

5/The Power of Perception

Is my life really stressful, or is it all in my mind? And if it is in my mind, can I think about things differently and not experience so much stress?

Why does one of my classmates thrive while balancing a full class load, a job, and an active social life, while another classmate in the same situation burns out?

I feel like I'm being pulled in too many directions, but I don't see that I have any choices. How much of my stress is the result of my thinking, and what can I do about it?

REAL PEOPLE, REAL STORIES

It's All How You See It *Jerry's story:* "I worked hard during high school, both at school and at my job after school at a grocery store. I have always wanted to go to college and knew it was up to me to make it happen. My parents were always supportive, but with four kids to support and not great jobs, I knew early on that I couldn't expect any financial help from them. I really like college and appreciate the opportunity I have to learn and grow. I think college will help me accomplish my goals, and even though it's hard, I'm determined to learn as much as I can and make the most of this opportunity."

John's story: "College seems like a waste of time to me. The teachers expect too much and don't seem to understand that students want to have a life besides studying. Most of my classes seem to have nothing to do with the real world, and the assignments are a bunch of busy work. This really is a waste of my time."

Jerry and John attend the same university, have the same major, and take many of the same classes. Jerry views school as an opportunity. John views school as a burden.

Great men are they who see
that spiritual force is stronger
than any material force, that
thoughts rule the world.

—RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Student Objectives

Study of this chapter will enable you to:

1. Define perception and explain how perception affects your experience with stress.
2. Explain cognitive appraisal and cognitive restructuring.
3. Describe how the hardiness characteristics of commitment, challenge, and control can be developed to facilitate a more positive perception.
4. Discuss how your thoughts activate the stress response and how it is therefore in your control.
5. Describe the relationship between the amount of stress you feel and the level of control you feel.

The Power of Perception

Have you ever wondered why people react to the same situations differently? Some people get nervous before a test, or a big game, or speaking in front of a group of people, while others enjoy the challenge. Could it be genetics, perception, personality, or attitude that makes the difference? Yes, yes, yes, and yes—and probably other reasons, too. Your experience with life's events depends on your strategies for coping with stress, your previous experience with stress, your genetic makeup, and your level of social support. Most important, however, is how you perceive the events in life. A shift in perspective is the first critical step toward improving how you experience stress. Understanding how the mind interprets and perceives incoming information is the key to stopping stress where it starts—in your own mind.

But can you actually change the way you perceive things? Can you learn to *think* differently? Absolutely! Changing the way you think is no small matter, yet this goes to the heart of where stress begins. In this chapter and the next we will explore the power of the mind and the power of perceptions. You will learn specific and proven methods, including cognitive restructuring, levels of responding, and rational emotive therapy, to help you *prevent* stress. These tools will help you perceive events in life more accurately and effectively. You will learn

how your mind affects your experience with stress. When you finish reading these chapters, you will know the answers to these two questions:

1. How do my thoughts relate to the way I experience stress?
2. What tools and techniques can help manage my thoughts and perceptions to prevent stress and enhance the quality of my life?

Nonoko's Story

Once upon a time there was an old Zen master named Nonoko who lived alone in a hut in the woods. One night while Nonoko was sitting in meditation, a powerful stranger came to the door and, brandishing a sword, asked Nonoko for all his money. Nonoko continued to count his breaths while saying to the stranger, "All my money is on the shelf behind the books. Take all you need, but leave me ten yen. I need to pay my taxes this week."

The stranger went to the shelf and removed all the money except ten yen. He also took a lovely urn on the shelf.

"Be careful how you carry that urn," said Nonoko. "It can easily crack."

The stranger looked around the small, barren room once more, then began to leave.

"You have forgotten to say 'thank you,'" said Nonoko.

The stranger said "thank you" and left.

The next day, the whole village was in an uproar. Half a dozen people claimed they'd been robbed. When a friend noted that Nonoko's urn was missing, he asked Nonoko if he, too, had been a victim of the thief.

"Oh, no," said Nonoko. "I loaned the urn to a stranger, along with some money. He said 'thank you' and left. He was pleasant enough but careless with his sword."

Source: *The Book of Est.*, by L. Rinehart (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1976).

The story about Nonoko illustrates that individuals can have the same experience but with very different results, depending on their thinking. Like Nonoko, you can learn to think about the events of life in a positive, life-enhancing manner to prevent stress and greatly improve your quality of life. Think back to the dimensions of health introduced in Chapter 1. Recall that the intellectual, or mental, dimension of health relates to thinking and the emotional dimension relates to feeling. The intellectual dimension of health is the focus of this chapter.

Perception

Perception, a person's cognitive (mental) interpretation of events, is perhaps the most critical aspect in preventing unnecessary and unhealthy stress. Experts who study stress agree that in nearly all cases, the events themselves are not what cause us to feel stress but, rather, *the way we perceive or interpret those events is what causes us to feel stress*.

