

Less Stress Part 4 – Measuring Progress and Moving Forward

Hello TD Fitness Family! Welcome back to the fourth and final episode of this series on lowering stress in your life, and the final TD Fitness Podcast episode of 2021. I think you'll find this information helpful, especially as you navigate some of the stressors associated with this time of year, and seek to enter 2022 with an even better outlook. This episode is really about answering the question, "How do you define success as you seek to better manage stress in your life?" How do you view progress? The right perspective in "making progress" helps us understand what's really important when measuring positive change. This is especially true when it comes to stress management because how you feel about your progress is directly related to the amount of stress you feel (or you don't feel). So, in this episode, I'll talk about a few things – what we measure and why; I'll talk about the bigger picture, which really gets after the importance of a longer-term mindset, as opposed to being focused on the here and now; and we'll wrap up with a little discussion on asking the right questions and dealing with setbacks along the way.

So, for starters, how do you begin to measure stress in your life? When it comes to measuring things in general, there are things that are easy to measure, typically because they have a number value associated with them. These are things like height and weight. Then there are things that are more difficult to measure because they are more subjective. A good example here is trying to measure how we feel. Feelings are hard to measure, but they have a huge effect on our mood, our demeanor and our outlook. So, as we look at what this means for our stress levels, the challenge is apparent. There are no really good measurements, per se, to tell us whether our stress levels are improving, getting worse or staying the same. My smart watch attempts to associate a number to my stress levels, which I suppose is ok. It measures heart rate variability, which is the variation in the amount of time between each heartbeat. The premise here is that emotional reactions to stressful situations, or overall feelings of stress cause an increase in heart rate. So, it takes this data, and combines it with other inputs such as the amount of rest I get and the amount of exercise I accomplish (because each of those affect our stress levels) to come up with a value that is associated with my stress level. My data shows that my stress levels primarily reside

in the “low stress” range. Now, is this measurement on my watch accurate? Meaning is it a true measurement of the stress I’m feeling? Maybe. I will tell you that I certainly don’t feel overly stressed most of the time. And I do use rest and exercise to manage my stress while coping with the busyness and demands of life. Because I know that consistency in those areas help each of us manage stress. But that value, the stress number on my watch, is a form of feedback to me from one day to the next. I can see that today was better or worse than yesterday, for example. And that’s what measurements are...they’re feedback. So, when you’re looking at your stress levels, you can use a smart watch device, or even self-assess how you’re feeling from one day to the next. However you choose to approach this, I encourage you to stay focused on what you’re truly trying to measure, even though it may be more difficult to measure those things.

You see, success along your journey leads to confidence, and the confidence that you’re able to progress in one area of healthy change actually spreads to other areas of your life. The *feedback* that you get from measuring progress along your journey is quite literally “fed back” into your overall motivation to continue with that goal, *and* your motivation to address other areas of improvement. This is why *what* we measure is so important. Don’t just measure something because it’s easy to measure. Seek to measure things that are better indicators of true progress.

One sure-fire measurement of true progress is in the action, or steps you take toward improving. We can sometimes feel the effects of stress, but it’s not like we have a refined “stress meter” to tell us exactly how we’re doing from an improvement standpoint. This is why I go back to what I consider is the most important thing to measure when it comes to progress along your improvement journey...whether we’re talking about stress, fitness or nutrition. And that thing is the actions you take toward improving. You have control over your actions. You can meter your actions based on how you’re feeling. You can alter your actions based on what’s going on around you. And you can adjust your actions going forward. What types of actions can you take to reduce or better manage stress? As we’ve said before, you can focus on your sleep. You can be better at planning or organizing your time. You can exercise more. You can eat healthier. These are all things that *you* can do to improve. You can improve your actions. You have less

control over outcomes. That's why I recommend measuring your actions toward improvement, vs. trying to measure the outcomes that you're hoping for. You'll find that improvement will occur...though it may not look exactly like you expected.

You see, when you measure outcomes, your improvement is judged against progress made in those outcomes. In some cases, that's good. If I press the accelerator in my car, I don't want progress to be measured by how much or how hard I press the pedal. I want it to be measured by how fast I accelerate. Similarly, if I press the brake, I'm less concerned by how much the pedal is pressed. I'm more interested in how quickly I stop. Those are good times to measure outcomes of my actions, not the actions themselves. But when it comes to self-improvement, we have very little direct control over our outcomes. The control we can exert is through the actions we take, but even then, there are usually other factors at play when it comes to the outcomes themselves. So when it comes to self-improvement, in this case, measuring improvement in managing or reducing stress, the important takeaway is that a form of improvement is developing the *skills* required to reduce stress in your life. These are the *skills* of managing sleep, managing your schedule, managing exercise and your diet. Everyone wants to cross the finish line, but in a marathon, it's just as much about the race you run. We have to keep the bigger picture in mind. Living a healthier life is the long-term goal. It's not a win or lose game. It's try and learn. Learning is improving, and when you're improving, you're winning at life.

