

Speed Through Stress!

In 5 Steps

In 15 Seconds!

Dr Rob Pennington





Welcome and Congratulations!

Congratulations on taking the step to get this material. I know it will make a profound difference in how you recognize your stress quicker and move through it faster. I've spent 30 years learning how to do this and I'm so happy to have the opportunity to help you make the same powerful difference in your own life. I use these 5 steps for *Speeding Through Stress* in 15 seconds many, many times every day. They help me lower the baseline of stress I experience each day but also increase my abilities to produce better results in the face of my challenges.

There was a time when I did not know how I could make a simple, fast, positive difference in my life. Circumstances happened that made me feel good or feel bad. I believed that if I could change the circumstances, then I could feel good more often. And while that is logical and has some truth to it, it isn't the whole truth.

I learned I could feel good quicker, even in challenging situations. I learned to turn my worst experiences into my best opportunities, and that led me to produce results better than I had imagined possible earlier in my life. I wish the same miraculous results for you.

Blessings,

Rob



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RECOGNIZE STRESS WHEN IT HAPPENS

*What I am unaware of controls me.
What I become aware of I can change.*

Every day we have challenges. Some of our choosing, but many are unexpected and undesired. Our upset usually has little effect upon the event but can have tremendous negative effects upon ourselves, our health, our attitudes and even on how we treat those we love.



Bled, Slovenia

I have planned for many months to spend two weeks on a wonderful trip to a very special Alpine country, [Slovenia](#), the northernmost republic of what used to be Yugoslavia. My business partner of 30 years, [Stephen Haslam](#), started a weeklong retreat for about 150 people 20 years ago. Amazingly this program on spiritual and psychological growth has continued every year since. Sometime Stephen went alone.

Sometimes I went. Sometimes we were there together and sometimes we are able to take our spouses. Sometimes we helped design the program when neither one of us attended. The Slovenian people have done this program each year on their own and we were happy and proud to be of support.



It has been an amazing series of retreats at resorts in the Alps for an amazing group of people. What special times we've had. And since it has been about 10 years since I have been able to attend I was really looking forward to seeing old friends and sharing a hot chocolate beside the lake in Bled. Spending a week exploring how our imagination is at once both the source of our creativity as well as a doorway to experiencing our creative Source is for me as good as it gets.

Unfortunately, the week before I was to leave, I learned the program was cancelled. Due to the increased economic uncertainty in Europe most people who might otherwise have attended chose to be more conservative with their discretionary spending and elected not to attend. So, for the first time in 20 years this weeklong retreat was not going to happen. My wonderful vacation, workshop, retreat, one I had not been able to have for years, was unexpectedly cancelled. Yuck!

But more than that, I learned my airplane ticket, which is usually reimbursed by the income from the retreat, was not only non-refundable (I expected that because I had purchased a cheaper flight to have less expense for the Slovenians to cover) but I learned it was also non-credit too! Amazing. I couldn't believe it. I have never heard of a non-credit flight. I was stunned. I was disappointed about the loss of the retreat and now I have this humongous airplane ticket I'm either going to use or loose. Double Yuck!



I could take the flight and spend two weeks at my own expense at a time when I myself had little discretionary funds and spend much of that time all by myself in or foreign country or I could eat the ticket. Neither choice seemed good. Neither choice was what I wanted but I had to make a choice. I was certainly aware of my disappointment and frustration.

But I've learned, as anyone who has read the first chapter of my book, [Find The Upside Of The Down Times: How To Turn Your Worst Experiences Into Your Best Opportunities!](#), that when a door closes a window opens. But you have to make a change; you have to turn around to see the window opening. So, what opportunity was opening in this disappointing turn of events that I had not considered?

Well, two things came to mind. One, I was with my sister in Kentucky the weekend before the July 4th celebration: a small town event that I had heard the joys of for many years but had not had the opportunity to experience. Before learning that I would not be going to Slovenia, I had even felt disappointed that I was in Kentucky just a few days before this celebration but would miss it. Obviously, now I had the opportunity to stay and enjoy a special time with my sister and family, to fulfill a long held wish. So I did. Happy Birthday America!





But another possibility came to mind. My sister was planning on being in Houston for the 2 weeks while I was to be out of the country to care for my parents. So we planned what we called a Cousin's Tour of Texas. We would take a brother/sister drive around the state to visit our various cousins who we had not seen in some years. It was a good plan. But even the best plans can change.

When we got to Texas we learned my uncle had just passed away the night before and that my mother would be having knee surgery that week as well. So the Cousin's Tour was off. All of them would be coming to us to attend my uncle's memorial and it worked out perfectly for both my sister and myself to be in town exactly when my mother needed us most.

Coincidence? From a point of view where everything is random and no value can be perceived in what would appear to be unrelated events – maybe, but maybe not. It is interesting that I learned later that the conference I thought had been cancelled actually was reinstated, but too late for me to attend. And it no longer was the best opportunity for me. And I guess that is really the message.

I'm coming to realize that every worst experience has the potential for the best opportunity. You may not at first have even wanted that new opportunity but you come to view it as one that is, in fact, more valuable.



But how do you get there quicker? How in the middle of a difficult, challenging, undesirable situation do you find -- do you even think to look for -- a positive desirable opportunity? My best advice is to begin discovering that opportunity in what I call the every day “elementary school” lessons in life. If you want to be ready when the graduate school lessons come, you have to be prepared. The Boy Scouts are right!

We cannot control what happens in our lives but we can control our reaction to it – not our first reaction – that’s a habit. But we can control our second reaction and that can make all the difference. It can make a difference not only in how I feel and how I behave but, as a result, it can actually have a powerful impact on what does happen. But to do that, to make a simple, fast, positive difference in how I respond to the challenges of my life, I have to recognize the exact moments I’m experiencing stress. Otherwise I can’t do anything about it.

