

MATTMCWILLIAMS

Live with Passion. Lead with Purpose. Leave a Legacy.

Why Stress Can Actually Be Good for You

Almost a decade ago, my boss at the time said something about me that changed my life. "Matt thrives in chaos," he said. "When others are paralyzed by the stress to the point of inaction, Matt is focused and gets results." That one statement forever altered the way I look at stressful events.

His words came shortly after a particularly stressful 48 hours in our company. Our only server had crashed and for the next two days, our developers, my boss and I survived on virtually no sleep. There was no guarantee that we'd recover the data from that server. Second guessing and finger pointing were in abundance.

It didn't feel like it at the time, but I was in my comfort zone. I was standing out as a leader.

All the physical and emotional pain of those 48 hours was still fresh. The anxiety was very real and the side effects were still lingering for most of us. But I was energized. But why?

When my boss said that I thrived in chaos, it redefined stress for me. Instead of remembering those 48 hours as dark times, giving me gray hairs and stomach ulcers, I saw the positives that came out:

- An opportunity to lead our team through a difficult time.
- A better understanding of how our company's technology worked.
- A feeling of accomplishment.
- Exciting memories of how we all worked together.

Little did I know there were even more positives to the stress.

The Dark Side of Stress

We all know the negative statistics associated with stress or least the general conclusion that "stress is bad." According to WebMD:

- 43% of all adults suffer from stress-related illnesses.
- 75-90% of all doctor visits are related to stress.
- Stress costs American businesses more than \$300 billion each year.
- More than half of mental disorders are caused by long-term, untreated stress.

And we know that stress can cause or play a major role in:

- Headaches
- Diabetes
- Heart disease and other heart problems
- Depression
- High blood pressure

- Weight gain
- Arthritis
- Skin problems
- The list goes on and on...

So stress is bad, right? Actually, no.

According to Shawn Achor, "if managed correctly, stress can be **enhancing** to both our performance and our overall well-being."

In other words, stress can actually be good for us.

A Better Way of Looking at Stress

Achor and Yale researchers Ali Crum and Peter Salovey set out to prove that simply changing the way we *look* at stress can change the effect it has on our bodies and minds.

They divided 380 managers into two groups. Group one watched a video that cited similar statistics to the ones I shared above. The message: "Stress is bad. Stress is costly. Stress could kill you."

Group two also watched a video, but this video focused on how stress can *help* you. It focused on how stress can:

- Boost performance on cognitive tasks and memory.
- Increase the speed at which the brain processes information.
- Help in physical recovery and immunity.
- Increase mental toughness, create deeper social bonds, and lead to post-traumatic growth.

It must be made clear that both groups were given only the facts. It was just a matter of *what facts they focused on*.

When my team and I went through the 48 hours of stress related to the server crashing, I saw both sides of the stress coin. I was exhausted, had a terrible headache, and I'd bet I gained some weight and had high blood pressure.

But I also had an indescribable energy and the sheer number of new business ideas we had in those 48 hours was remarkable. Afterwards, I did indeed feel mentally tougher. If I could get through those 48 hours, what was a little setback at the office? And we were certainly closer as a team afterwards. The shared stress was a bonding experience and we often recalled those two days fondly.

Choose What You Focus On

So, what were the results of the study by Achor and his team?

Those who watched the video that focused on the positive effects of stress showed a 23% drop in the physical symptoms (such as those listed above) caused by stress. And their productivity increased nearly 37%!

The key to the decrease in negative side effects from stress and increase in productivity was entirely due to what the managers focused on. The same was true for me and the same is true for you.

Over time, I began to identify with what my boss had said. I thrived in chaos. When others were paralyzed, my mind was sharp and focused. I might not look calm on the outside (more like a chicken with its head cut off), but on the inside the stress was actually helping me.

The key is to change what you focus on. Focus on the negative aspects of stress and you'll suffer the consequences. Focus on the positives and you just might find that you, too, thrive in chaos. My 12-step guide to handling stress will help you to identify your stress reactions, reframe the negatives into positives, and handle stress the right way.

What positives have you seen come from stressful events?