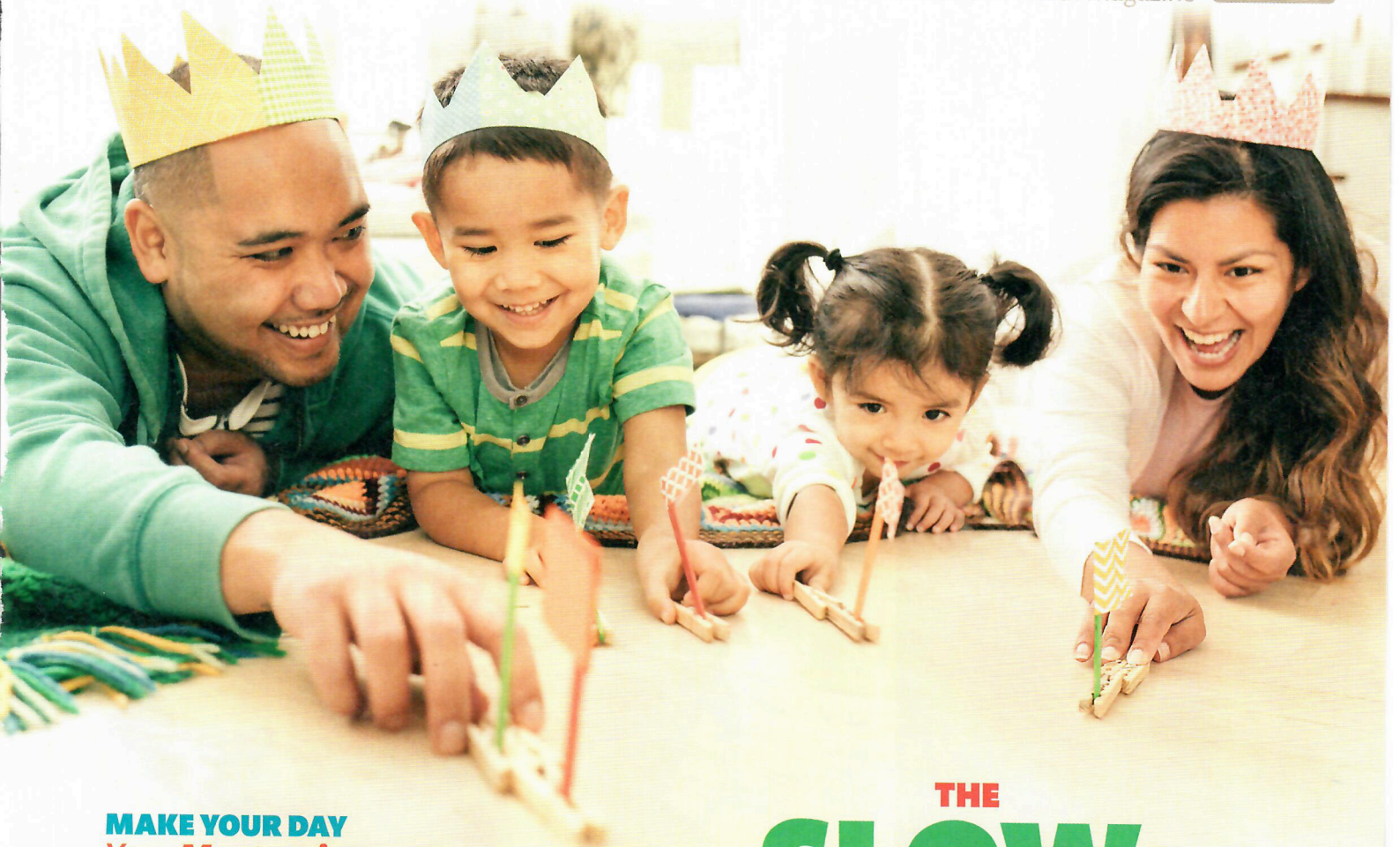


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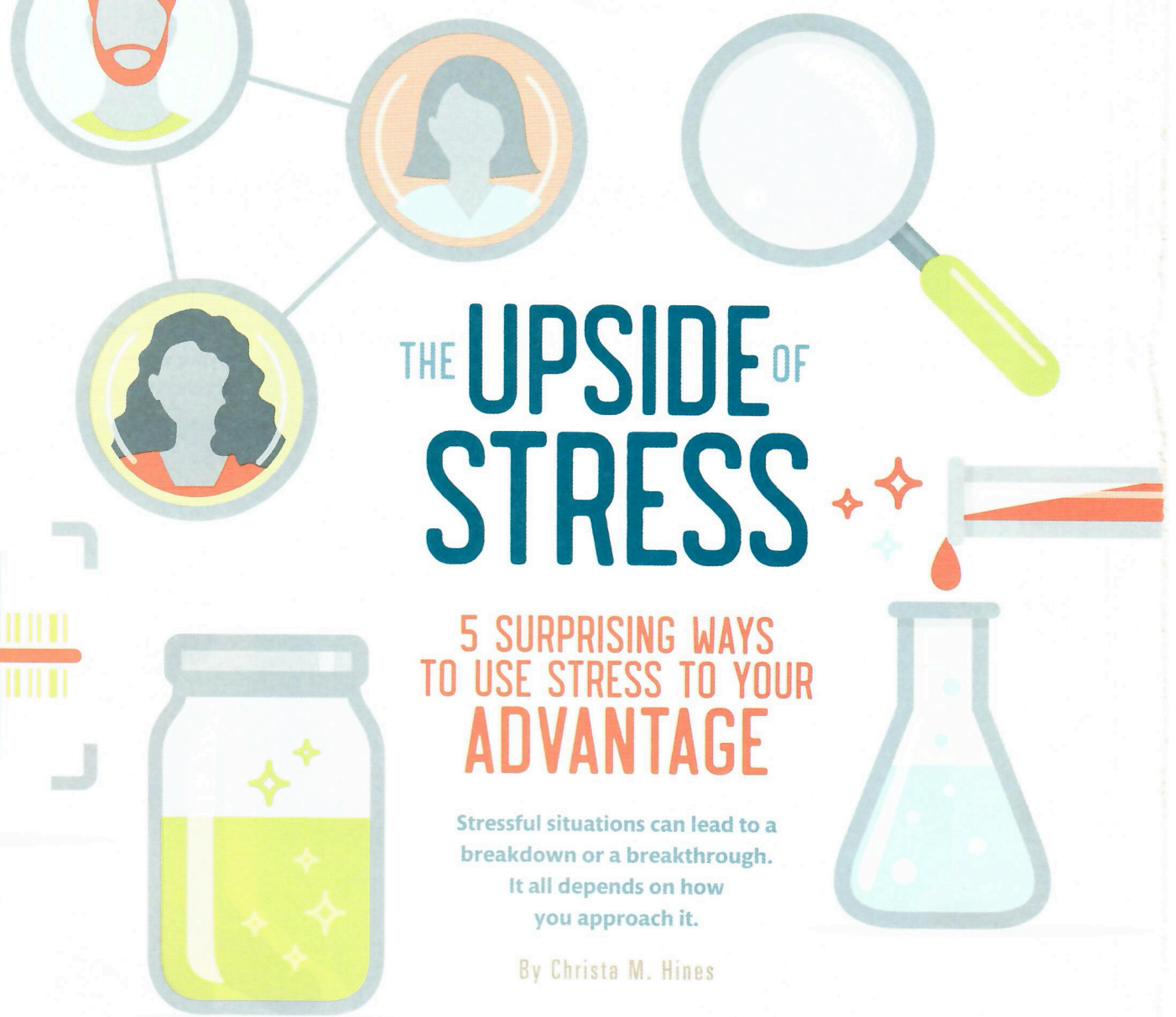
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THE UPSIDE OF STRESS

5 SURPRISING WAYS TO USE STRESS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Stressful situations can lead to a breakdown or a breakthrough. It all depends on how you approach it.

By Christa M. Hines

From work pressures and financial worries to family concerns and global issues, stress is an inescapable part of modern life. But is all stress bad? And if not, is there a way to leverage stress to work for us instead of against us?

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOOD AND BAD STRESS

Stress is a normal part of life. It's the body's natural response to change, challenges, and threatening situations.

Grief, trauma, natural disaster, financial struggles, relational conflict, or an unhealthy workplace can all cause distress. **Distress**, a form of chronic stress, releases stress hormones into the body for prolonged periods of time. With chronic stress, life feels out of our control. We may feel in over our

heads, overwhelmed, anxious, and uncertain, like flying solo in a fog with no landing gear or navigational instruments.

Chronic stress is exhausting, and if it goes unmanaged, it can lead to mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression, and physical health issues, such as body pain, headaches, heart disease, obesity, stroke, and digestive conditions.

Eustress, on the other hand, is a positive form of stress that releases short bursts of stress hormones into the body.

"Good stress is the type we have when we're learning and growing. A good parallel is if you can imagine on a physical level when you're at the gym lifting weights," says clinical psychologist Chloe Carmichael, PhD, author of *Nervous Energy: Harness the Power of Your Anxiety*. "You're shaking a little bit, but you're safely building the muscles, working

just at the edge of strength. That's great. That's when you're building muscle."

