A New Paradigm for Managing Stress

How Adaptive Inquiry® transforms Derailment Risks into Advancement Opportunities

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Background and Overview

When asked about stress in their workplace, business leaders consistently tell us three things:

1. The level of stress being experienced by their employees is at or near an all-time high.
2. A certain level of stress keeps employees on their toes and moving forward, but beyond this level, people start losing their edge, taking shortcuts, making mistakes, behaving badly, disengaging, and jumping ship.
3. Stress is having a significant impact on the bottom line.

Third-party research bears out these assessments:

- 41% of employees say they typically feel tense or stressed out during the workday. (American Psychological Association, 2009)
- 7 out of 10 employees identified as "high potentials" derail, and most of these derailments can be traced to stress-induced behavior. (Dotlich & Cairo, 2003)
- In a study of a large, multi-employer, multi-site employee population, healthcare expenditures for employees with high levels of stress were 46% higher than those for employees who didn't have high levels of stress. (Goetzel et al., 1998)
- Job-related stress is estimated to cost U.S. industry more than $300 billion a year in absenteeism, turnover; diminished productivity; and medical, legal and insurance costs. (Rosch, 2001)

When asked what they're doing to address the issue of stress in their workplace, most of the business leaders we spoke to told us that beyond allocating funds to their Employee Assistance Program (EAP), they really didn't see much they can do about it. Stress, they believe, is an inevitable part of modern corporate life, and given global competition, technological innovation and tightening regulations, the problem is only going to get worse.

We disagree. We believe the current epidemic of occupational stress has less to do with business conditions and more to do with a pervasive misunderstanding of what stress is, its underlying cause, and the options available for resolving it. In this article, we'll:

1. Present a series of observations which, taken together, comprise a new theory of stress
2. Illustrate, through the use of a case study, how this new theory of stress is being used to resolve stress and increase performance in corporate settings

We'll begin by dispelling a common misconception about what causes stress.

The Actual Versus Perceived Cause of Our Stress

A common misconception is that stress is caused by what's happening in the world. *"It was a scary situation." "This project is so frustrating!" "He made me angry!" "Last quarter's results were quite disappointing."* Common to all these statements is the assumption that our

When we mistakenly attribute the cause of our stress to unfavorable life conditions:	When we correctly attribute the cause of our stress to inadequate self-effectiveness:
"I'm afraid because there's a threat out there."	"I'm afraid because I'm at a loss to *neutralize* a **threat**."
"I'm angry because someone did something they shouldn't have done."	"I'm angry because I'm at a loss to *assert* a **right**."
"I'm anxious because something bad might happen."	"I'm anxious because I'm at a loss to *mitigate* a **risk**."
"I'm frustrated because something/one is thwarting my progress."	"I'm frustrated because I'm at a loss to *achieve* a **goal**."
"I'm resentful because someone hurt me and hasn't made amends."	"I'm resentful because I'm at a loss to *air* a **grievance**."
Etc.	Etc.

stress is being caused by events and circumstances, but a closer examination reveals that this assumption is the result of a cognitive error in which we're mistaking a stimulus for a cause.

We feel stressed, not because of what's happening in the world, but because we lack confidence in our ability to meet our needs in the midst of what's happening. Stress arises not from an evaluation of unfavorable life conditions, but from an evaluation of inadequate self-effectiveness.

For example, let's say you're feeling stressed about an upcoming project review meeting. You feel ashamed at the prospect of telling your teammates you're not going to deliver your piece on time and you feel apprehensive at the thought of being chewed out by your boss afterwards. And, when you reflect on why you're behind, you feel frustrated with regard to the number of times your computer has crashed and resentful toward the IT guy, who seems more intent on flirting with a woman in Sales than working on your computer problem.

While it may be tempting to attribute your stress to being behind on your deliverables, having an abusive boss, seeing your computer crash, or having to rely on a co-worker who's more interested in flirting than doing his job are evidence that your feelings of shame, apprehension, frustration, and resentment are not the direct consequence of these events and circumstances, per se. Rather, these painful emotions are the direct result of your subconscious mind being at a loss to meet your needs to be seen as a reliable team member, be treated with mutual respect by your boss, achieve the goals you've set for yourself around this project, and air what you believe to be a legitimate grievance to the guy in IT.

