Adapting to Stress
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RULE NUMBER 1:
Don’t sweat the small stuff.

RULE NUMBER 2:
When managed well, it’s all small stuff.

If cavemen and cavewomen had not experienced “stress” when surprised by saber-toothed tigers, they would have been history’s first fast-food meals.

True — our early predecessors didn’t have to cope with traffic gridlock, voice mail, or holiday shopping — but they had their problems.

Life is largely a process of adapting to the situations that surround us — whether this involves adjusting to the loss of a loved one, dealing with “difficult people,” falling in love, or getting a promotion.

In large part, our health and happiness depend on how successful we are in this effort.

This easy-to-read booklet can help you hone your skills in adapting to the challenges and opportunities of daily living.

It offers practical tips you can use today — to change your attitude when you can’t change your world. And it supports a way of thinking and acting that can have you believing “it’s all small stuff.”
A caveman had two options upon finding himself face-to-face with a saber-toothed tiger. He could fight off the attack—or he could run like crazy. To do either, his body had to be able to prime itself—in seconds—to do more than usual.

**Today’s tigers**

While this alarm response (stress) worked pretty well for our ancestors, it’s not very practical today.

This is because today’s “tigers” are rarely direct threats to life and limb. Most of them—deadlines, traffic jams, child-care hassles, job worries—are primarily emotional.

Rarely is it appropriate (or effective) to lash out at, or run away from, modern-day hassles.

Nonetheless, our bodies tend to respond to all threats—whether they’re physical or emotional, real or perceived—as if we still lived in the jungle.

When we allow ourselves to become frightened, frustrated, upset, or angry—and don’t provide a release—physical and mental health problems can result.

**The ‘Fight or Flight Response’**

Some of the ways the body prepares itself to meet danger (real or perceived):

- Stored sugars and fats are released into the bloodstream to provide quick energy.
- The heart beats faster to provide more blood to the muscles.
- The breathing rate increases to provide more oxygen to the blood.
- Blood-clotting mechanisms are activated to protect against possible injury.
- Muscles tense in preparation for action.
- Digestion ceases so that more blood is available to the brain and muscles.
- Perspiration increases to help reduce body temperature.
- The pupils dilate, and the senses of smell and hearing become more acute.

*Source: University of Wisconsin, LaCrosse*

“Some days you’re the pigeon, some days you’re the statue.”

— Joel Goodman
WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is a natural reaction of the body to any demand ("pleasant" or "unpleasant") placed upon it. Although we sometimes face physical stressors like having to hit the brakes in traffic, it’s the emotional stressors like hurry and worry that are the major stressors of modern times.

4 Things that ain’t so

MYTH #1
Only unpleasant situations are stressful.

Landing a new job can be as stressful as getting laid off. Falling in love can be as stressful as breaking up. We secrete stress hormones into our bloodstream when we win an award and when we witness an accident. Adapting to any change — positive or negative — is potentially “stressful.”

MYTH #2
Stress makes you less productive.

Too little stress (boredom) can make you as unproductive as too much stress.

Everyone has an ideal level of stress.

Having enough changes and stimulation in your life — but not too much — is the secret to maximizing health, happiness, and productivity.

The trick is to find out how much stress is right for you — and to find ways of keeping the changes in your life within your comfort range.

MYTH #3
Workaholics should slow down or they’ll get sick.

Stress researchers have found that many workaholics are very satisfied with their lives. People who work long hours “for a cause greater than themselves” tend to have excellent health.

You can’t force a turtle to run like a race horse, and you can’t force a race horse to plod like a turtle.

People with “race horse personalities” who take care of themselves and their relationships are just as healthy as anyone else.

Source: Marcia Miceli, Professor, Ohio State University’s College of Business

MYTH #4
What’s stressful for me is stressful for you.

If three people were trapped in an elevator, one might “flip out”; one might remain calm during the experience and have an anxiety attack later; and a third might be totally unaffected.

Situations are rarely stressful in and of themselves. Many great people in history have even faced torture and death with poise and equanimity.

Stress is something we create in our minds.

Mental stress is dependent upon how we interpret the events that are happening around us.

Source: Wesley E. Sime, PhD, Department of Health and Human Performance, University of Nebraska Lincoln
Over 30 years ago, researchers developed a 43-item checklist that measured the cumulative load of potentially stressful changes. What they found is that there is a strong relationship between the amount of change in people's lives and their risk of injury and illness.

That is, the more changes in one's life, the greater the risk of injury or illness leading to hospitalization.

Here's an updated checklist for today's lifestyles.

NOTE!

- It takes physical and mental energy to adapt to change — whether we see the change as important or trivial, planned or unplanned, joyful or sad.

- Adapting to any change causes physical and mental “stress.”

- Stress is cumulative. That is, it builds up. A lot of small changes add up and put us over the edge — as surely as one major change.

- When we allow too much change into our lives at one time, accidents and illness are more likely to happen.

- It's important to spread life's changes out over time as much as possible.

Try not to graduate, get married, start a family, and get a new job all in the course of a year.

Pace yourself.

Give yourself plenty of time to adjust to one big change before you take on another.

Most important, allow yourself some slack so you can cope if an unexpected change like illness comes up.

