

A young green plant with several long, thin leaves is growing out of dark, textured soil. The plant is positioned on the left side of the frame. The soil is dark brown and has a crumbly texture. The background is a blurred view of more soil and some distant greenery.

STRESS RESILIENCE

Turning Stress Into An Asset

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Introduction

While chronic stress definitely puts your health at risk, research does find that when you learn to manage stress in the right way, it can actually work for you. In fact, it can actually improve your performance, and your own resilience and strength.

UC Berkley reports research (Daniela Kaufer and Elizabeth Kirby, University Of California, Berkeley) reports that some stress is actually good for you. *“You always think about stress as a really bad thing, but it’s not,” said Daniela Kaufer, associate professor of integrative biology at the University of California, Berkeley. “Some amounts of stress are good to push you just to the level of optimal alertness, behavioral and cognitive performance.”*



Can stress really be constructive?

Stress Is Unavoidable, How We Use It Is Not

One thing is true, stress is unavoidable, and all of us will encounter it at home, at work and in our daily lives. The world is filled with chaos, change, uncertainty and a barrage of endless responsibilities.

Stress is inevitable, but how we perceive it and its effect on you is not.

Altering how you view stress can yield amazing results, especially in high demand jobs, athletic training, in school, when facing deadlines and other situations where a stressor typically causes panic.

Stress resilience and turning stress into an asset is all about how you use it.



Change Your Perspective

A stressor triggers a state of arousal in the body known as the “fight or flight” response, but how you interpret this state of arousal is all in your mind.

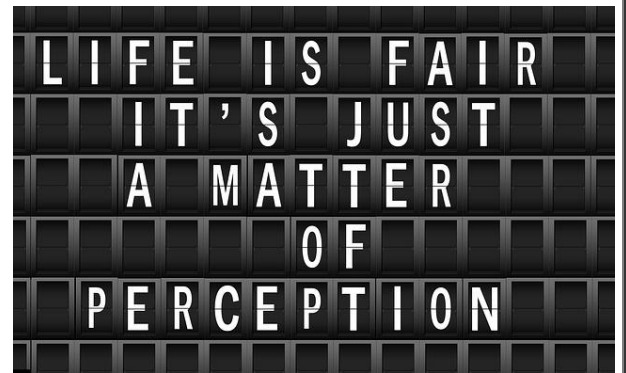
Worry and anxiety are the typical mental responses to stress, and this is where the problem lies.

It is not the stress that is our enemy, but how we perceive it.

Symptoms of the physiological response to stress, fight-or-flight, including increased heart rate breathing and blood pressure, muscle tension and a general state of arousal is often perceived as anxiety or intense worry, and this is what hinders performance.

However, worry and/or anxiety and arousal are not the same things.

When you learn to distinguish the difference between worry and anxiety and stress, you can use stress to your advantage.



Stress and the mental reaction we have to it are fueled by a skewed perception of events and circumstances. Deadlines, work demands, and even commuter traffic are beyond our control, but how we respond to them is not.

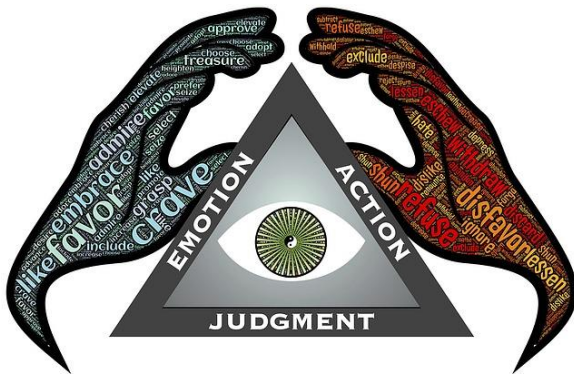
So, for example, if your drive home means sitting on a parking lot called the freeway, you can choose to get pissed, bang your hand on the steering wheel and cuss at all the drivers in the same situation as you OR you can realize that the traffic is not something you have any control over, but instead of elevating your stress and blood pressure by getting pissed off about it, you can spend that time relaxing in your car and listening to some music.

You can see how the latter instantly negates the stress of the traffic by changing your perspective; you regain control and use that situation for something that supports your wellbeing.

