

## How To Rewire Your Brain To Better Handle Stress

By Chris Myers

August 4, 2016

In most scenarios, stress is just another aspect of the human experience. It comes and goes, and while it's relatively unpleasant to deal with, its long-term effects are negligible. However, when stress becomes pervasive and continuous, the physical and mental health impacts can be severe.

Entrepreneurs are particularly susceptible to the negative effects of pervasive stress. Running a business or team requires leaders to manage multiple complex and diverse functions at once. Throughout my years at BodeTree, I've found that this large universe of responsibility is the central source of stress in my life. Each part of the team, from sales to development, has unique and occasionally conflicting perspectives and desires. Managing all of these different views and needs can be exhausting.

For the longest time, I found myself working to treat the symptoms of stress. I'd take the occasional vacation and practice mindfulness techniques when things got rough. However, any relief I experienced was fleeting. Eventually, I realized that I needed to stop trying to manage symptoms and instead work to rewire my brain to cope better with the nature of stress itself.

### Neuroplasticity

The human mind is a fascinating thing, and far more flexible than we assume. The mind can transform over time, learning to cope with everything from daily challenges such as stress to even catastrophic injury. This flexibility has a name: neuroplasticity.

Put simply; your brain has the amazing ability to reorganize itself, create new neural pathways, and expand neural networks. One simple way to create these pathways is to change your recurring thought pattern.

If you're anything like me, your stress follows a fairly predictable pattern. You encounter some external stimulus, whether it's a bad sales call or problem with your product. That stimulus, in turn, triggers a series of negative thoughts and feelings that cause a physical reaction: a quickened heartbeat, headaches, irritability, etc. In turn, these physical reactions lead to more stressful thoughts, and the whole cycle repeats.

### Ditch the thoughts that provoke stress

But what if you changed your response to that external stimulus? Early on at BodeTree, we had some rough sales presentations. We received more rejections that I care to remember, and each time I felt as though it was a personal affront. People didn't just not like our product; they didn't like me. That type of thinking caused me a lot of unnecessary stress until I changed the way I thought.

Instead of taking the rejection of my product personally, I looked at it as a means of improving. In their rejection, these people were giving me the answers to the test in a sense. Each time I received a "no," I took the opportunity to deconstruct their reasoning and improve going forward.

That exercise went a long way in rewiring my brain's reaction to stress. However, it was not the end-all solution. I also had to learn to avoid the triggers and bad behaviors that provoked those reactions in my mind.

One such bad behavior was my compulsive financial modeling. I had a master model that outlined every aspect

# Forbes

of our business, and would obsessively tweak assumptions and performance benchmarks. As I did that, I'd invariably model out the worst-case scenarios and drag myself into a stress spiral.

I realized, however, that the entire exercise was pointless. Wallowing in the theoretical did nothing to help me move the business forward. Further, it was a behavior that I knew sent me down a stressful path. I stopped the behavior and learned to actively avoid other triggers that I knew were counter-productive.

## **Resolve to take action**

Instead, I learned to take action when presented with a stressful situation. No matter what you're facing, there are only three paths forward. First, you can work to change it by putting whatever influence you have to use. Second, you can recognize that the situation cannot be changed and simply learn to accept it. Third, you can choose to remove yourself from the situation. Granted, leaving problems behind isn't always possible, but in the case of most work-related stresses, you have the ability to simply walk away.

When you simplify the path forward by choosing one of these three paths, problems become much more manageable. It's important to remember that the mind is far more malleable than we tend to think. It's possible to reprogram your brain to handle stress more effectively by disciplining our thoughts, avoiding the triggers that provoke negative reactions, and resolve to take action. Stress will always be a part of the entrepreneurial life, but with enough effort, it's possible to break its control over you.