not yet know, until finally you get the email which holds the verdict. You passed! Incredible! Unbelievable! Perhaps they made a mistake? How can that be? But how wonderful! This feels really great. Oh My God.

And so this is the EPPP story. It began a long time before exam day, but you did not know. And thankfully so! You went through the difficult years of professional/graduate school, survived exams, presentations, practicums and internships. Blessed and unaware, you rode the high of your successful dissertation defense and graduation, received your degree, yes the one with the word “doctor” on it. You can still savor the glory of it all. But…… after some time, it started to dawn on you that, well, gee… you were not actually done. And thus the EPPP prep story began, with its very own load of Stress and Hardship.

Given that you must study for, and sit to take the exam if you want to get licensed; given that there is really no way to avoid the stress that comes with it, the question is: how can you help yourself to remain in optimal conditions, to maximize your pre-EPPP physical and mental health during the trying times of EPPP preparation? How can you control the gripping anxiety that seems to hold you prisoner, day after day, and how can still enjoy a minimally decent life during the EPPP prep phase?

I recall that when I was studying for the exam, during the winter of 2009/10, I would struggle to keep my schedule of meditation and yoga as regular as possible; I was well aware that I needed the two practices to be regular, like never before. I also knew that it was imperative that I ate delicious, healthy, and brain-nourishing food, possibly home-cooked (I am single, so there was no one else that could do that in my home but me) and that I take good organic supplements to support the study process and enhance learning and memory. In a few words, I knew that I needed to take care of myself with love, compassion and quality. I needed to care for myself in the same way I would have cared for a beloved friend or family member. In other words, I needed to parent myself.

In times of higher stress, when it all felt out of control, all I could do is to let it be. I would tell myself: “Well, it is all going to hell. I am not sure about anything. Mortgage is two months behind and I have no income. I am alone, poor me.” But also “Where am I in my life and what does it all mean? Why am I doing this to myself? Why am I so far away from my family, in a foreign Country? What am I after? What this moment in time really means?”

As logical as its answer may seem, this last question was actually holding a much deeper meaning. That’s right. “What do I want? Where am I going? What does this mean?” I needed to look at these questions. And, although I certainly did not find all the answers, there was a process I needed to go through, a process, I believe now, that was part of my personal and professional growth, as a woman and as a psychologist. I appreciate that, now. It was a process of discovery and maturation. A process of existential and spiritual enrichment, with no doubt; and for that, I am grateful.

There are certainly many ways in which you can address stress and anxiety during the time you study and prepare for the big psychology exam. Undoubtedly you will find, or have already found, your own tools and techniques to deal with stress. Below are four tools that I found particularly effective to deal with it.

LET YOUR ISSUES “JUST BE”
The EPPP prep phase brings up issues that may have been dormant for a long time. Issues that can create some seismic activity in your emotional life, and may definitely add to the stress you already feel. Perhaps these issues were buried deep, never addressed. They may create havoc at an unconscious level, and you know not why you feel the way you feel. But however they manifest, the fact is: you need to be able to deal with the discomfort that may arise from it. While this is no time, I believe, for in depth therapy, given the clear and rational goal looming at the horizon, and the need to focus on achieving it, it is definitely time for introspective self-care. Be aware of your issues, and take a compassionate stance toward your problems and challenges. Respect and Love your struggles. Befriend your problems. There will be time later, if you want, to address them in therapy, to do something more focused about it. For now, accept whatever comes up. Acknowledge the pain you may feel. Do not try to investigate it too much; to understand where if comes from. It is more important to you right now that you learn to sit with it. It’s ok. Feel the pain, let it be, let it act in you and it will evaporate. The light of consciousness destroys the darkness, and this is a similar process. Accept the feeling, acknowledge and let it be, and it will go away. For good.

DO CREATE!
Another helpful practice to engage in, during EPPP prep time, is the expression of your Creativity. Creativity is sort of an abstract concept depicting something your intellectually know to be good for you, and that you always intended to concretize, but never did. Creativity is, I believe, of paramount importance during these electric times. Expression of creativity allows a deliverance of goods, a revelation of meaning; it gives sense to what seems to have none. It curbs the anxiety by summoning up the energies unleashed in the system by the chronic stress response, and releasing them through the creative act. That why it is so precious, and especially in times of intense stress. I have the memory of taking breaks to cook wonderful dishes, my way to engage in creative acts during the EPPP prep phase.

