



TOPIC OF THE MONTH

January 2017

How do you think about stress?

Last month the founder of my school did an interview with Kelly McGonigal on stress. She is a Stanford University psychologist and a leader in the growing field of “science-help.” Through books, articles, courses and workshops, McGonigal works to help us understand and implement the latest scientific findings in psychology, neuroscience and medicine.

She also has one of the most watched ted talks.

https://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend

In her ted talk she explains that knowing stress is bad for you ... makes it much worse for you than if you don't know it's bad for you ... so what to do?!? The word is out ... **and we can be aware of the harms of stress — without having to succumb to them.** When we do feel too much stress what we can do is transform our stress to something positive.

All this talk about stress and its effects . . . we tend to stress ourself out trying not to be stressed!

Our first step toward transforming our stress in to something positive is to realize not all stress is bad. A stress response that lasts 30-40 seconds up to a minute or two, once or twice per day can support a healthy nervous system. It is when you keep setting the stress alarm bells off and marinating all day in stress hormones that can be more problematic.

If you are Stressed In the "bad" way, you are not doomed. You are most likely feeling stress because you care. Caring is good. Stress increases our hormones giving us what it takes to overcome the stressor — **energy and quick thinking. Turn your stress into motivation -- motivation to address what is stressing you out and resolve it.** More on this later.

Let's talk about good stress first — good stress and bad stress are chemically similar in the body -- but do vary some degree on which hormones are secreted the most.

Stress can be from excitement — an interview, a workshop you are teaching in front of a big crowd, a job opportunity, a performance, getting together with a peer you respect — these are examples of the good side of stress. When you feel stress from excitement you have an



opportunity you don't want to ruin — harness your stress hormones as energy to perform better.

To do this -- Recognize the stress feeling in your body. Is it in your stomach? Your palms? Shakiness? Your breathing? Worries? Become mindful. Now identify what you can control. Your breath and your thoughts. While deep breathing or meditation may not resolve all stress it is pretty helpful in good stress and mild stressors.

As you take control of your breath; imagine the situation you are excited about. Sit for a moment and imagine in your mind how you would like this event to go. As soon as you start worrying transform the worry into your dream -- your dream turnout of this event :)

Then use the energy from the hormones to dive in! Even in bad stress situations if we run and fight we use up those hormones so they are not in our bloodstream all day where they cause harm. In today's world we might not have to run or fight but we do have to think quick on our feet. Use up the stress hormones — take a deep breath and dive in and solve the situation. **Use your breath as a tool to remind your body you have what it takes to handle the situation.**

Stress is your body and brain preparing you to be ready for whatever is coming at you.

☪ Your pounding heart is preparing you for action

☪ You are breathing faster to get more oxygen to your brain.

Joy and courage also have these similar effects in our body — making our heart beat and breath faster.

Fear vs. Excitement - turn your fear into excitement.

With all that being said — you don't always have to control your inner experience! For example feeling good excitement stress can help you to choose **meaning over protection**. Another good stress example; flying . . . I don't like to fly . . . but when I fly good things happen. I am spreading my joy and love of good yoga, good food, and clean food as medicine (you know saving the world from bad food and bad medicine). In this situation I want to lower my cortisol (through food, breathing, meditation) while allowing and accepting the stress to motivate me to get on that airplane.

Excitement and fear are similar in the body — **Transform your fear into excitement**. Take what it is that you are fearful about (in my case flying) and turn that into excitement (doing what I love and getting to see the world while I do it).



Feel the empowerment of knowing your body is going to give you what you need in the moment. Stress can make you do a better job! Adrenaline does have an upside.

Don't just try to get rid of your stress — put it to good use!

“Bad” Stress

Bad stress tends to narrow the arteries more than good stress — hence its higher risk of heart attack, good stress does not seem to have this effect on our arteries. What is the difference? Cortisol vs. oxytocin.

If it is “bad” stress you are dealing with — emotional stress, ego related stress, illness stress, too much on you stress . . . then it is the inner experience we want to work with -- Your thoughts. Albert Ellis a famous American psychologist coined the ABC theory which states it is not what happened to us that effects our well being -- **it's how we think about what happened to us**. We can apply this idea to stress.

