

THE BIG IDEAS

Let's Define Stress

It involves something you care about.

Stress Mindset

What's yours?

The Challenge Response

Threat to challenge. You got this!

"I'm Excited!"

Is way better than "I am calm."

A Mindset of Meaning

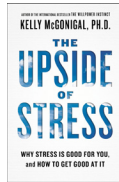
It's time to cultivate one.

Bigger-Than-Self Goals

Are empowering.

Your Personal Everest

Another cold, dark night!



The Upside of Stress

Why Stress Is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It

BY KELLY MCGONIGAL, PH.D. · AVERY © 2015 · 279 PAGES

"My curiosity about how your attitude toward stress influences its impact sent me on a search for more evidence. I wanted to know: Does how you think about stress really matter? And if believing that stress is bad *is* bad for you, what's the alternative? Is there anything good about stress that's worth embracing? ...

The latest science reveals that stress can make you smarter, stronger, and more successful. It helps you learn and grow. It can even inspire courage and compassion.

The new science also shows that changing your mind about stress can make you healthier and happier. How you think about stress affects everything from your cardiovascular health to your ability to find meaning in life. The best way to manage stress isn't to reduce or avoid it, but rather to rethink and even embrace it.

So, my goal as a health psychologist has changed. I no longer want to help you get rid of your stress—I want to make you better at stress. That is the premise of the new science of stress, and the purpose of this book."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D. from *The Upside of Stress*

[The Upside of Stress.](#)

This is one of my favorite books of 2015! I HIGHLY recommend it. [Kelly McGonigal](#) is a *fantastic* writer and the research she shares on the benefits of stress are truly astonishing.

If you've ever had stress in your life (hah!) and wondered how to deal with it more optimally, I think you'll love the book. It's based on [Kelly's uber-popular TED talk on stress](#) you might have seen and it could quite literally change your (+ your family's) life. (Get it [here.](#))

As per the intro quote above, the essence of the book is the fact that how we THINK about stress plays a huge role in its affect on us. Rather than try to get rid of stress (good luck with that!), we're much better off shifting our mindsets to embrace and use the stress wisely!

The book has two main sections: Part I = Why stress is good + Part 2 = How to get good at it. I'm excited to share some of my favorite Big Ideas so let's jump straight in!

LET'S DEFINE STRESS

"So as we begin this journey together, I offer this conception of stress: *Stress is what arises when something you care about is at stake.* This definition is big enough to hold both the frustration over traffic and the grief over a loss. It includes your thoughts, emotions, and physical reactions when you're feeling stressed, as well as how you choose to cope with situations you'd describe as stressful. This definition also highlights an important truth about stress: Stress and meaning are inextricably linked. You don't stress about things you don't care about, and you can't create a meaningful life without experiencing some stress."

"If you have butterflies in your stomach, invite them into your heart."

~ Cooper Edens

"I wrote this book with that specific purpose in mind: to help you discover your own strength, courage, and compassion. Seeing the upside of stress is not about deciding whether stress is either all good or all bad. It's about how choosing to see the good in stress can help you meet the challenges in your life."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

Stress. The word is pervasive in our culture and the typical attitude associated with it is that we need to avoid it and/or reduce it at all costs.

"I'm so stressed!" is rarely said in a tone that sounds like, "And that's awesome!"

But the fact is, we only feel stress when something we care about is at stake. This is known as the "stress paradox"—the presence of stress, rather than being a sign something is wrong with our lives, can be a barometer for how engaged we are in activities that are meaningful to us. As McGonigal advises, if we want meaning in our lives, we need to welcome stress.

WHAT'S YOUR STRESS MINDSET?

"Psychologist Alia Crum and her colleagues have developed the Stress Mindset Measure to assess people's views of stress. Take a moment to look at the two stress mindsets below and consider which set of statements you agree with more strongly—or, at least, would have agreed with before you picked up this book:

Mindset 1: Stress Is Harmful.

Experiencing stress depletes my health and vitality.

Experiencing stress debilitates my performance and productivity.

Experiencing stress inhibits my learning and growth.

The effects of stress are negative and should be avoided.