You can recognize good stress as that buzzy adrenaline rush you get when you jet off to a dream destination, go on a first date, get married, land a new job, or buy a home. Although you may be nervous because the situation stretches you outside your comfort zone, you come away feeling euphoric and more confident. Even a roller coaster or intense movie, with its edge-of-your-seat twists and turns, can trigger eustress.

"Eustress serves to have positive effects, such as motivating us, making us more productive and more creative, and making us feel more confident about whatever task, activity, or project we're working on," says psychologist Carol Chu-Peralta, PhD, founder and clinical director for the Center for Resiliency in Montvale, New Jersey.

Whether you're more likely to experience distress or eustress can vary by individual and situation. According to a study in the *British Journal of Health Psychology*, access to the right resources can make a big difference between a situation triggering chronic stress versus eustress.

Supplies of time, money, confidants, and coping mechanisms can turn something one person finds challenging yet exciting into something another person finds unmanageable and distressing.



If you tend to perceive a change or novel experience with heart-pumping trepidation or fear, try shifting your perspective.

"Consider the reframe of a stress event as a life experiment," Chu-Peralta says. "Because literally every second of the day, life is throwing us an experiment, meaning it's throwing an opportunity at us to try out a different skill or a different approach."

How did you handle a similar stressful event in the past? If it didn't go well, what did you learn? What can you do differently this time?

Suppose you're feeling anxious about moving to a new community. The last time you pulled up stakes, you spent months feeling lonely and unhappy. Can you experiment with ways to plug into your new community with more intention? For example, if you love to read, join a neighborhood book club. Want to get in shape? Take a fitness class. Passionate about animal welfare? Volunteer at a local nonprofit.

"If it ends up having a relatively positive effect or a different outcome than in the past, that serves as evidence that you're capable of handling or getting through stressful events in the future," says Chu-Peralta.

2 GET CURIOUS.



If something in your life distresses you, dig into why. Take procrastination as an example. A recent study published in *JAMA* found that procrastination not only increases our stress levels, it can also lead to issues like anxiety and depression, higher rates of loneliness, poor sleep, inactivity, and even physical pain.

Understanding why you're procrastinating puts you back in the driver's seat. If you procrastinate on cleaning the house, is it because you feel resentful that no one else in the family helps? If you're procrastinating on a work assignment, is it because the perfectionist in you is worrying about a negative outcome?

EVERY SECOND
OF THE DAY,
LIFE IS
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TO TRY OUT
A DIFFERENT
SKILL.



“Now, to balance this thought out, you need to identify what you can do about it,” Chu-Peralta says. “What are your options?”

Can you divvy up household responsibilities among your family members? Does it make sense to hire a professional house cleaner?

And what about that persnickety perfectionism? Distinguish if you’re feeling stuck because of perfectionism or a drive for excellence.

“Perfectionism is a needless way of picking at yourself over unrealistic standards—things that nobody can actually do, like typing 1,000 pages with zero typos,” Carmichael says. “A drive for excellence,” on the other hand, is an indicator that “there’s something you could actually do to improve.”

Maybe you’re struggling because there’s a knowledge gap and you need more information

that requires insights from a colleague or supervisor. Think about small steps you can take to move forward. When you test out creative solutions, you shift from distress into eustress with a surge of positive, forward momentum.

3 CONSIDER YOUR ENERGY SUPPLY.



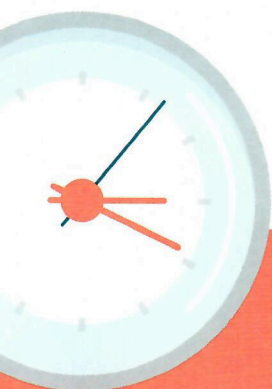
Your child needs help with homework. A healthy dinner isn’t going to make itself. Your boss wants those financial reports ASAP. Your mom needs help getting to the doctor. The car is making funny noises. Your partner would like a word. . . With all of these necessary responsibilities competing for our attention, it’s no wonder many of us are walking around frazzled, distracted, and irritated.

Now, imagine you have a jar that contains your daily allotment of energy.

“That jar is all the energy that you’re capable of putting out for that day,” Chu-Peralta says. “If I’m using 100 percent of the energy within that jar solely within the role of being a productive employee, then I have absolutely no energy left to put toward any of my other roles in the day.”

