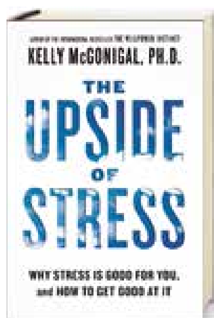
DON'T STRESS ABOUT STRESS

The Upside of Stress: Why Stress Is Good for You, and How to Get Good at It

by Kelly McGonigal. Avery, 2015 ($26.95; 304 pages)



Correlation does not imply causation. This is a fundamental lesson psychology professors like me teach in introductory courses. Violating this principle can lead to serious misconceptions, even dangerous practices.

McGonigal, a psychology instructor at the Stanford University School of Medicine, probably teaches that principle, but in *The Upside of Stress* she seems to have ignored it. The book is a follow-up to a powerful TED talk she gave in 2013, which has had nearly 10 million views online. Her message: I have been wrong in counseling people to avoid stress; new research shows that stress can hurt you only if you believe it can.

McGonigal credits a 2012 study by Whitney P. Witt, then at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and her colleagues for her epiphany, but that study showed only that believing one's stressful experiences are harmful was *correlated* with illness and early mortality. That does not mean beliefs caused illness. There is a simpler, less mysterious way of accounting for the results: people who experience stress but who suffer minimal ill effects from it come to believe that stress cannot hurt them, whereas people who *do* suffer ill effects come to believe that stress is harmful. Voilà, we now have the correlation those researchers found but with belief as an *outcome* rather than a cause. McGonigal continues to make this type of error throughout her book.

On the plus side, she describes a variety of recent experiments that indicate that telling people about the positive aspects of stress can indeed cause some to feel and function better. Even here, though, she often exaggerates the significance of the studies' results by using language suggesting that all the subjects in the study—mothers, students, women—were helped. That never happens in real research; only some people are helped—enough to get the study published.

Based in part on studies with soldiers and police, McGonigal also tells us that avoiding stress can hurt you, whereas high stress can be good for you. She never mentions the many professions in which one must be relaxed to perform optimally: acting, writing and public speaking, to name a few. It makes you wonder: if optimal performance can be achieved when one is in a relaxed state (think martial arts), wouldn't that be the happiest and healthiest way to go through life?

As early as the 1950s, therapists such as the late Albert Ellis showed that teaching people how to reinterpret challenging events in positive ways could help them reduce or eliminate stress, and therapists worldwide now teach people to "reframe" in this way. McGonigal is saying that when you *do* feel stress, don't make matters worse by stressing about *that*. Reframe the stress as "excitement" and make it work for you.

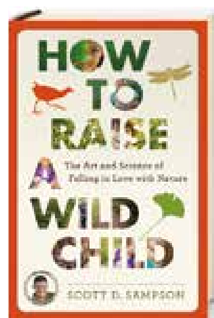
Although this strategy might work for some, there are still thousands of studies showing the ill effects of stress on the immune system, mood, the brain, sleep, sexual functioning, you name it. If some people feel and function better when we tell them stress is good, I'm all for it. But stress is still a killer.

—Robert Epstein

NATURE CONNECTION

How to Raise a Wild Child: The Art and Science of Falling in Love with Nature

by Scott D. Sampson. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015 ($25; 352 pages)



Many preschoolers and their parents know paleontologist Sampson as "Dr. Scott" on the television program *Dinosaur Train,* where he adds science commentary to the show's animated dino tales and closes each episode with this exhortation: "Get outside, get into nature and make your own discoveries."

In *How to Raise a Wild Child,* Sampson provides a persuasive book-length exposition of that tagline's advice. He makes a cogent case for the importance of cultivating a "nature connection" in children and offers thoughtful guidance on how to do so amid today's pressures of hectic, high-tech, increasingly urbanized life.

Sampson cites various studies indicating the benefits of exposure to nature, including reduced stress, stronger immunity and better concentration. Some doctors have even begun writing "park prescriptions" to encourage patients to go outdoors. "On the whole, nature is good for us, both as children and adults," Sampson writes, adding that we need to cultivate an emotional bond with natural settings if we are to protect them. As biologist Stephen Jay Gould once noted: "We will not fight to save what we do not love."

Troublingly, in recent decades kids more and more have been sequestered indoors, as fearful parents discourage unsupervised roaming and schools cut back on recess to make more time for test prep. Today American children spend more seven hours a day, on average, in front of electronic screens, doing homework, playing games, watching TV and interacting with friends via social media.

To heal this growing rift with nature, Sampson touches on three broad themes: experience, mentoring and understanding. Experience, he emphasizes, should be frequent and hands-on; nature documentaries can only do so much, and regular forays into local green spaces are no less important than grand Yosemite adventures: "A meaningful connection with nature is forged first and foremost through firsthand, multisensory experiences, from abundant unstructured time in the backyard to weekends in the park and occasional visits to wilderness." Mentoring, in Sampson's conception, centers on adopting the playful attitude of children, not simply relaying information. "Being an effective mentor means becoming a coconspirator, a fellow explorer, a chaser of clues," he writes. To promote understanding, Sampson favors focusing on big ideas, such as evolution and cosmology, showing kids that everything in nature is connected—including them. Although technology often separates kids from nature, it can also be used to build appreciation, such as with apps for bird-watching, plant identification and geocaching, using GPS for outdoor treasure hunts.

Sampson proposes making cities more nature-friendly by creating more green school yards, reintroducing native species and linking parks through networks of trails. *How to Raise a Wild Child* is stocked with valuable ideas and deserves attention from policy makers, educators and activists, as well as the parents of 21st-century kids. *—Kenneth Silber*

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