

Try a Different Tact: Go Against Your Instincts for a Fresh Approach to Managing Your Stress

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In the midst of stress, try a different approach – you will build your self-control and remind yourself that you are capable of managing your stress!

When we experience stress, we do one of three things: we fight, flight, or freeze. Consider, for instance, a situation of stress at work – perhaps your boss walks into your department, yelling at everyone over a report that is overdue. Maybe your reaction is to fight – either confronting the boss, for instance, challenging the deadline, or confronting a colleague who caused you to miss the deadline. Maybe you suddenly have to go to the bathroom, or you have to check your calendar because you can't remember what time you have to pick up your kid – either of these are versions of flight, either physically or emotionally leaving the situation. Or you might freeze up, and rather than physically or psychologically checking out you feel yourself just shut down – as if the boss' tirade fades into the background and instead you stop hearing, seeing, feeling what's going on. Everything shuts down. When you freeze under stress, you don't address the situation at all.

We tend to react in a consistent way, or at least have consistent patterns. For instance – you may always fight. Or, you may fight at work where you feel there is value in confrontation, but flight at home, because you prefer not to fight with your partner. Or you may flight at work, if you prefer to be viewed as a positive team player rather than be confrontational, but fight at home, based on the pattern you have with your spouse. But you have a pattern – and it's helpful to know what it is. There is growth in awareness of how you respond to stress.

And from that awareness, you can try a helpful exercise. The next time you are in a stressful situation – try, consciously, to do the opposite of your normal reaction. This exercise is intended to force you to become mindful. You want, in the midst of the stress, to bring your awareness into the present moment. You want to consciously make a choice about how you are going to react to the stressor. This is about gaining both awareness of the moment and facilitating your sense of self-control. So, essentially, rather than letting stress take over you are saying – I am here, and I am in charge of me.

For instance – if you normally fight when you are under stress – then the opposite of fighting is seeking connection. When a stressful situation occurs and you feel your hackles go up – before you pounce and attack, stop. Take a breath. Turn to someone you trust and say, "I need help." Or "I don't understand." Sit in that space of being open – of being vulnerable – of asking for help. And see what happens.

If you normally flight – if you tend to leave the room or psychologically leave the situation by doing something else – then just stop. Do nothing. Don't even fidget. Just sit in the space. Take a few deep breaths. Force yourself to be still – calm – quiet. And see if you can figure out from deep inside – what is really going on. Why are you experiencing stress? What is the core of the situation?

And if you normally freeze – then don't allow yourself to stop. Give yourself 3 seconds to answer the question: "What is one thing I can do right now?" And then immediately do it. Don't allow yourself to become paralyzed. Remember that movement leads to more movement – even if your first action doesn't solve the problem, it gets you moving, and that puts you on a trajectory toward addressing the stressful situation.

The point of the exercise is to help you remember that whatever the event – the event itself is not causing you stress. What is causing you stress is your perception of the event. And because of habit and tendency, you have a consistent way of behaving when you perceive stress. By changing how you behave – you can change how you think and feel – and with a calmer perspective and clearer eyes, you may see the situation differently. Whatever the outcome – by changing your reaction – you have changed the dynamic. And, most importantly, you have asserted to yourself – I am in this present moment. I am in control of my behavior. You have begun to lay the foundation that you are capable of managing your stress.



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