

Seven ways to have a healthier relationship with stress

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Credit: UC Berkeley Greater Good Science Center

Are you suffering from chronic stress? Many of us are—whether we're stressed out by our jobs, complicated relationships, caregiving responsibilities, or the general state of the world.

That's where Elissa Epel's new book, "[The Stress Prescription](#)," comes in. A health psychologist and director of the Aging, Metabolism, and

Emotions Center at the University of California, San Francisco, Epel explains how [stress](#) affects our bodies and minds—including our health, happiness, and longevity—and how to manage it in the best way possible.

Too many of us are in a constant state of alertness, she argues, which makes us ill-prepared to navigate the everyday stressors and bigger upsets that occur when living a full life. We may think we're relaxed, but we're actually maintaining a low-level vigilance that's hard on our bodies. Constant physiological strain can shorten our telomeres (the caps at the ends of our DNA that protect it from aging)—a process she wrote about in her bestselling book, "The Telomere Effect."

Epel emphasizes that not all stress is inherently bad—and that we shouldn't aim for a stress-free life. We need our physiological stress response to survive, as it can come in handy when we're gearing up to perform or facing an actual life-or-death threat.

"Anything worth doing will have aspects of stress woven through: challenge, discomfort, risk. We can't change that. But what we can change is our response," she says.

If we can learn how to handle stress better and build up stress resilience, we're more likely to thrive, she argues. To do that, she recommends seven guidelines and offers specific practices to get us there.

Embrace uncertainty

Life is uncertain, and things will not always go according to plan. But, if we get better at tolerating uncertainty, it can lead to less stress, as well as other good things—like being able to trust others, collaborate, and cooperate more.

Tolerating uncertainty means not always having rigid expectations of the future. "Strong expectations can hurt us whether they're positive (something we're looking forward to) or negative (something we're dreading). Better to loosen our expectations as much as we can," says Epel.

One way to do that, she says, is to practice [mindfulness meditation](#), which keeps you focused on the present and prevents ruminating too much on what unknowable thing might happen. While you'd be forgiven for thinking it's better to anticipate disasters so that you're prepared for them, she argues against that approach. Anticipating the worst leads to spikes of cortisol that are harmful to your health—and result in no better response to stress than not anticipating it.

Don't fret about what you can't control

Like the old adage goes, when things go wrong, it's good to recognize what's in your control and what isn't—and then focus your attention on changing what's under your control. For example, if your spouse suddenly becomes incapacitated, and you're called upon to become a caregiver—a huge stressor for most people—it's better to accept reality, manage what you can, and let go of the rest.

This may not sound easy. But with reflection, says Epel, you might find that many things you ruminate about—what others think of you, a potential illness or diagnosis, the outcome of an election—are not under your control, making worry needless and even problematic. Once you realize this, you can focus on accepting what's not controllable and making better choices about how to handle stressors actually under your control. That might mean letting go of superfluous activities, taking breaks in your busy life for some restful breathing, or practicing self-compassion.

Harness the body's stress response to meet challenges

Our bodies are well designed to enter into fight-or-flight mode when we are under threat or facing difficulties. But the physical effects of stress depend on our attitude—whether we see it as a bad thing or recognize the positive, energizing elements of that mode. When we see the benefits of stress, we actually show a healthier stress response in our bodies—which can help us overcome challenges.

"When we focus on the benefits of stress, we feel less stress about stress, pay attention to positive cues rather than threatening cues, and approach situations more confidently rather than avoid them," writes Epel.

This kind of reframe can be helpful for accepting our mistakes along the way when we try new things. Knowing that failure, challenge, and stress can be an important part of reaching our goals can help us to take them less to heart—and prevent us from giving up too soon.

How to do it? Reframed statements around stress—like saying, "This is exciting! I can appreciate this feeling" as opposed to "This is so stressful. I hate this feeling."—have been found over many studies to reduce our negative feelings about stress.

Train your cells to metabolize stress better

Chronic stress is never good for us. But getting an occasional shot of high stress that our bodies can tolerate and easily recover from—something Epel calls "hormetic stress"—is actually good for us. It builds resilience at the cellular level and makes us better prepared to handle future, unexpected stressors.

While all exercise is good for managing stress and improving our health,

Epel recommends [high-intensity interval training](#) (HIIT), which gives you the most bang for your buck. HIIT involves short bursts of high-intensity exercise followed by a [recovery period](#), and it has become very popular for people who have less time to exercise.

For those who can't do HIIT, there are other ways to expose our cells to short bursts of stress, such as taking a cold shower or using a sauna. Though the research is relatively new, Epel provides some evidence that both of these can increase stress resilience and lead to better health, too (though you might want to check with a doctor before trying them out).

Use nature to recalibrate

There is ample evidence that spending time in nature reduces stress and improves well-being. Epel argues that "exposure to nature, in all forms and contexts, is one of the most powerful and immediate ways to reduce stress."

Being in [green spaces](#) allows us to experience "attention restoration"—a kind of recovery from the stress of cognitive overload and constant stimulation that many people experience in their everyday lives. Experiencing nature can also produce feelings of awe, which, in turn, reduce stress—along with a host of other benefits. If you don't have easy access to the woods or an urban park, take heart. Even looking out at the night sky or watching nature videos can be calming.

Practice deep rest

We all need to relax in order to reduce stress in our lives. But, says Epel, we also need to find moments of deep relaxation where we experience "protected, tech-free, rest-focused downtime for ourselves." This kind of deep rest is different from what we typically think of as "relaxing"—like

lounging on a couch and watching TV or walking our dog at night. It's more about the kind of experience you might have on a meditation retreat, where you practice letting go of all responsibility and just being.

Of course, sleeping or napping are ways we can get that kind of rest—if we're good at them, which many of us aren't. But there are other things we can do, too. Epel suggests specific deep breathing exercises, which is something under our control that can quickly put us into a relaxed state—and has all kinds of benefits for our physiology.

Find moments of joy in your life

When we feel happy, we tend not to feel so stressed out. So, says Epel, it's important to cultivate more moments of joy in our lives—especially moments of purpose and meaning. "The science of happiness and joy is pretty clear: It's good for the mind, good for the body, good for stress resilience," she says.

While chasing happiness can actually hurt your well-being if you get too obsessive, you can simply turn your mind toward noticing the positive. One practice she suggests (which I took to heart, personally) is changing the way you wake up and go to bed at night. Rather than startling awake and immediately thinking about all you need to get done, she suggests taking a moment to imagine what you're looking forward to that day. Similarly, before going to sleep at night, you can recount the happiest parts of your day and what you're grateful for.

"Happiness and gratitude give us that reserve capacity, the charge to our battery," she writes. "They give us the resources to zoom out, take a healthy perspective, see the challenge, stay flexible, and be resilient."

While some of these tips for managing stress may be familiar to you, it's definitely helpful to have them all in one place. Thankfully, the book is

short and easy to read, yet still chock full of research—as well as ideas on how to make the findings work for you, personally. By following Epel's prescription, you are bound to increase your resilience to stress—and be happier and healthier for it.

Provided by University of California

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