
Stress and self-esteem

Reduce stress by increasing your self-esteem

Richard T. Lovelace

The author proposes that stress is caused by the perceptions and thoughts of the person experiencing the stress. If we perceive an event as threatening, then we will experience stress. Our thoughts and perceptions, in turn, are determined by our self-esteem, which is our overall opinion of ourselves. If we have lower or inaccurate self-esteem, we are more likely to perceive events in our life as stressful. To reduce stress, therefore, we must increase the accuracy of our self-esteem. The article discusses some common misconceptions about self-esteem (e.g., having low self-esteem puts me in the minority; we are what others think of us; it must be my fault); explores ways of thinking that create stress (e.g., “makes me feel” thinking; “makes me do” thinking; “what people say matters most” thinking); and then examines ways to change our thinking (e.g., watch out for “don’t” thinking; confirm our considerable value and importance; use mental images to focus on helpful information; practice taking responsibility and not taking or giving fault or blame). Some basic tests for measuring our level of stress and self-esteem are also provided.

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It seems to be our lot that we must learn certain and important realities for ourselves that our ancestors learned for themselves, before us. What we feel, for instance, results from what we think about what happens to us, and not from what occurs.

—Earl Nightingale

Stress is not what most people think it is. Rather than being emotions or life events, stress is what your body does to start getting ready to deal with something you perceive as a threat. As a result, your muscles tense, your blood flow changes, and your breathing and heart rate increase. When these reactions occur too intensely or too often, they can seriously hurt the body. This is called chronic stress response and is related to six of the leading causes of death and disability—heart disease, cancer, lung disease, accidental injury, suicide, and cirrhosis. Most addictions are little more than inappropriate “home remedies” for obvious or hidden symptoms of stress. If you want to change just one thing to ensure good health and a successful career, dealing with stress is the area on which to concentrate.

There are three ways people try, emotionally, to gain relief from the physical symptoms of stress—they become scared, angry, or sad. In some situations, one or more of these emotions may help (e.g., you are in imminent danger of being hit by a car), but most of the time these reactions are unnecessary and not conducive to a happy or productive work or home life.

I am convinced that the immediate cause of stress is subconscious thinking filtered

through hurt self-esteem. I have found that many people have difficulty accepting this idea. The goal of this article is to further explore this concept and to describe techniques for reducing stress by changing our thinking. As I discovered when I surveyed 175 CLMA members, this topic is of great interest to clinical laboratory managers. In fact, a group of Rhode Island laboratory managers said stress was the sole reason they were planning to leave their jobs (1). Employee turnover, limited financial resources, deadlines, mergers, and meetings are just some of the perceived sources of stress for laboratory managers (24).

Some basics

As I said earlier, stress is what your body does to begin getting ready to deal with what you perceive (consciously or subconsciously) to be a threat (5). Stress is an internal and biological event and has been defined this way: "When an organism perceives threat, the body undergoes a generalized physiological response involving the autonomic nervous system and the endocrine system" (6). Some of the physical and emotional symptoms are stomach upset, dizziness, cold hands, blushing, sadness, anxiety, irritability, feeling warm or sweaty, headaches, muscles pains, trouble catching breath, or rapid heartbeat.

The most potent of the initial symptoms of stress are the uncomfortable emotions. This phenomenon is usually called "flight or fight"—fear or anger. Because there has been a growing awareness that depression is a common third emotional response, "flight or fight" has been updated to "hike, hit, or hide" (5). These emotions fuel the thoughts and actions judged necessary for "protection" from the perceived threat and relief from stress.

An attribute all humans share is that we can grow accustomed to chronic discomfort and begin to experience it as normal. For example, if we put our hands in uncomfortably warm water, at first we will be painfully aware of the heat. But if we leave our hands there long enough, we will become acclimated to it. What this means is that, for many of us, our symptoms of stress have become subconscious or hidden. We can have many of the symptoms and be unaware of them.

Again, stress is not created by events or circumstances but by the *thoughts* of those experiencing stress (5,7,8). These thoughts are our responses to a multitude of real or imagined influences, our perceptions of which are filtered through and affected by our self-esteem (5). As Dr. Hans Selye, the father of modern endocrinology and the investigation of stress, said: "It is not what happens to you that matters, but how you take it" (9). More recent research confirms this theory. It is not an event itself that causes stress but how we *perceive* the event that determines whether we will experience stress. For example, to one person, the loss of a job may be perceived as a very stressful, frightening, negative event. However, to another, the same event may be perceived as positive with opportunities for growth.

