

**Session 7: Stress**

We have all heard that stress kills, that we should learn to manage our stress because stress is a bad thing. That’s true, but not exactly the way you have heard. Living a stress-free life is not good either. The only people who are truly stress-free are dead and that’s not what you want either. Stress isn’t the problem, distress is.

Let’s start with defining the term stress because we are a little sloppy in our use of that word.

The term “stress”, as it is currently used was coined by Hans Selye in 1936, who defined it as “**the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change**”. Since a demand for change occurs almost every minute of every day, we are under a constant demand for change. My alarm goes off signaling that it’s time to make a change in my rest pattern. My husband brings me coffee and both the smell and presence of the coffee signals my body that there will be a change in my caffeine level. My gas gauge signals the need for a change in my plan in how I will get to work because now I need to stop to fill my tank. Change is all around us, all the time, and therefore, stress is constantly present. Stress, by itself, is not the problem. It’s the degree of stress that presents the difficulty.

According to the Yerkes-Dodson Law, there is an association between performance and stress. At one end of the curve, we have little to no stress and the result is complacency, lack of motivation, boredom, and sadness. At this end of the curve, nothing good is happening. We aren’t taking the steps to make good things happen in our lives or dealing with the challenges that are a natural part of living. We aren’t helping ourselves and we can easily become victims of addiction and illness, both physical and mental. Active seniors who have an accident and suddenly need to be cared for in a nursing home face a situation in which all their needs are being addressed and very little is being demanded of them. You might think this would be a wonderful situation but with little to no demands, there hold on life often slips and dementia or other physical health issues emerge. Our bodies and our minds are not meant for a stress-free life.

At the other end of the curve is distress. This is where demands are higher than our capacity for responding. Things feel out of control and we are overwhelmed. At this end of the curve, we experience anxiety, panic, and emotional and mental paralysis. We don’t know where to start and we feel like we are at the mercy of our environment. It might feel like the harder you work, the behinder you get or like you can’t do anything right, no matter what you do it won’t be good enough. This is an awful place to be and living here for too long is going to cause damage to both your physical and emotional health. Anger, frustration, fear, a sense of failure, and unworthiness are your companions and both the quality and quantity of your performance grinds to a halt.

Clearly, not enough stress or too much stress are a problem. What’s in the middle? What’s the compromise. It turns out that stress can be your friend when you move past complacency and before you tip over into distress. The middle is called eustress and eustress is where the good things in life occur, it’s the good stress. It produces positive feelings of excitement, fulfillment, meaning, satisfaction, and well-being. It helps you to feel confident, adequate, and stimulated by the challenge you experience from the stressor. Eustress occurs when you are learning something new, you are actively working toward a valued goal, or when you are pushing yourself just a little outside of your comfort zone. You are feeling some pressure or challenge, but you know you have the resources to manage it and you are in control. You understand that you have a choice, you can turn off the pressure or walk away from the challenge, but you don’t want to because the result matters to you and you know that with effort, you can achieve that result. It is in this zone that your productivity is at its highest and you are making good things happen. It isn’t easy but you can feel your capacity growing and with it, your self-esteem and sense of purpose and value.

Moving past complacency and toward eustress is simple but not always easy. It involves taking action and if you are deeply immersed in the depression associated with the lack of stressors, you might need some help to get started. Mel Robbins suggests the 5-second rule. When faced with the need to get out of bed or to do something that, at the moment looks daunting, she says to count to five and then get started. This strategy requires that you make the commitment to do something when you reach five. If you just take the next small step, chances are you will continue the momentum and take the next step and then the next step. For example, you are lying in bed, and you really don’t want to get up. The alarm rings and you commit to putting your feet on the floor when you reach five. That’s all, just your feet on the floor. Once you have done that, it is much easier to actually stand up, and walk away from that comfy, warm bed.

On the other side of the curve, when you are feeling overwhelmed, the goal is not to be free of stress but simply to ramp it back so that it is manageable. You want to reduce the demands just enough to give you that sense of control, to allow you to think clearly, and take productive actions. When you are in the distress zone, your sympathetic, fight or flight response is fully engaged, and cortisol and adrenaline are flooding your body. You need to trigger the parasympathetic rest and digest response so that your body can replace the chemicals that are causing you physical and emotional harm and instead, pump up the production of all the helpful chemicals like dopamine, oxytocin, serotonin, and endorphins. How do you do that? There are a host of strategies you can use but the best of the best all includes deep breathing. Why? Because deep breathing stimulates the vagus nerve which triggers the rest and digest response. If you add mindfulness to this, you can slow your brain and your heart, allowing you to feel calmer, think more clearly, and feel more in control.

Mindfulness can be used reactively or proactively to help you manage your stress and move to the eustress zone and once there, to stay in that zone. The reactive use of mindfulness involves recognizing the signals of stress in your body such as sweaty hands, shallow breathing, your heart racing or butterflies in your stomach. Your stress signals might be a little different from others but, when you notice them, you can take a one- or two-minute break to engage in mindfulness. Then, when you return to taking action, you will do it with a fresh sense of control and clearer thinking. Proactive use of mindfulness involves engaging in regular, brief sessions of mindfulness before demands get out of control. By doing that, you put yourself in an optimal level of processing and you can often prevent those demands from every tipping you over into the distress zone. Instead of stress causing you harm, you are now using stress to help you achieve the things that matter most to you. It is contributing to your sense of well-being and your quality of life. There is no need to be afraid of stress because now, it is your friend. It is helping you and you are in control! Good things happen when we make friends with stress.