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Turning Stress into an Asset

8:40 AM Tuesday June 28, 2011

by Amy Gallo | [Comments \(20\)](#)

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You constantly hear how bad stress is for you: it's damaging your health, jeopardizing your relationships, and hurting your performance. While these risks are real, [recent research](#) is showing that work strain, when managed correctly, can actually have a positive impact on productivity and performance. So how can you take the stress you thought was killing you and make it constructive?

What the Experts Say

Stress is unavoidable. "We live in a world of ongoing worry, change, and uncertainty. You have to get used to it," says Justin Menkes, an expert in the field of C-suite talent evaluation and the author of *Better Under Pressure: How Great Leaders Bring Out the Best in Themselves and Others*.

"Stress is an inevitable part of work and life, but the effect of stress upon us is far from inevitable," says Shawn Achor, an expert in positive psychology and the founder of *Good Think, Inc.* Both Achor and Menkes agree that altering your approach to stress can yield positive effects. "Stress can be good or bad depending on how you use it," says Achor. In fact, how you manage pressures can distinguish you as a leader and give you a career advantage. Here are five principles to follow.

1. Recognize worry for what it is

"When you hear about stress being unhealthy it is so often because people aren't getting to a place where they are seeing worry for what it is: a feeling," says Menkes. The heightened reaction — tension in the body, heart racing — is an indicator of how much you care about the task you are about to do. In fact, according to Menkes, how much stress you feel is directly correlated to the importance of the activity. "If it didn't matter, you wouldn't worry," he says. Once you understand worry as an indicator rather than a symptom of dysfunction or a cause for panic, you can react to it more rationally. Plus, remember that stress is not unending. "Feelings by definition are fleeting. They feel like they will be eternal but just give it five minutes," says Menkes.

2. Then, reframe the stress

Once you've recognized what worry is, you then need to adjust your mindset. Achor's research shows that how you view stress determines its effect on you. "Our brains work much better at positive than at negative, neutral, or stressed," he says. When you are negative and worried, your brain goes into "fight or flight" mode, which limits your ability to think. If you are positive and concerned, then your brain turns to "broaden and build" thinking which allows you to process more possibilities. Which direction you go in is up to you. "When people have a stress in their life, they can attempt to see it as

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a challenge, instead of a threat," says Achor. This mental shift will allow the feeling to be activating rather than paralyzing.

3. Focus on what you can control

One of the most positive things you can do when faced with worry or anxiety is to remember what you can affect and what you can't. Far too many people spend time feeling bad about things they simply can't change. In Achor's book, *The Happiness Advantage*, he outlines an exercise he calls the Island Experiment. He suggests you write out a list of stresses and put them into two circles, "islands." One island holds the things you can control. The other is for the things you can't. Ignore that second island and choose a single concrete action to take in the first. This will begin to solve the stress and move you toward your goal.

4. Create a network of support

Knowing that you have somebody to turn to can help a lot. "It's important to have that outlet so you know you can freak the heck out if you need to," says Menkes. You may not use this option, but it can be comforting to know it's there. Build supportive relationships when you're not stressed. Menkes encourages you to "put in the effort and build the emotional deposit" so you can cash it in when and if required. The company you keep also makes a difference. "Surround yourself with people who do not complain or ruminate upon things they can't change," says Achor.

5. Get some stress-handling experience

According to Menkes, the best way to learn to handle stress is through practice. "If the body is not used to stress and you experience it, you'll panic and it becomes a vicious cycle that needs to be broken," says Menkes. He often sees this in younger people: "They have more intense reactivity than older people. It's not only a function of hormones but it's a function of experience." Don't wait for a dire situation to try out these techniques. "Think about ways you can put yourself in non-game-changing, but pressured, situations. Pressure and fear are good because it means you are stretching," says Menkes. For example, if public speaking is nerve-wracking for you, he suggests you sign up for [Toastmasters](#) and try out your skills in a contained setting. Set up experiments in which you feel stress, but can manage it.

Principles to Remember

Do:

- Think of stress as an indicator that you care about something, rather than a cause for panic
- Focus on the task, rather than the emotion
- Build relationships so that you have people to turn to in times of stress

Don't:

- Assume your stress is going to last forever
- Worry about things that are out of your control
- Spend time with people who are negative

Case study #1: Focus on what matters most

Eric Loucks, an assistant professor at Brown University's Department of Community Health, was awake at 2:00 am worried about how he was spending his time. Like most academics in his field, his job has two primary functions: research and teaching. To fund his research — and his salary — he has to secure grants. The pressure to win grants is particularly high, especially since only 8% of applicants for federal medical research monies receive funding.

