

Everyday Vitality

What's in it for me? Advice on how to thrive in life.

We often long for easier lives, dreaming and making plans for that wonderful day when things settle down – the baby is older, the kids leave for college, this new job becomes less demanding, we retire – and we won't be so stressed. Unfortunately, a completely stress-free day will probably never arrive. But rather than giving up on the parts of your life that challenge you, you can learn to coexist with your difficulties. If you manage to cultivate vitality, you'll find that challenges, hard work, and even stress itself can actually be sources of strength. In these blinks, you'll learn how to push through the tough times and use them as ballast for your journey. In these blinks, you'll learn

how playing a team sport can help you live longer; why holding a loved one's hand can actually make something less painful; and when to channel your inner Batman or Wonder Woman to manage stress.

The difference between those who handle stress well and those who don't is the cultivation of vitality.

Imagine that you've had a terrible week. Maybe a beloved pet passed away, or a family member received a worrying medical diagnosis. You might be tempted to cancel plans, turn off the ringer on your phone, and drown your sorrows in nonstop TV, beer, and ice cream. But here's the thing: None of those things will really help you feel better. They can often actually drag you down even more. So what will help? The key message here is: The difference between those who handle stress well and those who don't is the cultivation of vitality. Look around at your friends and family. Who seems OK even when things don't go their way, and who lets the situation drag them down? Penn State professor David Almeida refers to these groups respectively as Teflon people and Velcro people. "Velcro" people remain stuck in difficult situations, catastrophizing and spiraling into more negativity. They tend to pull away from others and indulge in what he terms "cotton candy" activities for the soul, like overeating or binging TV shows. These are things that may seem good initially, but don't do any actual good in the long run. Interestingly, this group also tends to have more physical health issues. The "Teflon" crowd, on the other hand, demonstrates vitality. They make plans but remain flexible. They stay engaged and deliberately plan to do things daily that make them feel good and strong. They're even supportive of others in their times of need. The key is "doing." What you do helps you build vitality – not what you think. You don't need a life-altering event to come your way in order to begin building vitality. It's the little things that really bring us down – the traffic jam, the surly teen, the bills. As Muhammad Ali pointed out, sometimes it's the pebble in your shoe that wears you out, not the mountain in front of you. Dredging your soul daily for reserves of resilience to deal with the myriad tensions and roadblocks of daily life can be a drain and a challenge to the strongest of us. So who's better equipped to deal with this endless parade of small, daily stressors? Those who display vitality recognize the importance of these three things: Autonomy, competence, and relatedness. They are proactive and make plans. They go out and do things. And they draw strength from doing things with others.

Cultivating vitality doesn't mean eliminating stressors; it means operating within their framework.

University of Richmond researchers tempted two groups of rats with Froot Loops. One group had the cereal buried in their bedding and had to search for it. The other group were handed their treats. After a few weeks, researchers began presenting the Froot Loop inside a clear plastic ball. All the rats tried to get the Froot Loop, but the rats who were used to working for their treat worked harder. In fact, the rats who had their treats handed to them made 30 percent fewer attempts and spent 60 percent less time working on getting the cereal. What the hardworking rats show us is that we can't eliminate stress – and maybe we shouldn't even want to. Working hard is good for us. Rather than waiting for some magical time when all the things that stress us out disappear, we should try to coexist with them. Here's the key message: Cultivating vitality doesn't mean eliminating stressors; it means operating within their framework. The worker rats unknowingly touched on a concept known as desirable difficulty. They figured out what the right amount of challenge was for them. The answer to stress is not to give it up completely. Instead, studies show that people enjoy working – in fact, especially enjoy it – when the work is challenging. Studies on pre-goal attainment also show that the engaged, uplifting feeling of moving toward a goal is just as important as the glow of achieving it. Here's a great example from the 1950s. Trying to appeal to busy housewives, General Mills came out with a cake mix. All the ingredients were in powdered form. All you had to do was add water, mix, and pop it into the oven. You'd think it would have flown off the shelves, but the opposite happened. The mix required so little effort that it almost felt like cheating. That rewarding feeling just wasn't there. General Mills retooled the kit so that an egg had to be added to the mix. The result? Instant success. So what about the Catch-22 of wanting a challenge, but struggling with the accompanying stress? To reap the benefits of a positive outcome without the struggle, you need to develop vitality and resilience. We'll learn how to do that in the next blinks.

