



Harnessing the upsides of stress

Changing your mindset doesn't mean taking a Pollyanna view of the world. The key isn't to deny stress, but to recognize and acknowledge it — and then to find the upside, because a full-throttle fight-or-flight response is not the only possible reaction to stress (at least when the stress does not involve a potentially life-threatening situation).

In people with a more stress-hardy mindset, the stress response is often tempered by the challenge response, which accounts for the so-called excite-and-delight experience that some people have in stressful situations, such as skydiving. Like the typical stress response, the challenge response also affects the cardiovascular system, but instead of constricting blood vessels and ramping up inflammation in anticipation of wounds, it allows for maximum blood flow, much like exercise. The balance of hormones is different, too, including more DHEA.

Another modification to the stress response is called tend-and-befriend. It explains why, after the September 11 terrorist attacks in 2001, the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, or the 2016 massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, people felt the need to reach out to friends and relatives in the community — to assure themselves that loved ones were all right, to comfort the distressed or bereaved, and to shore up social networks. Connecting in this way actually helps reduce stress as opposed to, say, watching an endless loop of TV coverage. That's because tend-and-befriend also involves different balances of hormones — in particular, increased levels of oxytocin, which enhances bonding between a mother and child or between sexual partners, for example. It makes the brain's reward centers more responsive to social contact, and it is an important part of resilience.

Dialing back from full-on fight-or-flight can be simply a matter of changing your mindset. Studies have shown that when participants are told "You're the kind of person whose performance improves under pressure," it does — by as much as one-third. How can you shift your mindset? A 2015 book called *The Upside of Stress* by Kelly McGonigal gives multiple ideas. Here are just a few suggestions:

- When you notice a racing heart — for example, before you give a presentation or initiate a tough conversation — realize that your body is trying to give you more energy and see if you can capitalize on that.
- If you are feeling nervous, pause to consider why, and ask yourself if it's because you're doing something that matters to you and therefore reinforces your values and gives meaning to your life.
- Don't deny the stress, but redirect your energy away from it and toward the task at hand.
- If you are feeling overwhelmed with work or cares, try doing some small act of kindness for someone and note the mental reward you reap.
- Nurture your social networks. Caring creates resilience.
- Try to focus on the larger purpose of whatever you're doing. When you're stuck in a traffic jam taking your daughter to school, remember that it's because you love her and want her to get a good education.
- Whatever you're doing, don't pretend that stress doesn't exist. People who deny it tend to isolate themselves and reinforce their fears. Instead, ask yourself why you're experiencing this stress and look for any positive aspects to it. Are you learning something from it? Are you gaining strength? Are you connecting with people on a more fundamental level? Do you feel more intensely alive?

For additional information on the dangers of stress and ways to relieve and manage it, buy [Stress Management](#), a Special Health Report from Harvard Medical School.