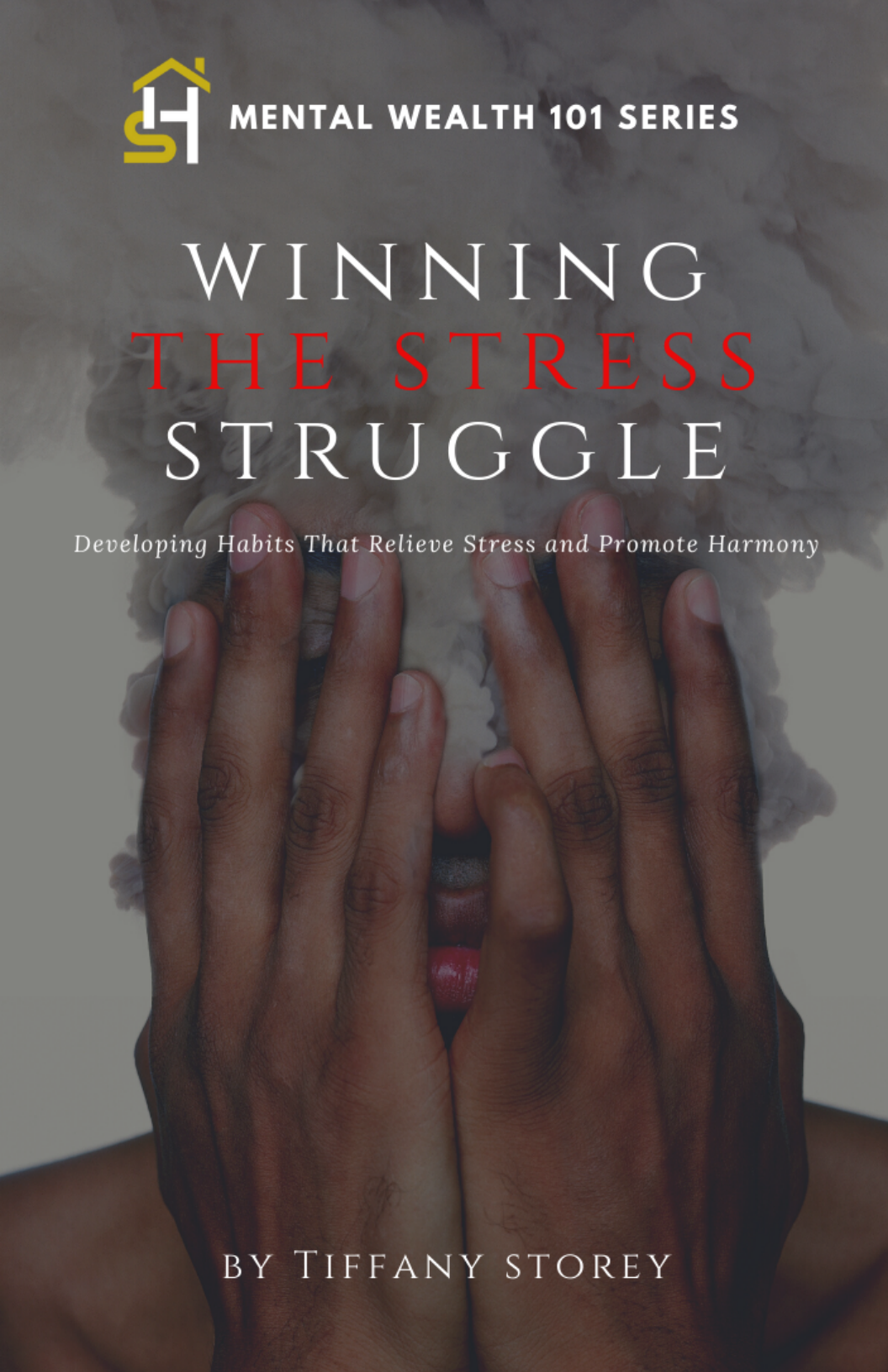
MENTAL WEALTH 101 SERIES

WINNING THE STRESS STRUGGLE

Developing Habits That Relieve Stress and Promote Harmony



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Introduction

Life seems to become more stressful with each passing year. The impact of stress can pose serious challenges to your health and happiness. Much of our stress is the result of habits that have a negative impact on our lives. We create our own stress and become less capable of dealing with it effectively.