The first step in cultivating vitality is to choose it intentionally.

Here's a little trick to dealing with a tough situation: Don't be yourself. Weird, right? All your life, you've been told to be your true, authentic self. But what if your true self goes to pieces at the thought of public speaking? Here, being you is only going to result in a panic attack! But what if you decided to "become" your chatty, confident Aunt Sally, a popular college professor who delivers top-notch, entertaining lectures to packed classrooms? If you pretend to be her for the hour that you have to make a presentation, maybe you'll pretend so hard that you'll deliver a fantastic performance. Why would this work? Because you made a conscious, precise decision to act a certain way, and prioritized achieving that result. The key message is this: The first step in cultivating vitality is to choose it intentionally. Just like channeling Aunt Sally (or Batman, or Wonder Woman) to get through a tough situation, you can use this shift in perspective to adjust your view of the past. Say you've always been helpful and obliging, praised all your life for being the "nice girl." But lately, you've been feeling increasingly resentful

about picking up everyone else's slack at work. So next time your boss asks you to stay late and finish up your work, rewrite that history. Say no – and change your story. It's never too late to reject traits that have become affixed to you and begin to embody traits that you value instead. Keep in mind that even role models aren't perfect. Though it's fine to look up to and emulate someone you admire, don't become caught in the trap of envying them. Comparing yourself to others all the time robs you of joy in your own life. Choose to see the positives in your life, big or small, like someone holding the door open for you, or your child coming home for a visit. Thinking about positives can generate uplift, and a series of these small acts of grace can feed on themselves and create a spiral of positivity. A trigger for this uplift spiral can be something as simple as getting in your car after work and thinking of all the good things that happened in your day before you start the engine. Now let's find out how to include others in this learning process.

Building and maintaining connection with others is a powerful source of vitality.

Studies have shown that hikers find hills more strenuous to climb alone compared to when they trek with a friend, and that people afraid of public speaking are less nervous after a hug. And paramedics who have high levels of social support sleep better after a high-stress day than those who report lower levels. In one study of married couples, those who held their spouse's hand while being administered an electric shock felt less pain than those who didn't. Interestingly, those who were in loving relationships felt the least pain. It turns out that loving and being loved can actually shield you from some of life's hardships. The key message here is: Building and maintaining connection with others is a powerful source of vitality. When life gets busy, it's easy to retreat into the cocoon of our own homes and avoid contact with others. But it is precisely that contact that can help us deal with the stress. Better conversations make people happier. That's real conversations that involve a significant exchange of information, not just small talk. Don't hijack the conversation and talk only about yourself. Ask questions. Include everyone in conversations. Look, listen, and notice. Something that's also very important? Put your phone away! Effective communication can be especially important in romantic partnerships and marriages. Create a decontamination protocol to wash off the tough day at work before joining your family so you don't take your stress out on them. When your partner tells you something, respond with active constructive responding (ACR). This means responding with wholehearted, genuine enthusiasm, including eye contact, follow-up questions, and focused attention. ACR can literally make the other person feel more loved. In fact, the three best words in romance may not be "I love you," but "Tell me more." When loving communication translates into action, it can become an even more powerful source of strength. It isn't the big, lavish gestures like diamond necklaces that lead to long-term contentment; it's the layers of invisible support – like filling up the tank of your partner's car to make the next day easier for them. These small acts of kindness and thoughtfulness can help to reduce another person's stress immensely.

Another way to build vitality is by

challenging yourself.

