

To Handle Increased Stress, Build Your Resilience

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Wherever you live or work, stress is on the rise. According to the United Nations' *International Labour Organization*, workers in developed and developing countries are facing increasing strain at work. The onslaught of mounting stressors includes 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 pressure, or we look for ways to alleviate our discomfort: Find a different job, hire a new employee to take on the increased workload, or switch careers altogether. 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 internal resilience skills include adaptability, having 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 are 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 their body's physiological signs of stress actually prepare them to cope better, those participants became less anxious and more confident in stressful situations, viewing their internal 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 perceptions of them. You might ask, "How can I use the energy created by being stressed about this new job to better prepare for it?" Or "What can I learn from feeling stress about my increased workload that will help me better prioritize my time?"

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 is possible to have *too much* stress. Pay attention to early warning signs that you might be burning out, whether those show up as back pain, headaches, sleepless nights, short-temperedness, or relying more heavily on "comforting habits" like drinking alcohol or excessive eating. Become familiar with your own distress signals and take note when occasional warning 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 feel overwhelmed, it's easy to assume you can't change your situation. Research from the University of Capetown and the United Kingdom's Ashridge MBA program found that business students who believe their success is primarily *their own responsibility* tended to take on too much ownership for events in the external world and, in doing so, created more significant stress for themselves.

There are things that will always be outside 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 is *within* your influence and what is *outside* of it. For things that you cannot 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. **This will help you better understand the root causes and see possible ways to alleviate or avoid future stress.** For instance, did you grow up in a family or a culture where disagreement and conflict were avoided? If so, that is 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 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 (or 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 trend 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 are 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 quick fixes or “options” that may temporarily ease your discomfort but don’t address the root causes.

Analysis alone is not enough. Researchers point out that analysis without action leads to ruminating and anxiety. By identifying specific actions you can take you’ll be able to 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 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 work, and find solutions to the business, social and global pressures we face. **When it comes to handling stress, start with yourself: You are your most effective, powerful resource.**

— **Ama Marston** is an internationally recognized strategy and leadership expert and co-author of *Type R: Transformative Resilience for Thriving in a Turbulent World* (2018). Forget *Type As* and *Type Bs*. The future lies with *Type Rs* — *resilient* individuals, businesses, families, and communities that turn challenges into opportunities during times of upheaval, crisis and change.

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