

Less Stress Part 3 – A Process for Lowering Stress

Over the last couple of months, we've talked about the importance of mindset and how an understanding of the things around us can affect our ability to deal with stress in our lives. And again, the underlying message here is that you can lower your stress levels. And just about all of us need to. So this month, we get into the approach behind that goal. A solid approach is critical for positive, healthy change. But the challenge with any change is in filling in the gap between where you are right now and where you want to go. And the natural inclination is to jump right into the "doing" and figuring out what you have to do to change. But the doing, and even just figuring out what has to be done, should come *after* you determine *who* you want to be on the other side. I mean, that's your goal, right? To be a better version of yourself. So think about this...what's the difference in who you are right now and who you want to be? From a stress reduction standpoint, what do you not want to worry about as the "new you?" That defines the new you with less stress. What do you want more time for? That defines the new you that can devote more time and attention to the important things in life. Thinking about who you want to be on the other end of your change, and visualizing that person, your new self, is the first step in making the change you seek to make.

Now, whether the "less stressed you" is someone who has fewer stressors on your plate, or fewer things to worry about, or whether it's someone who has more time for things that you consider to be the most important things in life, like time with kids, family and loved ones...whatever that vision is, whoever you have envisioned yourself to be, the next question you may be asking is, "ok, then what?" And I'd tell you 'yes.' Then comes the *what*. Because what to do is the next step. And the answer to that is to take action. Not just random action, but action that will move you toward the person you want to be. Well, if the difference between current you now, and you on the other end is the action you need to take to get there, then what can you do or stop doing to move in the right direction? That's action. What current stressor can you reduce or remove completely from your life? Take that action. What types of things can you add

to your life to help manage, cope or better deal with stressors? That's action too. Whether you take away things that aren't necessary, or whether you add sleep, exercise, healthier eating habits or white space in your calendar, you have to do these things consistently over time. So when it comes to the action you need to take, the "what" that needs to be done, the answer is almost always this – healthier habits practiced consistently over time. That's the answer to the question of the next step after determining who you want to be...it's consistently taking action.

Now, if you can view your goal as a destination, then picture this scenario. Imagine you're in a small row boat in the middle of a large lake. You look around and see the picnic area or campsite on the shore that you need to get back to. So, you use the oars to turn the small craft to get pointed in the right direction and you start rowing. Figuring out *who* you want to be on the other side of your positive change...that's your goal, your destination, just like the campsite that you need to get back to. And that initial step of taking action to get you closer to the person you want to be...that's the act of rowing. And each and every row, as a matter of fact, that moves you closer to your goal is the consistency in habits that we're looking for. It's not just one or two strokes of rowing that will get you there. It's continued effort. And the continued effort on your path to a better you is fueled by your "why." That's what will drive you and keep you going after you start. Motivation gets you started, but habits keep you going. And when things come to interrupt those habits, your "why," your true reason for wanting to make change in the first place, is what will fuel you to continue. So it's important to identify your *why* early on. Identify the equivalent of "needing to get back to the campsite," and do that early. Try to think about why the change you seek is important to you. Maybe you want to be less irritable. Maybe you want to rest and sleep better. Maybe you want to live longer. Or maybe you just want to make the life you're living more enjoyable and more fulfilling. Whatever the reason, you have to identify that reason and keep it front and center along your journey. When the day-to-day struggles of implementing positive change in your life hit you, the why, the reason for doing what you're doing will help you push through the difficult times and challenges. So look at where you need to go, point that little boat in the right direction, start rowing, and let your purpose drive you.

So, one thing that adds to consistency in habits is personalizing your effort and your approach. We've mentioned that there are several areas you can focus on to make your life less stressful. From getting more sleep, to planning better, to exercise and healthier eating. Well, it's easy to think in terms of "getting to where I need to be" in each of those areas. And that's ok, but perhaps more important than that is to figure out where you are in each of those areas. Are you currently averaging only 4 hours of sleep? How can we make that 4.5? Are you bad at planning your schedule? What's the first step you can take to go from zero to a little bit better in that area? And what can you do to make your exercise and nutrition habits better than they are right now? It's common to look at your goal and highlight the difference between where you are and where you want to be. But when it comes to healthier living, it's paramount to determine where you are on *your* journey, and to focus on improving from there. It's not so much about the gap as it is about the progress.

