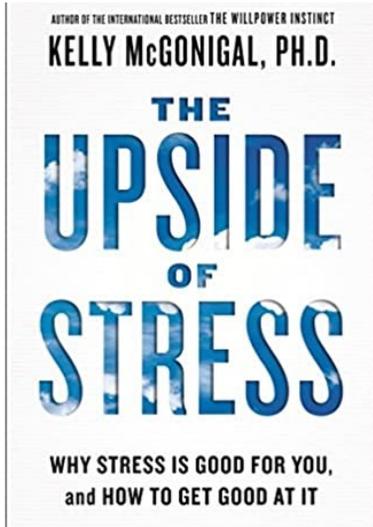


Book Summary

Upside of Stress

By [Kelly McGonigal](#)



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Main Take-Aways

- Changing your Mind about stress
- A meaningful life is a stressful life
- How we talk about stress
- Mindset shift around stress
- Tend and Befriend: Connect
- Shift & Persist: Cultivating a Growth Mindset

Intro

Blurb from Book: This book is based on a course I teach through Stanford Continuing Studies called the New Science of Stress. The course, which enrolls people of all ages and from all walks of life, is designed to transform the way we think about and live with stress.

It's helpful to know a little about the science behind embracing stress for two reasons. First, it's fascinating. When the subject is human nature, every study is an opportunity to better understand yourself and those you care about. Second, the science of stress has some real surprises. Certain ideas about stress - including the central premise of this book: that stress can be good for you - are hard to swallow. Without evidence, it would be easy to dismiss them. Seeing the science behind these ideas can help you consider them and how they might apply to your own experiences.

The advice in this book isn't based on one shocking study - even though that's what inspired me to rethink stress. The strategies you'll learn are based on hundreds of studies and the insights of dozens of scientists I've spoken with. Skipping the science and getting straight to the advice doesn't work. Knowing what's behind every strategy helps them stick.

My Thoughts: I love this book. This year has been hugely stressful and the strategies outlined in this book have already made a tremendous difference.

“The first step is to acknowledge stress when you experience it.”

Changing your Mind about stress

Blurb from Book: A mindset is usually based on a theory about how the world works. When a mindset gets activated - by a memory, a situation you find yourself in, or a remark someone makes - it sets off a cascade of thoughts, emotions and goals that shape how you respond to life.

What is your stress mindset? Take a look at the two stress mindsets below and consider which set of statements you agree with more strongly.

Mindset 1: Stress is Harmful: Experiencing stress depletes my health and vitality. Experiencing stress debilitates my performance and productivity. Experiencing stress inhibits my learning and growth. The effects of stress are negative and should be avoided.

Mindset 2: Stress is Enhancing: Experiencing stress enhances my performance and productivity. Experiencing stress improves my health and vitality. Experiencing stress facilitates my learning and growing. The effects of stress are positive and should be utilized.

Importantly, negative views of stress are associated with very different outcomes than a positive perspective. Crum’s research shows that people who believe stress is enhancing are less depressed and more satisfied with their lives than those who believe stress is harmful. They have more energy and fewer health problems. They are happier and more productive at work. They also have a different relationship to the stress in their lives: They are more likely to view stressful situations as a challenge, not an overwhelming problem. They have greater confidence in their ability to cope with those challenges, and they are better able to find meaning in difficult circumstances.

My Thoughts: This year has been difficult for everyone. There have been so many changes for us all, changes we can’t guard ourselves or our families from.

Mindset is the frame you see life through. Is life happening to you or for you? The difference can set you up to suffer or strive. This took me many years, and in intensely stressful times I find myself slipping back into a reactive and defensive mindset (mindset 1), instead of a proactive and receptive mindset (mindset 2). Letting life happen for you and letting it change you, can be a game changer.

A meaningful life is a stressful life

Blurb from Book: High levels of stress are associated with both distress and well-being. Importantly, happy lives are not stress-free, nor does a stress-free life guarantee happiness. Even though most people view stress as harmful, higher levels of stress seem to go along with things we want: love, health, and satisfaction with our lives.

It turns out that a meaningful life is also a stressful life.

“There are several prototypical stress responses, each with a different biological profile that motivates various strategies for dealing with stress.”

What are the best predictors of a meaningful life? Surprisingly, stress ranked high. In fact, every measure of stress that the researchers asked about predicted a greater sense of meaning in life. People who had experienced the highest number of stressful life events in the past were most likely to consider their lives meaningful. People who said they were under a lot of stress right now also rated their lives as more meaningful. Even time spent worrying about the future was associated with meaning, as was time spent reflecting on past struggles and challenges. As the researchers conclude, “People with very meaningful lives worry more and have more stress than people with less meaningful lives.”

Why are stress and meaning so strongly linked? One reason is that stress seems to be an inevitable consequence of engaging in roles and pursuing goals that feed our sense of purpose. When people report the biggest sources of stress in their lives, topping the list are work, parenting, personal relationships, caregiving, and health.

