

CAUGHT IN NATURE'S PATH

Achieving Emotional Recovery and
Stress Relief after a Disaster



TERRY LYLES, PhD
www.TerryLyles.com

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The images confront us with shocking detail and striking frequency. We see scenes of natural disasters on TV and the Internet, which show vivid depictions of devastation, destruction, and distraught victims. We read headlines such as . . .

“Tornados Cause Massive Damage, Death in Midwest”

“370 Dead after Indonesian Tsunami”

“Death Toll Reaches 85 in California Wildfires, Hundreds Unaccounted For”

“Hawaiian Volcano Erupts, Lava Flow Destroys 700 Homes”

In recent years, we have witnessed every kind of natural disaster: tornados, floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, droughts, blizzards, wildfires, and more. The loss of property and material goods is virtually incalculable, but most devastating of all is the loss of life itself. Living with the personal loss from calamity can affect us daily for the rest of our lives.

If you have experienced loss due to a natural disaster—whether involving your home, work, or, worst of all, loved ones—you know the excruciating pain involved. I empathize deeply with your sorrow and suffering. And for those working with the victims of tragedies, I have sincere appreciation for your significant contributions, especially your efforts to preserve life during disaster and recovery. For more than two decades, I have assisted with disaster relief, witnessing firsthand the devastating effects of countless hurricanes, wildfires, and the tsunami in Asia. The grief and suffering accompanying disasters such as these is enormous. Destruction and loss are agonizing to endure.

I can say with utmost confidence, however, that my training and experience have allowed me to develop a unique program for helping people respond, adapt, and recover quickly and thoroughly. How? By transforming the negative aspects of stress into something positive.

“Stress, while not always welcome, is a powerful force that can be harnessed and utilized to create better outcomes.”

—Terry Lyles

Stress, while not always welcome, is a powerful force that can be harnessed and utilized to create better outcomes. As a matter of fact, I believe stress is good for us. Our bodies are hardwired to handle stress. Our physiology is designed to process and convert stress into energy that can enable us to perform at peak efficiency. Properly utilized, stress can propel us toward success in every area of life. Stress is meant to define us, not defeat us; to illuminate us, not eliminate us; to complement our life, not complicate it.

You might be thinking—especially if you’re in the midst of tragic circumstances—that it’s absurd to believe stress is a good thing. I can tell you with certainty that you will flourish and thrive if you learn to see tragedies as opportunities to change, grow, expand your perspective, and deepen your spiritual faith. As difficult as it may seem to believe right now, you will even say years from now that your experience was one of the most profound and transformative events of your life. I know this to be true from the people I have worked with following disasters, as those tragedies pushed many people to make changes that were extremely beneficial to themselves and their families.

The strategies presented here are the accumulation of knowledge I have acquired and practiced throughout my education and career as a sports psychologist and performance coach—and more specifically as a “stress doctor” in the trenches during numerous relief and recovery efforts. As you walk with me through the pages ahead, you will learn how to navigate life’s storms with greater skill and accuracy than you ever imagined and build the foundation for a successful, healthy, and balanced life.

A Fresh Look at Stress

Simply put, stress is any opposing force that potentially limits forward progress. I say *potentially* because we often cannot control what happens in life, but we can control how we interpret and respond to stress. We can see life’s demanding events and difficult circumstances as either a negative threat or a positive challenge. In truth, our stress levels are directly linked to how we perceive them. If we perceive an event as negative, unfair, or insurmountable, then stress will compromise our health, happiness, and productivity. Conversely, when we choose to view an event positively, it becomes an opportunity for growth, development, and discovery.

Stress is a natural part of life, and very little would happen without it. Stress is the stimulus for all action and growth. Any inventor or innovator would confirm that we act because of stressful conditions. For example, it was the stress of high temperatures that brought us air-conditioning. It was the stress of not being able to communicate frequently and efficiently that brought us telephones, televisions, and computers.

It was the stress of washing clothes by hand that brought us washing machines. The list goes on and on. Yet many of us spend our time and energy trying to avoid stress or to minimize it, or just wishing it would go away. Thus, we miss the chance that it presents for a new opportunity or experience.

As I have learned in my research and work, viewing *each one* of life’s events—even the natural disasters—as a positive challenge is only a matter of training, of shifting your focus 180 degrees. In my years of disaster relief work, I have continually been amazed by the sheer strength and determination of the human spirit to prevail in spite of all odds. Most often, this is a matter of seeing stress for what it is—a natural part of life—and changing your perspective to *utilize* stress rather than *resist* it.

