



# Good-For-You Stress

*How your stress mindset can increase your resilience*



Stress is an increasingly prevalent health issue with the World Health Organization declaring stress the “health epidemic of the 21st century.” Stress can not only impact your overall mood, increasing your risk for depression and anxiety, and your physical wellbeing, contributing to heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes,<sup>1</sup> but can also influence job performance, job safety, absenteeism, and disability. One in four Canadian employees will take an absence for stress. The impact of stress on work performance is higher than the impact of physical health concerns (67 percent for stress versus 53 percent for physical health).<sup>2</sup>

With Millennials and GenXers more stressed than previous generations,<sup>3</sup> and the gap between our own stress levels and what we perceive as a healthy amount of stress continuing to increase,<sup>4</sup> it’s not surprising to hear about stress everywhere you turn – in the news, social media, and in conversations with our colleagues, family, and friends.

## Good Stress

Believe it or not, there is such a thing as “good stress” – also called “eustress.” Eustress is that push inside you that keeps you alert, focused, and motivated. It’s what drives us to strive for success in our daily tasks, reach for job advancement, or run out of a burning building.

When we experience stress (good or bad) our body enters the “fight or flight” state. Back when we regularly encountered predators, our bodies were primed to divert resources toward areas required for running or fighting – our heart, lungs, and muscles – and away from non-essential systems, such as immune and digestive. After all, digesting your last meal is not important when you’re running away from a bear.

Although we no longer encounter predators regularly, our body still responds the same way to any stress – even when you’re sitting at a desk, behind the wheel, or reading email on your phone.

## Bad Stress

When the demands or pressures exerted on us become more than we can handle, good stress can turn to bad stress, called “distress.” Distress can be caused by the number of demands placed on us, or the duration/chronicity of the demands.

Imagine this: You are an avid downhill skier, and it gives you a rush to soar

down that powdery slope. Your heart races, and breathing quickens – your stress response kicks in, but it’s good, enjoyable, and motivates you to try a more challenging hill. But, if you had to ski down that slope without any breaks, for a day, a week, a month straight, then that once enjoyable activity will cause you distress.

Distress occurs when the pressures in our lives stop feeling motivating and inspiring, and instead start to feel overwhelming, causing you to feel tense, and wondering if you can cope. When left too long, we can feel burnt out and resentful. A state of chronic stress, without the chance to get out of the fight or flight state, is where we see the health consequences stated above.

## Perceived Stress

Perceived stress is the way we see the demands and pressures placed upon us, and our perception of how it impacts our physical and mental wellbeing. There are two camps:

***Stress-is-debilitating*** – In this mindset, stressors are seen as overwhelming

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1 NIMH, 5 Things You Should Know About Stress <[www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/stress/index.shtml)>.

2 Morneau Shepell, Workplace Mental Health Priorities (2016).

3 “Stress In America Report,” *American Psychological Association*, Feb 4 (2015).

4 “Stress In America Report,” *American Psychological Association*, Jan (2012).

Figure 1  
Stress Level Chart



demands for which the individual may not have the internal resources to meet the pressures.

**Stress-is-enhancing** – In this mindset, stressors are seen as challenges for which the individual has adequate resources to meet the pressures.

Your stress mindset can make a significant difference in whether or not stress will cause negative health consequences. People who have a “stress-is-

enhancing” mindset have a lower stress reaction than those who see stress as a problem, meaning they actually produce less of the stress hormone cortisol.<sup>5</sup> Cortisol is our main stress hormone, responsible for the fight or flight response, driving up our blood pressure and inhibiting our digestive and immune systems.

Not only does one’s perception of stress alter your stress response, but it also leads to improved health symptoms, higher levels of energy, greater life satisfaction, better work performance, and desire for feedback to enhance future growth and performance enhancement.<sup>6</sup>

### Negative Messages Influence Stress Mindset

Messaging around the negative impacts of stress is all around us, and these negative messages are in fact *negatively influencing* our stress mindset. Even if you are predisposed to a Stress-is-enhancing mindset, viewing negative messages about stress can worsen your ability to handle stress.