Fortunately most people are not stressed every moment. Our emotional state during each day has a roller coaster of highs and lows. I may have a growing baseline of stress that makes me more susceptible to stress because of the build up of all the stressful moments that I am *not* doing anything about. Or I could be going through my day reducing my baseline by recognizing my stress quicker and moving through it faster. That is very possible.



You may be aware the Center for Disease Control reports that 65% of medical illnesses in the USA are preventable and related to how we are not handling our stress. If you are going to do anything substantial to reduce your risk of dying from a preventable illness, then doing more than exercise and diet will be necessary.

Both regular exercise and a healthy diet are valuable and necessary for our greatest health, but if that is all you do, you likely will still have many stress-related issues in your health, your relationships, your career and your finances. You won't be at your best. But combine exercise and diet with *The Five Steps for Speeding Through Stress* and you will develop a powerful ability to function at your highest level possible.

The first step is to become clearer about where and when you experience stress. On the next page is a worksheet for you to make a list of specific situations where stress typically happens for you in an average day. Be as specific as you can, make as long a list as you can, and describe each situation fully. Remember, what you are unaware of controls you. What you become aware of you can change.

1st Column For each situation describe who, what, when, where and why. Only use the first column now to list your stressful situations. Come back to this worksheet later, after you read the instructions on page 10 on how to complete the list by identifying the symptoms you experienced in each stress and the type of stress.



List of Stresses, Symptoms and Types during an Average Day

Stresses (what happens)	Symptoms (how you know)	Type



2nd Column When you've completed the first column listing your stressful situations, use the second column on page 9 to make a list of how you know you are feeling stressed. What are the symptoms, signs, signals, clues you experience that let you know when you are experiencing stress? Make your list as specific as possible and as long as possible. Remember, the more awareness you have, the more ability you will have to recognize your stress quicker and move through it faster.

3rd Column When you've finished the list of stresses and symptoms, go back to the worksheet on page 9 once more and complete the third column. Identify each symptom with a letter: **T** for thought, **F** for feeling, **B** for behavior, **P** for physical symptoms. For example "worrying" would be a **T**, "depressed" an **F**, "fidgety and restless" a **B** and "headaches" a **P**. Total up the different letters to see if you tend towards a particular type of stress. This is important information, as it helps you zero in on the particular types of stress you experience. The better you get at recognizing these early warning signs of stress, the faster you will be at *speeding through your stress*.

On the next page, make a list of all the things you currently do to help you deal with your stress. Again, make this list as long as possible as well. Make comments about each item, like how effective it is, and how often you use it and how you might improve its use.



List of What You Are Already Doing To Reduce Your Stress

Positive Steps That Reduce My Stress

Effectiveness



THREE DEFINITIONS OF STRESS

It is normal to think that the interruptions, the detours, the distractions we experience as we move along the path of accomplishing any task are, by definition, not part of our path. But what would our experience be of these often-stressful circumstances if we thought of them more as unanticipated parts of a better path? How often does one of these unexpected changes actually end up providing us valuable information or insights or opportunities that improves our final result or enhances our experience or provides us with a unexpected ‘helping hand’?

The answer is, “We never know.”



Sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn’t. But if we were more curious and less resistant, maybe we would find value more often in these unexpected and unplanned detours along our way.

There are three definitions relating stress and change that can provide a deeper insight into why we get stressed in the first place and what we can do about it in the second.



The Three Definitions relating Stress and Change are:

- I. *Stress is resistance to Change.*
- II. *Stress is a signal a Change is needed.*
- III. *Stress occurs whenever I am unable
to create a positive image of Change in my mind.*

I. Stress is resistance to Change.

You may have heard the expression, “the only constant is change”. Stop and consider for a moment how many changes have taken place in your world since the earliest times you can remember. Are you old enough to remember a time when your parents or grandparents never locked their doors? Or maybe they left the keys in their car just in case anyone wanted to borrow it? But today, don’t we all make sure all our doors are locked? Isn’t someone always reminding us to lock our car - inside our locked garage - and put The Club[©] lock on the steering wheel?

Many of our grandparents or great grandparents lived in neighborhood that all had front porches. On any given evening or weekend you could see your neighbors across the street rocking or swinging, and often that would result in an unplanned visit. People just dropped by to say, “Hello” and to see how you were doing. By the time our parent’s neighborhood was built, all the front porches seemed to have been moved to become back porches that had fences around the yard. The



emphasis changed from community to privacy. Then when houses started getting air conditioning, most of these back porches got screened in or walled in, turned into family rooms with windows that were always closed. With that change the neighborhood had gone from privacy to isolation. That was a profound change. When I grew up I spent a lot of time outside playing with other kids in my neighborhood. Not too many kids today have the same experience.

So many changes have happened in my lifetime. I'm wondering if you had parents who had the same job or career throughout their whole lives? There was a time when you could be pretty sure that if you worked hard in a company, you could advance, feel secure, and know that you could retire with a decent pension. Do you feel that secure about your current job today? How many times have you changed jobs in your lifetime? I have heard that our children can expect to have on the average 15 *different* jobs in their lifetimes and 4 or 5 *different* careers. I know I've had about 4 already: therapist, trainer, speaker and coach. And I'm in the process of yet another – media expert.

The point here is not to evaluate the direction of these changes, which makes for a very interesting topic in itself, but to point out that life is always changing for all of us, that there is always a lot of change to relate to and adapt to. If anything, there seems to be more and more change, as if change were somehow speeding up.