Are You in Danger? Ask yourself this important question: In the past month of your life, how much of your time was spent in life-threatening situations? Taking into account every minute, how much of the time was your life really in danger? Perhaps you were in a car accident or some other incident that briefly involved a dangerous situation. Maybe you were hiking and lost your footing in a dangerous place along the path. Maybe you were at risk of being mugged or attacked. Nearly everyone can recount occasional instances when we have been in danger. Sometimes the danger is a real one and can be interpreted as threatening. This distress can lead to positive action that is necessary for you to avoid pain or danger.

If we take into account every waking moment of our lives, we can immediately realize that we are rarely in any kind of danger that puts our life at risk or in which we will feel physical pain from an outside source. Certainly there are exceptions. Some of us live in places where real danger regularly looms large. But for most of us, if we analyze our situations accurately, we have to acknowledge that our lives do not involve many life-threatening experiences.

In the previous chapters you learned about the effects of stress on the physical body. You also learned that the stress response begins with a thought. The thought sends an initial message to your various body systems that you are in danger. This message activates a state of physiological arousal, the fight-or-flight response. This fight-or-flight response is an automatic reaction to the sensation that you are in danger.

Refer to the Stress-o-Meter self-assessment that you completed in Chapter 2. This was a general assessment of the level of stress you felt during the last month. You gave yourself a ranking between 1 and 10. What was your score? Was it higher than a 2 or 3? At this point, we must ask the key question: If you are in real danger so infrequently, if you have so few genuinely threatening experiences when you need extra energy, speed, or power to survive, why would you report any score higher than 2 or 3 on the Stress-o-Meter? Remember—the only purpose of the stress response is to keep you alive. But if you are in danger so infrequently, why would you need to activate the stress response? To be honest, why would you ever feel stressed?

Author Anecdote

How Stressed Are You Really?

In my classes, I begin this discussion by asking each of the students the following question: "In the past month, how much of your time was spent in situations where your life was really in danger?" Usually, three or four students have gone through something serious like being in a car accident or running out of air while scuba diving. One student told me she was camping and a big brown bear really did show up in her campground.

I go around the room asking each student this question, and as I do this, I do some math. A class usually has about 30 students, and I multiply that number by 30 days in a typical month multiplied by 24 hours in a day multiplied by 60 minutes in an hour. This adds up to 1,296,000 total minutes of life accumulated by the members of our class during the last month. Then I total the number of minutes they spent in a situation when their life was in honest-to-goodness danger. The top number so far has been 15 minutes.

Continuing with the math, I take the number of minutes during which the class experienced stress from true danger and divide that number by the total number of minutes lived during the last month. The results invariably come out to be far less than 1%. Then I go a step farther and ask the students what percentage of their time they feel stressed. They report anywhere from 30% to 90% of each day feeling unpleasant stress.

—MO (*to be continued*)

Author Anecdote

How Stressed Are You Really? (*continued*)

At this point, I usually ask someone from the class to come to the front of the room and stand beside me. Let's say I have chosen Susan. I ask her if she knows *The Star Spangled Banner*. I tell her to think of that song in her mind so she is clear how it goes. Next, I ask her to sing that song to the rest of the class at the very top of her lungs, much like the singer does at the beginning of a major league baseball game—just barrel it out!

Occasionally someone will be courageous enough to go for it, but most of the time, the students become red in the face (either in anger at me or in embarrassment, or both), fidget a lot, and try to talk their way out of my request for them to sing.

After a few long moments I ask Susan to sit down, and I thank her for volunteering. Then I ask her this important question: "Susan, if you were at home and nobody else were around—in other words, you knew nobody would hear you—perhaps you were in the shower or vacuuming your house, would you have any problem singing *The Star Spangled Banner* at the top of your lungs?"

Invariably the response is, "No, I would have no problem if I were at home all by myself."

My next question to the class is this, "What is the difference between being at home and being in front of a classroom full of people? Aren't you singing the same song in both places? You're essentially doing the exact same thing both times."

—MO (*to be continued*)

Author Anecdote

How Stressed Are You Really? (continued)

I ask Susan what initial thought went through her head when I asked her to sing. Usually it is a sense of panic. Susan will report that she felt her heart rate increase, her breathing change, her face become flushed, and many other internal sensations, all of which are natural responses when we feel like we are in danger. But her life was not in danger in any way up there in front of the class.

I next ask the students to name a few stressors—events they think cause them to feel stress. They usually respond with things such as finances, homework, tests, not enough time to do everything, or family and relationship problems. Then I choose one of those stressors, such as taking tests. I ask the class if it is possible for them to study for and take a test without feeling any distress.

"No way!" is the common roar in return.

I rephrase the question and ask, "Even though it may not be likely, is it humanly possible for someone to study for and take the test without feeling any anxiety?"

A few students usually have caught on by now, but the most vocal ones still emit a resounding "Impossible!"

Then I ask the students if I, as a teacher at the university, would feel any stress if I were to take the test. What if I were to study hard and then take the test? Or what if my 6-year-old son were asked to complete the test? Why in the world would he or I feel any stress about taking the test? Soon, most of the students have figured out that the test itself is not the cause of their stress.

