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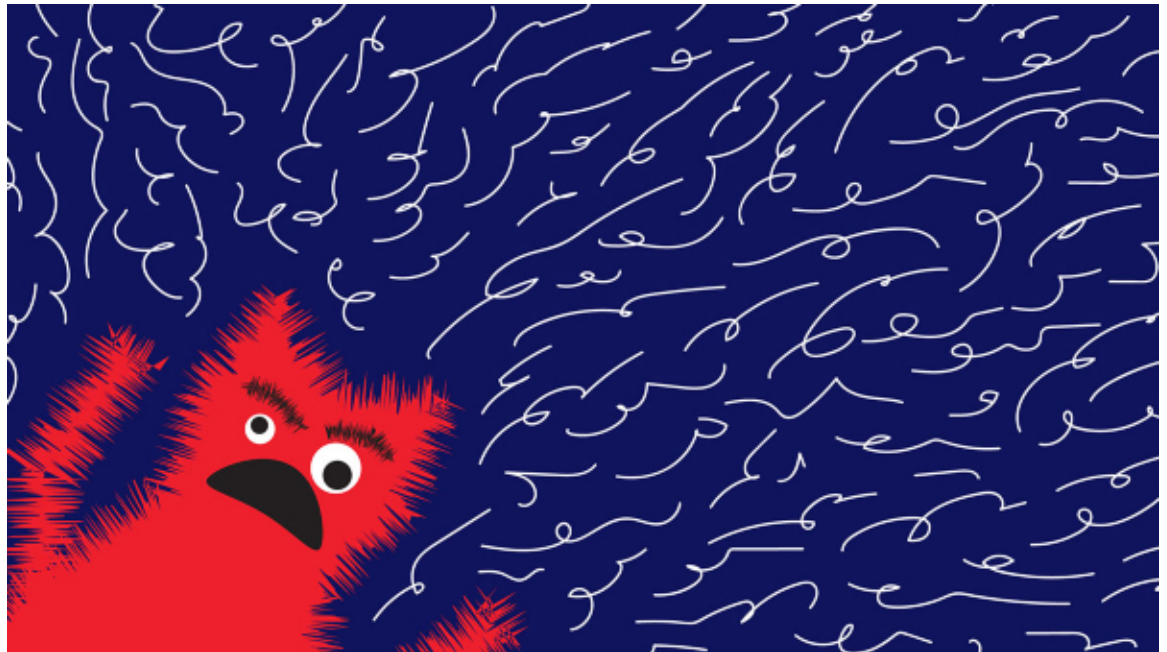
Pressure Doesn't Have to Turn into Stress

by Nicholas Petrie

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Cat Yu for HBR

When I was in my late twenties, I was diagnosed with stomach cancer. Doctors operated and told me to hope for the best. I returned to Japan, where I was working, and tried to forget about it. The tumors returned a year later, this time in my liver. After a long search, the surgeons found a new procedure to remove them, but I knew this was, again, perhaps only a temporary fix. I was a mess for the next six months. The hardest part of my illness was my constant anxiety about it coming back.

Then I met a man who changed my outlook. Dr. Derek Roger had spent 30 years researching why some people in difficult situations become overwhelmed, while others persevere. He taught me everything he'd learned, and as I started applying it, my anxiety subsided, even though my situation didn't change. In fact, the cancer came back about five years ago and remains relatively stable in my liver. But I no longer worry about it. Derek became my mentor, and over the past 10 years we have trained thousands of leaders to overcome their stress.

The process starts with understanding that stress is caused not by other people or external events, but by your reactions to them. In the workplace, many people blame their high anxiety levels on a boss, job, deadlines, or competing commitments for their time. But peers who face the same challenges do so without stress. Derek and I often meet executives who have high levels of pressure but low levels of stress, and vice versa.

Pressure is not stress. But the former is converted to the latter when you add one ingredient: rumination, the tendency to keep rethinking past or future events, while attaching negative emotion to those thoughts. Of course, leaders must practice reflection — planning for the future or reviewing past lessons — but this is an analytical, short-term process, with positive fallout. Rumination is ongoing and destructive, diminishing your health, productivity, and well-being. Chronic worriers show increased incidence of coronary problems and suppressed immune functioning. Dwelling on the past or the future also takes us away from the present, rendering us unable to complete the work currently on our plates. If you ask ruminators how they are feeling, none will say “happy.” Most feel miserable.

To break this stress-inducing habit, Derek and I recommend four steps:

Wake up. People spend most of their day in a state called “waking sleep.” This is when you pull into the office parking lot but can't remember the drive there, or when someone in a meeting asks for your opinion but you've missed the last few minutes of conversation. Since all rumination happens during this state, the first step is to break out of it. You can do this physically: Stand or sit up, clap your hands, and move your body. Or you can do it mentally: Connect with your senses by noticing what you can hear, see, smell, taste, and feel. The idea is to reconnect with the world.

Control your attention. When you ruminate, your attention gets caught in an unproductive loop, like a hamster on a wheel. You need to redirect yourself to areas in which you can take useful action. Here's one exercise we encourage executives to use: Draw a circle on a page, and write down all of the things you can control or influence inside of it and all of the things you cannot outside of it. Remind yourself that you can care about externalities — your work, your team, your family — without worrying about them.



VIDEO WHEN STRESS HELPS YOU GET MORE DONE

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Put things in perspective. Ruminators tend to catastrophize, but resilient leaders keep things in perspective for themselves and their teams. We tell people to try three techniques: contrasting (comparing a past stress to the current one, i.e., a major illness versus a missed sale), questioning (asking yourself “How much will this matter in three years’ time?” and “What’s the worst that could happen?” and “How would I survive it?”) and reframing (looking at your challenge from a new angle: “What’s an opportunity in this situation I haven’t yet seen?” or even “What’s funny about this situation?”)

Let go. The final step is often the hardest. If it was easy to let it go, we would have done it already. We find that three techniques help. The first is acceptance: Acknowledge that whether you like the situation or not, it is the way it is. The second is learning the lesson. Your brain will review events until it feels you’ve gained something from them, so ask yourself, “What have I learned from this experience?” The third is action. Sometimes the real solution is not to relax, but to do something about your situation. Ask yourself, “What action is required here?”

While struggling with cancer, it took me a couple of years to train myself to follow these steps. But ultimately it worked. My stress levels went down, my health improved, and my career took off. More heartening, I discovered that everything Derek had taught me could be taught to others, with similar results.

Nicholas Petrie is a senior faculty member at the [Center for Creative Leadership](#) and the lead researcher and creator of its Change Equation, which shows leaders how to change in ways that minimize stress and maximize results. He works with CEOs and their teams to create resilience strategies for organization.