If change is speeding up then it requires us to learn how to speed up how we deal with it – to speed through the stress we experience with change more quickly.

It seems that now, more than ever, we are called upon to adapt to a whole spectrum of rapidly changing situations. For how long has it been that you reach for your phone to do something other than make a phone call?

If every time there was a change it took you in a direction you wanted to go, would there be any stress? No. But have you noticed life is not like that?

Many times in a day, let alone in a lifetime, life takes a detour from where we wanted it to go. It is natural for us to seek stability and yet, if this wish is applied too rigidly in a rapidly changing world it becomes resistance to change, and this resistance creates stress. And stress can kill you. Fortunately there are things you can do to recognize a habitual, stressful reaction quicker and move through it faster. (I'm hoping you are noticing the repetition of that idea.)

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Review the list stresses of page 9 and for each one write down why that is something you would resist. What makes it bad? What bad could happen because that situation happened?



II. Stress is a signal that Change is needed.

Another way to say this is that the purpose of tension is to get your attention.

Consider the function of pain, which is similar to tension. If you cut yourself deeply and felt no pain, there is a real danger you might bleed to death. Is the pain bad? Well, that is a matter of opinion. We certainly don't like pain. I know I try to avoid it as much as possible. But pain can make me aware of the need to take corrective action. Once I've taken that action, the pain subsides because its purpose has been fulfilled. If I cut myself and I give it attention by putting medicine on it and a Band-Aide® – the pain goes away. But let's say I ignore the pain and the cut becomes infected. Now the pain gets worst, a pain I could have avoided if I gave it the attention it needed. Tension or stress works the same way. Both awaken our awareness that something needs attention in our lives that a change needs to be made, that some corrective action should be taken.

The purpose of tension is to get our attention.

Pain is necessary. Suffering is Optional.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

For each negative reason you wrote on page 15 about why you were resisting a change, write what change is needed, either in the situation or in yourself.



III. Stress occurs whenever I am unable to create a positive image about Change in my mind.

Notice that this definition does not say that I know everything I need to know in order to be successful in implementing this positive image in my mind. It only says that I can imagine the possibility. Thomas Edison did not know how to make a light bulb. He failed about 1500 times. Someone allegedly asked him “How did you keep going with all those failures?” He simply knew that it was going to be done. He just didn’t know how to do it. He responded, “Well, I learned a lot of ways how not to make a light bulb!”

This third definition of stress says I am able to hold a positive image of a desired possibility in my mind. But who is in control of what is in your mind? Most people don’t really think they are. But whatever you believe, i.e., whether you believe you are in control of what you think, or whether you believe you are not, will determine how you think, feel, behave and the results you are able to produce.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

For each change you identified on page 16, describe the positive outcome you would like to produce.



THE LEVELS OF BEING

What you think influences how you feel, what you feel influences how you behave, and how you behave creates results in your world, for better or worse. Positive thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes will ultimately create positive results in your world, while negative thoughts produce negative results.

We live in a culture that actually has a totally different view. It is a view that basically says, "stuff happens," and whatever happens makes you feel and act in certain ways that are considered normal under the circumstances. Anybody would feel and behave this way under these conditions.

It is even embedded in our language. For example "He made me angry." What that sentence describes is a world in which another person has the power to control how I feel, that I have no recourse but to experience that situation the way he has decided that I should experience it. Or how about this, "This rain is so depressing." You could translate this to read: "I can't feel good today, there's water in the air!" The predominant way of looking at our emotions in our culture is





that we are emotional victims, that we really have very little to do with how we're feeling. Fortunately that isn't true. You have a lot to do with your emotions.

This view of being an emotional victim is easily broken down when we stop to imagine that it might be possible for another person to react differently than we do. Perhaps there are some people who would not get angry when someone does what we believe 'makes' us angry. Or it might be that some people enjoy when there is water in the air. I do!

*If it is possible for someone else on the planet to experience
a situation differently than I do – then it is possible for me.*

My friend John had this brought home to him on his first job where one of the big bosses announced to middle management one day "if your employees are enjoying their jobs, you're not doing your job." When John heard this, his immediate reaction was to be angry and upset. "How could he say that? How could he believe that?" One of John's good friends and fellow employees didn't seem bothered by this fellow at all. She seemed to feel the boss was making an fool of himself and that this didn't need to ruin her day!



YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Take a moment to think about an upsetting situation in your own life. Think about what you believe (thought) that required you to be upset (emotion). Consider what someone else might have thought differently than you that would have resulted in a different emotion. Now imagine thinking that thought and experiencing that emotion in the same situation.

The good news is: if it is possible for another person to respond to stupid behavior in a healthy way, then it is also possible for me. I may not know how, but that is only a matter of education and learning. The fact that it is possible to respond differently, i.e., amused rather than angry and upset, suggests that the point of view in which I think I am required to feel angry and upset is incomplete, or even downright wrong. It suggests that I might have something to do with the stress I am experiencing. I need to find out what that is, and find out how I can change it. Otherwise, my only way to relieve my stress would be to get that other person to change (not likely) or for me to leave the job/relationship (could be costly).

You may have available to you choices you are not aware of - yet. That has been the primary point of the exercise you have completed so far. By asking you to identify and write down specifically where and with whom you experienced stress, and then what signals you have that you are experiencing stress, you are beginning a process of becoming more aware. And with increased awareness



comes increased opportunities. For example, you may have thought any aches and pains you feel were an inevitable part of getting older. In fact, age may have very little to do with it. Why have pain in a part of the body in which there was no injury or illness? Could it be.....Tension!