Mindset 2: Stress Is Enhancing.

Experiencing stress enhances my performance and productivity.

Experiencing stress improves my health and vitality.

Experiencing stress facilitates my learning and growth.

The effects of stress are positive and should be utilized.

Of these two mindsets, 'stress is harmful' is by far the most common. Crum and her colleagues have found that while most people can see some truth in both mindsets, they still view stress as more harmful than helpful. Men and women do not differ, and age does not predict mindset."

Which mindset do *you* agree with most strongly?!

If you're like most people, it's the "stress is harmful" mindset.

This is rooted in what researchers call the "mismatch theory"—the mindset that our evolutionarily adaptive fight-or-flight response was helpful when we were evading sabertooth tigers but it doesn't have a place in our modern society.

Helping you shift your mindset to see how stress can be enhancing is, of course, the essence of the book. McGonigal presents a bunch of amazing "mindset interventions" to help us shift!

The fact is, the stress we feel when something we care about is at stake can, if properly perceived, *help* us achieve our goals. But we need to shift our mindset to see that if we want to fully experience its potential benefits.

THE CHALLENGE RESPONSE

"Like a fight-or-flight response, a challenge response gives you energy and helps you perform under pressure. Your heart rate still rises, your adrenaline spikes, your muscles and brain get more fuel, and the feel-good chemicals surge. But it differs from a fight-or-flight response in a few important ways: You feel focused but not fearful. You also release a different ratio of stress hormones, including higher levels of DHEA, which helps you recover and learn from stress. This raises the growth index of your stress response, the beneficial ratio of stress hormones that can determine, in part, whether a stressful experience is strengthening or harmful..."

"If you believe that the demands of the situation exceed your resources, you will have a threat response. But if you believe you have the resources to succeed, you will have a challenge response."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

People who report being in a flow state—a highly enjoyable state of being completely absorbed in what you are doing—display clear signs of a challenge response. Artists, athletes, surgeons, video gamers, and musicians all show this kind of stress response when they're engaged in their craft or skill. Contrary to what many people expect, top performers in these fields aren't physiologically calm under pressure; rather, they have strong challenge responses. The stress response gives them access to their mental and physical resources, and the result is increased confidence, enhanced concentration, and peak performance."

We've all heard of the "fight-or-flight" response.

But have you heard of the *challenge response*? What about the *tend-and-befriend response*? And, we know about post-traumatic stress but what about post-traumatic *growth*?

McGonigal has a chapter that takes us "Beyond Fight-or-Flight" and then dedicates chapters to each of the above optimal stress responses.

We'll start with the challenge response.

Remember: We're not trying to get super calm. It's all about *embracing* the energy we feel when stressed and using it to fuel our performance. By having a positive relationship to our stress and approaching it with focus but not fear, we literally change the underlying biology of our experience. (That's amazing.)

Reminds me of [John Eliot](#) who tells us we need to eat stress like an energy bar and shares this wisdom in his great book [Overachievement](#) (see Notes): "*Working on techniques to manage stress is a bit like trying to win the Indy 500 by putting a governor on the engine of your race car or swapping out a powerful V-12 for a V-4 because it offers a 'quieter ride.'* You wouldn't do that. Not if you were after the checkered flag. Not if you were racing star Jeff Gordon. No superstar is about to give his opponents an edge. Nor should you be trying to relax when the pressure's on."

Here's a *really* cool way to embrace our stress and let it rock:

I'M EXCITED!

"Imagine that you work for an organization with hundreds of employees and you're about to give a presentation to the entire group. The CEO and all the board members are in the audience. You've been anxious about this talk all week, and now your heart is pounding. Your palms are sweating. Your mouth feels dry.

What is the best thing to do in this moment: try to calm down, or try to feel excited?

When Harvard Business School professor Alison Wood Brooks asked hundreds of people this question, the responses were nearly unanimous: 91 percent thought the best advice was to try to calm down.

You've probably told yourself or others in moments of stress that if you don't calm down, you'll blow it. This is what most people believe. But is it true? Is trying to relax the best strategy for performing under pressure? Or is it better to embrace the anxiety?"

