

## What is positive stress?

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*Stress has a bad rap even though it's part of our human experience. It's never considered good news when someone exclaims, "I'm so stressed out!" This negative stress isn't just common – it's become so problematic that a recent Harris Poll [survey](#) for the American Psychological Association (APA) found nearly two out of every five adults in the US say they can't bring themselves to do anything when stressed.*

*But what about positive stress? While the word has a negative connotation, not all stress is harmful — and it can sometimes make you [healthier and more productive](#).*

### **The benefits of positive stress**

As professor and positive psychologist Dr. [Llewellyn Van Zyl](#) puts it: "We tend to believe that stress is a destructive force that only leads to negative individual and organizational outcomes." Stress, however, can motivate us to perform. According to Van Zyl, stress pushes us to go on dates, work harder at the gym, and meet deadlines at work. "Stress can energize us and help us [improve our productivity](#) and [performance at work](#), and can also help promote a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction when we overcome challenges."

"When we're stressed, more cortisol is pumped into our systems," continues Van Zyl, "and this enhances our cognitive abilities such as improved concentration, memory, and problem-solving abilities." Endorphins, our natural mood boosters, are released when we experience "eustress," or positive stress. They make us feel happy and give us a sense of well-being. "We also know that eustress can strengthen our resilience, increase our grit and help improve our adaptive capacities, helping us cope with future stressors more effectively," Van Zyl says.

Positive stress [improves our physical and mental health](#). "It can reduce the risk of depression, high blood pressure, and heart disease," says [Jennifer Frost](#), chair of an employee resource group on mental health at Paycor, an HR software company. "Positive stress also improves performance and inspires [success](#)."

she says. This kind of stress boosts our resilience and strengthens our confidence and energy. We're teaching our brain that we can do something, whether it's taking on a new responsibility at work or finishing up a project effectively under a deadline.

### **Good stress gone bad**

Eustress is a wonderful asset — but you can have too much of a good thing. When you start feeling [burnout at work](#), it's no longer positive stress. "Negative stress can result in exhaustion or burnout, create [anxiety](#), and contribute to poor focus," says Frost.

Frost tasted the transformation of positive-to-negative stress when she and four colleagues were assigned the substantial responsibility of restructuring their department. Despite being very scrutinized by management, they still felt motivated to do the job well. "We were all really happy to be given the freedom of testing our hypotheses, understanding each other's jobs, and cooperating on how we might increase efficiency and production for our department."

However, the manager in charge of the project wanted to only test their ideas instead of the team's. "We kept voicing our worries, but they went unanswered. A senior manager decided to remove us from the project after realizing how much it was impacting our ability to work, and the project was shelved."

"I had migraines and tension headaches and I had [problems falling asleep](#). I began to overeat and didn't want to leave the house," she remembers. At this point, the excitement and eustress Frost enjoyed at the beginning of the project shifted to "distress," or negative stress. "My thoughts were constantly running back and forth on how I was going to do all of my work and meet my manager's requirements." Ultimately, the project's inefficiency led to its failure and created a stressful environment for the whole team. Frost's experience is a common case of avoidable distress, as [CIPD's 2022 Health and Wellbeing at Work report](#) notes that [management](#) style is one of the most common causes of negative stress at work.

### **...And vice versa**

Yet Frost's workplace was also a place where moments of potential distress turned into productive, positive stress. A little while after the department-restructuring fiasco, Frost received a promotion. She transitioned from [tax](#) specialist to team lead of tax services, where she took on the responsibility of overseeing seven teams. "This was a significant change from my prior role, and all of a sudden I was expected to take charge of these teams and know how to support them in their everyday tasks."

Learning the ropes of this new position was a difficult undertaking. But this time, the challenge evoked eustress. "I used it as a chance to broaden my knowledge and skill set, knowing that it would advance my professional development." Unlike the restructuring project, Frost felt the benefits of her hard work and watched her career advance. Almost a year after her [promotion](#), Frost is still flourishing. "It made me feel exhilarated and ready to take on the world," she explains.

### **Managing stress**

Yet when stress is long-term, positive or negative, it takes a toll on us. "High levels of stress can lead to issues like burnout, anxiety, [depression](#), sleep disturbances, weakened immune system, cardiovascular disorders, and difficulties in maintaining healthy relationships," Van Zyl says. It's essential to remember that these symptoms apply even when the stress we're experiencing is positive. "This cumulative stress,

albeit experienced as excitement, has the same negative effects as distress. Therefore, it's crucial to manage and balance stress effectively."

Here are Van Zyl's tips on keeping all kinds of stress in check:

### **Self-care**

Taking time for ourselves is crucial for managing stress. Van Zyl encourages taking a mental health day when we need it. "Recovery is essential and we need to be more aware of what our bodies and minds need."

### **Self-compassion**

We're human and can only do so much — something we tend to forget. "Showing self-kindness, and humanity, and being mindful of our energy levels and needs can help us more effectively capitalize on the positive aspects of stress," advises Van Zyl.

### **Social support**

Talking with family, friends, and coworkers can help dissipate the stress of feeling stuck or [overwhelmed](#). "Doing this provides us with a means to come up with different perspectives and solutions to complex problems," Van Zyl explains.

### **Work-life balance and saying no**

While attaining the holy grail of work-life balance may seem impossible, it's important to try. "We need to make time to engage in hobbies and activities that bring joy as these can help us relax and recover," Van Zyl says. It's also essential to say "no" when we don't have the capacity to take on a new project or task at work.

Stress is a natural part of life, but regulating it will allow us to reap its benefits. "Embracing eustress while managing distress is key," Van Zyl says, "so try to find a balance between what you think you can do, and what you actually can do."

*Photo: Welcome to the Jungle*

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