Mastering Stress
WORKBOOK 2 - PREVENTING STRESS
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Stress Prevention

To introduce you to this Stress Prevention Workbook, let's consider an analogy:

We start with a weed (stress) in a garden of flowers (the rest of your life experiences).

Most stress management books and stress therapies focus almost only on getting rid of the most noticeable parts of the weeds: the stem and leaves. They focus on the visible symptoms of stress, such as headaches, depression, irritability, insomnia, and many others. The hope is that by doing away with the leaves, the weed becomes less noticeable; less obvious. It's not hard to find quick-tips on how to cope with the weeds, or disguise the weeds, or even learn to live with the weeds.

The problem with tips, or quick fixes, is that they don’t solve the problem of how the weeds got into the garden in the first place. Because the cause of the weed remains unclear, other symptoms inevitably show up, as more weeds surface somewhere else in the garden.

The truth is that the weed isn’t the problem; the problem is the seed. Thoughts are the seeds of stress. Remember, your thoughts always precede your emotions, and they always precede the activation of the stress response.

The best way to get at the “root” of the problem of stress is to figure out how the weed seed lodged itself in the soil. Once you have this understanding, you recognize that you can do something specific to root it out and prevent another seed from lodging there again.

This Workbook, along with the Mindfulness Workbook and the Stress Reduction Workbook, will help you do two things. The first is to understand how the seed got into the soil and what to do about it. The second is to learn how to get rid of the weeds that are already a part of the garden.

Adopt a Proactive Paradigm about your Stress

Once there was a man sitting at the edge of a river. It was a wide and deep river with a swift current. After sitting for a while, he began to notice people floating down the river. As he continued to observe, he realized they weren’t happily floating; they were struggling for their lives.

The river was turbulent and had a dangerous undercurrent. This made it extremely difficult for people to swim to the bank to safety. Recognizing the dangerous
situation, the man quickly started doing all he could to try to help these unfortunate people get out of the river. He grabbed nearby branches to reach to them. He even found a rope that he could throw in hopes that one or two would catch the other end and be pulled to safety.

He worked and worked until he used all of his energy and resources. He saved a few, but he wasn’t able to save everyone who desperately needed his help. Sadly, he watched as others fought to escape their demise. Their only hope was that perhaps someone downstream would rescue them.

Then a thought occurred to him. “I should go upstream and stop these people from getting into the water in the first place. That would prevent this horrible problem!” So, he ran up the river still watching the weary souls helplessly fighting the raging water.

Soon he encountered a man who was tossing these people into the river. A large sign posted nearby said, “Enjoy the most exciting ride of your life!” People, who wanted a quick thrill, were lining up in droves not understanding what their ultimate fate might be. They just did what everyone else was doing.

Observing this, the man who had been downstream, stepped in and immediately stopped the person from throwing in any more people, thus saving all those in line from certain peril.

This rescuer had recognized that there were two locations where he could help save people. One place was downstream after the swimmers had already realized that they were in danger. The best place, however, where he could do the most good, was the spot where he prevented them from being tossed into the river.

Similarly, there are two places where you can successfully do something about your stress.

*The first place is before it begins.* On the fight-or-flight diagram below, the X represents the point where you begin to perceive conditions as being somehow threatening.

*The second place where you can manage your stress is after the activation of the stress response has begun and you need to turn it off.* This is the Y on the diagram.

The most valuable place, and where you do yourself the best, is at point X. This is where you prevent your stress before it ever starts. The purpose of this Stress Prevention Workbook, and the Mindfulness Workbook is to do just that, to teach you simple, powerful, and
effective ways to prevent stress from happening in the first place.

**Natural Stress Response**

We know, however, that because people get wrapped up in the craziness of life, they oftentimes forget how to keep the seeds out of the garden. At that point, they still need to know effective ways to turn off the stress after it has started. I will teach you how to do that in the Stress Reduction Workbook.

**Thoughts Precede Emotions**

Stress is an emotional response. Stress feels a lot like other emotions such as fear and anger. We all experience many emotions all the time, but emotions don’t just happen. The emotions that you feel are preceded by a specific set of dominant thoughts.

You never have an emotion without having thoughts about something first.

This is the Pattern: **Thoughts ➔ Emotion**

Thoughts always precede emotions. It doesn’t happen the other way. You don’t have an emotion first. Our dominant thoughts generate our emotions. This is true with all of your emotions, be they positive or negative.

Consider these examples:
• You don’t feel the emotion of sadness without first thinking about or interpreting a situation in a sad way. The same situation could just as easily create feelings of happiness or serenity, depending on how you look at it.

• Anger, for example, always has a specific thought that precedes it. That earlier thought sounds something like, “What just happened should not be happening this way!” This thought immediately creates the feeling of anger in us. Someone interprets an event in this way and gets angry. Another person might interpret the same event in a different way—think about it differently—and not feel any anger.

We will revisit this idea more thoroughly later on in this workbook, but for now, I want you to get clear about the idea that you experience stress because of the way you think about something.

You have the threat thought of danger and the emotions associated with fighting and running follow. It doesn’t happen any other way.

Reflective Questions: Think of a time, recently, when you felt sad, angry, frustrated, happy, elated, or joyous. Step back from your emotions and ask yourself: What was the dominant thought that preceded my emotion? It might be hard to find, but it’s there. There will always be a dominant thought. Take a moment to write down the experience, the emotion, and the dominant thought that preceded your emotion.

Write your answers in the space provided.

Stress Begins with our Thoughts

Let’s review what we’ve learned so far.

All stress begins with thoughts. So, all of your stress begins with your thoughts. It isn’t what’s happening “out there” that initiates the stress response. It’s how you interpret what’s happening “out there” that leads to dominant thoughts that cause you to become stressed out.

Here is how that works with stress.

• Events happen in your environment.

• Next, you observe the event and interpret the meaning of the event and its impact, or potential impact, on you.
• Then, depending on how you interpret the event, if there is any perception of a threat, you experience physiological and emotional changes activating the fight-or-flight response.

This is why you never feel stressed about anything without first having a thought about it.

We call this our perception of a threat. If you think a situation will lead to some kind of pain (emotional, mental, spiritual, or physical), your stress response will turn on automatically to prepare for the potential pain. **This potential pain is what we call a “threat.”**

Understanding all this, it becomes clear that preventing stress is best done by focusing on your thoughts.

I’ll say this many times: When you eliminate the threat thought, you effectively prevent the stress response from turning on in the first place.

**How to Eliminate Threat Thoughts**

Something happens in your environment. The possibility of getting stressed out about it arises. But the stress response only turns on if you include, in your many thoughts, a dominant threat thought. Remember, it doesn’t matter if it is accurate or not. Our body systems can’t tell if we are really in danger or if we are just making it up. The dominant thought starts the process all the same.

As that situation unfolds, or as you imagine a future event or remember a past incident that includes a threat thought, you can ask yourself four very powerful questions. And if you answer them accurately, the threat thought will not happen. You have effectively prevented the possibility of activating the stress response. Here are the four questions:

1. **Am I really in danger?** In other words, is this threat real? What is the perceived threat? What is the likelihood of this threat actually causing me physical pain?

   Of course, you *have to* answer this question honestly or it won’t work. As I mentioned in the first workbook, you are seldom in situations where your life is in danger and rarely are you likely to experience any real physical pain.

   Therefore, the answer to the first question, **“Am I really in danger?”** is almost always, **“No. I’m not in any real danger.”** Once you have that recognition, you inform your nervous system, your endocrine system, and your hypothalamus that they don’t need to make any physiological changes to help keep you safe.

2. **Can I handle this?** *Again, honesty is essential.* The correct answer is yes, but how can you feel confident that you can handle this situation without dying or having any pain?
When pondering a potentially stressful situation, think about all of your past experiences. Recall similar events from your past that you have survived. It may not have been pleasant, but you will quickly conclude that you can handle things, and probably better now because you have even more “life experience” and wisdom.

Let’s say for example that you have a big test coming up. You realize that you have taken well over 500 tests during all the years you’ve been in school, and you haven’t been injured from any of them. Now you can say to yourself, “Why should this one be any different?” It won’t. You’ll be similarly safe during this one.

What about a job interview? If you have ever interviewed for a job or spoken in front of a group of people and not been hurt, you realize there is no reason why this interview should be any different. You can rest assured that you’ll handle this one just as well as, or better than all of the others.

You’ve been asked to give a speech to your co-workers or at a community event. You realize that you’ve done this before and you didn’t experience any physical pain. So it is very unlikely that this time will be any different.

However, what do you do if this is your first time giving a speech? You can’t very easily rely on your own past simply because you haven’t had the experience. What you can do instead is accurately look at the experiences of other people. Nobody gets physically hurt from the dangers of giving a speech. We never see that happen. So if others don’t ever experience a physical threat, there’s no reason for you to think that you will.

Again, you are teaching your mind to eliminate any notion of real threat.

If you don’t sense any threat, you won’t activate the stress response. No stress response means you can follow through on any selected activity without unnecessary tension or anxiety. You will probably handle the situation with a clearer mind and feel more confident.

3. Is the perceived threat one that I can do something about? Is it in my circle of influence? In other words, can you influence the situation so the perceived threat doesn’t exist anymore?

Most stressful events relate to conditions or situations we can’t do anything about. We get anxious about the well-being of someone who lives several states away; we have plans for a picnic, but the weather doesn’t cooperate, so we get angry.
However, sometimes we can manipulate situations, and as a result, remove the stressor. If you can, then go ahead and take care of it. If you can’t, there’s no need to stew and fuss over it. Let me give you an example:

Not too long ago, my family and I were staying at a condo in southern Utah, in an enjoyable town called St. George. It’s one of our favorite places.

As we were getting ready to go to sleep, we noticed a group of people gathering at a nearby condo. As the evening progressed, we noticed these folks getting noisier and noisier. They were having a fun time. We tried our hardest to fall asleep. But it was too loud. It was getting quite annoying.

It occurred to me that I could continue stressing about our inability to fall asleep, and their noise or I could simply contact the resort manager and let her take care of things.

I grabbed the phone, discussed the situation with the night manager, and within a few minutes, the noise had subsided considerably, and we were able to fall asleep.

*There are times when you can do something about the environment or the “stressor.”* When those favorable opportunities are available, take control of the situation.

*When you can’t do anything to influence a situation, when the environment can’t be changed, the best approach is to apply the tools you will learn in these workbooks.*

This leads us to the fourth question, the question that drives the rest of this Stress Prevention Workbook:

**4. Can I think about this differently?** Remember that all stress begins with the way you think about something. *Therefore, the correct answer to this question is always, “Yes, I can think about this situation in a different way that doesn’t involve activating the stress response.”*

This idea is so central and important to our understanding of living a happier and less stressful life that we will spend the majority of this workbook explaining exactly how to do this.

Let’s use a simple example to show how, by asking these 4 quick questions, you can successfully prevent any stress from occurring:

**Traffic Jams**

Many people become stressed in traffic jams. The cars around them move too slowly or not at all, and they have to be somewhere soon. Let’s pretend that it’s you who are stressing out
in a traffic jam. We can go through each of the questions and see what happens to the stress.

**Am I really in danger?** If you analyze the situation accurately, very seldom does anyone get hurt in a traffic jam? The reason you're stressed rarely has anything to do with any life-threatening condition.

You’re stressed because you’re late for something that you have decided is important. The traffic jam is getting in the way of you arriving at a particular time. *Not getting there on time is the perceived threat.*

At no point during the traffic jam, however, are you in physical danger. There is no immediate threat while you sit there in the car. You’re safe. When you arrive at your destination, you’ll also be safe. You may have to deal with the consequences of being late, but most likely your life isn’t going to be in any physical danger.

So you've answered the first question, *there is no real threat.*

**Can you handle the traffic jam, or be late, without getting hurt?** It may be uncomfortable, but people are late all of the time. You’ve probably been late before, and nothing physically painful happened. So, yes, you can handle it this time.

**Is this traffic jam under your circle of influence?** Do you have any control over it? The answer is no. There is no way to control the traffic jam, or being late, so why spend a lot of energy getting upset about it if there’s nothing you can do to change the speed of the flow of traffic?

**Can you think about this differently?** The correct answer has to be yes. You can enjoy your favorite song. You can watch other people's reactions and get a good laugh. You can take the extra time to plan your upcoming days or think about some important ideas you haven't had time to develop.

You are free to think anything else you want to think about. And as long as the thought doesn’t include any perceived threat, you won’t turn on the stress response.

**Consider This**

The next time you feel stress, see if there is a different way to think about it. (There always is).

For example, let's say that you are a huge sports fan and your favorite team just lost the championship game. Run through the first three questions and then watch how the fourth question, accurately answered, results in no stress.
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What was the real threat? – The team didn’t win. I may have lost a bet with my buddy at work. But the score of a game can’t possibly hurt me.

Can I handle it? – Yes, the team has lost before and I still turned out fine.

Do I have any control over the outcome of the game? Superstitions aside, no I don’t have any control over who wins the game.

Can I think about it differently? – Yes, I can think any number of thoughts that do not cause me to get stressed out. Rather than getting upset about the loss, here are a few other ways that I could think about the game:

• It was an exciting game.
• It’s great that they made it to the finals.
• I had a fun time following all the exciting action of this year's team.
• They'll be better next year.
• It's only a game

You can re-think any situation the same way. As long as your different thought doesn't include a threat, you won't turn on the stress response, or have emotions that are less than positive.

Reflective Questions: Think of a stressful situation that has occurred for you in the last few days. Answer the following questions in the space provided.

Describe the situation.

Were you in real, physical danger? (If so, think of another situation.) What was the real threat?

Were you able to handle the situation without getting hurt?

Was the situation inside your circle of influence? Did you have any control over it?

Could you have thought about things differently so that it would not have been as stressful for you? If so, how?
Stress Prevention Activity
The next time, and every time, you find yourself in a stressful situation, answer the four big questions and then notice what happens.

Describe the situation.

1. What is the real threat?

2. Can I handle it?

3. Is this under my control?

4. How can I think about it differently?

Describe changes in your perspective, stress levels, emotions, and well-being.

Place Choice Inside the Gap
In our book titled UNWIND!, Sam Bracken and I introduced you to some great ways that you can use Dr. Steven Covey’s 7 Habits to create a stress-free life. Most of that book involved principles presented initially by Dr. Covey that, when lived by, tend to prevent problems. When you live by those principles, you naturally avoid a lot of stress in life.

In this Stress Reduction Workbook, I’d like to go into much greater depth about how to prevent stress extending beyond the information in UNWIND! So let’s get started.

Adopt a Proactive Paradigm
A paradigm is a way of looking at things, in general. It is a worldview; a pattern of thinking. It is a fundamental belief about something as we see it. To us, this is how it is. We have a paradigm about how much we can control our thinking. To the extent that we believe that our thoughts lead to our feelings and that we can control our thoughts, we’ll gain the upper hand on our stress.
I’d like to begin with the well-known observation made by Viktor Frankl who was imprisoned in a POW camp in Nazi Germany during World War II because he was a Jew. He saw the most horrendous atrocities committed by a group of people on another group of people. The prisoners were persecuted to the point where many of them simply gave up on living. But he noticed that there were some prisoners who were different. They had a different way of looking at things and in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* he suggested that this was the difference in whether they survived the camps or not. This is what Frankl said:

“We, who lived in concentration camps, can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing. The one thing that can never be taken away is the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

**The Reactive Paradigm**

- This way of looking at the world essentially says: External forces dictate my life. I have little or no control over them. Those forces stress me out.

**The Proactive Paradigm**

- This way of looking at the world sounds like this: I dictate my life. No one else does. I choose how I will respond to stressful circumstances. I can choose to feel some other way than stressed.

It may seem hard to swallow, that you can control your stress, but it is true. As soon as you own that, you will be amazed at the freedom you have to create your own happiness and peace of mind.

In the next little while, I will show you some powerful tools to help you make that happen. This just might change everything for you.

**Stimulus-Response, and the Gap In-Between**

Life happens.

Most of the time, you are NOT able to control or even influence many of life’s events. Events over which you have very little if any control includes things like the weather, the stock
market, natural disasters like earthquakes or tornados, the information found on television, the Internet, radio, or the thoughts, feelings, and actions of other people.

Many times, you see these things happen and without thinking, you turn on your stress response as you react to these events.