Let me approach this concept of the long-term goal another way...Is your goal to reduce stress right now? Or is it to live a less stressful life? This is the question that many of us fail to answer when we're trying to improve our health, our habits and our lifestyles. It's almost always a choice between the here and now, and long-term health. Those of you who know me and the message that promote also know that I try to keep the focus on long-term health. Now, there may be times in your life when a short-term approach is necessary, but my approach is about life-long change. Dropping weight fast is easy. Keeping it off is another story. Avoiding unhealthy foods is easy for a day. Living a life of better eating requires a different approach. And I can have a stress-free day tomorrow if I wanted, simply by

doing nothing and watching movies all day. But living a life of lower stress and less worry is different. It requires a different approach.

But what we all struggle with is the waiting, right? Waiting is the hard part because we've become accustomed to getting what we want now. And we've been promised that instant gratification in a number of areas. But living healthier is an infinite game. That's why consistent, sustainable actions are important. And that's why patience is important. We exercise patience through waiting. If you're taking action to improve, trust me when I tell you that you *are* improving...even if you don't necessarily see it. So, continue to wait...patiently, until you *can* see or feel the results and the progress that has been taking place all along.

Let me sum up some of what I just talked about another way. Let's say you've tried to reduce your stress levels, or manage them as best you can. But you don't feel any relief. In fact, the whole reason why you've tried to get a handle on those stressors is because of the negative impact that it's having on you. And now, perhaps you're even more stressed because of what you perceive as failed attempts at improving. Here's what I'd tell you. It goes back to the themes I just mentioned. First, be patient. Change doesn't occur overnight. Next, keep learning. You are improving in some way, even if right now, it's just in discovering the things that don't work for you. And finally, continue to measure progress through the amount of action you take, not the immediate outcomes, which could take longer to realize. These are the things that will continue to be important. Especially when you're not necessarily seeing the progress you had expected.

One final word on continuous improvement before I wrap up this episode and series...We all want to get better, right? Better at fitness, better at nutrition, and better at managing stress. But how do you really get to that continued or constant improvement state that we so often talk about. Well, the keys, after any action you take to change, are to assess and adjust. Assess by asking yourself how it went or how things are going. Are you in a better place than you were before? Have you made progress by taking action? Remember, this question is all about the difference between the current you and the past you. It's

not a comparison to others. Then after you assess, you can ask yourself why you are or aren't closer to your goals. Should you change anything? If so, what? That's the adjustment part. In order to keep moving forward, you have to constantly reassess where you are, how it's going, and what you need to change, if anything. Because sometimes what got you here won't necessarily get you to where you need to be. Assess and adjust if you want to continuously improve.

Alright...over the past few months, I have again stepped through my principles for healthier living, this time with the goal of reducing and managing stress. As a recap, those principles are grouped in four major themes. Here are those themes and takeaways as they apply to reducing stress.

1. A productive and positive **mindset** helps us overcome mental challenges associated with reducing and managing stress. This mindset should help us objectively assess our present state, optimistically look to the future, and prudently learn from the past. Mindset is fundamental to any change, but this is especially true with stress management because so much of it is mental.
2. An understanding of the environment and how it affects us allows us to work through or around those things we sometimes view as obstacles in handling stress. Once we start to focus on those things that only we can control, and we start to shape our environment to work in our favor, the chances of lowering stress in our lives increases exponentially.
3. A solid approach will enable you to lower stress. This approach must be grounded in consistent action. It starts with identifying the type of person you want to be, it's driven by your true why, and it's implemented through a smart approach to consistent action.
4. Finally, #4 and what this episode is about – we have to maintain the right perspective and understand what it truly means to make progress. What we measure is important. Keep the bigger picture in mind and focus on the long-term. Stay resilient...don't let setbacks become roadblocks.

TD Fitness Family, you can live a life of lower stress. I know you can. Remain positive and stick to the principles. Let them carry you through the holidays and into the new year.

That's it for now. Again, a reminder that if you like this, please leave a rating or comment, and spread the word! Don't be afraid to provide me with feedback so I can continue to give you what you need to succeed. And head over to tdfitness.net to download my "25 Healthy Habit Ideas for Busy Lifestyles." It's a tool that can give you some simple ideas on how to start living healthier.

As always, thank you for your support throughout the year and always. Stay safe. Be blessed. And continue to take action toward a healthier you. I'll catch you again in 2022!

Coach T, signing off.