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**THE NEW SOCIAL READJUSTMENT RATING SCALE**

**HEALTH**
- Injury or illness which... kept you in bed a week or more
  - was less serious than that
  - Major dental work
  - Major change in eating habits
  - Major change in sleeping habits
  - Major change in your usual type/amount of recreation

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## LIFE’S CHANGES

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**TOTAL SCORE:**

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**DIRECTIONS**

Read the list of life events. Enter the score for each event that has occurred to you in the past 12 months. If any event occurred more than once, multiply the point value by the number of times it occurred. Then, total your score.

**YOUR SCORE**

A total score of 250 to 500 is considered a moderate amount of stress. If you score higher, research indicates you may face an increased risk of illness.

Source: Journal of Psychosomatic Research, Vol. 49, No. 3

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**IT’S YOUR CHOICE**

**How to cope with change**

- This study implies that stress is caused by some event or situation outside of us.

  But this is not really true. Stress has more to do with how we react to a given event in our minds. Not everyone who scores high on this scale is heading for illness. This is because we all interpret and react to change (stress) differently.

- **Life events don’t create our stress: our mind creates our stress.**

  If it’s not easy for you to adjust to change (“good” or “bad”), try to limit the number of changes that occur at any one time. Use this list of major life events as a guide.

  For most people, spreading life changes out over time is one of the best ways to prevent stress, accidents, and illness.

- **When an unplanned change occurs** (e.g., job loss), you can choose to overreact — or you can choose to take it in stride and “roll with the punches.”

  If it’s impossible to fight or flee from a problem, consider flowing with it.
About Your World

One way we can reduce stress is to change our minds about how we relate to the world.

Changing Your Mind

It makes sense to learn how to react to situations in a way that doesn’t disturb our inner peace.

We can react to any situation with positive, constructive, loving thoughts — or react with negative thoughts.

We can choose to forgive and forget — or let something bother us forever.

“We see things not as they are — but as we are.”

Listen to your internal talk

• Is the situation really that awful? (If World War II was “awful,” can this situation be considered “awful” as well?)

• What can you learn from this situation?

• Is it true that you can’t stand it? (Maybe you just don’t like it.)

• Have you lived through similar situations and survived?

• How can a situation make you a “rotten” person? (You make your share of mistakes — but this doesn’t make you rotten; it simply makes you human.)

You can choose to say negative things to yourself, or you can choose to forgive and forget — and carry on.

Stress is not something that happens to us. Stress is something we talk ourselves into.

We all talk to ourselves throughout the day, whether we’re aware of it or not. This self-talk can make us our own best friend, or our own worst enemy.

It’s commonly thought that the people and the situations around us are responsible for our stress.

When we take a closer look, it’s clear that no one can make us feel sad, angry, jealous, ignorant, or incompetent except ourselves.

As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.”

Negative self-talk can cause your:

- heart to pound.
- palms to sweat.
- blood pressure to rise.

Positive self-talk can help you:

- take a deep breath.
- go with the flow.
- think of “difficult” people as hurt, worried, fearful, or needy.
- think of problems as “opportunities in disguise.”

Self-talk that’s stressful

- It’s absolutely necessary for me to have love and approval from everyone all the time.

- I must be unceasingly competent and perfect in everything I do.

- It’s horrible when people don’t act the way I’d like them to act.

- It’s horrible when things don’t happen where/when/how I’d like them to happen.

- If I don’t go to great lengths to please others, they will abandon me or reject me.

- When people disapprove of me, it means I am wrong or bad.

- I need perfect love and a perfect relationship to be happy.

- My worth as a person depends upon how much I achieve and produce.

- My way of looking at the world is the only way of looking at the world.
Although there are dozens of ways we can talk ourselves into feeling stressed-out and miserable, some common themes run through most negative self-talk.

**All-or-nothing self-talk**

This is thinking of everything as either black or white, yes or no, perfect or imperfect. (“My performance wasn’t perfect, so I’m a total failure.”)

**Overgeneralization self-talk**

You think of a single unhappy situation as being an endless pattern of defeat. (“I blew this assignment; that figures, I blow all my assignments.”)

**Ignoring the positive self-talk**

You forget the many positive things about yourself and your life the moment something “negative” surfaces. (“I’m a terrible speaker; I can’t do anything right!”)

**Negative programming self-talk**

You anticipate a negative outcome, and then act as if it were an established fact. (“I probably won’t get the job anyway, so there’s no use applying for it.”)

**Labeling self-talk**

You attach a label to yourself instead of simply describing the mistake. (“I’m scatterbrained and inconsiderate,” instead of, “I forgot an appointment.”)

**Egocentric self-talk**

You think of yourself as being totally responsible for other people’s moods or feelings. (“He’s in a terrible mood; it must be something I said.”)

**‘Should’ self-talk**

Some examples:

- **I should** be perfect all the time.
- **I should** be accepted, admired, and respected by everyone all the time.
- **I should** be treated with fairness and consideration at all times.
- **I should** have a life of pleasure without pain or obstacles; things **should** come easily to me — the world owes me.

If these *shoulds* don’t happen, I’ll feel simply awful, horrible, terrible, and I won’t be able to bear it.

*The next time you find yourself in a potentially ‗stressful‘ situation, take a deep breath; relax your stomach, back, shoulder, and jaw muscles; and do some ‗straight thinking‘.*

**Say these things to yourself, instead**

- **My thinking** affects the way I feel.
- **If I am unhappy about the way I am feeling,** I need to change the way I am thinking.
- **Is my thinking realistic,** or am I blowing things out of proportion?