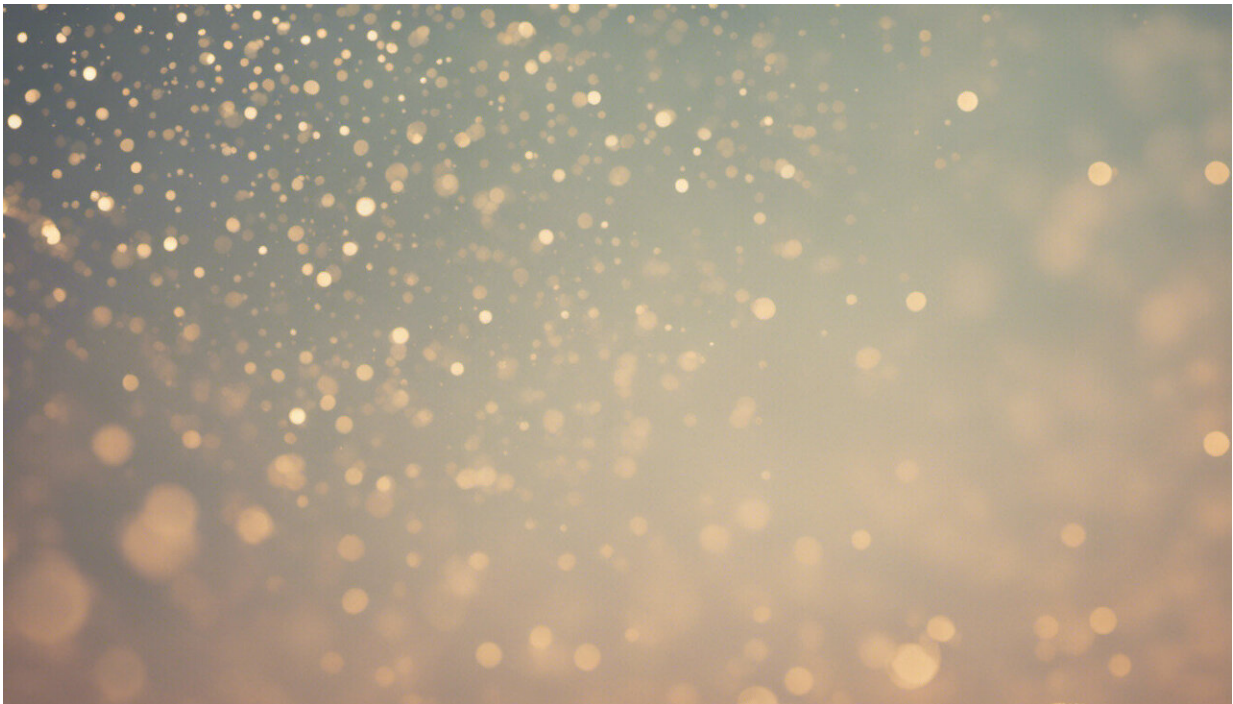


Embracing stress is more important than reducing stress, psychologist says

May 8 2015, by Clifton B. Parker



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

If people actually embrace the concept of stress, it can make them stronger, smarter and happier, a Stanford expert says.

"Stress isn't always harmful," said Kelly McGonigal, a business school lecturer at Stanford and program developer for the Stanford Center for

Compassion and Altruism Research and Education. "Once you appreciate that going through stress makes you better at it, it can be easier to face each new challenge."

The Stanford News Service interviewed McGonigal, who recently published a new book, "[The Upside of Stress](#)," on the subject.

How can one cultivate a mindset to embrace stress?

The initial research on stress mindsets, which was conducted by Stanford psychology Assistant Professor Alia Crum, showed that viewing stress as a helpful part of life, rather than as harmful, is associated with better health, emotional well-being and productivity at work – even during periods of high stress.