Changing your perspective also includes not engaging in “all or nothing” thinking or dwelling on broad sweeping statements such as “My life sucks” “Nothing ever works out for me.” This type of thinking further fuels the negative mental response we have to stressors, making for more stress.

Take The Challenge

The heightened reaction that is the body's response to stress can be a gift as it indicates just how much you care about the given situation or task at hand. After all, if you did not care, you would not worry or be anxious.



So rather than viewing a particular stressor as a disability or a threat, begin to see it as a challenge, which makes it an activating event, instead of a paralyzing one.

According to Daniela Kaufer, "I think intermittent stressful events are probably what keeps the brain more alert, and you perform better when you are alert."

Do you think professional athletes or great musicians achieved greatness without this power? Think again.

Years of endless hours of practice, facing and overcoming insurmountable challenges and overcoming stress is how they got to the top.

When you view worry and anxiety as an indicator you can then avoid the usual panic that comes with stress and use these emotions in constructive ways.

Take Advantage Of Pressure

Pressure can be your greatest asset or downfall! It can push you to perform at your best or fall flat on your face.

The truth is you can turn your mental reaction to stress and its pressure into the edge you need to succeed. You can learn to manage the adrenaline-fueled arousal of a stress event without panic.

Training yourself to use the aroused state of stress and properly channeled adrenaline to your advantage can really propel you forward, instead of paralyzing you and holding you back.

Being able to manage emotions, remain calm under pressure and turning stress into an asset has a direct link to performance. According to TalentSmart, 90% of top performers are good at controlling their emotions during stressful times and have the ability to remain calm and centered.

It may seem like a daunting task, but the way to use pressure to your advantage is to learn how to perform well under pressure. Begin by putting yourself under non game-changing pressure filled situations, and practice, practice, practice.

According to Justin Menkes, acclaimed author of *Better Under Pressure* and expert in the field of C-suite talent evaluation comments on Harvard Business Review, *"Aspiring leaders must be taught how to manage their stress in such a way that it actually increases their focus and clarity. They need to gain experience in stressful situations where they get an elevated — but not overwhelming — sense of adrenaline and are set up for success. Confidence under pressure can be built like a railroad track in the brain through exposure to repeated experiences over time."*



Interestingly enough, the US military uses stress inoculation training in order to ensure optimal performance under high levels of stress and duress, of course, military service men, and women are certainly put under some of the most stressful situations one can image.

Consider those situations that make you feel stressed the most. If you fear public speaking, then set up mock speeches with family and friends and practice. There are also services that create such opportunities and teach people to overcome fear of public speaking.

Menkes advises that there are various exercise that can develop stress resilience and using stress to your advantage, such as memorizing a poem or a long list of something and then reciting it in front of friends or family. He points out that asking them to poke fun at any mistakes you make is also helpful, which teaches you and facilitates the opportunity to work through added pressure and perform well regardless.



Set up experiments that create discomfort, even chaos and find your way through, for example instead of following your usual predictable and comfortable schedule, turn it upside down, and then problem solve as needed.

On the weekend, create multiple difficult goals with a time limit, such as running errands, mowing the lawn and doing something with your family, stick to a strict deadline, make yourself accountable.

Envision possible high-pressure scenarios at work, (if you are not facing real ones) and brainstorm how you would work through them.

According to Menkes, *“While it is a noisemaker in the untrained mind, when channeled properly adrenaline can help people accomplish things that they never would have imagined possible. The ability to make adrenaline a friend is a necessity for executives in today’s environment of ongoing duress. Not surprisingly, it’s also a hallmark of the world’s best CEOs.”*

Begin to see and use pressure, as an asset, and it will bring you many opportunities to excel.

Harness The Power Of Control And Letting Go

So many of us spend futile time and energy trying to change those things we cannot, instead of putting energy towards changing what we can. Stress resilience involves making this distinction.

Far too many people suffer from undue and unnecessary stress loads that stem from things that they cannot change, which brings with it a lot of worry and anxiety.

Take the example of traffic, how many times have you sat there, beating your hand on the steering wheel, fuming because you were stuck on the freeway?



Futile? Yes! Helpful? No!