It may be that every time you experience stress, even a stressful thought, that you tighten muscles, even micro muscles. For instance, if you are worried about not getting enough done, i.e., carrying the weight of the world, then your neck and shoulders are going to be tight. Do that often enough and your muscles can enter a state of chronic spasm and your shoulders will definitely ache. By the time you feel the pain it may have been growing for some time. You might have frequent headaches, and over many decades of upper back tension your upper back can force you to hump over--not because you're 75 years old, but because those muscles have drawn the bones of your spine forward into a tight bow.

To be able to recognize, to become aware of this way of dealing with stress and to intervene, to learn to stretch and relax those muscles, might prevent such a painful condition from developing in the first place or help you alleviate it in the second. That's why we encourage you to know your early warning signs of stress.

Now, back to the Levels of Being. The diagram on page 18 is hierarchical and causal. Think of it as a waterfall. Your stress on one level flows into and produces



stress in the next level. Your thoughts cause how you feel. Your feelings cause how you behave, and your behavior produces results in your life. The only exception is neurological or chemical damage. Other than that, this is true. Results waterfall of cause and effect, show up in a number of areas: in your body, your relationships, your work, your possessions, and even in your bank account.

There are basically two kinds of thoughts, positive and negative. Positive thoughts tend to produce a cascading effect of positive feelings, positive behaviors, which then affect positive results in the world, results we might call effective. Negative thoughts will tend to produce negative emotions, which produce negative behaviors and negative results that might be characterized as ineffective, i.e., not the results you want.

*In a way, the worst you can be is ineffective,
- just not producing the results you want.*

Another way to look at this causal chain or cascade is to see it as an avalanche. This term probably best applies to the negative side of the diagram, because that's how it feels. Because we are mostly unaware of how stress operates, we may not even be aware the avalanche has happened until it is a done deal -- meaning that it has shown up in our bodies as an ache or pain or even an illness. There is [evidence](#) that even some cancers have psycho-neurological causes.



The art of stress management is to be able to stop the avalanche at the snowflake, at the “seed thought” that starts the whole downhill slide. I am going to show you what I have been practicing for decades to stop this avalanche of stress. This practice that has made a profound difference in my ability to handle both the elementary and graduate school lessons in life.

RECOGNIZING YOUR AUTOMATIC STRESS REACTION™:

A close friend of mine, Dr. Jim Nourse, Psychologist and Author of [Simple Spirituality: Finding Your Own Way](#), was on his way to the airport in Asheville, North Carolina, to catch a flight to Houston where he and I were going to be teaching a stress management course. His wife Judith was driving and decided to take what had been reported to them as a shortcut. They got turned around and ended up having to return to the original route, but with less time to spare.

As they approached a stop sign the car died, and refused to come back to life. After several minutes of anxiety, Jim remembered that this is exactly the sort of thing we talk about in stress management! For a brief moment he turned his attention inward and noticed that he was holding his breath and that the muscles of his abdomen were tight.



Jim was also aware of two thoughts flitting through his mind: "This is just my luck," and "I'll never make it on time. I'll miss my plane. Right in line behind those thoughts were others: "Maybe I'll have to miss the whole training because I couldn't get there on the first day. Maybe Rob will feel I let him down. If he feels I let him down, maybe he won't want to work with me." Jim's mood, as you might expect, was very serious and somber.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Take a minute and remember a similar situation, any situation in which life happened while you were exercising other plans. See if you can remember what was going on inside you. How did you feel? What did you think? You may simply remember being upset, because you had not yet learned how to focus on the thoughts requiring you to be upset.

What Jim was experiencing illustrates what I call the Automatic Stress Reaction[©] (ASR). ASR is a sequence of events involving the mind and the body that happen without thought. We do not decide to do the ASR. It is a habit. Habits are what we do without thought. Habits happen automatically, triggered by specific types of situations. It is a classic stimulus response paradigm from Behavioral Psychology. Remember [Pavlov's dogs](#)? Food is brought and they salivate. A bell is rung every time the food is brought. Eventually all that has to happen is for the bell to ring and the dog salivates.



Whenever our day doesn't go the way we want, whenever anything or anyone isn't the way we want, we experience the ASR. The Automatic Stress Reaction is a habit we all have learned -- only too well. Here is a more in-depth description to help you become aware sooner of each part so you can move through it faster. You have got five chances to help you notice when you are resisting a change, when a change is needed and when you could create a more positive image of change in your mind. They are:

The Automatic Stress Reaction

1. Stop breathing
2. Tense muscles
3. Have self-doubt
4. Think negative
5. Become serious

1. Stop breathing. This is a variation on the startle response, which can be very obvious in some people. When you hear someone gasp suddenly in response to a perceived threat, or hold their breath in, like it's the last one they'll breathe. Sometimes it's not as dramatic. It can be hardly noticed, just a momentary halt in one's breathing, a quick moment of tension that stops your breath.

2. Tense muscles. Stress always involves tensing muscles somewhere. You cannot have a stressful thought without a muscle tightening. The mind and the body are too intimately related. This is simply one instance of the fact that every mental event produces some physical event. Your mind and body are not separate but two sides of one coin called ... you!



Whatever is in your mind has some impact on your body. If it is positive, the impact is positive – if negative it is negative. Remember the waterfall levels of being. This can be a very subtle biochemical event that you might not consciously experience at all, or it may be a very obvious physical event like a muscle spasm or yelling or crying. In the case of the ASR, some muscle group or other will always become tense. For different people, it may be different muscles. I always seem to have my back and shoulder muscles tighten, but I have a long history of lower back pain as well.

