

Insights from *The Upside of Stress* by Kelly McGonigal

“It turns out that how you think about stress is one of those core beliefs that can affect your health, happiness, and success. Your stress mind-set shapes everything from the emotions you feel during a stressful situation to the way you cope with stressful events. That, in turn, can determine whether you thrive under stress or end up burned out and depressed. The good news is, even if you are firmly convinced that stress is harmful, you can still cultivate a mind-set that helps you thrive.” – Kelly McGonigal

The Power of Mind-set

Mind-sets are beliefs that transcend preferences, learned facts, or intellectual opinions. Adopting the right mind-set can dramatically alter the course of your life.

Greg Walton, a psychologist at Stanford University, published a paper in *Science* magazine that showed the power of adopting a new mind-set. Greg had African American freshmen at Stanford University read the following message: ‘Everyone struggles with social belonging, but this changes over time’. Afterward, they were asked to write an essay on that message and develop a supportive message for next year’s freshmen.

“Walton tracked its effect on African American students, who have typically struggled the most with the feeling of not belonging. The results were astonishing. The one time intervention improved the students’ academic performance, physical health, and happiness over the next three years, compared with students who had not been randomly selected to receive the intervention. By graduation, their GPAs were significantly higher than the GPAs of African American students who hadn’t participated. In fact, their GPAs were so high that they had completely closed the typical GPA gap between minority and non-minority students at the school.” – Kelly McGonigal

How to Adopt a New Mind-set

Steps to adopt a new mind-set:

- i. Make the mind-set simple and concrete: “Thinking ____ will lead to ____”
- ii. Allow yourself a trial period (1-2 weeks) to apply the new mind-set in the real world and determine its worth.
- iii. Find an opportunity to share your experience with others.

The benefits of adopting a ‘stress is enhancing’ mind-set:

Changing your interpretation of stress has been shown to release powerful chemicals in your body that boost performance. Based on saliva samples from a 2013 study at Yale, participants who adopted the mind-set that ‘the feeling of stress enhances performance’ released more DHEA and oxytocin into their body (natural chemicals that the body produces).

| The benefits of DHEA | The benefits of Oxytocin |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accelerates learning Strengthens focus Increases pattern recognition Counter-acts the harmful effects of cortisol and adrenaline | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases courage and confidence Increases empathy and compassion (enhanced ability to understand what others are thinking and feeling) Widens blood vessels and increases blood flow to the brain |

“The best way to manage stress isn’t to reduce or avoid it, but rather to rethink and even embrace it. New science shows that changing your mind about stress can make you healthier and happier.” – Kelly McGonigal