Good stress? [1]

To Alice,

Is there such a thing as GOOD stress?

signed, frustrated

Answer

Dear frustrated,

Stress is often good: it's energizing, motivating, and even lifesaving at times. The human stress response fuels us for athletic events, "pressures" us to earn money for food and movies, and yanks us out of harm's way when a car is coming at us at 60 M.P.H. Gravity is also stress, but it allows us to walk around without getting caught in trees, power lines, and airplane propellers.

Good stressors, also called eustress, are situations and events that we think of as positive, but which still trigger the stress response. These happenings can include earning a good grade, graduating, working at a new job, making more money, getting married, and even going on vacation. These good things are stressful because they involve a change in the way we act and/or think about things. And, change is stressful whether or not we tag it as good or bad.

That last sentence is a good one to contemplate if you're considering stress reduction. Even though positive events cause the stress response, this reaction is probably less of a strain on our systems than stress sparked by stuff most of us consider bad or unpleasant: getting a disappointing grade, having a minor car accident, a rainy weekend, etc. What if we flipped our brains over and decided to look at "bad" grades as a chance to improve academically, to view fender-benders as opportunities to reflect on how lucky we are to still be alive, and to see wet Saturdays as extra time to clean, read, and sleep. Yes, it's the glass-is-half-full thing, but this maxim can trivialize a concept that, with regular use, will most certainly be a mega stressbuster for the rest of your life.

Try it, and maybe your next letter will be signed, "Hopeful," "Exhilarated," or "Up for the challenge."

Alice!

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