

Positively Using Stress to Increase Concentration and Performance

By Kathy Slattengren, M. Ed., [Priceless Parenting](#)

Does parenting ever leave you feeling stressed? When you care about how something will turn out, there is a certain amount of stress involved. One of the things you care most about is your children.

Whether it's getting your kids to school on time, coordinating schedules or dealing with misbehavior, raising kids involves stress. Your kids also have stress in their lives as they respond to expectations from you, their teachers and their friends.

How you respond to stress can either leave you feeling on top of your game or spinning out-of-control. Harnessing the benefits of stress while avoiding the pitfalls is key to using stress to your advantage.

Being Overwhelmed By Stress

When your physical safety is at risk, you have a fight-or-flight response. The thinking part of your brain is bypassed so that you can take immediate action. This is critical if you are about to be hit by a car and need to jump out of the way.

It is this type of stress response that appears in emergencies. There are many stories of people being able to do extraordinary things in dire situations like lift a car off a child. They perform heroic acts in moments of stress without even thinking about it.



When you feel overwhelmed by a stressful situation, it can also trigger the fight-or-flight response. Have you ever found yourself feeling overwhelmed and screaming at your kids? When you respond to your kids by yelling, hitting or threatening, you are experiencing a fight response.

Stress can hinder your ability to function well. Being able to calm down when you are feeling out-of-control is critical to performing your best.

Being Energized By Stress

Athletes competing at the Olympics are certainly under stress. By the time they reach this level, they have developed an ability to perform well in stressful situations. The top performers make it look easy – they are in the flow and give their best performance.

Stress provides energy to your brain and your body. This energy can help you take action towards your goals, find the courage to defend your values or learn from your mistakes.

In her book, [The Upside of Stress](#), Kelly McGonigal's teases apart healthy versus unhealthy responses to stress. McGonigal explains "The energy you get from stress doesn't just help your body act; it also fires up your brain. Adrenaline wakes up your senses. Your pupils dilate to let in more light, and your hearing sharpens. The brain processes what you perceive more quickly. Mind-wandering stops, and less important priorities drop away. Stress can create a state of concentrated attention, one that gives you access to more information about your physical environment."

When a gymnast performs a perfect routine, she is tapping into that positive energy from stress. She is totally concentrating on each moment and doing exactly what she has trained to do.

Instead of having a fight-or-flight response, these athletes are experiencing what McGonigal calls a “challenge response”. She writes “Like a fight-or-flight response, a challenge response gives you energy and helps you perform under pressure. Your heart rate still rises, your adrenaline spikes, your muscles and brain get more fuel, and the feel-good chemicals surge. But it differs from a fight-or-flight response in a few important ways: You feel focused but not fearful. You also release a different ratio of stress hormones, including higher levels of DHEA, which helps you recover and learn from stress.”

For most daily situations having a challenge response to stress will serve you better than a fight-or-flight response. When your kids are pushing your buttons, yelling at them is a fight response. A challenge response might be saying something like “This is really bothering me. I’m going to my room to calm down.”

Your best parenting happens when you can respond to your kids from a place of calm confidence. Your worst parenting moments occur when your stress boils over into an angry response.

Practicing and Preparing

The more you’ve practiced and prepared for a situation, the more likely you are to give your best performance. My son’s TaeKwonDo instructor often spoke to the students about the importance of preparing for the tests. Each belt level test involved reciting Korean vocabulary, being able to state the meaning of the belt level plus being able to execute the forms and break boards.

When it came time to test, it was clear which students had been practicing the vocabulary and definitions. Trying to cram for the test often resulted in students forgetting under pressure.

Preparing for a test or performance far ahead of time increases the likelihood that you will do well. Being able to [control negative thinking](#) is also critical to doing your best in stressful situations. Beating yourself up is not helpful!

When it comes to parenting, each day brings new challenges. Your kids are constantly changing. As soon as you feel competent in dealing with one developmental level they move onto the next!

How can you practice and prepare in parenting? One way is to take [parenting classes](#) and learn from others. You will also get plenty of practice every day. If things don’t go as well as you would have liked, pause and consider how else you could have responded better. Learning from your mistakes is a healthy response to stress.

Stress is part of life. Getting stress to work for you instead of against you is worth the effort!

Kathy Slattengren is an internationally recognized, inspirational parent educator and founder of Priceless Parenting, <http://www.PricelessParenting.com>. Priceless Parenting offers online [parenting classes](#), [parenting presentations](#) and [parent coaching](#). Parents learn to effectively handle misbehavior while building loving relationships. © Priceless Parenting, LLC