Imagine that!

You're about to give a big talk. You're super nervous. Heart is pounding. Palms are sweaty.

What should you try to do?

Try to calm yourself down? Or try to get excited?

Alison Wood Brooks decided to test which response was optimal. She brought people into her lab and had them prepare to give a speech. She had half of them say to themselves, "I am calm." The others were told to embrace the anxiety and say to themselves, "I am excited."

"Despite most people's belief that some adrenalin improves performance, but too much impairs performance, the evidence suggests otherwise. When it comes to performing under pressure, being stressed is better than being relaxed."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

And guess what?

Although they both felt nervous, the group that embraced their anxiety and told themselves they were excited felt more confident and better able to handle the pressure.

And, most importantly, they gave better speeches.

As McGonigal tells us: "People who watched the speeches rated the excited speakers as more persuasive, confident, and competent than the participants who had tried to calm down. With one change in mindset, they had transformed their anxiety into energy that helped them perform under pressure."

Although most people believe that the best strategy under pressure is to relax, this chapter will reveal when and why the opposite is true. Whether it's a student facing the most important exam of her life or a professional athlete facing the toughest competition of his career, welcoming stress can boost confidence and improve performance. We'll look at how embracing your anxiety can help you rise to a challenge, and even transform a typical fear response into the biology of courage."

This is HUGE!!

If you only got one Idea out of this Note, let this one be it. :)

Next time you (or a loved one) are feeling super stressed (or even just a little stressed!), rather than try to get rid of the anxiety, EMBRACE it.

Rather than getting stressed about your stress, try saying "I'm excited!!" to yourself, and then let that energy flow through you as you transform a potential fear response into the biology of courage!!

I've been having fun playing with this throughout the day. Any time I feel a little surge of nervous energy, I'll say to myself, "Awesome! I'm excited. Let's do this!"

Super fun. :)

CULTIVATING A MINDSET OF MEANING

"If you struggle with avoidance, self-doubt, or feeling overwhelmed, helping others is one of the most powerful motivation boosters that you can find."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

"A classic study from the 1990s points to one of the best ways to cultivate a mindset of meaning in everyday stress. A bunch of Stanford students agreed to keep journals over winter break. Some were asked to write about their most important values, and how the day's activities related to those values. Others were asked to write about the good things that happened to them. After the three-week break was over, the researchers collected the students' journals and asked them about their breaks. The students who had written about their values were in better health and better spirits. Over break, they had experienced fewer illnesses and health problems. Heading back to school, they were more confident about their abilities to handle stress. The positive effect of writing about values was greatest for those students who had experienced the most stress over the break.

The researchers then analyzed more than two thousand pages from the students' journals to see whether they could tell what had made the writing assignments so helpful. Their conclusion: Writing about values helped the students see the meaning in their lives. Stressful experiences were no longer simply hassles to endure; they became an expression of the students' values. Giving a younger sibling a ride reflected how much a student cared about his family. Working on an application for an internship was a way to take a step toward future goals."

That's amazing.

Cultivating a mindset of MEANING is big.

And this study reveals a surprisingly simple and equally powerful way to go about doing that.

Let's take a moment to reflect on this.

What are your most important values?

How are today's/this week's activities related to those values?

Here's to creating meaning and transforming hassles to endure into expressions of our values!

BIGGER-THAN-SELF GOALS

"Crocker isn't the only researcher who has investigated the benefits of taking a tend-and-befriend approach to achieving personal goals. Dave Yeager... has shown that helping students find their bigger-than-self goals improves academic motivation and performance. In one study, college students were given a twenty-minute 'beyond-the-self' mindset intervention that included this exercise:

Take a moment to think about what kind of person you want to be in the future. Also think about what kind of positive impact you want to have on the people around you or society in general. . . . In the space below, write a few sentences that answer this question: How will learning in school help you be the kind of person you want to be, or help you make the kind of impact you want on the people around you or society in general?