Albert Ellis ABC Theory
A=Activating Event
B=Beliefs about the event
C=Consequences
Most people think A=C . . . it is not. B=C

- 36 First accept the stressor. Remember you are stressed because **you care**.
- 36 **Observe — don't react**. Get better at recognizing it. Its ok to feel stressed, the key is to recognize it. For example a few years ago I had a fight with my daughter and I remember standing there feeling so angry with her. In that moment I realized I was feeling anger. I stepped back and watched myself — it totally changed how I reacted to her which totally changed her reactions. We ended up laughing at each other.
- 36 During emotional stress, if we can get ahold of our thoughts we can better put our stress to good use. **Direct your thoughts to a positive outcome and steer your actions in that direction**. This requires:
 - o Mindfulness — means what do you want to pay attention to here? Not the drama of stress, but what you are trying to create? Be mindful of what you are doing to support the big picture.
 - o Awareness = Remember. Remember the big picture. Don't get caught up in the drama.
- 36 In negative stressors try to lower your cortisol not necessarily the stress, allow the stress to give you the energy you need to address the situation at hand or help you seek better ways to react to life experiences. How to reduce cortisol? **Control your**



thoughts. The best way to control cortisol is with your thoughts. Although there are some foods and herbs that can help if necessary -- Clary sage has been shown to help with cortisol levels.

- ॐ Oxytocin and Community — Oxytocin is also released in the stress response (as per the data spoken by Kelly McGonigal). Oxytocin is known as the cuddle hormone and makes us seek human connection. Adversity and stress can make us seek community. Through community you find support. Having community improves our survival rates. This is what gives us resilience. People who seek community during stressful times gain a better stress response (more oxytocin) and better resilience from their stress.

Resilience is a big upside to stress! Caring protects us from negative stress (due to its oxytocin release).

More on stress and community

Not all bad stress is toxic — or needs to evoke the fight and flight response. It seems the more oxytocin in our stress response the better. To have more oxytocin and less cortisol it comes down to the difference between an **enemy or ally**. If the stress involves a person, **befriending and attending** is a positive stress response that can evoke empathy, compassion, and community (and therefore oxytocin). **Its called approach instead of fight or flee. The best thing you can do in a stressful situation involving someone else is to Befriend the person, make them your ally not your enemy. Enemy thoughts = more cortisol and negative stress side effects.**

- ॐ Apologizing, even if you know you were “right” shows what is more important than being right is the relationship.

Attend and befriend stress increases oxytocin (and progesterone) making us seek community. Community is a powerful healing tool.

- ॐ Connect through your heart — Try to understand the situation from other peoples perspectives, put yourself in their shoes. Ram Dass explains this well in his space suit theory ... please see more on this below.
- ॐ Be courageous.

A word on Empathy, empathy is a positive emotion — but contagious stress is passed through empathy. Don't catch someone else's stress by reacting to their stress, ex. “freaking out” about the situation. Attend to the person by nurturing, caring, and being courageous.



Internal vs. external. To reduce the stress response remember What can you "control"?

If you try to control your external -- it can be very depleting and isolating, for example

- ☪ If you try to control your environment beyond a certain point -- sirens going past a yoga studio -- we happen to be across the street from the fire station ... well we could find a location away from town that sirens won't go by so frequently... but then it would be a less convenient location so along with less sirens there would be less of you all coming by Instead I have learned how to control my internal environment and turn this into something positive by first of all not speaking over the sirens. Taking a moment of silence as they pass and in that moment send a prayer out that all is well. And I often remind my classes to do the same :) when groups of people pray or meditate together good things happen 🙏
- ☪ Same with our families and work colleagues, we can not choose them either! If we try to control our external environment by avoiding family or work colleagues holidays become lonely and work festivities become a challenge. Instead try to control how you feel or think about people, keeping an open heart and mind to all different walks of life help build community.

The internal fix

What we can change is how we think about these situations, which in turn changes how we feel about them. Which brings us back to Albert Ellis and his ABC theory . . . it is not what happens to us that determines our well being — it is how we believe about what happened to us that effects our well being.

What Channel are you on? This is from Ram Dass with some excerpts from me included.

Ram Dass has spoken about channels of operation — or levels of consciousness — on several occasions. Once we are aware of these channels or levels we can see beyond people's "suits" or space suits as Ram Dass explains and see the soul behind the eyes — literally where we are all one. In the words of Ram Dass "Hey is that you in there? It's me in here! How did you get into that one??" He has joked there's really only three of us going through all these incarnations . . .

Our Space Suits

Our space suits — or our body personality type/vocation — serve a purpose growing up, our parents teach us what our space suit is and how to fit in it. This can help us stay in



community growing up where we are safer, protected, loved, and fed. As we start to mature, maturity hopefully will help us look not only at our space suit, but who we are inside this suit.

If we can identify who we are inside and what motivates us toward happiness and contentment we can change our space suit! As we identify with our Self inside our spacesuit it will make us easier to identify other souls inside their space suits.

