What do you think the role of stress is in our lives? I’m a health psychologist, and I was trained to view stress as the enemy of well-being, of productivity, of happiness, and of health, and I spent many years trying to help people reduce their stress or avoid it. But in the last few years, I fundamentally changed my mind about stress, and I want to change yours, too. I'll start by talking about something that I call the stress paradox.
I went to 121 countries and asked people the same question: “Did you experience a great deal of stress yesterday?” We computed something called a stress index, which is the percentage of people in any country that said, “Yes, yesterday was very stressful.” A group of psychologists got their hands on that data, and asked an interesting question: Does a country’s stress index correlate with other indices of well-being, like life expectancy, GDP, global happiness, or people’s life satisfaction? It turns out that it does, but in exactly the opposite direction the researchers expected. The higher the nation’s stress index, the greater the GDP and life expectancy, the more satisfied people are with their lives, with their work, their communities, and their own health…the happier they are. Basically, the more people who thought yesterday was very stressful, the better it was for public health, for the economy, and for all the other elements they looked at.

In order to better understand this odd correlation, the researchers looked at what other experiences seemed to correlate with a high stress index. They found, as you might expect, that on stressful days, people were also more likely to feel sadness, to feel worried, or to feel angry. But a high stress index also correlated with some interesting things, like feeling a great deal of joy, laughing a lot, saying that you felt a lot of love, or saying that you learned something interesting.

The researchers realized that the same circumstances that give rise to stress also give rise to these positive experiences, and that’s what I call the stress paradox. Even though we experience stress in the moment as distressing, and we often think of it as being undesirable, it can be a barometer for how engaged we are with the things in our lives that bring love, laughter, learning, and growth. Stress actually seems to go along with the things that we most desire: the love, the happiness, the success, the wealth, the satisfaction, and the meaning in our lives.

More recently, a group of psychologists asked a broad sample of people in the United States to reflect on whether they felt like their lives had meaning. The researchers gave people a whole bunch of other surveys to find out what was the predictor of having a meaningful life. It turned out that one of the best predictors is stress, any way they measured it. People who experience higher levels of stress in their lives right now are more likely to find meaning in their lives. If you look back in a person’s life to see how much adversity they faced, that also predicts more meaning. Even the amount of time you spend every day worrying about the future predicts a greater sense of meaning in your life. Researchers concluded that, overall, people who feel that they have a meaningful life worry more and experience much more stress than people who feel their lives are less meaningful.

This is a really different way to think about what stress means. Stress could be a signal that you
are engaged in the goals, in the roles, and the relationships you’re pursuing, that you’re facing the challenges that will also give rise to meaning in your life.

All too often, when the moment of stress arises—

whether it’s anxiety, overwhelm, sadness, despair, anger, or frustration—we view that stress as a signal that we are either inadequate to the challenges of life, or that we shouldn’t be feeling stressed out. Maybe we think that our lives have become toxic, that there is something fundamentally wrong with us, and we might actually turn our attention to trying to avoid the things that give rise to stress.

And that brings me to the next reason why I changed my mind about stress, and why I want to change your mind, too. How you think about the stress in your life plays a profound role in its effects on your well-being—whether that stress is harmful and leads to things like depression and burnout and heart disease, or whether it leads to greater well-being and resilience.

Here are two different ways of thinking about stress. I invite you to consider which one best describes the way that you talk about stress, and the way that you relate to it in your own life. Is stress negative? Something that needs to be avoided, reduced, managed, suppressed? Or is stress positive and helpful—something to embrace, accept, and use? The mindset you hold plays a really big role in how that stress affects your life.

Researchers at Yale have found that people who hold a more negative perception of stress, and believe it should be reduced or avoided, are more likely to experience what we typically think of as the negative outcomes of stress. They’re more likely to have health problems like back pain, headaches, and illnesses. They’re more likely to become depressed. They’re less productive at work, and enjoy it less. They’re even more likely to get divorced. Other studies with other research groups have shown that it may increase your risk of stress-related heart attacks or mortality. On the other side, people who hold a more positive and accepting view of stress seem to be protected from those things, even when their lives are stressful. They’re healthier. They’re happier. They do better at work, and are better able to find meaning in their struggles.