All this does is raises your stress level and puts you into a frenzy over something you have no control over.

Let go of things you cannot control and focus on those you can.

Exercise

To gain awareness into what is controllable and what is not in your own life, try this exercise.

1. Draw a large box on a piece of paper and draw a line down the middle
2. On the left side list all the things **that cause you stress that you *can* control**
3. On the right list all those things **that cause you stress you *cannot* control**

Besides giving you awareness in making this key distinction, this exercise allows you to practice making the distinction itself, classify stressors, and identify those causes of stress that you can affect.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Focusing on what you can control and letting go of that which you cannot

THINGS I CAN CONTROL

My attitude, feelings, thoughts and actions
My job choice
My performance at work
My own self-awareness
How I spend money
How I deal with stress
The relationships I engage in
Future and present choices I make
How I interpret situations
How I learn from my mistakes
How I handle difficulties
How I deal with people
Staying calm
Goal planning/Goal fulfillment
My optimism
How hard I work
How much I like myself
My positive thinking skills
How well I prepare for challenges
How I handle myself
How many risks I take
How honest I am
How seriously I take my commitments
My communication skills
The clutter around me
Taking steps to reduce risks for disease
How I deal with life on life's terms

THINGS I CAN'T CONTROL

People or what they do, say, think and feel
My boss or his/her attitude
What happens around me
How much things cost
Stress
My partner - what he/she thinks, feels or says
People's expectations
What people think about me
Whether people like me
Past choices
The weather or natural disasters
Traffic
The past
The future
Other people's choices
Who is in my family
Growing old
Dying
Disease
Life in general

Stress Offers Opportunities To Learn, Grow and Improve

When things in life are calm, comfy and cozy, we rarely learn much of anything or grow as people.

Adversity creates opportunities for growth. When we begin to see those opportunities as gifts, and appreciate them, they will bring the greatest rewards.

Mastering the art of working under pressure and turning stress into an asset provides you with ample opportunities to learn and develop key skills that will not only help you at work, but in all other areas of your life.



When you begin to use pressure to your advantage and take control over stress instead of letting it control you and put you into panic mode, you will be rewarded.

- You can see just how much you are capable of achieving.
- You will gain pride in being able to overcome the difficulties you faced, and do a great job regardless.
- It will show you that you have the strength and commitment to face anything, and you will grow as a person.
- You can learn and develop the skill of assessing situations as to what is important and what tasks take priority
- You can learn to identify what you can and cannot control or change
- You can harness and develop the skill of “mind over matter”
- You can learn time management skills
- You can learn how not to panic no matter what occurs
- You can learn how to control your emotions
- You gain resiliency

- You can learn to manage fears, frustration, and anxiety
- You can learn to take action instead of wallowing in panic, anxiety of worry
- You can learn to restructure your thoughts, perceptions, and mindset
- You can perfect the art of working efficiently under a clock
- You can learn to be in charge instead of being a victim of life's circumstances
- You can raise the bar on your tolerance that will allow you to see how the many little things in life that used to be key sources of stress and worry are inconsequential
- You can gain awareness into areas of personal weakness so you can work on improving
- You can master the art of turning stress into an asset



Key Take Aways

- A stressor triggers a state of arousal in the body known as the “fight or flight” response, but how you interpret this state of arousal is all in your mind. Stress is not the enemy, but how we perceive it.
- Worry and anxiety are the typical mental responses to stress, when you learn to distinguish the difference between worry and anxiety and stress, you can use stress to your advantage.
- Consider stress an indicator to take action about something you care about
- Rather than viewing a particular stressor as a disability or a threat, begin to see it as a challenge, which makes it an activating event, instead of a paralyzing one.
- You can turn stress and its pressure into the edge you need to succeed and manage the adrenaline-fueled arousal of a stress event without panic.
- Let go of things you cannot control and focus on those you can.
- Adversity creates opportunities for growth, seeing these opportunities as gifts, and appreciating them, brings the greatest rewards.
- Focus on the task at hand and not on the emotions
- Mastering the art of working under pressure and turning stress into an asset provides you with ample opportunities to learn and develop key skills that will not only help you at work, but in all other areas of your life.