

Book review

The Upside of Stress

Why stress is good for you, and how to get good at it

Category: Book Reviews / Self-help

Author: Kelly McGonigal

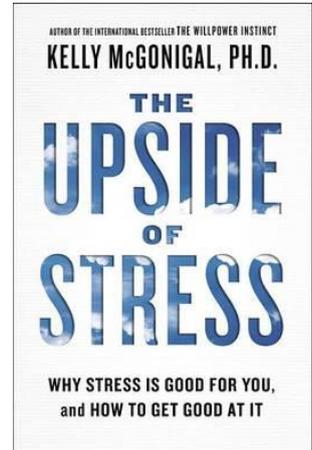
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Audience: Supporting Myself

Summary: Psychologist McGonigal offers a surprising new view of stress, revealing the upside of stress and how to capitalise on its benefits



I was first alerted to this book as it was listed in the Berkeley University *Greater Good Centre* list of recommended books for 2015.

Health psychologist Kelly McGonigal's 2013 TEDtalk on this topic has had millions of views; the public who have brought her book often rave about it, though not everyone in the positive psychology field endorses her book.

I found reviews that challenged her reframing of existing theories and arranging data to suit her purpose. Personally I found it had quite an impact on me; it was a refreshing read, with a good mix of research, case studies and self-reflection exercises. I can't say in my case that I have learnt to embrace stress as she writes, but yes to see it with fresh eyes with the realisation I am not as powerless as I often assume in the face of everyday stress.

She introduces the reader to the concept of 'mindsets', beliefs that shape your reality. They are powerful because they affect not just how you think but also how you act. For example, when we view stress as harmful it becomes something to be avoided. By contrast, people who believe stress can be helpful are more likely to cope with stress in a proactive manner, and see it as an opportunity to grow. Which leads to the outcome where you build your resources for dealing with future stress, become more confident and create a strong network of social support.

The belief that stress is helpful becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. This can also result in a change to our physiology where instead of a threat response sensitising the brain to future threats, it makes the brain release resilience-boosting hormones. Interesting also is you are more likely to see your challenges as temporary.

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McGonigal notes that embracing stress is a radical act of self-trust, you don't have to wait until you have no fear, stress or anxiety to do what matters. If one continues to put dreams aside until life is less stressful or busy, those dreams may never be pursued.

Days after reading this book I would catch phrases I was using to describe stress, and in that moment I realised I had a choice to reframe what I was thinking. Though I wouldn't always do that, I feel more aware of my "automatic inner dialogue".

The author also notes that we can extend this way of thinking to our wider world, to also be aware of how we talk about stress to people we care about. She says that we can also use the mindset approach to help them identify their own strengths and values that assist them through their struggles.

I can see how some people might view her approach as Pollyanna-ish, not taking into account things like poverty, but I feel her approach has merit, especially as it emphasises staying connected and actively looking for support. I found her book to be a beacon, whereby each individual can take clear messages from the research and personalise them.

Reviewed by Kim Higginson, Information Resources Specialist at the Mental Health Foundation

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