

Nine Ways Successful People Defeat Stress

by Heidi Grant Halvorson

Feeling stressed? Of course you are. You have too much on your plate, deadlines are looming, people are counting on you, and to top it all off, you still have holiday shopping to do. You are under a lot of pressure — so much that at times, you suspect the quality of your work suffers for it.

This is life in the modern workplace. It is more or less impossible to be any kind of professional these days and not experience frequent bouts of intense stress. The difference between those who are successful and those who aren't is not *whether* or not you suffer from stress, but *how* you deal with it when you do.

In the spirit of *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*, here are nine scientifically-proven strategies for defeating stress whenever it strikes.

1. Have self-compassion.

Self-compassion is, in essence, cutting yourself some slack. It's being willing to look at your mistakes or failures with kindness and understanding — without harsh criticism or defensiveness. Studies show that people who are self-compassionate are happier, more optimistic, and less anxious and depressed. That's probably not surprising. But here's the kicker: they are more *successful*, too. Most of us believe that we need to be hard on ourselves to perform at our best, but it turns out that's 100 percent wrong. A dose of self-compassion when things are at their most difficult can reduce your stress *and* improve your performance, by making it easier to learn from your mistakes. So remember that to err is human, and give yourself a break.

2. Remember the "Big Picture."

Anything you need or want to do can be thought of in more than one way. For instance, "exercising" can be described in Big Picture terms, like "getting healthier" — the *why* of exercising — or it can be described in more concrete terms, like "running two miles" — the *how* of exercising. Thinking Big Picture about the work you do can be very energizing in the face of stress and challenge, because you are linking one particular, often small action to a greater meaning or purpose. Something that may not seem important or valuable on its own gets cast in a whole new light. So when staying that extra hour at work at the end of an exhausting day is thought of as "helping my career" rather than "answering emails for 60 more minutes," you'll be much more likely to want to stay put and work hard.

3. Rely on routines.

If I ask you to name the major causes of stress in your work life, you would probably say things like deadlines, a heavy workload, bureaucracy, or your terrible boss. You probably wouldn't say "having to make so many decisions," because most people aren't aware that this is a powerful and pervasive cause of stress in their lives. Every time you make a decision — whether it's about hiring a new employee, about when to schedule a meeting with your supervisor, or about choosing rye or whole wheat for your egg

salad sandwich — you create a state of mental tension that is, in fact, stressful. (This is why shopping is so exhausting — it's not the horrible concrete floors, it's all that *deciding*.)

The solution is to reduce the number of decisions you need to make by using routines. If there's something you need to do every day, do it *at the same time* every day. Have a routine for preparing for your day in the morning, and packing up to go home at night. Simple routines can dramatically reduce your experience of stress. In fact, President Obama, who assuredly knows a great deal about stress, mentioned using this strategy himself in a recent interview:

You need to remove from your life the day-to-day problems that absorb most people for meaningful parts of their day... You'll see I wear only gray or blue suits. I'm trying to pare down decisions. I don't want to make decisions about what I'm eating or wearing. Because I have too many other decisions to make. You need to focus your decision-making energy. You need to routinize yourself. You can't be going through the day distracted by trivia. —President Obama, Vanity Fair

4. Take five (or ten) minutes to do something you find interesting.

If there were something you could add to your car's engine, so that after driving it a hundred miles, you'd end up with *more* gas in the tank than you started with, wouldn't you use it? Even if nothing like that exists for your car just yet, there is something you can do for yourself that will have the same effect... doing something interesting. It doesn't matter what it is, so long as it interests you. Recent research shows that interest doesn't just keep you going despite fatigue, it actually *replenishes* your energy. And then that replenished energy flows into whatever you do next.

Keep these two very important points in mind: First, interesting is not the same thing as pleasant, fun, or relaxing (though they are certainly not mutually exclusive.) Taking a lunch break might be relaxing, and if the food is good it will probably be pleasant. But unless you are eating at the hot new molecular gastronomy restaurant, it probably won't be interesting. So it won't replenish your energy.

Second, interesting does not have to mean effortless. The same studies that showed that interest replenished energy showed that it did so even when the interesting task was difficult and required effort. So you actually don't have to "take it easy" to refill your tank.

5. Add *where* and *when* to your to-do list.

Do you have a to-do list? (If you have a "Task" bar on the side of your calendar, and you use it, then the answer is "yes.") And do you find that a day or a week (or sometimes longer) will frequently pass by without a single item getting checked off? Stressful, isn't it? What you need is a way to get the things done that you set out to do in a timely manner. What you need is **if-then planning** (or what psychologists call "implementation intentions").

This particular form of planning is a really powerful way to help you achieve any goal. Nearly 200 studies, on everything from diet and exercise to negotiation and time management, have shown that deciding in advance when and where you will complete a task (e.g., "*If* it is 4pm, *then* I will return any phone calls I should return today") can double or triple your chances of actually doing it.