Besides being subconscious, thoughts that create stress are inaccurate (5). I propose that, without exception, thoughts that create stress do not accurately reflect reality. Stress that creates emotional upset comes from distorted or inaccurate thoughts (10,11).

Dr. Selye's statement that "It is not what happens to you that matters, but how you take it" is difficult for many people to believe and accept because:

- Many well meaning and competent professionals have taught just the opposite for years.
- The thoughts that cause our stress are subconscious and hidden from us.
- We hear what we want to hear (*i.e.*, this idea makes people uncomfortable so they disregard it).

Why would people not want to hear that they are basically responsible for their stress? And why is it that even if they do hear and believe, it hardly makes a difference in their lives?

Perhaps the answer can be summed up in one word: self-esteem. People with so-called low self-esteem perceive this message as criticism. They mistakenly hear, "It's your crummy fault you have this awful stress." And, hearing that message, their already damaged self-esteem sinks even more. By ignoring this message they protect their self-confidence.

Self-esteem is your overall opinion of your relative worth, importance, power, and competence (12,13). Self-esteem can also be described as the sum of how you feel about yourself (14). Low self-esteem is probably as prevalent among the successful and wealthy as among the down and out (5). Even

individuals characterized as egotists, braggarts, holier-than-thou, or egomaniacs do not necessarily have high self-esteem. Just the opposite, they use their behavior to try to hide their negative feelings about themselves from themselves and others.

You can dislike yourself and not know it (5). What you consciously think of yourself is surface self-esteem. How you feel about yourself beneath the surface is subconscious self-esteem. Surface self-esteem varies from moment to moment and reflects your estimation of how well you are doing and how well others like and appreciate what you do, have, feel, or think. Subconscious self-esteem is more constant and reflects the sum of your evaluation of yourself from infancy to the present.

People generally think that poor self-esteem is caused and maintained by environmental factors such as poverty and neglect. Some blame environment for causing low self-esteem but blame the individual for maintaining it. For example, many of us do not pay enough attention to what we do or have that is good (15). Still others assert that we do not give ourselves enough positive self-talk or affirmations or that we do not get enough approval from others.

Your self-esteem is reflected by behaviors, emotions, and beliefs (16,17). Although people may disagree on what behaviors, emotions, or beliefs represent "poor" self-esteem, hardly anyone disagrees with the proposition that self-esteem is of tremendous importance. Its influence is felt in every significant part of our lives. As Nathaniel Braden, an authority on self-esteem, put it: "I cannot think of a single psychological difficulty—from anxiety and depression, to fear of intimacy or of success, to alcohol or drug abuse, to underachievement at school or at work, to spouse battering or child molestation, to sexual dysfunction or emotional immaturity, to suicide or crimes of violence—that is not traceable to poor self-esteem" (18).

If we are to make a significant impact on stress, we need to understand the inaccurate thinking that causes it. We need to begin, in part, by helping ourselves and others better understand the nature of self-esteem. Because those of us who write about and lecture on damaged self-esteem have it ourselves, we often use misleading words. For example, we describe self-esteem as being either "high" or "low." Most people associate high with "good" and low with "bad." So it is assumed that low self-esteem is

bad and those with it are bad people. It is more factual and useful to describe self-esteem as being either "accurate" or "inaccurate." If people do not like themselves, it is because the same subconscious and inaccurate thoughts that create their stress also cause and maintain their hurt self-esteem. The more they know about themselves that is accurate, the more they will like themselves (19). To help replace inaccurate thinking with accurate thinking, we will now examine some common misconceptions about self-esteem.

Common misconceptions about self-esteem

The more facts you know about self-esteem, the less damaged your self-esteem will be. Here are some common misconceptions and counters to them.

Having low self-esteem puts me in the minority

"Having low self-esteem puts me in the minority. It is just additional proof of my inadequacy and lack of worth. So I will protect my sense of self-worth from this additional injury by denying—consciously and subconsciously—that it is low."

There is only accurate or inaccurate self-esteem. If you do not love you, do not realize how valuable you truly are, and are not confident that you are competent in the ways that truly matter, then that is an error—an honest mistake!

It makes no sense to think of self-esteem in the context of good versus poor or high versus low. There is only inaccurate self-esteem. The more apparent your inaccurate self-esteem, the greater your health-, career-, and life-threatening stress and the more intense the uncomfortable emotions of depression, fear, or anger. If you have inaccurate self-esteem, you are in an exceedingly big boat with everyone else living today.

