

PUBLICATION

Women's Health Tip: I'm SO STRESSED

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I had a bad week. A really bad week. No one died. There was no terminal diagnosis. No damage that is permanent. But it was bad enough that I started questioning my goals and priorities. It also got me thinking of a trip to Napa Valley. In wine country, I learned that vineyards subject their grapes to stressful conditions in order to produce a perfect wine.

The stressful week started when I fell down a full flight of stairs head first, rushing to dinner after a hard workout with quivery legs. I'm fine, but had bruised legs and arms that hurt all week. On Monday, I fell asleep with 119 unopened e-mails, praying that there was no emergency needing urgent attention. On Tuesday, a goal I wanted to accomplish before the end of the year crashed and burned. On Wednesday, I left work early to watch my amazing son play basketball for his school; he played his heart out, only to foul out of the game with 10 seconds left, giving the other team the free throw that won the game. My heart hurt worse than my legs. On Thursday, I failed to receive approval for a new attorney to join my group. I woke up Friday with my right eye swollen like the elephant man from an allergy – my dermatologist had no diagnosis except that the irritant was coming from the inside, not the outside. Saturday, I was craving a relaxing afternoon of catching up with an old friend, who then canceled at the last minute for a work emergency. I returned home, feeling sorry for myself, questioning whether I could choose a better path that would avoid such a stressful week.

I lost sight of the succession of great days before this week.

As I was driving, I thought of a trip I took to Napa Valley where I learned how fine wines are made. A vineyard owner explained during a tour that grape vines are given plenty of water during their initial growth. But as the vine begins to mature, water is withheld in order to "stress" the vines. She explained that when the vines are stressed, they begin to conserve resources and direct their nutrients away from the superfluous foliage to flow directly to the fruit. Essentially, when all conditions are perfect, the vine makes leaves and foliage, saying, "this is a nice easy spot, I will stay here forever." But then when the vine is stressed, usually with water deprivation, it funnels those nutrients to the grapes. When it must make decisions to survive, the energy goes to the end most likely to bear fruit.

Isn't that the way a really stressful week is? When everything is easy, we cruise down a path without questioning our next move. But when we become overly stressed, we begin to make hard decisions about where to spend our energy. Is this the place we want to stay? Am I focusing my limited energy on the things that will bear fruit? At the end of this week, I reevaluated where to focus my time, my attention, my risk-taking, my energy, my best, asking which of my efforts are going to bear good fruit.

Does that make stress any less, well, stressful? No, not really. But, understanding that stress is part of the process of making a more complex and beautiful fruit does make it a little easier to bear.

Here are 10 tricks I use to keep my stress in check. We want complex fruit, but dead on the vine is not good for anyone.

