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5 Weird Ways Stress Can Actually Be Good for You

August 18, 2014 | By Amanda MacMillan



Photo: Getty Images

We hear over and over again that [stress is unhealthy](#). And all that talk makes us, well, stressed. But getting worked up isn't always a bad thing, says Richard Shelton, MD, vice chair for research in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Alabama Birmingham; after all, the body's fight-or-flight response is meant to be protective, not harmful.

It's only when stress becomes chronic, or when we feel we're no longer in control of a situation, that it negatively affects our health and wellbeing.

Here, then, are five reasons you should rest easier when it comes to everyday stress—and how a little short-term anxiety can actually benefit your brain and body.

It helps boost brainpower

Low-level stressors stimulate the production of brain chemicals called neurotrophins, and strengthen the connections between neurons in the brain. In fact, this may be the primary mechanism by which exercise (a physical stressor) helps boost productivity and concentration, Dr. Shelton says. Short-term psychological stressors, he adds, can have a similar effect, as well. Plus, animal studies have suggested that the body's response to stress can [temporarily boost memory](#) and learning scores.

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It can increase immunity—in the short term

"When the body responds to stress, it prepares itself for the possibility of injury or infection," says Dr. Shelton. "One way it does this is by producing extra interleukins—chemicals that help regulate the immune system—providing at least a temporary defensive boost." Research in animals support this idea, as well: A 2012 Stanford study found that subjecting lab rats to mild stress produced a "massive mobilization" of several types of [immune cells](#) in their bloodstreams.

It can make you more resilient

Learning to deal with stressful situations can make future ones [easier to manage](#), according to a large body of research on the science of resilience. It's the idea behind Navy SEAL training, Dr. Shelton says—although you can certainly benefit from less extreme experiences, as well. "Repeated exposure to stressful events gives [SEALs] the chance to develop both a physical and psychological sense of control, so when they're in actual combat they don't just shut down," he says.

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This idea may even hold true at a cellular level: A 2013 University of California San Francisco study found that while chronic stress promotes oxidative damage to our DNA and RNA, [moderate levels of perceived daily stress](#) actually seem to protect against it and enhance "psychobiological resilience."

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It motivates you to succeed

Good stress, also known in the scientific community as eustress, may be just the thing you need to get job done at work. "Think about a deadline: It's staring you in the face, and it's going to stimulate your behavior to really manage the situation effectively, rapidly, and more productively," says Dr. Shelton. The key, he says, is viewing stressful situations as a challenge that you can meet, rather than an overwhelming, unpassable roadblock.

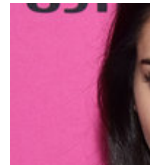
Eustress can also help you enter a state of "flow," a [heightened sense of awareness](#) and complete absorption into an activity, according to research from psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. Flow can be achieved in the workplace, in sports, or in a creative endeavor (such as playing a musical instrument), and Csikszentmihalyi argues that it's driven largely by pressure to succeed.

It can enhance child development

Moms-to-be often worry that their own anxiety will negatively affect their unborn babies—and it can, when it's unrelenting. But a 2006 Johns Hopkins study found that most children of women who reported mild to moderate stress levels during pregnancy actually showed [greater motor and developmental skills](#) by age 2 than those of unstressed mothers. The one exception: the children of women who viewed their pregnancy as more negative than positive had slightly lower attention capacity.

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