Think about how you’d like to disperse your energy throughout each day to strike a better balance. “A balanced approach means it needs to be an emotional and a rational decision,” Chu-Peralta says. “How would I feel by withdrawing some of the energy I’m putting toward that employee role?” Now, think about it factually. “What would it look like if I’m not taking on 10 tasks assigned to me this month? I’m going to speak to my boss and see if I can only take nine.”

Test out small changes. Maybe you decide not to look at work emails between 8 P.M. and



QUICK WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS

- ❖ **AVOID “FAKE BREAKS,”** like numbing out with drugs, alcohol, or TV.
- ❖ **TAKE BREAKS FROM SOCIAL MEDIA.**
If this is hard, change your phone settings to black and white mode, which makes it less tantalizing to scroll.
- ❖ **SLOW YOUR BREATH; SLOW YOUR RACING MIND.**
 - 1 ▶ Close your eyes and sit with your hands in your lap.
 - 2 ▶ Inhale, filling your lungs with air.
 - 3 ▶ Feel your middle ribs expand horizontally.
 - 4 ▶ Notice as the upper chest lifts with air.
 - 5 ▶ Hold that moment at the top of the inhale.
 - 6 ▶ Repeat in reverse. Notice how your breathing and frantic thoughts begin to slow.

SOURCE: CHLOE CARMICHAEL, PHD

8 A.M. to ensure you're present with your family, get the sleep you need, and can exercise before work.

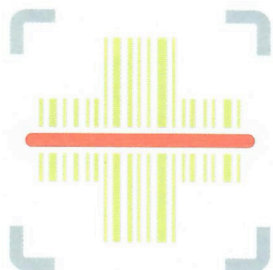
If you're balancing work and caregiving, would your supervisor be open to a hybrid schedule or a four-day workweek?

"Use trial and error to see what works instead of prematurely marrying yourself to a drastic change, which will ultimately lead to dissatisfaction and failure," says Chu-Peralta.

Even if you derive positive energy from your work or family responsibilities, finding ways to recharge remains essential to avoiding eventual depletion and burnout.

"Build activities into your schedule so you have the freedom to be passionate, involved, and excited about your work without having your other needs go unattended," Carmichael says. "Maybe try a standing Sunday brunch with girlfriends or a standing Friday morning cell phone walk-and-talk to catch up with a friend in another state."

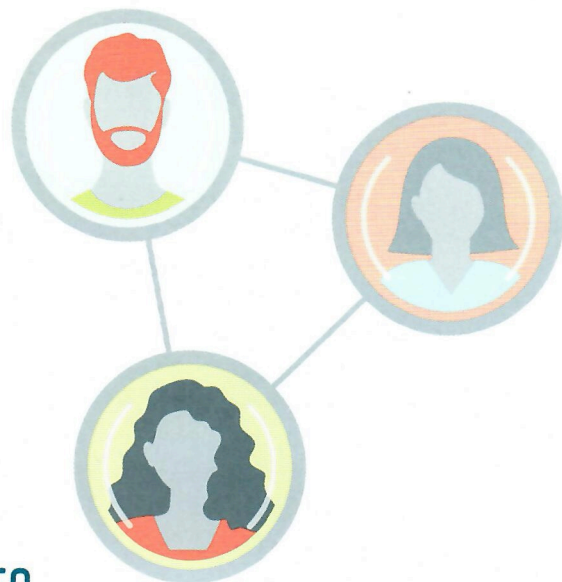
4 SCAN FOR THE POSITIVE.



Paying attention to the positive things that happen in your life can help you dial down the intensity of the negative events.

When we only focus on the negative and disregard the positive, psychologists call that cognitive dampening. Instead of savoring positive events, we downplay them.

"Challenge yourself every day by asking: 'What are the three best things that happened to me today?' You're training your brain to scan for the positive stuff," Carmichael says.



5 LET STRESS LEAD TO CONNECTION.

Although it's not always easy to coordinate time with friends when you're feeling swallowed by work and family issues, your health will thank you.

Isolation is a form of negative stress that puts us at risk for cardiovascular disease, mental health issues, obesity, and early death. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, healthy social networks help us better cope with stress, manage anxiety and depression, and reduce the risk of chronic disease.

When you're stressed, you might find yourself wanting to phone a friend, but you may hesitate because you don't want to burden them. However, reaching out to your social network is a natural and healthy instinct.

"Biologically, whenever we're stressed out, the brain releases the hormone oxytocin [which gives us] the desire to share what we are stressed out about with someone else," Chu-Peralta says. "The coping skill of leaning into our community is built within us."

If stress is interfering with your health and quality of life, consult a licensed therapist or mental health care provider.

Christa M. Hines is a content strategist and award-winning writer.