

Growing Through Stressful Times

It is said that we can see the true character of human beings during times of crisis or challenge. Some may “thrive” during stress. For many, facing challenges feeds their energy, and they may feel inspired by problem solving and adapting to a quickly changing environment. But for most of us, stress can be unnerving. It takes us quickly out of our comfort zones, leaving us feeling depleted and exhausted. When we’re stressed, we may not be our best selves. Prolonged periods of stress will cause behavioral, physical, emotional and cognitive symptoms. Some examples include memory and concentration problems, poor judgement, anxiety and depression, changes in eating and sleeping habits and aches and pains in the body. But are negative responses to stress a measure of true character? Not likely. Studies have shown that our brains may be predisposed from birth to be either “stress thrivers” or “stress survivors”. Our personal experiences, beginning in childhood and throughout our lives also affects our “go to” stress response. But even though we may come into this world wired a certain way for crisis and stress, there is hope.

The theory of Post-Traumatic Growth says that positive changes can be gained as a direct result of a struggle with stress or a crisis—or in extreme cases, a traumatic event. The theory of post-traumatic growth was developed by psychologists Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun. They found that individual growth after a particularly stressful event included things like improved relationships, enhanced perceptions of one’s own strength and mastery, and a greater appreciation of life.

Why is there an opportunity for growth from stress and crisis?

We stand to gain a great deal of self-awareness during times of stress—if we pay attention. We may find out we’re more adept at handling a crisis than we think. But even if we learn otherwise, these shortcomings may be something we were never aware of in the past. This is a window of opportunity to learn different ways to adapt, which prepares us for the next challenge. Perhaps most importantly, this helps us gain important perspective as to how negative experiences can sometimes change us for the better.

So, what determines whether stress and/or crisis will harm or help us? As it turns out, the answer is you. In order to leverage the stress, we’re feeling and turn it into a growth opportunity, we first have to adjust our mindset. After that, we can take action to ensure we’re moving forward.

Adjusting your Mindset

- **Try reframing your thoughts.** When it comes to everyday challenges, it’s often our internal dialogue that makes all the difference. If we allow our initial negative thoughts to take root in our minds, it can color not just one challenge, but anything else that may arise. Ever notice how on days we “wake up on the wrong side of the bed”, things can continue to get worse throughout the day? We woke up

with a negative mindset, and that set the tone for the entire day, inviting more challenges. That's because our thought patterns affect the way we feel, and the way we feel affects our behaviors. Be mindful of negative thought patterns, and when you notice them, try shifting your inner dialogue, and interrupt this pattern. Instead of thinking, "I can't do this", think, "I can do this, but I might need a break before I do", or maybe, "I can do this if I ask for a little help". Reframing thoughts is a skill and it requires consistency. But if done enough, can retrain the brain into viewing challenges in an entirely different way.

- **Know You are Not Alone.** Challenging circumstances and stress are difficult, but they are normal for everyone. Try to take comfort in the fact that everyone faces unique challenges. The only difference is how we respond.

Move Forward with Action Steps

The next time you're up against a challenge, try some of these steps and see if your attitude changes:

- **Try looking at a challenge with less emotion, and more objectivity.** What is the situation, what are the areas over which you have control, and what are the options for addressing them?
- **Think of the problem as an opportunity to deviate from your usual response and try something new.** Consider asking for input from others who may have strong problem-solving skills, or someone you trust who has been through a similar situation before.
- Have confidence that you can handle this new situation. Draw on your own past experiences to get insight on how you successfully navigated those.
- **Try to view a stressful situation as an opportunity for a positive to enter your life.** What can you learn from this? Can this negative period in your life be turned into something beneficial for your life?

Remember, "when you can't control what's happening, challenge yourself to control how you respond. That's where the power is" ~ Unknown

Contact Ulliance for coaching and/or counseling to help you manage stress during challenging times.