



Coping with Change: Is There "Good" Stress? by award-winning author and stress-relief expert Susie Mantell

*"Often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one which has been opened for us."
-- Helen Keller*

Some stress is totally unproductive. Stewing and fretting and imagining dreadful problems that haven't happened yet -- and may never happen, is non-essential stress. It usually doesn't help us one bit. Such ruminating seems to be human nature, and we all experience it to some degree on occasion. But stewing and fretting and imagining dreadful problems seldom motivate us to fix or change anything.

"Stress" can be anything that disrupts or disturbs normal, routine physical, emotional or cognitive functioning. That even includes the initial shock of a surprise party, or jitters on the blind date that eventually turns out to be the love of your life. Those are stressful emotions at first, but generally not dangerous in the long run.

There's no place like homeostasis. The body-mind is always trying, unconsciously, to maintain homeostasis, constantly working to maintain equilibrium. The body-mind just loves the status quo. Imagine a tiny dust particle entering the nasal passage. We don't just allow the dust to accumulate over the years into one humongous nasal dust bunny. As soon as it enters, we sneeze them out. We don't have to *try* to sneeze. We just do. That is the body's automatic response to the unwelcome visitor, expelling it so things can get back to normal. Now if that fleck of dust entered the eye instead, the body knows not to sneeze this time but instead, the eye tears to wash out the "stressful" intrusive dust particle that, if left there, could cause irritation or eventually, infection in the eye. Responding with itching or slight inflammation or tearing or sneezing are constructive responses to stress. If we didn't ever feel the stress of itching or pain, or sadness after an argument with a loved one, we would not know that we need to fix the problem. Stress is the healthy attempt of the body-mind to maintain balance. It's the "re-set" button. Stress can be a powerful motivator for necessary change, propelling us toward a new job or apartment; to change a schedule, an attitude, a relationship --or a light bulb. Most discoveries and creative solutions originate in somebody's stress. Microwave ovens, disposable diapers, salad bars, paper, velcro, even zippers came about because someone needed to save time, simplify and reduce day-to-day stress.

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For some people the very word, "Change," causes tummies to tense. The status quo represents comfort but Change leads to "the unknown," therefore something to be avoided. Others thrill to it. Their worst nightmare is, "same old/same old. Their heartbeats quicken with excitement to fresh possibilities, and "the unknown" feels like an enticing adventure. Most of us fall somewhere in-between.

*"There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud
was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." (Anais Nin)*

Not all 'stress' is 'distress.' Much is of course, when it leads to anxiety or worry or fear, pain or anger. We generally of all think of those emotions as very stressful stuff. Negative and painful emotions cause distress, are very uncomfortable, and may, or may not, lead to positive, constructive change.

Think of a toddler being scolded for running into the street. He will feel stress at being scolded. He may even cry. But *that* stress, in this case negative reinforcement, will also motivate him *not* to run into the street again. Even if he is too little to understand why the street is dangerous, he doesn't want to be scolded again. So the stress brought on mom or dad's sharp tone helps him learn to stay safe, even if that's for a different reason. A soldier in combat, upon hearing a bullet whiz past him ducks and runs for cover, saving his life. We hear a fire alarm and quickly leave a building. We can't fit into our clothes, so we lose those 5 extra pounds. Those are examples of constructive or "good" or "useful" stress. Each referred to the ways in which stress can motivate us to make necessary changes. If "necessity is the mother of invention," then I would say that stress is the midwife, and humor is the doctor on-call.

"Good" Stress Helps Us To . . .

- Recognize what is wrong or needs fixing.
- Know when to scratch, put on a sweater, move, marry. (Or not)
- Initiate invention & problem-solving.
- Inspire scientific discovery, technology and creative design.
- Assess the need for medical or psychological care.

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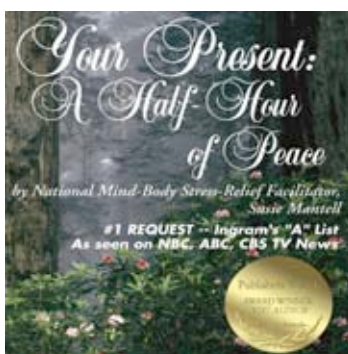
The nature of any change will inform its impact on us. Meeting new neighbors is quite different from *being* the new neighbor. Leaving a job you despise is very different from retiring after a forty year career you've loved. In addition, voluntary change is altogether different from change that is imposed upon us, or is terribly sudden, or change that wounds our hearts.

When a change is due to some kind of loss., that change does not diminish all has come before. But sometimes, healthy reactive change is how we go on. It is how we forgive, and love again, how we create and work. Change is how we give and it is how we grow. Sometimes, change is a whisper. It happens so subtly that we do not notice for a while.. (*e.g. the subtle deterioration of a relationship, or the gentle growth of a friendship. Or those ten pounds. Where did they come from?*)

*"In the depth of winter, I finally learned that within me
there lay an invincible summer."--Albert Camus*

One thing is certain: How we perceive and cope with an event will determine both its "stress value" for us, and our ability to use it to create deeper meaning in our lives. Perception sets in motion the mechanisms we use to rise... or crumble. But perspective is a choice, a point of view. And it can shift at any time.

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