—MO

Stress Comes from Within As typified by the student who was asked to sing in front of the class, the chronic stress that we feel is rarely, if ever, the result of a truly threatening situation. The point of that example was to demonstrate that our stress almost always stems from situations that are not, by their nature, sufficient to put us in real danger. The outcome that we think is going to do us harm usually doesn't. As a result, we create in our bodies a false sense of emergency.

This leads to an important conclusion about the stress we feel: *The perception or the interpretation of an event is what initiates the fight-or-flight response. The event itself is not what causes us to experience stress.* As stress theory has evolved, the notion that human stress is a direct response to external stimulus is no longer credible. Whether we feel stressed seems to depend on how we view what is happening. Interpretation of stressors, not the stressors themselves, causes distress.

In his book *Creating Health*, Deepak Chopra explains that we commonly assume that stress is something outside of us, that stress is speed, noise, and chaos. This view is in error, he says. Stress comes from within. Chopra quotes Dr. Daniel Friedman, an authority on stress, who says:

Stress is a coupled action of the *body and mind* involving *appraisal* of a threat, an instant modulation of response. The triggering mechanism is the individual's *perception* of threat, not an event. Perception is modified by temperament and experience.¹

FYI

What Makes You Nervous?

Can you guess the top four situations that people perceive as stressful? Here is what Bernice Kanner, author of *Are You Normal?*, says:

1. Making a speech
2. Getting married
3. Getting divorced
4. Going to the dentist

What makes your top ten list of situations that you interpret to be stressful?

Source: *Are You Normal?: Do You Behave Like Everyone Else?* by Bernice Kanner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995).



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Public speaking can be a stressful experience.

Dr. Friedman goes on to say that we all respond to outer threats in our own way, depending on our previous level of arousal and ability to adapt. Appropriate stress helps the individual to adapt. Inappropriate stress, by contrast, serves no useful purpose and may result in disease. So stress is subjective and the individual's perception of threat, not the event itself, is what triggers stress.

Whenever we sense a potential for pain or danger of any kind—emotional, social, spiritual, or physical—our body reacts in its perfect way to help us survive. *The only way the body knows to do this is to turn on the fight-or-flight response.* We do not have any other natural way to handle a perceived threat. Certainly we can learn other ways, but our body inherently knows only one way that is immediate, fast-acting, and guaranteed to produce powerful results.

The reality of an exam is that it has no power to turn on the fight-or-flight response. It is merely a piece of paper with words printed on it. The stressor is based entirely on what that test means to us and how we interpret it. If a stranger—someone who was not in the class—were to be given the same test, she probably would interpret it as some interesting questions with no other meaning to her personal well-being. Students who feel stressed about a test are the ones who interpret it as critical to their future because a low score may pose a threat to their well-being.

The World is NOT a Stressful Place

The summarizing point and the essential concept in preventing stress is that *no event in life is inherently stressful.* Rather, we make stressful interpretations of the events of our days. No event in life causes stress universally for everyone. We have decided that some facet of the situation will inflict pain or discomfort, which may be physical, emotional, or spiritual. The situation also may be seen as a threat to our sense of well-being and comfort.

This understanding shifts the influence of what causes stress from external factors to internal control. Although some situations, such as a tsunami, a hurricane, an incurable illness, or being attacked, will be interpreted as stressful almost universally, we usually have the power to take control of how we interpret any event in life.

This concept might be fairly easy to capture intellectually, but to make it a working principle in daily life is quite another thing. We are not trained to think this way. From our earliest days we are taught commonly accepted statements such as these:

- This test is stressing me out.
- You make me mad.
- This class makes me bored.
- He hurt my feelings.
- She is so irritating.
- Life is stressful.

We simply accept the mistaken notion that what happens outside of us affects how we feel inside. Life events happen, and our reactions seem to be automatic.

The following real-life scenarios demonstrate how interpretation and perception are the deciding factors in the outcome.

Lindsay steps up to the foul line, puts the basketball in her shooting hand, lofts the ball into the air, and watches it sail through the hoop. She scores. When would this situation—standing at a foul line shooting foul shots—be stressful? One answer would be “when she is shooting to win the game.” If she misses, her team will lose.

In our culture, we have decided that losing is painful. When will this not be stressful? Lindsay probably will feel no stress when she is in her backyard shooting foul shots by herself. She is doing precisely the same thing in both circumstances (at the end of the game or in the backyard). The only reason one situation is stressful and the other is not is because she has interpreted one differently than she has interpreted the other.

If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.

—MARCUS AURELIUS
(121–180 AD)

Stress is an ignorant state.
It believes that everything
is an emergency.

—NATALIE GOLDBERG

During the game Lindsay is thinking of all the negative consequences if she misses. Because she is thinking about avoiding future pain, her body automatically turns on the stress response. When she is shooting in her backyard, she doesn't sense any negative consequences if she misses the shot. In the absence of a perception of potentially negative consequences, she will not feel any effects of the stress response. The way she has interpreted the event is the key point.