We are what others think of us

"Pretty is as pretty does." "Clothes make the man." "You are what you eat." "A man is only as

good as his word." These are only some of the sayings that illustrate and perpetuate an extremely wrong and damaging belief: the notion that we are what we (or others) do, have, think, or feel—that we are what others think of us.

For the first months of our lives, we do not know where we stop and others begin. Then we discover we are not extensions of our parents, but we still do not know what we are. We hear comments such as, "You're a good little girl (boy), you picked up all your clothes." We interpret this to mean that, "To be good you must do good." Subsequently, we make other wrong interpretations: "Good people have good things." "Good people feel good." "Good things happen to good people." "Good people have good thoughts." "Good people are liked or loved by others." "Good people live and work with good people." "If you are good, good things happen to people you care about." "Good people live and work in good places."

Of course, we also believe the opposite. If you have problems, feel badly, behave inappropriately, or have "evil" thoughts, then you are "bad." Therefore, we come to think that our value and competence are reflected by what we (or others) do, have, think, or feel. Because, as children, we are highly prone to do "badly" (*i.e.*, make mistakes), feel badly, or live with people or in places we judge to be bad, we mistakenly and subconsciously conclude, "I must be a bad, unworthy, inadequate, unloved, and incompetent person." It is this inaccurate self-esteem that sticks with us.

What all this means is that, as adults, we frequently perceive ourselves as bad. So our self-esteem is often under attack or threatened. At least 90% of the stress we have comes from countless perceived threats to the very core of us: how we feel about ourselves. If you believe you cannot protect yourself, you may constantly be going on alert (*i.e.*, feeling stressed) for the perceived or anticipated threat.

The trouble is that we are *not* our bodies or what we do, think, or feel. And we certainly are not what others think of us. These common misconceptions need to be left behind in childhood as part of the process of self-discovery.

But what are we, if not what we thought before? Brilliant people have tried to capture the essence of what we truly are. The gist of those attempts is that we are all made of the same

stuff, are basically equal, are wonderful and of the greatest value, and are deserving of tremendous pride in ourselves. Just *being* makes you of tremendous value.

If you are not to blame, then it must be my fault

We seek to protect our injured sense of self-worth by either placing blame on others or ourselves. It is somehow better (*i.e.*, a way of avoiding greater pain) to take the blame and punish ourselves to keep from experiencing imagined worse consequences.

I have often told about a report I read in *Psychology Today*. The article described how people who got mugged often felt guilty from blaming themselves and sought counseling. In their eagerness to help, well-meaning and capable therapists gave the message, "It's not your fault you got mugged. Blame the mugger, not yourself." And those counseled would say, "Yeah, it is not my fault. I have got a right to walk anywhere I want to, anytime I want to." So those counseled would too often go out and get robbed again.

Then counselors decided that responsibility—rather than fault or blame—needed to be emphasized. Responsibility means recognizing that you make choices and that you do what you do, have what you have, and feel what you feel because of those choices. What happens to you (that you can do something about) results from your choices—even if those decisions you make are subconscious and unknown to you. Responsibility has to do with what you *can* do something about—the here and now—rather than what you can do nothing about—the past and the future. So there is little guilt, fear, or loss of control when you take responsibility. Once the people seeking counseling accepted responsibility, they could recognize and change the behavior that contributed to getting robbed before.

Inaccurate self-esteem results from confusing responsibility with fault or blame. It comes from the mistaken notion that our value is reflected in what happens to us or others or where and with whom we work or live. Not true!

Poor self-esteem results from growing up poor, abused, and the like. If you did not experience these, there is no reason for you to have low self-esteem.

Because inaccurate self-esteem basically comes from understandable, no-fault misinterpretations we make as children, teens, and adults, everyone is susceptible to and responsible for their damaged self-esteem. Here is just one example. A woman I worked with experienced a major illness as a child. Because she was so ill, her parents and others protected and watched over her much of the time. When she was most ill and hospitalized, her parents left her with strangers (*i.e.*, hospital staff). During our therapy sessions, we learned that she had interpreted all this as meaning, “I must be very incompetent and in great danger for people to have protected me so. I must be unlovable and unimportant for my parents to have left me when I needed them most.”

Thinking that create stress

The hidden and inaccurate thinking that creates our stress originates in confusion about who and what we are and confusing responsibility with fault or blame. Let us review some of the major thinking culprits.