When I first came across this research, I was deeply skeptical. I thought the reason those people on one side were happier and healthier was because they hadn’t experienced enough
stress yet. If they suffered a little bit more, they would join me on this side of the line, where I
had the accurate and correct mindset that stress really is bad. The great thing about science is
you can test those hypotheses, and this one turned out not to be true. The protective benefit of
embracing stress, rather than trying to reduce or avoid it, seems to hold true whether your life is
not very stressful or extremely stressful, whether or not you’ve had a relatively easy life, or
whether your life has had a lot of adversity in it.

Most important to me, as someone who wants to help people be healthier and happier, is that
research shows that when you tell people about the importance of stress mindsets and you
encourage them to choose a more accepting attitude toward the stress in their lives, they
actually become healthier, happier, and more productive at work—even in very difficult and
stressful circumstances.

Here’s a mini mindset intervention that will help you choose this more accepting and embracing
attitude in the moments when stress is rising, whether it’s anxiety, anger, overwhelm,
frustration, or sadness. To give you this mindset intervention, I’m going to tell you about three of
my favorite scientific studies that test how someone’s positive view of stress transforms her
experience.

A study conducted at Columbia Business School brought people into the laboratory to prepare
and then deliver a persuasive talk. They were told that their talk would be evaluated by experts
in communication, and they would be getting critical feedback on everything, from their body
language and facial expressions to what they said and how they said it. When they showed up
and started to give their speeches—not knowing this would happen—the experts began
interrupting them often to tell them exactly what they were doing wrong: “Your body language
suggests that you lack confidence.” “You need to try to stand this way.” “You need to make
better eye contact and here’s what that would look like.” “You used a really weak example. You
need to come up with a better one.” “Let’s just go back in your speech and try that again.”

This is a pretty stressful experience for folks to go through. But before they went through that
period of having to adapt immediately to critical feedback, all the participants watched one of
two very short videos about stress. Some unlucky participants were forced to watch a
three-minute video that started with a demoralizing statement that said, “Everyone knows stress
is bad for you. But research shows that stress is even more debilitating than you’d expect.”
Everything that we usually hear about stress was in this video: “Stress makes you sick. Stress
interferes with performance. Stress will kill you. It’s a problem. You need to reduce it or avoid it.”
The other participants got a real mindset intervention with a short video that started with a very
different statement: “Everyone thinks that stress is bad for you, but research shows that stress
is actually enhancing." This video informed participants that our own stress responses—how our bodies and brains respond to stress—can help us rise to a challenge and improve performance. Stressful experiences are an important part of life. They help us learn and grow and can be opportunities to develop strengths and choose our priorities. The researchers were curious whether giving people a positive spin on stress would transform their experience.

To be clear, everyone in the study was stressed out. It really is nerve-wracking to give a speech and get negative feedback and adapt on the spot. Everyone experienced it as stressful. However, the people who were put in this more accepting mindset towards stress felt more confident, more determined, even more excited about the experience.

The researchers also looked at their physiological stress responses. We’ve all heard about certain stress hormones, like adrenaline and cortisol, but there are a lot of hormones that the body and the brain release during stress. One is DHEA. Most people don’t know that this is a stress hormone. DHEA plays a role in being a precursor to testosterone, and it helps your body get stronger from physical exercise. In the brain it functions as a neuro-steroid, which helps your brain grow from stressful experiences. It helps your brain form new connections from new experiences so you’ll be better the next time you face a similar challenge.

In this study, the participants who were put in that more positive mindset toward stress released higher levels of DHEA during and after their talk. They entered a physiological stress state that makes it easier to learn and grow as a result of doing something anxious or difficult. Getting that critical feedback in a moment and having to respond to it, their bodies and brains shifted into a stress state that helped them learn and grow.

The next study was a study of job-interview stress. The researchers were interested in that feeling of anxiety and stress that happens right before you have a big opportunity where you really want to impress others and nail the performance. So they told some participants to do what most people usually do—spend a few minutes thinking about how they were going to impress the interviewers, how they were going to show their strengths, and prove that they were the best person for this job.