Students were then given a series of both boring and difficult math problems. The students who had completed the beyond-the-self reflection persisted longer and ended up finishing more problems correctly. The same brief mindset intervention in high school students not only boosted short-term motivation, but also led to higher end-of-the-semester GPAs. Yeager and his colleagues found that when students thought about their bigger-than-self goals, it changed the meaning of both boring work and academic struggles. The new meaning—that persevering at their studies would help them make a difference in the world—motivated them to engage with, rather than avoid, the stress of challenging themselves."

That is so good.

It's from the chapter all about the benefits of a "tend-and-befriend" response. Did you know (before I mentioned it above!) that the "tend-and-befriend" response is another alternative to the "fight-or-flight" response?

Yep. Powerful stuff.

Stress doesn't just make us fight or freeze or flee. It can also make us be nicer. And, what's exciting is that we can deliberately shift our mindsets to make this response more likely—allowing us to use the stress energy positively in the process!

Science says: If we're constantly competing with other people as we go after our own professional and personal goals, we're going to struggle a whole lot more than if we're able to frame our lives in the context of something bigger than ourselves.

So, let's take a moment to engage in this little "beyond-the-self" mindset intervention.

As McGonigal asks us:

- "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?"

Take a moment to reflect on those questions (now and particularly when the stress is bubbling up) and watch your energy and vitality and courage and meaning rise!

*"This research doesn't suggest that the most helpful mindset is a Pollyanish insistence on turning everything bad into something good. Rather, it's the ability to notice the good as you cope with things that are difficult. In fact, being able to see *both* the good and the bad is associated with better long-term outcomes than focusing purely on the upside."*

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

"The Wharton researchers summarized their findings with this advice: 'When individuals feel time constrained, they should become more generous with their time—despite their inclination to be less so.'"

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

JUST ANOTHER COLD, DARK NIGHT ON THE SIDE OF EVEREST

"The science tells us that stress is most likely to be harmful when three things are true: 1. You feel inadequate to it; 2. It isolates you from others; 3. It feels utterly meaningless and against your will. As we've seen, how you think about stress feeds into each one of these factors."

~ Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D.

"Everyone has an Everest. Whether it's a climb you choose, or a circumstance you find yourself in, you're in the middle of an important journey. Can you imagine a climber scaling the wall of ice at Everest's Lhotse Face and saying, 'This is such a hassle'? Or spending the first night in the mountain's 'death zone' and thinking, 'I don't need this stress'? The climber knows the context of his stress. It has personal meaning to him; he has chosen it. You are most liable to feel like a victim of the stress in your life when you forget the context the stress is unfolding in. 'Just another cold, dark night on the side of Everest' is a way to remember the paradox of stress. The most meaningful challenges in your life will come with a few dark nights.

The biggest problem with trying to avoid stress is how it changes the way we view our lives, and ourselves. Anything in life that causes stress starts to look like a problem. If you experience stress at work, you think there's something wrong with your job. If you experience stress in your marriage, you think there's something wrong with your relationship. If you experience stress as a parent, you think there's something wrong with your parenting (or your kids). If trying to make a change is stressful, you think there's something wrong with your goal."

"Just another cold, dark night on Everest."

That's what someone said to Alia Crum as she was struggling late one night working on her dissertation—doubting whether she had what it took to get it done.

Imagine a climber complaining about conditions on Everest. Not gonna happen. It's all about the context of meaning we create for ourselves as we face OUR Everest.

Here's to seeing the upside of stress and getting excited about our challenges as we optimize, actualize, and scale our personal Everests!

B

Brian Johnson,
Chief Philosopher

About the Author of "The Upside of Stress"

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Kelly McGonigal, Ph.D., is a health psychologist and lecturer at Stanford University, and the author of the international bestseller *The Willpower Instinct*. As a leader in the field of "science help," McGonigal is passionate about translating cutting-edge research from psychology, neuroscience, and medicine into practical strategies for health, happiness, and personal success. Her TED Talk on the upside of stress has received more than seven million views. (Learn more about Kelly and her work at kellymcgonigal.com.)

About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson loves helping people optimize their lives as he studies, embodies and teaches the fundamentals of optimal living—integrating ancient wisdom + modern science + common sense + virtue + mastery + fun. Learn more and optimize your life at brianjohnson.me.

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