

Six Steps to the Mindset that Rewires Your Brain to End Stress

By Don Joseph Goewey

There are six steps you can take to begin shifting your attitude in ways that, neurologically, can wire your brain to quiet stress reactions and amplify the higher brain function that enables you to succeed at life. All five are so simple you might think they could not possibly produce a dramatic shift in your attitude, let alone the way your brain functions. They can and results are profound, accruing rapidly. Put it to the test for two weeks and see what changes for you.

Step 1: Bust Negative, Stressful Thinking

The mind makes up emergencies that the brain believes are real. The vast majority of these are false alarms, but the brain's fear center cannot tell the difference between a real and imagined threat. It's what the great French essayist Michel de Montaigne meant when he said, "My life has been full of terrible misfortunes, most of which never happened."

You can't always stop thinking a negative thought, but you can stop believing it. If you don't believe an anxious, stressful, pessimistic thought it has no power. It's just a thought that comes and goes. When you don't believe a negative thought, it doesn't turn into stress, anxiety, or depression.

Practice the following for the next two weeks:

- Be aware of negative, anxious, stress-provoking thoughts whenever they occur. Notice the way these thoughts morph into negative emotions that produce a perception of threat.
- Don't try to change these thoughts or feelings. Simply observe them. If you criticize, blame or condemn yourself for thinking and feeling negatively, simply observe this as another negative thought.
- Tell yourself: These thoughts and feelings are in me, not in reality. Take a moment and see the truth in this. Let it sink in. Then refuse to believe the stressful thought.
- Remind yourself that although negative thoughts and feelings are "in me," they are not me. They come and go like clouds. But the essence of your being is like the

blue sky these clouds travel through and sometimes cover. Let your mind go completely and become the blue sky for a moment and be at peace.

The more you practice not believing negative thoughts, the more joy you will experience and the more you will see solutions instead of problems.

Step 2: Stop Worrying (The Clear Button)

A study at Cornell found that 85 percent of what we worry about never happens.¹ With the 15 percent that does happen, 79 percent of subjects handle the matter better than they expected. These findings suggest that we have nothing to worry about almost 97 percent of the time. The prescription is to stop worrying. Here's how:

Imagine there is a button at the center of your palm that, when pushed, sends a signal to the primitive brain to stop negative, fearful, worried, or pessimistic thinking.

- Press the button and as you do become aware of your breath.
- Count to three, as follows, thinking of each number as a color.
 1. Take a breath, count “**1**,” and think **red**.
 2. Take a second breath, count “**2**,” and think **blue**.
 3. Take a third breath, count “**3**,” and think **green**.
- As you exhale, let your mind go completely. Relax into the present moment. Be right here, right now. Create the intention to be at peace as you relate to the current stressor, as well as other stressors that might arise during the day, confident in the clarity your calm now affords you.

Why the Clear Button Works

The part of the primitive brain that excites stress reactions is fully developed in a human being by age two. It possesses the intelligence of a two-year old. This is why adults resemble the *Terrible-Two's* during an extremely emotional stress reaction. Every parent knows that you can't reason with a child during a tantrum. You can only distract them from it. Pressing the button, counting to “3,” and seeing the numbers as colors is a form of distraction that quiets your primitive brain.

Step 3: Frame a Stress-Free Day by Starting Each Day in Quiet

This step is an antidote to the frenetic, early morning rush out of the door that frames the day in stress. It encourages you to set aside five minutes first thing each morning to

consciously frame a dynamically positive and peaceful mindset for meeting the day's challenges with confidence. Here is how you do it:

- Close your eyes or take a downward gaze.
- Tilt your head toward your heart. Follow your breathing.
- Feel each breath softening your heart and opening it wider. After a minute or two, open your eyes.
- Feel appreciation for the gift of another day of life.
- Set your intention to have a rewarding and productive day.
- Commit yourself to being positive and at peace on the inside, regardless of what happens on the outside.
- Feel the power of your attitude seizing hold of the day and shaping it into a great one.

Step 4: Take Regular Breaks

Some of us see breaks as time wasted, so indulge me while I present the reason why breaks are critical to success.

Breaks are not only part of what rewires you for a stress-free brain, they are an essential feature in generating the brain function that sustains peak performance and provides the creative insight for problem-solving.

