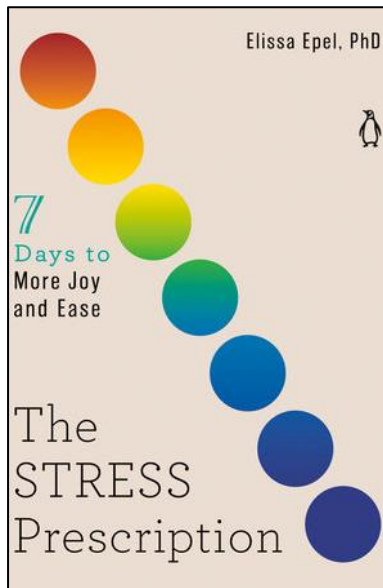




BOOK 411

4 thoughts, 1 life-changing idea, & 1 stack of memorable quotes



The Stress Prescription: Seven Days to More Joy and Ease

BY: Elissa Epel, Ph.D.

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What You'll Learn:

1. Accepting & Embracing Uncertainty
2. Baseline Stress, Vagal Tone, and Morning Breathing
3. Your Body Loves Acute Stress (plus the challenge mindset)
4. The Power of Nature, Water, and Breathing

1 Life-Changing Idea

Flip the Script and Bring the Retreat to You



4 Thoughts

1. Accepting & Embracing Uncertainty

“We know now that stress biology and aging biology are wrapped up together. Our bodies get worn down more quickly under chronic stress, and chronic uncertainty is the most ubiquitous form of chronic stress. Thus, the antidote: We need to “turn off” our threat response to uncertainty. We need to shift our mindset to accept uncertainty as the defining condition of our lives, instead of fighting against it or feeling threatened by it.”

“Chronic uncertainty is the most ubiquitous form of chronic stress.” < -- Let that sink in.

As Dr. Epel says, the antidote is to accept uncertainty as a **“defining condition of our lives.”** That by itself might change our lives forever.

But what I love about this idea is how it can be related back to the concept of “pre-silience” we recently discussed in *Peak Mind*. Recall that having pre-silience means you can be in a difficult situation and know you have the inner resources to get through it. We might add that if we embrace uncertainty, we immediately increase our pre-silience, too.

But how do we actually do this? One of the best ways is to loosen (but not remove altogether) our expectations:

As Dr. Epel says, **“Strong expectations can hurt us whether they’re positive (something we’re looking forward to) or negative (something we’re dreading). Better to loosen our expectations as much as we can.”**

So by loosening our expectations and embracing uncertainty, we can increase our mental pre-silience while decreasing our stress.

And in the next thought, we’ll look at how breathing might help this process even more.



2. Baseline Stress, Vagal Tone, and Morning Breathing

“We each have our unique starting baseline—the level of stress arousal that we usually hover around through any typical day. Every person’s starting baseline is different: some people are tightly wound up, vigilant, and ready to startle at an unexpected noise, while others might be like a placid lake that is hard to disturb. Regardless of where we start from, the lower we can get our baseline stress arousal, the better—it means we’ll be much more able to tolerate the peaks of stressful events.”

The mission of this book is to lower our baseline stress levels, and this is where the power of breathing comes in in a couple of ways:

1) Vagal Tone: We know that slow breathing can increase our vagal tone, directly translating to a lower baseline stress level in our nervous system. Thus, a consistent slow breathing practice may be one of the most efficient ways to lower our baseline stress, making us **“much more able to tolerate the peaks of stressful events.”**

2) Morning Breathing: To me, the passage above also highlights the power of doing some slow breathing first thing in the morning. By starting out at a lower baseline every day, we’ll tolerate stressful events better. And as a bonus, starting out calmer will help us accept and embrace uncertainty simply because we’re in a better state of mind.

Together, we might say that having a consistent morning slow breathing practice is one of the best ways to lower our baseline stress levels. The importance of this cannot be overstated. As Dr. Epel points out, **“dropping our default stress baseline allows us to operate at a healthier and more biologically sustainable level of nervous system arousal.”** 🙌

3. Your Body Loves Acute Stress (plus the challenge mindset)

“Your body loves acute stress. This process of peak and recovery—of sympathetic nervous system action followed by parasympathetic nervous system action, triggering cell cleanup and repair—is wonderful for us. In fact, we need it ... We need rest and relaxation, yes, but we also need positive stress. We need both.”



You've probably heard this a thousand times, but it's worth repeating: Stress isn't necessarily bad; it's *chronic stress* that harms our health.

And while much of the book focuses on relaxation-oriented exercises to reduce chronic stress, Dr. Epel does an excellent job describing the benefits of positive stress too:

“It turns out that exposing the body to manageable positive stress does the opposite of what long-term toxic stress does: it improves the health and regenerative life span of your cells, instead of slowly wearing them out. We call this hormetic stress.”

How do we practice “hormetic stress?” She provides many ways. Of course, exercise is #1. But she also explicitly mentions the power of cold-water immersion and Wim’s method as potent hormetic stressors. And in my opinion, we can clump any *short-term fast-breathing exercise* into this “hormetic stressor” category.