Developing healthy habits save time and are similar to the autopilot feature found in commercial aircrafts. By relying on our habits, we free up our mind for other tasks.

While it's easy to see how diet and exercise habits can influence our waistline, it's a little more challenging to accept the idea that our habits can either create stress and misery, or promote relaxation and harmony.

But habits can do exactly that.

> "Being in control of your life and having realistic expectations about your day-to-day challenges are the keys to stress management, which is perhaps the most important ingredient to living a happy, healthy and rewarding life."
>
> - Marilu Henner

The Negative Impact of Stress on Your Life

There are two types of stress: eustress and distress.

Eustress is good, positive stress. Working toward goals or taking a vacation can be stressful, but in a positive way.

However, when most of us talk about stress, we're referring to distress.

Consider the negative impact stress can have on your health:

1. Stress can lead to weight gain. Studies have shown that higher levels of stress frequently reduce the desire to exercise. Stress also has a negative effect on the ability or desire to make healthy food choices.

    - Excess weight is dangerous, especially considering that it can lead to a variety of serious medical conditions, including heart disease, diabetes, hypertension, and sudden death.

    - If you're struggling with your weight, consider the amount of stress in your life.

2. Stress can disrupt your sleep. If you've ever noticed what a lack of sleep can do to your mood, it's easy to imagine what it does to your body. When you're stressed, it can be difficult to fall and stay asleep. Your body and mind need the restoration provided by sufficient sleep.

3. Stress increases the likelihood of serious illness. High levels of stress have been shown to result in a higher prevalence of serious illnesses.

    - Societies and professions with high levels of stress tend to experience the poorest health.

4. Stress has a negative impact on your immune system. Physical and emotional stressors have a detrimental effect on immune system function. This not only makes you more susceptible to catching a cold or other mild illnesses, but it also increases the risk of cancer. Your immune system plays a vital role in the destruction of cancerous cells.

Stress is a powerful force that has an undesirable impact on your physical health. Decreasing the amount of stress in your life greatly enhances your overall health and chances for longevity. Creating positive habits can help to minimize stress.

Stress also influences your happiness and sense of well-being:

1. Stress can negatively affect your mood. Stress is believed to be a leading cause of depression. We've all had that feeling of being trapped and miserable during times of excessive or chronic stress.

    - It's difficult to have a positive outlook toward the future if stress is a big part of your life.

2. Stress can negatively affect your relationships. Whether it arises from money, parenting, work, family issues, or other personal situations, stress can make relationships much more difficult to manage.

Stress and happiness rarely go together. Reducing your stress will likely lead to greater peace, harmony, and happiness.

"The truth is that stress doesn't come from your boss, your kids, your spouse, traffic jams, health challenges, or other circumstances. It comes from your thoughts about these circumstances."

- Andrew Bernstein

How Positive Habits Can Reduce Stress

Our lives are largely the result of our habits. It's easy to see the impact that habits, both positive and negative, have on our lives.

Brushing your teeth each day has a profound impact on the condition of your teeth. Missing a day here and there has little impact, but brushing on a regular basis has a very positive outcome.

Failing to brush your teeth regularly has a very negative effect, and brushing your teeth occasionally doesn't help much. Your dentist will unlikely be able to tell whether you brushed your teeth 10 times or 0 times over the last 6 months. It's the habit of brushing that provides positive results.

Similarly, there are many habits that can reduce your stress and promote the harmony we all crave. Again, these habits won't accomplish much if only used sparingly. It's important to make a daily habit of them.

