

How to Engage Positive Stress

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Summary

We all experience stress at some point in our lives. But let's look at two different points of view.

The first, stress is harmful. Stress blocks our growth, worsens our health, and should be avoided at all costs due to its negative effects.

The second point of view is that stress is helpful. Stress enhances our growth, improves our health, and can yield positive results, helping us become the person we want to be.

In this discussion, we will explore stress as a mathematical model, $\text{Stress} = \text{Pressures} - \text{Capacity}$, and how to manage stress so that it serves us, that it is useful in our lives.

Theory

$\text{Stress} = \text{Pressures} - \text{Capacity}$

If we think of stress in this way, there are only two ways to successfully manage stress: increase capacity or reduce the pressures.

Before determining which way to manage stress, let's first look at four different scenarios.

1. Low pressures and high capacity = boredom When we have no challenges, no pressure to complete a task, but we have the energy, the space, and the time to do it, we crave something more. Lowering pressures can bring apathy and indifference.
2. Low pressures and low capacity = autopilot We're going through the motions. There's no pressure but we don't have the energy to do anything anyway. This is the hamster wheel of mediocrity. We don't feel stressed. We're not necessarily bored, but we are uninspired. We lack passion. This type of situation can lead to depression.
3. High pressures and low capacity = overwhelm Too much of this can lead to chronic stress which is not beneficial. The question is do we reduce our pressures or increase capacity?
4. High pressures and high capacity = "In the Zone" A state of working in Flow. When we are so engaged in our work, time flies! We feel accomplished. In this scenario, we see stress as a learning experience, a way to grow and develop. This is stress being helpful.

Stress as helpful is Eustress, coined by a Hungarian endocrinologist, Hans Selye. It literally means "good stress."

Since the mid-twentieth century, society has blamed many health issues on too much stress. But stress, when managed appropriately, is ultimately how we grow. How we learn new skills. How we feel accomplished.

Increasing Capacity

Increasing capacity is often the solution to overwhelm, yet many of us have no idea how to increase our capacity. Yet it is as simple as relaxing.

We increase capacity by engaging the parasympathetic nervous system.

There are only two states of being: powerful and primal. And these two states of being, correlate directly back to the two parts of our nervous system, the sympathetic and parasympathetic.

Our sympathetic nervous system, (fight, flight, or freeze), is designed to keep us safe from mortal danger. It doesn't create space or allow for more capacity.

The parasympathetic, the rest and digest system, creates capacity. When we are calm, we have more space to process, to look for the right solutions, to learn and grow.

There are several ways to engage the parasympathetic nervous system, all are forms of self-care. We will explore two: Breathwork and Mindfulness.

Breathwork

Our breath is a unique function of our physical body. It is the only system that we have conscious control as well as the system functions automatically.

During this portion of the presentation, belly breathing and longer exhales will be demonstrated and explained.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness and meditation affect the brain's response system. It builds stronger connections to the lateral prefrontal cortex, allowing one to observe rather than engage in our thoughts and emotions. We see things as they are, not through the lens of our past experiences.

Dr. Dan Siegel uses the term Mindsight in his book AWARE. It is how we see our own mind and those of others. Observing thoughts and emotions rather than allowing them to define us. We can develop this skill of Mindsight with what he calls the 3 O's: Open, Observe, Objectivity.

In using this skill set when we feel overwhelmed, we can see things as they are, better define what is realistic to get done and accept where we are. This does not take away capacity nor does it decrease our pressures. By being open to observing with objectivity, we actually create capacity by seeing things as they are and allowing our brain to rationally find a new perspective to complete our tasks at hand.

Summary

Stress can be beneficial when it is Eustress when we have high pressure but high capacity. We can create capacity when we engage the parasympathetic nervous system when we find ways to relax.