Here's an interesting fact: Nobel Prize-winning scientists are two-and-a-half times more likely to have a hobby compared to your average scientist. You'd think they'd be so busy coming up with groundbreaking theories that they wouldn't have time for anything else, but it turns out that some of the world's most successful people are constantly learning new things. Here's the key message: Another way to build vitality is by challenging yourself. Start by questioning your assumptions. We're always told to "be happy," but it's OK to be sad sometimes. Allow yourself to feel disappointed rather than rationalizing your way out of the problem by saying, "Oh, she wasn't right for me anyway," or "That teacher never liked me." Put what you're feeling into words and pinpoint why something bothers you. Understand that ambiguity exists and learn to coexist with it. Then, challenge yourself to go out and do something new and interesting – something that increases your knowledge, broadens your perspective, and helps you do even more new things. Passive activities like watching TV or scrolling through social media on your phone don't count! If you've ever hit the magic stride on a run or become lost in the words of a poem you were writing, you were lucky enough to be caught up in the flow. The flow is that wonderful feeling that comes when you are so immersed in something that you almost transcend yourself and become one with the thing you are doing. Doing activities that can lead you to this point will almost certainly build your vitality. On a more everyday level, challenge yourself to become healthier in general. Get at least seven to eight hours of sleep; any less can make it impossible to think clearly or see things in a positive light. Prioritize sleep as you would a meeting: Set an alarm for your bedtime, and set notifications on your phone to silent an hour before bed so you can start to unwind. Make sure to exercise. A 30-minute walk three times a week has been shown to be as effective as stress-relief medication. A sedentary lifestyle can almost double the chance of depression. Even improving your posture can affect your mood. Once you do a small thing that makes you feel better, it can feed into another thing, and the next thing you know, you've kicked off a whole series of positive events. You might even find that you've created a habit!

Context matters when you're building vitality.

In a study designed to test whether intention affects pain perception, participants were paired up and divided into three groups. In each group, one partner administered a small electric shock to the other. Members of group 1 were told that they had been shocked by mistake, while members of group 2 were told that their partners had shocked them on purpose, although no reason was given. But members of group 3 were told that the electric shock was a step in a process that would eventually allow them to win lottery tickets. And guess what? Members of the third group reported feeling the least amount of pain. Just knowing that the pain was inflicted with the intention to help participants gain something made the pain hurt less. The key message is this: Context matters when you're building vitality. We live in a society where we've been encouraged to put our own mask on before helping others. We keep hearing, "Do things for yourself. Put yourself first." Much of this is a backlash against the stress of overcommitment. But focusing only on yourself can leave you empty and unfulfilled. When study participants were asked to do something nice for themselves, for another individual, or for humanity, those who did something nice for others had positive feelings that lasted longer than

those who did things just for themselves. To help put your choices in context, think about what is meaningful to you. Perhaps you have high cholesterol. Simply knowing that fried food is bad for you may not be enough for you to avoid unhealthy eating. But when you think about a grandchild you love, and then think about your cholesterol, you might be more likely to stick to a healthy diet so you can be around long enough to enjoy their company for many years to come. In a world where it feels like headlines about war, disease, and environmental disasters are constant, it's easy to get caught up in negativity. Cultivate vitality by rejecting a pessimistic lens through which to see the world. Don't go out of your way to look for bad news, and don't be that person who's eager to share the latest litany of disasters with others. Instead, note and write down at least two ordinary uplifting moments per day. Vitality is not something you have to be born with; it's something you can grow within yourself. Following the steps outlined in these blinks can help you build vitality amid the daily stressors of life.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks is that: Stress is an inevitable part of modern life. Rather than avoiding it, you can become more resilient by embracing the positive aspects of the challenges that come your way. By being intentional, reaching out to others, and seeking out challenges, you can cultivate vitality. Developing vitality is a win-win, as the more positive you are, the more positivity you seek out and create. Vitality can help you thrive amid chaos and uncertainty. Next time a tough job, difficult person, or frightening news day comes your way, practice the lessons in these blinks and make those challenges work for you. And here's some more actionable advice: Prompt others to find their own answers. When you're trying to help people stuck in a difficult situation, don't tell them what to do. Instead, ask them what they would tell someone else who was in the same position. This forces them out of their own heads and adjusts their perspectives, making it easier for them to evaluate their problem.