

The Stress Response Helps You Rise to the Challenge, Connect with Others, and Learn and Grow

How the stress response helps you

Rise to the Challenge

- Focuses your attention
- Heightens your senses
- Increases motivation
- Mobilizes energy

Connect with Others

- Activates prosocial instincts
- Encourages social connection
- Enhances social cognition
- Dampens fear and increases courage

Learn and Grow

- Restores nervous system balance
- Processes and integrates the experience
- Helps the brain learn and grow

How you know it's happening

You notice your heart pounding, your body sweating, or your breath quickening. You are mentally focused on the source of stress. You feel excited, energized, anxious, restless, or ready for action.

You want to be near friends or family. You notice yourself paying more attention to others, or are more sensitive to others' emotions. You feel a desire to protect, support, or defend the people, organizations, or values you care about.

Even though your body is calming down, you still feel mentally charged. You replay or analyze the experience in your mind, or want to talk to others about it. A mix of emotions are usually present, along with a desire to make sense of what happened.

Rethink Stress: Rethink Your Stress Response

Bring to mind a recent experience that you would describe as stressful. Maybe it's an argument you had, a problem you faced at work, or a health scare. Then read the summary chart "The Stress Response Helps You Rise to the Challenge, Connect with Others, and Learn and Grow." Take a moment to consider which aspects of the stress response were present during or after your stressful experience. Did your body try to give you more energy? How do you know this - what sensations did you feel in your body? Did you seek out social contact or support? What did the impulse to connect feel like? Were you motivated to act or to protect or defend someone or something you care about? How did that motivation express itself? Did you replay the incident in your mind after it was over or talk to someone about it? What emotion, were present afterward – or perhaps now as you think about the experience? Take a few moments to describe, in writing, what you felt.

Before, you might have viewed the sweaty palms, need for moral support, or rumination afterward as excessive stress "symptoms." Maybe you saw them as signs that you weren't handling stress well. Can you choose to rethink these same symptoms as signs that your body and brain are helping you cope? If there is one part of your stress response that you particularly dislike or mistrust, consider what role it might play in helping you protect yourself, rise to a challenge, connect with others, or learn and grow. Take a few more moments to write about your experience from this, point of view.

Rethink Stress: What Brings Meaning to Your Life?

Take a few moments to list your most meaningful roles, relationships, activities, or goals. In what parts of your life are you most likely to experience joy, love, laughter, learning, or a sense of purpose? When you have listed a few, ask yourself this: Would you also describe any of them as sometimes or frequently stressful?

We often imagine how ideal it would be to get rid of the stress we experience at home, at work, and in pursuit of our goals. But that isn't a realistic possibility. We don't get to choose between a stress-*full* or a stress-*free* experience of family, work, community, love, learning, or health. If there is something in your life that is both meaningful and causing you a great deal of stress, take a few moments to write about *why* this role, relationship, activity, or goal is so important to you. You might also consider writing about what life would be like if you suddenly lost this source of meaning. How would you feel about the loss? Would you want it back in your life?

Rethink Stress: What Are Your Values?

The list of values below is not exhaustive, but it's designed to get you thinking about your own. Which values on the list are most important to you? Pick your top three, and if something comes to mind that is not on this list, write it down.

Acceptance	Fairness	Love
Accountability	Faith/Religion	Loyalty
Adventure	Family	Mindfulness
Art or Music	Freedom	Nature
Athletics	Friendship	Openness
Celebration	Fun	Patience
Challenge	Generosity	Peace/Nonviolence
Collaboration	Gratitude	Personal Growth
Commitment	Happiness	Pets/Animals
Community	Hard Work	Politics
Compassion	Harmony	Positive Influence
Competence	Health	Practicality
Cooperation	Helping Others	Problem-Solving
Courage	Honesty	Reliability
Creativity	Honor	Resourcefulness
Curiosity	Humor	Self-Compassion
Discipline	Independence	Self-Reliance
Discovery	Innovation	Simplicity/Thrift
Efficiency	Integrity	Strength
Enthusiasm	Interdependence	Tradition
Equality	Joy	Trust
Ethical Action	Leadership	Willingness
Excellence	Lifelong Learning	Wisdom

Rethink Stress and Transform Stress exercises copied from “The Upside of Stress: Why Stress is Good for You and How to Get Good At It” by Kelly, McGonigal, PhD (Penguin Random House, New York, 2016).

