

HOW TO USE STRESS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Michelle Gibbings, author, change leadership and career expert, and founder of *Change Meridian*, teaches us how to make the most of stress

Pressure! Some people hate it, while other people thrive on it. While everyone reacts to pressure differently, what's common is that pressure is part of the everyday working life for many of us. There's the constant juggle of tasks, competing requests for attention, ever-shifting deadlines and expectations and likely a demanding boss. Understanding how to use pressure as a tool for progress is critical.

Find your Goldilocks zone

A certain amount of pressure is good for you because it helps motivate you to act and keeps you focused. This is because when you experience the right amount of challenge and interest, chemicals are released in your brain (noradrenaline and dopamine), making you more alert, motivated and ready to learn. Researchers and



educators often refer to this as the Goldilocks zone. This is the zone of optimal performance where you are working on a task or learning something that is neither too hard, nor too easy. Just like the children's story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears it is *'just right'*.

This zone has parallel ideas with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's concept of 'flow', which is a state you experience when you have the right level of skill and the right amount of challenge. If one of those elements is missing, you'll either end up anxious, bored or somewhere in-between. Being in flow can be characterised as feeling like you are 'in the zone' or 'in your groove'. It is when you find work almost effortless. You reach this peak when you are working on things that challenge you, but you feel equipped to rise to that challenge.

Mihaly said: "The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times... The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile."

Ask yourself:

- > What new skill am I learning?
- > How am I seeking to stretch my capabilities?
- > Am I looking out for opportunities to take on new experiences?

Pick your frame

You can't control what happens to you every day. You can, however, choose your response by noticing your feelings, reactions and where you focus your attention. You can reflect or ruminate.

Whilst both practices require you to look back, the emphasis and focus is different.

It's easy to ruminate and become stressed. You run the scenario in your head again and again - trying to rewrite how the event unfolded. It becomes like a broken record, which keeps spinning and there is no off switch.

When you ruminate you aren't being productive with your thoughts because the thinking process doesn't reach a conclusion. Research shows that rumination can lead to a range of negative outcomes: depression, anxiety, and over-eating and drinking, for example. When you reflect you think about the situation, focus on uncovering what you have learned, how you were feeling and identifying what you would do differently next time. It requires a growth mindset so you can generate insights as to the cause of the situation and is outcome focused.

To focus on reflection, ask yourself:

- > How did I feel at the beginning, during and end of the situation, and why?
- > How did those feelings impact what I said and did?
- > What do I think was going on for the other person/people involved?
- > What would I do differently next time, and how would that change the outcome?

Welcome the growth

Stress often arises at work when you are being asked to do something new. It may be a new boss, using a new system, or being expected to take on board a new way of working. With any form of change there is a period of discomfort. In fact, if you aren't feeling uncomfortable it's pretty likely you aren't doing or learning anything new. The discomfort you feel is your brain's ways of alerting you to the fact that you are doing something new. So rather than labelling the discomfort as 'bad', accept it and embrace it as a 'good' sign.

Ask yourself:

- > Am I being reactive or responsive?
- > Am I noticing how I am feeling and taking the time to stop, breathe, reflect and then respond?
- > What self-care practices (i.e. exercise, eating well, meditating, gratitude practices and the like) am I using to release the pressure valve?

In the modern workplace pressure and stress are inevitable. Your success will be decided by whether you use those feelings to accelerate your growth and progress, or hold you back.

Michelle is author of *Step Up: How to Build Your Influence at Work and Career Leap: How to Reinvent and Liberate your Career*. For more information visit michellegibbings.com