



GOOD & STRESSED

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I. Introduction: What Is Stress?

- A. Consider how you view stress, how it affects you, what you feel about it
- B. **Definition:** American Institute of Stress (stress.org): *“While everyone can’t agree on a definition of stress, all of our experimental and clinical research confirms that the sense of having little or no control is always distressful—and that’s what stress is all about.”*
- C. Historically understood as a negative experience; should be avoided, decreased, and managed
- D. In training for field workers, the stress of living cross-culturally is highly emphasized. Measures are taken of how much stress you may expect—my measurement, for example, placed me in a category of expecting a major illness in two years’ time.
- E. But is there a different view? Does stress have to mean lost years, lost health, and lost hope?

II. A New Approach

- A. Discovered Dr. Kelly McGonigal’s work, *The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You and How to Get Good at It* (New York: Avery, 2015) (page numbers below refer to this book)
- B. Based on new mindset research, encourages a whole different perspective—embracing stress as a resource rather than as a detriment

C. Who is Dr. Kelly McGonigal?

- 1. Health psychologist out of Stanford
- 2. Historically had embraced negative view of stress and taught people how to reduce, manage, and “survive” stress
- 3. What changed? She found the following study:
Study tracked 30,000 adults. They were asked in 1998 how much stress they had and how they viewed it. In 2008, public records were used to track the fatality rate of those same 30,000. High level of stress did increased risk of fatality. However, it was not the stress alone that increased risk. It was the combination of higher stress with a negative view of stress. Those with same levels of stress who reported a



positive view or neutral view of stress were healthy, had the lowest risk of death of everyone. This needs to be emphasized; it is not the stress that caused biological harm alone—it was the belief that stress would cause biological harm, along with the stress. (p. xii, introduction)

4. Key to understanding this approach to stress, is that we are looking at how the mind directly affects the body. For the most part we understand that the body affects the mind—exercise releases endorphins and all kinds of good things happen in your mind to increase your concentration, clarity, etc. But we rarely consider how the mind may directly affect the body—it can be difficult to grasp that how you think can change your chemical makeup. Let's use a couple of studies to demonstrate this.
 - a. Hotel domestic workers (study done by Dr. Alice Crum, p. 5): Two groups of workers. First group were told the benefits of exercise. Second group was told the benefits of exercise and how the work they did (vacuuming, changing beds, etc.) actually met surgeon general's criteria for recommended exercise amount. Tracked both groups for 4 weeks. First group, no change. Second group lost weight and body fat and had more positive view of job. Blood pressure was also lower. No other changes had been made in their lives, other than the perception that their work was exercise. This took one 15-minute intervention to change their mindset, which in turn, changed their physical body.
 - b. Study on stress, also done by Crum (pp.7–9): 3-minute video demonstrating and explaining positive effects of stress led to study participants performing better in a mock job interview. Higher levels of DHEA were found in their spit as well, which is released along with cortisol when the body experiences stress. However, a better ratio of DHEA to cortisol creates a “growth index”—better problem solving, resilience, better focus, and decreased negative after-effects of stress. In other words, a 3-minute video on positive aspects of stress started to change participants' mindsets and they experienced a biochemical change due to the way they were thinking about stress.

III. What is a Mindset?

- A. Definition: “Beliefs that shape your reality, including objective physical reactions, and even long-term health, happiness, and success.” (p. 4)
- B. A mindset is beyond simple preferences—it influences how you carry out daily life and how you think about your life.
- C. Mindsets can be changed—it is important to realize that you can actively direct your thoughts and attitudes. This is where hearing how you talk to yourself and others is extremely important.
 1. Examples of what I mean about the importance of speech:
 - a. Mindset research focuses a great deal on education. As you may know, in the 1990s, self-esteem was a major focus. It was thought that if you told children “you are really good at that,” their self esteem would be raised. Instead, they saw the opposite. Praising and constant rewarding actually lowered self-esteem and lowered performance. But when hard work and perseverance were encouraged, growth could happen and better performance was achieved. How we talk influences our mindsets—if you believe intelligence, for example, is a fixed trait, and you've been told you're smart—fear is experienced when being asked to learn something new and new



challenges are then avoided as you don't want anyone to think you're not smart. But if you are praised for how hard you work and for your perseverance, you feel freedom to pursue new challenges and learn to work for success.

- b. A personal example: As our oldest son started Flemish school, we would often tell him, "Kai, your Dutch is so good. You're doing a great job." One night at bedtime, my 4-year old tearfully told me "Mommy, I'm not very good at Dutch. I don't understand it." We quickly realized the mistake we had been making. We changed our encouragement to "Kai, we are so proud of how hard you are working" and other things along that line. In a matter of weeks, Kai's proficiency in Dutch began to explode. It's important how we talk to others and ourselves.

2. Steps to changing mindsets (p. 30):

- a. Learn new information/point of view
- b. Do an exercise that helps you take on the new point of view
- c. Share it with others
- d. Final thought on mindset interventions: incredible tools as they are often quite short (as little as a 3-minute video), but are providing lasting changes. Most people, in the long term, don't remember the intervention even, but still show higher resilience and health.