**Stimulus→Response**

In psychology, this theory is commonly known as Stimulus→Response or S→R. It is as if something pushed your buttons, then seemingly outside of your control, without thinking, you react. We call this reaction conditioning.

Conditioning occurs as we experience events throughout our lives. We have acquired and maintain certain attitudes, beliefs, or emotions toward people or things. Essentially, we’re learning as we go. Some of the things we learn, we hold on to them tightly, whether we realize it or not.

For example, a person is abused as a young child and now, as an adult, she is afraid of men. Consciously, she knows that most men are decent and good, but the subconscious program that’s running in her subconscious mind says differently, based on the conditioning that took place when she was young.

Such is the case for many of our unpleasant emotions. We get told that we are dumb, that we are not good looking, that we’re different (the stimulus) and immediately we retreat, we resist, we recoil, we react (the response). And we do these without giving a second thought to the reason why.

This is so common, in fact, that few really stop to question conditioned attitudes, beliefs, or emotions. In fact, we’re surprised when we see someone who doesn’t retaliate with anger when something “mean” is done. We are surprised when someone isn’t offended when a name is called. We can’t believe it when someone isn’t upset when his or her flight is canceled.

**Conditioned Beliefs**

Many people have the mistaken belief that we can’t even do anything about our reactions; that we’re hardwired to this S→R model—that we’re genetically programmed to be angry, for example. They believe that stressful things happen to us and we can’t help but respond in stressful ways.

**Pavlov’s Dog**

No doubt, you recall in your high school or college psychology course a discussion about Ivan Pavlov and his famous experiment with the dog. Ivan would introduce food
(stimulus) and immediately the dog would salivate (response). This is an instinctive, natural response to the food, an environmental condition.

Ivan then introduced a sound—a new stimulus—combined simultaneously with the introduction of the food. The dog still responded with salivation.

Finally, he introduced the sound, but without the food. He found that the dog had conditioned itself to salivate to the sound because it unconsciously connected it with the food. Even when the food was not present, the dog still salivated to the sound.

Since then, psychologists have done many experiments, both with animals as well as with humans, to study this phenomenon. Their conclusion: your conditioning determines your behaviors. In other words, your conditioning runs your show.

To a large extent, they’re correct.

Even our own experiences seem to support this belief.

Imagine yourself driving in your car, minding your own business on your way to work. How would you react if you looked in your rearview mirror and noticed a police car behind you with its siren blaring and lights flashing? What would be your likely response to this situation? If you are like most people, you begin feeling anger and frustration, and you become upset that you are being pulled over.

We have many patterns of behavior (conditioned responses) that run on autopilot and don’t serve us very well.

For example:

- When someone yells obscenities at us, we immediately get defensive, angry, and offended.
- When driving behind a slow driver, or when someone quickly cuts in front of us, we tend to get irritated or upset.
- During a class or meeting, we tend to get impatient or bored when the speaker goes overtime.

The feelings we create based on our reactions to these events are conditioned or learned.

They are not inherited tendencies.

We don’t inherit angry, bored, or easily offended genes.

For example:
• You are not offended because of something another person says or does. That person does not have that power. You have chosen to feel offended or to not feel offended.

• If you feel bored while listening to someone, you don’t feel that way because of what the person is saying. You are bored because you have chosen to be bored. If you change your thoughts about the situation or change what you are thinking about during the presentation, the feeling of boredom disappears.

We are not programmed at birth to respond with an automatic emotion when something happens in our environment. We have learned to respond in these ways through training and by modeling others.

This is both good and bad news.

*The bad news is that at some point we have all learned negative ways of reacting to specific stimuli.* Unless you are aware of this conditioning, and you do something to change it, you’ll thoughtlessly react in the same way that you learned.

You may have never considered the possibility that you can respond to any situation in a completely different way. Most of the time, people respond to situations automatically without considering the possibility that they can actually react to it differently.

**Recall what I mentioned earlier:**

Your feelings are always preceded by your dominant thoughts. Change your dominant thoughts and you immediately change your feelings. You are always responsible for how you think, and consequently how you feel.

*So, the good news is that if you have learned a particular response to an event, you can also unlearn it.* We, as conscious human beings, have the capacity to take responsibility for our thoughts and immediately put ourselves in control of how any situation will affect us. It is possible to decide to *not* have that button pushed when something happens.

You can do this when you realize that what you think is entirely up to you. It is your choice. In any situation, you have the power to choose your response to what is happening.

**Mind the Gap**

We can take our S→R model, separate the Stimulus from the automatic Response and discover that we can place a Gap in-between.
In this Gap, this space between the stimulus and response, you have the power to place something that will transform your reaction. *You have the power to choose a different thought, a different interpretation, a different perception than the one you’ve been conditioned to give and place it directly between stimulus and response.*

**This power to choose your own response is your greatest power.** This power to place in this Gap any thought that you choose creates a new, empowering, freeing model that looks like this:

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Stimulus → Gap (choice) → Better Response
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*Remember, whatever thought you put in the Gap is based entirely upon how you choose to interpret it.* As I mentioned before, the actual event itself doesn’t cause stress; you are stressed by the way you interpret what is taking place.

If this is true, how could you interpret the situation of the police officer driving behind you differently? How could you choose another thought to put into the Gap? What could you say to yourself about this situation so that you experience it without activating the stress response?

- You might think something like, “This police officer is protecting everyone’s safety and has noticed that I am doing something potentially dangerous. I am being stopped to keep me from harming someone else. I am grateful for police officers!”

- Alternatively, you could see the police officer as a person who is just doing his job in the best way that he can. You could say, “He is working hard to do his job in the best way he knows how.”

These interpretations may seem strange or unlikely, as you read them right now, but that isn’t important. *The key point is that you decide how you want to interpret the event.* You have the ability to choose to interpret each of life’s events any way you want. *In that way, you also decide whether you set the stress response in motion or you remain balanced.*

*This understanding is useful in practically any situation where you find yourself starting to feel stressed.*

Let’s return to our drive through the mountainside that we talked about in the Science of Stress Workbook.

Imagine that you are driving down a road in a hurry to your destination. This winding road takes you through some mountainous areas. You approach a car driven by a
very calm old man who is in no hurry whatsoever. He is out on an afternoon drive thoroughly enjoying the scenery.

But you are still in a rush and need to get to your meeting, and there are no places where you can safely pass him. He doesn’t notice you because he is so focused on the beautiful scenery. His stereo is turned up so he can’t hear you honking at him.

Usually, in these situations, you would become frustrated. You might notice your heart rate increasing and your muscles tense in your arms, face, and shoulders. You might start slamming the steering wheel with your hands, and your face would probably turn various shades of red.

Is it possible for you to interpret this situation differently so you don't activate the stress response?

It must be possible, because not everyone behind slow-driving old men has the same response, no matter how late they are for the important meeting.

You aren’t restricted to one single response to the situation. It will always depend upon how you decide to view the event.

How could you interpret this event differently?

There are many interpretations you could have that would not initiate the stress response and cause this inner imbalance.

- You could say that this person is probably saving you from getting a ticket because you would have very likely been speeding to your destination. That would be worse than being late.

- You could also have the dominant thought that this is an excellent opportunity to see all the beautiful views you usually miss when you drive too fast.

The way you interpret the situation doesn’t necessarily even have to be true or accurate. You could make up the circumstances to mean anything you like.

- You could pretend that this person is the President of the United States and you are a Secret Service Agent assigned to follow and protect the president.

However silly this may seem, it emphasizes this important point.

You can choose how you interpret every event.
Given that choice, you have total control over how worked up you will or will not get, and whether you will experience the ill effects of the activation of the stress response.

Remember, feelings, including stress, follow your thoughts. And if you don’t have the threat thought, you won’t have stressful feelings.

My family and I had an interesting occurrence that clearly demonstrated how dramatically our interpretations can immediately affect our emotional state, and how quickly we can change our dominant thoughts.

One Saturday afternoon we arrived at the field of our daughter’s soccer match. Uncharacteristically, one of the referees was late. The game could not proceed without him. As time passed, the parents became angrier and angrier. Someone would complain about how disrespectful this referee was, and another would say she had better things to do than wait for him. The tension was growing by the minute. Some of the parents were planning to let him know how upset they were when he actually did arrive. Others made plans to contact his supervisor to make sure he never worked another soccer game. Interestingly, the kids warming up on the field, waiting to play the game didn’t seem to mind a bit that the referee was late.

As the frustration continued to grow, one of the other referees received a phone call from the referee who was late. It turns out that his son had been in a terrible car accident and he needed to attend to that situation before he could come to the game. He was hurrying as fast as he could, but the seriousness of the accident made him unable to get to the game any sooner. He asked the other referee to apologize to all of the parents for the delay.

An amazing thing happened when we heard the news of this man’s situation. A collective and instantaneous change took place among the parents sitting in the stands. What had previously been feelings of anger and frustration, immediately turned to feelings of love and concern for this man and his son. To a person, the collective anger instantly turned into a common desire to help him in any way possible. The switch was immediate and powerful. It was amazing to watch how quickly the sentiment changed toward the referee.

The only thing that changed, for everyone in attendance, was the way they interpreted what was happening. They had changed what they had put in the Gap, thereby also changing the Response.

The truth is we could have interpreted the event that way in the first place.
Instead of choosing to assume that this guy was rude and irresponsible, we could have assumed that he was a nice person and something serious had happened to keep him from coming.

Thinking that way in the first place would have kept us from being upset and turning on the stress response.
Upgrade Your Thoughts

Understanding now that:

- Your thoughts always precede your emotions
- You create your emotions by your dominant thoughts
- You have the power to choose your thoughts and your resulting emotions

**It now becomes possible to look at your thoughts, find out what emotions follow them, and then go back to the primary thoughts, and change them.**

That’s powerful!

An interesting characteristic about the mind and the way we think is that we can upgrade our dominant thoughts from stressful, threat-filled thoughts to un-stressful, proactive thoughts simply by deciding to do so. When we do, we immediately feel differently, we feel better.

Consider the story of my daughter’s soccer game and the referee who was late because his son was in an accident. Upon hearing the news, the parents changed their dominant thoughts from anger to love. As they upgraded their dominant thought, their mood changed, and so did their stress levels.

Nothing else changed; the game still started late, people still had other things to do, schedules were still interrupted. The difference was they upgraded from anger to love, stress to peace, when they interpreted the situation differently.

What I’m suggesting here is that you can do the same thing in every situation, and even before the stressful feeling kicks in.

As you notice yourself starting to feel a certain feeling, based on your dominant thoughts, you can, right then, place a different thought into the Gap.

**Upgrade Your Thoughts**

It’s really pretty easy to upgrade your thoughts. All you need to do is consider your current dominant thought and then replace it with a more favorable, more positive, more empowering dominant thought. A more favorable, less stressful emotion will automatically follow.

Here are some examples of thoughts or emotions that most of us would consider stressful. Following each one is an example of an upgraded thought. These upgraded thoughts automatically lead to feelings and emotions that don’t include stress.
You can upgrade your dominant thoughts from:

- Threats to challenges, which brings you feelings of excitement, eagerness, motivated
- Expectations to preferences, which brings you feelings of detachment, happiness
- Anger to tolerance or forgiveness, which brings you feelings of peace
- Judging to observing, which brings you feelings of calm
- Resistance to acceptance or allowance, which brings you feelings of release, relaxation
- Complaining to gratitude, which brings you feelings of joy, serenity, contentment, fun
- Guilt to self-acceptance, which brings you feelings of peace, relaxation
- Fear to love, which brings you feelings of compassion, caring, consideration
- Fear to curiosity, which brings you feelings of fun, daring, excitement
- Jealousy to allowing, which brings you feelings of release, caring
- Arguing to empathy, which brings you feelings of understanding

Can you see how powerful this can be?

You are now in control. You are the one choosing your thoughts, and by upgrading your thoughts, you can change how you feel.

Let’s look at a few more examples so you can get a good feel for this.

Imagine that you really enjoy waterskiing. It’s something you really look forward to doing, whenever you have a chance. One of the worst things that could happen, on the day that you go waterskiing, is to have a lot of wind. When you go skiing, you have an “expectation” that the lake water should be a smooth, not choppy.

However, it is a windy day—not what you were expecting.

You might think thoughts like this, “It should not be windy! It was supposed to be a nice calm day.” If you maintain that expectation or demand as your dominant thought, the emotions you’ll automatically generate are anger or frustration.

However, if you upgrade that dominant thought to a preference, your thinking would sound more like this, “I usually prefer that the water be really smooth, but that isn’t how it is today. I can’t do anything to calm the waters, so I’ll decide to do something else. “

This might sound ridiculous to just blow it off like that, but isn’t it more ridiculous to stay upset about something over which you have absolutely no control?

Let’s try another.
You’re in a meeting that keeps going well beyond the time allotted. It just keeps going and your boss, who is running the meeting, doesn’t seem to be in any hurry to finish it.

In this situation, you could do a lot of complaining about what a lousy boss this person is and how inconsiderate she is being, (judging), and how much you hate meetings in general, (resistance).

Now you probably can’t affect the length of the meeting—it wouldn’t be the right thing to do. And if you continue to complain, not only will the clock move more slowly, but the emotions you’ll generate—because of resistance and boredom—will be very stressful ones like frustration or irritation.

Now, notice how you’ll feel if you upgrade those complaining thoughts to more stress-preventing grateful thoughts. “Isn’t it great that I have this job in the first place? Many of my friends don’t have jobs right now and are really struggling. Having this job, even though it has its moments, provides me with so many opportunities and experiences that I wouldn’t have if I weren’t working!”

*How are you going to feel, if gratitude is your dominant thought? Pretty good, right?*

Or you could say, something like: “This boss of mine, though she means well, is trying her hardest to help us become better employees. I appreciate her for doing that. I forgive her for going longer than she said she would. She probably has lost all track of time.”

*How are you going to feel, if these are your dominant thoughts? Probably a lot better.*

When I am on the freeway and I see someone driving recklessly by me at top speed, rather than making all kinds of judgments about that person (idiot, crazy driver, etc.), I consider a different thought: This guy is on his way to the hospital because his wife, who is sitting in the back seat of the car, is about to have a baby at any moment. It would be far better if she had the baby at the hospital, so go ahead and speed by me so you can get there really fast. It’s pretty funny how many “almost-births” have happened on the freeways where I drive.

*More importantly, how will I feel if these are my dominant thoughts? I’ll feel a lot better than if I would have chosen anger.*

**The possibilities for upgrading your thoughts are endless.**

You’ve been asked to go to a party with some friends. In the past, you’ve been conditioned to fear people, especially new people. Your conditioned response might
sound something like, “I’m really not comfortable being around other people, and especially people I don’t know.”

If you insert love into the Gap and upgrade your fear to love, you would have a completely different experience. “These new people might also be nervous to meet me. They probably want more friends.” You would welcome people. You would want to get to know them, and you would be interested in the possibility of developing new relationships. That’s a different and far better feeling than the conditioned feeling of fear.

Here’s another one that I encounter a lot during the summers where I live. Frequently, I hear people complain about how unbearably hot it is. The temperature is in the 90s and it’s too warm for comfort. Rather than wallow in their misery, my immediate thought goes to this dominant thought: At least it isn’t January 15th when the temperature hovers right around 18 degrees. As soon as I think this thought, a hot summer day doesn’t seem so bad.

There is tremendous power, as well as a great feeling of freedom when you realize that you create your thoughts and you can upgrade them anytime.

**It puts you in control.**

You always have a choice about what you think. Taking this control is much like working a muscle. It grows with practice and the more you exercise your choice to think in useful ways, the more proficient you become in doing so—and the more you find yourself preventing your stress.

**Try This**

The next time you feel any type of negative or stressful feeling:

- Assess the feeling. Specify which feeling you’re having. Determine the dominant thought that precedes the feeling.

- Change your dominant thought to an *upgraded thought*.

- Dwell on the upgraded thought.

- Notice the change in how you feel.
• Strengthen this muscle by practicing this every time you notice yourself having stressful or less-than-positive feelings.

In the next section, we will explore some more ways to improve your thinking patterns, and as a result, experience much greater levels of peace and contentment . . . and much less stress.

If you really want to change how you feel, you must change the way that you think.

**Stress Prevention Activity – Filling the Gap & Upgrading Your Thoughts**

The purpose of this activity is to help you gain control of the Gap between stimulus and response.

