



Good Stress vs. Bad Stress: A New Approach

If you're like most Americans these days, chances are you're feeling pretty stressed out right now. Your life is overscheduled, your mind feels pulled in many different directions, and you often struggle to keep up with all the various demands of a single day.

But did you know stress doesn't necessarily have to be a bad thing? In fact, according to much of the latest research, what actually seems to be far more important than the amount of stress you have in your life is how you perceive and manage that stress. The right kinds of stress—known as “eustress” by psychologists—can actually offer us many benefits. In addition, most of the “bad stress” we face can be turned into “good stress” if we can only learn to make a few simple adjustments in our approach to it.

So, while we can't just remove all the stress from our daily life, we're beginning to learn that we can do some basic things to manage or offset its overall impact on us.

First and foremost, we can change our perception of stress, which leads to a change in our experience of it. Our brains evolved long ago to set off an alarm, an automatic stress response, whenever we encounter any perceived threats in our environment. But, if we can learn to interpret a stressful event as a challenge or an opportunity—rather than a threat—that toxic mix of anxiety and fear can actually transform into feelings of excitement, motivation, courage, resilience, and resolve. Over time, the “distress” becomes a kind of “eustress”. It's all a matter of perception.

So how do we change our basic approach to stress? Here are a few quick tips:

Reframe stressful situations.

Challenge the story you're telling yourself about your stress. Your boss changes your role at work unexpectedly? An opportunity to learn new things. An argument with your partner? A chance to find a new way forward. Finding a new perspective on a stressor literally changes your body's response to it.

Define the kind of stress you're facing.

Good stress helps us learn new things, achieve goals, adapt to new situations, and find creative solutions. We feel energized and in control of a situation. Bad stress, characterized by feeling high amounts of responsibility in a situation and low amounts of actual control over its outcome, inhibits our functioning and gives rise to anxiety, tension, and fatigue. If you take a moment to identify which type of stress you're facing, you can then figure out the best way to proceed.

Embrace good stress.

The right kind of stress can be enormously helpful to us in our daily lives. Look for situations and opportunities that challenge you, or that you find meaning or enjoyment in, and then embrace them!

Offset bad stress.

Chronic stress, if it can't be reframed or avoided, can often be offset by building healthy habits that increase capacity and resiliency. This includes doing things like:

- Getting good, consistent sleep
- Engaging in regular, moderate exercise
- Eating healthy and at regular intervals
- Reducing caffeine intake (drink more water instead)
- Having a good support network, personally and professionally
- Building pockets of "rest and recovery time" into your daily routine
- Finding meaning in your work
- Helping other people around you
- Making time for pleasurable activities

Remember, stress itself is not the enemy here – it's all about your perception of stress and how you learn to harness it. As noted health psychologist Kelly McGonigal recently noted, stress itself isn't bad for you, but thinking that it is bad for you absolutely is.

"Create meaning in your life," says McGonigal, "and then trust yourself to handle the stress that follows."

*Source: Chad Perman, MA, LMFT
Therapist at the Bellevue Branch of WellSpring Counseling*