



transforming stress

+  HeartMath.



## Transforming Stress

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## Transforming Stress

Yes, stress has become a very big problem. The statistics on mounting stress and its detrimental effects on body, mind, emotions, and health literally shout at us. For example, The American Institute of Stress notes that 75 to 90 percent of visits to primary care physicians are for stress-related complaints. A Harvard study shows that people who live in a state of high anxiety are four and a half times more likely to suffer sudden cardiac death than non-anxious individuals. An international investigation reveals that people who are unable to effectively manage their stress have a 40 percent higher death rate than their non-stressed counterparts.

Think about this. In 2002, people in the United States alone bought nearly \$17.2 billion worth of antidepressants and anti-anxiety drugs, up more than 10 percent from 2001. Americans spent \$1.1 billion in the same year on just two of the major prescription sleeping pills, to say nothing of the over-the-counter brands. It's also shocking to know that seven of the top ten best-selling drugs are for stress-related ailments. And, it's not just an American problem. Developed nations across the globe report higher levels of stress, anger, anxiety, and dissatisfaction than ever before. We need to understand why this is happening.

## Part I. Stress

Stress has become all too pervasive. Faster communications speed up people's sense of time. We're bombarded with a constant stream of

information—e-mail, the internet, cell phones and TV. We're exposed to other people's heightened stress at home, at school, on the street and in the workplace. People broadcast their stress through reactions, energies, and words, and everyone feels it.

Stress has become so pervasive that we've simply adapted to this unhealthy condition. It's become so normal that some people actually think stress is good. In certain cases they may be right. It's true, for instance, that stress can be a motivator useful in addressing a challenge. Without some stress in our lives we probably wouldn't get as much done. Life would be a little bland and boring without challenges. Everything would be too easy and we wouldn't push ourselves towards achieving new things.

However, too much stress, like the extraordinary amount of stress we experience in today's world, creates overload. Your creativity and clarity decline; you start to have more aches and pains, fragmented thinking, and negative attitudes. Stress ages us before our time and robs us of our vitality and enjoyment of life.

For many of us, workloads and pressures are intense. The boss expects us to produce more, our children have a lot of stress from school and peer pressure. There are always more bills to pay and there is an unrelenting pressure to buy or do. The world is in transition, with terror reports and heightened alerts, and people don't know where it's headed. This creates a gnawing, stressful insecurity. It's time for all of this to change. It's time for genuine action.

Most of us have familiar stress symptoms we've become habituated to and one of the first steps in dealing with stress is to acknowledge it and identify your stress symptoms.

Right now, see if any of the following apply to you?

**Irritability.** Is your fuse shorter than it used to be? Do you find yourself getting angry at little things more often?

**Diminished sense of humor.** Do you find yourself feeling weighted down or too serious? Do you laugh less than you used to? Do you feel depressed or resigned to a life that's not changing?

**Worry.** Do you find yourself caught in distressing thought loops, replaying anxious emotional experiences or projecting anxious situations in the future?

**Excessiveness.** Do you eat, drink, or use mood-altering stimulants excessively? Do you seem to rely on stress to keep going?

**Forgetfulness.** Do you find yourself forgetting little things more often? Do you feel a kind of mental gridlock?

**Aches and pains.** Do you have recurring headaches, frequent gastrointestinal distress, or tension in your face, jaw, shoulders, back, or chest?

Nervousness. Do you talk fast or excessively? Do you spill things more, feel more uncoordinated, have more nervous tension?

Fatigue. Do you feel run-down a lot? Are you tired, but unable to really get restful sleep? Do you have a hard time falling asleep or wake up early in the morning and have trouble falling back to sleep?

Illness. Have you been sick with allergies, colds, or flu more often? Or do you have a chronic problem your doctor has told you is stress-related because no pill or other remedy has helped?

If you answered yes to three or more of the above questions, then you are experiencing some degree of chronic stress. But don't worry. For starters you're not alone; and, as you will learn, you have a lot more power than you may think to stop letting stress get the better of you.

Most people have heard about ways to cope with stress—eat nutritious foods, drink less alcohol and coffee, stop smoking, exercise, meditate, take breaks, get more rest, spend time with friends, and do fun things. These are all good to do as they help to reduce the effects of stress. More often than not, however, they don't get to the source of the problem and the stress comes right back. It requires a more refined approach to *transform* stress.