In a recent study, people’s stress mindsets were manipulated by showing subjects film clips that highlighted either the enhancing or debilitating nature

of stress.<sup>7</sup> The group who viewed the film clips showing the dangers of stress had a reduced ability to adapt to stressful tasks, paid more attention to negative events, and had an increased production of the stress hormone cortisol. Alternately, the group who viewed the film clips showing that stress can be beneficial to health had better performance on cognitive tasks, and were able to maintain more positive emotions during stressful tasks. This group also had an increase in the hormone DHEAS (dehydroepiandrosterone), which has been associated with improved psychological resilience<sup>8</sup> and positive mood.<sup>9</sup>

What we see from this study is that the messaging we encounter can have a significant impact on how we perceive stress, and this can strongly influence our stress response, as well as our overall health and disease risk.

### Stress Perception and Resilience

Resilience is the capacity to recover quickly from adversity, pressures, and stress. Having good psychological resilience enables you to move from distress back to eustress easily, bounc-

5 Alia Crum, Peter Salovey, and Shawn Achor. (2013), “Rethinking stress: The role of mindsets in determining the stress response,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* Vol. 104, No. 4, pp. 716-733.

6 *Ibid.*

7 Alia Crum, Modupe Akinola, Ashley Martin, and Sean Fath, “The role of stress mindset in shaping cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses to challenging and threatening stress,” *Anxiety, Stress, & Coping*, Jan 25, 2017, pp. 1-17.

8 Denis Charney, “Psychobiological mechanisms of resilience and vulnerability: implications for successful adaptation to extreme stress,” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, (2004) Feb; 161(2), pp. 195-216.

9 Cheryl Frye and Elizabeth Lacey, “The neurosteroids DHEA and DHEAS may influence cognitive performance by altering affective state,” *Physiology & Behavior*, (1999) Mar; 66(1), pp. 85-92.

ing back quickly from the physical and mental consequences of the stress response. Resilience is not necessarily a trait that you are born with, but is certainly a capacity that can be developed.

Having a stress-is-enhancing mindset can lead to high resilience to stress. Even if you are not a natural “optimist,” or don’t tend to see your stressors as challenges, you can change your stress mindset and build resilience.

## Build Resilience through a Good-for-You Stress Mindset

You are not stuck with the stress mindset you have today. The following are ways to build a Stress-Is-Enhancing mindset.

### 1. See stress as a challenge.

Honing the stress-is-enhancing mindset revolves around the ability to see a stressor as a challenge instead of a problem. When you think “this is too hard, I can’t do this”, instead try “this will pose an interesting challenge; how do I tackle this?” This change in thinking will not happen overnight, but as a result of conscious effort to reframe stressors as challenges.

### 2. Build the resources you need to tackle the challenges.

Like a mountain climber trying to tackle a tough climb, you need to go in with the right equipment to meet the challenge. Ask yourself what you need to tackle your stressors as challenges. Do you need more time, or to build stamina through improving physical health? Or, do you simply need a colleague or friend to hear you out?

### 3. Rest and recover.

Like climbing a mountain or running a marathon, stress places physical and mental pressures on us, and our bodies and minds need to rest to return back to a healthy state of function. Comparing the intensity and duration of your stress to running may be helpful in determining how long you need to rest. After a sprint, you just need some time to catch your breath. If you run five miles, you may need to stay off your feet for a few hours. For a full marathon, you may need some more concentrated days off, maybe some help from a professional to help you restore. From a stress perspective, this may involve massage, counselling, meditation, or yoga.

### 4. Take negative stress messages with a grain of salt.

Negative messaging about stress is almost everywhere. It may be useful to take a break from viewing these messages; put down that smartphone, take a break from social media, etc. And, if you’re finding it hard to avoid negative messages, focus on Step 5, to see your stressors as a challenge you can deal with competently and effectively.

### 5. Surround yourself with positive messages.

Viewing messages that stress can be enhancing may change your stress response for the better. Take the time to find and read pieces on the benefits of stress. Talk about the positive aspects of stress and discuss your stressors as a challenge instead of a problem with your family and friends, and change the conversation around you.

## Conclusion

Stress is an inevitable part of all our lives. Running away from stress is not a viable option; however, reviewing and practicing some of the approaches mentioned in this article can help turn stress from a bad experience into a positive gain. **MW**

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