

A Deeper Dive into IBS Relief



IBS Relief Now!

Session Five: Turning Stressors into Personal Resilience-Builders

Life Stress and IBS

Stress in life is not only inevitable. Leading researchers have shown that stress is necessary to survive and to thrive. Hans Selye, the father of the field of stress medicine helped us understand that the various stressors we encounter – extremes of cold or hot, starvation, intense physical exertion, powerful mental challenges, or immediate threats to our survival – all have something in common. They have been part of life on earth as long as there has been life on earth. As such, stressors are *any stimulus* to which our body



generates an *adaptive response*.

In other words, stressors are packages of experience, sometimes good and sometimes not, that prompt us to adjust, to adapt, and most importantly, to learn something that will hopefully help us be more successful in the future. In short, encountering stressors in life is the most direct means by which we learn to be more resilient going forward. That truth is what makes learning to be stress resilient so important for managing IBS more effectively.

We have a complex and exquisitely designed stress response system. Once a relevant stressor is detected, in or out of conscious awareness, multiple systems within the brain and body are engaged to make just the right amount of energy available to address our

needs. At the same time, other systems activate self-protecting mechanisms to increase our survival odds. Blood clotting agents are released into our bloodstream in anticipation of potentially being wounded. Visual and hearing acuity gets fine-tuned to assure that we see and hear what is preying on us, or to help us capture the prey we are stalking. The digestive system gets ramped down, so that its high energy demands don't conflict with the immediate energy demands of hunting or escaping from being hunted.

In our discussion so far, there is little reason to link stress exposure and increased IBS risk. The IBS link enters the picture because our stress response system was designed to “get in, get on, and get out – fast.”

See problem. Generate response. Activate response. Response works or it doesn't. End of story.

There is no lingering worry. No stewing with regret over what should have been or could have been. There is no ruminating about a hoped-for future and the mental rehearsal of the dreaded consequences that could befall us if what we wish for doesn't come to pass, or worse, that what we fear the most might really happen. These thoughts represent modern-day stressors unique to human beings. They differ from what our stress

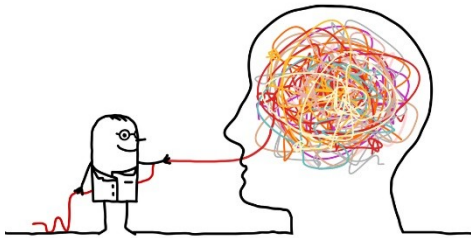


response system was designed to address. And, by functioning as chronic stressors that weigh heavily on the mind, activated merely by imagining them, they generate a chronic need to respond, which depletes and exhausts our brain's and body's stress response machinery.

IBS becomes more active in the presence of these types of mental worries. The reality is, as we have previously noted, if there are significant mental worries present, there are identifiable physical consequences. We are an integrated unit where divisions between mind and body are convenient in theory but which don't really exist inside us. So, chronic mental worry, whether about IBS or about other life challenges, exerts a strong influence on our digestive functioning in ways that lead to the sensitization and dysregulation so characteristic of IBS.

When Stress isn't Distressing

If we were to look at stress from the perspective of the brain, we would discover something



important. We would find that the vast majority of stressors are neutral **until** we perceive them in a negative light. That's right. Until we perceive a situation as negative, which is largely a learned perception based on past experience, a stressor is simply a situation to which we must generate an adaptive response. Stressors are simply environmental invitations to learn something new and to grow from the experience!

Maybe an example will make this point more clearly. From the perspective of the body, sitting in an airplane at 30,000 feet during heavy turbulence is no different than sitting strapped into a roller-coaster ride at the amusement park. Both involve sudden changes in acceleration and deceleration and the pull of gravity. Both leave us physically all too aware of being subject

to forces many times more powerful than we are. Both are events to which we voluntarily expose ourselves. But, for many, that is where the similarity ends.



What is the difference? The perception of the flight's turbulence can leave us feeling we are about to die – a major threat if there ever was one – while the roller

coaster leaves us feeling exhilarated and energized, and eager to get back in line to do it again. Interesting, right? Maybe we should change the familiar saying that, **Seeing is Believing**, to **Perceiving is Believing!** What we perceive determines our beliefs, and our bodies conform to what we perceive and believe by activating stress response systems that are either pleasant and exciting or are distressing and physically unpleasant, like IBS with its multiple and variable symptoms.

Learning Resilient Perception

The last 15 years have seen an explosion in our understanding of the need to revise our old thinking that stress is inevitably a negative experience to be avoided at all costs. One dramatic example of this reconceptualization of stress relates to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). By studying people who are exceptions to the rule that trauma **ONLY** produces long-lasting negative effects, the health care field have discovered something called post-traumatic **growth**. Under certain circumstances, trauma can unleash powerful healing forces that can result in positive and lasting personal changes and greater stress resiliency.

I discovered this personally through work I did in Montana with a group of military veterans who designed a program specifically intended to push veterans diagnosed with PTSD toward positive



resilient change. Through immersing them in a rigorous, demanding, and highly stressful program built around the relationship between horses and their riders, the wounded combat veterans spent time in the rugged Montana mountains learning to redirect their fear-based traumatic responses into perspectives on their lives, which became filled with new meaning, new purpose, and new direction. Without medication and formal psychological treatment, these veterans, in response to tremendous pressures in the wilds of Montana, stopped seeing themselves as victims and instead re-discovered how to express the true potential that resided within themselves. They became resilient perceivers.

