



STRESS: A BADGE OF HONOR OR A CODE WORD FOR FEAR?

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According to the Center for Disease Control, 80% of visits to the doctor are believed to be stress-related. Yet what is “stress” if not fear, anxiety, and worry dressed up in more socially acceptable clothing? While we tend to view worry, anxiety, and fear as signs of weakness, most of us are perfectly willing to admit that we’re stressed.

In fact, for many, being “stressed out” is practically a badge of honor. We’re willing to parade around our stress as proof that we’re busy, productive, valuable people leaving our mark on the world. But for many people, being “stressed out” is just the code word for being really, really scared.

Stress: Code for Fear

Think about it. When we say we’re stressed at work, don’t we really mean we’re afraid of making mistakes, of disappointing our bosses, of harming someone we’re responsible for helping, of being perceived as “unprofessional,” of speaking up for what we believe is right, or of letting the deal slip through our fingers?

When we say relationships are stressful, aren’t we really afraid of betrayal, rejection, unrequited love, infidelity, divorce, getting our hearts broken, or winding up alone?

When we say we’re stressed about money, aren’t we really afraid of poverty and the loss of power, comfort, and safety we think money provides? Aren’t we afraid we won’t have enough of a safety net should life’s uncertainties thwack us upside the head like a cosmic two-by-four?



How the Body Works with Stress

Most of us aren't even aware how much fear rules our lives, but our bodies reflect this truth. While fear is designed to be a healthy survival mechanism that triggers the fight-or-flight stress response when your life is in danger, the body can't tell the difference between being chased by a tiger and having fearful thoughts about work, relationships, or money. Whether you're about to be a tiger's lunch or you're having a fear-based thought about an imagined future, a stress response is activated, and the body is filled with stress hormones like cortisol and epinephrine.

But here's the real kicker. The body is beautifully equipped with natural self-repair mechanisms that know how to fight cancer, prevent infection, ward off heart disease, and retard aging. But these self-repair mechanisms are turned off every time the body is in stress response. This wouldn't be a problem if your body was only in stress response once or twice a week, since stress responses are only meant to last 90 seconds beyond when the threat to your life is over.

But this is not what happens. Modern-day humans experience over 50 stress responses per day—most of them stemming not from real threats to your life but from thoughts about imaginary threats that will most likely never come true.

How to Fight Stress

The good news is that you can change all of this. By calming the fears that arise in the mind and flipping the body from stress response into its healthy opposite—the relaxation response—you can activate the body's natural self-healing mechanisms.

In addition to making life changes to align your life choices with your truth, you can add scientifically proven practices to activate relaxation responses that will switch on the body's natural self-healing mechanisms. When you do this, not only do you abort the disease-inducing stress responses, you also free your mind from the unnecessary suffering caused by fear.

It all starts with coming into present time, since most fear exists only in an imagined future or a remembered past. When we stay present, we can more easily come into right relationship with uncertainty, and in doing so, we can help our nervous systems relax so that the body can do what it does best—heal itself.

