

Empathy and Stress Reduction

Terry Wu, Ph.D.

[Why The Brain Follows](http://WhyTheBrainFollows.com) ~ Terry@WhyTheBrainFollows.com

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the threat of virus infection and the social isolation are causing a lot of stress. During stressful times, humans have the tendency to focus on their own safety and survival first. They are less concerned about other people's pain or suffering. Having effective stress-releasing mechanisms improves our own well-being. At the same time, reducing our own stress makes us more empathic toward others, increasing our bonding with others even during trying times.

Our bodies have an ancient stress response that was designed to drive us to run away from large predators tens of thousands of years ago. We call it the "Fight or Flight" response. The stress response evolved to move our bodies physically so we could escape from predators and find safety. Today, we don't face the threats of lions or tigers anymore. However, we turn on the same stress response by having thoughts, feelings and memories. We are smart enough to anticipate danger. We often activate the same stress response in the absence of real danger.

In a world that seems so uncontrollable and unpredictable, how do we reduce our stress? A very effective way is to move our bodies. The stress response enables us to deliver plenty of energy and oxygen to our muscles very quickly. As our muscles are fully fueled, we get ready to run away or fight. When we move our bodies, we do exactly what we are supposed to do when under stress. That releases our stress. This is why physical activities, like walking, biking, running, swimming, and yoga, are powerful stress reducers.

Humans are social creatures. When we are connected with others, we gain a sense of safety, which blunts our stress responses. Social support is a powerful way to reduce stress. During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to stay connected with friends, family and colleagues. Having conversations or check-ins through in-person or virtual meetings, or phone calls provides real human-to-human connections. However, spending 3 hours a day on social media can lead anxiety, instead of anything meaningful.

Social support is about give-and-take. You can reach out to others to seek social support to lower your stress. At the same time, you can reach out to others to give social support. When you reduce other people's stress, that good feeling can blunt your own stress response and that feeling can last a long time. You can take actions to reduce someone else's stress first.

Ample scientific evidence has shown that stress is reduced by doing, instead of thinking. We are living in a world where positive thinking is all the rage. It appears that all successful and resilient people know how to think positively no matter what happens to them. The mindless media and fraudulent self-help gurus relentlessly promote such snake oil. But in reality, we are given a false sense of control that we can think our way out of stress.

Positive thinking is based on the baseless assumption that we can change our thinking with more thinking. Numerous studies have found that stress impairs our ability to think clearly. The ancient stress response was not designed for us to think. Instead, it was designed for us to move our bodies and take actions.

Luckily for us, thought follows movement and thought follows action. When we move our bodies and when we take actions, we lower our stress. When our stress is lower, we think better. When we think better, we become more empathic and compassionate.