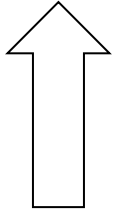


Rating and Changing Stress-Pat Openlander, Ph.D.

When stress in the form of anxiety, annoyance, avoidance, or discouragement affects us, we can help ourselves feel better by improving our skills. To gauge improvement, we can start by *rating* the level of stress on a scale from one to ten. If one is completely relaxed and ten is “losing our minds,” rating our stress gives us a place to start in understanding ourselves.

10. Out of Control



As we move up the scale from relaxed to upset, our body changes. We pump out stress hormones (adrenalin) that send chemical and electrical messages throughout our brain and body. These brain chemicals:

- Increase our heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure.
- Affect blood flow to the skin, arms, and legs, thus creating “funny feelings” in our body.
- Block digestion thus causing stomach problems, constipation, or diarrhea when we are upset.
- Damage our problem-solving by interfering with our memory. When we get upset, it is harder to remember things and think in new ways.

1. Relaxed

The top end (above five) of our one to ten scale is called the “fixation zone” because we may get stuck going over and over what’s bothering us with no real progress in our thinking.

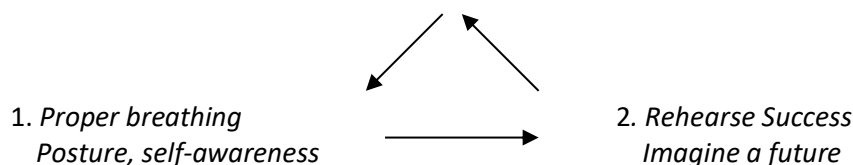
Rating helps us by putting our expectations in a bigger context. It’s hard to change when we are upset or scared. In fact, arguing, running away, “freezing up,” and “fogging up” (drug/alcohol abuse) are common responses when we move above five on our scale from one to ten.

Changing our upset pattern requires building a foundation starting with **the Big Four**. These four skills must be mastered before we can reliably change our upset feelings and moods.

1. *Nutrition-hydration* means high vegetable/berry intake; modest fat intake; modest caffeine intake; quality protein (think salmon/chicken); eating breakfast; drinking water, and generally reducing sugars and refined grains (wheat, rice, etc.) to lower carb intake.
2. *Sleep* means getting roughly eight hours a night, rising about the same time each day, avoiding substance abuse, and having coping methods when sleeping becomes a problem. Example: After twenty minutes of tossing and turning, get up, leave the room.
3. *Exercise* involves improving the function of our heart, lungs, and key muscle groups by walking, stretching, and weight lifting. Aim for one hour each day minimum.
4. *Socialization* means strengthening our networks of family and friends. We accomplish this by *truly listening to and supporting* (empathy) those around us.

Next, **the Power Triangle** isolates the three components in stress management. Each build on the other. Once **the Big Four** are in place, we can turn our attention to the psychology behind changing our upset.

3. Talk to ourselves and others calmly and confidently



1. *Start by correcting problems with breathing.* Improper breathing contributes to anxiety and difficulties in problem solving since anxiety hurts our decision-making skills. Two key skills:

- *Learn to breathe from the diaphragm.* Lie on a carpeted surface and place a book on your belt. Raise and lower the book while breathing easily through one's nose. Keep your inhalations and exhalations roughly the same length. Check your breathing at the top of each hour. "Am I breathing or holding my breath?"
- Focus on the movement of air on the in-breath and out-breath. Is the air warmer on the in-breath or out-breath? This skill can deepen into *a meditative approach* to our mental activity. *The constant flow of thoughts through our minds is not reality.* Letting go helps us bounce back from adversity more quickly as our resilience improves.

Posture and self-awareness:

- Keep our shoulders down and back and our heads up with eyes at the horizon. Looking down and slumping our shoulders may fool our bodies into supposing we are under threat. When we keep our body erect and head up, we reduce stress levels and *we conform to this timeless wisdom: act the way you want to feel.*
- Regulating our functioning begins with noticing when we are straining or holding particular muscles. Instead, ask: "what could be lighter or easier?"

2. The other side of the triangle's base emphasizes the *use of imagery.*

- Often anxiety is accompanied by a pattern of anticipating/rehearsing failure. We don't wipe this pattern out but rather *notice and redirect* immediately to images of success.
- Develop *a hopeful vision of the future.* I can vividly imagine situations where I've achieved a hoped-for goal. Make these images as concrete as possible by adding sounds, smells, and physical sensations that would accompany such a success. Powerful images of success strengthen our focus.

3. Science teaches that *our thoughts shape our feelings over time.* Hence, *talking to ourselves calmly and confidently is crucial.* This skill is built on **the Big Four** and the base of the **Power Triangle**. As we calm ourselves, our thinking improves. The main ingredient in bothersome anxiety is the thought that we face a catastrophe (a heart attack, losing control in public, being humiliated). These threatening thoughts prompt a surge in powerful stress hormones which produce symptoms from a racing heart to fatigue, insomnia, stomach problems, and reduced problem-solving ability. The goal of this last exercise is to think more optimistically.

Practice the following skill several times a day: *draw three columns* with the headings-challenge, automatic thoughts, and rational responses. For example:

1. *Challenges:* a racing heart/a public presentation
2. *Automatic thoughts:* my racing heart means a heart attack/I'll be publicly humiliated
3. *Rational responses:* the doctor said my heart is ok/I'll prepare and read my remarks

Through the wonders of neuroplasticity, *these changes in thinking and action permanently alter our brain and body* as we grow in resilience, positive outlook (optimism), "social intuition" (empathy), self-awareness, focus, and the ability to regulate our responses to new situations.

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