Stress may be a natural byproduct of pursuing difficult but important goals, but that doesn't mean every stressful moment is rich in meaning. And yet even when the stress we're under doesn't seem inherently meaningful, it can trigger the desire to find meaning - if not in this moment, then in the broader context of our lives. Far from being a luxury, the ability to find meaning in our lives helps us stay motivated in the face of great difficulties. Human beings have an innate instinct and capacity to make sense out of their suffering. This process is even part of the biological stress response, often experienced as rumination, spiritual inquiry, and soul-searching. Stressful circumstances awaken this process in us.

My Thoughts: Often the things that create stress in our lives are the things that matter to us the most. If I'm stressed out about something, I try to figure out why I'm stressed and if it's altering me to an area that I'm either focusing on because I'm actively avoiding something else, thus using the stress as a smoke screen, or if I need to focus and proactively engage in that area of my life so that the “stress” becomes integrated and supported. Reactive vs Proactive.

“Mindfulness exercises are a way to practice staying open to what you sense and feel, rather than shutting down.”

How we talk about stress

Blurb from Book: Unlike what many people think, mindfulness isn't about relaxation or escaping the stress of the day. Instead, it is the ability to pay attention to and accept whatever thoughts, sensations, and emotions are happening. If you are feeling sad, you notice what sadness feels like in your body. You don't try to push it away or replace it with happy thoughts. One of the effects of the biological stress response is to make you more open to your experience. You feel things more, and your ability to notice expands. You are more sensitive to other people and your environment. This increased openness is helpful, but can be overwhelming. Many people, when they experience this opening in the presence of other people's suffering want to slam it shut. So they distract themselves, or distance themselves, or get drunk. Mindfulness exercises are a way to practice saying open to what you sense and feel, rather than shutting down.

Rather than trying to reduce stress, they embraced it. When stress is part of what makes something meaningful, shutting it out doesn't get rid of the stress. Instead, taking the time to fully process and make meaning from what is stressful can transform it from something that drains you into something that sustains you.

How we talk about stress matters. In most workplaces, families, and other communities, the way we talk about stress does little to support our well-being. We might complain casually about stress, reinforcing the fantasy of a stress-free life. Or we vent about our struggles instead of reflecting on what we can learn from them. Sometimes we choose to suffer in silence, preferring to avoid the vulnerability that comes with honest discussions about suffering. Hopefully, you have begun to pay attention to how you talk about stress as a way of practicing mindset mindfulness. Consider when and where there might be an opportunity to openly discuss the challenges you face, especially in the roles and relationships that are personally meaningful.

My Thoughts: Taking the time to fully process and make meaning from what is stressful can transform it from something that drains you into something that sustains you. Proactive vs Reactive.

This entire book has helped me move from a fantasy around what my life “should” look like (stress free!) to what it does look like (stress filled).

This thinking supports the reality of a lot of the suffering we see in the world and the Stoic viewpoint of acknowledging reality, striving to become resilient and still do good. Proactive vs Reactive.

Mindset shift around stress

Blurb from Book: Psychologists have gone on to coin many phrases to describe what it is to be good at stress: grit, learned optimism, post traumatic growth, shift-and-persist, having a growth mindset. We've also learned so much more about how to cultivate these attitudes. But Maddie's definition of what it means to be good at stress - the courage to grow from stress- is still my favorite description of resilience. It reminds us that we cannot always control the stress in our lives, but we can choose our relationship to it. It acknowledges that embracing stress is an act of bravery, one that requires choosing meaning over avoiding discomfort.

“What action can I take, or what choice can I make that is consistent with my goal at this moment?”

This is what it means to be good at stress. It's not about being untouched by adversity or unruffled by difficulties. It's about allowing stress to awaken in you these core human strengths of courage, connection, and growth whether you are looking at resilience in overworked executives or war-torn communities, the same themes emerge. People who are good at stress allow themselves to be changed by the experience of stress. They maintain a basic sense of trust in themselves and a connection to something bigger than themselves. They also find ways to make meaning out of suffering. To be good at stress is not to avoid stress, but to play an active role in how stress transforms you.

The effect of mindset was strongest for those who reported the highest levels of anxiety. The doctors and teachers who experienced the most anxiety were protected against burnout if they viewed anxiety as helpful. The researchers concluded that if people could learn to accept stress and anxiety as part of a challenging work life, that anxiety could actually become a resource rather than a drain on their energy.

Choosing to view anxiety as excitement, or motivation can help you perform to your full potential.

My Thoughts: This idea was completely transformative for me. I forget where I heard the concept (could be in this book or while I was doing additional research), but I read a story about two musicians. Both experienced pounding hearts, sweaty palms and a desire to run right before they went on stage. One chalked it up to nerves, anxiety and “proof” they didn't have what it took to perform in front of an audience. The other tagged it as excitement, adrenaline and used it to pump themselves and their band members up even more and exploded on the stage. They used the same physical reaction in polar opposite ways. How you see your experience is often more important than the actual experience itself.