On this particular night, Eric had two grant deadlines fast approaching and was feeling anxious about how little attention he was giving to his students and colleagues. He had been working hard toward the deadlines, which left little time or energy for mentoring students, collaborating with colleagues, or any of the other duties that make up the other half of his job.

Lying in bed, he started thinking about everything he was unable to do and the people he felt he was letting down. "I simply don't have enough time in the day to do what would be ideal," he says. But he recognized that sitting up at 2:00am was not a good use of his time. One way that Eric handles stress is to practice meditation. That night, he used an approach described by [Thich Nhat Hanh](#), a Buddhist Zen master. First, Eric named the emotion. He recognized that the stress was a result of feeling that he wasn't supporting his students and fellow professors. He then gave it his attention. "The hardest thing to do is sit with the feeling for more than ten seconds," he says. But by holding his focus on it he was able to see that in dedicating time to the grants, he was also supporting others: his students,

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collaborators, and family. "I am trying to discover novel things that influence our health to help society," he says. While it was hard to feel the stress, it helped him see what matters most.

Then he was able to take a step back and look at the stress and ask himself, What is the next best step? "All I can do is prioritize the most important thing at the moment," he says. He told himself that he would focus on the grants, since the deadlines were looming. He would get back to his students and colleagues when he was finished, which was in just two days. For Eric, the stress was a surface feeling and a deeper more fundamental issue was underneath: feeling he was letting people down. When he was able to get to that issue, he felt more equipped to solve it.

Case study #2: Know what you can change, and what you can't

A few years back, Gustavo Osorio, a veterinarian and product manager in animal health, was given an opportunity. His boss had left the multinational company they worked for in Mexico City and Gustavo was temporarily put in charge of strategy for his business unit. His boss had been a strong leader and shielded Gustavo and the rest of the team from any problems he faced from above. This meant that Gustavo was seeing many of the pressures and stresses at the corporate level for the first time.

While honored to have the temporary promotion, Gustavo was under an immense amount of stress. He was doing many tasks that he had never done before while trying to prove he could handle the new work. He knew that the pressure was getting to him and sometimes he was not able to live up to expectations. "I made it difficult for the team to follow me at times," he says. He relied on certain people in his life to put the stress into perspective, talking regularly with a couple of close friends, including a co-worker on his team. "My wife and family also played an important role because they allowed me to vent my worries and frustrations, mostly by listening and offering unbiased advice," he says. One of the ways he relieved the immediate stress was by sticking to a regular workout routine, even though he was working long hours. He often got up at 5:30am to run eight to ten kilometers.

He was able to use the strain to his advantage in the long run. "I think the stress I felt made me work beyond what I thought I was capable of," he says. After some time in the new position, he was also able to more clearly identify which circumstances he could influence. "I learned to focus on the most important things and stop worrying about those things I couldn't change. I developed ways to quickly assess situations, classify them into important and non-important, and respond accordingly."

Eventually the company brought in a new business unit manager. While Gustavo's hopes of a permanent promotion were not realized, the experience allowed him to see his strengths and weaknesses more clearly and develop a more productive approach to stress. "I'm now on a path to being a better leader," he says.



AMY GALLO
Amy Gallo is a contributing editor at *Harvard Business Review*. Follow her on Twitter at [@amyegallo](#).

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Cedricj 1 month ago

Great article. One of the downsides of living in a 'I want it yesterday' environment' is that we forget that the brain requires times of rest in order to tap into the creative unconscious. So many times the problems that perplex us are solved in those 'down' times. If there were no pauses between musical notes we would have nothing but noise. Whether stress is 'good' or 'bad' we always need those stress free moments to function at our best.

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cedricj.wordpress.com

 Cedric B Johnson, Ph.D and 10 more liked this Like Reply

 Amy Gallo 1 month ago in reply to Cedricj

"If there were no pauses between musical notes we would have nothing but noise." - a wonderful argument for quiet and moments of rest. Thank you for your comment.

 bytz and 7 more liked this Like Reply

 Jamie Matthewman 1 month ago

Stress is simply a thought - it is always the thought that causes the stress. When you understand this truth and don't get caught up in your thinking, instead simply notice it for what it is without judgement, stress becomes easier to deal with. Although thinking is habitual, so it can take time in my experience for this insight to really be appreciated! Stress is an indicator it is time to slow down, to get back to this moment that's all. It is never caused by anything external, it is always caused by your thinking about your thinking!

3 people liked this. Like Reply


 AVS 3 weeks ago in reply to Jamie Matthewman

Perfectly right.
This thinking has to be avoided by awakening our inner power hidden in our sacrum bone.
'Sahaja Yoga' makes this possible with new dimension.

