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# What you think about Stress Changes It

## Improving Acute Stress Response: The Power of Reappraisal



### Principle

When our bodies react to a stressful event, thinking of the reaction as useful actually changes the reaction itself.

### Quote

“reappraising arousal as a coping tool during acutely stressful episodes that require instrumental responses can promote adaptive physiological responses, reduce attentional bias, and improve performance.”

### So What - Application

If changing the way you think about stress can change your body's reaction to it, we could learn ways to do this.

When we're stressed we can breathe to calm the body, reframe what the stressor means to calm ourselves, or reframe what our body's arousal means to stay energized, but meet the stressor as a challenge instead of a threat.

We could say - this nervousness before I give my speech is my body's way of pumping me up to be ready.

The researchers think this could be useful for people with social anxiety disorder who see social interactions as threatening. Reframing their nervousness as their body's way of preparing them for conversation could help.

### The Research Story

Three researchers from University of Rochester, University of California, San Francisco, and Harvard University used existing research to make a case for the idea that it's not stress that's the problem, but how we look at stress.

A skier who has only one way down the mountain can interpret their stressful body arousal as fear or excitement. We can interpret stressful events as a challenge or a threat, depending on whether we think we have the resources to meet the stressor. Either way our heart & hormones start racing. However, if we see stressors as a threat, our blood vessels constrict and our cardiac efficiency goes down, whereas when we see it as a challenge, our blood vessels dilate, and our cardiac efficiency goes up.

The idea of psychological toughness is that when you have a “stress response” and your body gets all pumped up - it can be an effective way to cope with stress. When you feel stress rising in your body, think of it as a resource to help you meet the situation.

Your body and brain automatically respond to stress. You can't stop a stress response any more than you can stop yourself from sweating when it's hot out. Lots of skills like CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy) teach us to reframe our thoughts in order to calm our bodies down. However, when stressful situations require us to stay engaged and be active, reframing has a different purpose: to change the type of stress response experience.

In a prior study participants did a public speaking task known to stress most people out. The group that was taught how to reframe their nervousness had less blood vessel constriction and looked for threat cues less. In another prior study they found that reframers got calm afterward faster. Another group taught that body changes like heart rate predicted better scores, not worse, did better on a practice GRE test and the real GRE months later.

When you reappraise your body's reaction to a stressor, part of your brain begins to make new meanings, part begins to create a strategy, and part slows the release of stress hormones. Participants who reappraised their body's reaction to public speaking reported that the task was just as demanding, but that they had more resources to cope with the task.

They aren't sure if how good you are at reappraisals, how well you notice changes in your body, or how motivated you are to meet the challenge of this stressor makes a difference in how well the reappraisal actually works.

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