Breaks create the brain state in which the dots connect themselves. Breaks also improve memory and support what is called “memory consolidation,” which is essential to envisioning something novel or learning something new. All this depends on what is called the basic rest-activity cycle (BRAC).²

This cycle repeats itself about every ninety minutes. During the first half of the BRAC, brain waves oscillate at a fast rate. You feel wide awake and are able to focus your attention. During the last half, your brain waves start to slow down until, in the last twenty minutes of BRAC, you begin to feel day-dreamy and somewhat tired.

During the fast brain wave phase, each brain cell uses ions to generate electrical signals. But the fast brain waves burn through these ions, which means your brain requires a period of rest to refuel. The restoration process takes 15 to 20 minutes of rest, after which your brain rebounds with the power to run fast brain waves. Breaks are how we human beings actually get more work done with higher quality.

Here's how to take a break

- Every 90 minutes take a break from work. Step away from the office and your smart phone and go outside or to a window and see what Mother Earth is doing.

- Look at the sky, notice the quality of light that's present, watch the clouds pass, the wind blow, the rain fall, or whatever is happening.
- Allow your mind to grow quiet and connect with life for a moment.

Step 5: Count Your Blessings

Researchers have found that people who are more grateful have higher levels of happiness and well-being.³ They are also more creative than people who are feeling stressed, making them better problem-solvers. Unhappiness drops your chances of creative insight to slightly below random chance.⁴ Meaning that if you have a creative thought, it was an accident. So give yourself a creative leg up by counting your blessings.

- Once a week, at bedtime, recall three things that happened during the previous week for which you are grateful.
- Then acknowledge three things in your life for which you feel blessed.

The research shows that counting your blessings just once a week is more effective than doing it several times a week. They think this is because when people do anything too often it loses its freshness and meaning.

Step 6: Master the Small Stuff

A dynamically peaceful approach to life delivers an experience that is the polar opposite of stress. You don't have to be Gandhi to find peace. Peace is in the small stuff. For example, a brain under stress wants to elbow its way to the head of every line or pass the car in front. It always feels late, pressured, and victimized. The good news is we don't have to be victims of stress. We can actually rewire those brain reactions away.

How? Over the next seven days, add one of the following items to your to-do list;

- Every now and then, practice being at peace by choosing to stand in the longest line at a store. Use the time to slow your motor and quiet your mind until you are at peace.
- Listen to soft music or an uplifting interview on the way home from work. Take the slow lane. Tell yourself, my peace of mind does not depend on my car moving faster.
- When you feel conflict with someone today, tell yourself, "I am not going to let this person or situation control how I feel."
- Quietly do good deeds and acts of kindness.
- Look for the best in someone you know.
- Devote today to seeing your strengths and positive qualities.
- Practice forgiving trivial errors.

About the Author

Don Joseph Goewey is managing director of ProAttitude, a human performance firm with the mission of ending stress. In his long career, Don has worked in some of the most stressful places on Earth – from cancer wards to prisons to refugee camps to corporate offices – helping people transcend stress and fear to reach a higher potential.

He has collaborated with Carl Rogers, Ph.D., the father of humanistic psychology and Gerald Jampolsky M.D., who innovated a school of psychology based on attitude. He has held executive positions at Stanford Medical School, San Mateo County Mental Health, and directed the CAH International, one of the leading programs on psychological crisis.

His book, *Mystic Cool*, was a bestseller at Amazon for books on stress and neuropsychology. His work has been featured in the Today Show, CNN, Forbes, the San Francisco Chronicle, Monster.com, Disney's *family.com*, and Outside Magazine.

References

¹ Robert L. Leahy, PhD, *The Worry Cure: Seven Steps to Stop Worry from Stopping You* (New York: Random House, 2005), 109.

² "Basic Rest and Activity Cycles," Polyphasic Society, <http://www.polyphasicsociety.com/polyphasic-sleep/science/brac/>.

³ R. A. Emmons and M. E. McCullough, "Counting blessings versus burdens: An experimental investigation of gratitude and subjective well-being in daily life," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 84, no. 2, (2003): 377–89. doi: 10.1037/0022-3514.84.2.377.

⁴ Annette Bolte, Thomas Goschke, and Julius Kuhl, "Emotion and Intuition: Effects of Positive and Negative Mood on Implicit Judgments of Semantic Coherence," *Psychological Science* 14 (2003): 416–22.