Gaining Clarity within the Crisis

Our world’s recent disasters have presented us with daunting and dramatic challenges. As we come to understand stress and properly utilize it, we must first see that it affects us in four primary areas:

- Mental—our thoughts
- Emotional—our feelings
- Spiritual—our purpose and goal alignment
- Physical—our energy

At any time, we can determine our mind/body alignment by assessing where we are in each of these areas and then making necessary adjustments to restore balance. When I consult with people on how to consistently thrive in life, I ask them to take a daily inventory. When you awake in the morning, take a few minutes to assess where you are mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically. It is vital to understand where you are so you can make choices that will empower you to live at your highest capacity throughout the day. Take some time now to assess where you are in life by answering the questions on the following page.



Personal Stress Assessment	1=POOR, 5=EXCELLENT
MENTAL ZONE	
How well can you focus?	1 2 3 4 5
How well are you able to concentrate?	1 2 3 4 5
How well do you handle distractions throughout the day?	1 2 3 4 5
How well are you navigating confusion and indecision?	1 2 3 4 5
EMOTIONAL ZONE	
How well are you managing periods of moodiness?	1 2 3 4 5
How well do you navigate periods of being short-tempered?	1 2 3 4 5
How well do you trust others?	1 2 3 4 5
How well are you dealing with the disaster overall?	1 2 3 4 5
SPIRITUAL ZONE	
What was your level of personal fulfillment prior to the disaster?	1 2 3 4 5
What was your level of professional fulfillment prior to the disaster?	1 2 3 4 5
How satisfied were you with your contributions overall?	1 2 3 4 5
How connected are you now to what's most important to you?	1 2 3 4 5
PHYSICAL ZONE	
How would you rate your energy from morning to evening?	1 2 3 4 5
How would you rate your ability to eat every three hours throughout the day?	1 2 3 4 5
How would you rate your physical conditioning?	1 2 3 4 5
How would you rate the frequency and effectiveness of your daily rest breaks?	1 2 3 4 5
TOTAL SCORE	

CALCULATION AND EVALUATION

Add your answers together for a total score.

75–80: You are operating at peak levels

65–75: You are operating at above average levels

55–65: You are operating below healthy levels

Below 55: You are in the danger zone, possibly approaching burnout

It is characteristic of people involved in disasters—whether victims or relief workers—to find themselves in the burnout zone. Fears arise in the face of unprecedented change and the uncertainty that accompanies such drastic change. And while our minds and bodies are equipped to handle this level of stress for short periods of time, it can be destructive in the long run if not navigated correctly.

Search and Rescue: Signs of Stress

With every disaster, the search-and-rescue process can be quite traumatic to the untrained eye and can cause a number of symptoms that persist for weeks, months, and even years if not treated properly. The stress of witnessing widespread destruction and devastation can be overwhelming. Worse, seeing people with serious injuries or viewing dead bodies can cause your mind and body to disconnect.

Below is a list of signs that could indicate you have a compromised stress response and that you need to process the trauma. You may wish to seek help from a trained professional to begin your road to recovery.

- Unrelenting fear, anxiety, or panic
- Persistent feelings of helplessness
- Troubling dreams and nightmares
- Daytime flashbacks
- Irritability
- Sleep disturbances, such as insomnia or fear of going to sleep
- Difficulty concentrating; distractibility
- Heightened awareness
- Confusion and disorientation
- Irrational behaviors
- Short temper
- Frequent crying

The stress response could also be expressed spiritually as questioning beliefs and morality, or physically as depleted energy, dehydration, and fatigue. These symptoms can occur immediately or be delayed, taking days, weeks, and even months to show up. The key is understanding that these are normal, natural stress responses to a traumatic event. Once we recognize the symptoms, it is critical to do what we can to recover and restore our health.

How Your Body Responds to Stress

Those who experience a severe and life-altering change, as in the case of a natural disaster, typically deal with many stresses at once. These compounded stressors will create physiological changes that, if ignored, will result in illness and disease. It is important to understand the negative effects of stress so you are empowered to make healthy choices.