The 3 Keys to Building Stress Resilience

Developing stress resilience and reducing your IBS reactivity requires three important steps. (These suggestions are based upon the research of K. McGonigal, PhD, and described in her book, *The Upside of Stress*, Avery Press, 2015).

1. **The Stress Response: Familiarizing yourself with and befriending your body's energy mobilization efforts** – When you perceive a stressor, your body reacts by making energy available to you. This involves a quickening of your heart, restlessness, and the familiar “adrenaline rush” that signals that your body is ready to go to work on whatever task you assign it. This is where learning to practice thoughtful deliberation (Session Four’s **Deeper Dive**) becomes so important. Just because your body mobilizes for action, doesn’t mean you must go into battle against stress. In fact, learning that “discretion is the better part of valor,” as Shakespeare said, enables us to choose when to turn off the negative stress response and turn on our self-soothing and calming response system. This reduces the chronic dysregulation of our digestion system and minimizes IBS reactivity.
2. **Stress as a Social Connection Invitation** – The traditional view is that when facing what we perceive as significant stress, the response is “every man for himself” or “run for the hills.”

In reality, something different happens. Stress also activates our social connection systems. We tend to want to be near others. Being connected to others helps us feel less alone with our distress. Moreover, there is often safety in numbers. Also, it is often the case that when facing stressful challenges, “two heads are better than one.” Being around other people can us conceive of possible solutions we might never have thought of on our own. When experiencing IBS symptoms, the initial impulse is often to separate from others and to isolate ourselves. Building stress resilience often involves having the courage to act counter-intuitively. When distressed by IBS or by life stressors that activate IBS symptoms, it is often helpful to see the comfort and company of a trusted friend or partner.

3. **Stress as Brain Fertilizer** – There is little that stimulates brain growth – neuroplastic change – that rewires the brain faster than encountering something we don’t understand or can’t initially solve. Our brain’s transmission system shifts gears from the rapid, automatic habit mode into the slow and deliberate, problem-solving mode. From an IBS management more, this slower pathway supports the integration of networks across the brain. New habits are born under the stress-induced pressures of these problem-solving efforts. The more we approach new situations with an attitude of curiosity and courage, the more rapidly we transform perceived negative stressors into ever-present opportunities to learn and grown. In researching my book, *Staying Sharp: 9 Keys to a Youthful Brain through Modern Science and Ageless Wisdom*, Simon & Schuster, 2015), this is exactly what I found. Curiosity builds stress resilience to such a degree that it is associated with longer and healthier life expectancy, a higher self-



reported quality of life, and greater feelings of optimism and hope regarding the future. So, get curious, fertilize your brain's growth, and enjoy the benefits of reduced IBS reactivity.

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FACTS – Summary of important points

- Stressors are neutral packages of experience. Our **response** to the stressor determines the impact it will have on our gut, our mind, our day, and our life. And, our response pattern is changeable.
- Our stress response system is ancient. It existed long before we were capable of worrying, fretting, and ruminating about missed opportunities or fears about future possibilities. Self-protection is the main purpose of this ancient stress response system. Recognizing our bodies reactions as efforts to make us safe helps us become **resilient perceivers**.
- Habits involving chronic worry and fear distort, disrupt, and dysregulate our stress response system, with negative consequences for our digestive system and IBS.
- Changing our outlook involves transforming our **mindset**. This enables stressors to be perceived as the brain fertilizers, which foster brain rewiring and that strengthen our stress-resilience.
- The three keys for changing our stress resilience mindset involve 1) learning to befriend our body's efforts to energize and protect us; 2) recognize how stressors pull us to seek safe and empathic connection with others with strengthens our social networks; and 3) rising to the stress challenge, which is to rewire our brains as we learn to weave more meaning and purpose in our daily lives.

ACTS – What you can begin doing NOW

Habits are learning. While sometimes hard to change, they are not hardwired into us. Learning to modify old habits, replacing them with healthier habits that reflect new learning is an important skill when managing IBS. Here are essential steps.

- Stressful experiences are inherently neutral. They can be perceived as irritating or depressing hassles. They can be perceived as unexpected challenges that can be accepted or even as opportunities to grow. Aligning your view of the stressor with your personal values helps you perceive life's stressors as opportunities for resilient growth.
- Generate a list of your core values. Here are examples of core values: trusting, forgiving, curious, generous, adventurous, reliable, empathic, dedicated, patient, simple, authentic, etc. Take 5 minutes to identify your core values. Pick 3. Then, write for 5 minutes as to how these values matter to you and how you live in accord with them. Then, when you next find yourself in a stressful situation, bring your list of core values to mind. Research shows that keeping those cherished values in the front of your mind, softens the impact of the stressor.
- **Lean into** stressors; don't avoid them. Research clearly shows that people who describe their lives as most meaning-filled and fulfilling also describe stressful lives. The key is not in seeking to escape stressors but to learn to transform them into resilience building blocks that help you construct a more joy-filled life with less IBS.

Stay Tuned: In the next **Deeper Dive**, (Session Six) we will explore the role of sleep in managing IBS. Sleep's role as a coordinator and regulator of long-term brain health as well as physical and emotional resiliency is under-appreciated. I believe you'll find the information both enlightening and restful sleep-inducing. See you soon!