Like Reply

 Iorga Madalina 4 weeks ago

It is indeed an interesting article. In fact, the idea that stress is not genuinely good nor bad was highlighted from the very beginning by Hans Seyle, one of the promoters of the concept, who distinguished between eustress (defined as the optimum amount of strain that can lead to positive outcomes, such as high motivation, professional development) and distress (meaning too much strain or, on the contrary, insufficient challenges in the workplace). In the same time, irrespective of the theory used in describing the construct, stress was generally acknowledged as depending on peoples' perception of the experience. Therefore, mindfulness is the key towards transforming stress in an organizational asset, since no awareness, no strain! And, I would continue, no strain, no motivation!

 Jeremiah Stanghini liked this Like Reply

 Jeremiah Stanghini 3 weeks ago in reply to Iorga Madalina

When I saw the title of this HBR post, I thought for sure the author was going to write about eustress. I was surprised when I got to the end and there was no mention of the concept. Thanks for mentioning this concept well before I could get to the post to do so myself. :-)

With Love and Gratitude,

Jeremiah

Like Reply

 Bibek Singh 6 days ago

Very nice article...forwarded to 75 Toastmasters !

Like Reply

 Paul Regulagadda 1 week ago

Very good read, already recommended to couple of my friends. :)

Like Reply



David Lapin 1 week ago

Great and helpful article, thank you! I like to think of the difference between stress and tension. Stress in a violin string can cause it to snap. But without tension in the strings, there cannot be music. The music of life is no different.

David Lapin
Author: Lead By Greatness
<http://LeadByGreatness.com>

Like Reply



Bharat 2 weeks ago

stress arises when one can not live up to the expectation set by other or one can not live up the expectation in form dream may career goal something of that sort. That is when people started to loose focus think negatively and at last give up. Instead of that if we focus on the cause of stress and try to resolve it taking small steps it's slowly ease away and we regain the confidence to move forward

Like Reply



Beverlyne Asiko 3 weeks ago

Such wonderful,encouraging words are always timely as the greatness of any task ahead of us will always be an indicator of the level of stress we will experience.
Beverlyne Asiko

Like Reply



fermata 4 weeks ago

Great article, great advice. What if my manager is the one who's highly negative? I can't exactly avoid her, but I find her attitude completely demotivating and stressful. I generate enough anxiety on my own without her snippy comments about how crappy the project is that she just assigned or how impossible the client is that I'm about to start working with.

Like Reply



V P Kochikar 4 weeks ago

Amy, these are great tips on how to see stress as constructive. Jose also raises an interesting point - I'd say stress is a function of the expectations we have of ourselves (and often, high stress is a concomitant of high expectations!).

However, scaling down high expectations to reduce stress would be throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

A more constructive approach would be to first devote explicit thought to *why* the high expectations are leading to high stress (for example, a person who wants to earn an Ivy League law degree may lack the funds, or the grades to acquire that degree). Then, work to dissolve or sidestep that hurdle (for example, the law school may be willing to part-fund or lower its entry criteria for applicants with certain kinds of experience. Acquiring that work experience may also help build a savings buffer that will ameliorate the funding problem).

This approach uses stress as an asset because analyzing the stress helps propel one to find ways to achieve their expectations.

Like Reply



Anamika Garg 4 weeks ago

Nice case study example...I think 'Stress' is just a word like 'Values'...Values gives power to differentiate Among good & bad practices, while Stress is something which can be used & applied as bad or good practice...& if used with a correct approach..it can bring wonders to your efficiency & productivity in work life..

Like Reply



Anamika Garg 4 weeks ago

It's an interesting Case study example..

Like Reply



Laowai Blog 4 weeks ago

Really interesting article. One can consider China as an example of how stress can damage a nation as a whole: Children in China study for 10-12 hours every day including weekends, and they also do not have any brothers or sisters to play with. This stressful environment for them creates a nation of very stressful people. You are welcome to read more here: <http://laowaiblog.com/running-...>

Like Reply



David Kaiser 1 month ago

Great article. I think I have heard of a moderate amount of stress that motivates us to do better as "eu-stress." Great point about reframing the meaning of stress, and focusing upon accepting what you do, and do not have control on, in order to focus upon doing the best you can with the tasks you do have control over. Really, that's all you can do, you can't do it all, and trying will only burn you out, but there is plenty of time to do the things that really matter and bring in the desired results.

David Kaiser, PhD
Time Management Coach to C-Level Consultants
www.DarkMatterConsulting.com

Like Reply



Jose Pin 1 month ago

Very interesting article on a recurring current topic. Would love to see a complimentary article on how to deal with self imposed stressed produced by the desire of performing better and acquiring more responsibilities

Like Reply



Atif Masood Chaudhry 1 month ago

Wonderful article
Keep it up Amy Gallo

Like Reply



Chris P Peters 1 month ago

Thanks for sharing - Great words of wisdom & personally, very timely.

Like Reply

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