One of the first things to understand is that it's not the external things that are the real causes of stress. We have a tendency to blame the boss, the spouse, the traffic and so on for our stress. We say things like "You're stressing me out!!" or "This job is just unbelievably

stressful.” The externals—people, places, things and events, do create convenient opportunities to feel stress, but they’re not the real cause.

For many years now, stress researchers have concluded that it’s our “*perception*” of events, not the actual events themselves that cause most of our stress. For example, thousands of people can be stuck in the same traffic jam but each person has their own perception of it. Some may perceive it as very stressful and inconvenient. Others see it as no big deal, and a lot are in between in various degrees. There are as many perceptions of the traffic jam as there are people stuck in it and some of those perceptions create more stress than others.

There’s certainly a lot of truth in understanding stress from this perspective but there’s an even more refined understanding of the real source of stress. At HeartMath we’ve studied the stress problem. Through the many stress-reduction programs and before-and-after assessments we’ve conducted, we’re in a position to take the pulse of stress in many environments, including corporations, hospitals, government agencies, schools, sports and fitness centers, and with health professionals, teachers, children, and other individuals.

After serious study and observation over 15 years, we’ve determined that it’s not just the “*perception*” of events that cause stress. More importantly, it’s our *emotional response* to those perceptions that make up the substance of stress. Here’s an interesting example.

In just about every survey asking people what causes their stress, the #1 answer is the same—the feeling of not having enough time. So it

appears on first look that time pressure is the culprit. The real culprit, however, as stated in the surveys, is the “*feeling*” of not having enough time. So it’s the emotions—the anxiety, frustration, the feeling of being overwhelmed, and so on that people experience when confronted with time pressure. The stress is found in the experience of our negative emotions. This is important to understand. The lack of ability to address emotions is the primary cause of today’s stress epidemic.

## **Part II: Understanding How to Change the Stress Response**

Often, during the course of any day we experience an emotional roller coaster ride. When emotions have nowhere to go, the emotional energy builds up and then gets vented in frustration, anger, judgment or blame—all different forms of stress. If you can’t find relief, you may blow up or just want to go hide under the covers. This is often called the “fight or flight” response. Stress switches on brain circuits and hormones that prepare the body to protect itself in dangerous situations. The problem is this survival circuitry gets activated by everyday situations that are stressful, but not life-threatening—an argument with your mate, a traffic jam, a looming deadline—until your mind, emotions, and body are on stress overload. But, as we learn how to manage emotions, we can experience the new perceptions needed to transform stress, both individually and globally.

Trying to develop new levels of emotional management could seem impossible but, in fact, it’s not. Fortunately, new research shows that you can stop the momentum of stress and create more inner peace, whatever your circumstances. You don’t have to succumb to ongoing

stress. The key lies not in the mind alone; but, amazingly, it's found in the heart. Exciting new research on the heart has found that there is a way to relieve stress that both comforts you and—most importantly—transforms stress into positive feelings and creative energy.

This concept may seem unusual; but HeartMath's science has now provided new information showing that the physical heart can be used as a transformer to re-pattern your stress circuitry. This research shows that the heart sends powerful signals to the brain that, when harnessed, help you transform your stress responses far more quickly than was thought possible.

We'll explain. The heart actually sends its commands to the brain and the rest of the body in four different ways. These messages from the heart reflect the emotions you are feeling and have a direct impact on how your brain functions. When you experience stress, the heart's messages become erratic, causing the brain to become less active, restricting your ability to think clearly while fueling the stress response. On the other hand, if you're feeling positive emotions like appreciation or care, your heart pulses in a more coherent and ordered rhythmic pattern. The heart's messages then open the brain up, allowing you to perceive new, creative solutions.

The brain remembers these signals and creates patterns that influence your behaviors. By learning how to shift these signals from the heart through activating positive emotions, you can create new patterns that allow you to perceive life as less stressful.

It's not hard to do this. Right now I'd like you to try this simple exercise. Put your hand on your heart, in the center of your chest, and find a sincere feeling of appreciation for someone or something in your life (a person, place, or pet, or an accomplishment, for example). Choose something that's easy to appreciate, with no negative emotional history to color your appreciation. Feel that appreciation from your heart for the next 20 seconds.