One reason that how you think about stress matters is because it changes how you respond to stress. Viewing stress as harmful leads people to cope in ways that are less helpful, whether it's getting drunk to "release" stress, procrastinating to avoid stress, or imagining worst-case scenarios. One study found that simply having the goal to avoid stress increased the long-term risk of outcomes like depression, divorce and getting fired, by increasing people's reliance on harmful coping strategies.

In contrast, viewing stress more positively seems to encourage people to cope in ways that help them thrive, whether it's tackling the source of stress, seeking social support or finding meaning in it.

So should we just tell ourselves that stress is good for us?

In the course of researching the book and leading my own stress mindset interventions, I've discovered that the most helpful mindset toward stress

goes beyond a generally positive attitude toward stress. The three most protective beliefs about stress are: 1) to view your body's [stress response](#) as helpful, not debilitating – for example, to view stress as energy you can use; 2) to view yourself as able to handle, and even learn and grow from, the stress in your life; and 3) to view stress as something that everyone deals with, and not something that proves how uniquely screwed up you or your life is.

The emerging science on stress mindsets shows that it is possible to change all of these attitudes, even if we are used to thinking of stress as harmful. For example, when you feel your heart pounding from anxiety, you think about how your body is trying to give you the energy you need to rise to the challenge. More importantly, changing any one of these attitudes can help you thrive in the face of ordinary stress as well as chronic or even [traumatic stress](#).

When is stress bad?

There is a reason stress has a bad reputation, and part of it is the evidence that chronic and traumatic stress can increase the risk of illness, depression and early mortality, among other things.

Choosing to see the upside of stress isn't about denying the fact that stress can be harmful. It's about trying to balance your mindset so that you feel less overwhelmed and hopeless about the fact that your life is stressful. We rarely get to choose the stress in our lives, and it isn't realistic to think we can avoid stress. Given that life is going to be stressful, what do you gain by focusing on the fear that the reality of your life is killing you?

Psychologists have found that the ability to embrace stress requires a high tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. You have to be able to understand that two seemingly opposite things can be true at the same

time. It can be true that going through something stressful can make you sick or depressed, and it can also be true that the same stressful experience can ultimately make you stronger, more compassionate and more resilient over time.

When facing a difficult or stressful situation, what should people do?

Stress is most likely to be harmful when the following conditions are present: it feels against your will, out of your control and utterly devoid of meaning. If you can change any of these conditions – by finding some meaning in it – you can reduce the harmful effects of stress.

The relationship between stress and meaning can be very helpful to understand. A 2013 study asked a broad national sample of adults in the U.S to rate how much they agreed with the statement, Taking all things together, I feel my life is meaningful. The researchers then looked at what distinguished people who strongly agreed with the statement from those who did not. Surprisingly, every measure of stress that the researchers asked about predicted a greater sense of meaning in life. People who had experienced the highest number of stressful life events in the past were most likely to consider their lives meaningful. People who said they were under a lot of stress right now also rated their lives as more meaningful. Even time spent worrying about the future was associated with meaning.

One of the researchers' main conclusions from this study is, "People with very meaningful lives worry more and have more stress than people with less meaningful lives."

Rather than being a sign that something is wrong with your [life](#), feeling stressed can be a barometer for how engaged you are in activities and

relationships that are personally meaningful.

Any other tips for dealing with stress?

One simple mindset reset that can help us face and find the good in the stress in our lives is to view it as an opportunity to learn and grow. The ability to learn from stress is built into the basic biology of the stress response. For several hours after you have a strong stress response, the brain is rewiring itself to remember and learn from the experience. Stress leaves an imprint on your brain that prepares you to handle similar stress the next time you encounter it. Psychologists call the process of learning and growing from a difficult experience stress inoculation. Going through the experience gives your brain and body a stress vaccine.

This is why putting people through practice stress is a key training technique for NASA astronauts, emergency responders, elite athletes and others who have to thrive under high levels of [stress](#).

Provided by Stanford University

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