Remember that stress is something you often do to yourself. Being yelled at by your boss isn't necessarily

stressful. It's your resulting thoughts that create stress. Some examples might include:

- Does this mean I'm going to get fired? How will my family survive?
- I'll never get a promotion. I'll be stuck in this job forever.
- I really need that raise. Now it won't happen.
- My boss hates me. I hate my job. How did I end up here?

Can you see how more positive mental habits could result in less stress? Although these mental habits might be deeply ingrained, they can be altered for the better.

"Happiness is a choice. You can choose to be happy. There's going to be stress in life, but it's your choice whether you let it affect you or not."

- Valerie Bertinelli

Habits That Make Life Easier and More Pleasant

There are certain habits that help minimize stress and promote harmony. Creating new habits that serve you and support your physical and mental health can only make life easier and more fulfilling. Choose habits that help you.

Incorporate these 10 habits into your life:

1. Make a list of the most important things to get done. Completing important tasks each day makes life easier and less stressful. Most of us wake up each day and spend our mornings trying to figure out what do first. Whether it's Monday or Saturday morning, know what needs to be done before your feet hit the floor.

    - Before retiring for the evening, make a list of the things that need to be done the following day. Prioritize them and create a plan for getting them done.

    - By making your list at night, you free up your mind to focus on other things. Your brain is free to work on solutions while you sleep. You can get started immediately and avoid procrastinating.

2. Exercise. Exercise boosts your mood. An intense workout can help to clear the mind, burn off excess energy, and reduce stress. It's good for your body, mind, and waistline, too!

    - Choose a form of exercise that you enjoy. Remember that there are plenty of options for exercising alone or with others.

    - Find a way to make exercise a part of your daily schedule.

3. Be grateful. When feeling stressed, you're probably focusing on the negative. Everything seems to go south when your stress level is sky-high. But you likely have many things in your life that are great.

    - On the drive to work, make a mental list of everything in your life that fills you with a sense of gratitude. It might be your health, children, spouse, home, or even the song on the radio.

    - By focusing on the positive, you will raise your level of happiness.

4. Stay in the present. When your stress level starts to rise, you may dissociate from your environment and start

living more inside your head. Stress has a way of making us fret about the future and focus on the negative. This cycle only magnifies the stress.

- Imagining the worst isn't going to help. If anything, it will make you less capable of dealing with the issue at hand.

- It's important to bring yourself back to the present moment. Focusing on your environment is one of the best ways to snap back to reality.

- Look around and describe 10 things you see. If possible, describe them aloud. For example, "I'm looking out the window and see a small brown dog running through the grass. He has a red collar and floppy ears."

- After you've described 10 things you see, go through a similar process with what you hear, smell, and feel. Depending on the environment, finding 10 items may be difficult, so just list as many as you can.

- By the time you're done, you'll be back in the present moment and out of your head. Your stress level will be lower, too!

5. Monitor your mood and self-talk. Most challenges are easier to prevent than they are to solve. It's much easier to avoid gaining weight than it is to lose 100 pounds. It's easier to brush your teeth each day than it is deal with severely decayed teeth.

    - If you're able to notice when your mood and thoughts start to go awry, it's much easier to bring yourself back to a more positive condition. So when you first start to feel stressed, acknowledge it and begin to deal with it.

    - It takes time to develop this habit, but it's critical. You might want to set a timer to remind yourself to review how you're feeling as each hour passes.

6. Spend some time on enjoyable activities. If you feel like you rarely get to take part in enjoyable activities, now is the perfect time to start. There's rarely a better time than the present.

    - Think about something you've always dreamed of doing and come up with a plan to make it a regular part of your life. Thirty minutes of enjoyable activity is bound to make you feel better.

7. Meditate or pray. Meditation is one of the best ways to give our brains a rest. Even sleep isn't as mentally restful because we often spend all night dreaming about work or bizarre situations.

