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## **ARTICLE** **STRESS**

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*by Christine Porath and Mike Porath*

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# How to Thrive When Everything Feels Terrible

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We're surrounded by negativity everywhere we turn. The news we read, social media we peruse, and conversations we have and overhear. We absorb stress from our family, friends, and coworkers. And, it's taking a toll.

The Mighty, a community platform (founded by Mike) that provides health information and brings people together around specific health issues, has surveyed more than 70,000 readers and community members since March around their awareness, perceptions, and experience with the coronavirus crisis. In September, respondents reported their top three emotions were frustration,

worry, and anger. The number of respondents choosing anger as one of their top emotions has more than doubled since March — rising from 20% then to 45% in September.

Negativity can have toxic effects. In fact, Christine’s research has shown over and over that we falter when exposed to negativity or rudeness. [Witnessing rudeness](#) interferes with our working memory and decreases our performance. [Mere exposure to rude words](#) reduces our ability to process and recall information. We tend to shut down, stop communicating, and cease being helpful to others. [Dysfunctional and aggressive thoughts \(and sometimes actions\) skyrocket](#).

Fortunately, Christine’s research also shows that there is [a productive way to counter those effects](#). It’s called thriving — the psychological state in which people experience a sense of both vitality and learning. Thriving individuals are growing, developing, and energized rather than feeling stagnated or depleted.

In studies conducted across a range of industries, Christine has found that people who experience a state of thriving are healthier, more resilient, and more able to focus on their work. When people feel even an inkling of thriving, it tends to [buffer them from distractions, stress, and negativity](#). In a study of six organizations across six different industries, employees characterized as highly thriving demonstrated 1.2 times less burnout compared with their peers. They were also 52% more confident in themselves and their ability to take control of a situation. They were far less likely to have negativity drag them into distraction or self-doubt.

So how do you increase your thriving especially when it feels like you’re drowning in negativity? Our research points to some tactics.

**Avoid negativity.** Pay attention to what you’re ingesting: what information you chose to read, [the media you consume](#), the music you listen to, the people you choose to spend time with, and the people you look up to. Negativity seeps into our pores through these sources. So make simple choices away from negativity and toward positivity.

**Watch out for what you say out loud.** Negative language is particularly insidious and potent. Be mindful of what you’re thinking and saying. Yes, those around you influence you and your mood, but we have more control over our thoughts and feelings than anyone else. And what we say out loud also carries significant weight. According to Trevor Moawad, a mental conditioning coach who works primarily with elite athletes, [it’s ten times more damaging to our sense of thriving if we verbalize a thought than if we just think it](#).

So, think twice about how you’re framing and speaking about a situation. Instead of saying, “This is the worst I’ve ever seen,” or “It’s catastrophic,” (or “devastating” or “terrible”), tweak your language to be more neutral. You might say, “This situation is challenging,” which recognizes the opportunity for growth or learning. You can — and should — acknowledge the truth, while minimizing its power to drag you down.

**Adopt a neutral mindset.** Negative thoughts and worries take us off track. We're more likely to [struggle on basic tasks](#). Long term, repetitive negative thinking is associated [with cognitive decline and Alzheimer's disease](#). It also hurts others because they are then exposed to our negativity. Of course, it's all too easy to dwell on toxic people or situations. We might play the blame game, ruminate, or overanalyze the situation. It's far better to adopt a proactive mindset, focusing on what we can control and what we should do next.

Moawad suggests using [neutral thinking](#) — a nonjudgmental, nonreactive way of assessing problems and analyzing crises. This includes staying in the moment, reacting to each moment as it unfolds, and keeping your focus on how you can influence your next action. Don't get sucked into analyzing past failures or hijacked by future fears or thoughts. Take one play at a time.

**Practice gratitude consistently.** There is lots to be said about the [benefits of gratitude](#). Gratitude reduces our stress, makes us happier, and helps us reach our goals. Routinely feeling grateful increases the social support we receive, which further [reduces stress](#) and its negative effects. It's especially powerful when practiced alongside neutral thinking. Seattle Seahawk quarterback and Super Bowl winner Russell Wilson has talked about how he has used this combination to navigate the death of his father, a gut-wrenching Super Bowl loss, the impact of Covid on his life and profession, and other challenges. Wilson says that with an "attitude of gratitude" you can be thankful for a challenge, and get through it.

His advice spurred our family to think about some of the positives that the pandemic brought. For example, like many families, we started a weekly Zoom meeting, uniting family members spread across the globe that hadn't been in regular touch previously.

**Take care by managing your energy.** You can also increase your resilience in the face of negativity and encourage thriving by exercising, eating well, and getting enough sleep — all things we know we're supposed to do but we often fail to when we're bombarded with negativity. When we exercise, our muscles pump "[hope molecules](#)" into our bodily systems that are good for our mental and physical health. You can amplify these effects by exercising outside, with others, or to music.

Healthy eating also helps you stave off negativity. How well do you respond to frustration when you're hungry? We lack the self-control required to respond patiently. [Sleep is also important](#). A lack of it impairs self-regulation and self-control, which can produce more negativity. Research has linked poor sleep to frustration, impatience, hostility, anxiety, [low levels of joviality](#), [lower levels of trust](#), [workplace deviance](#), and [unethical behavior](#). Sleep deprivation also [hurts the relationship between leaders and their followers](#), and [diminishes how much help people provide to others](#).

**Seek out positive relationships — inside and outside of work.** Christine's research found that de-energizing relationships — in which one person possesses an enduring, recurring set of negative judgments, feelings, and intentions toward another person — have four to seven times greater impact on an employee's sense of thriving than energizing, positive relationships. To offset these effects,

surround yourself and spend more time with *energizers* — the people in your life who make you smile and laugh, and lift your spirits.

You may not be able to stop the flow of negativity in your life, especially right now, but you can resist its toxic effects by making smart choices about who and what you surround yourself with, the mindset you adapt, and the information you consume. Not only will you be better off because of these choices — those around you will too.

*Editor’s note (10/30): This piece was updated to restore a paragraph that was accidentally left out when it was originally published.*

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