

# HELLO STRESS, GOODBYE DISTRESS

Stress has gotten bad press. The combination of thoughts and feelings that we label *stress* can often be valuable, even wonderful.

Stress is simply our gut response to any change. Physiologically, stress and excitement are almost the same. The stress response includes an extra surge of adrenaline, a heightened pulse rate, and an impulse to brace for sudden action.

We can have this experience in the face of events that are unpleasant—*and* with events that are pleasant. Stress can be our response to a dressing down from the boss—and to dressing up for a masquerade ball.

Stress can mean a power surge, an extra bolt of energy that moves us into action. Seeing an old friend for the first time in a year, embarking on a new career, going on vacation to a new part of the country—all these can trigger stress. These can be forms of stress that we actually enjoy.

## **Distinguish stress from distress**

When it becomes too intense or lasts too long, stress becomes distress. That's when we start to notice it taking a toll on our health and our ability to solve problems.

Most people forget the distinction between stress and distress. When they use the word *stress*, people usually mean *distress*.

To get more of what you want in life, keep this distinction in mind. The basic idea is to seek out optimal levels of stress while avoiding crippling levels of distress.

We can choose to see distress as an invitation to change some aspect of our thinking or behavior. Distress is a signal that one of our current reactions is not serving us. We can relabel stress as the excitement and energy needed to make those changes.

## **Start with attitudes**

If you want to say goodbye to distress, then start with your attitude toward it. Consider the possibility that distress is never the result of external circumstances.

Nothing and no one “makes” you feel distressed—not even the supervisor who chews you out or the store clerk who insults you. No event is inherently distressful.

Instead, try on a new idea: Distress is a function of how we *respond* to other people and events. With some practice, we can learn to choose new responses—before stress cycles downward into distress.

If we adopt this attitude toward distress, then we don't have to rely only on fixing the circumstances that we usually see as the cause of our distress. We can first get relaxed, clear, and grounded. Then we can deal skillfully with our circumstances, whatever they are.

## **Take charge of your stress knob**

Imagine that within your body-mind system is an old-fashioned radio knob that you can turn up or down. This is your stress knob—one that you can adjust to control your level of stress. When the knob is set too high, you feel distress.

When responding to distress, we often give up control of the stress knob. We pretend that something or someone else causes our distress. In the process, we let other people and external circumstances take charge of our happiness.

By experimenting with the options explained in the next two articles, you can start taking charge of your stress knob. You can turn distress down into stress or even down into relaxation. And you can do this at almost any time you choose.

Distress comes to us in many disguises, including anxiety, burnout, and boredom. Even though it can show up in a variety of ways, we can identify two basic types of distress—one that primarily affects the mind (worry) and another that centers on the body (physical tension). Some of the strategies described next work equally well for either kind of distress.