    - Many individuals find benefit in prayer. It can provide a peaceful perspective and hope for the future.

    - Consider adding meditation, prayer, or both into your daily schedule. Check out some resources at the bookstore or online to help you get started.

8. Practice forgiveness. If you're unable to forgive, it's difficult to be at peace. Focusing on old hurts likely gets you worked up. Furthermore, failing to forgive yourself for your own missteps can hold you back from the peace and harmony you desire.

9. Be focused on solutions. Are you assertive when it comes to solving dilemmas, or do you stick your head in the sand and hope they'll resolve themselves? Although many of us are great at distracting ourselves from unpleasant situations, this is rarely a good solution.

- When something is causing you stress, take the time to examine the issue, come up with the best possible solution, and put it into action. Isn't this much better than hoping for the best?

10. Choose something to look forward to. It's challenging to enjoy life if you lack something that excites you when you look at your future. You could choose to highly anticipate a vacation, the birth of a child, or your first book being published.

    - We all need things to look forward to. Create a compelling future.

These 10 habits will serve you well. With a little effort, you might even come up with some additional habits that will be even more effective for your personal situation.

What will help you the most? Think about it.

"Stress is nothing more than a socially acceptable form of mental illness."

-Richard Carlson

How to Create New Habits

Deciding to adopt new habits sounds great on paper, but it can be challenging to put them into action. How many times have you tried to exercise on a regular basis, only to find yourself back on the couch after a few days or weeks?

There are many strategies that can make installing and maintaining new habits easier.

Follow these steps to create long-lasting, positive habits:

1. Choose the time and place. Many positive habits will be centered on a time, place, or both. For example, you might exercise before work. Or you might meditate in the evenings in the spare bedroom.

    - Having a specific time or place to perform and perfect your new habits is instrumental in ensuring they quickly become a regular part of your life.

2. Start with one habit at a time. It's natural to resist change. Trying to change too much at once is frequently a recipe for disaster. Begin with a single habit. When you're performing that habit reliably, add in another. Continue this until you've incorporated all

the habits that you believe will relieve your stress and promote harmony in your life.

- Willpower is only available in finite quantities. Adding multiple new habits at the same time requires far more willpower than most of us have in reserve.

- There's no hurry. Take whatever time is necessary to install each new habit completely. It might take a month or even longer.

3. Start with the easiest habit. How can you give yourself the best odds for success? Start with the habit you believe will be the easiest to perform religiously. A little success will encourage you to continue adding more positive habits, and make your progress much smoother.

4. Understand why. Consider each habit and what it will add to your life. If you're unable to see the benefit in a particular habit, you'll be unlikely to stick with it.

    - Reminding yourself of the importance of the habit will dramatically increase the odds of being successful.

5. Reward yourself. As you reach various milestones, give yourself a little reward. Even a single week of 100% compliance is a reason to celebrate. Keep the rewards small, so you can have more of them.

6. Focus for 30 days. Psychologists often claim that it takes 30 days to create a new habit. Do everything you can to successfully get through those first 30 days successfully. You'll likely keep the habit forever if you can just survive that month. Stick with it!

    - Missing a single day here and there isn't a big deal. However, missing two consecutive days is simply creating the habit of not doing the activity.

7. Have a trigger. Habits are much easier to create if we have something that reminds us to do them. A good trigger is something that automatically happens each day.

    - For example, it might be getting out of bed, putting on your shoes, eating lunch, or sitting down at your desk. Anything that you already do every day can serve as a reminder to perform your new habit.

8. Prepare. Some habits require planning, equipment, software, or other consideration. If you're going to

exercise in the morning, you'll probably need to set your alarm to wake up earlier. It might also make sense to have your workout clothes laid out and ready to go.

- Perhaps there's an app that can assist you with getting organized. Perhaps you're just missing the knowledge you need to be successful.