Think of an unpleasant situation in which you found yourself getting emotionally upset, angry, frustrated, or stressed. Describe it in the space provided:

Describe the thoughts that you had during this experience in the space provided:

Now consider some different, better dominant thoughts you could have inserted into the Gap between stimulus and response. Write down the thoughts that would have helped prevent stress by using this chart:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative Dominant Thoughts to Insert into the Gap</th>
<th>What You Might Say to Yourself</th>
<th>Finish the Thought</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gratitude</td>
<td>I appreciate . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’m thankful for . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowance/Acceptance</td>
<td>It’s okay . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can live with this . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I can go with the flow . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>I wonder...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What would happen if...?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What can I learn from this...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
<td>I am noticing . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>This could be fun ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preferences</td>
<td>Even though I’d prefer it this way, I can’t control what’s happening here . . .</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiveness</td>
<td>I release my emotional attachment to ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
<td>I’m happy being me during this ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathy</td>
<td>I’m interested in you ...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’d like to understand what you’re feeling about this...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
From Resistance to Unruffled

*What you resist persists. – Carl Jung*

**Resistance is the Culprit**
If you carefully analyze your negative thoughts, you’ll discover that almost all of them contain one specific psychological characteristic: resistance.

When you resist, you essentially say “NO!” to what is (or what was or what will be).

You are in a state of resistance when you don’t want things to be as they are; you want things to be different. When you resist someone else, you are thinking of how you want him or her to change. You want them to do something different than they are doing (or have already done).

Recall that the stress response is activated by the thought of “Uh-Oh! This is going to be bad!” It is also activated by the resistance thought, “Oh no! This should not be happening!” or “Oh no! This should not have happened!”

Consider several of our so-called negative emotions: anger, depression, helplessness, fear, boredom, sadness, or any variation of these. In almost every case, the thought behind the emotion includes resistance. You are saying “no” to what is.

**What You Resist tends to Persist**
Carl Jung said an interesting thing about resistance. He said, “*What you resist persists.*”

In other words, trying to somehow make something go away, or even the mere desire that something go away actually keeps it in place. Jung suggested that *those things you resist might actually even grow.*

Many illustrations easily demonstrate this principle. Try to stop being angry by resisting your feeling of anger. What happens? You get angrier.

Have you ever tried to resist eating something you know you shouldn’t eat? What happens? You want it even more. Resisting it just increases your desire for it.

In our society, we have an obesity problem. Many people with whom I have worked have a dominant thought of resistance toward the extra weight they carry around. What I’ve noticed, is the more they resist it, the harder it is for them to lose the weight.

**Resistance Creates Stress**
Resistant thoughts sound a lot like, "Things should not be this way." Or, "I hate this." Or, "That person should not act that way." These thoughts not only turn on the stress response but stressful emotions as well.

Consider the person who goes into a movie theater to watch her favorite movie. As the movie begins, she notices that the people around her are using their cell phones. Other people are loudly chewing their popcorn or removing wrappers from candy in loud and annoying ways.

In her mind, all of these distractions should not be happening and the more she focuses on them and continues to resist them, the more irritated she becomes. Curiously, the more she wants the distracting sounds to go away, the bigger they become.

So, if resisting it won’t make something bad go away, and might make things worse, how can we go about changing what we don’t like or what we don’t want? How can we make the stressful emotions disappear?

**Replace Rather than Resist**

The better approach is to replace, rather than resist. Since you are free to choose any thought that you want to put into the Gap, you can choose to upgrade to a better one whenever you find yourself resisting.

And with what do you replace those resistant thoughts? You replace them with thoughts that are the opposite of resisting. A few of these high-quality replacement thoughts would include acceptance, allowance, forgiveness, love, and gratitude. The instant you upgrade your conditioned thoughts to these, you will feel differently.

Recently, I was teaching one of my classes and we were discussing this idea. One student was an older woman who, by most people’s standards, had been through a very challenging life. She raised her hand and told us that she had been in and out of therapy and counseling for over 25 years. She had seen numerous psychiatrists and counselors during that time.

She said she had tried nearly every psychological technique known to man that was designed to help her get better. She had “done it all” in her attempts to heal.

Her comment to us was that after all the work that she had done with all of these counselors to help her with her problems, in every case, upgrading her thinking was the final and most important step she had to commit to if she was going to heal. She realized that she had to stop resisting so many things in her life and instead, replace
her resistance with acceptance, allowance, forgiveness, love, and gratitude. She said that until she did this, she continued to struggle. Once she did this, she was able to experience true peace and healing.

**Stress Prevention Activity – Upgrading Your Resistance Thoughts**

The next time you find yourself feeling irritated, annoyed, or angry, step back from the emotion and analyze precisely what you are thinking that is creating this feeling. These thoughts may be about something or someone else, or they might be about you.

Now notice the resistance thought.

It will probably sound something like, “This should be different.” Or, “This shouldn’t be happening this way.” Notice how you are thinking “No!” about it, them, or you.

Now take a deep breath, take charge of your thinking, and replace the “No!” thought with a “Yes!” thought. Replace your resistance with forgiveness, love, acceptance, or gratitude. Watch how much differently you feel. Use the following space to write down the experience.

- Write about the situation that you resisted. What was happening? Who was involved?

- What did you notice about your thoughts, as you were resisting? Be specific and accurate.

- When you changed your “No!” thoughts to “Yes!” thoughts, how did your feelings change?

Practice this activity every time you find yourself resisting things you’d like to be different, and notice how your feelings about the situations change. Obviously, you may not be able to do too much to change the situation or circumstances, but when you are in this non-resisting state of mind, the annoying aspect of it won’t concern you anymore. And, as Carl Jung would have probably said, “when you cease to resist, that which you resisted will cease to persist.” It may even go away altogether.
Stress-Related Emotions: Anger & Fear

Earlier, I told you that your emotions are preceded by your dominant thoughts—you never have an emotion without a dominant thought that first interprets a situation.

Let’s spend some time focusing on some common emotions associated with the stress response. Once you understand how these work, you can do a lot to remove them from your day-to-day range of emotions.

Anger

Most societies have rules, common agreements about how things should be. These rules bring order to our lives. Without them we would experience chaos.

Examples include:

- People who drive cars in the United States need to drive on the right side of the road (as opposed to the left side in Great Britain or Japan).
- People should not steal from other people.
- People who want to hunt or fish ought to have licenses.
- People need to have a library card to check out books from the library.
- Coaches in little league sports need to treat the kids respectfully.
- People who work in restaurants should give prompt and polite service.

In general, most of us have agreed to these rules. These rules represent our beliefs for how we feel things should be.

We also have individual rules, or demands. Each of these rules is based on how we feel things should be for us. Our rules usually contain the words “need to” “should” or “must.”

I have a long list of rules or demands to maintain order and peace in my home. Here are a few simple ones that work for me:

- My kids should be in bed by a certain time on a school night.
- Cats should not throw up on my living room couch.
- The room needs to be quiet while I am meditating.
- The music my kids play shouldn’t be too loud.
- Spiders need to remain outside of the home and preferably create their webs several miles away.
- The grass around our home should be alive and green during the summer, rather than dead and brown.
I need to be in bed by 10:00 p.m.
My desk ought to be clean and organized.
My kids should practice playing the piano for 30-minutes each day.

Demands and Rules Are Not Universal

Demands and Rules are simple everyday agreements that we make with others or ourselves. Rules are not Natural Laws. In other words, there is no natural or universal law that says it must be quiet in the house for me to meditate nor is there one that says the kids have to play the piano each day. There is no all-encompassing cosmic law that says the server at our favorite restaurant should be prompt and polite. We have simply decided that this is how things ought to be. We made up our demands.

The Only Real Reason You Are Ever Angry

This leads us to the emotion of anger. Pay close attention: The only real reason why you ever get angry is that an event has happened that breaks one of your rules, it goes against one of your demands. Someone has done something that is in conflict with your beliefs about how you think something ought to be. The resulting emotion, which you generate by this thought, is what we call anger.

It is very important that you understand this concept because as soon as you do, you can virtually eliminate anger from your life. An event of itself does not make you angry any more than events can make you feel stressed, afraid, bored, or any other emotion.

If it were the case that we had anger genes, we would get mad every time the cat throws up on the sofa. But that doesn’t always happen, and for some people, it doesn’t bother them at all. The way you interpret the event in your mind, what it means to you, always determines whether you will become angry about it. Let’s look at some examples to demonstrate this.

Attachment to Our Own Rules

Have you ever driven with someone who experiences road rage? What this person is essentially saying is that he is angry because other people are not following the way he thinks they should drive. His attachment to this rule and his certainty that he is “right” about his rule is precisely what sends him into a fit of rage each time that rule is broken.

Let’s refer to my rules about my home. One of my rules says my room should be quiet when I am meditating. What if my kids bring home their friends and they start making a lot of noise in the next room? This noise is disrupting my quiet. They are doing something in direct conflict with my beliefs about how things ought to be while I meditate.
Their noise however, is not what causes me to be angry. I actually enjoy their noise on some occasions, because I know they are happy and having a great time. However, my rule about quietness during meditation is in conflict with what I am currently experiencing. I generate my feelings of anger from that thought.

It looks like they are the ones causing the emotion in me. In reality, it is my own rule that I have made up, that is being violated. This is how I create the emotion of anger.

**Re-examine Your Rules**

Given this understanding, you can immediately defuse anger simply by reexamining your rule. Be aware that it is your rule, and not the event itself, that is causing you to generate anger.

Let’s say that my cat has, in fact, thrown up on my sofa. Rather than letting anger cause me to do something I will probably regret, I can remember that it is my made-up rule that is being broken, which is the real cause of my anger—the rule that cats should not throw up on the sofa. With this awareness, I can operate from a more positive emotional state with regard to the cat and everything else around me.

**The Difference is Emotional Attachment**

You probably notice that there are those who rarely seem to get angry. Don’t these people have any rules in their lives?

The difference is the degree of emotional attachment they have to their rules and demands. When you are unwilling to budge on your rules, when you need to be “right” about the correctness of your rules, you'll feel more anger when your rules are broken.

However, when you are willing to be flexible with your rules, you’ll find that you don’t turn on the heat when your rule gets broken.

Here’s an example: I almost never get angry. There are times, however, when my kids are playing their sports, and I am either watching or coaching them, when I find myself getting angry. It usually happens when a referee makes a call that is contrary to how I viewed the action—he's made a bad call. Ordinarily, I wouldn't get angry at a referee who makes a bad call—no big deal—no emotional attachment. But when my own kids are penalized for his poor judgment, as I see it, I get mad. I'm very emotionally attached to the continued well-being of my kids. My rule says they should be treated fairly. And he's not treating them fairly.

Over the years, however, I have learned that I don’t need to cling so tightly to the way the referee should call the game. I can recognize that it’s only a game and the referee will never
get it right every time. He’s doing the best he can and wouldn’t make calls deliberately designed to harm my kids. I can cease being so attached to how things ought to be.

When I release my emotional attachment, I also cease being so angry.

**Upgrade to Preferences**

One of the ways to do this is by upgrading your “musts,” “demands,” and “shoulds” to **preferences**. In other words, rather than saying something must happen in a certain way, you can upgrade it by saying you “prefer” things happen in certain ways.

I could say, “I prefer that refs make good calls during my kids’ games. They may not always, but that’s my preference.”

If that is the way you approach most uncontrollable events that take place in your environment, you’ll find yourself rarely generating a heated frenzy. As a result, you can experience peace of mind rather than anger.

**Other Emotions**

Jealousy, irritation, frustration, resentment, disappointment, and other related emotions all have their roots in anger. Whenever you feel any of these emotions, it is because things are happening contrary to the way you think they should.

The problem with thinking this way—that things should be going differently than they are—is that they aren’t.

Regardless of how much you think they should be otherwise, things happen, and there’s usually not much you can do about them. It is in these times that you can practice the art of upgrading your thoughts to more peaceful, empowering, and stress-preventing thoughts.

**Anger Is Not Always a Bad Thing**

Having said that let me make a quick comment about anger. The purpose of helping you realize the real source of your anger is not meant to completely remove anger from your collection of emotions.

Anger can be a useful emotion that moves you to positive action. People who were angry about something have founded many beneficial organizations, charities, and foundations. Rather than lash out and become destructive to themselves and others, these people used their energy to create solutions and make things better.
The problem with anger is that it too frequently drives people to do things that hurt others or themselves. Abuse, in its many despicable forms, is usually an extension of anger. Aggression and violence have anger at their roots.

**Type A Personality**

Anger that leads to feelings of hostility has also been found to be very dangerous, not only for those who happen to be near the angry person, but also for the cardiovascular health of the angry person.

The “Type A personality” was once considered at high risk for damaging the blood vessels of the heart. However, upon further analysis, it turned out that the high risk isn’t so much the “Type A personality” as it is the “hostile core personality.”

Anger, aggressiveness, and hostile behaviors are some of the leading predictors of heart disease and cardiovascular problems.

Anger generally leads to a large number of negative outcomes. It affects our health, our relationships, and our emotional stability.

Once you understand your anger, how you generate it, and how you can diffuse it, you will gain more control over this very common but potentially dangerous emotion.

**Stress Prevention Activity**

Think of something that happened that resulted in you becoming very angry. If it will help you, write it in detail in the space provided.

Now that you’ve identified the incident, think of the rule you created that, once it was broken, triggered your angry emotion.

Write your rule here.

(When you read your rule, it will probably include the words “should,” “must,” or “ought to” in the rule.)
Next, think of a different way of interpreting that event. What can you say to yourself that upgrades your rule to a preference and changes your feelings of anger to something more like acceptance, tolerance, or peace?

Write the new preference here.

Look at both rules. Evaluate which of the two will result in less stress and more happiness. Think of other rules that you have that you want to change to preferences instead.

Write them here.
Guilt
Guilt is an emotion that is very similar to anger. It usually occurs when you do something that is contrary to your own rules or demands that you have about yourself.

Perhaps you have established a rule for yourself that says you shouldn’t eat a lot of food late at night or that you shouldn’t treat other people in unkind ways. When you do eat late at night or if you are mean to someone you care about—when you break one of your own rules, it usually results in guilt. Guilt can be especially significant if you find you have violated a rule that has to do with one of your highly held values or with your mission.

You can manage your guilt in much the same way as you manage your anger. When you realize that your guilty thoughts cause your unpleasant feelings, search to see which one of your “rules” you have violated. In other words, figure out what is the real cause of the guilt.

If your guilt involves another person, you may want to see what you can do to repair any damage you may have done. Do what you can to fix it and then let it go. It doesn’t make much sense to fill up your present-moment thoughts with painful memories, which you can’t relive or undo.

Now you can release your attachment to the rule by upgrading it to a preference; learn from the experience and then feel the relief that follows.

Fear
Fear and stress are very similar. They frequently feel the same. If you truly understand the fear and get a clear picture of what is happening when you feel fear, you can learn to do away with the need to fear things at all. You can make the fear disappear!

In my class, when we begin our focus on fear, I start with this question: “Why do you think you are here?” I don’t mean to ask the students why they are here in this building on this particular day. I ask them why they feel they are alive and what they are here to do while they are alive. What is their purpose for living and being? (Do you recall asking yourself this question earlier in this workbook?) They commonly respond with answers like these:

- To learn everything I can
- To enjoy life to the fullest
- To make a difference in other people’s lives
- To serve others
- To support a family and provide a quality life for my kids
- To develop my skills, talents, and natural abilities
- To have a good time
• To work toward and reach the goals I set for myself

Expansion

After some discussion, I tell the class that I would like to add an additional purpose that takes into account some of those already mentioned. I introduce the idea that one purpose for living is to expand. I believe that you and I and everyone that gets to live a lifetime on this earth are here to expand, to grow, to become more of who we are. We are beings with infinite potential and amazing capabilities. Realizing our potential, actualizing our capabilities, involves expanding.

This desire to expand is an instinctive part of your nature. You may not always follow it, but inside of you, dormant perhaps, is this tendency, this urge, to become more of who you are. However, realizing that potential is a gradual process. It doesn’t happen in an instant. You expand in the direction of your potential much like a balloon expands as air is slowly blown into it.