3. Have self-doubt. This component relates to when we feel like we don't have the ability or resources to steer the situation toward any sort of successful outcome, and often involves subtle or not so subtle harsh negative thinking about ourselves. Henry Ford said, "There are people who think they can, and there are people who think they can't, and they are all right." Stress occurs whenever we think we can't. If anytime an event happened our immediate reaction was "I can handle this," then where would there be any stress? There wouldn't be any. It is only when we have doubt that we will not be able to achieve the success we want, or we won't respond successfully to a change, that we experience stress. And remember, whatever we think, we think we are right about.



4. Think negative. In the above example, you can see how negative thinking can multiply in a split second. Before you know it, you have a cafeteria of worst-case scenarios in your mind. The ASR is much more than just having self-doubt. When we project a negative thought into the unknown future we also experience it as if it is happening, right now, in the present. Our body does not know the difference between what is actually happening and what is imagined. It feels the same.

5. Become serious. When all of the above are going on, the mood is anything but happy. There is no humor to be seen in the situation because your life, your plans, your day have just been ruined or at the very least unexpectedly delayed. At such moments it is a habit to become that serious, responsible, mature adult who has things to worry about, people to see and places to go. And others had better know it!

The Automatic Stress Reaction is not bad. It is a part of your hardware designed to equip you to deal with unanticipated appearances of saber-toothed tigers. By that I mean in our early days as cave people, whenever we were out for a walk and we went around a bend and there was a saber-toothed tiger, it was in our absolute best interest to have an automatic mechanism that instantly gave us an enormous amount of energy. Our ASR does exactly that. We perceive a danger and chemicals cascade out of our brain to stimulate our nerves and muscles. It is



supposed to last only a few moments while you either fight or flee. The ASR is a tool of survival. It can save your life!

The trouble is that we over-use this ability for a multitude of modern day situations for which it was not designed, e.g., confrontations by the boss, arguments with the spouse or kids, waiting in line at the supermarket, traffic jams, telephone voice menus. None of these events are life threatening – at least not in the saber-toothed tiger range of threat. But repetitively stimulating this same chemical process can kill us. Remember The Center for Disease Control says 65% of us die from a preventable illness related to stress.

We take this incredibly potent biological survival mechanism and experience it 40 or 50 times a day in situations that have nothing to do with survival. Such hyper-stimulation of our nerves and muscles can have a harmful affect on our immune system. When you are being attacked by a saber-toothed tiger, you can afford to have your immune system suppressed a bit -- that's not the priority of the moment. But if you experience the ASR 40 or 50 times a day and there are no real external threats to your survival, you may find one developing internally. The ASR's breathing pattern, tensing pattern, self-doubting & negative thinking pattern and getting serious pattern gradually move from acute to chronic, with potentially disastrous effects on overall health, even death.



If you want to reduce your habit of responding stressfully to anything (or anyone) that isn't the way you want it to be, you need to learn how to recognize these five steps in the ASR right in the moment that they are occurring for you. Only then can you do something to stop it.

A good practice is to begin noticing any one of these five aspects of the ASR for a while, and when you've learned to recognize that one consistently, you can then try the next one. Develop your perceptiveness of each component and then link them together, seeing all five in operation each time you experience stress.

Remember, what you are unaware of controls you. What you become aware of, you can change. For most of us, the ASR is so habitual, we have repeated it so many times, that we're not even aware of it when it is happening -- except as an experience of upset, anxiety, worry, fear or frustration. Beginning to look for these symptoms can be like looking at something through a microscope that is out of focus. You just don't see very clearly. But if you really want to be aware of your stress in a way that will allow you to significantly change it, then you have to focus your mental microscope, and see clearly just what it is that needs changing.



YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Start going through your day just checking in on how you are feeling. Notice whether you are feeling good and in the green or feeling bad and in the red and how intense is your color of emotion. And if you are in the red, which of the five ASR symptoms do you notice. Take notes!

THE STRESS MANAGEMENT RESPONSE[©]

Let's go back to Jim and Judith and the stressful situation Jim was experiencing when their car had troubles en route to the airport on the way to co-teach a [Successfully Managing The Stress of Change](#) training with me.

As the starter motor whined on without effect, Judith remembered that a friend worked about a block from where the car stalled. She thought it might just be possible to borrow her friend's car and get Jim to the airport on time.

Jim at this point was still in the throes of thinking negative thoughts and couldn't imagine it was possible to actually get to the plane on time, even though they might make it to the airport. As they abandoned the car and he began tuning in to the telltale signs of the Automatic Stress Reaction ravaging his immune system, like



any good stress management specialist he began to do something about it. Jim began doing the exact opposite, what I call **The Stress Management Response**.

As Jim began to (1) inhale and exhale fully, to (2) let his shoulder muscles relax and to (3) reassure himself that his value and worth were not in question, even if he didn't make the flight, a (4) positive thought began to occur to him that actually his luck had been pretty good, and that having a friend near by with a car was a great example of it. How fortunate that, if you have to have a breakdown, it be near a place where another car might be available. How amazing is that (5)! The whole thing might even end up making a good story for one of his talks.

Stress Management Response:

1. Breathe deeper.
2. Relax completely.
3. Reassure yourself.
4. Think positively.
5. Smile for no reason.

He went on to consider, "If Life really is a school where the mystery is what your lessons are, then maybe the mark of a successful student was not whether or not he made it to the airport in time, but how he handled the changes in his agenda in the process of attempting to get to the airport." I completely agree with Jim's wisdom here.

All this was occurring to Jim as he and Judith were walking quickly down US-25 with traffic passing in both directions, with a suitcase on wheels in tow. He also



thought “I’m going to look back on this and laugh,” and then it occurred to him, “Why wait until later, this is a pretty funny scene right here, two people looking like they’re in a god-awful hurry, carting a suitcase down US-25—and it would be even funnier if they’re laughing while doing it.” So they did!