See if you can relate to the following example:

Imagine that you are driving down a narrow, winding road behind someone who is driving slowly. You are in a hurry, but she, apparently, is not. Imagine that you are late for an important exam. This exam is so important that you may fail the course if you are late. You are definitely in a rush. The driver in front of you, though, is on a leisurely drive with her husband and kids.

Now imagine that an elderly man, who is driving a large car, pulls out just in front of this family. He is in even less of a hurry than the family in the car in front of you. The driver in front of you slows down so that her car doesn't run into the old man. You are forced to slow down as well.

The speed at which this older man is moving is driving you bananas. Soon you are in a rage, pounding the steering wheel, honking your horn, shaking your fist; your face has turned red and you are noticeably irate. If we ask why you are so upset, you might say something about how that man is making you stressed out. He is upsetting you because he is driving too slowly. In reality, you are upset, stressed, and out of balance because of how you are interpreting the situation. The older gentleman isn't making you feel stress. The other driver, the one with her family in the car, is on the same road, driving at the same speed behind the same slow-driving man, and she is not feeling upset, out of balance, or the least bit stressed. Why not?

These two drivers are not stressed because they have interpreted the situation differently. The second driver may see the situation as an opportunity to move even more slowly so she can catch more of the wonder of this beautiful drive. You interpret the slow-driving man as a major hindrance to you. In his thoughtless leisure, he is possibly causing you to flunk your test. That thought, for you, is painful. The event is not what causes you stress. What causes you stress is the meaning you give to the event.

Events themselves are not inherently stressful. This idea is illustrated concisely by a Taoist story of a farmer whose horse ran away:

Upon hearing the news, all the neighbors came over to lament the loss. "What bad fortune!" they exclaimed, to which the farmer's reply was, "Maybe."

The next morning the farmer awoke, and to his surprise he saw his horse had returned, and with it had come six wild horses. The neighbors came over, and with astonishment, congratulated the farmer on his good fortune.

The farmer's reply was simply, "Maybe."

The following day, the farmer's only son was trying to saddle and ride one of the new horses when he fell off and broke his leg. Again, the neighbors came to offer their sympathy for the misfortune. Again, the farmer simply said, "Maybe."

The next day, the officers from the army came to recruit every young man to help fight in the war, but because of the broken leg, the farmer's son was rejected. When the neighbors came in to say how fortunate the father was that everything had turned out, his reply to them was, "Maybe."²

As you can probably guess, this story goes on and on. The events themselves did not make the farmer feel any particular way. How he interpreted these events was what led to his serene attitude toward the events that others viewed as tragedies.

In short, the examples provided in this chapter are intended to emphasize the idea that events in the surrounding environment are not what precipitate stress in most people; interpretations are what actually trigger the stress response.³ The connection between perception and physiology is incredibly strong. We can set off the stress response just by imagining confrontation with a teacher, for example. When we feel stress, we do it to ourselves. Knowing

Everything in life is but a challenge. Challenges can never be good or bad; we make of our challenges what we will.

—TOLTEC TEACHINGS BOOK

this one single thing gives us complete power to *undo* it. If we are feeling stress, we can immediately take responsibility and take positive measures to stop the stress. This puts us back in control! Cognitive restructuring will help you learn how to do this.

Cognitive Restructuring

Cognition is a mental process that consists of thinking and reasoning skills. The ability to think and learn makes us uniquely human. It enables us to be rational, make good judgments, interpret the world around us, and learn new skills. Without cognitive functions, we could not interpret our daily lives, adapt and make changes, and develop the insights to make those changes.⁴ Cognitive functioning allows us to react individually to the same situation. **Cognitive appraisal**—our interpretation of a stressor—is the deciding factor in our reaction.

Cognitive restructuring refers to the mental act of changing the meaning or our interpretation of the environmental stressors in life. This is sometimes called **reframing**. This approach substitutes our perceptions of stressors from thoughts that are threatening to thoughts that are non-threatening. The source of excess stress is **cognitive distortion**, in which perceptions become distorted and magnified out of proportion to their seriousness. Cognitive restructuring entails first awareness, and then correction, of these stressful, maladaptive thoughts.

