



Stepping Stones for the Good Life

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Would the *Real* Antidotes to Stress Please Stand Up?!

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When it comes to stress, the wiring in our brains works against us. When we're under stress, what does our brain want more of? A chemical called Dopamine. Under stress we—or rather the primitive side of our brain--become fierce in our desire for Dopamine. Without a second thought, what are the most common rewards we race after? Which activities do we *think* will make us happy? The following list of activities won't surprise you in the least: we eat, drink, smoke, shop, watch TV for long periods of time, surf the web, gamble, and play video games.

Here's the rub, and it's a big one. Even though the primitive side of the brain *thinks* during times of stress that these strategies will bring us the feelings that we crave, *they don't*. What, in fact, are the *worst* strategies for getting rid of stress? You guessed it—go back to the final sentence in the last paragraph and read it again. What we most *crave* is exactly what makes things *worse*.

We think that trip to the mall—and the accompanying dose of immediate gratification--will make us feel better. (In fact, studies have shown that we get more pleasure from the *anticipation* of buying stuff than from actually buying it—but that's another article.) When we cave in to the shopping urge, it only increases our stress. That additional credit card debt now sits on our shoulders like a backpack full of bricks. If we're overweight and stressed out, we eat. If we're chronic procrastinators, we put our to-do list aside so that we don't have to think about it. If we're smokers, we smoke.

Unfortunately, there's no easy or surefire way to ignore this insistent shriek of our reptilian brain when we feel stressed. But it may help you out to know which types of activities actually *do* relieve stress, according to the American Psychological Association. Here they are:

- Exercise (including sports)
- Praying or attending a religious service
- Reading
- Listening to music
- Spending time with family and friends
- Getting a massage
- Going outside for a walk
- Meditating or doing yoga
- Spending time on a creative hobby

How do these strategies actually relieve stress? By releasing chemicals in the brain that enhance our mood (such as serotonin) and also the hormone oxytocin, which makes us feel good.

Plus, to add insult to injury, when we cave in to our urges our next move is often to beat up on ourselves. But we know from studies of human behavior that feeling guilty or badly about ourselves only makes things worse. The best thing we can do when we give in to temptation is to do what you would almost certainly do with your best friend—be understanding, be compassionate, be forgiving.

So try this. The next time you're under stress and running headfirst toward your temptation of choice, talk with yourself as if you were your best friend. The dialogue might go something like this:

Primitive brain: "But I want _____ and I want it NOW!"

Rational self: There, there (spoken in a soothing tone of voice). Of course you do. That's how our brain is wired. But having a marvelous human brain under our skull also means we can change course and do something that could actually make us feel better. What do you say? How about if we team up here?

So when you're under stress, stop yourself and ask: What is it I *really* want? And then, for example and depending on what circumstances you're in, call a friend or a colleague, take a walk, go the gym, stick your nose in a book, pray or engage in whatever spiritual ritual is helpful to you (if you're religious), or devote some time to a creative pursuit that brings you joy or satisfaction.

Do something that will *really* give you what you want.

Reference: *The Willpower Instinct: How Self-Control Works, Why It Matters, and What You Can Do to Get More of It* by Kelly McGonigal