Now, notice any changes in how you are feeling compared to before you did this exercise. This is the energetic heart in action. This brief moment of sincere appreciation has probably changed your heart rhythms, sending stress-reducing signals to your brain. It may have even given you some intuitive perception and clarity. This is just a simple exercise and there's more to learn, but hopefully you can get a sense of how you can release yourself from stress by using the power of the heart to regulate the emotions. We call this: *listening to heart intelligence*.

Heart intelligence could sound like an unusual term, but it isn't a mystery. We hear people telling others to use heart intelligence all the time, with different ways of saying it. When you tell children to remember to appreciate, or tell a friend to be honest with himself, or tell someone to follow his heart, these are suggestions of heart intelligence. It's the intelligence of the heart that can give you the new ability needed to manage emotions and get to the source of stress.

Heart intelligence is simply the flow of new awareness and intuition that you experience once the mind and emotions are brought into

alignment with the heart. It can be activated through self-initiated practice. You experience heart intelligence as thoughts and emotions that benefit you and others, and guide you in behaviors that smooth your way through life. Everyone has this intelligence within, waiting to be uncovered.

This type of intelligence is especially useful in shifting attitudes. One attitude shift—connecting with your heart power and intelligence when you feel emotional turmoil or stress—is a small energy investment with big energy savings. It changes your heart rhythms, sending a powerful stress-reducing command to the brain. Making an effort to change an attitude provides emotional regeneration and builds a reserve of high-quality emotional energy that transforms stress.

Regenerating yourself emotionally helps you create a new internal pharmacy that releases stress-reducing hormones. You feel better and you increase your intelligence—not necessarily standard IQ, but intelligence that guides you in dealing with difficult people or situations in a less stressful way.

You can use your heart intelligence to build the emotional power needed to transform stress in three ways: boosting emotional energy, stopping emotional drains, and clearing old emotional accounts (like resentments and judgments of people). Together, they build the emotional resiliency needed to transform stress.

### **Part III: Boosting Your Emotional Power**

The first pathway to emotional regeneration starts with learning what adds to your emotional energy. This means finding out what gives you an emotional boost without giving you an emotional letdown later.

Coffee, sugar, and other stimulants can pick up your emotional energy, but they give only a temporary boost.

Many people also take vacations, get massages, eat health foods, or take vitamins and minerals to relieve stress or boost emotional energy. These approaches may be effective in the short term, but soon the same old stress feelings prevail. That's because these are all external energy boosters. They depend on external factors. There's nothing wrong with external boosters, but they won't relieve stress for long. Even relaxation techniques or exercise often provide only temporary relief.

The most powerful energy boosters are the feelings that we all want more of: feelings like appreciation, genuine care, compassion, kindness, forgiveness, and love. These heartfelt feelings are internal emotional energy boosters. They add high-quality energy to your emotional bank account. They regenerate and sustain you mentally, emotionally, and physically, even when external boosters aren't available.

Emotional regeneration comes from having more of these positive feelings flowing through your system. Engaging the coherent power of your heart to generate and sustain more of these beneficial feelings

can bring you more peace and fulfillment and provide the foundation for transforming stress.

You can easily boost your emotional power by making an effort to find things to appreciate during the day, caring for others, showing a little kindness and having more compassion for yourself.

The second pathway to emotional regeneration is plugging leaks where your emotional energy tends to drain away. You know—the things that trigger feelings of irritation and frustration, or worry and letdown.

These feelings often start with an “irk” or “ugh,” or a dart of insecurity or envy. We all have these feelings. It’s only human. They aren’t bad feelings. It’s what you do with them that matters. For instance, if you let a feeling of irritation build instead of dealing with it, you end up in frustration or anger, which drains huge amounts of emotional energy, leaving you more vulnerable to stress.

You can start restoring your emotional energy by paying attention to the stressful feelings that trigger emotional drain.

If you’d like, try this. During the course of your day, notice your emotional sound effects. It’s an enlightening exercise that gives you more awareness of your feelings and perceptions. Here’s what we mean.

Your outer emotional sound effects are things like the sighs, swear words, negative humor, and expressions whispered under your breath.

There's also your inner emotional sound track; the sounds you make to yourself even if you don't express your feelings aloud. These often include inner sounds like ughs or irks or groans. Your emotional sound effects will influence your next thoughts and choices, and your stress level.