Once you've chosen three values as personally meaningful, pick one and write about it for ten minutes. Describe why this value is important to you. You could also write about how you express this value in your everyday life, including what you did today. If you are facing a difficult decision, you could write about how this value might guide you.

These ten minutes can change how you relate to the stress in your life, even if you don't write about anything that is currently stressful. You may want to repeat this exercise with the other two important values at another sitting, or revisit this exercise when you are feeling especially overwhelmed by stress.

Students sometimes tell me they struggle with choosing a value for this exercise-either they aren't sure how to identify their own values or they have difficulty narrowing it down to one. Keep in mind that values reflect what you care about. For this exercise, you are simply expressing what feels important and meaningful to you right now. It can be an attitude, a personal strength, a priority, or even a community you care about. It can be what you would like to experience in life or what you would like to share with others. It could be a principle you would like to use to make important life decisions.

For this exercise, it doesn't matter if you are "good" at a value, or if other people will understand why it is important to you. A value can be something that comes naturally to you or something that you would like to develop in yourself. For example, one of my students initially found this exercise uninspiring because she had picked competence – something that other people valued in her but that she didn't connect with emotionally. In fact, it was something she felt that other people expected of her, but that she herself resented. When I mentioned that she could choose something she aspired to, she realized that she wanted to cultivate greater acceptance, even though it was incredibly difficult for her.

Transform Stress: Turn a Threat into a Challenge

Viewing the stress response as a resource can transform the physiology of fear into the biology of courage. It can turn a threat into a challenge and can help you do your best under pressure. Even when the stress doesn't feel helpful – as in the case of anxiety – welcoming it can transform it into something that is helpful: more energy, more confidence, and a greater willingness to take action.

You can apply this strategy in your own life anytime you notice signs of stress. When you feel your heart pounding or your breath quickening, realize that it is your body's way of trying to give you more energy. If you notice tension in your body, remind yourself that the stress response gives you access to your strength. Sweaty palms? Remember what it felt like to go on your first date – palms sweat when you're close to something you want. If you have butterflies in your stomach, know that they are a sign of meaning. Your digestive tract is lined with hundreds of millions of nerve cells that respond to your thoughts and emotions. Butterflies are your gut's way of saying, "This matters." Let yourself remember why this particular moment matters to you.

Whatever the sensations of stress are, worry less about trying to make them go away, and focus more on what you are going to do with the energy, strength, and drive that stress gives you. Your body is providing you access to all your resources to help you rise to this challenge. Instead of taking a deep breath to calm down, take a deep breath to sense the energy that is available to you. Then put the energy to use, and ask yourself, "What action can I take, or what choice can I make, that is consistent with my goal in this moment?"

Transform Stress: Turn Overwhelmed into Hopeful

When you are feeling overwhelmed, look for a way to do something for someone else that goes beyond your daily responsibilities. Your brain might tell you that you don't have the time or energy, but that is exactly why you should do it. You can also make this a daily practice – set a goal of finding an opportunity to support someone else. By doing so, you prime your body and brain to take positive action and to experience courage, hope, and connection.

Two strategies can amplify the benefit of this practice. First, your brain's reward system will get a bigger boost from doing something new or unexpected than if you do the same kind act every day. Second, small acts can be just as powerful as grand gestures, so look for little things you can do instead of waiting for the perfect moment to be magnanimous. I encourage my students to be creative in what they decide to be generous with. You can give others appreciation, your full attention, or even the benefit of the doubt. Like other mindset resets we've seen – such as remembering your values or rethinking your racing heart – it's a small choice that can have unexpectedly large effects on how you experience stress.

