

One Research-Backed Way to Effectively Manage Your Stressful and Busy Schedule

By James Clear | Behavioral Psychology, Stress Management

About twenty years ago, a group of college students at Stanford University headed home for winter break. While they were gone, they were given the task of keeping a daily journal.

In this journal, some of the students were asked to write about their most important personal values and then describe how the events of each day connected with those values.

Another group of students was simply asked to describe the positive events that happened throughout their day.

When the students returned to school after the break, the researchers discovered that those students who wrote about their personal values were healthier, experienced fewer illnesses, and had better energy and attitude than the students who merely wrote about the positive events in their lives.

As time has gone on, these findings have been replicated in nearly a hundred additional studies. In fact, according to the book [The Upside of Stress \(audiobook\)](#) by Stanford professor Kelly McGonigal:

“It turns out that writing about your values is one of the most effective psychological interventions ever studied. In the short term, writing about personal values makes people feel more powerful, in control, proud, and strong. It also makes them feel more loving, connected, and empathetic toward others. It increases pain tolerance, enhances self-control, and reduces unhelpful rumination after a stressful experience.

In the long term, writing about values has been shown to boost GPAs, reduce doctor visits, improve mental health, and help with everything from weight loss to quitting smoking and reducing drinking. It helps people persevere in the face of discrimination and reduces self-handicapping. In many cases, these benefits are a result of a one-time mindset intervention. People who write about their values once, for ten minutes, show benefits months or even years later.”

—Kelly McGonigal

But why?

The Power of Personal Values

Why would such a simple action like writing about your personal values deliver such incredible results?

Researchers believe that one core reason for this is that journaling about your personal values and connecting them to the events in your life helps to reveal the meaning behind stressful events in your life. Sure, taking care of your family or working long hours on a project can be draining, but if you know why these actions are important to you, then you are much better equipped to handle that stress.

In fact, writing about how our day-to-day actions match up with our deepest personal values can mentally and biologically improve our ability to deal with stress. In McGonigal's words, "Stressful experiences were no longer simply hassles to endure; they became an expression of the students' values... small things that might otherwise have seemed irritating became moments of meaning."

Living Out Your Personal Values

My own experiences have mirrored the findings of the researchers. In fact, I stumbled into a very similar practice by accident before I had even heard about these research findings.

Each year, I conduct an Integrity Report. This report has three sections. First, I list and explain my core values. Second, I discuss how I have lived and worked by those core values over the previous year. Third, I hold myself accountable and discuss how I have missed the mark over the previous year and where I did not live up to my core values. I have found that doing this simple exercise each year actually helps to keep my values top of mind on a daily basis. Furthermore, I have direct proof of how and why my writing and work connects with my most meaningful personal values. This type of reinforcement makes it easier for me to continue working when the work gets stressful and overwhelming.

If you're interested in writing about your own personal values, I put together a [core values list](#) with more than 50 common personal values. You are welcome to browse that list for inspiration when considering your own values.

Whether you choose to conduct an integrity report like I do or keep a journal like the Stanford students, the science is pretty clear on the benefits. Writing about your personal values will make your life better and improve your ability to manage stressful events in your life.

<http://jamesclear.com/personal-values-journal>

Also Ted Talk from Kelly McGonigal on stress:

http://www.ted.com/talks/kelly_mcgonigal_how_to_make_stress_your_friend

"Chasing Meaning is better for your health than trying to avoid discomfort. Go after what it is that creates meaning in your life and then trust yourself to handle the stress that follows"