Comfort Zones

Interestingly, in contrast to our desire to expand is our tendency to gravitate toward our comfort zones. A comfort zone is any place, situation, relationship, or experience where we don’t feel any threat to our sense of well-being. It is where we feel safe. It is usually a known place or situation where we feel some control or at least we usually know what is going to happen.

Examples of comfort zones include our homes, our jobs, and the things we commonly do every day. Our comfort zones also include the people with whom we spend time such as our friends or family members, the places we frequently go to eat, the types of food we eat, the places we go to exercise, the type of car we drive, and the routes we commonly travel to get to our various destinations. Simply, we prefer being in places, around people, and doing things that feel routine for us. We like to feel comfortable.

In the illustration below, the circle represents us. In it, we put your “comfort zones.” This is where people prefer being most of the time.
Leaving the Comfort Zone

Now comes the tricky part. In order to realize this aspect of your human nature, which is to expand and grow, you must leave your comfort zones. You must do things that feel uncomfortable. There is very little growth, expansion, or progress when you spend your time and energy in those places we would call your comfort zones. Certainly, you are usually safe and tend to enjoy pleasant experiences there, but little expansive movement happens in your comfort zones. Like the expanding balloon, leaving our comfort zones might look like this:

Moving out of your comfort zone doesn’t happen without effort on your part. Your effort produces the expansion. However, this effort usually involves overcoming or dealing with some type of fear. We could call the part outside the circle your “discomfort zone,” because the name implies that you don’t feel especially comfortable “out there.” Nevertheless, if you are to expand and grow, there is where you must put yourself.

Moving into your discomfort zones consistently involves facing your fears.

What is Fear?

It important to understand what fear really is. When you understand how you think when you fear something, it becomes easier to do something to change the subsequent feelings of fear.
Fear usually involves a focus on the future. You create, in your imagination, thoughts or images that something in the future, an event or experience, is going to be painful or uncomfortable. Fear is the feeling of wanting to avoid the future-oriented imagined threat, pain, or discomfort.

Fear and the Stress Response

Recall that the stress response happens because you want to prepare for a threat that might cause you to feel pain. The body mobilizes its systems to supply you with power and speed. Fear is similar in that it is our desire to avoid pain. Rather than responding with speed and power however, we respond with immobility. Fear keeps you from moving forward toward a specific outcome.

Aspects of Fear

Many people have never really thought rationally about their fears. They just are afraid of certain things and feel stuck to those fears. The following aspects of fear might surprise you, but they are true and learning about them can be very beneficial in overcoming fear.

1. Nothing in the world is inherently fearful.

Like stress, nothing “out there” universally causes fear for everyone who experiences it. Fear is entirely an internal experience.

Many people are scared to death of snakes. Others are content to have the little critters slithering all over them. The snake itself is not a frightening thing. The fear is the meaning you generate in your mind about the snake. If you have a belief about possible pain or discomfort if you are anywhere near one, you do your best to stay as far away from the slimy creatures as possible. If, on the other hand, you decide that there is no potential pain associated with snakes, you might enjoy being with them.

Another obvious illustration is public speaking. Some have said that public speaking is the number one social fear in our culture. I know many people who are scared to death when they think of speaking in front of a group of people. Many others I know do it regularly without giving it a second thought.

These examples, and plenty of others, indicate to me that it isn’t the snake or standing in front of an audience that creates the fear. The fear is generated by the thoughts that we have about these things. If they were inherently fearful, then everyone would be afraid of them. But everyone isn’t.

This understanding is useful because now, whenever you fear something, you can take responsibility and do something about it, rather than remaining a helpless victim.
2. **Fears are learned. You do not have a genetic predisposition to fear.**

Psychologists tell us that newborn babies may have a natural fear of falling and of loud noises. Others disagree saying the babies are simply reacting to them; they don’t really have the capacity to associate a pain with an experience. The jury is still out on which theory is true. Even if we do inherit these two fears, this leaves all of the other fears that we experience without any genetic component. In other words, you do not inherit fearful tendencies. You didn’t get your fears from your parents or grandparents.

*Why then would you fear anything?*

If your fears are not inherited, then you must have learned them. You learned to fear something from your own experiences. If a child gets a painful sting from a bee, he may become afraid of bees because he has learned that bees can cause pain.

We also learn to be afraid of things from the experiences of others. If a snake once bit your best friend and hurt her badly you may come to believe that you too should avoid that pain. You are likely to create that fear in your own mind as much as if you had experienced it yourself. You don’t have to experience that pain to understand that you’d rather not experience it yourself. Therefore, you avoid snakes and the pain the snakes might cause you.

3. **If a fear is learned, it can also be unlearned.**

In the end, it doesn’t matter when or where you began fearing something.

If a fear is learned, then logically, it can be unlearned. How can we be sure of this? Because people stop being afraid of things all the time.

In working with people and their fears, I’ve seen people overcome their fear of heights, small places, meeting others, quitting jobs, beginning relationships, ending relationships, public speaking, and a host of others. If one person can do it, so can someone else. Sure, it may be challenging, but it is possible.

4. **There is no real pain in your discomfort zone.**

Your discomfort zones are only uncomfortable if you choose to make them uncomfortable. Just as no event is inherently fearful, the discomfort in your discomfort zone is also your own doing. You create the perception of potential threat, discomfort, or emotional pain. If you analyze the situation carefully, you realize there isn’t going to be any pain.

*How do we know this is true?*
Our experience confirms this point. Watch how we can break down each of the steps of one of our most highly feared events—public speaking—and determine where the real pain happens.

Imagine that you are “next” to give an important speech to a large group of people on a subject that you care about deeply. While you anticipate your turn, you notice that your hands are cold and shaking, your mouth is dry, and it’s difficult to put your thoughts together (the stress response is cranking!).

Now here is the reality of the situation: You are comfortably sitting in your chair. There doesn’t seem to be any real pain being inflicted on you while you sit there awaiting your turn. No need for the stress response there. At some point, you are introduced; no pain there. The walk from your chair to the podium is a safe one. You give your speech to the audience. During your entire speech, you have remained free from danger, still no pain. Nobody threw any rocks, sticks, or tomatoes. They may have looked at you in funny ways. It isn’t likely, but they may have gotten up and walked out of the room while you were speaking; but those actions don’t hurt you physically. You may interpret those actions to mean something awful, but you make that choice. As I mentioned before, they can’t hurt you with their thoughts.

Therefore, you’ve remained safe and pain-free during your entire speech and now you are finished. You pick up your papers and walk back to your seat. Again, no pain.

In every aspect of what, for some people, is the most fearful thing they can possibly think of doing, there really is nothing that warranted being afraid. It was an entirely safe experience.

Remember, fear is the feeling you have when you want to avoid future pain; in this case, a pain that doesn't exist.

You can view practically every other event that people find fearful, follow it through from beginning to end, and find the same lack of real pain.

5. **You can handle the situations that you fear.**

How can you be sure that you can handle situations that you fear? There is one place where you can immediately look that will assure you that you can handle them. That place is in your past experience. Throughout your life, you have handled numerous situations that at first seem scary. But after completing them, you found that you remained safe and okay. Why would this currently feared situation be any different? It rarely is.

6. **The only way to overcome your fears is by facing them.**
We could talk about all of the reasons why you feel fear. We could discuss how your learned responses have caused you to feel afraid. But until you actually step through that border of your comfort zone, you will never rid yourself of your fears.

As Shakespeare once observed, “A coward dies a thousand deaths, a hero only one.”

Why does it happen this way? Because the coward’s fear prevents him from truly living. This thought of fear repeats itself and as a result, he doesn’t expand, he remains in the same place, in his comfort zone.

The hero moves through his fear to get what he seeks. He expands. He doesn’t think about it much. He simply moves in the direction of his goal, into the discomfort zone, and finds that nothing is as painful as he thought it would be.

In class, I ask the students to think of something that they fear. Not something that will barely edge them just outside their comfort zones, but something that they know will move them way “out there.”

I ask them to select something that they feel they ought to do, something that would add real value to their lives, but they haven’t done because of their fear.

Next, I ask them to use the next two weeks and actually take the steps that will move them through that experience or event they feared doing. They are to move well outside their comfort zone and do whatever it is they feared to do.

I am always amazed, at the conclusion of this assignment, at the breakthroughs as well as the insights of the students who choose to “go for it.” Common phrases I hear sound like these:

- “I can’t believe I was afraid of something so silly.”
- “I feel so alive and free since I did that.”
- “It’s like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders.”
- “What a relief to know that I can do something that I never thought I could, or never tried because of my fear.”

There is a tremendous internal power that accompanies breaking through your fears. Once you recognize the true nature of fear, you start to sense that there is so much more you can "go for" in life. You realize your lack of growth has little to do with the external circumstances in your environment.

On one occasion, I was eating dinner at a restaurant with two of my kids. After a while, my young daughter told me that she was quite thirsty and wanted another
drink of water. I told her to ask the server to bring her a drink of water. Her face went sour and her eyes lowered. I could tell she didn’t want to. She was afraid of asking, but she really had no idea why she was even afraid.

Similarly, others see something that they want, but their thoughts of potentially painful outcomes prevent them from pursuing it. As in the case of my daughter, most of the things that we fear are based on empty ideas about what might happen to us, but usually don't. There was no threat. There would be no future pain in asking for a glass of water.

It is the same with most of the things that we fear; the only pain that we will experience is the pain and discomfort that we create in our own minds.

The final part of this class assignment involves inviting the students to find another fear and tackle that one as well. There is tremendous power in momentum. If you settle for one little victory, you stop the growth that you have started and go back to feeling safe in your comfort zone. The best thing you can do, to continue your progress, is venture out and pay another visit into your discomfort zone. Bit by bit, you discover how unreal fear really is.

**Stress Prevention Activity – Breaking through your Fears**

Think of something that you are quite nervous or fearful of doing. Not just something with a tiny bit of fear, but that big one you know should be done, but you have been avoiding for quite a while because your fears of what might or might not happen are stopping you. It is something that is definitely outside of your comfort zones.

Break through your fear and take a risk. Do that thing that you have feared. Don't just go through the motions, do the whole thing. If it doesn't cause you to leave your comfort zone, that wasn’t the thing you fear. Decide on something that causes you to want to back off just from the thought of it.

Begin this activity by describing (below) the thing you fear doing. Relate your thoughts and feelings about why it seems to be fearful for you.

After you have completed the activity describe your experience from beginning to end of going for it and doing the thing you really feared. Also, describe any insights you gained about that particular fear and your thoughts about it. Describe any insights you have gained about your own fears in general.

**Examples of some common fears to get you thinking about what you might do:**

- Ask somebody out on a date
- Quit a job
- Confront someone
Forgive someone
Interview for a job
Speak in a public meeting
Go rock climbing (fear of heights)
Change majors
Mend a broken relationship
tell someone who you have avoided that you love him or her
Visit someone you don't know very well and get to know him or her better

You may have already done something previously that you felt was fearful. That's great! For this activity do something else.

Breaking through fears and taking risks is like a muscle. The more you do it, the easier doing fearful things will be for you in the future, and the less stressful they will seem. When you are no longer stopped by your fears, you have gained a huge upper hand on stress. Get hooked on this idea and there is no limit to what you can become and attain! So go for it

Write Your Fear.

Describe your experience of risking, of doing the thing you feared. What did you do?

Describe your insights about your fear and about going for it.
Worry

The dominant thought that precedes the emotion of worry is that things are going to get uncomfortable down the road. It is a lot like fear only it has more to do with situations you don’t have as much control over. You can use the ideas that I related to you in the fear section and apply them the same way.

Here are some helpful ideas to consider when you feel the urge to worry:

1. Most things you worry about are out of your control.

If something is out of your control, it is out of your control. Worrying won’t change that. People tend to waste a lot of present-moment energy that could be used for more beneficial or enjoyable purposes with the energy they spend worrying.

2. Worry is not the same as caring.

This seems to be an especially difficult concept for women. Mothers especially tend to feel that if they love their children, they should worry about them. But there is a difference between worry and love.

Worry means you are focusing on an unpleasant future outcome, which may or may not occur. Worry does not have any constructive outcomes. It does not give you more control. It distracts you from enjoying the present moment with your children. Then there is the relationship with your children who might interpret your worry to mean that you do not trust them. And, it does not teach your children good emotional coping skills.

3. Worry is not the same as planning.

Worry is not the same as planning unless you are planning to have painful, negative outcomes. Planning is defined as bringing future moments into the present so appropriate control can be applied. Worrying involves sending the mind into the future and imagining bad, painful, or unpleasant outcomes in that future moment. Planning increases control over future events, thus reducing the possibility of negative outcomes. Worry does not.

4. Most of the things people worry about never happen.

Think about all the things you’ve worried about and then ask yourself how many of them actually happened. Usually, the results or outcomes turned out to be far different than the way you worried about them.

5. Worry is a habit.
Some people are so used to worrying, that they don’t know how not to worry. Worrying is a way of life for them, it is just something they do. These people are trapped. Many have no idea that there are other, much better ways to show your love and concern for others.

Some people actually become worriers because they like the attention that they get, for worrying about so many people and things. The bottom line though is that worrying does not solve problems. It keeps people from using their energy in productive and creative ways. And, it continues to hold people in a chronically stressed state.

What to do when you feel the urge to worry.

Try moving your worries from your mind to paper.

Writing down what worries you can release feelings and give you perspective.

Practice mindfulness.

Worry consists of future, fear-filled thoughts. Mindfulness keeps your thoughts in the present moment (refer to the Mindfulness Workbook).

Talk about what worries you.

You can talk to yourself, or to another person. If you talk to another person, ask them to just be a sounding board. You probably don’t want advice, or for someone to judge you and your irrational fears, so ask the person to be aware of that and to just listen to you. Just talking about your feelings can release emotions, and help you feel a lot better.

Stop the stress response.

We have referred to this before—how to prevent activation of the stress response—and it applies perfectly to worry. In any situation when you are worrying about something, you can ask yourself these questions:

What is the threat?
Is it real?
Can I handle it?
Can I do something about it right now?
If not, can I think about it differently?

By accurately answering these questions, you can eliminate habitual worrying completely. When you eliminate worry, you will have figured out another powerful way to prevent stress!
Work WITH Your Subconscious Mind

The following story happened many years ago. I still remember it as if it had happened yesterday. The impact it had on me was profound back then, and it continues to be one of those amazing phenomena regarding humans that I think we are only beginning to understand.

One very interesting day in high school our teacher Mr. Ward told us he was familiar with hypnosis, so we asked him to show us how it worked. Previously, he had hypnotized a couple of the girls in the class, Paulina and Judy. He informed us that they could “go under” simply when he called their name, counted to three, and then snapped his fingers. We didn’t believe this for a moment, but we played along.

Before his demonstration, Mr. Ward asked who the strongest boy in the class was. Rick, who played football, was clearly the strongest of us all. Mr. Ward then set up two chairs about four feet apart. He asked Rick to suspend himself between the chairs with his upper shoulders, head, and neck on the seat of one of the chairs and his ankles and feet on the seat of the other. His body, from his upper back down to his calves, was to remain suspended. Mr. Ward asked Rick to remain in that position for as long as possible without buckling or bending at the waist.

Within a few seconds, Rick’s body started to shake, especially his stomach muscles. We were timing him, cheering him on. He lasted about fifteen seconds until he could no longer hold that position. Those fifteen seconds seemed like a long time to Rick.

Mr. Ward then approached Paulina and said, “Paulina, one, two, three” and then he snapped his fingers. Immediately, Paulina collapsed to the floor like a rag doll. Mr. Ward asked Paulina if she could hear him and if she was okay (her eyes were closed as if she was asleep). She said she was fine. Fascinated, we watched but we were pretty sure she was faking it. He then suggested to her that the next time he counted to three and snapped his fingers, her body would become stiff like a steel beam used in construction. He mentioned to her that it would be impossible for her body to bend. He said this to her a couple more times and asked her if she understood. Still, with her eyes closed, she said, "yes." Mr. Ward then counted to three and snapped his fingers. We watched as Paulina began to straighten out her body on the floor. Mr. Ward asked a couple guys in the class to pick her up and place her between the chairs, in the same position Rick tried earlier, supported only by her feet on one chair seat and her upper shoulders, neck, and head on the other.

