



Fight the

FRAZ

A new study suggests that preventive, proactive approaches are the most helpful—and that our stress management IQ is painfully low

By Robert Epstein

ZILED Mind

“Desserts” spelled backward is “stressed.”

Isn't life like that? Even the good things in life—fine wine, rich food, sex—can stress you out.

There is just no escaping stress, and some experts even suggest that a little stress is good for you. In my view, that idea is flawed—the misleading result of averaging data across many individuals. Yes, high levels of stress are harmful to most people, adversely affecting health, mood and productivity. And yes, most people perform and feel better when faced with moderate levels of stress. And sure, very few people know how to be productive when they are not being pushed by stressors—but it can be done. Just as some people are able to perform well under highly stressful

conditions (think Olympic athletes), it is also possible to perform well when relaxed (think masters of kung fu). That should be the goal, in my opinion: a life that is productive but also virtually stress-free.

Bear in mind that there is only an approximate relationship between stress—our internal, adverse reaction to stimuli we perceive as threatening—and stressors—the threatening stimuli that actually surround us. A traffic jam might make us feel stressed one day but not the next. This is good news because it suggests that with the right training and preparation, we might be able to face *any* stressor with equanimity.



The inability or unwillingness to manage stress can have a devastating effect on people's lives.

I have been investigating this issue for nearly two decades now, and in a study I presented recently at the annual meeting of the Western Psychological Association in Los Angeles, I compared different stress-management techniques to see which are the most helpful.

In real life, unfortunately, although we receive intensive formal training in writing and math, learning how to manage

stress is left entirely to chance. Many people, overwhelmed by bills, flat tires and abusive bosses, resort to destructive ways of coping, drugs and alcohol being the most common. But research conducted over the past few decades suggests that there are at least four broad, trainable skill sets or “competencies” people can use to manage stress nondestructively: source management (reducing or eliminating the sources of stress), relaxation (practicing techniques such as breathing exercises or meditation), thought management (correcting irrational thinking and interpreting events in ways that don’t hurt you), and prevention (planning and conducting your life so that you avoid stressors).

My new study looked at how an ethnically and racially diverse group of 3,304 people managed stress. The subjects ranged from 10 to 86 years old (mean 34.9), and about 85 percent of them were from the U.S. or Canada, with the remainder from 28 other countries. They participated in the study by completing an online test accessible at <http://MyStressManagementSkills.com>.

Participants were asked to answer various demographic questions and then to rate, on 10-point scales, how stressed they were, how generally happy they were, and how much success they had had in both their personal and professional lives. I conjectured that people with good stress-management skills would be not only less stressed but also happier and more successful both personally and professionally. Stress can really wear you down, after all, and it is brutal on relationships, even affecting the quality

JOSE LUIS PELAEZ, INC. Corbis

FAST FACTS

Stress Test

1>> Few people receive formal training on how to manage stress, which may explain why many of us turn to destructive ways of coping.

2>> Although commonly practiced relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation help, they may not be as effective as learning to sidestep potential stressors before they happen.

3>> Receiving training in stress management will make us better at handling the ups and downs of daily life.

Test Your Stress-Management Competence

Here is a selection of items from the Epstein Stress-Management Inventory (ESMI-i). To get a rough measure of your competence in the four areas measured by the test, check off items that apply to you. If you are able to check off three or four items in a category, you are probably

COMPETENCY I

Manages Sources of Stress

- I have adequate shelf, file and drawer space to serve my needs.
- I consistently put important tasks ahead of unimportant tasks.
- I try to schedule appointments and meetings so that they won't overlap.
- I have no trouble keeping my work area organized.

COMPETENCY II

Practices Relaxation Techniques

- I schedule some relaxation time every day.
- I sometimes visualize soothing scenes to relax.
- I sometimes use special breathing techniques to help me relax.
- I sometimes tense and relax my muscles as a way of fighting stress.

reasonably competent in that category. To compute your overall score, add up the number of check marks you made. If you scored under 12, you might want to consider taking a stress-management course. To take the full version of the test, visit <http://MyStressManagementSkills.com>.