But another group of participants got very different instructions for that pre-interview, high-anxiety period. They were asked to think about how the job was connected to their values. They were asked, when that moment of anxiety came, to bring the bigger context of personal meaning into that experience of anxiety. And they were asked to think about how, if they got this
job, it would be an opportunity to express those values. Why did they care so much about getting this job, and what could they do if they had that job that was personally meaningful?

Just as in the last study, this mindset of meaning didn’t make people less stressed out—they still felt anxious and stressed about the job interview. However, they did a lot better. The researchers filmed the interviews and showed them all to unbiased raters, who rated each interviewer on different criteria. Participants who had spent a few minutes putting their anxiety into a context of meaning were rated as being more inspiring and more uplifting. They were the kind of people that other people wanted to work with and hire, because they felt inspired by them.

In terms of their stress physiology, the researchers looked at cortisol. Cortisol is a stress hormone that is most associated with burnout, especially in the workplace. People who have a stress response characterized by higher levels of cortisol are at greater risk of depression, fatigue, burnout, collapse, and things that we want to avoid in order to thrive in the workplace or in other roles that are important to us. In this study, the participants who took on a mindset of meaning released lower levels of cortisol during and before the interview, even though they were still anxious and stressed. They had a healthier physiological stress response without suppressing the stress, or reducing the stress, or running out of the office because they were so panicked about the interview. They didn’t avoid the stress by bringing in a mindset of meaning—they transformed it.

The last study I want to tell you about was a very different kind of stress study. In this study, people came into the experiment and were asked to spend a few moments thinking of an experience in their lives that was difficult, and still painful to think about. Some participants were asked to think about it in the way that we usually ruminate on painful experiences—to just sit down by ourselves and think about it. Other participants were invited to think about it from a different point of view: “For the next two minutes, try to think of the experience as an opportunity to grow, to learn, or to become stronger. If this experience was far in your past, take a moment to think about any benefits that you might have experienced by going through that difficult and painful experience.”

During the two minutes that everyone thought about this heartache or trauma, their facial muscle expressions were being measured by electrodes attached to their faces. One of the first things the researchers noticed was that when participants were trying to see the good in something painful, they actually had less activation of the corrugator muscles of the forehead—the muscles that furrow your brow and flatten your eyebrows in that classic, telltale signal of distress. But they also had electrodes on the zygomaticus muscle, which lifts your
cheeks into a smile. And those muscles were more activated, even though the participants were thinking about painful experiences. It wasn’t just their faces that were happy. The participants who thought about the stressful experience from a benefit finding mindset reported greater levels of gratitude, joy, and forgiveness, and they actually felt less angry afterward, now having thought about it in this way.

The physiology that researchers looked at was something called heart-rate variability. Heart-rate variability is considered the classic physiological sign of emotional resilience. When participants who thought about this painful experience the way we usually do, their heart rate variability got constricted. But for the people who thought about their painful experiences from a benefit-finding mindset, their heart-rate variability increased. Making contact with that point of pain was putting them in a physiological state of resilience and producing the biology of gratitude and joy.

I said I wanted to change your minds about stress. But what I really want to do is simply empower you to understand that how you think about stress can make a difference in how that stress impacts everything, from your physiology to your brain resilience to your well-being to how well you’re able to do the things that matter to you. The way to change your mindset is surprisingly simple, as you saw in those three interventions.

If, before reading this, I asked you whether you hoped that tomorrow would be stressful, odds are you wouldn’t have said yes. Of course, we don’t actually get to choose whether tomorrow is stressful or not. But I hope that if tomorrow is stressful for you, that you might take a moment to think about the paradox of stress, to recognize that a meaningful life is also a stressful life, and that you could use that stress—not as a signal that there’s something wrong with you, that you’re inadequate to your life, or that your life is somehow fundamentally toxic and killing you—but to actually use that stress as a sign that something you care about is at stake. To take that stress as an opportunity to think about what you care about, and to view whatever the situation is as an opportunity to learn, to grow, to choose to express your values—and most importantly, to trust that you can handle the challenge.