

Excelling Under Pressure -

Finding Strength and Peace Amidst Stress

by Dr. Norman Vincent Peale (1979)

Introduction: A Warm Welcome and a Grateful Heart

Welcome, friends, to an opportunity where we'll journey together through the landscape of stress, understand it, and-most importantly-discover ways to thrive in the midst of it. Let's start with a question, one as timeless as it is simple: How many of you have felt the weight of stress before? Take a moment to think about it, then consider this: you're not alone, and today, we'll begin transforming that stress into strength.

Advise the name of the talk '**Excelling Under Pressure - Finding Strength and Peace Amidst Stress**'

Acknowledgement & thank you

Thank you for being here, for investing your most valuable resource-your time. We all have busy lives, filled with countless things pulling at us. But today, let's set those things aside, look inward, and focus on something that could enrich all those areas we value. Together, we're going to see stress not as an enemy, but as a signal, a call to harness our inner resources and become our best selves.

Include more questions to manage any objections openly and early (be forgiving):

How many of you can think of at least 100 other things you could be doing instead?

Acknowledge and validate all responses.

Most of us are getting stressed out because we feel there is too much to do and not enough time to do it.

Objectives

Objective for the excelling under pressure workshop

After a couple of minutes, gather a list of what participants would like to get out of today's session.

The Purpose of Stress

If we are going to do anything about stress, we need to be able to recognize it.

What do you experience when you are stressed?

Facilitate a group discussion on what participants experience when they get stressed

Acknowledge and validate all responses

The purpose of stress/the fight or flight response

How many of you have ever heard of the fight or flight response? What is the purpose of this bodily reaction?

If yes, can you explain what it is?

Fight or flight means building up the energy to be able to respond to a life-threatening situation.

Stress as basic instinct

Let me ask you: Is stress good or bad?

Stress is a natural part of life, a response built into us for a purpose. Imagine, if you will, a caveman wandering through the forest. Suddenly, a bear appears! In that instant, the caveman has a choice: stand and fight or turn and flee. This is the fight-or-flight response, an ancient mechanism that helped us survive. But here's the thing—today, our "bears" often aren't real. They're work deadlines, traffic jams, bills... and yet, our bodies respond as if they're life-or-death situations.

For many people however this life-threatening experience sets the stage for 'dysregulation'. The energy mobilized by the perceived threat gets "locked" into the nervous system when we go into freeze.

This freeze response sometimes reveals itself when you breathe. Holding your breath and shallow breathing are both forms of freeze. The occasional deep sigh is the nervous system catching up on its oxygen intake.

Personal story

Offer a story-based personal experience of stress (e.g. Stress on your way to the work, church, a ball-game), explain that it is a physical response and that the resulting emotions are by-products. Connect to physiology of stress / physical response with emotions just side effects

Heart rate increases

Breathing becomes shallow and fast

Muscular tension increases

Feeling of anger and hostility increase

The modern-day dilemma: not that we get stressed it's just that we get stress in situations where it serves us no benefit. There are no Bears, but it feels like it!

Understanding the Sweet Spot of Stress:

The Bell Curve of Performance

Stress doesn't have to be all bad. There's a place where stress sharpens us, where a bit of pressure helps us perform better, focus more clearly, and strive harder. Think of it as a bell curve. At the peak, we're in that sweet spot where stress serves us well. But add too much, and the performance dips as the weight becomes too much to bear.

Discuss: When can a stress reaction help us?

Ask the audience for examples, make a list

Introduce the Stress Bell Curve - the stress sweet spot. Draw it for the group.

There's too much, too little and then the perfect amount of pressure to generate optimum performance.

Exercise

Facilitate an exercise to determine what stress means to people and what they experience day-to-day.

It's when we do exercise such as this that we realize many of us are under similar levels of stress or challenge, even if we don't show it. We also may have very different strategies to deal with it.

Definition of stress and the Bridge

If we are going to recognize stress, we need to have a clear definition of what it actually is. If we were commissioned by the dictionary as a group to define stress, what would we come up with? Different approaches to stress, e.g. Biological, medical, psychological, health and safety, academic, etc.

Provide the 's definition of stress, which is a structural engineering approach: $F/A = P$ (Force Over Area = Pressure)

The Bridge Analogy

Well then...what is stress?

Imagine a bridge. A magnificent structure stretched across a bustling city, with cars, people, and bicycles hurrying across each moving with purpose and urgency.

Soon, trucks start rolling over it, then motorcycles, adding weight sound, and pressure. Imagine, then a herd of cattle joining in - all jostling for space all adding to the commotion and the strain. The bridge bears it all, but it wasn't built for this unending burden.