Once you become more conscious of your inner and outer sound effects and the feelings that are going on underneath, you'll start to see where your energy is going. You'll even see humor in your reactions, and that helps release stress too. When you catch yourself draining away your valuable emotional energy, use the power of your heart intent and try to shift to a more positive emotional state. Just focus your attention in the area of the heart, pretend you are breathing through this area and try to find a feeling like care, appreciation or love. As you do, you'll stop the energy drain and you'll hear your emotional sound track change.

The third way to replenish emotional reserves is to clear out old emotional accounts. By old emotional accounts, we mean stored-up feelings or beliefs about past events that cause you to react to current situations with more stress than you would otherwise. In other words, the emotional habits you've developed.

A lot of stress reactions are simply emotional habits. For example, you may have particular kinds of triggers that cause you to automatically fly off the handle with blame and anger. "I just hate it when people..." Well you can fill in the blanks for yourself. Then you start whining at someone or cursing yourself. What's happened is that you've tapped

into an old emotional pattern and are reacting out of habit.

Transforming stress involves recognizing and clearing old emotional accounts so they don't keep triggering the same old emotional habits and drains.

The good news is that they are habits you can change. This isn't necessarily easy but as you learn to listen more to your heart, build up your emotional energy and stop emotional drains, you'll create the power you need to clear emotional accounts. As you build up your positive emotional energy reserves, clearing old accounts will get easier. You'll develop the emotional resilience that helps prevent future stress.

For now, try to identify a couple of old emotional patterns that cause you stress. It shouldn't be too hard to find one or two obvious ones. Stay on the lookout and when one of these comes up and recognize it for what it is — like an old suit of clothes that you don't want to wear anymore. See it as not such a big deal. Practice taking the drama or significance out of the situation and move on. As you increase the power of your heart intent through practice, it will get easier.

It's each person's job to ward off the stress epidemic. It's your job to do what you can to change the environment of stress. Even one person managing emotions through the heart can help change the surrounding environment. You can create a more coherent environment—changing what you can and cushioning what you can't—through the power of your heart's meaningful intent. This takes a little

practice, but so does learning to eat with chopsticks. Then it becomes fun.

As stress continues to proliferate, more people will come to realize that they have to roll up their sleeves at times and go deep in the heart to bring about their own fulfillment. Often, when stress takes you down to a certain level, you go deeper into your heart because there's nowhere else to go. And more times than not, you'll find a major release and come out with a more regenerative way to look at life.

So in summary:

Stress has become all too pervasive, affecting society globally.

Life in general can be very stressful, but don't look at external events as the main source of stress.

It's our perception of events and, more importantly, our emotional reactions to these perceptions that cause stress.

The key to transforming stress lies in developing a new level of emotional management. This can be accomplished by engaging the power of the heart to help change old stress-producing habit patterns.

Going to the heart connects us with our natural ability to accumulate positive emotional energy needed to transform and increasingly prevent stress.

Focus on three areas—boost your emotional energy and effectiveness by making an effort to feel more positive emotions; progressively stop emotional drains by observing what you are feeling and thinking; and last, make genuine efforts to clear out old emotional patterns that trigger the stress response.

With a new understanding of stress and a little sincere practice on engaging the power your heart's intent, you can make great strides towards living a life that's more enjoyable and less stressful.

### **Next Steps**

Through this e-booklet you've hopefully learned some new things about stress in today's world and how to transform it. Rising stress levels are affecting almost everyone, so all of us need new ways to deal with this. At HeartMath we've spent years researching the stress response and helping people reduce the stress in their lives. As a result, we've created a System of tools, techniques, technologies and other resources that have been proven effective in reducing and relieving stress.

This e-booklet gave you a general overview of the stress epidemic today and the mechanics of stress accumulation. Much of the content was taken from

*Transforming Stress* by Doc Childre and Deborah Rozman (New Harbinger, 2005), an easy to read book that offers specific HeartMath techniques to help you manage emotions, reduce stress and bring your emotional power into alignment with your heart . It will provide you with "how-to" information that you can easily learn and apply.

We wish you the best in your efforts to live a life with less stress and more enjoyment. To learn more about HeartMath tools, techniques, technologies and training programs that can help you cultivate a state of coherence and emotional balance, please visit our web site at [www.heartmath.com](http://www.heartmath.com) or call us toll free at 800-450-9111.

Enjoy and Take care!