Paulina was probably the smallest girl in the class. She had never lifted any weights, nor had she ever considered doing exercises to strengthen her abdominal muscles. We watched in absolute astonished amazement as Paulina remained in this suspended position for nearly a minute without bending. I couldn’t believe my eyes. This was superhuman what she was doing. There was no way she could fake this. This hour of a class had been one of the most memorable experiences of my young life. I should probably add that Paulina’s muscles were very sore the next few days.
A few years later, I saw a similar demonstration on television where a man was hypnotized and suspended between the chairs. Only this time, another person jumped up and down on his stomach. The suspended man didn’t bend or buckle even a bit.

Something out of the ordinary happens in the mind during hypnosis that makes someone suddenly able to do extraordinary things. The following is a simplified summary of how the mind works during hypnosis, why it is so powerful, and what this has to do with preventing stress.

Two Parts of the Human Mind

Consider the mind as having two parts: The conscious mind and the subconscious mind (we could also call our subconscious mind our unconscious mind, our non-conscious mind, our inner intelligence, and many other names).

The Conscious/Subconscious Relationship

It has been said that less than 5% of our daily activities are done on a conscious level. We function subconsciously for over 95% of the things that we do each day.

Essentially, we are program-running automatons for most of our daily activities.

In a way, this is a very good thing.

Imagine how awful it would be if you had to learn how to tie your shoes every time you wanted to put them on, or each time you drove your car, you had to consciously create muscle tension in just the right ways, throughout each part of your upper and lower legs and feet so you apply just the right amount of pressure to the gas to speed up, or the brake to slow down.

Conditioning

We call this unconscious programmed behavior, which we’ve learned mostly from previous experiences, conditioning. We’ve conditioned an incredible number of learned behaviors. In many respects, we’re glad that we have learned—or been conditioned—to do so many things on autopilot.

Consider This

Think of the last hamburger you ate. As the conscious director of the show, your job is to decide to eat the hamburger.

After that, everything happens subconsciously. Your subconscious mind does everything else.
You put the food into your mouth. But you don’t need to think about how to grab the burger, how to flex and relax the muscles in your arm, or in your mouth in just the right way so the food ends up inside there. You begin chewing, without needing to consciously make that happen. As you continue working on the food, you apply just the right amount of saliva.

The tongue moves the food around so that it gets in between the teeth and then in just the right way sends the barely broken up food down the esophagus where peristalsis continues to move it down to the stomach. You don’t have to consciously think about any of that.

Nor do you have to think about how the protein from the hamburger is going to end up being a part of your right thigh. Your subconscious mind takes care of each of those steps, too.

It’s pretty amazing when you think about all the things that happen within you without you being in conscious control of it:

Our bodies can digest food, kill pathogens inside of us, make a baby, listen to music and recall how the next note will sound before it does, scratch an itch, and repair the cut you made on your arm when you fell doing yard work last week. Organs like the kidneys, liver, heart, and all the other tissues in the body have cells that are constantly being born, living and dying.

All this happens while you ride your bike on a mountain trail keeping balance, dodging rocks, not needing to know which muscles to move, and how much to push the pedals to go faster, or which muscles to apply to the bike’s brake system so you slow down to avoid running into the tree. All of this happens while you are unconsciously aware of gravity, speed, wind resistance, daylight, and the shadows that might hide some loose rocks along the trail.

These and a thousand more physiological bits of activity all happen simultaneously, and usually flawlessly because your subconscious mind is really the part of you that unconsciously makes it all work.

Your conscious awareness is the director; the subconscious mind is the rest of the show.

The interplay between the conscious and the subconscious mind is an extraordinarily powerful and miraculous process.

If we liken our mind to an old coal-powered steam engine:

- The conscious mind is like the engineer who sits in the front of the train. His job is to guide the train wherever it needs to go. He sees a hill coming up and decides that the train will need more power. He sees a sharp curve coming up and determines that he needs to slow down so the train can negotiate the turn safely. The conscious mind
takes in data, analyzes it, and makes decisions.

- The subconscious mind is like the person in the back who shovels the coal into the fire. He follows the directions from the engineer and does exactly as he is told. The engineer picks up the phone and says, “We need more power!” The coal guy (also known as the stoker) simply says, “Oh, okay.” He then dumps some more coal into the fire. He doesn’t question the command. He doesn’t consider the consequences. He doesn’t even see what’s coming up ahead. He just does precisely what he is told to do. He only knows to perform his tasks exactly according to instructions without question, without a doubt. Such is the subconscious mind; it follows instructions without question and functions to create whatever the conscious mind directs.

The Conscious and Subconscious Mind

The subconscious part of the mind is subject to the directions given to it from the conscious mind. Whatever the conscious mind believes, thinks, directs, and focuses on is what the subconscious mind will work on to make happen. The conscious mind activates the dominant thoughts of doubts, fears, reservations, and considerations for what we feel we
can or can’t do. The subconscious mind simply believes what it is told and goes to work to create that reality.

For example, when we say to ourselves that we can’t learn math or that we are shy or that we can’t quit smoking, or that we have dominant thoughts about any other belief or limitation, our subconscious mind says, “Oh, okay. I will create shyness.” “I will make him bad at math.” “I will make it really hard to give up his addiction.” It just puts the coal in the fire, exactly as it was instructed.

The following table shows the differences between the conscious and the subconscious mind:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conscious Mind</th>
<th>Subconscious Mind</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The programmer</td>
<td>The program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captain of the ship</td>
<td>The crew of the ship – below the deck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmer</td>
<td>Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter</td>
<td>Hunting Dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineer</td>
<td>Stoker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes value judgments, analyses</td>
<td>Implements orders, doesn’t question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senses good/bad, right/wrong, appropriate/inappropriate</td>
<td>Unable to judge good/bad, right/wrong, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does not possess a prominent moral value system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makes no value judgments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Impersonal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possesses a prominent value system</td>
<td>Does not override conscious thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes decisions and selects destinations</td>
<td>Subject to “conscious” control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Does not initiate pursuits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processes 40 bits of environmental stimuli per second</td>
<td>Processes about 40 million bits of stimuli per second</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can think forward and backward in time</td>
<td>The focus is only on now – this moment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Provides less than 5% of our daily conscious activity | Directs 95-99% of our daily behaviors. Holds the memory and emotional impact of everything we have thought, felt and experienced through our entire life

Initiates “beliefs” | Stores “beliefs”

The Conscious and Subconscious Mind During Hypnosis

When a person is hypnotized, an interesting thing happens with the conscious mind. Usually, the person who is hypnotized goes into a slightly altered mental state, usually more relaxed, where he or she is “more suggestible.” What this means is the conscious mind sort of moves off to the side for a little while and the hypnotist talks directly to the subconscious mind.

Without the conscious mind filtering the information, the subconscious mind doesn’t know any limitations, so it does exactly as it is told. This is why hypnosis works as powerfully as it does.

What does all this have to do with preventing stress?
Putting your subconscious mind to work

If you’re like most people, it might seem like your conscious mind is like a hive of honeybees, thoughts coming and going without much direction or destination. If you’ve ever stopped to watch your thoughts as they happen, you know what I mean. It’s difficult to keep your mind focused.

Gaining some degree of control over your thinking is imperative, but it doesn’t mean you have to corral all of the bees buzzing all over the place.

It just means being conscious of your thinking and doing a few simple things that help you maintain a few specific dominant thoughts in front of all the others.

Give your Upgraded Thoughts to your Subconscious Mind. Remember, the subconscious mind is like the computer that just runs the programs it’s been given. Over 95% of your behavior comes from these continuously running programs.

The subconscious mind doesn’t question the validity or the appropriateness of a new program that it is given from the conscious mind. It just does what it’s told. So let’s give it something really worthwhile to do.

If you want to see your upgraded thoughts become your reality more quickly and with less effort, consciously turn them over to the subconscious mind and let it help you bring them about. I want to share with you three powerful ways to make that happen for you.

Self-Talk

There are several ways to give your subconscious mind a new program. The first way is by zeroing in on your self-talk.

Reflective Questions: Take a moment and just listen to the constant flow of thoughts that pass through your mind. Don’t try to change or modify them. Just passively observe them.

What do you notice about this never-ending stream of mental chatter? Write your answer in the space provided.

Probably included in this stream are images, judgments, evaluations, hopes, worries, concerns, doubts, daydreams, and a host of other types of thoughts. It can be quite overwhelming, as we watch our thoughts, to recognize all the different things that seem to magically “pop” into and out of our minds.
Remember this:
Your consistent dominant thoughts become your reality.

How does this happen?

Your consistent dominant thoughts seep into your subconscious mind as a pattern for the subconscious to work with. You’ve given your subconscious mind something to do. Being the faithful servant that it is, it goes to work.

You can break down your consistent dominant thoughts about yourself—your self-talk—into two categories: effective and ineffective self-talk.

Ineffective self-talk

*Ineffective self-talk consists of words that tend to create more stressful feelings.* These are words you might commonly say to yourself like “I can’t” “I won’t” “I shouldn't” “I need to” “I ought to” “I hope to” “I wish” “I probably could” and other similar sounding phrases.

The reason these are ineffective is that they do not create the belief within you that something is possible, doable, or achievable. Using these words, as you think about attempting something, leaves you stuck—not very convincing; not very empowering.

This reminds me of the times when I ride my bike and I’m facing a really steep and long uphill ride. I find that if I say to myself that I *can* do this hill all the way to the top without stopping to rest, I usually do. But if I say to myself anything that sounds like, “It’s not happening today. I’ll never make it up there.” Sure enough, I don’t make it to the top without stopping and resting on the way.

The other reason these are ineffective is that your subconscious mind always listens to these things you say to yourself, especially if they are filled with emotion, and knows only to act according to this programming coming in from the conscious mind.

When it hears ineffective terms, such as I’m not very smart, I’m not capable, I’m not confident, and similar statements, it goes to work creating that reality for you, in the direction of things you really don’t want.

Some have said, “You are what you eat.” I say, “You are what you think.”

If you have self-talk that says you’re shy, that’s what you’ll become, because your subconscious mind will create that reality for you as you program it through your consistent, dominant self-talk.

In Proverbs, we read, “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.”
Effective self-talk

Effective self-talk, on the other hand, uses words that move you positively in the direction of those things you do want. Effective self-talk includes positive affirming words such as “I am” “I can” “I do” “I will” “I intend to,” “I plan to” “It is happening” “I’m on it.”

Again, when you consistently say to yourself, “I am a healthy, fit person,” your subconscious mind goes to work creating that reality. It doesn’t question if that’s a true statement or not. The subconscious works the same, in both positive and negative ways.

This reminds me of the time when I ran the St. George Marathon. I was feeling so good after the first half of the race that I took off and ran too fast for several miles. After that, I was dead. The only thing that kept me going was my positive self-talk. I kept telling myself, “Come on Mike, you can do this. You can keep going. You can finish.” I kept saying words like, “My legs are strong,” “I CAN do this.” “I am powerful.” During the last couple of miles, people watching the race added to my confidence. They were cheering me on, telling me I looked great and that I could do it. Sure enough, this increased my energy, and I finished just fine.

Reflective Questions: As you go through your day, become more conscious of your thoughts. What negative thoughts would you like to replace? Do you need to say the command “Stop” to interrupt the negative thoughts looping in your head? What thoughts will be best to replace the negative ones? As you replace your mental conversations with effective self-talk, what happens?

Write your responses in the space provided.

Affirmations

A related way of positively rewriting the programs in your subconscious mind is using specific, directed affirmations, also known as suggestions.

The word affirmation means to make firm. An affirmation is any statement or assertion that you believe is true about you.
When a person says, “I’m fat,” she is stating a belief about how she is. The more frequently the statement of belief is applied, the more likely it is that the message will make it through to the subconscious mind.

The more this happens, the more the subconscious mind will believe you’re serious about it and begin to produce conforming results.

It will create the desire to eat unhealthy food, in unhealthy quantities, and at inappropriate times of the day, such as late at night.

The subconscious mind doesn’t analyze whether or not being fat is an unhealthy state, or if it is good or bad. It creates what it is told to create. Unknowingly, she tells the subconscious mind to carry out an order and that’s what it does. The person may feel as if she has little control over the situation, but it is she who gives the subconscious mind the orders.

I love to ask my students how many of them think that they are bad at math. About two-thirds of them usually raise their hands. The repeated affirmation, “I’m bad at math,” successfully yields the results of being bad at math. However, nobody is born with “bad at math” genes. Believe it or not, you have the innate ability to learn math just as much as you can learn anything else.

Other examples of negative affirmations are those where people judge some aspect of their skills or character. They’ll say something like, “I’m . . .” followed by a perceived inadequacy. “I am a terrible business person.” “I’m incapable of keeping good relationships.” “I am the worst cook.” “I’m a horrible artist” or “I’m worthless.”

Fortunately, you can reverse these outcomes with positive affirmations. You change the affirmation to, “I’m slender and fit.” “I’m athletically inclined and capable of learning any sport.” “I have a great relationship with many people.” “I am a skilled business person. “I have tremendous value and worth.”

If we were able to get into the minds of those who are successful in any respective endeavor, we would find that they have very positive affirmations surrounding the behavior or activity. The affirmations are so confidently applied that there is no question, for the subconscious mind, but to go to work to bring about the successful behavior. They know they will be successful and their self-talk reflects only that possible outcome.

You may disagree, arguing that the positive affirmations simply aren’t true for you. It may seem like they aren’t, especially when you are just starting the process. It does require a bit of trust at first. As you keep at it, you’ll soon find that your subconscious mind really is working for you to help you with the results you’d like to see.
Creating Affirmations

There are some things you should keep in mind when you create and apply your affirmations:

Create your affirmations as “I” statements.

Affirmations should be in the first-person perspective. Rather than saying, “People who are balanced remain calm,” create your affirmation this way: “I am balanced and calm.

Another example: “You relax when you do things that turn off the stress response.” A better affirmation would sound like this: “I feel relaxed and peaceful.” Can you see the difference?

When you program your subconscious mind with affirmations that don't relate specifically to you, it won't think they have to do anything with you. Using the term “I” gives your subconscious specific directions that the statement meant is for you.

Affirmations or suggestions should be positive statements.

Instead of saying, “I am not stressed and uptight,” you should say, “I am serene and tranquil.” This is because the subconscious mind doesn’t as easily recognize words like “not” or “don’t.”

If you say, “I’m not stressed,” the subconscious mind mainly focuses on the words “I’m” and “stressed.” It recognizes what you consciously focus on, and when you say I’m not stressed, you’re still focusing on “stressed.” Therefore, it is always better to state your affirmations in a positive way, the better outcome that you desire.

Instead of “I’m not anxious when I present this speech.” It is better to say, “When I give this speech, I am composed and confident.”

Affirmations should be spoken in the present tense.

These statements should be spoken in the present tense. These statements should be spoken as if the desired outcome is already happening.

Instead of saying, “I will be still and peaceful,” it is better to say, “I am still and peaceful.” Again, the subconscious mind believes whatever you tell it. If you project your desire into the future, your subconscious mind will respond accordingly. It will say, “I will make her peaceful sometime in her future, but not necessarily right now.”

Trust your subconscious to complete the task that you give to it.
Speak to it assertively. Rather than saying, “I sure wish I could be relaxed and calm,” say, “I am calm, peaceful, and relaxed.” Be confident in your affirming. The positive emotion that you include with your statement helps it become more fixed in your subconscious mind.

Use affirmations in a variety of times during the day.

The more you use affirmations and the more ways you use affirmations, the more likely they will get through to your subconscious.

One of the best times to use affirmations is when you fall asleep at night. Your high-quality affirmation is a much better dominant thought to replay over and over, as you fall asleep, than the things that did or didn't happen today and those bad things that you're worrying might happen tomorrow.

Repeat your affirmations during stressful moments.

During tense times, use full deep inhalations and as you easily exhale, speak your affirmation confidently to your subconscious mind.

Here are a few examples of affirmations for you to consider as you construct your own:

- I am calm.
- I accomplish my tasks easily and effortlessly.
- I am happy and alert.
- I am confident in my ability to reach my goals.
- I can do anything I decide to do.
- I am at peace.

The more often you repeat affirmations, the more potent they become.

Visualization and Mental Rehearsal

A third powerful method for replacing your old, worn out subconscious programming is with a very fun and interesting method called Mental Imagery or Visualization.

“See it. Imagine it. It’s the same to your brain.”

This is the title of a news story that highlighted recent research out of MIT. The essence of the study was that whether you successfully perform an activity or task in your physical life, or if you simply imagine performing it successfully, your mind and body tend to believe that it has actually happened. Either way, you program yourself for future success regarding that activity.