- Plan ahead and implement the necessary preparations to ensure your success.

New habits can be challenging to develop, but these strategies will make it go more smoothly.

"One of the best pieces of advice I ever got was from a horse master. He told me to go slow to go fast. I think that applies to everything in life. We live as though there aren't enough hours in the day but if we do each thing calmly and carefully we will get it done quicker and with much less stress."

- Viggo Mortensen

Remove Old Habits That Are Detrimental to Your Progress

Typically, we make life more challenging than it needs to be. It isn't just the new habits that are challenging to install. We all have well-established negative habits that can prove to be formidable obstacles.

Contemplate these ideas for removing those pesky old habits from your life:

1. Make a list of your negative habits. Think about the habits you're attempting to install and consider which of your current habits will be obstacles. Maybe you need more sleep, but you play poker every Wednesday night until 3:00 AM.

    - Do you distract yourself by watching TV or overeating when you get stressed?

    - Do you fall asleep whenever you try to meditate or pray?

2. Create positive alternatives that provide the same or a similar benefit. What do you gain by performing the

negative habit? For example, playing poker might be about spending time with your friends. Is there another time or way you could see them without disrupting your sleep schedule?

- It's important to replace the negative habit with a new habit that provides the same benefit. It's very challenging to give up something that feels good. The key is to find something with similar benefits, but without the negative aspects.

"We need to distinguish between stress and stimulation. Having deadlines, setting goals, and pushing yourself to perform at capacity are stimulating. Stress is when you're anxious, upset, or frustrated, which dramatically reduce your ability to perform."

- Andrew Bernstein

What To Do When Challenges Occur

In most cases, new habits are successful at first. It's definitely easier when motivation and enthusiasm are high. However, there are distractions that make compliance more challenging. Vacations, illnesses, and other unforeseen circumstances can result in a few days of non-compliance suddenly turning into weeks.

Consider these strategies to get past the hurdles when implementing your new habits:

1. Have a contingency plan. If you normally run after work, have a back-up plan in case it's raining or you have to work late.

    - Consider the potential obstacles to each habit and create solutions to deal with them effectively.

    - Have a back-up plan ready to go before you need it.

2. Make a list of your negative triggers. Negative triggers are things that distract you from your new behaviors. It might be a particular friend that focuses on negative

topics. Perhaps flipping through the channels before bedtime leads to you watching a movie until 2:00 AM.

3. Manage your expectations. Expecting too much, too soon, can have negative consequences. It isn't necessary to be perfect. A few slip-ups aren't a reason to get upset and discard your new routine. Expect to experience a few challenges.

    - Avoid putting too much pressure on yourself. Giving a task too much emphasis can make it appear less appealing.

4. Start over even smaller. If you're consistently struggling, start over at the beginning. But this time, make it easier on yourself. Maybe 30 minutes of exercise is too overwhelming at the beginning. Start with one minute. Even though one minute of exercise doesn't have a lot of practical value, it makes getting to 2 minutes of exercise a little easier.

    - Taking small steps and making adjustments can ensure your long-term success.

"Many of us feel stress and get overwhelmed not because we're taking on too much, but because we're taking on too little of what really strengthens us."

- Marcus Buckingham

Conclusion

By taking control of your habits, you can reduce stress and increase harmony in your life. Habits are powerful tools of efficiency. Consider how much time you'd lose each day if you had to concentrate on how to drive, tie your shoes, or brush your teeth. We're able to do these tasks without even thinking about them. Sometimes we can even do other things at the same time.

But our habits can also betray us. Focusing on your struggles rather than finding solutions, staying up too late, and creating distractions are all examples of habits that fail to support peace and happiness.

Add a few positive habits and eliminate a few negative ones. In 30 days, you'll be well on your way to making a drastic change in your life.

"You must learn to let go. Release the stress.
You were never in control anyway."

- Steve Maraboli