IV. Four Important "Reframes" to Change Mindset.

A. A Stressful Life → Meaningful Life (Context Change)

1. Where would you be without the stress you have? My kids, my work, and my relationships all cause stress. Do I really want a "stress-free" life?
2. Gallup World Poll found that a nation's well-being was connected to its level of stress. But not the way you might think. A nation that reported a higher level of stress also reported higher levels of happiness, satisfaction, and overall health. (p. 63)
 - a. Identifying values and seeing those in your everyday tasks is key: Stanford study on students over Christmas break—one group asked to journal about values; second group was asked to journal on good things that happened. Values group reported better health and satisfaction upon return —students with higher levels of stress reported highest positive impact from values journaling. (pp. 69–70)
3. The mindset values intervention is well-studied and has been shown to be one of the most powerful and effective interventions. Why? Because it gives deeper meaning to everyday tasks; the small stressors of daily life become viewed through the lens of greater values and are brushed off more easily.
4. Intervention: Start with first intervention slide and consider what are stressors for you and what they add to your life. Next, take time to utilize the values intervention on the power point presentation. Identify your values and journal for 10 minutes on your top priority.

B. Threat → Challenge

1. Athletic competition versus taking a test: Why do athletes amp themselves up for a game but students try to calm themselves down? This question led to an understanding of two types of responses to stress:
 - a. Threat response — classic fight or flight — heart rate increases, adrenaline kicks in, fear response, body can respond with extraordinary, even miraculous, strength



- a. Challenge response — similar in that heart rate increases and adrenaline is released and strong chemical response. What's different? Focused, not fearful. Hormones are slightly different — higher level of DHEA which allows for learning from experience. When an athlete, artist, surgeon are doing what they are skilled in—they are in this challenge state—they're not calm, instead they're in a very healthy challenge response state
2. A study that helps demonstrate this research (researcher: Dr. Jeremy Jamieson, p. 99): Social stress test used to test effects of understanding benefits of stress response. Social stress test puts participants through a public speaking component and math solving component, which is attended by listeners trained to give as poor feedback as possible. Considered to be one of the most difficult tests available.
 - a. Three groups
 - i. one group was placebo
 - ii. one group, told to ignore stress
 - iii. one group was told benefits of stress response and how our bodies are trying to rise to the occasion
 - b. Mindset intervention group had incredible results:
 - i. increased perception of internal resources
 - ii. moved cardiovascular response from threat to challenge
 - iii. they presented with more confidence and better body language
 - iv. overall, they performed better
 - v. afterwards had more resilience to fear of failure
 - vi. further, participants included those with social anxiety disorder and same results were found
3. How to embrace somatic (bodily) reactions to stress:
 - a. Reframe what body is doing; heart is racing because of excitement, stomach is feeling nervous as it is releasing chemicals to help increase performance; palms are sweaty as you are close to something you desire
 - b. Catch negative cognitions: "I'm too nervous to talk" becomes "I'm so excited to share this information"
4. Take time to work through Challenge Intervention on power point; take 10 minutes and think through these pieces. If possible, share with another person some of your reflections.

C. Fight or Flight → Connect

1. Initially responses to stress were thought to fall entirely into 2 categories: fight or flight. However, connect is a third option and it proves helpful.
2. "Tend and befriend" — when you decide to help someone else, you activate the state in your brain that triggers courage and creates hope (p. 139)
 - a. One study found a strong contrast between those that were active in community and those that were not. For those that were not active, a new stressor was highly correlated with likelihood of sickness. For those that were active and connected, there was zero correlation between stress and negative health developments (University of Buffalo, p. 156)
3. Generosity with your time and money, is shown to also increase these positive results



- in the brain—one study out of Wharton concluded that if you feel like you have no time, the best way to gain time is to use some of it to help others (p. 141)
4. It is important to look for connections outside of yourself— finding goals that are “greater than yourself” decreases stress and increases performance (pp. 144–48)
 5. Sense of common humanity—are you actually alone in your suffering? People that can recognize how others they know or don’t know have similar struggles present with higher resilience and coping skills (pp. 165–70)
 6. Connection Intervention; utilize power point slide to take time to adopt connection reframe into your life. Again, share with another person as you are able.

V. Avoid Adversity → Claim Gospel Truth

- A. Claiming gospel truth is my phrase, not Dr. McGonigal’s. But the reframe here is so tied to Scripture, I felt we had to connect it directly to God’s promises to us.
- B. Psychological community has struggled to accept study done on adversity. “Whatever Does Not Kill Us” (Researcher: Dr. Seery, p. 184). Study showed strengths in people who had gone through a moderate level of adversity. (Seery stipulates that there is simply not enough data or participants with high level of adversity to know exactly how adversity affects them—it would not be a sound conclusion that someone who has experienced higher than moderate levels of adversity is without hope...). In fact, people who had experienced moderate levels of adversity were healthier than those who had experienced low (they had lower risk of depression, better physical health, and great life satisfaction). The psychological community has trouble with this study as they feel it endorses suffering/ trauma. However, as Christians, we should see this as another sign of God’s redemptive work; he has hardwired into our brains ways in which suffering can be redeemed for good in our lives.
- C. Benefit finding—when participants in studies are asked to find an upside to their difficulty, they experienced increased positive biological responses and were moved from threat responses to challenge responses (pp. 202–6).
- D. Post traumatic growth—when these stories are shared, people can experience vicarious resilience. In other words, resilience can be “contagious” (pp. 212–16).
- E. Allow yourself time to perform the “Claim” intervention. Remember, this is not an exercise in ignoring the pain or suffering you (or others) have experienced. It is a choice to find a benefit or an area of growth that occurred through the experience. It in no way means you are saying that the suffering or trauma was inherently good. Are you able to share a story of resilience with another person?

VI. Final Thoughts

- A. Stress is a part of life, whether or not it is desired. What is exciting is that research is showing that God has provided tools both internally and externally to allow us to flourish as we experience stress.
- B. This research could mean significant changes for you and for those that you influence. Challenge yourself in how you think and talk about stress.
- C. Remember your context, accept the challenge, connect with others, and claim the truth about adversity.