

WORKING ON IT

I'm starting the year with 'The Stress Prescription'

My anxious brain loved Elissa Epel's book about learning to recognize and handle good and bad stress

By [Meredith Goldstein](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 4, 2023, 5:08 p.m.



Elissa Epel's new book is "The Stress Prescription" JEREMY MONTEMAYOR

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About a third of the way through her new book, “[The Stress Prescription: Seven Days to More Joy and Ease](#),” researcher and professor [Elissa Epel](#) presents a wildlife scene. I’ll summarize.

Basically, there’s a lion and a gazelle, predator and prey.

The gazelle is stressed – *clearly* – because it is a sitting duck (sorry to mix animal metaphors). The gazelle has every reason to panic.

But the lion is not without stress. Why? Because it has a challenge. It has to catch the gazelle, which involves some hunting skills. If it doesn’t succeed, it’ll have to find another meal.

Clearly, the lion and the gazelle are experiencing different types of stress. One is fighting for its life, while the other is figuring out the best way to get dinner.

Epel – director of the University of California, San Francisco’s [Aging, Metabolism, and Emotion Center](#) – asks readers in her new book: are you feeling like a gazelle ... *all of the time*?

“Most of us are not regularly being chased by life-threatening lions,” she writes. “But our bodies are behaving as though we are. Too often, we’re responding to the stressors that pop up over the course of a day as though they’re a survival threat to fight off or run from, rather than a meal to take down. Our bodies shoot into fight-or-flight mode, dumping cortisol and adrenaline into our bloodstreams, rocketing our nervous systems into a state of fear and vigilance. And when that response happens ... our bodies no longer know how to ‘come down’ from the stress.”

Very true. I am a gazelle most days. A freaked out 45-year-old gazelle, cracking her knuckles late at night, trying to guess what bad things might happen in the immediate future.

Elissa Epel, PhD



7
Days to
More Joy
and Ease

The STRESS Prescription

Epel's book, released just before New Year's, explains that when high-level stress becomes our baseline, we can age faster and be more vulnerable to disease. There are obvious reasons for our anxiety (consider the last three years), but we have to figure out how to deal with it.

I've read a bunch of books about stress and anxiety for Working On It, this monthly self-help book review column. The guides are often great at explaining the "why" of stress, but don't always offer the kind of practical solutions I can use long-term.

My life won't ever be free of stressors. I have no plans to begin a life of meditation and a journey to inner peace. So what am I supposed to do?

Epel's book helped me with that, and I've been recommending it to friends whose baseline emotion is worry and discomfort. Though I'm suspicious of any self-help book that promises to fix you in a specific number of days, that's not what Epel aims to do, despite this book's title. She does have seven pillars of reworking stress in your life, but you can consider her ideas over months instead of days.

Instead of trying to help readers erase stress altogether, she defines different types of stress and explains how some of it can be good, with anecdotes, research, and biology lessons that weren't over my head. Her tips feel practical. Epel also demystifies the biggest issue standing in the way of calm – our need for control.

Many of us play out every possible negative scenario, so we can prepare ourselves for danger and feel more in control. But we can't predict the future, so by guessing, we're only adding to the misery of the actual bad experience – if it ever happens. Also, we don't spend much time anticipating good things. We often forget that positive outcomes even happen.

This is a great book for present and former caregivers, by the way. Epel understands how worrying and trying to anticipate problems can take over when you're responsible for a

vulnerable person's well being.

Some of Epel's tips for dealing with stress – in addition to figuring out how to accept what we can't control – include determining whether specific stresses are “threats” or “challenges”; using nature – and experiences that create awe – to detach from stress; and experimenting with physical exercise – and temperature – to teach the body to recover from stress. All of her ideas were tasks I would actually do, with solid alternatives for a range of readers.

Not to get too meta, but after I realized I liked this book a lot, I felt stressed about reviewing it. I feared writing a review that didn't hit the right points. I imagined finishing it at the office right after the holidays, and then worried there might be someone with COVID at the next desk. I thought about the rest of my to-do list and freaked out a little. Then, for kicks, I wondered if my sister had gotten her flu shot yet, because she keeps putting it off. After that, for no good reason, I sat there and [wondered who, in my life, might be upset with me.](#)

But then I used the tools in Epel's book to reset. I stopped thinking about what I couldn't control. I made a list of what I could actually do to address my stress – like text my sister about the flu shot, and then let go. I accepted that it's possible that no one is mad at me right now, and that I am doing just fine.

I realized that writing about this book was a challenge (a fun one), not a threat.

How lucky am I? I got to read a book I liked! (I hadn't anticipated that would happen.)

I realized that in this moment, I am a lion, not a gazelle.

I'm not a lion who meditates, but that's fine. I'm doing my best.

[“The Stress Prescription”](#) by Elissa Espel, Penguin Life, \$15.

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