

The Good News About Stress Management: How "Good" Stress Keeps Us Going & Growing - By: Barbara Schiffman

Every health and lifestyle magazine contains articles claiming stress is bad for us. They list dozens of ways to relieve stress, from exercise to eating healthy foods. A wide range of relaxation techniques have also been proven to help manage stress in our crazy-busy world, especially for people who take care of others and tend to neglect themselves.

But stress is not always as bad as these cautionary articles insist. In fact, some stress is actually necessary to keep us going and growing.

Our individual responses to different types and levels of stress can either drain or energize us. It is how we perceive and process both ongoing and unexpected stressors that intensifies or reduces their impact on our bodies, minds and emotions.

The term "stress" was first used in the mid-1950s by endocrinologist Dr. Hans Selye in his book "The Stress of Life." In his research experiments, Selye discovered that we experience stress not only when we hear bad news but also when we receive good news. He differentiated these two types of stressors by calling negative stress "distress" and positive stress "eustress" (the Greek prefix "eu" means well or good).

The idea that we naturally feel stressed by positive experiences -- like getting married, having a baby, graduations, promotions, winning awards or races -- is echoed in the Social Readjustment Ratings Scale. Devised by University of Washington medical researchers Holmes and Rahe, the SRRS ranks the impact of good stress-events as well as bad stressors like death, divorce or losing a job.

They discovered it is the accumulation of minor plus major changes over a period of time that increases one's chances of developing stress-related ailments like heart disease, cancer or a weakened immune system. Stress effects also intensify when several changes occur without enough time between them to recharge our physical and mental resources.

When dealing with normal life changes, Holmes and Rahe also concluded that a single event is rarely stressful enough to cause significant illness if we have some control over the situation and are able to view it as a challenge or opportunity instead of a threat.

So stress is not always bad or unhealthy. It can actually keep us from becoming complacent or staying too long in jobs, relationships or environments which are not good for us. When bad stress builds to the "breaking point," it usually forces us to make choices and change our behavior or environment with positive and healthier results.

Stress is also necessary to keep us moving forward while working toward a goal -- like a creative or business project -- or training for athletic events like championship games or marathons. This type of eustress prevents us from slowing down or giving up too soon and helps us build momentum in the early stages to empower us to reach the "finish line."

So positive stress management can actually give us a Competitive Edge via increased focus and drive. As we move forward on what researchers call the Performance Stress Curve, eustress helps us make choices, take actions and communicate more clearly.

When it comes to managing stress, there are two basic approaches: Defensive or Offensive. If we take a Defensive approach, we subconsciously distort reality by hoping the situation will change without having to do anything about it. But this keeps us in a state of denial and often amplifies the internal impact of distress, contributing to disease or depression.

Taking an Offensive approach, however, enables us to manage stress by using it to our advantage. By consciously changing or adapting, we adjust to life-changes organically and can view things in perspective that at first feel like problems. Then we can reframe these "problems" as opportunities or challenges and take appropriate action.

Offensive ways to manage stress include:

- 1.Changing our situation whenever possible
- 2.Increasing our ability to cope with the situation as it is
- 3.Changing our perception so the situation looks and feels different
- 4.Changing our behavior, as this is truly where we have the most control

Whenever we feel stressed, it can be useful to first determine whether it's Distress or Eustress. Then we can decide whether to become Offensive by utilizing or adjusting it, or remain Defensive and wait to see if the situation

changes on its own. Sometimes choosing to live with stress is appropriate, like when it energizes our Competitive Edge.

We can also balance our stress levels to avoid being thrown off-center too easily or often. Ongoing stress management techniques for creating balance include sleeping well, eating healthy foods, exercising, meditating &/or focusing on the positive things in our lives. These are simple and inexpensive ways to relieve pressure, especially when we're faced with unexpected events or must manage stress over a long period of time.

While the bad news is that it's nearly impossible to avoid stress in our crazy-busy world, the good news is that using stress management techniques and being mindful can actually make stress empowering instead of draining. This puts us in control of the stressors in our lives so they can't stop us from continuing to go forward and grow more joyfully empowered every day.

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