Hardiness

Hardiness research⁵ suggests that the combination of three personality traits works together to dramatically reduce the perception of stress in individuals possessing these traits. The premise is that some individuals have traits that actually facilitate a more positive perception of daily events. **Hardiness** is the term used to describe this combination of personality characteristics and includes the traits of commitment, challenge, and control. A hardy individual is described as one who:

1. Views potentially stressful events as interesting and meaningful (commitment)
2. Sees change as normal and as an opportunity for growth (challenge)
3. Sees oneself as capable of having an influence on events (control)

Individuals strong in *commitment* believe in the truth and value of who they are and what they are doing. They have a sense of meaning and purpose in work and relationships. Therefore they remain committed and deeply involved rather than allowing themselves to become alienated by fear, uncertainty, or boredom. The term *challenge* reflects an outlook on life that enables an individual to perceive change as an opportunity for growth rather than a threat to one's sense of security or survival. Change, rather than stability, is seen as the common mode of life. The term *control* reflects a belief that one can influence the course of life events within reasonable limits. Hardy individuals have an internal sense of personal mastery, confronting problems with confidence in their ability to implement effective solutions.⁶

Studies suggest that the hardy personal traits of commitment, challenge, and control can be learned. Understanding these hardiness characteristics is important because if you don't always perceive situations in the most positive manner, these are areas you can focus on to improve your perceptions. In the pages to come, you will learn more about how to develop these traits to help you gain a more positive perspective on the events that contribute to your stress.

Author Anecdote

POPP Formula for Prevention

Over the years, I have taught stress-management workshops in large corporations and in small churches, to nurses, teachers, farmers, students, and executives, from coast to coast and overseas. One of the most important ideas in each and every workshop is this: Your perception becomes your reality. I developed the POPP formula for prevention to help participants in my workshops remember this critical concept.

POPP is an acronym for Point Of Positive Perception. Let this idea POPP into your mind every time you find yourself in a potentially stressful situation:

- There is an actual **point** in time when your thoughts initiate the stress response.
- You can choose a **positive** thought to respond to the events in your environment.
- This positive **perception** will stop the stress response from activating.
- You have **prevented** unhealthy and unproductive stress.

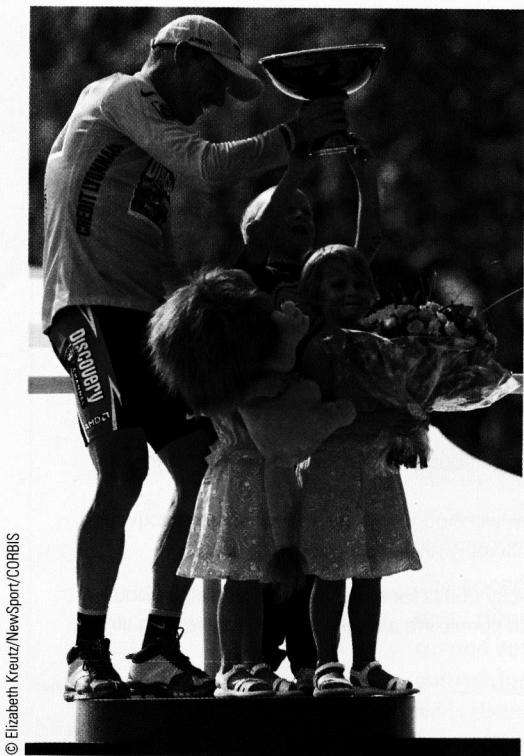
There is power in the simplicity of this formula. We are not talking about managing stress, or coping with stress. We are talking about preventing stress.

—MH

Point Of Positive

Perception = Prevention

—MARGIE HESSON



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Lance Armstrong learns that life is about more than a bicycle race.

Commitment—Turning Problems into Opportunities It is not what happens to you in life but what you do with what happens to you in life that determines the outcome. Listen to the experience of world-class cyclist and Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong, who in his mid-20s was diagnosed with cancer:

The most interesting thing about cancer is that it can be one of the most positive, life-affirming, incredible experiences ever. When somebody is in that position, he starts to really focus on his life, on his friends and family, and what's really important. You experience a different emotion and feeling than the guy who has woken up for thirty years in perfect health and gone to work or school and never had to worry about anything. That guy forgets that every day when you wake up, it's really a gift. . . . I love what I am doing by a factor of at least a hundred.⁷

How many of us would think of cancer as a positive, incredible experience? Remember, commitment, your ability to view potentially stressful events as interesting and meaningful, influences your perception, and your perception becomes your reality. Lance Armstrong's story clearly illustrates that an event such as being diagnosed with cancer, which normally would be considered very bad luck, can be interpreted as a positive, life-enhancing gift. His commitment to finding meaning and purpose through this life-changing experience affected his perception, and ultimately the quality of his life. The cancer is not what causes stress. The meaning we give to the cancer is what determines the outcome. So, even when we cannot change the things that cause us stress, we can change our perception.

Challenge—Change as Challenge Rather Than Threat You probably have heard the aphorism, "The only constant in life is change." Yet many people find change unsettling. Change can disrupt the normal flow of life and create a stressful environment. One must be prepared for change because change will happen whether we want it to or not. You can adopt one of two reactions to change: Either resent and fear change or embrace it and see new opportunities for growth in it. The first way leads to frustration, anger, and bewilderment, the other to excitement, awe, and challenge.

When you approach life with a more accurate interpretation of events around you, this positive perception halts the initiation of the stress response and you also learn that you can turn problems into opportunities to reawaken your enthusiasm for life.

Thomas Edison perceived things in a positive manner when he said, "I have not failed 10,000 times. I have successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work." It's all how we look at things.

