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## Putting Stress to Work for You

Stress is a fact of life in 21st Century America. When any group of people get together, the conversation inevitably turns to complaints about personal stress levels. In a rather bizarre game of “one-upsmanship,” people try to outdo one another by describing how much stress they’re under. This is a consequence of the fast pace of life today and the multiplication of “stuff” we can chase after. Each new “must have” style or electronic gadget means we have to speed up the treadmill to earn the cash we need to satisfy our desires. Those of us who work in the publishing industry get an extra heaping helping of stress. Ours is a deadline driven business, a business that is immensely complex and one that is currently under severe economic pressures. Unless we’re talking to a test pilot or a bomb disposal tech, we’re sure to win any “My stress can whip your stress” contest.

Starting in the 1930’s, doctors have been telling us that stress will kill us. Hundreds, if not thousands, of books and articles have been written on the detrimental effects of stress. The medical community warned that the “Type A” personality was doomed to suffer from bleeding ulcers, heart attacks, and nervous breakdowns before they died a miserable premature death. These poor stressed wretches also lived lonely and joyless lives which destroyed their relationships. In my career, I’ve seen this happen to my coworkers. I have known several people who seldom smiled, who constantly felt they were falling behind and who suffered severe heart attacks in their 40’s and their early 50’s. When I managed a call center for the yellow pages, on two occasions I had young people on my team pass out at work from blood loss due to ulcers. Fortunately, in my experience, these dire consequences of stress are the exception rather than the rule.

I have worked in the publishing business for over thirty years in a variety of demanding, and most would say stressful positions, and I am still alive and kicking. Moreover, I know many, many people who have worked in our industry for decades and who not only haven’t had any catastrophic health events, but who seem to actually enjoy their jobs. What’s the difference between these people and their co-workers who are far less resilient? Kelly McGonigal’s new book *The Upside of Stress* may provide some of the answers to this question.

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Dr. McGonigal holds a Ph.D. and is a health psychologist. She teaches a very popular course entitled the New Science of Stress at Stanford University. Before examining her research on stress, we should look at the traditional thinking on this subject. Much of the data on stress was gathered by conducting experiments on lab rats. These poor creatures were subjected to painful and life threatening experiences such as being placed in a bucket of water and forced to swim until they were on the verge of drowning. Dr. McGonigal describes these experiments as, “more like the Hunger Games for rodents, rather than stress the average person experiences in their lives.” This research led to a simplistic vision of our reaction to stress as the “fight or flight response.” This view of stress was that stress prepared us either to put up our fists and fight an enemy or take to our heels and run away. Scientists believed that since a person living in the modern day couldn’t react physically to stressful situations, that these primitive hormonal responses to stress were actually harming the body. In the context of our industry, we can neither punch a customer, who is yelling at us, nor run away from them. In effect, researchers believed that a system which evolved to protect primitive man was literally killing their civilized descendants.

Most books offered two remedies for stress sufferers; one could avoid stress or one could manage stress. Avoiding stress is not an option for us while we are alive. Dr. McGonigal notes that stress is closely related to the things that matter most to our lives. We simply do not stress out over things that do not matter to us. When we care about something, we worry about getting it right, we stress over how our children will grow up because we love them, we stress about our work because it is a source of pride to us. If we are just “phoning it in” we don’t feel stress. In the *The Upside of Stress* she cites interviews with people who avoided stress in their lives. Eliminating the stress in their lives also took the meaning and joy out of their existence.

Managing stress is a much more practical solution. She suggests that the word “stress” is overused in our culture. People use the word “stress” to describe the slight annoyance of a traffic jam or the life threatening trauma of having major surgery. Using Dr. McGonigal’s definition of stress, we should train ourselves only to be stressed by the things that are important, to the things that really matter to us. We should also use our

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minds to proactively prevent stressful, and merely annoying, events in our lives. Rather than waiting until deadline to get something done, try to get it done early. The work required is the same, but the stress generated by the task will be significantly lowered. It also helps to streamline one's schedule eliminating nonessential tasks and delegating where we can.

*The Upside of Stress* takes a much more nuanced view of stress. The ability to quickly prepare our bodies for a challenge is one of the reasons that the human race has thrived and survived throughout history. Far from being an archaic reaction to threats that no longer exist, Dr. McGonigal describes how our stress response can help us to thrive in a world that has more deadlines and computer crashes than saber tooth tigers and cave bears. The two hormones released by the brain in stressful situations, cortisol and dehydroepiandrosterone (DHEA), actually have beneficial effects on the body. Cortisol turns sugar and fat stored in the body into energy and enhance the ability of the body and the brain to use that energy. This “turbo-charges” our brains and helps us to think quickly and clearly. Physicians classify DHEA as a neurosteroid which, as the name applies, helps the brain grow. Just as the body uses testosterone to help the body recover and grow from physical exercise, DHEA helps the brain grow from a stressful situation. DHEA is why experience matters and why we become better at handling challenging situations as we get older.

A key factor in determining if an individual will suffer a bleeding ulcer or learn and grow from experiencing stress is the balance between cortisol and DHEA. People who have higher levels of DHEA are described as having a higher “growth index of stress response.” Psychologists who study human stress response have found that we have an innate ability to improve our personal growth index. This is a manifestation of the mind body effect, that how we view our situation and how we think about it has a direct impact on our physical well being. In the *The Upside of Stress* Dr. McGonigal describes the impact of “Mindset Interventions.” People who were taught to embrace stress and even to welcome it experienced the beneficial effects of stress, while those who believed that stress was harmful experienced all the harmful effects they expected. It is ironic, that the books detailing the negative effects of stress which were written with the goal of helping people; may actually have caused more people to suffer from it.

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Not only do people who view stress as potentially helpful have better physical outcomes, but they also are more effective in stressful situations. For example, we picture Navy Seals and other Special Forces soldiers as cool and calm under pressure. Blood tests performed on these men during stressful military exercises found that they actually have extremely high levels of stress hormones in their systems. It is not that they do not experience stress, but rather that they have learned to channel their stress in useful ways. One of the things that attracted me to advertising is the fast pace. In the past I joked with people that I was a “stress junky.” I can remember helping my reps on deadline, laying out ads, making decisions, closing reluctant customers; I did some of my best work on deadline days. After our publications closed for the week, I slumped in my chair, exhausted but with a great sense of satisfaction. After thirty years of deadlines, I have avoided ulcers and my ticker is still going strong. I always attributed this to good genes. I just thought I was naturally immune to the harmful effects of stress, but after reading *The Upside of Stress* I believe my love of deadlines acted as an antidote to the deadly effects of stress. Dr. McGonigal describes how educating people about the positive impact of the stress response can make them healthier, happier and more productive. Not only was this an effective way to have people handle a single stressful event but that this intervention seemed to have long lasting impact on how they handled future challenges.

We live in a stressful world and we work in a stressful industry. This situation is unlikely to change anytime soon and if it does, it is more likely that things will grow even more stressful. We can either go sit on a mountain and chant a mantra all day or we can learn to use our stress to become better and more effective people. Dr. Kelly McGonigal’s *The Upside of Stress* not only offers a new way of thinking about our relationship to stress, but also provides some actionable advice on how to turn stress from an enemy to a useful tool. Once we learn to embrace our challenges when confronted with a stressful situation, our response will be, “Bring it on!”

*This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.*

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