Whenever we blame our stress on events and circumstances – be it global competition, fickle customers, poor market conditions, micromanaging bosses, insubordinate employees, backstabbing co-workers, overly aggressive deadlines, etc. – we're mistaking stimulus for cause. The true cause of our stress is an inability to meet our needs in context of these events and circumstances.

While this might seem like a subtle point in theory, it makes a huge difference in practice. In fact, as we'll show later in this article, distinguishing between stimulus and cause is the single most important practice for managing stress. But, to see why, we'll need a few more distinctions. Let's look now at the relationship between needs, stress and painful emotions.

Needs, Stress and Painful Emotions

Just as we have physiological needs such as taking in nourishment and eliminating waste, we have psychological needs such as averting impending injuries/losses and achieving goals. Just as our body is constantly working

Psychological Need	Subconscious Stress	Painful Emotion
To *assert* what we believe to be our **rights**	We are at a loss to *assert* a **right**	Anger
To *mitigate* what we perceive as **risks**	We are at a loss to *mitigate* a **risk**	Anxiety
To *avert* what we believe to be impending **injuries/losses**	We are at a loss to *avert* an impending **injury/loss**	Fear
To *achieve* the **goals** we've set for ourselves	We are at a loss to *achieve* a **goal**	Frustration
To *air* what we believe to be legitimate **grievances**	We are at a loss to *air* a **grievance**	Resentment

"behind the scenes" to meet our physiological needs, our subconscious mind is constantly working "behind the scenes" to meet our psychological needs. In fact, we typically aren't aware of a physiological need until our body is struggling to meet it, at which point the struggle is made known through some form of bodily discomfort such as hunger pains or abdominal pressure. Likewise, we typically aren't aware of a psychological need until our subconscious mind is struggling to meet it, at which point the struggle is reflected through a painful emotion.

Although it's common for people to equate stress with painful emotions, it's both erroneous and dangerous to do so. When we manage our emotions, we're managing the *symptoms of our stress, rather than its underlying cause. We make this mistake every time we invoke any of the following strategies:*

- Suppressing awareness of our emotions, i.e., pushing our emotions out of our mind or pretending we feel differently than we do—causing us to lose connection to our needs and live "in our heads"
- Acting out what we interpret to be the impulse of our emotion, i.e., throwing our laptop against the wall or cursing at a co-worker—often damaging our reputation and self-esteem in the process
- Numbing ourselves, i.e., with food, drugs, TV, video games, etc.—putting us at risk of addiction, and in the case of drugs, reducing our brain's plasticity