CULTURE Connection

Fear of Failure

Most anxiety is based on personal perception, says Paul J. Rosch, M.D., president of the American Institute of Stress. "The Chinese word for 'crisis' consists of two characters—danger and opportunity," he says. "If you fear failure, you are under the kind of constant, slow-burning stress that can deplete your energy and corrode your health. If you can learn to see your failures as opportunities to learn and grow, the danger is gone and stress evaporates."

Source: Quoted in "Contents Under Pressure," by M. Zimmerman and S. Tuck, in *Men's Health*, August 2004, p. 176.



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Control An important aspect of how we perceive our environment has to do with the level of control we feel over our environment. Not only is control one of the characteristics of a hardy personality, but it is also key to understanding how you view the events in your life. Think of **control** as a deeply held belief that you can directly impact a situation. There is a relationship between the amount of control we think we have and the corresponding amount of stress that we feel. The more control we feel we have over our circumstances, the less stress we tend to feel. As our sense of control diminishes, stress levels tend to rise.

To understand this concept of control, let's explore what can and can't be controlled. There are some things in life over which we have no control. These are things such as the stock market; natural phenomena such as weather, earthquakes, and storms; and some forms of disease. We do not have control over other people. Although we can influence others, we do not have control over other people's thoughts, feelings, or actions.

We do our best to try to control how someone is thinking, feeling, or acting. As examples, we may act like a martyr—or try to make someone feel guilty or angry in attempts to control his or her thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, we do not have the power to control anyone else, even though we may spend a lot of time trying. The healthy response to things over which we have no control is acceptance, allowance, and a go-with-the-flow attitude.

By contrast, we do have total control over some things. These things are related primarily to ourselves—our thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and actions. At times, we may not feel that we are in control of these things, but ultimately, nobody but you can control your inner life. Your perception of what is happening in your life has a lot to do with whether you believe you are in control and have power over what is happening, or whether you believe external factors are controlling your life.

Self-Limiting Beliefs In between those things over which we have no control and those things over which we have total control are various situations over which we have some degree of control. In many instances, we have much greater control than we realize. In many areas of life, we frequently create beliefs, or feelings of certainty, about our limitations. For example, we might have a belief that we are not smart enough or capable enough to go to graduate school. We tend to act on that belief and not achieve what we would like to. The belief that we couldn't possibly be a concert pianist—even though this would be an appealing goal—may stop us from even trying to learn how to play the piano.

Thinking in this way comes from faulty notions that a person does not have the ability to carry out a specific task. These are called **self-limiting beliefs**. Our culture promotes beliefs that prevent people from pursuing worthy goals. Some examples of self-limiting statements are:

- I'm too old.
- I'm too young.
- I'm too fat.
- I'm not smart enough.
- I'm too shy.
- I'm not strong enough.
- I don't have enough willpower.
- I won't be successful, so why try?
- I can't control how I feel when this or that happens.

Author Anecdote

I Can See Clearly Now

A few years ago, for the first time, I got glasses. I was amazed and surprised at how clear and sharp the world around me became when I put on my glasses. Had the world around me changed? No. The difference was that I could now see the world clearly. My perspective had changed. I had become so accustomed to the dull and blurry view that I was not even aware of what I was missing. The world didn't change. I did.

Have you become accustomed to a dull, blurry view of the world? Do you expect your day to be filled with stress? Can you learn to see things in your life differently to make your life better? We tend to think we are objective and how we see the world is how it really is. But more accurately we see the world not as it is but as we are. We are conditioned to see things in a certain, sometimes stressful, way. We must look at the lens through which we see the world and understand that the lens shapes how we interpret the world. It has been said that the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscape, but in having new eyes.

One of my students shared with me that after reading this anecdote, he made the decision to use the act of putting on his glasses each morning as a reminder that he could choose how he saw the events of each and every day.

—MH

Stress is a response and therefore can be controlled. All it requires is changing your perception of what truly requires a stress response. You have the power to control the stress in your life. Decide to control the stressor; don't let the stressor control you. Since we cannot change reality, let us change the eyes which see reality.

—NIKOS KAZANTZAKIS



TIME TIP

"I face so many challenges every day that I was constantly exhausted. To help manage my time, I started to take a 'time out' every day. I write it in my planner so I have one hour just for me—for exercise, casual reading, soaking in the tub, or napping in the sun. This time out gives me a chance to relax and return refreshed and ready to face the challenges."

—Jenny M.

Statements such as these may not be accurate self-assessments, but because we believe them, we tend to act on these beliefs and bring about results that coincide with the limiting beliefs. Psychologists call these types of beliefs **premature cognitive commitments**. We commit prematurely to an inaccurate belief about ourselves. Richard Bach made an astute statement about what happens when we have these self-limiting beliefs when he said, “Argue for your limitations, and sure enough, they’re yours.”⁸ Our beliefs become our reality, regardless of how true or false they may be.

