

The Truth About Stress

Is Stress Most People's Friend? A Response to Kelly McGonigal

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Once I got serious about my career, I became a very hard worker. My ordinary workweek was 65 to 70 hours. When things got difficult, I worked more. From time to time, I took vacations and, almost inevitably, I spent the first few days sick. After a while, I noticed the pattern and reached the conclusion that lack of stress made me sick.

So I have a pretty good idea what Kelly McGonigal is talking about when she says that stress can be your friend. No doubt, stress can be a stimulant, a challenge to be met rather than overwhelmed by. Stressful events can bring out the best in us, lift us to levels we never thought possible. We can rise to the occasion.

But, it's not quite that simple, is it? Sometimes stress is wearing, even overwhelming; and whether it is or not depends on a great many variables -- the nature and duration of the stressful events, our personality, the amount of support available to us, our experience dealing with stress, and on and on.

Here's a few things I think I've learned about stress that don't quite fit McGonigal's view.

During the period of my life when it was fair to say that lack of stress made me sick, I was really a stress junkie. My boss and mentor frequently declared crises when there was a problem, but not one that was as immediately dangerous as he made it seem. For those of us who worked for him the crisis really was that he said it was a crisis, and there was hell to pay if we didn't start running around to find a solution, which we usually did, helping him to build an amazingly successful organization that relied on top managers who thrived on stress.

Later, when I became the boss at another organization, I discovered that I could vastly reduce my inner sense of stress by not over-reacting to problems that were not life-threatening and -- an amazing discovery -- by giving up procrastination and getting things done ahead of time. I used to think that I did my best work when I was under the stress of a deadline. My adrenaline pumped, my mind became keen, ideas emerged seemingly from nowhere! Turns out, however, I can do good work just by giving myself a deadline well in advance of the external deadline. What a relief to learn that I didn't have to be under tremendous stress to get things done and done well.

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Now, I am retired and happy to have a lot less stress in my life than I did when I was responsible for an organization -- even a small one. Raising money to support our work was always a matter of uncertainty and anxiety. I'm glad to be done with it. Of course, if that had been my attitude when I was working, it would have been a disaster. But this is a different time in my life. It's a time in my life for celebrating the achievements of the past rather than taking on more and more challenges. At least I think that's right; I am actually still sorting out what the right balance is of peace and ambition in old age. Some people are no less ambitious when they are old than when they are young, but I think that for most of us there's a developmental shift that makes stress far less our friend than it was when we were younger and as ambitious as Kelly McGonigal very obviously is and, at her age, should be.

As I said earlier, whatever studies there are that seem to show that stress can be our friend, there are plenty of studies that show that stress sometimes is very damaging. There's a link between poverty and poor health, for example. Recently, there has been a lot of attention to the impact of "adverse childhood events" on physical and mental health later in life. And, we know-- despite the evidence that McGonigal mentions that helping others is good for one's mood and sense of self -- that bearing the brunt of caring for a family member with a long-term disability, such as dementia, takes a terrible toll on many people -- not all, but many. On average, people who are poor, those who live in dangerous, life-threatening circumstances, kids with dreadful childhood experiences, and those who bear the burden of care largely alone for family members with long-term disabilities are likely to have adverse physical and mental outcomes in their lives. Some people draw from these experiences to become heroic, larger-than-life characters, but most do not.

This fact has very important implications for social policy. Adverse, stressful conditions such as poverty, living in danger, being victims of violence -- in the home, on the streets, and in war zones, and coping endlessly with nearly hopeless challenges of survival for oneself and others may promote the development of great strengths in some, but for most people they are debilitating and destructive. Social policies that rest on the fact great people occasionally rise out of terrible conditions leave too many people behind. We need social policies that address the circumstances that erode human potential, so that more and more people can grow up with the inner strength and social supports that it takes to be a person who can -- as McGonigal would have it -- be friends with stress.

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