

HOW TO SHIFT STRESS FROM HARMFUL TO HELPFUL

Stress is a broad term we use to describe occurrences when we feel overwhelmed by work, financial worries or even frustrated by traffic. It is a normal human reaction that we all experience from time to time. It is only when it becomes persistent, difficult to control and impairs our daily functioning that we need to be concerned. In fact, stress doesn't even have to be harmful, but rather it can be enhancing in certain situations. For instance, you may perform at your best when you are under the pump and have deadlines in place or when the stakes are high. Some individuals use stress as a motivating driving factor to achieve results, which can assist in delivering peak performance. In these instances, we release the 'feel-good' endorphin called dopamine.

What causes stress?

Stressors can arise in various areas of our lives. For instance, some common examples of work-related stress include having a heavy workload, working long hours, not getting along with your manager, handling changes within teams and job insecurity. Life stressors on the other hand can include financial worries, relationship difficulties or divorce, moving home, illness, taking on caring responsibilities and having unrealistic expectations of yourself and others. Although there are some common causes of stress, it is important to remember that everyone has different sources of stress and in turn, coping strategies. What is stressful for one individual may not be for another. Similarly, what works for one individual to cope effectively may be completely different to the next individual. Therefore, it is useful to become familiar with your own patterns in order to best manage adaptively.

You may well be familiar with the notion of stress and even the potential negative consequences of it when it is not managed effectively. But what you may be less familiar with is the concept of a mindset, or more specifically, a stress mindset. It is crucial to be able to identify when your stress mindset is harmful and further, to be able to challenge this, and shift it to being more helpful.

What is a stress mindset?

Your mindset is your inner belief relating to any experience. It will determine how you perceive that experience but it will also dictate your response and subsequent action. Accordingly, your stress mindset is how you relate and react to sources of stress. It is important to be able to identify when your stress mindset is detrimental in order to stop it in its tracks before it causes us serious pain. We have certain signs that we can look out for to identify whether we need to be concerned. These include negative thoughts, low mood, maladaptive behaviours and certain physical signs.

During times of stress, it is beneficial to have a resilient mindset. We want to change our response to stress and high-pressure situations by viewing it as a challenge, rather than as a threat. In doing so, we will be able to not only improve our psychological resilience, but we will also be able to flip the physical impacts of stress from detrimental to positive.

How can I shift my mindset from harmful to helpful?

Kelly McGonigal is the author of a very useful and popular book on this topic called, “the Upside of Stress – Why stress is good for you (and how to get good at it)”. She highlights how we spend too much time worrying about things outside of our control and not enough time utilising it in order to learn and grow. McGonigal proposes that there are three simple steps that can be used to not only change your mindset, but they will shift your body’s response to stress as well. They are as follows:

1. **Acknowledge the stress:** Allow yourself to notice and acknowledge stress as you experience it. By doing so, you will be able to become familiar with its nature and how it affects you physically. For instance, you may identify tight or tense muscles or maybe your jaw is clenched.
2. **Recognise it’s because you care:** Embrace the stress by acknowledging that it is in response to something that you care about. You wouldn’t be worried unless it meant something to you. So ask yourself: “What is at stake here for me and why does it matter?” Once you break the situation down like this, it is easier to detach the stress.
3. **Use the energy to achieve goals:** Is there another way that you could you can use the energy that stress gives you? Consider what is within your control and what isn’t. Once you have done so, channel your energy to focus on what you can influence in a way that is positive.

By engaging in these three steps, you will be on the right track to shifting your mindset in becoming more helpful. We want to become familiar with sources of stress, its nature, its effect on us and ways we can channel this energy to achieve positive outcomes.

What does research suggest?

Research demonstrates those who use these techniques illustrate a more adaptive approach to stress, higher work engagement and better health outcomes. Stress is inevitable in our lives so it is important to be able to cope with it effectively. Rather than focusing on reducing or avoiding stress, this approach can help you transform the stress into a more positive form.

These suggestions are not intended to undermine the importance of other techniques used to cope with stress nor to counter the concept that some stress can be detrimental. However, what is suggested is that under duress there is more than a single approach available to you. Maybe deriving the positive effects of stress may in part be a matter of shifting mindsets.

*For more information on our services, contact us on **02 8243 1500** or at **admin@cfch.com.au***