



## Introductory Exercise

As you walk in and get settled, take a few moments to reflect on the times in your life when you experienced the most personal growth. Be as specific as possible. What was it that motivated and fueled you to grow, learn, and improve during these times?

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## Part 1: The Paradox of Stress

Most likely your most productive periods of growth involved some stress. These experiences are a personal testament to the fact that stress can have enhancing effects. While most research focuses on the deteriorating aspects of stress, scientific research documents and explains that stress can actually enhance your performance, improve your health, and facilitate your learning and growth. Consider the following examples:

### Performance & Productivity:

- ◆ When the body encounters stress, it pumps hormones like adrenaline and dopamine throughout your system and fuels the brain and body with blood and oxygen. This response propels us into a superhuman state of increased energy, heightened alertness, and narrowed focus, which can help meet the demands of any stressor – mental or physical. Researchers call this effect *stress-related toughening* (e.g. Dienstbeier, 1989).

### Health & Vitality:

- ◆ While most research assumes that over time this short term stress response is bad for the system because it brings it out of balance, in many cases, these stress hormones actually induce a set of growth hormones which rebuild cells, synthesize proteins and enhance immunity, leaving the body even stronger and healthier than it was before. Researchers call this effect *physiological thriving* (e.g. Elissa Epel, 1999).

### Learning & Growth:

- ◆ In many cases, the experience of stress and adversity has been shown to facilitate the acquisition of mental toughness, deeper relationships, heightened awareness, new perspectives, sense of mastery, greater appreciation for life, sense of meaning, and strengthened priorities. Researchers call this *post-traumatic growth* (e.g. Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Park & Helgeson, 2006).

Learn more about the enhancing nature of stress by viewing our multimedia film clips: [http://pantheon.yale.edu/~ajc84/videos/all\\_e.html](http://pantheon.yale.edu/~ajc84/videos/all_e.html)

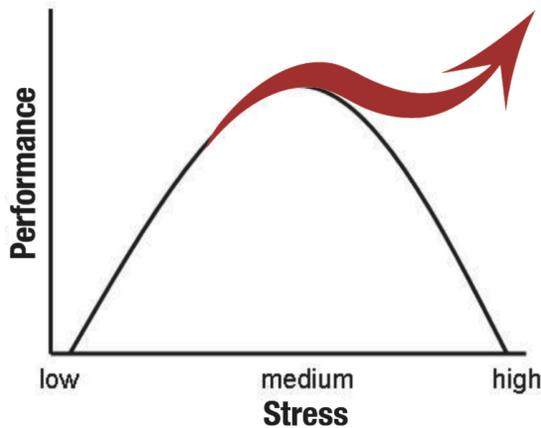


## The Power of Mindset

It is certainly paradoxical that while stress can and does have deteriorating consequences, it also has the capability of eliciting psychological growth and physiological thriving.

What is it that makes stress *enhancing* as opposed to *deteriorating*?

It is often assumed that the distinguishing factor is the amount or severity of stress: that stress is beneficial up to a critical point upon which any added stress will have deteriorating consequences. This assertion, while true to some degree, is both old and limiting. We rarely have ability or luxury to control the objective amount of stress and research suggests that attempts to avoid stress can actually increase anxiety and make the matter worse.



Fortunately, research also demonstrates that a new curve is possible: that people can and do actually reach higher levels of performance, health, and well-being under added stress and pressure.

Our research on the power of the mind suggests that one's mindset about stress is a *critical variable* which influences which response will occur. This research suggests that, regardless of the type or severity of stress you are experiencing, if

you can begin to believe in and focus on the enhancing possibilities of stress (as opposed to the deteriorating ones as most people do), these enhancing outcomes will be more likely to occur.

This is not about denying that stress can and does have deteriorating consequences. Rather, it is about shifting your pendulum of awareness and knowledge and then choosing to focus on what is most beneficial for you.

Just learning about the factual research on the enhancing nature of stress is the first step to changing your mindset and shifting your stress-response from the old curve to the new one. The final part of this training is devoted to skills and strategies through which you can choose to elicit an enhancing mindset actively and deliberately in the face of stress.



## Part 2: Three Steps to a Stress is Enhancing Mindset

### 1. STEP ONE: Acknowledge your stress. It is what it is.

*What is stressing you right now?* (Guidelines: Pick something that is very real for you, is current and/ or recurring, and that you want to work on improving your response to).

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*What are your typical responses to that stress?* (Guidelines: Write your objective observations, not criticisms or judgments).

Emotional Responses: Thoughts, beliefs and feelings that you generate (e.g. frustration, sadness, longing to get rid of the stress):

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Behavioral Responses: Actual actions or inactions you take (e.g. arguing, avoiding, eating ice cream):

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Physiological Responses: Sensations and changes that occur in your body (e.g. difficulty sleeping, tunnel vision, cloudy head, racing heart, stomach upset, fatigue).

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**2. STEP TWO: Welcome your stress. You are stressed because you care.**

Reconnect with the *positive motivation and/or personal value* behind your stress.  
*You have this stressor because you care about:*

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**3. STEP THREE: Utilize your stress. It is designed to facilitate.**

Channel: Return to your typical reactions as noted in Step One and your positive purpose you reconnected with in Step Two. *Are your typical reactions facilitating your purpose? What changes can you make in responding to this stress so that the stress you experience can be enhancing as opposed to deteriorating?*

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Include/Expand: *What are the opportunities inherent in this stress – the possibilities, learnings, and/or insights – that arise as a result of experiencing this stress?*

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### Part 3: Applications and Integration

These three steps work only when we do them. Thus, it is essential to work to make this response natural and habitual in your life by creating habits in which you do the three steps both routinely as well as in the heat of the moment. More specifically:

*Daily Anchors* are things that you choose to use as reminders such as: before meals or meetings, showers, red lights, clicking your seatbelt, putting on a jacket, or hearing the phone ring.

*Stress Signals* are things to watch for to help you recognize that stress is coming on. Psychological clutter or disorganization) and physiological reactions (headaches, muscle tension) can serve as useful signals to elicit an enhancing response rather than as tipping points of self-destruction.

My daily anchor will be: \_\_\_\_\_

My stress signal will be: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Witness \_\_\_\_\_