So take the tasks on your to-do list, and add a specific *when* and *where* to each. For example, "Remember to call Bob" becomes "If it is Tuesday after lunch, then I'll call Bob." Now that you've created an if-then plan for calling Bob, your unconscious brain will start scanning the environment, searching for the situation in the "if" part of your plan. This enables you to seize the critical moment and make the call, even when you are busy doing other things. And what better way is there to cut down on your stress than crossing things off your to-do list?

6. Use if-thens for positive self-talk.

Another way to combat stress using if-then plans is to direct them at the experience of stress itself, rather than at its causes. Recent studies show that if-then plans can help us to control our emotional responses to situations in which we feel fear, sadness, fatigue, self-doubt, or even disgust. Simply decide what kind of response you would like to have instead of feeling stress, and make a plan that links your desired response to the situations that tend to raise your blood pressure. For instance, "If I see lots of emails in my Inbox, then I will stay calm and relaxed," or, "If a deadline is approaching, then I will keep a cool head."

7. See your work in terms of progress, not perfection

We all approach the goals we pursue with one of two mindsets: what I call the Be-Good mindset, where the focus is on proving that you have a lot of ability and that you already know what you're doing, and the Get-Better mindset, where the focus is on developing your ability and learning new skills. You can think of it as the difference between wanting to show that you *are* smart versus wanting to get *smarter*.

When you have a Be-Good mindset, you expect to be able to do everything perfectly right out of the gate, and you constantly (often unconsciously) compare yourself to other people, to see how you "size up." You quickly start to doubt your ability when things don't go smoothly, and this creates a lot of stress and anxiety. Ironically, worrying about your ability makes you much more likely to ultimately fail.

A Get-Better mindset, on the other hand, leads instead to *self*-comparison and a concern with making progress — how well are you doing today, compared with how you did yesterday, last month, or last year? When you think about what you are doing in terms of learning and improving, accepting that you may make some mistakes along the way, you experience far less stress, and you stay motivated despite the setbacks that might occur.

8. Think about the progress that you've already made.

"Of all the things that can boost emotions, motivation, and perceptions during a workday, the single most important is making progress in meaningful work." This is what Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer refer to as the *Progress Principle* — the idea is that it's the "small wins" that keep us going, particularly in the face of stressors.

Psychologically, it's often not whether we've reached our goal, but the rate at which we are closing the gap between where we are now and where we want to end up that determines how we feel. It can be enormously helpful to take a moment and reflect on what you've accomplished so far before turning your attention to the challenges that remain ahead.

9. Know whether optimism or defensive pessimism works for you.

For many of us, it's hard to stay positive when we've got assignments up to our eyeballs. For others, it isn't just hard — it feels *wrong*. And as it turns out, they are perfectly correct — optimism doesn't work for them.

It is stressful enough to try to juggle as many projects and goals as we do, but we add a layer of stress without realizing it when we try to reach them using strategies that don't feel right — that don't mesh with our own motivational style. So what's your motivational style, and is "staying positive" right for you?

Some people think of their jobs as opportunities for achievement and accomplishment — they have what psychologists call a **promotion focus**. In the language of economics, promotion focus is all about maximizing gains and avoiding missed opportunities. For others, doing a job well is about security, about not losing the positions they've worked so hard for. This **prevention focus** places the emphasis on avoiding danger, fulfilling responsibilities, and doing what feel you ought to do. In economic terms, it's about minimizing losses, trying to hang on to what you've got.

Understanding promotion and prevention motivation helps us understand why people can work so differently to reach the same goal. Promotion motivation feels like eagerness — the desire to really go for it — and this eagerness is sustained and enhanced by optimism. Believing that everything is going to work out great is essential for promotion-focused performance. Prevention motivation, on the other hand, feels like vigilance — the need to keep danger at bay — and it is sustained not by optimism, but by a kind of defensive pessimism. In other words, the prevention-minded actually work best when they think about what might go wrong, and what they can do to keep that from happening.

So, do you spend your life pursuing accomplishments and accolades, reaching for the stars? Or are you busy fulfilling your duties and responsibilities — being the person everyone can count on? Start by identifying your focus, and then embrace either the sunny outlook or the hearty skepticism that will reduce your stress and keep you performing at your best.

Put some or all of these strategies for fighting stress, and you will see real changes not only in the workplace, but in every area of your life. With the holidays around the corner, you might want to work on creating a few if-thens for dealing with the relatives, too. "If I'm about to lose my mind, then I'll have some more eggnog," works wonders for me.



HEIDI GRANT HALVORSON

Heidi Grant Halvorson, Ph.D. is associate director for the Motivation Science Center at the Columbia University Business School and author of *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently* and *Focus: Use Different Ways of Seeing the World to Power Influence and Success*. Dr. Halvorson is available for speaking and training. She's on Twitter

@ghalvorson.