I Jumped Out of a Plane to Learn the Benefits of Stress

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I’m sitting in the back of the plane when the pilot announces we’ve reached maximum altitude. One of the crew gets up and – somewhat theatrically – slides open the side of the plane. In ones and twos, we shuffle towards the open door. When it comes to my turn, standing on the edge of a two-mile vertical drop, I’m more terrified than I’ve ever been.

Thankfully, as a first-time jumper, I’m strapped to an experienced parachutist who will guide us down. I don’t even have to take the next step. But my brain is screaming at me not to go through with it. Behind me, my instructor gently pulls my head back so I can hear his reassuring words over the roaring wind. I grit my teeth, take a deep breath, and we tumble forward into the fresh rushing air.

Answers to some of the most important questions in psychology can be gleaned from situations like this. What is stress? Why do we feel it? And how can we deal with it better?

Researchers have tracked levels of stress hormones in first-time and experienced parachute jumpers. At the moment of jumping, novices experience very high levels of stress, both subjectively (“Oh god, what am I doing?”) and objectively, based on levels of stress hormones. In contrast, experienced skydivers like the instructor also show a spike in stress hormones, but they don’t panic.

The researchers conclude that experienced parachutists are better able to cope because their prior experience means they can cognitively reappraise the stress they face, reframing stressful situations as challenges. The first time I jumped out of a plane this was beyond me. But in researching my latest book, Upshift, which is about performance and creativity under pressure, I learned that we all have this innate ability, and that we can unlock and improve it through conscious effort and practice.

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