If the need or desire is great enough, we can control a lot more than we think. If someone were to give you a hundred dollars to sit next to a crying baby during a 2-hour airplane flight, or to wait patiently in the supermarket line while the woman in front of you spends 20 minutes digging through her coupons, or to listen to the guy next to you in the library smack and pop his gum while you are trying to study, could you do it? Of course you could. Could you do it without feeling stressed? Suddenly it is not so awful, is it? Events that seem irritating and stress-producing take on new meaning.

When we are highly motivated, we can take control and prevent the event from initiating the stress response. If you could control your stress response for a hundred dollars, would you do it for a lifetime of less stress and better health? Again, we see the principle of perception and interpretation at play in virtually all events.

Locus of Control An additional concept related to control, known as **locus of control (LOC)**, refers to the way we ascribe our chances of success or failure in a future venture to either internal or external causes. People with an **internal locus of control** see themselves as responsible for the outcomes of their own actions. People with an **external locus of control** believe that whatever happens to them is unrelated to their own behavior—making it beyond their control.

Your perception of control has a profound impact on your motivation and your health. Researchers theorize that as far as a sense of control is concerned, a person is somewhere along a continuum of internal and external control. For example, if your thinking is more toward the internal LOC end of the continuum you might say, “The grade I receive in this class is entirely dependent on the work, study, and effort I exert toward each of the assignments and tests.” People with an internal LOC tend to participate in behaviors that positively affect their health, such as exercising, eating healthy food, and doing relaxation exercises.

If you tend to think from a more external LOC perspective, you might think or say, “I’ll get a good grade in this class because the teacher likes me or is in a good mood when she’s giving out grades.” People with an external locus of control would consider the condition of

Research HIGHLIGHT

Out of Control

Job stress can raise blood pressure over the long term, according to a study in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*. Men working 25 or more years in a demanding job where they felt they had little control had higher blood pressure at work and home than those who felt they had more control. The deterioration of health was not a result of the job itself but, rather, to the lack of control the worker felt. Feeling in control of our life reduces the unhealthy physiological changes induced by the stress response.

Source: “Life-course Exposure to Job Strain and Ambulatory Blood Pressure in Men,” by P. Landsbergis, P. Schnall, T. Pickering, K. Warren, and J. Schwartz, in *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 157(11), (2003): 998–1006.



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Perceived lack of control contributes to job stress and health problems, like high blood pressure.

their health as being independent of their behaviors. If they remain healthy or get sick, it is because of luck, chance, or circumstances.

People with a tendency to think from an internal LOC perspective are more likely to take responsibility and believe they can influence what happens to them. Moving toward this style of thinking will positively affect your ability to reduce the stress in your life. If you think you can control the stress you are experiencing, you are well on your way to doing so. This idea relates to the next concept we will discuss: self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy Changing our perceptions depends on the belief that we can change and will succeed. **Self-efficacy** describes the belief in our ability to accomplish a goal or change a behavior. When we truly believe we can do something, we often find we can. Have you read the children's story *The Little Engine That Could?* The little engine is famous for saying, "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can," as it pulls the train up the mountain. This is self-efficacy. The little engine did not say, "I wish I could" or "I might be able to" or "I hope I can" or "No way—I'm too small." If you have the courage and the faith to believe in yourself and your abilities, you can control the stress in your life if you think you can.

You might be saying to yourself that this surely sounds nice, but it isn't that easy to change how a person thinks about things. True, it isn't easy, but people can and do take control of their thinking and their perceptions every day. As a result, they change their behavior, even related to the most difficult-to-change thinking patterns.

All around us we see people who quit smoking, people who stop taking drugs, people who stop being angry, and people who change many other behaviors that some believe are nearly impossible to change. Many people come to realize the control they have over their thoughts and feelings. They recognize that they are not at the mercy of forces outside of themselves. Regardless of the environmental situations, these people can control their thoughts and, therefore, their feelings and behaviors.

As we were discussing this concept of control in class, one student offered an enlightened insight: "If you have control over something, there is no need to worry about it. If you can't control something, there is also no need to worry about it. There is nothing else . . . so there really is *nothing to worry about*." These are wise words. Understanding this balance is the key to preventing stress.

Putting It All Together

What can we do with this chapter? How can we apply the information? When we find ourselves becoming tense, we can ask ourselves the following questions to help diffuse the stress response.

1. *Is this stressor real?* Am I really in danger, or am I just imagining or creating the danger or pain? If we look at the situation with a rational eye, we find that rarely is the danger or pain real. This does not mean that the things we involve ourselves in are not important and worth pursuing. What it does mean is that we can do the important things that we choose to do without the added anxiety levels and accompanying stress. If we do not sense any danger, we will not feel any threat and, as a result, the stress response will not have to activate to prepare us for any potential of peril. We then can function in a more balanced way.
2. *Can I handle this situation?* One sure source to determine if we can handle something, and therefore diffuse the need to turn on the stress response, is our past experience. We have taken hundreds of tests, met thousands of people, done many unknown things that seemed scary at first, and we have survived them all. Why should this situation be any different? If we can handle something, there is no need

An Oldie but Goodie

The renowned theologian Norman Vincent Peale wrote the classic treatise on positive mental attitude. His book *The Power of Positive Thinking* has sold more than 3 million copies. He offers these timeless tips:

- You can have control over your life.
- You can get farther in life if you have a hopeful outlook.
- You can create your own luck.
- The only person who can change you is you.
- Believe in yourself! Have faith in your abilities!

