

# TIP OF THE MONTH

## How to Stress More Effectively

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Stress is traditionally viewed as negative, as a cause of health problems and something we must avoid or manage. We have traditionally managed our stress by learning and practicing relaxation strategies and cognitive strategies and increasing our social support. These tools are useful and important but there is another avenue that is equally effective: cultivating a mindset that allows us to “stress more effectively.”

Kelly McGonnigal, a health psychologist at Stanford, studied 30,000 adults over an 8-year period. Two main questions she asked were “Do you believe stress is harmful to your health?” and “How much stress have you experienced in the past year?” She then looked at death records and found that those who had a lot of stress, and who viewed stress as harmful, were 43% more likely to die. Those who did NOT view stress as harmful had the lowest risk of dying than anyone in the study, even those who had relatively little

stress. The key, she states is viewing stress as helpful, a sign that the body is energized, and preparing your body to meet the challenge.

[Listen to Kelly's Ted Talk.](#)

**Reflection:** Take a few minutes to think about at time in your life when you experienced substantial personal or professional growth; did that time involve some stress or struggle? Would the same level of growth have been possible without the stress or struggle?

Dr. Alia Crum and colleagues describe the effects of stress as paradoxical, having negative impacts as well as positive impacts, and describe the different outcomes as dependent on mindset.

**Your mindset is your set of beliefs or a way of thinking that determines your behavior, outlook, and mental attitude.**

[Listen to Dr. Crum's Ted Talk on changing your mindset.](#)

Crum describes a stress-enhancing mindset as one that views stress as facilitating learning and growth, enhancing performance and productivity, and improving health and vitality. She and her team believe that emphasis on the negative outcomes of stress may be well-intended but is counter effective. She lays out a three step process to adopting a stress-enhancing mindset.

- 1. Acknowledge the stress:** not venting or indulging, not denying or pushing stress away, but saying directly "I am stressed about\_\_\_\_\_."
- 2. Welcome the stress:** we do not get stressed about things we don't care about. It is important to reconnect with the motivation and values behind the stress by saying "I am stressed about\_\_\_\_\_ because I care about\_\_\_\_\_."
- 3. Utilize the stress:** not seeing the stress as a positive thing but channeling the energy and viewing the experience as being potentially enhancing.

Marilee Adams describes two basic mindsets: **Judger** and **learner**.

A judger mindset asks questions such as "What is wrong with them?"

Why am I such a failure? Whose fault is it?" A judger mindset is reactive, judgmental, and defensive and leads to a mood of pessimism and distress.

A learner mindset asks questions such as "What happened? What can I learn? What are my choices?" A learner mindset is thoughtful, flexible, and leads to a mood of optimism and hope.

What is key is the ability to notice when we are being a "judger" and switch to "learner". We can do this by using the ABCD method:

- **Awareness:** hear your fixed mindset voices
- **Breathe**
- **Curiosity:** how else might I view this? What is a learner question?
- **Decide**

Being aware of our mindset is a powerful skill but it is important to recognize that this is not about denying the potential negative aspects of stress, thinking that the stressor is a good thing, or seeking out unnecessary stress. It IS about honoring the paradox of stress, recognizing the power our of mindset, and learning to stress more effectively.

If you would like to improve the ways you relate to stress, reach out to FEAP for confidential assistance at 434.243.2643 or on our [website](#).

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