When the body perceives threat or danger, a “fire alarm” is pulled inside our system, releasing stress hormones that mobilize energy and increase blood flow to the

“We conquer by continuing.”
—George Matheson, Scottish minister and hymnist



muscles. Increased oxygen is transported throughout our entire body. Bodily functions that are not needed in crisis—like digestion, sex drive, and immunity—are all suppressed under this fire alarm response.¹

Throughout our lives, our body's emergency system may be easily triggered by a threat (or perceived threat). Therefore, it must be regulated. Otherwise, problems related to overall health will continue to increase over the years. People who cannot handle stress will inadvertently condition their body for the continual “on-switch” fire alarm and have difficulty turning it off. Those who handle stress well and understand how the body responds will have the ability to turn the switch off more quickly. When this fire alarm is constantly activated day after day, week after week, it will create a chronic state of stress. What feels manageable at first can eventually feel like a relentless slide toward grave peril, the long-term detriments of which can be deadly.

With this kind of strain, the entire mind/body navigational system is adversely affected. Additionally, high levels of cortisol (the fight-or-flight response chemical that helps us recognize and respond to danger) secreted for long periods of time have been linked with diabetes, heart disease, and obesity.²

Beware of Compensatory Behaviors

All of us have certain behaviors and tendencies we are inclined to fall back on when trying to cope with a natural disaster or other crisis. The way we respond to or transition through calamity tends to be repeated over and over, revealing how well we have learned to adapt. Some people spend money they don't have. Others get drunk, do drugs, engage in risky behaviors, or hang out with unhealthy people. This is called compensatory behavior—overdoing something in one area to make up for the lack of control felt in another.

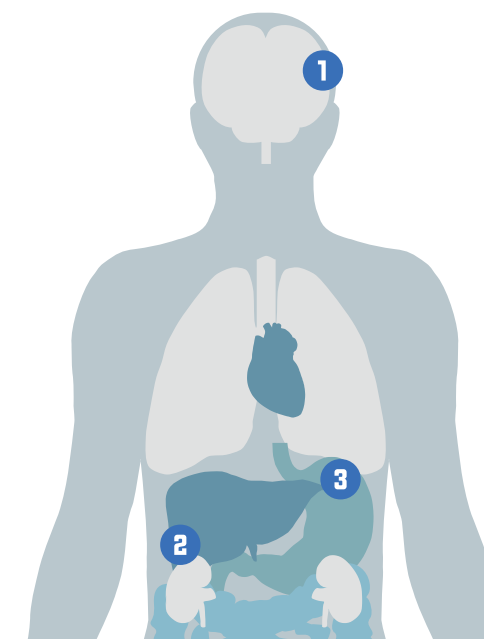
As human beings, we have a tendency to go overboard seeking pleasure in an effort to escape the pain and discomfort of a crisis. Living through a disaster will stretch you in ways not yet endured. However, if you have lived through a disaster, you must also remember the reality that *you have escaped with your life!* Focus on this awesome truth daily, and you will be able to properly navigate this potential mass of destruction.

How effectively you move through adversity depends on whether you react by resorting to an old compensatory behavior or by responding with a preferred behavior.

¹ Heathline, “The Effects of Stress on Your Body,” accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.healthline.com/health/stress/effects-on-body#1>.

² Mayo Clinic Staff, “Chronic Stress Puts Your Health at Risk,” April 21, 2016, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress/art-20046037>.

The Fight-or-Flight Response



1. Stress causes the sympathetic nervous system to send signals to the adrenal glands.
2. The adrenal glands release stress hormones into the bloodstream.
3. The fight-or-flight response causes a reaction in multiple parts of the body.

These are deliberate, positive actions designed to get you to the other side. If you are reading this while working or living in a shelter or other temporary housing, remember that there will be better days. You will function and even thrive again. For now, do the best you can with what you have.

The key is to first identify your weakest link. Once you are aware of your weaknesses, you will have a better chance of preventing yourself from slipping into a mode of self-destruction. For example, if your weakest link is physical, you may discover that your lack of energy spurs a desire for junk food (which then further depletes your energy). Because you know this is a weak link, you can do your best to choose healthy foods that fuel your energy and to schedule regular rest periods. You might even consider asking your family and friends to prepare healthy meals for you.

On the following page are some examples of weaknesses and possible positive action plans. Take time to identify your challenges and create positive strategies.

“Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success.”