After all our space suits serve a purpose, as Hanuman said when he was being reprimanded for destroying the banana orchard after eating the bananas (which is what allows the banana tree to grow back!) he said, "I am a monkey, this is what monkeys do". We too are human, and sometimes we have to do what humans need to do. Recognizing this external property of being human may help us find the person behind the space suit.

So which channel are you operating on? And which channel do you want to operate on?

Channel 1 - is the body channel. We see male, female, old/young, fat/thin, blonde/brunette. This is also the channel of Mating . . . Spreading our seed . . . On this plane you see everyone as a potential, a competitor, or irrelevant . . . Channel 1 is about the body.

Channel 2 - is the personality channel or as Ram Dass calls it the Therapy Channel. Are we happy, sad, delusional, grandiose, smart, searching, hoping. Where are you from? Are you a Dr., a Mother, a truck driver, a business person in a business suit, a hippie, laid back, type A or type B . . . Everyone is happy but you . . . Channel 2 is about our personality.

Channel 3 ... if you're in this yoga studio you are already working on channel 3 :) It is the new age channel; what is your astral story . . . are you scorpio, Pisces, aries? a fire sign, a sun sun? What is your dosha? Pitta, vata, Kapha, etc. It's the mythical channel, seekers of the holy grail . . .

Channel 4 - gets deeper and this is the channel I am referring to in this talk. Seeing the soul in others eyes . . . when you look into someone's eyes, you see another soul looking back at you with the same questions you have . . . Its an awareness that is just packaged differently . . . its another entity just like you in a different package. Its the soul plane.

Channel 5 - now we don't even see the body or the package -- we just see 2 mirrors facing each other. You realize we are all one . . . Its a deeper awareness. There is only one of all of us . . . this is one is in drag, this one is in a business suit . . . it's all one.



Channel 6 - is just to keep the Buddhist happy . . .we have gone back to the void, the formless. Like the peeling away of the layers of the onions the Buddhists speak of, when you peel away all the layers, what's left?

In our life we have gone into somebody training — somebody training happens on channels 1 and 2 — the ego channels. Most of us are on these channels most of our life.

As we mature we want to change our channels to the higher ones of 3,4,5,and 6.

Which leads me to Pattabhi Jois on *Saucha* or the Niyama of Cleanliness and Purification — There is an Internal and external *saucha*. We are going to look at internal purification. Here is what Pattabhi Jois says:

Śauca

There are two types of śauca, or purification: bahir śauca [external purification = cleanliness of body] and antah śauca [internal purification = cleanliness of thoughts words actions].

.....The second, internal purification, means viewing everything and every being as a friend, and treating all with affection (maitrī). Pattabhi Jois, Yoga Māla, pg 13

This means engaging the mind with the supreme feeling that all are our friends, and seeing that piece in everyone that does not die --- the soul plane-- and operating on that plane of existence.

Ways to minimize stress in your life:

- ॐ What is important in your life?
- ॐ what can you do this week for that answer?
- ॐ What positively attracts you? You want more of this in your life.

Ways to transform your stress:

- ॐ Don't avoid stress or pain, find the meaning of it — the mindset of meaning :)
 - o What is the meaning and purpose of this challenge? This is earth school after all.
 - o What is possible here?
- ॐ Growth Mindset — How has your stress or illness helped you become a better person? Maybe you are more empathetic, you've become a more caring person, you have learned how to pick up the pieces and carry on. This is a growth mindset — in a



growth mindset we learn and grow from our stressors. In a fixed mindset we view the stressor as bad and do not grow from it. **Stress in a fixed mindset can = stress that is bad for your heart. Stress in a growth mindset = empowerment.**

- ॐ Stress is a catalyst. It can make you move forward in your life.
- ॐ Find compassion for what you are going through — or the other person — this alone can transform your stress into a healthier stress response.
- ॐ Attend and befriend as explained above.
- ॐ FIND MEANING AND PURPOSE

Stress will pop up from time to time too. Next time you feel stress ask yourself:

- ॐ What do I care about?
- ॐ What can I do about it?
- ॐ What tools do I need to overcome?
- ॐ How do I want to respond to this stressor?

While it is possible to make something good out of stress, I am not saying that we want to create adversity or stress to grow — we have too much adversity in our world. What I am saying is when adversity is looking you in the face — make something good out of it.

Upsides of stress — Stress contains the seeds of

- ॐ Courage
- ॐ Resilience
- ॐ Learning
- ॐ Growth
- ॐ The way you deal with stress can help others. Be transparent with your stress.

We have all had challenges in our life, how do you handle it, that is the key. Like the lyric from the song “Duck & Cover” by Glen Phillips:

Everybody here's got a story to tell
Everybody's been through their own hell
There's nothing too special about getting hurt
Getting over it, that takes the work