

When Is Stress Positive?

Sue Shellenbarger Answers Readers' Questions

By Sue Shellenbarger

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Q:I have read your past coverage of how academic stress can sometimes be beneficial. How can students turn stress into a positive influence?

—N.S.

A:It helps to understand the difference between harmful and helpful stress. People experiencing beneficial stress feel pumped. Blood flow increases to help the brain, muscles and limbs meet a challenge, and the body returns to normal quickly. Harmful stress causes the blood vessels to constrict and blood pressure to rise. The heart may beat erratically, and hands and feet may grow cold. This response is more difficult to turn off.

The way students think about stress helps determine which response they experience. People who can control their emotions by changing the way they think about challenges are better able to respond positively. In laboratory studies, a brief training session on how the body's response to stress can spur higher performance was all it took for students to perform better on exams and public-speaking tests. This skill is called reappraisal, and it is taught by cognitive-behavioral therapists. A workbook cited by researchers, "Mastery of Your Anxiety and Panic" by David H. Barlow and Michelle G. Craske, has a chapter on thinking skills.

Writing about your anxieties for 10 minutes before a test or other challenge is another way to shift your attitude. Sian Beilock, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago, found in laboratory research that this simple exercise enabled students to perform better on tests. Her findings are described in her 2011 book, "Choke."

Another useful book is "Mindset," by Stanford University psychology professor Carol Dweck. It explains the importance of shifting your mindset, or your established attitudes and beliefs, toward interpreting challenges and setbacks as opportunities for growth, rather than signals of failure and inborn weakness. More information can be found at mindsetonline.com.

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