What happens if we continue to pile on the load, more and more?

Inevitably, the bridge begins to groan and bend under the strain. You'll see signs—creaks, buckles, tiny fractures that show it's reaching its limit, struggling to hold steady.

And here lies a simple truth: this is what stress is like, Stress happens when life's demands grow larger than the resources and strength you have to meet them.

So, remember these three words; Demands. Exceed. Resources.

Remember them. They are a powerful reminder that balance is necessary, that we each have our own capacity, and that there's wisdom in knowing how to lighten the load before it becomes too much. Rely on your fellow man, remember that we all go through this.

The Effects of The Bridge Collapsing - Recognizing the Signs: Listen to Your Inner Signals

What happens when a person's bridge collapses? Stress speaks to us, if only we're willing to listen. When you're tired, anxious, or have lost your sense of humor —these are signs that your bridge needs reinforcing. Don't ignore them! Take a moment, reflect, and ask yourself what steps you can take to strengthen your bridge.

Signs and symptoms of stress

Frustrated, demotivated, angry, tired, withdrawn, indecisive, worry, loss of pride in appearance, grinding teeth and clenched jaw, night terrors, problem with alcohol, repeat illness.

Key thing is that when we are aware of these symptoms of stress, we can do something about it. The responsibility for the maintenance of the bridge lies with them. Not with their parents, partner, preacher, or doctor.

What can be done?

Lighten the load. Strengthen the bridge. The same principle applies to us:

Building Resilience: Strengthening Your Bridge

Let's focus on solutions that don't just mask stress but help us rise above it. True resilience comes from within, from practices that build us up, such as time management, a positive mindset, and leaning on supportive relationships. Remember, the greatest bridges are those reinforced from the inside out.

Refresh and Restore: The Power of Breaks, Hobbies, and Reflection

Sometimes, all we need is a pause, a moment to breathe and regain perspective. Taking regular breaks, nurturing hobbies, and setting aside time for contemplation—whether through prayer, meditation, or simply sitting in stillness—are gifts to ourselves that restore us. These are moments when we remember that peace is always within our reach.

Time

Time management is a stress management technique. If you fail to master your time, you get overwhelmed. Good time management is essential if you are to handle a heavy workload without excessive stress. By using time management skills effectively, you can reduce work stress by being more in control of your time, and by being more productive. This ensures that you have time to relax outside work.

Sort your tasks in order of importance. Incorporate personal priorities to support work-life balance.

Learn to say 'No!'

Know your limitations and do not take on too much

We cause ourselves a great deal of stress because we want people to like us and we do not want to let people down.

We then end up doing more than we should. Learn to be assertive and how to say no without upsetting or offending people.

Energy management

Plot your own energy levels throughout the day on a basic chart (energy/time) and ask for a couple of volunteers to do the same.

Quality of diet

Why is eating well important? Food is vital- it is our energy source and provides our bodies with the goodness it needs to grow, fight disease and repair itself. Food can affect our stress levels in two ways: it can either be the cause of the stress - the physical stress caused to the body and its organs as it gamely tries to assimilate and metabolize what we eat and drink; or it can simply aggravate or increase the stress from which we are already suffering.

A balanced diet will boost our resistance against the effects that stress brings upon the body. A person with a healthy and balanced diet is likely to be far less stressed than someone with a poor diet as their bodies are working more efficiently. We are what we eat!

Exercise

When we get stressed, our body is preparing for a physical response. One of our greatest Presidents, Theodore Roosevelt, preached about the importance of the 'Strenuous Life' to a happy existence.

Drinking lots of water

Water - the elixir of life. The feeling of thirst can add to the feeling of craving something, and therefore create unease and stress.

Sleep

Why is sleep important? It restores, it replenishes and reinvigorates the mind, body and spirit.

Pastimes

Outside of work and home activities can be a great way to break up the week and alleviate stress.

Rest

Taking regular breaks throughout the day resets the system and regulates our feelings.

Vacation

Plan breaks and travel to rest and restore with loved ones.

Music

Distraction and relaxation. It feeds the ears and the soul.

10 minutes: talking to someone

A problem shared is a problem halved

Contemplation and prayer

Why is contemplation important? A connection to God, ourselves and community.

A Final Challenge - Your Personal Commitment

Before we part today, I challenge you to choose three small actions to carry forward. Let these actions be reminders of the power you hold to rise above the demands of life, to fortify your bridge, and to embrace stress as an opportunity for growth.

When you do this, my friends, you'll find that peace, strength, and joy are not far-off ideals but real, tangible parts of your life.

Revisit Objectives

The objectives from the beginning of the sermon will be revisited and any themes that were not covered will be addressed wither here or in private.