

By Lacy Wolff, ERS Health Promotion Administrator



We hear a lot about stress these days, and how it is linked to chronic disease. There is definitely a link between stress and health. However, our minds are powerful, and some researchers suggest that how we perceive stress can make all the difference.

### Consider this scenario, for example:

On your drive to work, you sit in traffic for a good amount of time. If you are frustrated because of the traffic, and, once at work, anticipate that you will have to sit in traffic again after your workday ends (“Ugh!”), you will experience physiological changes in your body:

- 1) You activate your stress response system. The body goes into fight, flight or freeze mode.
- 2) Your cortisol and adrenaline (stress hormones) levels increase as a result.
- 3) Your higher levels of cortisol and your stress put you at greater risk for heart disease, strokes, anxiety, depression, digestive problems, weight gain, headaches, sleep dysfunction, hypertension, as well as memory and concentration problems.

### Now consider this scenario:

You know that your drive to work will be slow going because of traffic, so you plan ahead and find a great podcast to listen to. You arrive at work having already started the day by learning something new. When your workday ends, you decide to enjoy the quiet and use the drive home as a way to decompress and reset.

What the two scenarios show is that how we *perceive* the traffic and the drive affects our health—not the traffic itself. Simply put, your mindset will affect your response to the stress.

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Fortunately, mindset is something we can train, and it starts with awareness (or mindfulness). It is understanding that the way you look at things has a greater impact on you than the thing itself.

Try thinking of stress as inevitable, and mostly good for us. Stress helps make us who we are, and pushes us if we are struggling to meet a deadline. For example, don't say: “Oh, I'm so stressed out.” Reframe your thinking. Say, instead: “I am going to double-down and get this done.”

Remember that you are hard wired for stress. Stress can make you stronger, not weaker. This new way of thinking can make a difference in your health and relationships, and may also improve your productivity.

If you would like to learn more about strategies to address your response to stress, please join us for a webinar called “Introduction to Mindfulness: What, Why and How” Friday, April 10, at 10 a.m. or 12 p.m. You can register through the [ERS Wellness Events Calendar](#).



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