

# Using positive emotions in the midst of stress

## What is stress?

Stress is the *perception* that something is more than the resources you have for dealing with it.

That word *perception* is really important. It's your *interpretation* that gives rise to stress.

What researchers are finding is that being able to have positive emotions during times of extreme stress helps people cope better. That does not mean you don't have negative feelings. Dealing with tough situations is hard. They can make you feel sad, angry worried.

But... Positive emotions can make a difference.

## What science is saying: Understanding our brains and nervous system

As we grow older neural pathways form like superhighways of nerve cells that transmit messages in our brains. When you travel over these superhighways many times, the pathway becomes more and more solid. Think of it like a set of Christmas tree lights that light up in automatically. Chronic stress and habits will create certain solid pathways. That is why our reactions to things may seem "automatic".

There is some good news about all this. Research has shown that we can actively affect how our brains work and we can rewire to create new pathways.

Positive mental activity can help us form new pathways, since "*neurons that fire together, wire together.*"

But because of the brain's well-known negativity bias - like Velcro for the bad but Teflon for the good to make these changes takes sustained and deliberate effort.

To strengthen more positive pathways use your positive emotions:-

- **Take in the good:** having a good experience in the first place
- **Enrich it:** helping it last 10 or more seconds while you experience it
- **Absorb it:** sensing that it's sinking into you.

The power of positive emotions

"Neurons that fire together, wire together."



# How do you increase your positive emotions?

Researches have identified 8 ways to express positive emotions. It is like a “tool kit” that you can choose the ones you like and use them!

That is an important point!!! You have to use them regularly to make them work for you. What are the 8 ways to express positive emotions?

## Notice positive things

Pay attention to those little things that make you smile or feel good. Note when they happen; a good TV show that made you laugh, seeing something pretty, something nice to eat or drink, warm sunshine on your face.

## Express those positive things

Find some way to express what you did or saw that was positive. Telling someone or writing it down makes the positive effect even stronger.

## Gratitude

One of the most powerful tools to build positive emotions is gratitude.

A five minute a day gratitude journal is a powerful tool to boost your well being.

Studies consistently show gratitude improves our relationships, makes us happier, improves our sleep, helps us deal with stress and strengthens our resilience. It does not matter if it is a very small thing. Many times we just take things for granted and it is the little things that matter most.



## Attainable goals

We all feel good when we can tick things we have done off a list. Make goals for your day, week, and month. Make sure they are realistic, but achievable. It may help to think of your goals in the short, medium and long term.

## Acts of kindness

These should be both random (let that harried mum go ahead of you in the checkout line) and planned (bring Sunday tea to an elderly neighbour).

Being kind to others, whether friends or strangers, triggers loads of positive effects. It makes you feel generous and capable. It gives you a greater sense of connection with others. It wins you smiles, approval and reciprocated kindness.

## Mindfulness

Here is a word you may not have heard before. Mindfulness is the ability to keep your thinking on one thing that you are experiencing. There are two types of mindfulness; formal and informal.

Formal mindfulness can be like guided deep breathing where you focus only on your breathing.



**Formal mindfulness** can be like guided deep breathing where you focus only on your breathing. It is so useful, we are including an example you can try.

Sitting down put your feet flat on the floor and close your eyes.

From deep in the pit of the stomach breathe in for 7 seconds and then breathe out for 11 seconds. Do this 5, 6, 7 times and see the reaction. The reason for making the out breath longer is that inhaling triggers one part of our nervous system that creates arousal and exhaling stimulates a relaxation response. By breathing out more than breathing in you trigger the relaxation response over the arousal response

**Informal mindfulness** is as you go through everyday events, pay attention to those little things. Focus on the sweetness of a ripe strawberry or the warmth of the sun when you step out from the shade. Stay with that experience and focus on it for that moment.

## Positive rethinking

It is the interpretations of events that make things seem more stressful. Being able to see things more accurately is the key to using your thinking to cope. Being aware of unhelpful thinking habits and challenging negative thoughts are steps toward thinking more positively.

## Focus on your strengths

Yes we all have weaknesses, but what are your strengths? Being able not only to acknowledge your strengths, but appreciate them is important.

**Putting these 8 ways to express positive emotions helps build your inner strengths to cope with most stresses people can face.**

**Use them enough, they can form new neural pathways that strengthens your wellbeing**

**The task now is to get a plan on how you are going to use them and make them work for you.**

<b>Positive emotion</b>	<b>What could you do more of?</b>	<b>How would you do this?</b>
<i><b>Notice positive things</b></i>		
<i><b>Express these positive things</b></i>		
<i><b>Gratitude</b></i>		
<i><b>Mindfulness</b></i>		
<i><b>Positive rethinking</b></i>		
<i><b>Focus on your strengths</b></i>		
<i><b>Attainable goals</b></i>		
<i><b>Acts of kindness</b></i>		

Changing neural pathways was taken from *Hardwiring Happiness* by Dr. Rick Hanson (2013)  
 Using positive emotions in the midst of stress was taken from a talk by Dr. Judy Muskowitz  
 from the University of California

Developed by Ed Sipler, Health Development Specialist South Eastern HSC Trust