“Makes me feel” thinking

“He really hurt my feelings that time.” “She made me so mad.” “These people are driving me to drink.” These are only a few statements that reflect the inaccurate belief that others (or circumstances or events) are the sources of and are somehow responsible for our emotions. As we learned earlier, what we feel does not come from influences. The emotions we identify as uncomfortable (*e.g.*, fear, anger, depression) come from a chemical process going on inside us—stress—that comes from our misinterpretation that we are threatened. And we feel threatened because we have inaccurate self-esteem.

Because we have inaccurate self-esteem, we seek to avoid blame for our emotions to

try and protect what self-esteem we have left. We wrongly believe that our feelings are us. “If I’m angry (and it’s wrong to be angry), then I’m a bad person...that is, if I’m to blame for it.”

Of course, just part of the problem with seeing others as controlling our emotions (both uncomfortable and comfortable) is that it limits our ability to love and care. When we accept that we—not others—are the source of our emotions, we are freed to love and care even more. Take responsibility and take charge!

Each time you allow yourself to have “makes me feel” thinking, you give yourself the incorrect message that “I’m so weak that even my emotions are controlled by others and my environment.” That serves to keep your sense of self-worth and competence inaccurate.

“Makes me do” thinking

Whenever we think we *have* to do something, it is a safe bet that we are thinking inaccurately. Thinking we “have to” literally means we have no choices. The truth is that we *have* choices but *do not like* them. Saying “I have to” is a way of trying to avoid fault or blame—“It’s not my fault. I had to do it.” We might get a little relief from this faulty belief, but the price we pay in inaccurate self-esteem is far too great. The subtle message to ourselves is: “I’m weak. My actions are controlled by others, and I have no choices.”

“What people say matters most” thinking

When you become upset and think it is because of something said to or about you, chances are you are doing this faulty thinking. What people *mean* by what they say—and not *what* they say—matters far more.

I recently realized that just as many couples divorce because they care about each other as do because they do not. When they shout at each other, “Well, leave if you want to. I’ll make it just fine without you,” often what they really mean is closer to, “I love you and am afraid you’re going to leave and there’s nothing I can do to stop you. So I’ll beat you

Test yourself!

Get a sense of your level of stress and the level of your self-esteem by completing the following simple tests.

Stress indicator

Following each of the three statements below, circle one number. The higher the number, the more you believe the statement describes you in recent times.

- | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. I am under too much stress. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 2. I worry about people or things. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
| 3. There are too many things I have to do each day. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |

If you circled a number higher than four on two of the above, then it is likely that you have moderate or higher stress. If you circled a number greater than four on only one item and that was number two, then it is likely that you have moderate or higher stress.

Subconscious self-esteem indicator

In the space provided to the left, write "A," "B," or "C" depending on which parts of the items come closest to describing you. Space does not allow giving many different descriptions, so it is unlikely that many will come close to describing you. Just choose the one that comes closest. The only wrong answers are those you give because you think they are right but are not closest to describing you.

- | | | | |
|----------|---|--|---|
| _____ 1. | A. When someone says something bad about me, it doesn't really affect me. Or, I like it when someone is bothered by what I say or do. | B. My feelings are hurt by someone's disapproval of me or of what I say or do. | C. Someone's criticism of me, if anything, increases my caring about or understanding of the person criticizing me. |
| _____ 2. | A. I don't really care about helping other people. I easily turn down nearly all requests for help. | B. It's about impossible for me to turn down a genuine plea for help. | C. I help others and I help myself. I won't help others if it means doing harm to myself. I may regularly turn people down. |
| _____ 3. | A. I don't much care if I get praised or not. In fact, I tend to feel uncomfortable being fussed over. | B. I need recognition. Most everyone needs praise for the good they do or for what they accomplish. | C. I'm comfortable with praise but really don't need it to feel good about myself and what I do. |
| _____ 4. | A. I have something of a blunt or brusque manner. I'm rather outspoken and it sometimes comes across to others as "mean" or "aggressive." | B. I'm usually reserved. I don't speak harshly to others and try always to be considerate, even if it means my needs go unmet. I don't confront all that well. | C. My usual manner could best be described as "happy." When needed, I easily speak up for myself without being harsh. I do confront well. |
| _____ 5. | A. I am careful about what I say because someone might use it to hurt me. | B. I am careful about what I say because I might hurt someone else. | C. I know that what others say will not hurt me. It's only what I say that hurts me. |

The fewer "C" answers you gave, the greater the likelihood that your subconscious self-esteem is hurting and chiefly responsible for your thinking that creates your stress. This is even more likely if most of your answers were "B."

