



Stressing for Success

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Your mind is racing. Time is moving either way too fast or way too slow. Your stomach is knotted. Your heart is beating faster than it should. There's tension in your shoulders, neck and jaw. Your breath is short and shallow...

How much *STRESS* have you been under lately? If you are trying to succeed at anything, it is likely that you have been under a considerable amount. In fact, many will tell you they need stress in order to succeed. But we also know that too much stress can stop us from succeeding. So how much stress is enough, and when does it work for you, and when does it work against you?

To answer that question, in the first place we must ask, what is stress?

Stress has been described by Time Magazine as 'the number one health issue today', and that was twenty years ago on June 6, 1983. Since then, if anything, our stress levels have gone higher.

And it's no wonder. One of the major causes of our stress is an inability to deal with change, and change is happening at an ever-increasing rate. I have read that a study was conducted at Stanford University in the late 1990's to predict the rate of technological change. The scientists discovered that if human evolution continues at the rate it has, by 31st December 2010 in a 30minute time frame, humans will be pioneering 18 discoveries as significant as the splitting of the atom! I don't know about you, but that makes my head spin.

Whether or not this actually happens, we will see. However, it is irrefutable that we live in the fastest changing time in human history, and it is showing no indications of slowing down. It is no wonder then, that stress is the disease of the current age.

But still the question is, what is stress, and how can we better deal with it?

"He stresses me out".

"That project placed me under a lot of stress".

"I'm stressed because I don't have enough time".

I hear these sorts of comments from clients all the time. And it is the general thinking that stress is something that 'just happens' in response to events and circumstances. Is this the case? Well, we are also told about the 'Fight or Flight Response Mechanism' – our body's way of preparing us to face danger. When we perceive a dangerous situation, our brain sends out a signal that

gives us a shot of adrenalin, and our muscles tense themselves in order to either face the threat and battle it, or run away from the situation. This is a survival mechanism that is hard-wired into us, so we are told this response to stress is unavoidable. This may well be true, but what really is stress in the first place?

Think about the last time you were extremely stressed...

Do you remember all of the circumstances surrounding the situation?

Was it a life-threatening situation?

Was your survival really at stake?

If you think about it, it probably wasn't, so why did your body experience a racing heart, sweaty palms, tense muscles, rapid breathing?

The last time I felt extremely stressed was in traffic. I had left plenty of time to get to a client, but for some unknown reason, the traffic ahead of me had come to a complete standstill. I decided to try an alternative route, but after making a few turns and committing myself to this new direction, my passage was even more blocked. To make matters worse, drivers were making mad dashes up the non-existent inside lane and forcing their way into the traffic ahead of me; others got stuck in the middle of the intersection, creating absolute gridlock in all directions. I was stuck watching this all happen as the minutes ticked excruciatingly by and the likelihood of arriving at my client appointment on time became more and more remote. All I could think was, "Why is the traffic not moving", and, "Why are people acting so selfishly and stupidly", etc. But then I had a realisation...

Stress is nothing more than the tension between my myths and expectations of what should be, and my acceptance of what is.

If you think about the last time you were stressed, I'm sure you will find that you wanted something (or many things) to be different than your reality, didn't you? Step back in your mind and listen to your story of how things should be which did not match up to what you experienced. You may have had an expectation of others' behaviour or a certain outcome, which wasn't being met, and your stress was one of disbelief.

But our myths and expectations are not the only determinant of our stress, because everyone knows that a certain amount of stress is a good thing. We need it in order to motivate ourselves. If we do not have ideas about the way things should be, and take action on them in order to create change, we would not have any progress. If we did not have expectations about how we should behave, we would allow all behaviours and have anarchy. So why is stress sometimes a motivator, and sometimes a demotivator?

The answer is your perception of your power over the situation. If you feel you are able to influence the circumstances and make changes you will feel empowered and motivated. If you feel like the circumstances have power over you and you cannot act to create the world you want, you will feel stressed and demotivated.

As an example, let's say you are working to a deadline for a particular project. If you feel you have the resources (including time) and abilities to get the job done on schedule, even though you know it will require some work, you will feel the pressure to make the change, and it will move you towards action.