This turn of events is a great example of the simple yet profound transformation that can occur with the Stress Management Response (SMR[©]). I would like to hear yours, too. Send me an email, or better yet, make a quick video message and send me that as well.

When a person practices the SMR, he or she will:

I. Breathe deeper. We are talking about taking slow, deliberate, full, complete inhalations and exhalations here. Most of us, after years of ASRing, we do a form of very shallow breathing, made even shallower by the fact that our culture values a tight, flat, held-in belly. In SMR breathing, you allow the belly to expand fully because that’s what allows the diaphragm its full extension, thereby allowing the lungs to fill completely, and then the exhalation proceeds to a full contraction of the diaphragm, forcing the last bit of air out of the lungs, ensuring that there is no “stale air” left. How often do you completely force all the air out of your lungs and completely fill it back in again. Unless you are an athlete I’d say probably never. As a result you actually begin to lose lung capacity. Your muscles around your



chest weaken, the amount of air going into and out of your lungs reduce and the slow process of reducing your air intake begins. Stop it. No matter your current condition, begin to breath deeper. Do it right now!

Let's give you an experience of breathing fully and deeply so you'll have a reference point. When you're in the middle of a situation you may not have the luxury of breathing in quite so dramatic a fashion, but this will give you a really full experience of deep breathing.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Sit in a chair with a firm seat and one that will keep your back reasonably straight; a huge cushiony chair isn't so great for this exercise. Put your hand on your belly and begin to inhale first at the belly level, so your hand is pushed straight out. As the breath continues let it expand into the chest, until finally it is completed when you feel your shoulders rising. Now begin exhaling in the reverse order, letting the shoulders fall, the chest deflate and then bend over toward the floor while your hand is pushing slightly into your belly, pushing every last bit of air out of the lungs. Then once again sit up as you begin to inflate the belly. Repeat this whole process 5 times.



Do you feel a little dizzy, maybe a little tingling in the fingers and toes, maybe a bit warmer? That's the energy that you have brought in to your body simply through five deep breaths - done fully. There is a tremendous amount of energy available simply by breathing in air. Most people need more energy but have no idea a limitless supply is right underneath their nose!

*The single most powerful stress reduction technique
you can practice is to breathe more deeply.*

Many of us complain of fatigue or low energy and seek to give ourselves a boost with a cup of coffee (caffeine) or a candy bar (sugar), which only postpones and intensifies the inevitable crash. Much of our energy depletion comes from being stuck in survival-style breathing and muscle tensing. By breathing more effectively, we can give ourselves an energy boost that is not subject to the sorts of crashes entailed in caffeine* and sugar. All these "benefits" come at a cost in terms of wear and tear on the body, not to mention increased stress (tired and wired), whereas the benefits of effective breathing are free and actually benefit the body.

* An interesting thing about caffeine you may not know: it isn't really a stimulant. It works by inhibiting the fatigue messages to the brain. Rather than giving you energy, it really just blocks your experience of how tired you really are.



II. Relax completely. This is an ability that takes practice. You begin by becoming aware of your ASR. You find out where specifically in your body you are tensing muscles and, using that awareness, you can let yourself relax. But there is a trick. Once you have developed the awareness and practiced the techniques, you can do what Jim did when he found his abdominal muscles tightening. By becoming aware of this fact he was simply able to let his muscles relax. But for most people it helps to actually tighten the already-tight muscle a little tighter – and then relax. It's called [progressive relaxation](#). You tighten a muscle, hold it tight on purpose a few moments and then release it to a more relaxed state.

For some people, it might be the neck and shoulders or the lower back where they carry most of their tension. Whatever the muscles, simply by learning to be aware of what is going on in your body allows you to locate areas of tightness, which you can then learn to tighten and then let go. Just recognizing that you are tensing a muscle gives you the opportunity to stop holding it tense.

A good practice is to scan your body when nothing particularly is happening: notice where tension might be. As you practice Step 2: “Relax Completely” more often, an interesting benefit begins to occur. You become more aware more often of when you are not relaxed – so you can relax.



But there is much more to relaxing than watching TV and drinking a beer. (Sorry about that.) Such activities may be less stressful than other aspects of your day, but they are not relaxing in the deep sense that is being suggested here.

*Relaxing completely is deliberately, on purpose,
removing tension from the muscles of the body.*

You may feel that you do this during sleep, or should. But it is more likely that you are taking muscle tension built up during the day into sleep. As a consequence you might have difficulty going to sleep, staying asleep or awakening refreshed.

Consider how you feel when you wake up. Do you rise up energized from a good night's rest, ready to tackle the day? Right, probably not! If you have spent all night working because you never took the tension out of your muscles before you went to sleep then no wonder you are tired. You probably just want to go back to sleep.

Complete relaxation is a profound inner stillness that is actually a waking state. The goal is to be awake and relaxed. What a radical idea! Many people, when they first begin to experience deep relaxation, have a tendency to fall asleep, and this can be for a number of reasons. Most of us are sleep deprived. We stay up too late and get up too early. That alone causes a lot of our stress.



Many of us have the experience that the only time we relax is when we go to sleep, and so any sort of relaxation automatically triggers us going unconscious.

Conversely, many of us associate being awake with being tense, and in fact use that tension to maintain wakefulness. The type of relaxation being described here is one of being completely relaxed while at the same time being completely awake.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

You can listen to an audio recording of my business partner [Stephen Haslam](#) leading you through a Balanced Relaxation process that will make you more relaxed than you have been in years. Go to: <http://www.resource-i.com/BalancedRelaxation.html>

3. Reassure yourself. Remember my friend Jim, stressing about getting to the airport on time to be able to join me in teaching a class on stress? Well, Jim did Step 3: “Reassure yourself” by reminding himself that his luck was, in fact, pretty good. Where he originally was thinking he wasn’t going to be able to handle not making it to the plane on time, and all the cascading consequences that *might* mean; now he was reassuring himself about some things that were going right.