If the above tests or your own instincts say to you that your stress is too high and your self-esteem is seriously hurting, consider getting assistance. Chances are that your personal physician can direct you to an appropriate source of assistance.

to the punch and tell you to leave. That way, I can save some pride (*i.e.*, surface self-esteem)."

Next time you are upset and think it is because of what someone is saying, ask yourself whether you are truly understanding what they mean.

"I'm my shirt" thinking

Have you ever looked deeply into the eyes of an infant? If you have, you know that you can see nothing unacceptable there. Anything improper gets added later, like layers of clothing. Think of your present and past behaviors, thoughts, values, feelings, body, possessions, opinion of yourself, the opinions others have of you, and all that happens to you and to others as your clothing. None of those are you. It is time to move to another level in your evolving understanding of yourself.

If you mess up and get upset with yourself, that is like getting upset with your jacket for being wrinkled, your shirt for being stained, or your shoes for being scuffed. When mistakes happen—and they do—take care of them as best you can and know that they are not you. Say to yourself, "Thank goodness this is only a mistake and not me."

Sometimes people ask, "But if I tell myself this and no longer consider what I do to be a part of me, what will keep me from being haphazard? Won't I give myself permission to not care what others think of me? Won't I do, think, or feel awful things?"

It is when someone sincerely believes she has an attractive face that she will take the most appropriate steps to enhance her appearance. It is when someone believes he has a healthy and appealing body that he is most inclined to choose and wear clothing that reflects that. The same is true when you realize how terrific, special, and capable you truly are. You want your outsides to more accurately reflect your insides. You think, feel, and behave even better. The opinions others have of you improve. But that does not mean everyone will "like" you better or treat you better. Some people like you best and only treat you well when you like yourself the least. Believe me, that is not the kind of liking you need or deserve! Those people do not care for themselves and feel most comfortable with others who do not feel good about themselves either.

People we typically call "egotists" or "narcissists" do not have exceptionally positive opinions of themselves. In fact, they have negative opinions of themselves and others. Their subconscious self-esteem is exceedingly hurt. It is just that they believe they are better than others, who are also worthless. They have a surface self-esteem that is overstated.

How to change your thinking

The key to mastering stress is to improve the accuracy of your self-esteem. So how do you do this?

Watch out for "don't" thinking

"Don't" thinking is one of several subconscious and inaccurate thoughts intended to build self-esteem. It ends up doing just the opposite.

One of my former clients made little progress in counseling with me and was of considerable value to my understanding of "don't" thinking. Few people I have ever worked with had more inaccurate, subconscious self-esteem than this fellow. He regularly came in for appointments and angrily talked nonstop about people he felt had wronged him. My efforts to interject potentially useful information were largely ignored, unless he mistakenly interpreted what I said as agreeing with him. At the end of the sessions, he would say, "Now, doctor, you tell me something that will help me this next week." Invariably, when I attempted to comply with his request, he quickly responded with the words, "I don't think..." and elaborated on why he thought what I said was incorrect. I came to realize that he was trying to enhance his severely damaged subconscious self-esteem by disagreeing with someone identified as an expert. By doing that, the message he gave himself was, "I must not be so bad if I can disagree with someone identified as an authority in his field." The problem was that his "don't" thinking thoroughly blocked useful information that would have helped considerably with his severe health-, relationship-, and job-threatening stress.

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Whenever you consult an authority on a subject you want and need help with and your first response to what is said or written is disagreement, that is a sign you need to take extra care. Your response may be more of an unconscious and inappropriate attempt to enhance your self-esteem than genuine disagreement. Take whatever amount of time you need to examine and test the information you have been offered.

Remember to confirm your considerable value and importance

You do not have to consider anyone to be better or worse than you. Everyone is human and equal and just by virtue of our being we all have inherent value.

Use mental images to focus yourself on helpful information

For example, picture yourself wearing layers of clothing. Let one piece of clothing, maybe your shirt, represent what you do. See the words "what I do" written on your shirt. Let another piece of clothing embody your thoughts, another your feelings, still another what others say to or think of you. When you make a mistake, think something "bad," or someone doesn't "like" you, tell yourself that it is only your clothing and not you. You can always change or get rid of what is "dirty." But it is not you. You are still of great value.

