**How to be good at stress **By Kelly McGonigal

What does it mean to be “good” at stress? Does it mean you don’t get stressed out? That you stay calm under pressure and bounce back from adversity?

Actually, no. The truth of stress as I’ve researched it shows two important things. Firstly, that trying to avoid it is fundamentally counterproductive. Secondly, that thinking that we can emerge from stressful circumstances unscathed and unchanged is precisely the wrong way of thinking about things.

Instead, we need to start thinking about how to have the courage to grow from stress. This view of resilience was first described by the psychologist Salvatore Maddi, who founded the [Hardiness Research Lab](http://sites.uci.edu/hardinesslab/) at the University of California Irvine. He dedicated his career to identifying what distinguishes people who thrive under stress from those who are defeated by it. The ones who thrive, he concluded, are those who view stress as inevitable, and rather than try to avoid it, they look for ways to engage with it, adapt to it, and learn from it.

The idea that we grow through adversity is not new. It’s present in the teachings of every major religion and many philosophies. It’s even become a cliché to say, “Whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.” But what *is* new is how psychology and neuroscience have begun to examine this truism. Research is beginning to reveal not only why stress helps us learn and grow, but also what makes some people more likely to experience these benefits.

One of the more recent insights from this science is that the ability to learn from stress is built into the basic biology of the stress response. Of course, you know that the stress response gives you energy by flooding your body with adrenaline. But the stress response doesn’t end when your heart stops pounding. Other stress hormones are released to help you recover from the challenge.

These stress-recovery hormones include DHEA and nerve growth factor, both of which increase neuroplasticity. In other words, they help your brain learn from experience. DHEA is classified as a neurosteroid; in the same way that steroids help your body grow stronger from physical exercise, DHEA helps your brain grow stronger from psychological challenges. For several hours after you have a strong stress response, the brain is rewiring itself to remember and learn from the experience. Stress leaves an imprint on your brain that prepares you to handle similar stress the next time you encounter it.

Psychologists call the process of learning and growing from a difficult experience *stress inoculation*. Going through the experience gives your brain and body a kind of stress vaccine. This is why putting people through practice stress is a key training technique for NASA astronauts, Navy SEALS, emergency responders and elite athletes, and others who have to thrive under high levels of stress. But stress inoculation doesn’t just transfer to similar stress situations; getting good at one kind of stress often helps in unfamiliar challenges. For example, [when people were asked how they are coping with the biggest source of stress in their lives](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/8956515), eighty-two per cent said they were drawing on strengths and confidence developed from past stressful experiences.

Yet not every stressful situation creates the kind of learning that helps us thrive under future stress. As I’ve discovered with almost anything that seems to be “true” about stress, the opposite can also be true. (This is part of what makes the science of stress so fascinating, and also so puzzling.) Stress

can also be paralyzing, draining and traumatizing. Sometimes what we learn from stress is fear, not courage, or self-doubt instead of self-confidence.

It would be easy to assume the outcome is determined by the nature of the stressful circumstance—say, that we learn best from manageable stress, while severe stress is more likely to be debilitating. But that assumption doesn’t always hold up; people also commonly report growing from chronic, uncontrollable and even traumatic stress.

One thing that does seem to predict whether a stressful experience is strengthening is the biology of your stress response. In particular, the ratio of hormones you release plays a role in determining whether a stressful experience leads to positive or negative outcomes. [Higher levels of cortisol have been associated with worse outcomes](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/11972140), such as impaired immune function and depression. In contrast, [higher levels of DHEA](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20562010)—the neurosteroid—have been linked to reduced risk of anxiety, depression, heart disease, neurodegeneration and other diseases we typically think of as stress-related.

The ratio of DHEA to cortisol that you release during stress is [sometimes](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1540-4560.1998.tb01220.x/abstract) referred to as the *growth index* of your stress response. A higher growth index — meaning more DHEA relative to cortisol — is associated with thriving during and after stressful experiences. It helps college students persist in the face of academic stress and land higher GPAs; it’s associated with better performance, greater learning, and [fewer post-traumatic stress symptoms during military survival training](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15289280); and it’s even been shown to predict recovery from extreme trauma, such as [childhood abuse](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19536787).

An important question, then, is: How do you influence your own — or somebody else’s — growth index?

One strategy is to choose a more positive mindset toward stress. Make a conscious choice when you’re stressed to view stress as helpful, and the experience as an opportunity to learn and grow. This mindset can actually shift your stress physiology toward a state that makes such a positive outcome more likely, for example by increasing your growth index and reducing harmful side effects of stress such as inflammation.

I learned this firsthand when I participated in a mock study at Columbia Business School to better understand [the findings of stress mindset researcher Alia Crum](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23437923) (who is now a professor at Stanford University). In the actual study, Crum put people through a stressful mock job interview that included strongly negative feedback, which the participants were expected to act on immediately.  (And yes, even the mock study was stressful—even though I knew it was a scripted experiment and not a real evaluation!)

Before the job interview, every participant was randomly assigned to view one of two videos about stress. The three-minute video I watched opened with the message, “Most people think that stress is negative … but actually research shows that stress is enhancing.” The video went on to describe how stress can improve performance, enhance well-being, and help you grow. The other video, which half of the participants in the study watched, opened with the ominous announcement, “Most people know that stress is negative … but research shows that stress is even more debilitating than you expect.” The video went on to describe how stress can harm your health, happiness and performance at work. Crum found that people who were asked to view stress as enhancing released more DHEA during the interview, resulting in a higher growth index.

[Other studies](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23478676) confirm that viewing a stressful situation as an opportunity to improve your skills, knowledge or strengths makes it more likely that you will experience stress inoculation or stress-related growth. Once you appreciate that going through stress makes you better at it, it gets easier to face each new challenge. And the expectation of growth sends a signal to your brain and body: get ready to learn something, because you can handle this.

People who are good at stress allow themselves to be changed by the experience of stress. Embracing our natural capacity for growth can help us change in positive ways, even in circumstances we would never choose.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

[***Kelly McGonigal***](http://ideas.ted.com/author/kelly-mcgonigal/) *is a leader in the growing field of “science-help.” Through books, articles, courses and workshops, the Stanford University psychologist works to help us understand and implement the latest scientific findings in psychology, neuroscience and medicine.*

**Source**

This text was adapted from [The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You and How to Get Good at It](http://buy.geni.us/Proxy.ashx?TSID=12134&GR_URL=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.amazon.com%2FThe-Upside-Stress-Why-Good%2Fdp%2F1583335617%2F) by Kelly McGonigal.

http://ideas.ted.com/how-to-be-good-at-stress/