Several good things happen when you successfully perform a task.
First, the activity becomes familiar to you, and you are more likely to feel comfortable with the behavior at a future time.

Second, your ability to perform that task in the future increases simply because of the repetition of it.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said:

“That which we persist in doing becomes easier, not that the task itself has become easier, but that our ability to perform it has improved.”

You simply get better at those things that you do successfully.

Third, by doing something successfully, with repetition, you tend to grow in your confidence toward that behavior, and other similar behaviors. The more confident you feel about anything, the better you will perform it. The more confidence you have, the less stress you’ll feel.

So, if you consider the MIT research, and mountains of other studies looking at mental rehearsal, it follows that whether you do it for real, or just in your imagination, your subconscious mind thinks you are actually doing it.

How It’s Done

When you practice mental rehearsal, you simply imagine things as you would like them to be. You create a mental movie as clearly as you can, using as many of your senses as possible, successfully doing the activity or way of being.

Try This

- Close your eyes and imagine a very large white screen hanging on a wall in front of you. Give it a feel similar to a screen in a movie theater. Imagine this screen has a gold trim surrounding it and it glows when you put your attention on it.

- Watch yourself on this screen and see yourself with perfect peace and serenity, or performing some type of activity that goes with your mission or your purpose. See it happen perfectly from beginning to end. See yourself enjoying the feeling that goes with performing perfectly. Sense your confidence growing as you successfully
complete your performance from beginning to end.

- Add more sensory data to the mental movie. Notice the sounds, the air temperature, and environmental conditions; make the movie as lifelike, as close to the real thing in your mind, as possible.

- Let the movie replay itself over and over. Each time, see the desired end result happen perfectly, flawlessly, and effortlessly. Enjoy watching yourself succeed.

Some people say that they have a hard time visualizing. This is not uncommon. Mental rehearsal is another muscle that can be developed. If you haven’t used it very much, it’s likely to be fairly weak.

One way to familiarize yourself with your mental screen is to begin by imagining something simple that’s easy to remember.

- Imagine a familiar place such as in your bedroom or in front of your home. Tune in to the detail of the place. Visualize everything that is familiar to you such as the familiar sights, sounds, smells, and the general feeling of it.

- Once you have a good sense of this familiar visualization, put yourself into the movie. It becomes your 3-D Magic Theater.

- See yourself moving around there, doing things that you would normally do. Feel yourself in the place. Enjoy the virtual feeling of being in this place.

- Don’t try too hard to make the scenes appear on your mental screen. It seems to be the case that the harder you try to make the mental movies, the more difficult it becomes.

- Effortlessly allow the video of yourself to happen, enjoying fully the successful performance, as perfectly as you can view it. But keep it fun, enjoyable, and relaxing.

The best time to program your mind through mental rehearsal is just prior to falling asleep at night.

- As you lie in your bed, gently begin to relax (if you need help relaxing, use any of the relaxation exercises described in the Stress Reduction Workbook).

Once you feel yourself becoming more peaceful and sleepy, create your mental screen and start the film playing in your mind.
In this relaxed state, see perfect performance happen with ease. Enjoy the feeling of success and joy as you perform flawlessly. See yourself feeling peaceful, happy, calm, and relaxed.

After you have viewed yourself several times and feel successful in every way, allow yourself to nod off to sleep.

While you are sleeping, your subconscious mind will go to work creating this outcome in your reality.

Stress Prevention Activity - Putting it all together

Affirmations
1. Choose one major goal or purpose for each of the following areas: your spiritual life, your physical life, your intellectual life, your emotional life and your social life. Write them in the space provided on the following page.

2. Create affirmations for each area for how it would look if you were living it perfectly. Use the ideas outlined previously for examples to follow. Make your statement sound as if you were already experiencing it perfectly.

Be sure that your declarative statements following these suggestions:

• First person
• Present tense
• Positively stated

Examples of appropriate affirmative statements might sound something like this: “I am a peaceful, happy and confident person. I approach each moment with calmness and serenity. I enjoy a constant state of inner peace and joy.”
Write your goals and your statements in the space provided.

Spiritual Goal
Positive Statement(s)

Physical Goal
Positive Statement(s)

Intellectual Goal
Positive Statement(s)

Emotional Goal
Positive Statement(s)

Social Goal
Positive Statement(s)

Repeat these statements to yourself at various times each day.
Visualizations
1. Create in your mind a clear picture of yourself living the way you have described for each goal. Imagine what it would feel like if you were already living your affirmation and see it happen as clearly as possible.

2. Take time to visualize these images several times each day, and especially right before you go to sleep. When you do this right before you fall asleep at night, the window to your subconscious mind opens wide and the image moves through to the subconscious. This new program becomes a script that your subconscious mind now runs to replace the old one.

3. In the next few days, notice any changes that have happened, as a result of your creative imageries. Notice what is different about things that may relate to the activity you imagined, either inside or outside of you. Write down those things you have observed in the space provided.
From Unmotivated to Inspired

*It is better to conquer yourself than to win a thousand battles. Then the victory is yours. It cannot be taken from you, not by angels or by demons, heaven or hell.* – Buddha

The paradigm of the unmotivated sounds like this:

I’m totally unmotivated. The constant stress, the pressure, the burnout, and the strains at home and work—I just can’t deal with it all. What’s it all for?

The paradigm of the inspired sounds like this:

I’ve got something really worthwhile to work on. The things I do today have value and meaning. I know the contribution I want to make. I can visualize the legacy I want to leave. I’m doing what I do for a purpose.

*Most stressed-out people have no sense of mission.* They have trouble getting up in the morning because they’re not motivated by what they’re going to do that day. They have no inspiring end in mind, or if they once had it, they’ve lost sight of it in the day-to-day grind.

Purpose and Passion

Do you love Monday mornings or hate them?

If you hate them, you are probably not living with real purpose, and when that happens, you’re probably going to be lacking passion. That’s stressful.

You can change that. We are going to spend some time getting clear on your vision, on your primary purpose(s) in life. We are going to help you discover your mission—to begin with the end in mind, and then start aligning your activities with your purpose.

Imagine this: You are a player on a basketball team (or any other sport). Think, for a moment, about why you might be playing on this team. If you’re like most people, you probably have several reasons for playing: to win, to develop skills, to experience being on a team, to learn the game, to discipline yourself, to get in shape, to enjoy working with others toward a common goal, or maybe just to enjoy the game and play for the sheer fun of it. All of these are positive purposes for playing the game.

Now think of how the game would be for you if you didn’t really have any purpose for playing. You just played, but you didn’t really consider why.
It sounds kind of pointless when you think about it. Why play the game if you don't have a purpose?

It’s like the archer who doesn't have a target. He is pretty much left to shoot in any direction not knowing where it will end up. But the instant he puts up a target and zeros in on the center—has a meaning behind his actions—the likelihood that he hits the center, a precise location, skyrockets.

With that in mind, I’d like you to pretend that your entire life from beginning to end is a game. It’s a big game. It’s an important game.

But what if you don’t have a target? If you don't have something that motivates you, if you don’t have a reason for doing what you do, if you don’t know your purpose, you are going to lack passion. You become uninspired, unmotivated, and unsuccessful; stress is a natural byproduct. How can you become more inspired, passionate, motivated, and successful in your game of life?

There are a few useful ways to find out your purpose for living. Probably the best is simply by asking yourself questions that reach deep into your most thoughtful parts and get to the heart of the matter. They penetrate your soul.

Here are some of those questions to help you discover the meaning and purposes of your life:

- What do I want out of the game?
- What would be the best way to have the game turn out?
- How do I want most of my days to look?
- What kind of player would I like others to say that I was, while I played?
- How would things look for me if I win the game?
- What does it mean to win my game of life?
- How do I want to be remembered after I die?
- Considering everything, what is most important to me?
- What do I love more than anything?
- What are my highest priorities and values?
- Why do I feel I am playing this game of life?
- What would I want my favorite people to say about me at my own funeral?

When you answer these questions thoughtfully, you’ll come up with several of your life purposes. If you don’t take the time to go through this first step, you’re much more likely to hit the proverbial midlife crisis. You will have climbed the ladder of success only to discover
it’s leaning against the wrong wall. This discovery process leans your ladder against the right wall.

Reflective Questions: Every successful player has a reason for playing. Your purpose or vision of yourself is yours to discover. Take a few moments to think about what your purpose or vision might be by answering the questions I posed to you above.

As you answered several of the questions, what answers consistently came up for you?

How do you feel about this discovery about yourself?

Improving Your Game

Think again about some of the purposes for playing basketball that I mentioned above: to improve, to win, to develop skills, etc. For each purpose, there are specific skills that you can develop that will increase your chances of arriving at your purpose. Once you figure out what your life is about, you can begin to investigate the skills required in order to see that happen. Let me explain.

There are many ways to work on skills that will lead you in the direction of the purpose(s) you have chosen for your life. Let’s look at a couple potential life purposes and see how this would work.

Let’s say that you feel that having inner peace is an important purpose for playing your game of life; you want to experience inner peace. And you feel that you will arrive at inner peace if you are able to forgive others, and also if you are able to find gratitude and contentment in the activities of your day. Forgiving and feeling grateful are skills or behaviors that you feel will bring inner peace.

The skills of forgiving and being grateful are activities you can practice every day, all day long. You can accept others, free them from perceived past harms, and be grateful for every experience. In so doing, inner peace will be the natural outcome of regularly practicing those skills or behaviors. You will achieve inner peace as a natural consequence.

Another example of a life purpose might be to grow, to expand. You might feel that this would make your life seem worthwhile and valuable if you were continually developing as a person.
In order to experience this purpose, you might begin a learning program that gives you opportunities to discover new information and acquire knowledge. You might find role models who you admire as people who are expanding in their own lives and have discussions with them. You can practice growing and expanding by taking classes, going on expeditions, spending time with people you don’t know very well, or doing anything else that would pull you out of your own comfort zones.

As you do these things, your life purpose of expanding will happen as a natural consequence. You’ll feel fulfilled, inspired, motivated. And you can do this with any life purpose that you feel applies to you. It’s that simple … and powerful.

Consider This

A big reason many people do not love their jobs is that they feel they lack purpose. They believe their jobs are boring, meaningless, or mundane.

By using the skills presented so far in this workbook, is it possible that in every job, you could feel inspired? Can you find more purpose and passion in your line of work?

For example

- Customer Service can be a place where a lot of people get "burned out." Think of the angry customers, the frustration, and the problems. It makes you want to pull your hair out.

What if the Customer Service Agent recognized that she valued intellectual strength and service? Could she upgrade her thoughts to improve her passion in her work? What if she decided in the "Gap" that each new customer was not a problem, but a new challenge? What if she focused on the idea that she has the power to help make people's lives better. Would that bring more purpose to her job? Would it be more motivating to go to work and do her best each day?

- How about someone who values friendship and creativity and is working in a fast food restaurant? He thinks that his job is boring and not fulfilling.

What would happen if he upgraded his thoughts by inserting the following into the “Gap?” “What can I learn from the new people that I will meet today?” “I am grateful that I have made good friends at work and that I have money to pay for my creative hobbies.”

Wouldn’t that change the way that every day unfolds for him?

Just as with your thoughts, you are the one who decides your life's purposes, its meaning. You have the freedom to decide the skills you want to develop in order to fulfill your purpose.
If you take some reflective time to ponder the importance and usefulness of having a purpose and doing things that help arrive at that purpose, you'll find that every day is a good day because the things you do will seem important; they will matter.

And that feels really good.

From Pressures to Priorities

“Live your life each day as you would climb a mountain. An occasional glance toward the summit keeps the goal in mind, but many beautiful scenes are to be observed from each new vantage point. Climb slowly, steadily, enjoying each passing moment; and the view from the summit will serve as a fitting climax for the journey.” —Harold B. Melchart

When I was fourteen years old, I went to California with a group of kids my age, and some of our parents. We went to Santa Monica Beach to see the ocean. None of us had been there before so this was a real treat for us. When we got there, we decided to try bodysurfing. We saw others doing it and it looked fun and much less difficult than regular surfing. Soon, we learned how it was done and found ourselves out in the water preparing for the waves to come our way. We had a blast trying out this new sport that none of us had ever done before.

When a large wave approached, I started swimming as hard as I could, hoping to time it perfectly. I found myself riding the wave in toward the shore. Suddenly, the wave churned and I plunged down, headfirst, into the sand under the water. I hit with a strong force, but I was okay. I gathered myself and came up for air only to have another similarly strong wave pound me again.

Down I went to the ocean floor. I lost all control. The only thought that came to my mind was that I needed to get above the water to get some air. I struggled and finally made it to the surface. Gasping for air, another strong wave knocked me off my feet and sent me quickly back down to the sandy sea floor. This struggle with the sea lasted two more powerful waves.

By this time, my energy was spent. Fortunately, the waves had carried me close enough to the shore where my friends, who saw what was happening, quickly dragged me to safety. I rested for quite some time until I regained sufficient strength to go back out into the ocean.

When people tell me about their days and about how they spend their time, it sounds a lot like my experience that day in the ocean. Wave after wave of stressful events knocks them off their feet. They barely make it up for air when another "wave" hits them. Soon, they wear out, fatigued from the constant daily battle.
The paradigm of the person who lives each day according to the daily grind of too many things to do and not enough time to do them is this:

“Oh, everything is equally important. I have to take care of all of it. And if I don’t do it all successfully, then I’m a failure. There’s just not enough time to do it all!”

It’s a very stressful way of managing our time and our life.

The paradigm of the person who lives by priorities is this:

“Some things are more important than others. I give priority to those things that help me achieve my mission. I first do what I can about those most important things and the things that relate to my mission and purpose.”

This is a much more peaceful, as well as a much more fulfilling way to live each day. Let’s investigate why.

In the many years that I have been teaching stress management, I have observed that one of the most commonly reported causes for a person’s stress is his or her inability to manage time. Many people haven’t figured out how to make time their ally rather than their enemy.

These skills are not commonly taught in schools; many people just don’t know about effective ways to manage their time. They flounder about trying to figure out some system for controlling what to do and when to do things.

Ultimately, they end up with something resembling a “to-do” list. When they don’t complete the items on the list, the resulting feelings are guilt, frustration, and disappointment. To make matters worse, the lists never seems to get any smaller. People just keep adding to the list without the satisfaction of a completed task. When this happens, they start to feel the relentless waves crashing down on them.

What is Time?

To begin, we must admit that time is a most peculiar topic. Our experience tells us that time moves in a specific direction from the past, through the present, and into the future. However, In the Workbook on Mindfulness, I relate to you the idea that:

It is always now—this present moment.

- We only have this moment to live.
- We can’t live in our own future or our past.
- There are no exceptions to this rule.
- This present moment is all we ever get.
Another aspect of time is how fast it moves.

If I look at a clock with a second hand and watch it move around the clock, it seems to go at a precise pace. However, when I take my eyes off the clock, suddenly the speed at which time moves never seems to be constant.

Let's say I am watching a movie with my wife. It is one of those romantic-comedy types— which aren't my favorites. I love being with my wife, but I don't love the movie. It seems to last forever. Time in this instance moves at a much different speed than when I compare it to the times when I'm doing something I really enjoy doing, like playing racquetball or riding my bike.

Another thing that I've noticed about time is that, although it doesn't seem this way:

Most of us have much more spare time than we think we do.

In my stress management class, I give my students the assignment of keeping a time log. In a time log, you keep track of every minute of every day and what you did during that time. The students always return somewhat amazed after completing this assignment.

Before doing this time analysis, they all believed that they live very busy lives and have very little spare time. After this assignment, the students always conclude that they have far more spare time than they thought they did.

They notice that they waste a lot more time than they had previously thought. If you analyze your own time, in the same way, I have a feeling that you will come to the same conclusion.

Stress Prevention Activity – Tallying your Time

I would like you to do this activity in two ways. The first, and less accurate way is to think back to the last three days of your life prior to today. I would like you to account for each 10-minute period, while you were awake, and write down exactly what you did during each of those segments of time, beginning the moment you woke up three days ago to the time you fell asleep last night. Try your best to remember every single thing you did, try to recall exactly how you spent your time. Go ahead and do that in the space below or use a notebook if you prefer.

