

Stress Management Recommendations - Part Two

Then, there is stress that we just can't avoid, and stress is a part of life. There is even positive stress that helps us to adapt and change. We talked about this in the HPA axis unit, the concept of eustress, or positive stress, that is adaptive and hormetic, versus distress, which disrupts allostasis and depletes our metabolic reserve and resilience. Half of dealing with stress is reducing the unnecessary stress, which we just talked about, and the second half is mitigating the harmful effects of stress that we can't avoid.

One way to do that is to reframe the situation, and this is a technique that is discussed extensively in cognitive behavioral therapy, which is a type of psychotherapy, and it involves essentially changing your perspective on what is happening. The stories that we tell ourselves about what is occurring in our life have a powerful influence on how we experience those events. We assign meaning to them, and that meaning affects our emotional tone, our emotional experience of what is happening. A simple example that is pictured on this slide here is getting stuck in traffic. Believe me, I hate traffic. I'm not this perfect when it comes to this because I can get really frustrated when I'm in traffic. One way that we can reframe getting stuck in traffic is, "Oh, this is an opportunity for me to take a deep breath, to pause, do some contemplative practice, just pay attention to what's happening around me, roll down the windows, feel the air against my face, listen to the sounds that I'm hearing." Or, maybe it's an opportunity to listen to something that we've been meaning to listen to, a podcast, potentially even make a phone call to a loved one or someone we haven't talked to in a while. This is a seemingly minor thing, but it's an example of how reframing can work.

Perhaps a more relevant example would be if you lose a job. That can be seen as a potentially catastrophic event, and certainly it could be in some situations, but it could also be a tremendous opportunity, especially if you didn't like your job very much, and you've been considering making a career transition, looking at that as an invitation or an opportunity to take the next step in your personal growth and evolution. It will totally change the emotional tone of that experience versus seeing it as there is something wrong with you, you failed, and now what are you going to do for the rest of your life?

Another way to mitigate unavoidable stress is lowering your standards. This may seem like not a very good idea if you're interested in optimal performance, but it actually—if you read books that are written by people who accomplish a tremendous amount, this is actually a recurring theme. The exception would be people such as Steve Jobs who are known for having just almost absurdly high, exacting standards. If you read those books, you'll see what kind of toll that took both on them and on the people around them. They were able to accomplish great things, but they were basketcases when it came to stress, and it caused and generated a lot of stress in their lives as well. Sometimes lowering your standards, such as not letting the perfect be the enemy of the good, as the saying goes, or following the 80-20 rule, like we talk about in the context of diet, it

can be really helpful and really a big step in minimizing stress. If you're planning a new program or product, writing a book, or something like that, there is always something more you could do to make it better. At some point, you just have to say, "Okay, this is good enough. It's going to help a lot of people. I can always improve it and iterate on it as time progresses, and I'm just going to release it as it is now." That's not only helpful in terms of stress management; it will make you a lot more productive.

Practicing acceptance is perhaps the single most important way to mitigate the harmful impacts of stress. One of my spiritual teachers once said that all suffering comes down to struggling against what is, which is essentially the opposite of acceptance. It's non-acceptance. It doesn't mean that it is possible to live life without pain, sadness, discomfort, or anger, but the struggle is an additional layer that we add on top of that experience of pain. So, if something happens that we don't like, I'm not suggesting that we just wish that away or that we pretend it didn't happen, but there is a difference between accepting that it is happening. If it is happening, there is presumably nothing we can do about it in that moment, and we accept what is.

Acceptance is different from submission. A lot of people get those two concepts confused. Submission is giving up. Acceptance is just recognizing what is, and those are crucially different concepts. Accepting that I'm ill in this moment doesn't mean that in the next moment I don't take steps to try to recover my health. It just means that I'm not constantly fighting against what is in each moment. There are a lot of things that are beyond our control in this life, and learning to accept the things that we can't change and learning to accept what is on a moment-to-moment basis is a fundamental tenet of almost all religions and spiritual practices, at least the mystical traditions of those religions, and also a basic tenet of mindfulness, which we've talked a lot about in this course.

Gratitude is another powerful way of mitigating the harmful impacts of stress. There are actually many studies on the positive effects of gratitude, bringing your attention to what you're appreciative of in your life instead of just focusing on the struggles, which I think in some way we're evolutionarily hardwired to do. We have a kind of scanning function that is always looking for potential problems, and that, from a survival perspective, might have helped us to survive in an environment that had potential threats. I think it's important to realize that we're hardwired for that, and it's also important to realize that we are living in a much different environment now than we used to be. Although there are perhaps more existential threats now than there were when we were hunter-gatherers, for many of us, our lives are not constantly in danger, so that hardwired evolutionary programming is not necessarily serving us at this point. We may have to consciously work toward bringing our attention to what we're appreciative of and grateful for.

People do that in different ways. Some people do a gratitude journal and have a practice of just writing down three, four, or five things they are grateful for in the morning and start off each day or even just doing that in bed. There are actually gratitude apps now that will help remind you to do this, celebrating your accomplishments maybe at the end of each day. There is an app from Strategic Coach, which is an entrepreneurial coaching program that will prompt you to do this. It is a productivity/gratitude celebration app. Each evening you write down three things that you

accomplished that day or three things that you were grateful for, and you write down three things that you want to ... your three main things you want to accomplish the next day. Then, the app will prompt you in the mornings and in the evenings. A lot of people like it, and it can be helpful with this approach.

Cultivating empathy is also really important for mitigating the impacts of stress. This works both ways—I mean empathy for yourself. If you're struggling, difficult realizing that you're doing the best that you can, treating yourself with compassion and love. One way to think about it—again, one of my spiritual mentors suggested treating yourself as you would treat your child, your young child, extending yourself the same level of understanding, compassion, and empathy and speaking to yourself in the same way that you would speak to your child on a good day when you're feeling balanced and connected, and then extending this to other people as well. This, of course, is a lifetime practice. It's not something you can just hear from me or read in a book and then automatically do. It's a practice.

There are lots of different ways to cultivate this skill. I think meditation practice or some kind of spiritual practice, prayer, or whatever it is that suits your orientation is crucial because it is what allows us to cultivate a witness perspective, which means we're able to watch our thoughts, our physical sensations, and our reactions and see them for what they are, see that they are not who we are. They are just part of our cultural conditioning and programming. They're not necessarily true, and we don't have to believe them, and we don't have to engage with them and react to them. Having that kind of awareness is what allows us to sink beneath that story that we tell ourselves about ourselves or other people and then connect with the feelings and needs that we have or that other people have. That is where empathy comes from, when we're able to recognize that people are primarily acting to meet their needs or in response to feelings that they have. If we can identify those same needs and feelings in ourselves, that is the basis for empathy and connection. That's how we can get past or we can actually use conflict as a way of enhancing connection rather than pushing us further apart.

Managing your time well is a crucial part of dealing with the stress that we can't avoid, and we talked a lot about this in *Busy-to-Balance*, so I'm not going to go into detail here, but careful planning, starting with clearly defining your purpose—that's where it all begins—and then making sure that how you spend your time is working towards that purpose. Then, establishing clear boundaries with time, learning to say no, and then organizing your time effectively—all of that can help tremendously in terms of relieving stress from overcommitted schedules.