

How to Transform Stress into Courage and Connection

By Kelly McGonigal | May 2015

Stress doesn't always lead to fight-or-flight, says Kelly McGonigal. It can also activate brain systems that help us connect with other people.

In the late 1990s, two psychology researchers at UCLA were talking about how the female scientists in their lab responded differently to stress than the men did. The men would disappear into their offices; the women would bring cookies to lab meetings and bond over coffee. Forget fight-or-flight, they joked. The women were tending and befriending.

The joke stuck in the mind of one of the women, postdoctoral researcher Laura Cousino Klein. Psychology research has suggested that stress leads to aggression, but that wasn't her experience. And it didn't fit with what she observed in other women either. They were more likely to want to talk with someone about their stress, spend time with their loved ones, or channel their stress into caring for others. She wondered if it was possible that science had gotten stress wrong.

Klein decided to dig deeper into the science, and she made the surprising discovery that 90 percent of the published research on stress was conducted on males. This was true of animal studies as well as human studies. When Klein shared this observation with Shelley Taylor, the director of the lab she worked in, something clicked for her, too. Taylor challenged her lab to study the social side of stress, especially in women. Looking at both animal and human research, they found evidence that stress can increase caring, cooperation, and compassion.

While the tend-and-befriend theory began as an investigation into the female response to stress, it quickly expanded to include men—in part because male scientists said, “Hey, we tend and befriend, too!”

Taylor's team, along with other research groups, began to demonstrate that stress doesn't only motivate self-defense, as scientists had long believed. It can also unleash the instinct to protect your tribe. This instinct sometimes expresses itself differently in men than it does in women, but the two sexes share it. In times

of stress, both men and women have been shown to become more trusting, generous, and willing to risk their own well-being to protect others.

Why would stress lead to caring?

From an evolutionary point of view, we have the tend-and-befriend response in our repertoire first and foremost to make sure we protect our offspring. Think of a mama grizzly protecting her cubs, or a father pulling his son from the wreckage of a burning car. The most important thing they need is the willingness to act even when their own lives are at risk.

To make sure we have the courage to protect our loved ones, the tend-and-befriend response must counter our basic survival instinct to avoid harm. We need fearlessness in those moments, along with confidence that our actions can make a difference. If we think there's nothing we can do, we might give up. And if we are frozen in fear, our loved ones will perish.

At its core, the tend-and-befriend response is a biological state engineered to reduce fear and increase hope. The best way to understand how the tend-and-befriend response does this is to look at how it affects your brain:

- The **social caregiving system** is regulated by oxytocin. When this system is activated, you feel more empathy, connection, and trust, as well as a stronger desire to bond or be close with others. This network also inhibits the fear centers of the brain, increasing your courage.
- The **reward system** releases the neurotransmitter dopamine. Activation of the reward system increases motivation while dampening fear. When your stress response includes a rush of dopamine, you feel optimistic about your ability to do something meaningful. Dopamine also primes the brain for physical action, making sure you don't freeze under pressure.
- The **attunement system** is driven by the neurotransmitter serotonin. When this system is activated, it enhances your perception, intuition, and self-control. This makes it easier to understand what is needed, and helps ensure that your actions have the biggest positive impact. In other words, a tend-and-befriend response makes you social, brave, and smart. It provides both the courage and hope we need to propel us into action and the awareness to act skillfully.

Here's where things get interesting. A tend-and-befriend response may have evolved to help us protect offspring, but when you are in that state, your bravery

translates to any challenge you face. And—this is the most important part—anytime you choose to help others, you activate this state. Caring for others triggers the biology of courage and creates hope.

Whether you are overwhelmed by your own stress or the suffering of others, the way to find hope is to connect, not to escape. The benefits of taking a tend-and-befriend approach go beyond helping your loved ones, although this, of course, is an important function. In any situation where you feel powerless, doing something to support others can help you sustain your motivation and optimism.

The tend-and-befriend theory doesn't say that stress *always* leads to caring—stress can indeed make us angry and defensive. The theory simply says that stress can, and often does, make people more caring. And when we care for others, it changes our biochemistry, activating systems of the brain that produce feelings of hope and courage.

I wrote my book, *The Upside of Stress*, with that purpose in mind: to help you discover your own strength and compassion. Seeing the upside of stress is not about deciding whether stress is either all good or all bad. It's about how choosing to see the good in stress, and in yourself, can help you meet the challenges in your life. Tending and befriend is one of the best ways to do this, and to transform your own stress into a catalyst for courage and connection.