Day 1
Next, I would like you to carry a notebook with you for the next three days. During that time, as each 10-minute segment of time passes, write down exactly what you did during those 10 minutes. You don’t need to include too much detail. Simply account for the ways that you spend your time during every bit of these three days. Use a timer or some other reminder tool to remind you to make a note about what you did during each 10-minute segment of your days.

When you are finished with the three days, I’d like you to consider a few questions:

- Was it easy or difficult to recall exactly how you spent your time when you were remembering the past three days? Did you have segments of time for which you couldn't account?
- What did you notice about the way you spent your time when you kept track of your day? Did you notice that you used your time in ways that seem useful and productive?
to you, or did you find that you spent a lot of time doing things that, in hindsight, you might consider a waste of your time?

Another characteristic of time is that each of us has the same amount in a day.

Each of us has 168 hours every week. We each get twenty-four hours a day. Yet we frequently hear people saying, "I don't have time for such and such."

What they are really saying is that they have chosen to spend their moments in certain ways, and they have chosen not to spend their time doing all the other possible things that they could do.

Additionally, you always do what you want to do.

You may think that you have to do something, but you don't. Nobody is forcing you to do anything at any time. There are consequences for what you do or decide not to do, and you may not want those consequences, but you always have a choice about what you do.

Early one Saturday morning my older brother called me up and asked me to come to his home to help him clean his garage. He lived about 60 miles away. I had way too many other things that I had to do, so I told him that I couldn't come to help him. I was too busy.

A couple of weeks later he called me again and asked me if I wanted to spend the day riding bikes with him in the mountains. I had no fewer things to do on that day than I did two weeks earlier, but as we talked on the phone, I told him that I would love to go ... which I did. It was a wonderful day that we spent biking in the high mountains of Northern Utah.

While I drove back to my home later that day, I thought about this and it occurred to me that I never have to do anything. I could have just as easily gone over to his house two weeks earlier to help him out (which I feel sad that I didn’t). The point I learned is this: I seem to always do what I want to do.

And so does everyone else.

You may not always like what you do, but you always spend your time the way you choose to spend it.

Nobody is holding a gun to your head demanding that you spend your time doing certain things. Every moment, you choose what you’ll do.

When I mention to my students that they always choose how they spend their time and that they are free to spend their time any way they choose, they become uncomfortable. They are not accustomed to having that much freedom.
I tell them that they don’t have to be in class, they don’t have to go to work, they don’t have to eat lunch at a certain time, and they don’t have to sleep the same hours of the night as nearly everyone else. They really don’t have to do anything.

They always have a choice about what they do with their time—always. We say that we “have to” do something or we “have to” be somewhere, but we don’t. What we do with our time is always our choice.

With these important characteristics of time in mind, here are some useful time management strategies that might help you manage your time better, and thus remove the stress that comes from poor time management.

**Time Management Strategies**

“If you fail to plan, you are planning to fail!” - Benjamin Franklin

First of all, it is very important that you spend some time each night or in the morning planning your upcoming day(s).

The almost worn out maxim still applies: *If you fail to plan then you are planning to fail.* Not many things of great value are ever accomplished without some planning.

Planning helps us avoid consequences that are serious and stressful.

Without planning, our lives feel the way I felt that day at the beach when I was body surfing and continually getting slammed to the ocean floor, wave after wave, almost drowning and completely out of control.

If, however, you plan your days ahead of time, and decide the most important things to do, you can ride the waves, and enjoy them. Planning involves knowing what you want and deciding on the appropriate steps to get it.

Dr. Covey taught the principle of Putting First Things First. The essence of this principle is that in the hustle and bustle of doing many little things, the important things in your life might be at risk. When the important things get left behind, you’re left with empty, anxious feelings.

The quote by Thoreau recognizes this dilemma:

“It is not enough to be busy. So are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?”
Doing everything is not as valuable as doing the most important things.

Big Projects and Small Tasks

For some of us, however, it often feels like we have a very full plate and we can't easily take anything off of it. Everything is important! Some of the items on our plate seem altogether too big by themselves, let alone in combination with everything else we have to do. Does this sound familiar? It's very stressful.

This reminds me of some wise words one of my professors told me when I was beginning my work on my Ph.D. We were contemplating the task of writing a dissertation. This piece of research would include deciding on and developing some directed reviews of relevant literature, deciding on a research project and carrying it out, gathering data, analyzing it, finding results, drawing conclusions, and then writing about it all. This was a project that would end up being about 300 pages with many drafts and revisions until I arrived at a finished product that usually takes most students over a year to complete.

I asked my professor how I should attack such a monumental task. His reply to me was something I remember every time I have a big task in front of me.

He asked me, “How do you go about eating an elephant?” Without missing a beat, he answered his own question, “One bite at a time.”

In other words, divide large projects into a bunch of small, easy to manage tasks!

As I followed his advice and divided this massive undertaking into much smaller, manageable pieces, I was able to not only complete my dissertation but also do it with much less stress.

Reflective Questions: Think of a big project or task that you have coming up. Identify the main purpose or goal you have in achieving it. Answer the following questions in the space provided.

Why is this project important to you?

What is the most essential part of the project?

When do you need to have this project completed?
Now Try This

Thinking about how you answered the previous questions, take the project and divide it up into smaller, very doable pieces. Indicate these smaller pieces in the space provided.

Now, look at the amount of time you have before the project is due. Break the time into segments; hours, days, or weeks, that you have until the project is due. Identify the number of segments you have to complete the project.

Using the space below, arrange the pieces of the project into the time segments. You end up with smaller portions of the project organized into workable time periods.

Prioritize

A necessary component of your planning should include a system that prioritizes which things on your lists are the most important and should be done first. There are varieties of ways you can do this.
First, you want to create a "to do" list. Make sure it is in a clearly accessible location where you can easily refer to it during the day. Be sure to include the portions of important projects you have broken down into smaller segments and items that are significant to your mission, health, and relationships.

- Now simply go through each of the items on your list and number them in order of importance to you and your mission. The most important item that you need to do today gets a “1” written next to it. The second most important item gets a “2” and so on. Now DO the items in the order that you have given them starting at number one. Items that do not get done are moved to another day’s “to do” list.

- Another more efficient way to prioritize a simple to do list is to identify the most important items on the list—those things that absolutely must be worked on today—with the letter A next to them. Things that should be done today, but are not as important get a B next to them. Things that can be done today get a C and so on.

Now go through each group. Look at the items that are in the A group. Identify the very most important item and place a 1 next to it. The second most important item in group A gets a 2 next to it. Number all of the A’s in order of their importance and necessity in getting accomplished today. Then do the same thing with the B and C groups.

Now you can focus on the A items in order of importance. Do item A1 first, and then move to A2. When you are finished with the A group, move to complete the items in the B group in their order of importance and so on. Any items not completed are moved to another day’s “to do” list.

Regardless of the method, it is imperative that you prioritize.

Try This

Create a “to do” list of the important things that you need to do today or tomorrow. Be sure to include the portions of important projects you have broken down into smaller segments and items that are important to your mission, health, and relationships.

Write your list in the space provided.
Now organize the items in order of importance using the ABC method we just talked about. Work on the items according to how you ranked them in their importance.

Follow Through
In addition to the need to plan, manage, and prioritize, is the requirement of following through on your plan.

- The natural inclination, with a “to do” list, is to do the easiest and most enjoyable items first. Most people procrastinate the difficult and unpleasant tasks. Sometimes, these are high priority items that are also very important.

- If you don’t follow through by working on the highest priority items first, then those important items are likely to turn into urgent and dreadful tasks that start to feel more like the ocean waves that increase anxiety and turn on the stress response.

If you prioritize and then follow through on the important items of your “to do” list, the natural results are peace and happiness.

Contentment and satisfaction occur when the things that are most important are done first, and less important things are done last. Chaos, frustration, and anxiety result when you don’t have a plan and you spend your time doing the unimportant things first.

Interruptions and Flexibility
You are probably saying to yourself that this is all well and good, but I am constantly being interrupted from my planned schedule and sometimes those things that come up feel more important to me than the items I put on my list during my planning time.

This leads to the final and very important step to time management. It involves the ability to be flexible when things come up that have still more value than those items that were planned.
How can you tell if the interruptions are more important than what you planned?

They are more important if they lead you in the direction of your goals, values, and high ideals. Sometimes, even though the interruptions seem important, when compared to your mission you find that they are of very little value and should be avoided.

For example, if I am working on my list of prioritized items and a friend calls me up who wants to go to watch a movie or get something to eat, I should weigh the value of this activity against the value of the items already on my list.

Is this activity important in nurturing this friendship? Or is it more about enjoying the movie? Is it more important than completing the items on my list? If not, I should probably forgo the activity.

However, if a family member or a friend is in desperate need of a listening ear and calls for help, and if this interruption is in line with my highly held value of being a good friend, I could forgo the next “to do” item and help the person in need.

Keep in mind that when I make this diversion from my list, there is the real possibility that I might not make it back to my prioritized list today. If spending time with this friend is in accordance with my mission and my highly held values, I would be okay with this. I know I have done the right thing. I can adjust my plan and move forward.

Checking Off the To Do Items

You don’t always finish all the items on your lists, and when you don’t, you shouldn’t feel upset or disappointed because you didn’t. An unfinished list should never produce guilt if you have done your best to remain true to your important priorities and values.

- You should consider what’s left as part of your next day’s planning session. Your goal in planning and prioritizing, and then following through, is to keep working on those things that are most important rather than those things that are least important. That’s all.

Important Things Are Sometimes Fun Things

Finally, your planning lists should not be limited to activities or task that are unpleasant, hard, or very time-consuming.

I always include on my list enjoyable things like working out—biking in the mountains, playing racquetball, jogging with my wife, playing basketball with my kids or friends, meditation, yoga, and many other fun and enjoyable things. I decided, long ago, that having fun and loving my life is very important to me. Because of this value, I plan things in my days that reflect this value.
It’s More Than Just Getting Things Done

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of keeping the most important areas of your life uppermost in your mind, and planning activities into your days that will enhance each of those areas.

- When you align your activities with your mission and purpose, the things you do each day will really matter. You will feel like you are making a difference, and your life will be filled with meaning.

- Perhaps even more satisfying is that once you begin to do this, you’ll start experiencing deep inner peace; a peace that can’t be taken from you because you are in control of what you want to accomplish.

Your time is yours to spend as you choose. If you take control of your time by planning and prioritizing, and then following through, you will find yourself riding the waves, rather than being thrown to the ocean floor.

Try This

Another way to prioritize during your planning session is to identify the things that are most important to accomplish according to your mission and the roles you have in your life.

In your next planning session, either tonight or tomorrow morning, begin by answering these two questions:

1. What’s most important to me in each of these areas of my life?
   - Personal
   - Family
   - Work/Professional
   - Other

2. Based on my answers to question 1, what is one thing I can do in each of these areas that would make a significant positive impact?
   - Personal:
   - Family:
   - Work/Professional:
   - Other:
While you’re planning your day, work these highly valued items your activities.

Then continue organizing the rest of the items on your list. Follow through with the most important items being attended to first, and then the rest of the items in order of their importance.
From Conflict to Cooperation

“No man is an island, entire of itself, every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.” –John Donne

Our relationships are commonly the most precious parts of our lives. Typically in relationships, there are times of great joy and happiness. Other times, there can be great pain and anguish.

Have you known someone who can’t seem to move on after being hurt by someone else?

When this happens, the long-term result is often a struggle with their health or turning to behaviors that make a bigger mess of their well-being. Holding on to the emotional pain, and the imbalance that accompanies it is a hazardous way to spend present moments.

Appropriate Ways to Solve Conflict

There are a lot of great resources on how to solve a conflict. Please continue to learn as much as you can in this area. We only have time to focus on a few of the most powerful tools here, but they are powerful and will provide you with a solid foundation for stress-free relationships with others.

The paradigm of conflict is this:

Life is a battle, and in every battle, there's a winner and a loser. It's a cut-throat existence, and you've got to compete or die.

The paradigm of cooperation is this:

Life is not a battle. Everyone can win. There’s enough for everyone. No one really has to lose in order for me to win.

Win-Win

Most of us learn to base our self-worth on comparisons and competition. We think about succeeding in terms of someone else failing—that is, if I win, you lose; or if you win, I lose. There is only so much pie to go around, and if you get a big piece, there is less for me; it's not fair. I need more pie. I need to keep up or do better than someone else.

The better way to approach all of our relationships is Win-Win. Win-Win isn't about being nice, nor is it a quick-fix technique. It is a character-based attitude for human interaction and conflict resolution.
Win-win sees life as a cooperative arena, not a competitive one. Win-win is a frame of mind and heart that constantly seeks mutual benefit in all human interactions. Win-win means agreements or solutions are mutually beneficial and satisfying. We both get to eat the pie and we both get to enjoy it!

During my bachelor's degree, I took a course on relationships. Each week guest lecturers who were "experts" in their field would speak to us.

I recall one speaker who was talking to us about how to cultivate our favorite relationships. He said to us:

“When you have a conflict with someone, you can either be right, or you can be happy, but you can’t be both.”

When people argue, and their need to be right becomes the most important thing, the relationship suffers, and they stop being happy.

How to Apply Win-Win

If you want to approach your conflicts with a win-win attitude, I suggest adopting three very important character traits:

1. Integrity: A person has integrity when their actions are congruent with what they value. Most people say that some of the most important things in life are the relationships that they have with others.

Refer to your mission statement. What did you say you wanted your life to be about? How do you want to be remembered? Most people do not include that they want to be remembered as always being right. Nearly all mention that they want to be remembered positively in their relationships.

As you answer the following questions, keep in mind that how you answer will help determine if you are acting with integrity in those relationships that are very important to you.

- What is more important, maintaining this relationship, or proving that I am right?
- How do other people see me?
- Do they see me as someone who wants to prove he is right?
- Do they trust me as someone who values the relationship and wants a mutually beneficial solution?
- Are my actions really in line with my mission?
2. Maturity: A mature person not only considers what they want but also expresses courage and consideration for the ideas and feelings of others.

Being open-minded is not a threat to you or to your ideas. It is through experience that we are able to carefully choose what is important and what really isn’t that important. When we know and understand what is really important to us, what we value, we do not need to be afraid of new ideas.

When faced with a conflict, ask yourself these questions:

- Is it worth it to have conflict over this issue?
- Would it be better to let this go and move on?
- Am I really being open-minded and carefully considering the ideas of others?

3. Abundance Mentality: People with an abundance mentality maintain there is a possible, positive and equally beneficial outcome, available for everyone involved. There is no need to compete for resources or satisfaction. One doesn’t have to lose in order for the other to win.

To apply the abundance mentality in your relationships, ask yourself these questions:

- What is it that the other person really wants?
- What is most important to them?
- What are their needs?
- What is it that I really want?
- What is it that is most important to me?
- What are my needs?
- In what ways can we both get our needs met?
- In this situation, can we have a win-win or is no-deal a better option?

Conflict creates negative feelings. Negative feelings often turn on the stress response, which turns our mind from thoughtful, analytical thinking to lizard brain thinking. Lizard brain thinking leads to lizard brain decision-making and is generally worse for relationships. In fact, it often leads to more conflict. We can avoid the added stress of poor lizard brain decision-making by filling the gap with the idea that a win-win solution is possible.

Win-win involves identifying the underlying concerns and needs of the two parties and finding an alternative that meets these needs.

Win-Win means not only avoiding and resolving conflicts, it also avoids activation of the stress response and better outcomes among relationships.
Stress Prevention Activity – Think Win-Win

The process is not always simple, but the concept is. Find out what constitutes a “win” for the other party.

That might mean just asking, or, it could mean heavy research if you’re conducting a business deal. It’s generally a good idea to get as specific as possible in finding out what “win” means for that other person; you might find that you are not very far apart at all.

Think about a possible conflict or a previous conflict you had with another person or group:

- What constituted a win for the other party?
- What were your needs and wants based on your mission and values?
- Did you work to negotiate a Win-Win or No Deal, for a mutually satisfying outcome?

What happened?

Try this for yourself and write your answers in the space provided.

Choose a relationship where you have differences or conflict.

Identify what constitutes a win for the other party.

Identify your needs and wants based on your highly held values.

What would be a win-win for both of you?

