

Being with Stressful Moments Rather Than Avoiding Them

When we use mindfulness to get rid of stress, we're no longer being mindful. Try this practice for being with and reimagining stressful moments.

By Eric Langshur and Nate Klemp PhD | July 26, 2017



Stress is bad. Ease is good. And mindfulness is about shifting from the former to the later.

Or is it?

When we began our mindfulness practice, this quickly turned into one of our core beliefs. We were both stressed out and overwhelmed in our lives—searching desperately for some way to find a greater sense of ease and flow.

So, like many in the mindfulness community, we turned to meditation as a way to cultivate calm and eradicate stress. And, in many ways, it worked. But we also noticed that we still got stressed... a lot! No matter how much we practiced, our lives continued to bring us stressful situations, relationships, and conversations.

Of course, we weren't the only ones clinging to this idea that stress is bad and ease is good. We found this idea lurking in the background of meditation apps, workplace mindfulness programs, and articles offering tips and strategies on reducing stress and anxiety. We found it in popular books and articles on meditation, with headlines like "Reduce Stress with Mindfulness," "Overcome Stress and Be Happier," or "Meditation—The Stress Solution."

Like many in the mindfulness community, this idea that stress is bad became an almost sacred belief. Whenever the uncomfortable sensations of stress arose, whenever we felt the faint call of our muscles tensing, our stomach churning, or our heartrate racing, we turned to the breath as a way to control and shift our experience from stress to ease. This approach helped us reframe our

thoughts. But we were often left with a residue of physical sensation in the body that we would label as “discomfort.” Our strategy to eradicate stress wasn’t working.

Over time, we experienced the underside of this commonly held desire to get rid of stress. We learned first hand that by prioritizing ease over stress, we created a subtle form of aversion—one that undermines mindfulness and our ability to thrive in the living of our lives.

The 2 Stress Avoidance Traps

1) The ‘Get Rid Of’ Trap

The first is internal to the practice of meditation itself. In many meditative traditions, one of the core principles is non-judgmental awareness—the idea of allowing thoughts, sensations, and perceived phenomena to come and go. The goal, in other words, isn’t to master the art of controlling our internal experience. The goal is to learn to be with whatever is arising, pleasurable, painful, comfortable, or uncomfortable.

The paradox is that when we use meditation to get rid of stress, we leave this core principle behind. Instead of witnessing the rise and fall of phenomena, we attach to certain states—ease, relaxation, flow—while simultaneously avoiding other “negative” states—stress, anxiety, irritation. Put bluntly, when we use mindfulness to get rid of stress, we’re no longer being mindful.

2) The Stress Mindset Trap

The second trap is based on the popular belief and faulty assumption that all stress is indeed bad. While this belief is commonplace, the science of stress fails to back it up.

Consider the research of Stanford psychologist Alia Crum. Crum’s research shows that how we respond to stress has a lot to do with our “stress mindset.” In one study, for instance, participants were tasked with doing a mock job interview, an almost universally stressful undertaking. Prior to the interview, some subjects were shown a video informing them that while stress is often seen as bad, “research shows that stress is enhancing.” Another group of subjects was shown a video claiming that research shows stress is even more debilitating than you might expect.

The results were quite simply amazing. Crum’s team found that altering the “stress mindset” of participants changed their biological response to stress. Those in the stress enhancing group, experienced an increase in the hormone DHEA a hormone associated with building optimal health, along with an associated rise in the growth index—a measure of focus and problem solving skills. Those who went into the interview thinking stress was bad, experienced a diminished biological response and performance.

All of this is to say believing that “stress is bad” is both factually inaccurate and counterproductive. It’s inaccurate because the research shows short-term stress (as opposed to chronic stress) often promotes positive mental and physical outcomes: good stress can be a powerful catalyst for growth. It’s counterproductive because simply believing the thought “stress

is bad” leads to a stress mindset that undermines the ability of our body and mind to deal effectively with the stress we face.

Practice: Reimagining Stressful Moments with Notice-Shift-Rewire

So, go ahead—stress yourself out. Of course, you don’t want to take this too far: as we all know, when stress becomes chronic, it can indeed become bad. But it’s worth experimenting with allowing yourself to move into the experience of stress in short bursts.

There are two ways to do this.

1) Cultivate the mindful experience of stress using Notice-Shift-Rewire. Let the experience of stress be your reminder to Notice what is happening here and now. *Notice* the sensations that accompany stress and see if you can even notice the part of you that favors the pleasurable experience of ease over the discomfort of stress. Try to catch yourself in this mind state of stress aversion.

The next step is to *Shift* back to non-judgmental awareness. See what happens when you simply observe the acceleration of your heartbeat, the tension in your jaw, shoulders or stomach, or the racing of anxious thoughts. What if that sensation of tension wasn’t labeled as ‘bad’?

Then *Rewire* by staying with whatever is arising. Let go of any effort to change your state.

2) Build resilience by shifting your mindset. *Notice* when you try to avoid certain events, experiences, or tasks as a way to steer clear of stress. Then *Shift* by reminding yourself—“stress isn’t bad. It’s often both a pathway to remembering to notice (advancing your practice) and to growth.” And, finally, *Rewire* by facing the stressors that arise in the course of life head on, staying with whatever arises.

By now, it should be clear that stress can either work for you or against you. By resisting and avoiding it, you diminish your ability to effectively navigate stress. But by integrating Notice-Shift-Rewire into your life, you can turn stress into an advantage.

Start developing this habit of Notice-Shift-Rewiring by setting a tiny goal—purposefully face into the discomfort of an ordinarily stressful situation once each day. If you want to make this even more sticky, tell your friends and family about your approach and see how they react. The simple act of explaining your alternative stress mindset can reinforce your practice and help others view stress from a different, bigger, perspective.

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