COMPETENCY III

Manages Thoughts

- I regularly examine and try to correct any irrational beliefs I might have.
- I'm aware that my thinking is sometimes unclear or irrational.
- I keep myself calm by being selective about what I pay attention to in my environment.
- I often reinterpret events to reduce the stress I'm feeling.

COMPETENCY IV

Prevents Stress from Occurring

- I try to fight stress before it starts.
- I keep an up-to-date list of things I'm supposed to do.
- I spend a few minutes each morning planning my day.
- I have a clear picture of how I'd like my life to proceed over the next few years.

GRAND TOTAL _____

Although we receive formal training in writing and math, learning how to manage stress is left entirely to chance.

of parenting ["What Makes a Good Parent?" by Robert Epstein; *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN MIND*, November/December 2010].

The main body of the test consisted of 28 questions about different practices that fall into the four broad competency areas I mentioned earlier, with the questions asked in a random order. "I often reinterpret events to reduce the stress I'm feeling" is an example of a test item that fits into the thought-management category. (To take an abridged version of the test, see the box above.) For each test item, people indicated on a five-point scale how much they agreed or disagreed with the statement. On completion of the test, participants were immediately given a total score, along with results in each of the four competency areas and information about what the scores meant.

A Surprise, a Lesson and a Dire Need

I thought I could predict the outcomes of this study fairly well (a presumptuous attitude in science), but in one respect—an outcome that has important practical implications—my predic-

tion was way off. If anyone had asked me which of the four competencies were most important, I would have said relaxation, followed by thought management. After all, a number of studies confirm what common sense tells you about relaxation: people who learn and practice techniques such as breathing exercises, muscle-relaxation exercises, yoga, meditation, and so on benefit in multiple ways. Meditating regularly, for example, has been shown to lower blood pressure and also to help people feel

(The Author)

ROBERT EPSTEIN is a contributing editor for *Scientific American Mind* and former editor in chief of *Psychology Today*. He holds a Ph.D. in psychology from Harvard University and is a longtime researcher and professor. The most recent of his 15 books is *Teen 2.0: Saving Our Children and Families from the Torment of Adolescence* (Quill Driver Books, 2010).

“immunized” against stressors. As for thought management, it is perhaps the main thing that therapists and counselors teach their clients: how to reinterpret events in your life so that they stop bothering you. It is empowering to learn how to do that.

But the new study showed clearly that prevention is by far the most helpful competency when it comes to managing stress. I determined this using a statistical technique called regression

and thought management—the competencies that people who are concerned about stress are most likely to try to improve through counseling or training. Relaxation, which can be practiced both proactively and reactively, fared better than thought management, which is almost always reactive. (My favorite example comes from Aesop’s Fables. Frustrated that he can’t reach the bunch of grapes, the fox reframes his thinking

On average, people get a grade of F when it comes to managing the inevitable stress they face in their lives.

analysis, in which scores in the different competency areas (known as subscales on a test of this kind) are used to predict various outcomes, in this case the answers to those questions about happiness and success. Prevention—doing things such as planning your day or year and trying to avoid stressors before they can affect you—was by far the most powerful predictor of all four of the outcome questions.

Also suggestive, the second most powerful predictor was source management, which is sometimes reactive but usually proactive. This broad category includes practices such as delegating tasks, organizing your space and scheduling your time well, all of which can be considered preventive measures.

Least predictive were those other two competencies, relax-

and concludes, “They are probably sour anyway.” Problem solved! Stress relieved!

The lesson here is to manage stress proactively. Taking a deep breath or counting to 10 when you are stressed is all well and good, but you will be much happier in the long run if you can find ways to avoid the situations that make you feel stressed in the first place [see box on opposite page].