His earlier worried thought -- the “that’s just my (bad) luck” thought -- actually represented a false belief he had learned growing up. He heard others say that



and learned that's what people said when confronted with an unexpected or undesirable detour in life.

Learning to transform our habitual negative self-talk into talk that is more reassuring can often be accomplished in a number of ways. One is with affirmations, i.e., "a positive thought you deliberately choose to immerse your consciousness into, which simultaneously erases the old thought pattern while producing permanent desirable results" ([Sondra Ray in "Loving Relationships"](#)).

In stressful times, your old negative self-talk hammers away at your self-esteem, repeating again and again. It takes practice to recognize that your depressed or disempowered feeling during such a time is more than just a feeling. The feeling itself is actually a response to negative self-talk, to thoughts that you do not like but that you are saying to yourself repeatedly. Identify and challenge any negative self-talk, and your feeling will actually change. [An exception is if you have any chemical or neurological imbalance in which case seeing a physician is recommended.]

To describe it very simply, reassuring yourself is beginning to imagine "I can" when you've been thinking, "I can't." A powerful secret to success is imagining "I can" even if, at the moment, you don't know *how* you can. Someone once said the difference between a success and a failure is that the success tried one more time. How could the success have done that, unless they had the thought that "I can"?



I have this challenge all the time. My first habitual reaction is to worry about things not turning out, i.e., being late, not producing the right result, disappointing someone. I'm sure you have your own list of self-doubts.

But I once realized that babies are not born with self-doubt. Self-doubt is something we learned. We all have learned over time to doubt our value and worth. For years I kept a debate going in my mind about whether it was OK to be me. Since I was the one having the debate, I realized I could resolve the debate, and in my favor! I decided to reassure myself that it is OK to be me, with my strengths and my weaknesses, with the things I do well and the things I do poorly. The whole ball of wax is OK to be. I am just a student in a school (life), learning lessons. Some I have learned and some I haven't. The better I feel about myself, the easier it is to learn my unlearned lessons. All my stresses are unlearned lessons.

Reassuring yourself is remembering you are valuable simply because you exist. It is saying that your worth is not dependent on your productivity or on whether you make mistakes, which inevitably we all do. You can evaluate your productivity but do not question your worth. Of course we have the habit of doubting our value but Step 3: "Reassure Yourself" is about moving from a negative to a positive quickly.



YOUR ASSIGNMENT

The next time you experience stress, take a moment to remind yourself of two truths:

- 1) Your value is something you determine – so take the opportunity to remind yourself it is OK to be you, and, 2) Even though you do not know exactly how you will successfully handle the stress you face, realize that you are determined to figure out the ‘how’.*

Once you realize you are the one keeping the debate about your value and worth going in your mind then you will also realize that you are the one (the only one by the way) who can resolve that debate. Choose to resolve it in your favor.

Use the next opportunity, when you are experiencing stress, to realize you are having a doubt about your worth, specifically based on whether or not you can successfully handle that particular source of your stress. Separate these decisions. One is a decision you make about your value right now in the present. The other is a decision about how you will choose to approach your future.

4. Think positively. If reassuring yourself is a matter of recognizing that you are essentially OK being you, then thinking positively is a matter of projecting a positive into the unknown. Everyone has heard of the “Fear of the Unknown”, haven’t you? Of course you have. But have you ever heard of the “Joy of the Unknown?” Probably not. But haven’t some of your past unknowns had some joy



in them? Of course, there is joy in the unknown. Why wait until you are there to anticipate it?

I know why. We've all been taught not to get our hopes up too high. You don't want to have high expectations and then be disappointed. Better to live with very low expectations so we don't have so far to fall. But that is a sad and crazy way to live. I am willing to live with high expectations and experience moments of disappointment, even profound moments, if and when I have to.

It is impossible to create what we cannot imagine.

I'm not talking about seeing life with rose-colored glasses. Instead I'm talking about what Stephen Covey says, as Habit #2 in his best seller, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" – Begin at the End. He says: Be clear about your goal. Consider it not only possible but something that through diligence and persistence you will achieve.

W. Clement Stone, publisher of [Success Magazine](#) says, "Anything enthusiastically conceived, consistently envisioned, is inevitably achieved." Jesus said, "Anything you want – believing – you shall receive." All of these are way more than what I'm suggesting in Step 4 "Think Positively".



I'm just asking you to take a look at what you are worrying about, what by definition you do not want to happen, and just consider its opposite. Give a few moments to thinking what you do want to happen. It is called a goal. Think about the goal at least 51% more than you think about what the worry. Hold your mind on that positive possibility like you are holding a water hose on a garden that is thirsty for life-giving water.

My friend Jim recognized he was getting an opportunity to practice what he was going to be preaching the next day when he turned the obstacle before him into the path he wanted to take and turned cruel fate into a playful joke. This is not a Pollyannaish way of thinking. It is highly practical. It suggests that the odds of success are greatly enhanced in a mental atmosphere where you project images of succeeding into the future.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Take one stressful thought and just flip it to its positive opposite – called a goal – and write it here:



5. Smile at the humor. This is the opposite of becoming serious. Jim decided not to wait until after the drama was over to see the humor in it. He remembered another situation, when he was driving to the Florida Everglades with another couple who started verbally fighting in the front seat. Then there came such an uncomfortable silence. All of a sudden the guy in the dispute burst out laughing. Something tickled him about the sudden seriousness and silence that had descended on the gathering. Everyone ended up laughing so hard it hurt.