Source: *The Power of Positive Thinking*, by Norman Vincent Peale (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1952).

FYI

Stress Busting Behavior

A NEW WAY OF THINKING

Practice incorporating these new modes of thinking into your everyday life:

1. "I don't need to be stressed about this. I'm not in any danger."
2. "It's not a problem, it's a challenge and a chance to grow."
3. "It's not a failure, it's a learning experience."
4. "Change is good. It brings new opportunities."
5. "I can't control how others behave, but I can control the way I think about it. And I can give others the benefit of the doubt."
6. "I think I can!"
7. "I am in control of my own destiny."
8. "I never think, 'I'm too old,' or 'I'm not smart enough,' or 'I could never do that.' I can do anything if I put my mind to it."
9. "Success depends on me; I am the one in control."

Which of these are already part of your usual mode of thinking (list the numbers)?

Which of these modes of thinking will be most difficult for you to switch to (list number)?

Pick one of these modes of thinking and describe a recent experience where it would have helped if you had used it.

to feel threatened by it. Our past experience tells us that we can handle most potentially stressful situations successfully.

3. *Can I think about this differently?* As events happen, we have a choice about how we view them or what they mean to us. Depending on how we interpret the situations will lead to feelings of calmness or stress. In Chapter 6 we expand on this idea.

Conclusion

Here is how perception influences the stress level:

1. Perception, or interpretation of events, determines the stress outcome.
2. Events are perceived as stressful if the expected outcome is threatening or painful.
3. Most of us are actually in real danger less than 1% of the time; therefore, we rarely need the stress response for protection.
4. By changing how we interpret events, we can prevent the stress response from activating.
5. Preventing unnecessary stress will promote health, improve quality of life, and prevent disease.

If you allow it, stress can bring out the best in you. You should view the changes in life as energizing opportunities to grow. Recognize that your perception becomes your reality. Embrace the powerful idea that you, and you alone, are in control of your thoughts, and that you can learn to think in a positive, stress-preventing manner. Learn to let go of the stressors that are not in your control. The bottom line is that you have a choice about whether life events will cause you stress. You can decide whether the stressors in life will control you or you will control the stressors.

Author Anecdote

An Immediate Change in How We Viewed the Situation

We had been waiting 45 minutes beyond the scheduled start time for my daughter's soccer game to begin. As each minute passed the fans along the sidelines were getting angrier and angrier because the referee was late. The shared attitude of the crowd was "How could this guy waste our day like this?" They were furious that he would take so long to arrive. I heard many comments about all the mean things these parents were going to say and do to this guy when he finally decided to show up.

Then came a phone call from the referee to one of the other referees in the game. It turns out that his son had been in a really bad car accident and he needed to attend to that situation before he could come to the game. Upon hearing this news, instantly a collective change in attitude toward this man occurred. One moment he was an evil person who deserved the maximum amount of wrath they could throw at him. And the next moment, he was the subject of their greatest sympathies. A change in how they looked at the situation completely changed the way they felt about it.

—MO

LAB

5.1 POPP

REVIEW AND APPLY Review and apply the POPP formula for prevention. For one day, deliberately focus on applying the POPP formula every time you feel your stress response begin to activate. When you feel yourself becoming stressed, stop and deliberately think of how you can perceive the situation in a positive manner so the stress response never activates. Use a cue, like wearing a Hawaiian shirt or switching your watch to the other wrist, to remind you that you are applying the POPP formula for the day. You will need to really pay attention to be alert to the events that are initiating your stress response, and you will need to think carefully about how your perception of that event can change the outcome for you. Here is an example:

Adam experienced stress on nearly a daily basis due to the lack of parking spaces at his university. This was not a good way to start his day. Adam applied the POPP formula when he was driving around the parking lot looking for an open space. At the point when he began to feel his hands gripping the steering wheel and his thoughts turning to frustration, he took a deep breath and deliberately changed his perception of the situation. He reminded himself that he could park a few blocks away. This would allow him to get some exercise, enjoy a nice morning walk to class, and appreciate the beautiful morning. He prevented his stress response from activating.

1. What cue did you use to alert yourself to deliberately think of positive responses to potential stressors?
2. Describe the events you encountered throughout the day that would typically initiate your stress response and your usual way of perceiving the situation.
3. Explain how you changed your thinking (perception) in each situation to change your outcome.
4. Explain your experience with applying the POPP formula. Include how you felt when you perceived potential stressors in a positive way as opposed to how you typically feel when you respond by becoming stressed.
5. At the end of the day, reflect on how applying the POPP formula affected your day.