Practice taking responsibility and not taking or giving fault or blame

Every moment of your life you are fully responsible for your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Fault and blame exist mostly in the past. It does no good to find fault with or blame yourself or others because nothing can be done about the past. You can tell when you are not taking responsibility because you feel upset, hurt, guilty, embarrassed, scared, sad, or angry.

Remember that inaccurate self-esteem is pervasive and not your fault

No one is born with the capability to always accurately interpret what happens to them. We do our best and learn from our mistakes. We do not even reach our full intellectual functioning until

In 1991, Dr. Lovelace conducted a survey of 350 CLMA members on the subject of stress. Of that group, 175 responded (53% response rate). Some of the highlights of the survey are presented below.

- Respondents agreed on what they thought most often caused their stress: personnel pressures such as being understaffed, poor communication with physicians and others, and time-related troubles such as erratic workloads.
- From the theoretical perspective taken by this study, few managers showed insight into what caused their stress.
- Respondents reported more stress than their stress inventories indicated (which was low-moderate). Half of the managers responding reported moderate or higher stress, and 25% reported high stress.
- Overall, the self-esteem test revealed that respondents felt "a little better than neutral" about themselves. The test also indicated that their self-esteem was hurting below the surface.
- No environmental factors that were considered appeared significantly related to self-esteem. For example, laboratory size did not seem to affect self-esteem.
- Only self-esteem was consistently and significantly related to stress. When surface self-esteem was heightened, reported stress was reduced, and vice versa.
- A majority of respondents had similar attitudes about stress, believing it was necessary and helpful within limits. However, nearly one-third thought stress was not really necessary in laboratories. For this group, liking what you do, liking yourself, and liking others was sufficient to ensure the best job performance.

young adulthood. Little wonder we so inaccurately judge ourselves, our worth, and our competence.

Do not let yourself accept faulty thinking

When you recognize that you have one or more symptoms of stress such as irritability, tension, sadness, muscle pain, cold hands, or a headache, ask yourself, "What could I be thinking that is creating my stress?" Once you identify the thinking, counter it with something closer to reality. When possible, do this in writing.

Here is an example of how to do this. You are at the laboratory, and it is late afternoon. You realize you are stressed, and you genuinely want to do something that will help. After some consideration you suspect you are stressed because you think that people are upsetting you and that you have to work late once again. You decide to write down your thoughts.

- 1 **My thought:** These people are upsetting me.
My counter: This is "makes me feel" thinking. My uncomfortable emotions come from my stress and not from people. It is this "makes me feel" thought and those like it that create my stress. I am giving myself the false message that I am under attack by others, which makes me feel badly. And that creates ill feelings in me toward people. Worst of all, I am giving myself the equally false message that I am weak and controlled by others. Without meaning to, I am harming my own self-esteem. I definitely do not want to do that.
- 2 **My thought:** I will have to stay here late again.
My counter: This is "makes me do" thinking. Saying "I have to" literally means that I have no choice but to work late. Without realizing it, I am saying to myself that my job or someone else is forcing me to work late. That only encourages unwarranted resentment toward my work and toward others. Saying "I have to" gives the indirect message that I am inferior and without choices. I do have a choice. It may be that the alternative to working late is unacceptable to me, given my values, but it is there. And I will no longer deny it. It is my responsibility if I work late, and I will not subtly blame anyone, including myself or my job, for it.

Reading the above examples, you might think, "I am not sure I can come up with counters like these. They are pretty involved and require more understanding of all this than I have now." If that is true, then do what you can. If nothing more, see if you can identify your inaccurate thought and give some kind of counter to it—even if it is only "If I work late it is because I find the alternative even less agreeable. Nothing else makes me do it."

Still another common "honest mistake" is to tell yourself something such as, "Even though I say 'makes me feel' or 'have to,' it doesn't do any real harm. That is because I really do know that no one and no job can make me do anything I am not basically willing to do." Telling yourself that is an example of the "don't" thinking presented earlier. You may realize *consciously* that you are not forced to feel or do something, but those are conscious thoughts. The thinking that makes your stress is occurring at a *subconscious* level. So it is only reasonable that there is a hidden part of your mind that accepts, maintains, and acts on the inaccurate thoughts. Simply knowing better, *consciously*, is insufficient. More needs to be done.

No matter what it takes to improve your subconscious and conscious self-esteem and relieve your stress, you are most definitely worth the effort. ☞

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