It's interesting to note that in order to observe something, you can't have your face right in it. You have to back up a bit. When you are observing the events that make up the ASR, you've backed off from it a bit. You are no longer neck deep in it. From that distance, you can often see the events that triggered the ASR, as well as yourself in the ASR, as events in a crazy sort of drama.

It is at that moment that you might actually get tickled. Have you noticed that when you laugh, you push all the stale air out of your lungs, and that you relax, and that you can't be self-doubting and negative-thinking? Just try it some time. Next time you're laughing - try to feel bad. There have been several studies confirming what Norman Cousins demonstrated in his best selling book "[Anatomy of an Illness](#)", i.e., that smiling, laughing at the humor is very good for you. It actually stimulates the immune system and can play a valuable role in the prevention and healing of illness. It helped him cure himself of *angela's spondylitis*.



But what is really interesting is that you don't even need something funny to make you smile. **You can actually smile for no reason.** Honest, you can. Now, you may have been taught that that is crazy or maybe a sign of senility, but I'm here to give you a professional opinion: you can absolutely smile for no reason. And it will have all of the same benefits as when you have a reason.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Try it. Smile for 60 seconds for no reason. Go on. Put a big smile across your face and just keep it there for 60 whole seconds for no reason. Try to feel bad. You can't. Keep that smile going. 60 seconds is a long time when you are wanting it to end. But keep smiling anyway. I want you to know in the muscles of your face that you can do this and do it for no other reason than you want to.

And then for graduate practice, go out in the world – right out there in public - and smile for no reason. Watch what happens. I guarantee you people will smile back.

VI. Pray sincerely. (Extra Credit) I add this 6th step for those with a spiritual orientation. There have been scientific studies of the power of prayer. Although a review of that literature is beyond the scope of this paper, suffice it to say that



prayer can add greatly to the power of the first five steps in the SMR. It is always good to get God on your side.

Reaction vs. Response

Notice I refer to the Automatic Stress *Reaction* and the Stress Management *Response*. A reaction by definition is something that is non-deliberate and unconscious. The Automatic Stress Reaction is a built-in mechanism geared toward ensuring biological survival and is by design unconscious and automatic. This would be no problem if we used it only under life-threatening conditions, but as stated earlier, we have generalized it into all sorts of situations for which it was not intended.

Each time it is applied to one of those situations, the effect is the same as if we were practicing it. At 40-50 times per day, over the course of 40 years or so, we have practiced the ASR a lot and have gotten extremely proficient at it. It has become paired up stubbornly with many different situations we find ourselves in on a daily basis. And it happens so quickly, it is hard to believe we have anything to do with it.

The five steps of The Stress Management Response, on the other hand, are a deliberate, consciously applied process that is a very powerful tool capable of, over time, neutralizing an over-utilized ASR.



This is why we refer to the SMR as a response. A reaction is like a knee-jerk reflex, whereas a response involves deliberation and intentionality. You have to want to do the SMR. Remember about the power of repetition. The more you practice something, the better you learn it, the more imbedded it becomes.

Does this mean that, if you have already practiced the ASR for 40 years that you will have to practice the SMR for 40 more years to make any significant difference? Fortunately, no. The element of conscious awareness has a powerful affect on the speed of the change. In my experience, significant change seems to take 10% of the time it took to build a pattern, and 10% of that to have a solid experience of making a turn in a positive direction. Because consciousness is so empowering, regular practice of the SMR can yield a noticeable change for the better in a month or less. Sometimes the change is immediate and permanent.

Stress management consists of becoming consciously aware of your ASR, followed immediately by a conscious application of the SMR.

This model does not say that you won't experience any stress after awhile. What it does advocate is that you can recognize your stress quicker and move through it faster. You can quite literally learn to *Speed Through Stress* in fifteen seconds.



Stress actually becomes a signal or trigger to begin the SMR. Remember that stress is a signal that change is needed. Here it is in action. A good way to think of this is: we can't control our first reaction in a stressful situation, but we can control our second. Previously, when the ASR set in, we just had to let it run its course. Now we can use the ASR to signal us to initiate the SMR.

Now that you are getting a feel for the ASR, you will find no scarcity of opportunities to practice the SMR.

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

Write a few examples of where, in the course of your day, you are likely to be forced to stop and wait. Make the list as long as you can. Anticipate all the potential situations--waiting in line at the bank, stopping at a red light, getting behind a slow car, waiting for an answering machine message to finish.



All these situations will be opportunities to begin focusing in on the elements of the ASR, making them conscious, and then beginning the SMR. What else do you have to do in such situations? Spending your time upset in the ASR--how much does that influence the amount of time you have to wait? It influences nothing but the quality of your life at such times. You basically have two choices. You can either choose to continue practicing the Automatic Stress Reaction (something you are already too good at), or you can choose to *Speed Through Stress* and begin practice the Stress Management Response (something that could quite literally save your life).

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

When you've finished your list on page 46, estimate how much time each day you might spend waiting. Most people spend around 1-1.5 hours a day, depending on traffic, just waiting. That's at least an hour a day for practicing the SMR.

By the way, Jim made it to his plane just as they were getting ready to close the hatch.



For more free information and to join a growing group of friends who are dedicated to making a positive difference in their life and in the lives of those they care about, please join me at www.DrRobPennington.com.

Let me know what worked and what didn't from what you have learned here.

I am really interested. You can email me at Rob@DrRobPennington.com

Thank you so much for taking the time to consider these ideas that have made such a profound difference in my life. I am very grateful.

Rob



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