

# Why Stress Is One of the Best Predictors of High Life Satisfaction

My life is messed up, why can't I get my act together?

Most of us have heard a variation of this talk track in our heads, or we've heard it from others. *If only, we think, I didn't have this problem, then everything would be all right.*

We feel burdened by what seems to be our unique sticky problems. Immersed in such a mindset, our actions may not demonstrate our highest values and purpose. What if, Ryan Holiday asks, the adverse circumstances we face offer "a formula for thriving not just in spite of whatever happens but *because of it?*"

Holiday, in his book [\*The Obstacle Is the Way\*](#), draws on the wisdom of Marcus Aurelius and other Stoic philosophers. He points out that Aurelius saw every obstacle, every adverse circumstance, "as an opportunity to practice some virtue: patience, courage, humility, resourcefulness, reason, justice, and creativity." The more virtues we practice, the more meaning we create in our lives. Resisting our problems means we are forgoing opportunities to become the best version of ourselves.

"Adversity can create resilience, and trauma often inspires personal growth."

The beauty in our lives often coexists with our burdens. The beauty remains long after the problem is gone.

"Obstacles," instructs Holiday, "are not only to be expected but embraced. Embraced? Yes, because these obstacles are actually opportunities to test ourselves, to try new things,

and, ultimately, to triumph.”

## Adversity Creates Meaning in Our Lives

In her book [\*The Upside of Stress\*](#), Stanford University psychologist Kelly McGonigal invites her readers to “Take a moment to identify a time in your life that was a period of significant personal growth—a turning point that led to positive changes or a newly found purpose.” Now consider this: “Would you also describe this time as stressful?”

Most answer “yes.” Echoing Aurelius, McGonigal observes, “Adversity can create resilience, and trauma often inspires personal growth.” *Persisting*, she explains, “is about maintaining the optimism needed to pursue meaning, even in the face of adversity.”

McGonigal asks us to notice how often we see the negative side of adverse circumstances, saying *This is so stressful* or *I’m so stressed*. Our mindset matters. Reporting on experiments by Stanford psychology professor Alia Crum, McGonigal explains, when we view stress as harmful we “try to escape or reduce the stress.”

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Attempts to escape can be worse than the problem. If we have a stress-is-harmful mindset, instead of addressing root causes, we try to get rid of our feelings by turning to smoking, alcohol, drugs, binge-watching television, checking our smartphones thousands of times a day, and other distractions.

There is a better way. Crum’s research shows that those with a stress-is-helpful mindset view “stressful situations as a challenge, not an overwhelming problem.” The result of that mindset shift is more productivity at work, more satisfaction

with life, “more energy and fewer health problems.” Perhaps most importantly, those with a stress-is-helpful mindset “are better able to find meaning in difficult circumstances.”

With a stress-is-helpful mindset, one taps into “a natural capacity to find hope, exert choice, and make meaning.” Challenges in life are opportunities to experience “strength, growth, and resilience.”

Research shows the happiest people are not without adversity. McGonigal offers:

*Happy lives are not stress-free, nor does a stress-free life guarantee happiness. Even though most people view stress as harmful, higher levels of stress seem to go along with things we want: love, health, and satisfaction with our lives.*

Stress is one of the best predictors of a meaningful life. Why? McGonigal explains: “One reason is that stress seems to be an inevitable consequence of engaging in roles and pursuing goals that feed our sense of purpose.” She adds, “the ability to find meaning in our lives helps us stay motivated in the face of great difficulties.”

## **How Adversity Created Meaning in My Life**

As a young boy, I was unaware I stuttered. Well-meaning speech pathologists turned me into a “professional” stutterer by coaching me in techniques that kept me focused on controlling disfluency. By the time I got to high school, I was afraid to speak in class out of fear of being bullied.

A self-concept as a stutterer was fully formed. When a speaking challenge was on the horizon, fretful thoughts consumed my mental bandwidth. *If only I didn't stutter, then my world would be all right*, rang true.

Becoming a professor hardly seemed a wise career move, yet I had little doubt that teaching was my path.

At 24, while in graduate school, I taught my first principles of economics class. By 32, I had won the first of 10 major awards for teaching excellence.

Stutterers have difficulty with publicly reading; I was never tempted to cut corners and read my notes or PowerPoint slides. Along the way, I found that stuttering receded when I was outwardly focused, completely present in the classroom, responding to what was needed at that time and in that place. In these ways, stuttering improved my teaching.

Those early years as a professor were especially stressful. Yet, I knew there was more to life than my mental suffering, and that realization opened me to a lifelong interest in human development and spirituality. As McGonigal writes:

*Human beings have an innate instinct and capacity to make sense out of their suffering. This instinct is even part of the biological stress response, often experienced as rumination, spiritual inquiry, and soul-searching. Stressful circumstances awaken this process in us. This is one more reason why a stressful life is often a meaningful life; stress challenges us to find the meaning in our lives.*

Success in the classroom led to students' requests for me to teach more courses in the MBA program. As a result, I developed a second area of expertise in leadership development, which led to fulfilling opportunities to deliver workshops.

Fretting about stuttering has not vanished in my life, but it occupies less of my mental bandwidth. I have benefited from working with [speech pathologist Barbara Dahm](#). Dahm has studied the way normal speakers spontaneously transform thinking to audible speech. Instead of fighting disfluency with more

controls, her approach helps remove a stutterer's self-created barriers to the natural speaking process.

Has stuttering helped me make more meaning in my life? Marcus Aurelius would have said yes, adversity pointed me forward: "The impediment to action advances action. What stands in the way becomes the way."

In the poignant *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "[Tapestry](#)," Captain Picard has an opportunity to relive a past incident in his life; an incident for which he long regretted his actions. A thread in the tapestry of his life is pulled, and Picard's leadership abilities are diminished. In this alternative life, instead of becoming captain, Picard is an unremarkable junior officer. His lesson learned, the trajectory of Picard's life is restored.

It might seem that a life without adversity would be an easier path, but would the richness of our life be lost?

## Turn to Your Values

McGonigal reports on research by psychologists Geoffrey Cohen and David Sherman. A simple mindset intervention of writing about your values leads to a huge payoff in your ability to cope with adversity:

*When people are connected to their values, they are more likely to believe that they can improve their situation through effort and the support of others. That makes them more likely to take positive action and less likely to use avoidant coping strategies like procrastination or denial. They also are more likely to view the adversity they are going through as temporary, and less likely to think that the problem reveals something unalterably screwed up about themselves or their lives.*

People may spend their lives seeking permanent solutions to

ease feelings of stress in their lives. Such solutions may seem tantalizingly close; in reality, they are out of reach. Aurelius advised looking in a different direction: “Objective judgment, now at this very moment. Unselfish action, now at this very moment. Willing acceptance—now at this very moment—of all external events. That’s all you need.”

McGonigal observes that life is “not about being untouched by adversity or unruffled by difficulties.” She writes, “Although many people idealize a life without adversity, those who actually have one are less happy and healthy than those who have faced some hardship.” We can use adversity to find more meaning. Encouragingly, McGonigal writes:

*The good that comes from difficult experiences isn’t from the stressful or traumatic event itself; it comes from you—from the strengths that are awakened by adversity and from the natural human capacity to transform suffering into meaning.*

In [\*Man’s Search for Meaning\*](#), Viktor Frankl taught us how to find hope and meaning amid great adversity. “Each man,” Frankl wrote, “is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.” We all have the capacity to awaken to our strengths.

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