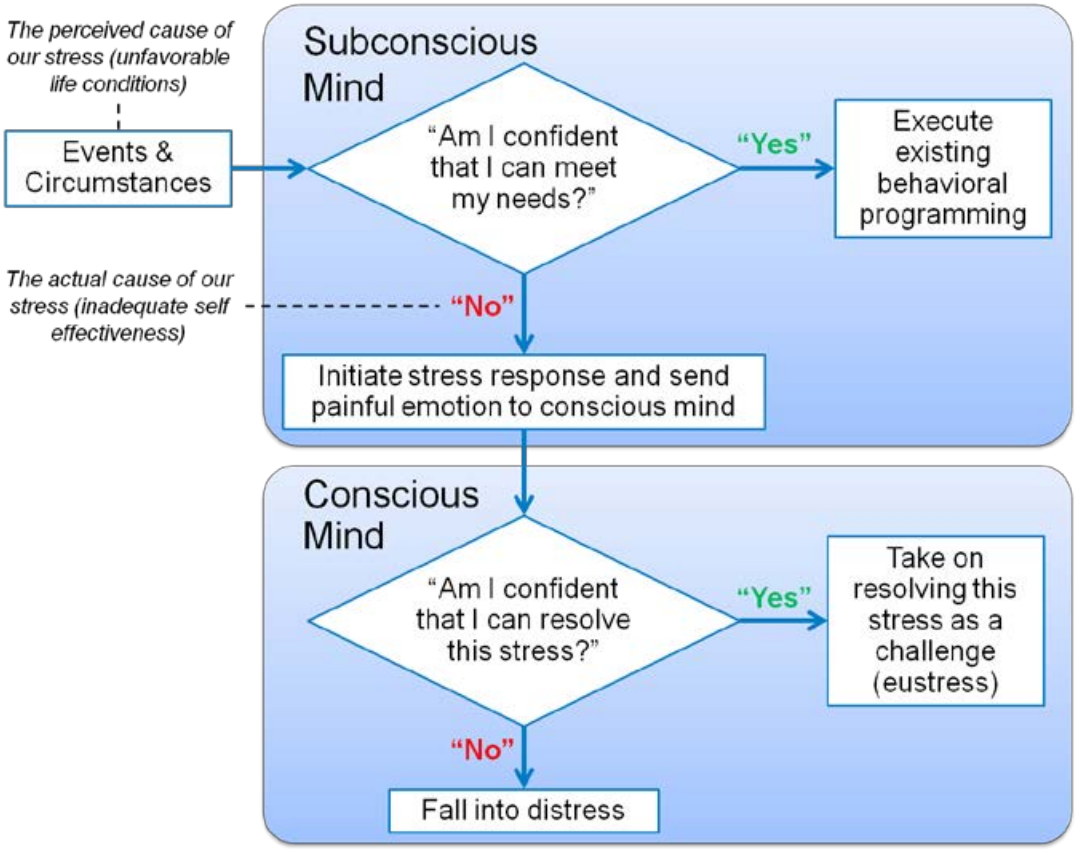
The problem with all these approaches is they fail to address the underlying cause of our painful emotions (e.g., our subconscious stress) while posing serious risks to our wellbeing and the wellbeing of others. The only real solution for managing our stress is to confront our subconscious mind's assessment that it lacks the ability to meet one or more of our psychological needs and resolve this assessment. We'll describe a process for doing this later in this article. Before we do, we must clarify the division of labor between our conscious and subconscious minds and the types of "stress" experienced by each.

Stress, Distress and Eustress

Contrary to the common sense view that we go through our day consciously directing our behavior, research has shown that upwards of 95% of it is orchestrated by our subconscious mind. Conscious thought simply isn't needed for activities we already know how to perform (i.e., driving a car). When, however, our subconscious mind encounters a situation (i.e., deer by the side of the road) for which it isn't confident it can meet one or more of our needs (i.e., our need to avert an impending injury/loss), it calls on our conscious mind for assistance, with this "cry for help" taking the form of a painful emotion (i.e., fear). It's then up to our conscious mind to resolve the stress our subconscious mind is under by modifying our subconscious beliefs (i.e., *"upon closer examination, that's a statue of a deer and I am not in imminent danger of injury/loss")* and/or behavioral strategies *(i.e., "tap on brake to alert the driver behind me, then slow down and prepare to stop if necessary").*

What's important to notice is that our conscious

The Actual versus Perceived Cause of Stress



According to this new theory, "stress" is the result of an evaluation made by our *subconscious mind* that it isn't confident in its ability to meet one or more of our **psychological needs,** while "distress" and "eustress" are evaluations made by our *conscious mind* in response to **stress** and reflected through the medium of **painful emotions.** With these definitions in place, let's see why distinguishing between stimulus and cause is the single most important practice for managing stress.

and subconscious minds have very different responsibilities. It's the responsibility of the subconscious mind to meet our psychological needs using the beliefs and strategies at its disposal, and whenever it lacks confidence in its ability to do so, to communicate its stress to the conscious mind in the form of a painful emotion. It's then the responsibility of our conscious mind to modify the subconscious mind's existing programming (i.e., beliefs and strategies) such that the subconscious mind can do its job of meeting the psychological needs at play.