MEDITATE
Another wonderful mean to distress is through meditation. While there are literally thousands of techniques available out there, only a handful of those are supported by tradition as well as science. To study the “brain on meditation” is a cutting edge area of contemporary cognitive neuroscience. There is now a significant amount of evidence supporting the claim that some meditation techniques enrich brain activity, allowing for “total brain functioning” (you can check out the work of researcher and neuroscientist Fred Travis one of the best in his field, in regard to this area), while decreasing sympathetic activity and inducing the relaxation response in quite a natural way. One of such techniques is Transcendental Meditation (TM), perhaps the most criticized as well as acclaimed of all meditation techniques. TM is also the most scientifically researched, and the one that gave way to the avalanche of research currently taking place on the effects of meditation on the mind and body. I have been practicing TM for almost 29 years, faithfully, every day. I researched it thoroughly for an undergraduate thesis as well as a doctoral dissertation. I can definitely attest to its beneficial effects, both on the personal and scientific perspective. TM literally “saved me” during trying times, last but not least the EPPP prep times of recent memory. Other techniques are there and available to relax and unwind. Among those are mindfulness meditation, which is gathering more and more respect in psychotherapy practices, and the “inner body meditation”, a wonderful simple technique of Zen flavor, which teaches one how to be in the moment.

YOGA THE BEAUTIFUL
And what about yoga? I have been practicing it as well, for several years now. Yoga and meditation are without a doubt a winning pair. While I personally think yoga is fantastic for a number of conditions, research also abounds to show that yoga is good for your health, from menopause to cancer to tension headache. Yoga has an uncanny ability to restore equilibrium between body and mind, in a way that makes you feel better right away. Although it is an Eastern practice, several millennia old, its current renaissance and endorsement by a growing number of medical and psychological practitioners in the western world, speak tons about its validity and beneficial effects for the modern, stressed-out body-mind.

IN SUM
I believe that, in summary, such a stressful time (starting from the day you decide to study for the exam, to when you actually schedule it, to the exam day) deserves the uttermost care and respect. You will be under Royal Stress, and will be up to you to defend yourself from its deleterious effects. Chronic stress and illness are also, unfortunately, a pair. The cascade of catecholamines and stress hormones inundating you at all times will throw you off balance in every sense, mental and physical, and it will be up to you to do something about it, to keep it in check. If you have diabetes (as an example), this will be all the more important, as glucocorticoids (stress hormones) will enhance glucose production in your bloodstream, which you will have to counteract effectively. If you tend to suffer from depression and anxiety already, keep in mind that the constantly circulating stress hormones will impact your mood, by affecting serotonergic, dopaminergic and adrenergic systems, hence by increasing mood swings, anxiety, as well as negatively impacting sleep and appetite, as in a vicious circle.

So ultimately, it is about balance. Physiology and mind go in pair. You go off balance, you may suffer. You keep in balance, you may enjoy good health and happiness. A concept that is not so easy to remember while studying for the EPPP, but worth shooting for. Your health and balance are in your hands. If you have family, theirs will be too. You know well how a person in a bad or stressed out mood can affect the rest of the family system. Do inform and involve your family members in the project, as it will be a family affair. They supported you during the years of grad school, they will support you now. And do not forget to keep a positive perspective on this last adventure before professional freedom. Do not, ever, become negative. Never think you will not pass. Not for a second. Keep a positive attitude, and stay with the course, just like you tell your clients!

And good luck to you!

**TIPS TO REDUCE ANXIETY BEFORE AND DURING THE TEST**

1) De-stress the mind (meditation, relaxation etc).
2) De-stress the body (yoga, exercise).

3) Eat healthy and light for better brain performance.

4) Be creative. Be creative. Be creative. Channel your creativity into an outlet, let it out!

5) Do not add extra stress to your life. Put commitments and extra efforts on a hold, if possible.

6) Enlist the help of family and friends to support you during this time.

7) Take breaks where you can JUST BE. No demands, no need to perform. Just Be.

8) Laugh and have fun, have a compassionate, non-attached attitude towards it all, and especially your own issues (they will come up)!

9) Have an alternate plan in case you do not pass this time. Even if you know you will. Rehearse it in your mind; write it down if it helps.

10) Know that, ultimately, this is really simply an exam, and will NOT make you any happier; it will simply make you more satisfied and able to proceed with your career. However it will not change your internal happiness one bit. That comes from different sources. Be in touch with those sources through solitary moments, meditation and time in nature.