

Stress and Stones



John Mehrmann

“Why do you have a pile of rocks on your desk?”

“Those aren’t just rocks,” I replied. “These small stones are gifts, remnants from great bridges that people built to cross over troubled waters. I keep them here to remind me. Take one, as my gift to you, and remember.”

Everyone faces periods of stress, disappointment, loss, or personal challenge. The most significant differences are the frequency and severity of the personal challenges. How we cope with these periods influences personal contentment and is reflected in our words and actions.

In times of stress, disappointment is exaggerated and obstacles are magnified. Even though the root cause of the stress might be associated with a specific issue, concerns can begin to have an impact on other seemingly minor activities or decisions. This can lead to mental and emotional duress, resulting in physical fatigue. Like a snowball rapidly descending a mountain, it gathers speed, consuming, combining, and colliding with our other daily activities until we are overwhelmed by an avalanche of issues.

Rather than ignore thoughts or take them all at once, focus on each concern one at a time. Visualize each problem as a stone. The size of the stone grows and takes shape based on the intensity and complexity of the challenge. As you contemplate the nuances and the implications of each issue, imagine the shape of the stone adjusting until it is complete. Consider every potential result of your obstacle. Every potential variation is a different perspective of the stone. Like

your stone, the issue may appear jagged or pitted. Perceived from different angles, the issue may appear easier to handle.

That stone represents the stress, fear, and frustration associated with that issue or challenge. It may appear unyielding, solid, and formidable. The stone that you have created may be difficult to manage or to change. When you have defined the problem, then your stone is complete.

Imagine rolling the stone down the grassy hillside and placing it on the bank beside a wide river. When that stone that represents your obstacle is firmly in place at the edge of the river, it is time to leave it and to start thinking about the details of challenges that will define your next stone.

Close your eyes and imagine using these stones to build the beginning of an impressive bridge across the river. You may have seen pictures of an old stone bridge that spanned a wide river. Use the stones created from your challenges to construct a similar bridge. Sometimes the chasm is deep. Sometimes the water runs cold and fast beneath your feet. Some bridges are long and narrow, while others are low and wide. The stones and the chasm determine the size and shape of the bridge that needs to be crossed. It takes many stones to build a bridge, large and small.

It requires patience and skill to fit the stones in place and build a great bridge. Once a stone has been set in place, it does not change and is used only once. If you start to think about that challenge again, then remember where you placed that stone, and stop dwelling on the issue. Use these stones to build one side of the bridge, the side that comes from your current dilemma. This side of the river may be bleak and stormy, but the skies on the other side of the river are blue, clear, and bright.

Just as there are times of stress and conflict, there are also moments of serenity. If you are experiencing stress, then you must surely also remember periods when it did not exist. Those moments of peace, calm, and joy will return. Perhaps you will find yourself enjoying a sunset, listening to the ocean, sitting on the front-porch swing with your children, or relaxing in your favorite chair with a good book. Take a moment to pause and reflect on the many things that you have to be grateful for in your life at that moment. Remember these things in detail, and shape these into the stones in your imagination. It is time to complete the other half of your bridge.

When you realize how fortunate you are, you are standing on the clear and sunny side of the river. With time you will discover that there are far more stones that represent thoughts of happiness than that represent conflict. When you reflect during moments of contentment, your appreciation will increase with recognition of the challenges that you have overcome on the path to building and crossing that bridge.

Minor inconveniences can easily become distractions. How often do little things like traffic lights or inconveniences in our schedules create an undue amount of stress? Is it because some other stress has magnified a minor inconvenience, or does a lack of conflict amplify the temporary inconvenience by comparison? Will you allow a minor inconvenience to have a negative impact on your mood or reflect in your interaction with others? A minor inconvenience is something that you will forget about in a day or a week, but the impact of expressing your irritation may have much longer-lasting effects. It is better to treat delays, mistakes, and minor issues like small pebbles and drop them on the roadway to fill the small crevices in your bridge. Walk over and past these small issues on your journey to the bright side of your life.

What shore are you standing on today? Are you looking for a way to overcome your challenges and strive for serenity? If you recognize the blessings in your life, have you taken a few moments to reflect on the obstacles that you overcame to reach this point in your journey? How is your current position reflected in the words and actions that you share with others? Your relationships are more than stones. Your relationships are the precious gems that make your bridge sparkle and shine.

Schedule a very specific time at the end of each day to close your eyes for five minutes to contemplate your current position. Hold a small stone in your hand and think about where you would place it in the section of the bridge that you are building today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Mehrmann is an authority on emotional intelligence, talent management, and organizational development. He is a consultant, coach, trainer, and speaker with Executive Blueprints, Inc., an organization devoted to improving business practices and developing human capital. ExecutiveBlueprints.com is an online resource with self-paced tutorials, tools, exercises, and educational and inspirational articles contributed from experienced professionals. Additional materials are available from <http://www.InstituteForAdvancedLeadership.com>.

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