When the conscious mind receives news (via a painful emotion) that the subconscious mind is under stress, the conscious mind makes an evaluation of its own as to whether it will be able to successfully resolve it. When the conscious mind is confident it will be successful in resolving the subconscious mind's stress, it enters into a positive mental state, taking on the challenge of resolving the stress with excitement, creativity, resourcefulness, and perseverance. Researchers call this state "eustress" and studies have shown that eustress—whether it appears in the context of carving your way down a challenging ski trail or achieving a stretch goal at work—accelerates learning and increases performance.

In contrast, when the conscious mind begins to lose faith that it will be successful in resolving the subconscious mind's stress, it falls into a negative mental state characterized by panic, desperation, withdrawal, and resignation. Researchers call this state "distress" and studies have shown it lowers performance and leads to anxiety, irritability, and depression.

The Single Most Important Practice for Managing Stress

When we mistake stimulus for cause and attribute our stress to events and circumstances, we tend to:

1. Erroneously conclude that the cause of our stress is outside our control (because many events and circumstances *are beyond our power to control)*
2. Lose confidence in our ability to resolve our stress
3. Fall into a state of distress in which our only options are to resign ourselves to living with this stress or rail against our fate

We call this the "projective" interpretation of stress.

Behavioral signs that we are caught in the projective interpretation of our stress:

> Regulating our Emotional State
> Becoming Reactive / Volatile
> Disengaging / Withdrawing
> Getting stuck in Analysis Paralysis
> Procrastinating
> Defending Irrational Beliefs
> Justifying Mistakes / Failures
> Denying Facts that Challenge our Opinions
> Playing the Victim / Blame Game

In contrast, when we correctly attribute the cause of our stress to a temporary inability to meet one or more of our needs, we tend to:

1. Conclude that the cause of our stress is within our control (because there are usually many ways to meet a given need)
2. Remain confident in our ability to resolve our stress
3. Enter into a state of eustress in which resolving the present stress represents an opportunity to update our beliefs, increase our competence and improve our performance going forward

We call this the "adaptive" interpretation of stress.

Behavioral signs that we are working the adaptive interpretation of our stress:

> Feeling into our Emotional State
> Thinking Things Through
> Engaging / Reaching Out
> Taking Calculated Risks
> Taking the Initiative
> Considering other Perspectives
> Learning from Mistakes / Failure
> Confronting the Brutal Facts
> Assuming Ownership for Results

Whether we're interpreting our stress through the projective or adaptive lens makes an enormous difference in how we respond to our painful emotions and whether we'll ultimately be successful in resolving our underlying psychological stress. For this reason, we believe the practice of interpreting stress by evaluating inadequate self-effectiveness (the adaptive interpretation) is the single most important practice for managing it.

While conducting training programs on this material, we asked mid-level employees at several Fortune 500 companies how much of their time they spent in the projective versus adaptive interpretation of stress. The most common answer was 70% versus 30%. If this ratio is indicative of businesses worldwide, training employees how to recognize when they're caught in a projective interpretation of their stress and shift into an adaptive interpretation represents a huge untapped opportunity to increase employee performance and quality of life.

Introducing Adaptive Inquiry

Adaptive Inquiry is a step-by-step process for shifting from the projective to the adaptive interpretation of stress and working the underlying evaluation of inadequate self-effectiveness to resolution. This process is now being taught to corporate employees and executive coaches.

What follows is a case study in which Andrea Zintz (co-author of this article) used Adaptive Inquiry to help a corporate executive shift from distress to eustress and make changes in his own beliefs and behavior that resulted in the resolution of his stress and a dramatic increase in his performance.

Andrea was brought in to coach "Gary," an executive who'd been identified as a "high potential" and placed on a fast track to the C-suite. After three years of rising through the ranks, however, Gary was derailing. Once known as the "smartest guy in the room," he now rarely spoke his mind, made faces he refused to explain, and had occasional outbursts of anger that damaged his reputation and self-esteem. Although he dressed in high-quality suits, his shirts were often not tucked in, and his tie was always slightly askew. Once thin, he was steadily gaining weight, and his boss worried that he was falling into depression.

