

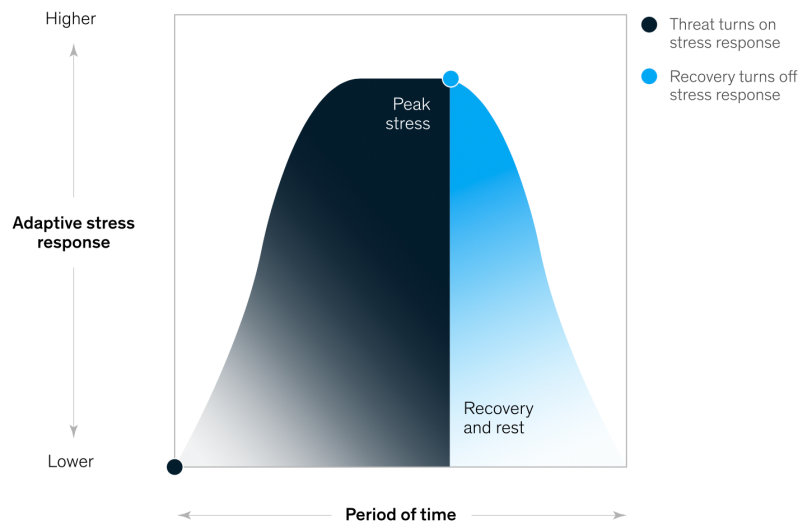
Turn everyday stress into optimal stress

It's a medical fact. From a physiological perspective, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with stress. A stressor causes the body's sympathetic nervous system to release adrenalin and cortisol. This boosts physical energy and mental awareness to counter an actual or perceived threat. In a normal stress response, the parasympathetic nervous system calms the heightened state when the danger passes. As the diagram shows, it acts like a brake, returning us to recovery and rest.

Too often, however, we don't calm down and continue to experience stressors without the restorative benefits of a normal stress response. This can lead to a chronically stressed state, including burnout and a variety of physical illnesses, mood swings and reduced empathy and impulse control.

Ways to manage stress

When managed well, stress can be an ally rather than an enemy. Here are three ways to manage stress.



> 1. *Locate and describe your stress.* Become self-aware and learn to tune into your body to harness your stress response better. Recognise the triggers and your danger zone and know how to cultivate deliberate calm to return to a state of recovery and rest. Practice shifting from being fully alert and engaged to slowing down, letting go, relaxing and giving yourself time to reset, recuperate and recharge.

> 2. *Create conditions for engagement and focus.* When you are overloaded, in the habit of multi-tasking and have

time pressures, focus is hard to maintain. Stay in the present with full attention on the task at hand. One thing at a time, one step at a time. Eliminate all distractions to allow uninterrupted focus and give yourself enough time to immerse yourself fully in the task.

> 3. *Make space for recovery and rest.* Make time for non-doing. Learn how to reset, come down, shift gear. Tune once more into your body, your breath, your thinking. Practice mindfulness and meditation. Build micro-breaks and blocks of time into your schedule; create buffers between meetings. Ensure you have 7 to 8 hours of sleep every night, exercise regularly, eat healthily, keep hydrated, and give yourself permission to wind down. And remember, responding to your smartphone is *not* taking a break!

Conclusion

"Stress is like spice – in the right proportion, it enhances the flavour of a dish. Too little produces a bland, dull meal; too much chokes you", Donald Tubesing.

References

- ✓ In preparing this post, I acknowledge this article by Jan Ascher and Fleur Tonies in the McKinsey Quarterly, February 2021, [Make stress your ally, not your enemy](#).
- ✓ [Banish stress and stop ruminating](#) from the Centre for Creative Leadership.
- ✓ Diagram: Bruce S. McEwen, "Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators" New England Journal of Medicine, January 15, 1998, Volume 338, pp171-179.