

KEEPING YOUR SANITY BY MANAGING STRESS WELL

<https://www.2thepointnews.com/keeping-your-sanity-by-managing-stress-well/>

Man should not try to avoid stress any more than he would shun food, love or exercise.

– Hans Selye

It is common knowledge that too much stress is bad for us; yet stress is also a necessary and vital part of living well.

Anything that you do that involves challenging yourself, confronting situations that require your best efforts, or pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone will involve a degree of stress.

So it's really important to understand that *happiness is not the absence of stress*. In fact, happiness or our well-being requires living with a degree of stress that we can manage.

And there's new research that turns what we thought we knew about stress on its head – what's most important for our health and well-being is not the stress itself, but what we believe about stress. Let's think about that.

When we're feeling too much stress in our lives, there are two things that we can do:

- *Do less of what causes us stress

- *Learn to manage a higher level of stress

Regarding the first: Legendary UCLA Basketball coach John Wooden said, "Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can do." That one sentence contains great leverage for decreasing stress. A major cause of stress is worrying and spinning our wheels trying to do things that are outside of our control.

When we focus on what we can't do, we feel both revved up to want to do something, and simultaneously helpless to actually do anything. It's like having one foot on the accelerator and the other on the brake at the

same time. To that end, focusing most of our efforts on what we can do will make us more effective, and less stressed out.

Another thing we can do to decrease external stress is to take stock of our environment, and find what increases our stress. Do you spend a lot of time commuting? Are you in an environment that overloads your senses, or in which you feel threatened? If you can change such things you can lower your stress levels.

Regarding the second, here are three simple but effective things we can do to increase our capacity for stress:

**Deliberately breathing more slowly and deeply* (not too deeply that you hyperventilate):

Practicing breathing between 4-6 breaths per minute for a few minutes a day can help calm your system overall.

**Practicing relaxing:* Meditation, prayer, giving yourself time to look at the stars at night... anything that trains your body and mind to relax will strengthen your ability to relax when you need to.

**Regular physical exercise:* There are huge psychological and physical benefits to regular exercise – from strengthening our capacity for stress, to decreasing anxiety, to preventing and relieving depression, to increasing your overall health and resilience.

Finally, one of the most effective strategies for managing stress is to make plans.

Making plans is like preventative stress management. If you know what have to accomplish in a given day, week, month, or year, then you'll be less likely to get caught by surprise and overwhelmed by something you hadn't prepared for.

If you can map out specific and doable tasks that you need to complete along the way, doing so will help you to feel competent and effective – as opposed to helpless and stressed out.

On the other hand...

In a TED talk awhile back, Kelly McGonigal of Stanford University revealed a new finding about stress. We used to think that too much stress could be very bad for us. In fact, people with high levels of stress have a 43% higher probability of dying than those with lower levels of stress.

But it turns out that it's not the stress itself that does harm. Those with high levels of stress who *believed that stress is bad* for them indeed had a 43% higher probability of dying than those with lower levels of stress.

However, those with just as high levels of stress who *believed that stress was a normal and healthy response* of their body to the challenges of life were actually healthier than those with lower levels of stress.

In other words, it's not stress, but the belief that stress is bad for us that does the damage.

In fact, the belief that stress is bad for us is the 15th highest cause of death in America. Not stress, but the belief that stress is bad for us! Talk about a deadly psychosomatic disorder...

When we believe that stress is bad for us, our arteries constrict and tighten. When we believe that stress is just a

natural part of a life well lived, our arteries are relaxed, and are actually in the same state as they are when we experience joy.

We know the power of *placebo*, but most people inaccurately think that placebo just means phony. But in fact, placebo is just another way of saying that a belief affected us in a way that we can't yet explain.

There is also the effect of *nocebo* – which is a negative effect from a belief, like the one that McGonigal describes here.

How we think about things matters. When you're feeling stress, if you're fretting over the potential negative impact of that stress, stop what you're doing. We do harm to ourselves by fearing our own emotions and experiences, and the first step to more resilience is to accept what's true.

Acknowledge that you are facing some challenges, and your heart, your nervous system, your lungs and organs, your muscles, and your brain, are all working on your behalf to help you to meet whatever your challenge may be. What your body is doing is a good thing, a healthy thing, and the right thing for it to do to get you through life's challenges.

Our body's response to stress is what allows us to lean into life. When we feel too much stress, we can do things to limit it, and we can practice skills to strengthen ourselves around it. Then by embracing the stress that we do have, we can actively and successfully turn it into a positive experience for ourselves.

And that's the way we can feel less stress about stress.

PS: My new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions* can help you with this part of your life in much greater detail, with deep understanding and practical skills for mastering these systems and living well. You can get it now with a deep discount, for \$99, if you use this code: LB99.

Joel F. Wade, Ph.D. is the author of *The Virtue of Happiness*, *Mastering Happiness*, his new course, *Mastering Emotions, Moods and Reactions*, *A Master's Course in Happiness*, and *The Mastering Happiness Podcast*. He is a marriage and family therapist and life coach who works with people around the world via phone and video. You can get a FREE Learning Optimism E-Course if you sign up at his website, www.drjoelwade.com.

Copyright ©2024 **2 The Point News** unless otherwise noted.