Andrea asked Gary to describe situations at work he found particularly stressful. Gary reported that he felt frustrated with peers who advanced "unworkable" ideas

and angry when his peers "bullied" him into going along with their decisions. Since Gary seemed to be exhibiting more distress when talking about being "bullied" than when talking about his peers' "unworkable" ideas, Andrea began with an Adaptive Inquiry into his anger.

Andrea knew from the Adaptive Inquiry method that anger arises when the subconscious is at a loss to assert a right. Andrea explored this with Gary and it led to his realization that he believed he had a right to have his opinions heard and suggestions considered and he'd lost confidence in his ability to assert these rights with his peers.

Having helped Gary see that the true cause of his anger was his own inability to assert what he believed to be his rights—not his peers' behavior—Andrea led him through an exploration of the four "adaptive actions" available for resolving his stress.

She began by inquiring into Gary's beliefs about what was and was not his "right" and what gave him these rights. In the discussion that followed, Gary revised some of his beliefs as to when and where he did and didn't have a right to have his opinions heard and suggestions considered by his peers. Gary realized there were boundaries with peers where he clearly didn't have a right to weigh in. That said, Gary also believed there were several topics on which he was entitled, given his role in the company, to have his opinions heard and suggestions considered.

Andrea then moved onto the second domain of adaptive action: changing practices. When she asked Gary what he had and hadn't been doing to assert his right to be heard, he acknowledged that his practice of remaining defiantly silent in meetings—which he'd put in place to keep himself from "going ballistic"—was a counterproductive strategy for asserting his right and, in retrospect, may have even contributed to the psychological stress giving rise to his feeling angry. Gary and Andrea discussed alternative approaches he might take to establishing and asserting his right to have his opinions heard and suggestions considered. They looked into Gary's recently revised list of situations where he believed he had this right. The practices included working through differences one-on-one in private prior to the group meeting, modifying the format of some of his meetings, and using different decision-making processes for different types of decisions. As Gary's confidence in his ability to assert his right grew, the intensity of his anger diminished, and by the time Andrea and Gary had come to the end of their coaching session, Gary was visibly excited to try out his new strategy.

In their subsequent coaching session, Andrea helped Gary resolve his frustration by shifting from a projective ("My peers are thwarting my progress!") to an adaptive interpretation ("My tactic for achieving this goal isn't working."). At that point, Gary stopped blaming his peers for his lack of progress and instead, modified his tactics.

As Gary's anger and frustration dissipated, subtler stresses appeared and with each—whether it revealed itself through feelings of resentment, shame, or despair—Andrea led Gary through an Adaptive Inquiry into each stress. With each shift Gary made from a projective to an adaptive interpretation of a stress, his mood improved and it wasn't long before he began coming up with new ways to meet his needs and resolve his stress. Along the way, Gary had a number of insights, i.e., his overeating was a misguided attempt to "stuff" his feelings of resentment.

Over the next 6 months, Gary met his stretch goals, asserted his views, and managed his peer relationships with care. He lost weight, tended to his appearance and gradually regained credibility as a leader. By the conclusion of the coaching engagement, Gary had been placed back on the short list for CEO. Gary attributed these changes to the work he and Andrea did using Adaptive Inquiry.

Summary

In this article, we've dispelled some common misconceptions about stress and demonstrated:

- The importance of distinguishing between the environmental conditions *stimulating* stress and the subconscious evaluations of inadequate self-effectiveness *causing* stress
- The dangers of confusing stress with the painful emotions that accompany stress
- The possibility of responding to stress with eustress rather than distress

We've also introduced you to Adaptive Inquiry, the revolutionary technique for transforming our relationship with stress from distress to eustress, and walked you through a real-life example of how Adaptive Inquiry is being used to relieve stress, increase performance, and mitigate derailment risks in corporations.

To learn more about Adaptive Inquiry, please visit: **http://adaptiveinquiry.com/** ■

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