

**Harvard
Business
Review**

Stress Management

To Handle Increased Stress, Build Your Resilience

by Ama Marston and Stephanie Marston

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Summary. For many of us, the initial response to stress is to look for external fixes. We turn to productivity tools or apps that promise to help us manage mounting pressures or we look for ways to alleviate our discomfort: find a different job, hire a new employee, or switch careers. But these solutions are often temporary and ineffective. Managing stress over the long-term requires cultivating skills that help you turn changes, stresses, and challenges into opportunities. Start by reframing how you think about stress. Shift your focus from eliminating day-to-day pressures to changing your perception of them. Recognize what you can and can't control. For example, you may not be able to change other people's behavior, but you can still take positive action. Better understand the root causes of your stress and identify possible ways to alleviate them. Finally, ask "What can I learn from this?" instead of "Why me?" to shape the challenge to your advantage. You can even jot down three possible ways in which you might be able to learn something from the stress you're experiencing. [close](#)

Wherever you live or work, stress is on the rise. According to the International Labour Organization, workers in developed and developing countries are facing increasing strain at work. The onslaught of mounting stressors include global challenges, such as climate change, terrorism, and political turmoil – as well as personal and professional challenges, such as illnesses, job changes, and organizational restructuring.

For many of us, the initial response to stress is to look for external fixes. We turn to productivity tools or apps that promise to help us manage mounting pressures or we look for ways to alleviate our discomfort: find a different job, hire a new employee to take on an increased workload, or switch careers. But these solutions are often temporary and ineffective. Managing stress over the long-

term requires cultivating your own resilience skills before seeking external solutions so that you can turn changes, stresses, and challenges into opportunities. These skills include adaptability, a healthy relationship to control, continual learning, having a sense of purpose, and knowing how to leverage support and appropriate resources.

To begin to shift the way you deal with stress and cultivate resilience, there are a handful of things you can do right now.

Reframe how you think about stress

How we perceive stress can be just as important to how we handle it as the amount of stress we're experiencing. Researchers at the University of Buffalo found that stressors, big and small, help us develop the skills to face other taxing or stressful circumstances in the future. A 2013 Harvard study also revealed that when researchers told participants that the physiological signs of stress prepared them to cope better they became less anxious and more confident in stressful situations, viewing their stress response as helpful. As a result, their hearts and blood vessels responded in the same manner that they would in times of intense happiness.

Shift your focus from eliminating the day-to-day pressures that you face to changing your perception of them. You might ask, "How can I use the energy created by feeling stressed about this

new job to better prepare for it?” or “What can I learn from the stress about my increased workload that will help me better prioritize my time?”

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When overwhelmed or anxious, pause to examine how your default outlook is influencing your perception of the stress. What messages do you hear from family, friends, and colleagues about how you should think about stressful circumstances? Look back at a previous stressful situation and ask, “Did I think that I had the resources both internal and external to meet the challenge at the time? What might I do differently now knowing what I learned from that situation?”

That said, it's possible to have too much stress. Pay attention to the early warning signs that you might be burning out, whether it's back pain, headaches, or sleepless nights, short-temperedness or relying more heavily on “comforting habits” like drinking or excessive eating. Become familiar with your own distress signals and take note when occasional signs become more frequent.

Create a healthy relationship to control

Being able to separate out what you can and cannot control is essential. When you're overwhelmed, it's easy to assume you can't change your situation. Research from the University of Capetown and the Ashridge MBA program in the UK found that business students who believe their success is primarily their responsibility tended to take on too much ownership for events in the external world and in doing so created significant stress for themselves.

There are things that may always be outside of your control: other people's behavior, weather, a financial crisis, or just plain bad timing. Ask yourself, "How close am I to the root causes or decision makers in these circumstances? Do I have the skills, information, resources, or relationships that enable me to change or influence this situation?" Make a note, either mentally or in written form of what's within and outside of your influence.

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For things that you can't control, recognize that you *do* have the ability to choose how to interpret or frame them.

Understand the root causes

Take time to reflect on your personal context as well as the

larger business and global context to better understand the root

causes and possible ways to alleviate and avoid future stress. For instance, did you grow up in a family or a culture where disagreement or conflict was avoided? If so, that's likely to exacerbate your discomfort and stress when confrontational situations arise. Be aware of your habits and instinctual responses and possibly seek additional support to build skills to more comfortably navigate conflict.

Much of what takes place globally whether economic, political, social, or environmental, impacts our outlook as well. Ask yourself, "Am I, my team, or my business under strain from a greater trend that is also affecting others in my industry or in my community? If so, do I/we need to adapt plans and expectations? Are there others who provide good examples of what works in this new context or how to turn this into an opportunity?"

Link learning with action

We can choose to see difficult circumstances as learning opportunities rather than as a time to shut down. When we ask "What can I learn from this?" instead of "Why me?" we can shape the challenge to our advantage.

Start by jotting down three possible ways in which you might be able to learn something from the stress you're experiencing. It might be something related to identifying or managing your emotions, or new interpersonal or technical skills. Reflecting in this

way will help you avoid going after fixes or “options” that may temporarily ease your discomfort but don’t address the root causes.

Analysis alone isn’t enough. Researchers point out that analysis without action leads to rumination and anxiety. By identifying actions you can take you’ll be able experiment with solutions and new behaviors and discover productive ways to handle challenges and stress.

By making conscious choices that help us build these skills, we’ll be better equipped to turn our stress and challenges into opportunities. With stronger internal resilience, we can then be proactive and intentional about how we use technology and other external tools to improve the quality of our lives and our work and find solutions to the business, social, and global pressures we face. When it comes to handling stress, start with yourself: we are our own most effective, powerful resource.

AM

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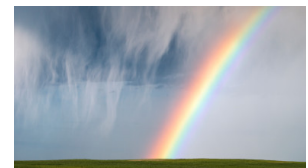
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