Now, starting from where you are tends to personalize your improvement journey from the very beginning. But how do you keep it about you? The way to do that is by personalizing your plan for success. Instead of asking, "which area should I focus on first, sleep, my schedule, exercise, or nutrition," instead think about the area where *you* can actually grow and improve right now. No extra time for exercise? Maybe you see the greatest opportunity for change in your sleeping habits. Or maybe it's in improving your nutrition habits. Any improvement in a single area is better than no improvement in any area. And by keeping your personality, your desires, and the realities of your life in mind when you're carrying out your plan, you'll have a much greater chance of success. The most important person in your progress, and the one with the greatest impact, is you! It's not your trainer, your spouse, or your coach. It's you. Don't let yourself fall into the mindset of choosing an area to improve in just because you saw a commercial or that's what your friend is doing. Being an active participant in your change means making decisions on your next steps based on your strengths, weaknesses and desires.

Now, you may be thinking, I'm pretty excited about lowering stress in my life. And there are a number of things that I could do right now to improve my lifestyle. I'm ready go all in and make those changes now! Well, my advice to you, from seeing and coaching a number of individuals over the past 14

years, is to prioritize your efforts. Meaning you should choose one or two things that you'll focus on. Because if everything is a priority, then nothing's a priority. For example, you may want to focus on an area where you're already somewhat close to meeting one of your goals. Or you may want to choose something that's easy for you to start doing right now. Or maybe some changes would just be more fun than others to start. Whatever you choose, be clear on what the priority is, and on what things aren't the priority. Your time is scarce and your attention is too. Choose *your* thing to improve. And after you make some headway or meet your goal in that area, then focus on the next thing.

As I prepare to wrap this up, let me give you three final things to consider as you embark on your self-improvement journey. The first is "don't try to be perfect." Take better steps, not perfect steps. Make better decisions, not perfect decisions. Seek to minimize stress where you can, not to eliminate it all together. And try to add some things to your life to help you cope with stress, but don't go overboard in setting expectations for exercise and meditation beyond what you can currently commit to. That's actually more stressful! Perfect is the enemy of good. And thinking we need to be perfect can prevent us from even getting started. So I encourage you to seek consistency over time. Don't try to be perfect all the time. Stay away from the all or nothing mindset and take action. It's not about perfection. It's about progress.

The second thing I'll offer is that small steps add up. In some of my recent reading, I came across an old Scottish proverb that is believed to have been one of George Washington's favorite sayings, "many mickles make a muckle." This is essentially translated to mean "small things add up to big things." I also re-read a passage recently that discussed the enormity of change. This passage pointed out that the two difficulties in change and growth are understanding that impactful change is most likely achieved through small steps, and staying consistent with these small changes. Remember, it's usually *cumulative stressors* that combine to increase the overall stress in our lives. So it only makes sense that taking small steps to reduce or eliminate some of these stressors one by one would lower our overall stress. Long-term positive change is achieved through consistent small habits.

And finally, I'll hit the importance of accountability. About a month ago, my exercise consistency had dropped off. I wasn't anywhere near as consistent as I should have been. The demands of work pile up. I often find myself in this perpetual cycle of early mornings to catch up on work, super busy days, time with the family after work and then somewhat early to bed so I can do it all over again the next day. I use the word "cycle" because that's exactly what it is, and it doesn't change unless I do something to break that cycle. But left to my own devices, the cycle continues. And the crazy thing is that I know what to do to break it. I mean, I write and coach on this stuff, right? Well for me, I found that I need some accountability. When you're striving for consistency, an accountability mechanism is oftentimes critical. So a couple of weeks ago, I brought that into my cycle. My wife and I are now doing a better job because we're holding each other accountable. She motivates me and I motivate her. That's important because I know my stress levels are lower when I'm consistent with exercise. That's a stress relief for me, as it is for most people. Maybe your accountability is a family member. Maybe it's a coach. Maybe it's simply logging your progress and a desire to start a streak or keep a streak going. Whatever it is, leverage the power of external influences and help. This is particularly important in reducing stress because when stress is high, one of the first things to go is our motivation. Use accountability to promote consistent action.

Alright, that's all I have for you this month. If you like this, please leave a rating or comment, and spread the word! And let me know if there's anything else I can provide. And remember, if you're looking for a tool that can help you out with simple ideas on how to start living healthier, head over to tdfitness.net and download my "25 Healthy Habit Ideas for Busy Lifestyles."

I'll be back soon with the final episode in this Less Stress series, where I'll talk about what progress looks like. Until then, have a blessed one! Coach T, out!