- 1) **Keep it in perspective.** Most stressors are not terminal or permanent. When these temporary circumstances stress me out, I take a step back to see the big picture. For example, when opposing counsel is a miserable human being, at least I have a good job. Or, perhaps your basement flooded, and you're thankful the bank didn't foreclose on your house. This is a life event that will pass, and we will all be okay.
- 2) **Give yourself permission to feel bad** – for a little while. Sometimes I find myself spending so much energy making a happy face, pretending like nothing is wrong, that I have no energy left to improve the situation. Occasionally, after a stressful day I allow myself to buy a good bottle of wine after work, skip a cocktail party in favor of watching a made-for-TV-movie on TLC and eating chocolate. I will allow myself to feel bad for one night only, and then I'm done. That can be really nice.
- 3) **Don't put off the inevitable.** I cleaned my whole apartment before I started studying for finals in law school. Putting off the inevitable. Or, I arrive at work and look at my To Do list and call back the four people I enjoy, putting off the one that makes me miserable until the end of the day. I've learned that the stress of dreading something is more damaging than the stress of getting it done. My advice is to get those awful tasks done first: call back the people you dislike, write the ugly brief hanging over your head, schedule your annual exam. Spend the rest of your day calmer having a big, fat checkmark beside that nasty task on your list. You might even use a wide-tip Sharpie to mark through it. Yeah, that feels good. There must be a diagnosis for people like me who get that much joy from using a fat, black marker to check off a terrible task from a to-do list.
- 4) **Name what is stressing you.** Making lists helps me manage my stress. When I tell you that I LOVE lists, I mean it: I love lists. Not as much as I love my children, but probably more than I love my dog. And I really love her. When I feel the To Do Storm brewing in my mind, only part of the stress comes from how much I have to do. My bigger worry is that I may forget something. Once I write it down, my head stops swirling, and I relax.
- 5) **Change your scenery.** Responding to a contentious brief from opposing counsel while sitting at a sunny, quiet, outdoor café that plays Jason Isbell helps me have a different perspective. Returning a dreaded call with an earpiece while driving somewhere I enjoy is a different experience than calling from my desk at 4 p.m. I'm writing this article from my favorite outdoor café, The Summer Kitchen, in my favorite beach town, Rosemary Beach. My guess is that this article has a totally different feel than if I had written it at my desk.
- 6) **Find stolen moments of pleasure.** In the middle of a stressful day, a few minutes of stolen pleasure can change your outlook on the whole day. Once after a really tough conversation in my office, I left the office and headed directly to a nearby candy and toffee shop. I walked out with the biggest, nuttiest, chocolate caramel apple I had ever seen. More often, I shut my office door, put on an album I love, make an iced tea, light a candle, and sip my tea while I watch boats paddle down the Cumberland River from my office window for ten minutes. I even keep a little pair of fancy binoculars on my window ledge so I can get a closer look at the boaters. Now, that's better. In a 9-1-1 stressful situation, you may need to get in your car and go to a beautiful grassy, green area for an hour with a blanket and a snack. The world will keep turning for an hour, I promise.
- 7) **Make your office a space that you love.** I know I am in my office more than I am in my home living room and kitchen. In my opinion, it's a big mistake not to think about how you feel in your office space. A sterile, cluttered, used-office-furniture space is not going to improve your stress level. Splurge on a beautiful painting that speaks to you, a lamp that brightens the space, a client chair that welcomes guests and framed photos that remind you of places and those you love.
- 8) **Attitude check.** Pastor and author Charles Swindoll said: "I am convinced that life is 10 percent what happens to me and 90 percent how I react to it." We all know someone who is gritty, tenacious, flexible, can change mental course on a dime, eyes on the prize, sees challenges as opportunities, who can pick herself up and dust off quickly when she takes a fall. She is an example for all of us that stress management, and life, is

about attitude. One of my mentors recently took a mission trip to Honduras. Along with the Honduran people, he painted a mural on the side of a building with a motto we remind each other of often: "Choose Happiness." People who have nothing other than their family, friends and a dirt floor one-room home, and are still joyful, are a reminder for me to check my attitude.

I keep a small photograph of the "Choose Happiness" mural on my desk. I need that reminder daily. Some days more than others.

9) **Know that stress is normal for all of us.** It's way too easy to start thinking that if you had chosen a different career path that life would have been so much easier – the Grass-Is-Greener syndrome. Most of the time that's just an excuse. There are people for whom the real problem is the career or firm they've chosen, and they need to make a change. But, for the vast majority, that is not the issue. Every job worth having has stress sometimes. Every wine worth drinking was stressed at some point. My guess is that Boone's Farm grapes don't get much water deprivation. So, if that's what makes you happy...

What career advice would you give your daughter? That's not easy, is it? There is so much wisdom in Tina Fey's poem "A Mother's Prayer for Her Daughter," and I laugh out loud every time I read it. Here's the relevant part for Tip 9: "Lead her away from Acting, but not all the way to Finance. Something where she can make her own hours, but still feel intellectually fulfilled and get outside sometimes and not have to wear high heels. What would be that be Lord? Architecture? Midwifery? Golf course design? I'm asking you because if I knew, I'd be doing it." So true. Every intellectually fulfilling job that I know of involves some stress. Ask people you trust about the stress in their jobs. You are not alone. It's normal.

10) **Set your eyes on the other side of the stressful situation.** It's easy to get engulfed by a stressful situation and lose sight about becoming a better person for it. When I was a new and young lawyer, I landed a new client that was in a crisis. I was 27, staring at an overwhelming situation for my new (and first real) client, and knew I was in a position to save them, or not if I didn't navigate the crisis perfectly. It was one of the most stressful times in my career. I felt the weight of it as if the future of my own company was on the line. Over the course of a year, we made it through, together. Sixteen years later, they are still my client and we have cultivated a beautiful relationship. My fruit is so much sweeter for it. I think of that early time in my career often when I face a seemingly insurmountable challenge. Because of it, I can start with the outlook: we can do this, think big, be creative, work hard, take that stress off your client and bear it for them. I'll be better for it when we get to the other side. And we will. We always do.

Hopefully, I will have many more years to allow stress to ripen the fruit in my life, and to let life sweeten the outcome by stressing my vines. I'd love to hear your tips, too, because one of the best parts of stress is being in it together.