

What is stress?

We use the term stress very broadly in our day-to-day lives to describe everything from our experience in peak hour traffic to the impact that serious illness and disease has on our wellbeing. There has been a large quantity of research conducted on the impact of stress on our longevity, performance and physical health since the late 1930's. Since that time, we have come to recognise that while there may be a number of detrimental impacts of excessive or prolonged stress, the relationship between stress and our physical and emotional well-being is not linear in nature.

Specifically, we know that some stress is good for us. For instance, you may perform best when there are deadlines in place or when the stakes are high. The athletes lining up for the final of the 100m sprint at an Olympic Games are surely under stress, but it does not appear as though this is a negative experience for them or detrimental to their wellbeing. However, we also may know of those around us reporting that they have ulcers or have lost weight due to stress. So, it seems like stress can certainly have a negative or positive impact on us.

Early research on stress defined it as “the body’s response to any demand made on it”. This definition encompassed any and every situation that requires a response or reaction, and tends to associate a negative term to everyday responses. A broad, and more useful definition identifies that stress is your response when “something you care about is at stake”.

When is stress harmful?

Research consistently reveals that too much stress is harmful. Exposure to high levels of stress for extended periods of time are associated with migraines and tension headaches, as well as increased risk of heart disease and gastrointestinal disruptions. When we have acute stress (i.e. a rush of adrenalin when we step out into the road and don't see an approaching car until it beeps loudly) or chronic stress (working full time and being the primary carer for a terminally ill dependant), we release a stress hormone called cortisol. As a broad rule, we tend to experience negative stress when we perceive that the demands being placed on us exceed the resources (such as time, skills, money, staff) that we have available to us to deal with those demands.

When is stress enhancing?

Good stress or “eustress” is the experience of being heightened or “pepped”. It might be your experience when competing with others, when presenting to an audience, or when you are pushed to complete a task within a tight deadline. When we are exposed to some level of stress, this can assist us in delivering peak performance. In these instances, we are releasing the feel-good endorphin called dopamine.

How can I shift my stress mindset?

Kelly McGonigal has written a very useful book on this topic called “the Upside of Stress – Why stress is good for you (and how to get good at it)”. She relates that there are three simple steps that can be used to shift your mindset about aging, intelligence or stress.

First step

Acknowledge stress as you experience it, so allow yourself to notice it and how it affects your physically. This might be tightened shoulder muscles, a clenched jaw. I could readily notice these signs while I sat on a stationary train.

Second step

Embrace the stress by acknowledging that it is in response to something that you care about. So ask yourself: “What is at stake here for me and why does it matter?”

In this instance what I considered to be at stake was how others thought about me. Maybe my being late would result in them thinking that I was not very professional or not committed to their training program. What was on the line was my reputation and how I was regarded by others.

Third step

Is there another way that you could you can use the energy that stress gives you? Having made all the calls that I could to mitigate this situation, there was not much left I could do other than review the training and look to see how I could give the attendees the best program possible in the likely timeframe. I set to work redrafting my training program on the train. I thought more broadly that this is not just happening to me – others who are due to be attending the training will also be impacted by this and will be late.

What does research suggest?

Research demonstrates those who use these techniques illustrate a more adaptive approach to stress, higher work engagement and better health outcomes. So rather than focusing on reducing stress, this approach can help you transform the stress that many be inevitable in your life.

These suggestions are not intended to undermine the importance of other techniques used to cope with stress nor to counter the concept that some stress can be detrimental. However, what is suggested is that under duress there is more than a single approach available to you. Maybe deriving the positive effects of stress may in part be a matter of shifting mindsets.