

The Role of the Mind in Stress

Or

I think, therefore I stress!

We've spent a lot of time learning about how stress affects our bodies, and how we can fine tune our behaviors to keep our bodies in good shape during prolonged periods of stress. It's good stuff to know, and provides a solid foundation for knowing how to deal well with stress. Now I'd like to move on to the really *fun* stuff regarding stress. *Fun* in the sense that what we're going to explore is both surprising and exciting.

Stress and the Mind Rule #1 - There are always two ways to eliminate stress once it has appeared:

- ***The first is to change the external environment in the direction the stress is pushing it to go until a balanced state returns (this is what most people are used to doing to cope with stress).***
- ***The second is to change your mind about what it is you think has to happen for you to no longer feel stressed (this is what we are going to explore now)***

The second way works as well as the first because *our minds have just as much to do with how much stress we perceive as does the whole rest of the "outside" world.* This alternate route to eliminate stress is rarely thought of as a first response. Yet it is often a quicker and easier path to the same goal. This makes it worth learning about. It can be called the "inside" approach" to stress relief.

This can be a little hard to understand at first glance. You may ask "How can the thoughts I think have any effect at all on how stressed I am? The whole problem is something that is happening to me from the "outside" world. I didn't ask for it to happen, and what I think about it doesn't matter at all!" This is pretty much the way we are all raised by our parents and our teachers and society in general to think. We learn that "you don't have to like it – just deal with it. Problems don't go away just because you wish they would".

I'm not here to tell you that they do go away with just wishful thinking. But I do want you to become aware that the experience of whether something is "stressful" or not has everything to do with what thoughts you allow to occupy your mind. Change your thoughts and you change your stress level – literally.

Here's an example: perhaps you find yourself in a position where you are expected to play a musical instrument in front of a group of strangers, and the thought of this causes a great deal of stress for you. There is no way out – you will have to perform. Why are you stressed? Perhaps you fear your skills are inadequate to play the instrument to your

satisfaction. Maybe you are afraid that others will judge *you* to be inadequate after your performance. Or perhaps being the center of attention of a group no matter what the occasion is enough to trigger anxiety (many people have this experience, often labeled “agoraphobia”).

The first approach to relieving the stress is to try to change the outside world in some way. We’ve been storing these options up since grade school (at least I have) – calling in sick, having a “car accident” (not too serious), a dying relative in a distant state – you get the picture. Remove the demand to perform, and you’ve removed the stress associated with that demand. You’ve changed the “inside” by changing the “outside”. This is what we all try to do first. But it often has consequences in that secondary stressors come to replace the first – the stress associated with having to create believable lies, keep a shifting story line straight, not answer the phone, and the like. It is often an imperfect solution.

The second approach to relieving stress is to leave the external conditions intact, and change only your thoughts about what is taking place. If you are afraid of not playing well enough to meet your own demands, it IS possible to reduce the demands that you are making on yourself, and thus reduce the stress you feel about your playing by changing only your thoughts.

If you are concerned about being approved of by others, it's possible to minimize or eliminate that stress greatly by having a close look at exactly what it is you think you need from these of the people in order for you to be able to feel good about yourself.

If the stress for you is one of been the center of attention in front of a group of people for any reason, it is possible, with help, to begin to change that response as well.

I've picked examples in this particular case of internal changes that are hard for most people to accomplish easily. Internal changes of what we expect from a situation or person are often much easier than this. But as a general rule, the benefit derived from an effort is equal to the energy that is put into that effort.

My goal today is not to try to convince you that the miracle cure to all stress is simply to change your thinking. My goal is to simply plant the seed in your mind that **we** define what we consider to be stressful, and **we therefore have the power within us to change those definitions** and thereby change our perception of what we consider stressful and what we do not.

Next time, I'll introduce you to some additional “**Stress and the Mind**” rules, and will begin to explore thought some very practical ways of implementing this powerful alternative method for coping with stress in your life.

Until then, may all good things find their way into your life.

Timothy