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Transform Stress: Turn Self-Focus into Bigger Than-Self Goals

When you feel stress rising at work or in any other important area of your life, ask yourself, "What are my bigger-than-self goals?" and "How is this an opportunity to serve them?"

If you're struggling to find a bigger-than-self goal, consider spending a few moments reflecting on one or more of these questions:

- What kind of positive impact do you want to have on the people around you?
- What mission in life or at work most inspires you?
- What do you want to contribute to the world?
- What change do you want to create?

Transform Stress: Turn Adversity into a Resource

Bring to mind a stressful experience from your past in which you persevered or learned something important. Take a few moments to think about what that experience taught you about your strengths and how to cope with stress. Then, set a timer for fifteen minutes and write about the experience, addressing any or all of the following questions:

- What did you do that helped you get through it? What personal resources did you draw on, and what strengths did you use? Did you seek out information, advice, or any other kind of support?
- What did this experience teach you about how to deal with adversity?
- How did this experience make you stronger?

Now think about a current situation you are struggling through.

- Which of these strengths and resources can you draw on in this situation?
- Are there any coping skills or strengths you want to develop? If so, how could you begin to do so using this situation as an opportunity to grow?

Transform Stress: Choose to Find an Upside in Adversity

Choose an ongoing difficult situation in your life or a recent stressful experience. What, if any, benefits have you experienced from this stress? In what ways is your life better because of it? Have you changed in any positive ways as a result of trying to cope with this experience?

Below is a list of the most commonly reported positive changes experienced in response to hardship, loss, or trauma, consider whether you see any signs of these benefits in yourself:

- A sense of personal strength. How has this experience revealed your strength? Has this changed how you think about yourself and what you are capable of? How have you personally grown or changed as a result of having to cope with this experience? What strengths have you used to help yourself cope?

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- Increased appreciation for life. Do you feel a greater appreciation for life or a greater enjoyment of everyday experiences? Are you more likely to savor simple moments? Do you feel more willing to take meaningful risks? Have you begun to give more time and energy to the things that bring you joy or matter most to you?
- Spiritual growth. In what ways has this experience helped you grow spiritually? Have you experienced a renewal of faith or reconnected with communities that are meaningful to you? Have you deepened your understanding of, or willingness to rely on, a religious or spiritual tradition? Do you feel that you have grown in wisdom or perspective?
- Enhanced social connections and relationships with others. How has this experience strengthened your relationships with any friends, family, or other members of your community? Has it given you more empathy for other people's struggles? Has it motivated you to make any positive changes in your relationships?
- Identifying new possibilities and life directions. What positive changes have you made in your life as a result of this experience? Have you set any new goals? Have you taken time to do things you might not have considered before? Have you found a sense of purpose or been able to channel your experience into helping others?

Transform Stress: Tell Your Own Story of Growth and Resilience

One of the best ways to notice, value, and express your own growth is to reflect on a difficult time in your life as if you were a journalist writing a restorative narrative. How would a storyteller describe the challenges you have faced? What would a good observer see as a turning point in your story – a moment when you were able to reengage or find meaning? If a journalist were to follow you for a week, what evidence would the journalist see of your strength and resilience? What do you do that demonstrates your growth or expresses your values? What would friends, family, coworkers, or others who have witnessed your journey say to describe how you have changed or grown? What objects in your home or office would a photojournalist want to photograph as evidence of your growth or resilience?

Consider taking some time to write your own story about any experience that you view as both stressful and a source of growth or meaning. Or use any medium that appeals to you, such as photo collage, drawing, or video. This exercise can be very personal or private, and you never need to share it with anyone. But it can also be a wonderful exercise to share with others.