What steps do you need to take to make this happen?
From Anxiety to Empathy

*Our need for each other is not an obstacle to overcome, but a virtue to be celebrated.* -- Robert F. Allen

We know how anxiety is related to stress, as discussed in The Science of Stress Workbook. But less understood is how empathy can turn off the stress response.

Empathy and the Stress Response

We know that emotions are the result of certain ways of thinking. Once these emotions develop, especially negative emotions, they need to be released because trapped emotions can cause a lot of tension and stress.

As we have discussed, when the stress-response turns on, sometimes the logical mind disappears and the lizard brain takes over. I don’t know many lizards with deep meaningful relationships. Lizard brains tend to make decisions that in relationships create even more tension, problems, hurt feelings, and stress.

Empathic listening releases trapped emotions, validates people, and creates atmospheres for positive relationships, and far less stress.

The paradigm of anxiety in relationships is this:

I need to intervene, but I might not know what to do. I need to solve this person’s problems. I need to “fix” this person. I need to take control.

The empathy paradigm is this:

I need to understand how this person feels. That’s the best thing I can do right now. I don’t need to fix anything. I don’t need to control. My job is to just listen. Simply understanding and allowing this person to be heard is the most important thing.

The root of most relationship problems is the feeling that “I am not understood.”

In almost every relationship where there is an obvious conflict, you will almost always notice that the people involved are not trying to understand the other people involved. They are more invested in getting across their own point of view, explaining their own problems and concerns.

When you actively try to understand other people, respecting their frame of reference and uniqueness:
• You give them the freedom to say what they really think and feel.
• This affirms them and fosters trust in the relationship.
• It also gives them the chance to release stored up emotional tension in a safe environment.

Most of us have little training on how to listen.

Most people merely listen with the intent to reply. As a result, they do not develop positive connections with others. Empathy fosters relationships and reduces social stress. It is an active listening that helps a person feel understood and validated.

This table shows the two ways that people commonly listen. Listening autobiographically leads to poor communication. Listening empathically leads to great communication:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening Autobiographically</th>
<th>Listening Empathically</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ignoring/pretending to listen</td>
<td>Seeking first to understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating</td>
<td>Listening with your heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordering, directing or threatening</td>
<td>Being respectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving advice, making suggestions or providing solutions</td>
<td>Allowing the speaker to feel what they feel no matter how irrational it might seem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telling people how they should feel; moralizing</td>
<td>Reflecting the speaker’s feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagreeing, judging, criticizing, or blaming</td>
<td>The speaker feels heard, affirmed, acknowledged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shaming, ridiculing, or labeling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting or analyzing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning or probing</td>
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These might seem like well-meaning ways of listening, but they are driven by your own autobiography and your desire to fix the problem for them.

These are the best ways to listen. They let the other person release feelings without fear of judgment and then allow them to resolve their own problems.
Getting to a place where you are listening empathically involves a focus on mindfulness (Refer to the Mindfulness Workbook for details). In order to understand how someone is feeling, you have to be focused on the present moment, here and now.

Autobiographical listening implies that you aren’t present. This type of listening invariably takes your thoughts into your own past and compares that with what is being said to you now. Usually, this frustrates someone who wants to be heard, which commonly results in tension and anxiety.

Four Developmental Steps for Empathic Listening:
There are four steps involved in listening empathically. Mastery of one moves you to the next. Step four combines the first three steps.

Practice with each step until you are comfortable with it, and then move to the next one. Be patient. You probably won’t be very skilled at first. Allow yourself to make mistakes. This type of listening takes practice.

Step One
Mimic the content of the communication: Simply repeat back to the speaker exactly what is said. For example, if someone says: "I like my job, but I don't feel challenged," you would say: "You like your job, but you don’t feel challenged." To mimic, just listen and repeat verbatim what is said.

Be careful here, you don’t want to sound like a callous parrot, so make sure your voice intonation and body language show that you are interested and concerned. The way to do that is to really be interested and concerned. Do this cautiously. You’re just getting warmed up with this step.

Generally what you’ll notice when you listen this way, is that the person speaking will recognize that you are really interested and listening. Hopefully, she will want to continue sharing her feelings with you.

Step Two
Rephrase the content: You put the speaker’s meaning in your own words; this takes more thought on your part. For example, the other person says: "I’m very concerned about my son. I don’t think he is doing as well as he could be doing academically." To rephrase the content, you might respond: "Your worried your son isn’t doing well in school."
Rather than saying what she said verbatim, you say it back to her using different words than she said while making sure you mean the same thing she meant. It's usually best to do this with a much shorter version of what she said. Do not try to read more into it than she said. You're simply opening the gate, giving her psychological freedom to continue speaking.

Step Three

Reflect feeling: Here, you listen and look for the emotion behind the words, observing facial expression, body language, and voice (tone, intensity, volume), etc. For example, if the person says: "I talked with my supervisor about how I could get a raise. I just wanted to know the criteria they use in giving raises, and she got mad and jumped all over me. I can't work for a woman like that!"

Reflecting the emotional content, you might say: "You're upset and angry. You feel like you were misunderstood."

In this step, you’re doing your best to reflect back what the person is feeling. You may not always get it right, but that’s not necessarily a bad thing. When you try to reflect feeling, he is going to really sense that you are in his world, listening, understanding, and being mindful.

Step Four

Rephrase the content AND reflect the feeling: You put both the speaker’s verbal meaning and emotional content in your own words. For example with regard to the last expression, you might say: "It hurts (the emotion) when you get reprimanded for seeking information (the content)." You are not agreeing or disagreeing with the person. You are only attempting to reflect your understanding of what the other person says and feels.

This fourth step is ultimately listening with empathy. You are combining steps 2 and 3. You are responding like an emotional mirror—you’re reflecting back to the person the content and feelings of what he or she is saying. You are not adding anything more to it. A mirror only reflects what is in front of it. This is the case when you listen empathically.

Empathy diffuses emotional energy and helps others get emotional tension “off their chest.” Many stressful interactions filled with defensiveness, guilt, blame, and frustration are often dissolved as both parties begin to trust each other enough to open the doors for more open and honest communication.

Please remember, however, that when you listen with empathy, people are vulnerable as they share personal feelings with you. It is your responsibility to have integrity and honor the privacy and obligation of these communications.

An Example of Empathic Listening
A student in one of my wife’s health courses shared the following story with her in class. We have tried to make it as close to her words to the class as possible.

The day after we learned about empathic listening in class, I was substituting at a local elementary school. Before I went to class, I was warned by almost everyone about a girl who would make my life hell that day. She had a lot of behavior problems and often tried to get attention by doing disruptive things.

When I went to class, I found out they were right. This fifth grader was trouble all day. I tried everything they teach us in our education classes on how to manage these types of students, but nothing worked. I was about to send her to the principal’s office when I thought about what we learned in class. I figured I had nothing to lose.

I got the class working on an assignment and I told her to meet me on the porch of the portable we were in. She came out defensive and ready for whatever I had in store for her.

When we got out there, I had no idea what to do, so we just sat there for quite a while. Finally, I said something like, “It’s frustrating when you don’t really want to be in school.” She just looked at me and didn’t say anything.

We stayed there for a long time and I was beginning to worry about the other kids in the classroom, but I just kept sitting out there with her. Finally, I think she realized I was serious about listening to her. After some small talk, she loosened up and told me that her parents were getting a divorce and it was all fault.

The first thing I wanted to do was to say was that it wasn’t her fault, but I remembered that would squash her trust in me, I was there to listen. So I said something like, “That must be a heavy burden to carry.”

She started to cry and she poured out her heart to me for the next 10 minutes. I tried to keep listening empathically. I guess I was the first person who did not tell her that her feelings were wrong, that she shouldn’t feel the way she did. She told me I was the first person who had really listened to her.

After that, she was the model student. She was happy the rest of the day. She even stayed in from recess to help me clean up the classroom. She was really a wonderful little girl who was going through a really difficult situation and needed someone to validate how she was feeling. I think inside she understood that the divorce wasn’t her fault, but she felt out of control and helpless, and that is just how it came out.
I realized the power that real listening can have. I didn’t have to do anything. As young as she was, she knew the answers; she just needed someone to listen without judging her.

That is how powerful empathic listening can be.

Stress Prevention Activity – Empathic Listening

The next time you are in a conversation with someone about an emotional issue, try exercising empathic listening. (You more than likely won’t be able to exercise empathy during mundane or casual conversations so be practical and patient when trying to use this skill.)

Do not tell the person that you are intentionally listening to practice being empathic. No one wants to be a “project.” Just be naturally and sincerely interested.

For the duration of the conversation, (usually 10 or 15 minutes or longer), simply focus all of your energy on listening for the single purpose of understanding. Do not judge, try to fix anything, or give opinions or stories from your own experience. Just try to understand where the other person is coming from and identify their feelings.

After you have finished, consider the following questions.

- What was the main topic of conversation?
- To what extent did you notice yourself vacillating between listening empathically and listening autobiographically?
- How did the person with whom you were talking respond to you when you listened with empathy?
- How easy or difficult was it for you to listen empathically?
- How did you feel while you were listening empathically, and after you were finished listening empathically?
Do not get discouraged if things do not go as you would like them to. It takes a lot of practice and experience to be really good at empathic listening. But, the rewards are worth it.

**Control**

There is strong evidence to support the idea that as your sense of control increases, your stress decreases. As the sense of control decreases, stress increases. It is likely that each of us has experienced this inverse relationship, and the changes we felt in each situation.

One student who took my class experienced the transformation that comes as his symptoms of stress decreased as his sense of control increased. He wrote me the following:

> I have changed a lot from this class. I had been suffering from depression for about 12 years now. I had an anxiety disorder that took me a couple years to overcome. I did not enjoy or have any desire to live life. I felt completely out of control. For the first time in 12 years, I can say I am happy and enjoy life. My road rage is completely gone now. I used to get headaches at least 3 or 4 times a week. Since the first week of class, I have had one headache that didn't last long. My mother and brother have told me how much happier and better I look countless times. The longest I have been mad is for a few seconds. I used to hold on to that anger for hours and even sometimes days. It took me between 30 minutes to an hour to fall asleep normally. Now it takes 5 minutes at most. I have regained control over my life, and my stress has gone away.

> This I know will be the greatest class I have ever taken...I don't see how it could have done more for me than it already has... I really just wanted to thank you for teaching these things to me. I will never forget what this class has done for me. I just want you to know that you did save my life. Jacob N.

As his sense of control increased, his stressful feelings, and accompanying stress-related symptoms started to go away.

**Understand What You Can and Cannot Control**

**Things You Have No Control Over**

There are some things over which you have no control or influence. A short list of these, as I mentioned previously, includes things such as weather, the stock market, world events, natural disasters, things other people are doing, the way other people feel or think, etc.
Trying to control these events is a waste of your own energy, resources, and present-moment happiness if you get anxious or frustrated about them.

What to Do

The appropriate way to respond to things over which you have no control is by upgrading your thoughts, as we explored earlier in this workbook. That is, respond with observation, allowance, love, forgiveness, acceptance, discovery, and gratitude.

Things You Have Some Control Over

There are two situations that fall under the category "some control." The first are situations where people do not think that they have any control, but in reality, they do. The second situation is where people think they do have control when in reality they do not.

Really Do Have Control

Some situations in life feel like you can’t directly control or influence, but in reality, you can. People who have addictions, for example, fall into this category. An addiction is a deeply held belief that you can’t function normally without a certain something (a chemical, a behavior, a person). In order to feel normal, the addictive element must be in your life. Otherwise, you won’t feel good.

An addiction can be very difficult to break. The person who smokes or is addicted to gambling may feel like it is impossible to function without the addiction. However, as I mentioned before, if one person can overcome it, then it is possible that anyone can overcome it. We see people breaking addictive habits all the time.

We also see many people who find themselves “stuck” in situations or settings where they feel they can’t make much of a change. However, changing one’s thoughts and belief patterns, though it might seem difficult, is what is necessary to break the habitual patterns that cause the feelings of lack of control.

What to Do to Increase your Sense of Control

To increase control in this situation, you must be constantly aware of your thoughts. Upgrade your negative or stressful thoughts as often as necessary. Let go of those thoughts that tend to make you feel out of control. Accept that you are the only one who regulates your own thinking and that what you think determines the emotions and consequences that naturally follow.

Really Do Not Have Control
Another category of control involves situations over which you can’t really apply much control, but you think you can. We commonly see this type of thinking in relationships. Some people do their best to try to manipulate or coerce others, hoping to control or change someone’s behavior. But it is still impossible for anyone to have the final say on how another person thinks, feels, and acts. When we try to control or directly influence people or situations, the resulting feelings are often frustration and anger.

What to Do

Instead, you can upgrade your thoughts: detach, observe, allow, accept, and be grateful. By doing this, you release your need to try to control others. This brings the resulting feelings of happiness and peacefulness. When you feel the need to control and dominate, you can step back and let go, and then watch your stress levels decrease dramatically.

Things You Do Have Control Over

Is there anything in life over which you have total control? The only correct answer relates to yourself: what you think, the emotions you feel, and how you behave. Nothing else falls into this category.

As Winnie the Pooh once described, these are the “Me Things.” You may not always take control of how you think, feel, or act, but these are still the only things that you can directly influence all the time.

One wise student made this interesting observation. She said,

“If I can control something, there’s no need to fuss or worry about it. If I don’t have any control or influence over something, I also don’t need to fuss or worry about it. And there is nothing else.”

Stay in Control, Prevent Stress

Things That Increase Feelings of Control

The best way to increase feelings of control is to apply the principles we have discussed in this Stress Prevention Workbook.

Take a minute and flip through the pages. What do you remember about threat thoughts, the Gap, your subconscious mind, upgrading your thoughts, resistance, empathic listening, moving out of the comfort zone, and other concepts that were discussed?

Look back and review what you have learned, what your feelings were about these ideas, and what you wrote about the activities you tried.
This is the purpose of this workbook. To give you information, skills, and exercises to help you increase your sense of control and decrease your stress levels.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness also increases control and results in decreased stress levels. It is so important that I have devoted an entire workbook to the topic. The Mindfulness Workbook will guide you through specific steps on how to peacefully enjoy every single moment of your life.

Try This

The next time you notice your feelings of control slipping and your feelings of stress increasing, ask yourself the following questions:

1. Do I have any control over this situation?
   - If the answer is no, upgrade your thoughts and let it go.
   - If the answer is yes, go to question two.

2. What kind of control do I have?
   - Do I have more control than I think I have?
     - Then do what you need to do to handle the situation.
   - Do I want to have control over someone or something, when I really don’t?
     - Upgrade your thoughts, ask the 4 simple questions, take appropriate action, and let go as each situation dictates.

3. Do I have a lot of control, but don’t feel like it?
   - Review this workbook and see how you can adjust your conditioned thinking patterns and beliefs that keep you from moving toward what you want. Make changes where you can and let go of the rest.
   - Move on to the Stress Reduction Workbook.
Now You Are Enlightened

Dr. Covey said, “If you think the problem is outside of you, that thought is the problem.”

You now understand what that means.

You now know that if you are ever going to get the upper hand on stress, it is solely up to you. When you feel pressure, anxiety, worry, or any other stressful feeling, it is NOT because of what is happening “out there,” but instead, it is always what is happening in your mind as you interpret what is happening out there. It is ALWAYS how you interpret what's happening that causes you to feel stress. It is never otherwise. When you get this, you’ve got it made.

Isn’t this an amazingly freeing thought? Many people spend their whole lives never figuring this out. How cool it is that you’re learning it now!

Once you do get it, you are, in my opinion, enlightened ... and now responsible for your life. Few things I know of are more empowering and freeing than realizing how much of a choice you have in everything!

This is pure Stress Management!

A Quick Word about Stress Reduction

It would be ideal if the contents of this Workbook were everything that you need to manage your stress. But it isn’t. Even though what is found in this workbook is the foundation for all stress management, sometimes you’ll forget. Sometimes you’ll get caught off guard, and the stress comes anyway. That is where the Stress Reduction Workbook comes in.

The information you will learn and the activities you will experience in the Stress Reduction Workbook will help you reduce and eliminate stress when it has already shown its ugly head and turned on the fight-or-flight response. The things you will discover in that Workbook will not only turn off the stress, they will help you feel better, calmer and much more relaxed.

I look forward to connecting with you in The Stress Reduction Workbook. Until then, stay calm.

You now know how.