If you do not think you have the resources, you will probably say things inside your head like, "I need more time", "I need someone to help me", "I have no idea how I'm going to get this done", and "This is impossible". You may also look around you at what others you are relying upon are doing and say to yourself, "They shouldn't be doing that", "Why don't they do it my way", and "They're hopeless". These are signs of distress. You may feel overwhelmed by your seeming inability to make changes, and you will expend energy on your stress and reduce your ability to take action.

This is the real question about stress. Is it empowering you and moving you towards action, or is it disempowering and reducing your ability to act?

So, in any situation, you can ask three simple questions to help diagnose your stress and re-empower yourself:

1. What do I think should be happening that is currently not?
2. Is it within my power to change these things – are my expectations realistic?
3. What action can I take in order to improve the situation now and in the future and reduce my stress?

Stop right now and ask yourself these questions about the last time you were stressed.

What answers do you get?

Do you feel your stress melt away?

When I was in the car, I asked myself those questions, and here were my answers:

1. What do I think should be happening that is currently not?
I think the traffic should be moving. I think other drivers should not be so selfish. I think the city should design a more effective road system.
2. Is it within my power to change these things – are my expectations realistic?
I cannot change the fact that the traffic is not moving. I cannot take responsibility for the actions of other drivers; I can only control my own actions. I cannot single-handedly change the city's road systems, especially not there and then. This defined the things I had no power over, and therefore had to accept if I wanted to reduce my stress.
3. What action can I take in order to improve the situation now and in the future and reduce my stress?
I took a number of actions to improve the situation at the time. Firstly, I took a few deep breaths – ones that expanded my belly rather than my chest. These instantly worked to release some of my tension and supplied more oxygen to my brain so I could think

more clearly. Then I used my mobile phone (with a hands-free system) to call my client and change their expectation of when I would be there. I followed my own code of ethics on the road, allowing others into the traffic when necessary, and avoiding blocking the cars flowing in the opposite direction. I began noticing the people in the cars around me and watched their reactions to the situation so I could learn more about stress, sometimes smiling and shrugging my shoulders at them to share in our mutual disappointment. I also put on a cassette tape of a training program I had been meaning to listen to so I could learn whilst I sat in the car. With regards to the future, I made a mental note to purchase more similar audiotapes for such situations.

My stress melted away, and a funny thing happened. The drivers I made eye contact with began letting me into the spaces ahead of them, whereas before they had been blindly ignoring me and barging ahead. I began to enjoy the time I was spending in the car because I was learning some extraordinary things. And all of a sudden, I was at my client appointment exactly two minutes before my originally scheduled time. More importantly, I was relaxed and focused for the meeting and able to be more effective than if I had arrived stressed and distracted.

If you consider your example of the last time you were stressed, you may be unable to absolutely predict what the consequences may have been had you undertaken different actions. However, I am certain your quality of experience would have been better.

So next time you feel stressed, take a moment to ask yourself these three simple questions:

1. What do I think should be happening that is currently not?
2. Is it within my power to change these things – are my expectations realistic?
3. What action can I take in order to improve the situation now and in the future and reduce my stress?

Notice how much more empowered you feel, and how your stress levels drop.

This is key knowledge known by the practitioners at Alcoholics Anonymous. Their famous prayer that is invoked at every AA meeting is;

*God, grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change...
Courage to change the things I can. And the Wisdom to know the
difference.*

One of the things you can change is the expectation you have of yourself and others. This is where coaching can help. For example, I have had a client whose expectation was that they should be the best at everything. This is obviously an unrealistic expectation, which was constantly causing them stress in their life. Through the coaching process we were able to change that self-perception so they only had to be **their** best.

As a result, they now achieve more than they ever had in the past, with much less stress. You can have that too.

So how are you working with stress in your life?

To find out more about stress handling, [please click here.](#)

Rod Power is a Human Strategist. Just as a Business Strategist works with organisations to help make them more successful, Rod works with people. Whether through empowering group training programs or individual coaching, work with him and you are sure to increase your confidence and ability to achieve the results you want in life. Rod also enjoys a good laugh, and has a wonderful wife, child and dog. He practices what he teaches.