But perhaps most powerfully, we can simply shift our mindset from a “threat response” to a “challenge response” in almost any situation to reap the benefits of hormetic stress. To do this, we reframe everyday “stressors” as “challenges.” That simple reframe can change the entire response of the nervous system:

“So know this: To a certain extent, you can shape your own stress response! You might feel the spike of adrenaline at work, but then you can choose how to interpret your body’s natural stress response and improve how things unfold.”

That’s pretty amazing. So here’s to harnessing and reinterpreting our body’s natural stress response to improve how things unfold and enhance our quality of life 🍌

4. The Power of Nature, Water, and Breathing

“This dramatic shift we experience in nature is called the attentional restoration effect: we have relieved attentional overload, we have opened up space in our mind, we feel better.”

Nature has an incredible ability to lower our stress. And it’s extra potent because it’s passive: All you have to do is show up, and nature takes care of the rest (pun intended).

More specifically, Dr. Epel tells us that when we enter nature, blood pressure, cortisol, and inflammation go down, while relaxation and calm feelings go up. This results from the calming sounds, awe-inspiring views, refreshing smells, and clean air for breathing that nature provides.



To take advantage of these benefits, simply get out into nature (whatever is available to you) as much as you can: **“It’s simple: By shifting our physical environment, we can shift our mental state. We can change both the content of our thoughts and our thought processes.”**

And if you can’t get out, try bringing nature to you. Even listening to water can improve mood and slow your breathing: **“Many people also resonate with the soothing sound of rhythmic ocean waves—it affects our breathing, slowing it down and encouraging deeper breaths than the shallow and insufficiently oxygenated breathing that is our habit.”** 🙌

So choose whichever way that resonates with you and enjoy the passive power of nature a little more, today.

1 Life-Changing Idea

Flip the Script and Bring the Retreat to You

“When we create conditions that are ideal for deep rest—feeling safe, engaging in a mind-body practice, or being in nature—our breathing will often change naturally as the body adjusts. Today, we flip that. We start with the breath. When we practice the kind of breathing our body wants to do in a deep rest state, we signal to the body that it’s okay to rest. It’s okay to let go. ... Breathing, it turns out, can be the quickest, most direct path to deep rest. When you can’t go to a retreat, you can bring the retreat to you. And all you need is your breath.”

When we create the right conditions for deep rest (like being on a retreat or in nature), our breathing will change accordingly.

But the true power of breathing is that we can consciously change it to create the conditions for deep rest—we can bring the retreat to us.

So, the life-changing idea is this: Pick a distraction-free time and make it a ritual to create your own deep-rest mini-retreat using the breath.

Dr. Epel suggests a 4-6-8 breath (4-second inhale, 6-second hold, 8-second exhale). But, essentially any slow breathing technique between 3-7 breaths a minute that uses a slightly longer exhale than inhale will create the deep-rest, retreat-like conditions we’re after.

And if you need any additional motivation, I’ll leave you with this gem from Dr. Epel:



“Breathing practices are one of the most powerful acts we can do to change our physiological state—and quickly. It’s quite amazing: we can control our breath, which means we can control the state of our autonomic nervous system and even our state of consciousness. By altering our breath, we also influence our emotional state, pushing us toward calm, joy, and equanimity.”

1 Stack of Memorable Quotes

“Our mission, as part of the Stress Prescription, is to push our default baseline level closer to true rest. To live well with stress, we need to drop our default baseline.”

“Our stress arousal level manifests in our breathing rate, as one of many factors shaping it. Spoiler alert: the deep rest we need is also about breathing.”

“There’s not one single way to create deep rest—there are a lot of ways to get there. ... But there’s one common change that happens with all those activities: a change in the breath to be more slow and rhythmic, and which leads to greater vagal tone (greater parasympathetic to sympathetic balance) and greater oxygen in the body.”

“If you’re feeling like a victim of circumstance (Why me?) think instead, Try me! Think about all the hard situations you have survived already—all that experience and hard-earned wisdom are embodied in you.”

“For the tough things you cannot change, consider practicing radical acceptance. This means accepting the situation completely: in your mind, your heart, and your body.”

“When we are holding tension—when the stress baseline is high—we tend to take more breaths per minute, and those breaths tend to be shallow rather than deep. We respond to stress with light, rapid breathing, often through our mouth.”

“Ultimately this can become a kind of “stress spiral”—the stress of the day triggers a lighter, faster breathing pattern, marked by periods of unconscious breath holding, and that in turn keeps the body in a state of sympathetic nervous system activation.”



“Breathing physiology is complex and fascinating, but the actual practice of ideal functional breathing is—thank goodness—simple and graceful.”

“Your breath is something you always have access to as a powerful form of stress relief.”

“But the research shows us that when it comes to building stress resilience, one of the most powerful interventions is focusing on joy—specifically, the positive things that exist in our lives now, and on creating a positive future.”