Can we actually learn to fight stress more effectively? Fortunately, my study shows that (1) people who have had training in stress management are better at it than people who have not and that (2) the greater the number of training hours, the better the skills. This suggests that no matter what our natural reactions are to stress, learning stress-management skills is likely



Preventing sources of stress before they strike is an important skill that many of us lack. Small scheduling changes could eliminate traffic jams and other teeth-grinding situations we experience.

AURORA PHOTOS

An Ounce of Prevention

Here are six strategies for fighting stress before it starts, which are suggested by the new study:

- 1. Seek and kill.** Take a few minutes every day to identify stressors in your life and find ways to reduce or eliminate them. Does that old cell phone of yours make you swear because the battery keeps dying? Get a new phone!
- 2. Commit to the positive.** In our culture, people often try to cope with stress in self-destructive ways, mainly by drinking, taking drugs or overeating. Commit to avoiding the self-destructive solutions—for a day, a week or whatever you can handle—and replacing them with positive, healthful ways of managing stress. Yoga class, anyone?
- 3. Be your own personal secretary.** People who keep lists of things to do really do more things. So use your smartphone or, in a pinch, a pen and paper (remember those?) to keep a list of things you need to do. You'll never walk out of a supermarket again having purchased everything except what you went there to buy.
- 4. Immunize yourself.** Through exercise, thought management and the daily practice of relaxation techniques, you will be in a better position to face stressors without feeling stress. Lion tamers manage to remain calm when working with lions, after all. With the right preparation, you can face almost any situation calmly.



- 5. Make a little plan.** Spend a few minutes every morning planning your day. You will waste less time, get more done and feel less stressed.
- 6. And make a big plan.** The famous behavioral psychologist B. F. Skinner not only planned his day and year, he even maintained a 10-year planner. You don't need to go that far, but planning your future is a great way of exercising more control over your life. The more control you have, the less stressed you will feel.

to be beneficial. That said, only 17 percent of the subjects in this study had had any stress-management training—a figure that is probably much lower in the general population. Even more disturbing, the new data show that people are poor at prevention; it ranked third out of the four competencies in our test scores.

The worst news, though, has to do with the overall scores I found. On a 100-point scale, people scored 55.3 on average on a test of simple, basic stress-management techniques. If you think of that as a score on an exam at school, that means that on average, people get a grade of F when it comes to managing the inevitable stress they face in their lives.

The Importance of Stress Management

A few years ago I conducted a seminar on stress management at a mental health facility in Massachusetts. Before we started, I asked the attendees—administrators and staff members at the clinic—to take a test of stress-management competence similar to the one I used in the present study. One disturbing result: the director of the clinic—a personal friend—had the lowest score in the room. He also had the most stressful job, and he had suffered some significant health problems in recent years, very likely brought about or at least made worse by stress. The physiological mechanisms by which stress damages health have now been well established.

The inability or unwillingness to manage stress can have a

devastating effect on people's lives. One of the most dramatic results of the new study was a high positive correlation between test scores and the overall level of happiness people reported. To put this another way, the study suggests that nearly 25 percent of the happiness we experience in life is related to—and perhaps even the result of—our ability to manage stress. I also found a strong negative correlation between the test scores and the level of stress people were feeling, as well as strong positive correlations between test scores and both the personal and professional success people had experienced.

The bottom line is that stress management is both trainable and beneficial, and individuals reap the greatest benefits by fighting stress before it starts. That insight leaves us with a great challenge: to teach techniques for managing stress to a public that knows little about them and, especially, to educate our children before the big stressors hit. **M**

(Further Reading)

- ◆ **The Big Book of Stress Relief Games.** Robert Epstein. McGraw-Hill, 2000.
- ◆ **Principles and Practice of Stress Management.** Edited by Paul H. Lehrer, Robert L. Woolfolk and Wesley E. Sime. Third edition. Guilford Press, 2007.
- ◆ **The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook.** Sixth edition. Martha Davis et al. New Harbinger, 2008.