Tend and Befriend: Connect

Blurb from Book: At its core, the tend-and-befriend response is a biological state engineered to reduce fear and increase hope. The best way to understand how to tend-and-befriend response does this is to look at how it affects your brain....which actually increases activity in three systems of your brain:

“Benefit finding has the most power when a stressful experience has affected you deeply. It can also be especially helpful in situations you can’t control, change, or leave.”

1. The social caregiving system is regulated by oxytocin. When this system is activated, you feel more empathy, connection, and trust, as well as a stronger desire to hold or be close with others. This network also inhibits the fear centers of the brain, increasing your courage.
2. The reward system releases the neurotransmitter dopamine. Activation of the reward system increases motivation while dampening fear. When your stress response includes a rush of dopamine, you feel optimistic about your ability to do something meaningful. Dopamine also primes the brain for physical action, making sure you don’t freeze under pressure.
3. The attunement system is driven by the neurotransmitter serotonin. When this system is activated, it enhances your perception, intuition and self control. This makes it easier to understand what is needed, and helps ensure that your actions have the biggest positive impact.

In other words, a tend-and-befriend response makes you social, brave and smart. ***Anytime you choose to help others, you activate this state.***

Where we place our attention when people we care about are suffering can change our own stress response. If we focus on comforting, helping, and caring for our loved ones, we experience hope and connection. If, instead, we focus on relieving our own distress, we stay stuck in fear.

We can create the biology of courage through small actions. Whether you are overwhelmed by your own stress or the suffering of others, the way to find hope is to connect, not to escape. In any situation where you feel powerless, doing something to support others can help you sustain your motivation and optimism.

My Thoughts: I read this book (the first time) in January of 2020. It was slated to be the Book Review for March or April in the CMC Blog. I could not have read this book at a better time in my life. Tend and Befriend got me through the shut down of NYC. It got me through quarantine. The cognitive understanding of what was happening to me psychologically helped me make better choices that returned better outcomes.

Shift & Persist: Cultivating a Growth Mindset

Blurb from Book: A growth mindset can create resilience more broadly, especially among those who have faced early adversity. Edith Chen, a psychologist at Northwestern University, has identified a coping style called shift and persist that seems to protect people from the typical health risks associated with having grown up in poor or unsafe environments. Shifting is a combination of accepting stress and changing the way you think about its source. It's often measured by asking people how much they agree with statements like "I think about the things I can learn from a situation, or about something good that can come from it" Persisting is about maintaining the optimism needed to pursue meaning, even in the face of adversity. It is measured with statements like "I think that things will get better in the future" and "I feel my life has a sense of purpose."

"Do I believe I have the capacity to transform stress into something good?"

People who cope with adversity by shifting and persisting seem immune to the toxicity of a difficult or disadvantaged childhood. Although a difficult childhood sometimes predicts unhealthier levels of [blood pressure cholesterol levels, obesity and inflammation], that is not the case for people who choose to see the meaning in stress and believe in their ability to learn and grow from it. They look as healthy as, or healthier than, people who had much less difficult childhoods.

Many things can affect whether someone uses a shift-and-persist strategy to cope with stress, including whether a child grew up with adults who modeled a growth mindset. But it's also something that can be cultivated at any stage of life, by choosing to appreciate you have grown from adversity.

People who find benefit in their difficulties report more purpose in life, hope for the future, and confidence in their ability to cope with the current stress in their lives.

Stress increases the risk of health problems, except when people regularly give back to their communities.

Stress increases the risk of dying, except when people have a sense of purpose.

Stress increases the risk of depression, except when people see a benefit in their struggles.

Stress is paralyzing, except when people perceive themselves as capable.

Stress is debilitating, except when it helps you perform.

Stress makes people selfish, except when it makes them altruistic.

“For every harmful outcome you can think of, there’s an exception that erases the expected association between stress and something bad - and often replaces it with an unexpected benefit.”

For every harmful outcome you can think of, there’s an exception that erases the expected association between stress and something bad - and often replaces it with an unexpected benefit.

My Thoughts: Is life happening to you or for you?

Do you perceive difficulty, trauma and challenges as a way to grow?

When you shift from a proactive vs reactive mindset things don’t get easier, but you get stronger.

Actionable Tips

From the book: Choose an ongoing difficult situation in your life or a recent stressful experience. What, if any, benefits have you experienced from this stress? In what ways is your life better because of it? In what ways is your life better because of it? Have you changed in any positive ways as a result of trying to cope with this experience?

My Thoughts: There are a fair number of exercises in this book that have helped me internalize and actualize my stress response, practicing it over and over as this year continued to add on.

About the Author of The Upside of Stress

[Kelly McGonigal](#)

Kelly believes that it is possible to experience hope, joy, and meaning, even when things are difficult. And she believes that the best way to do this is to connect—with one another, and with something bigger than ourselves.

About the Author of This Summary

Vivian Mandala

Vivian is a Governance Board Member/Founder of CMC Workforce, Director of CMC Network and a Construction Business Consultant. She lives in NYC. Connect [here](#).