—Henry Ford

Area	Challenge	Things I Can Do to Help Myself
MENTAL	Example: I keep thinking that it's not fair that this happened to me.	Example solutions: I take a few minutes to visualize my new and better future. I breathe slowly in and out through my nose. I focus on the good that I can do now by helping a neighbor who is struggling.
EMOTIONAL	Example: I am very moody and my emotions are all over the place.	Example solutions: When I notice that I am moody, I take 3-4 breaths in through my nose and out through my mouth to relax. I talk about my feelings with someone I trust.
SPIRITUAL	Example: I have lost my passion and motivation to excel in life.	Example solutions: I make a gratitude list and focus on my new opportunities instead of only the potential threats.
PHYSICAL	Example: I am constantly fatigued.	Example solutions: I carry a water bottle around with me and drink as much water during the day as I can. I schedule regular rest periods every 90 minutes throughout the day.

Secondary Effects of Traumatic Stress: Depression and Grief

Tragedies and disasters like the California wildfires, Indonesian earthquakes, and Florida coast hurricanes have resulted in untold losses for thousands (sometimes millions) of people. Grief is a normal cycle you must go through any time you experience loss; it is the space between your past reality and your future reality, which is yet to be revealed. One exercise that is extremely helpful when you have lost loved ones is to write them letters and then destroy them as a memorial to their life. This can keep your emotions flowing, helping you to avoid problems such as blockage and trauma, which can hinder your mind and body. Beyond the death of a loved one, you could also be grieving the loss of treasured personal items, such as your home, family comforts, and even future expectations.

It is helpful to be aware of the common stages of grief, which include:

- Shock
- Anger
- Sadness
- Depression
- Guilt

The first stage, shock, can last for several days, especially during an intense crisis. This state of survival can look normal to the outside observer, but shock does not necessarily mean vacant eyes and incoherent responses. Many people who are considered among the “walking wounded” look normal to the untrained eye, but in reality

they are not. It can be a paralyzing experience to view dead bodies during relief and recovery efforts while at the same time grappling with your own personal safety and loss.

Once the shock wears off, myriad other feelings persist until a person comes to terms with the tragedy and adapts to a new reality. During the grief process, it is normal to move back and forth through these stages. Beware, however, of getting stuck in one stage for a long period of time. For many people, a complete recovery can take years, but be assured that grief will transform into adaptation with each passing day. There is truth to the adage that time heals all wounds. As you use the tools presented in these pages, you will find that your road to recovery will be easier and faster.

Depression is a common symptom in people who feel unable to cope with stress. Acute stress disorder is usually caused by negative external circumstances such as disaster, the loss of a job, the loss of a family member, and financial reversal, to name a few. Clinical depression, on the other hand, is different. The factors that create clinical depression are complicated, but a simple explanation is that it is chemically induced by the depletion of serotonin in the brain.³ As with any level of depression, it is helpful to work with a trained professional who can assist you in your recovery.

Personal Qualities That Help You Prevail

Research and training have identified several markers that help define how well we relate to life’s challenges and how successful we are at navigating life’s storms. The first three markers relate to the concept of toughness. We might also call it fortitude, determination, or resolve. Usually, what toughens us are the things that go wrong, the hard knocks we learn from. Natural disasters are some of the toughest challenges, because most people are unprepared to deal with such a disruptive and unexpected change.

While experience is the best teacher, we can also train ourselves—mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically—to be tougher by refusing to allow life to get us down. Throughout life, we encounter many challenges. When we fall, it is our degree of toughness that determines how quickly we recover. Toughness is measured by the following three markers:



“The greatest weapon against stress is our ability to choose one thought over another.”

—William James

³ “Acute Stress Disorder,” Traumadisassociation.com, accessed March 18, 2019, <http://traumadisassociation.com/acutestressdisorder>.

“Always bear in mind that your own resolution to success is more important than any other one thing.”

—Abraham Lincoln

- **Strength**—the ability to dig deep and stand firm through life’s changes
- **Flexibility**—the ability to change and adapt to life’s circumstances
- **Resilience**—the ability to keep coming back until we succeed

Success does not mean that we never get knocked down; success means that we get up one more time than we are knocked down. Defeat is not failure; failure is when we allow defeat to become final.

The other major factor determining our quality of life, in addition to life toughness, is our relationship with life’s challenges and the way we navigate during these storms. Victims of disasters progress through three phases of recovery:

Survival mode—This is the natural, temporary first step in dealing with any crisis, especially one the magnitude of a natural disaster. Similar to being on “automatic pilot,” survival mode is when our body is in a fight-or-flight response that focuses our attention on what we absolutely must do right now to stay alive. The danger is getting stuck in survival mode, where illnesses can develop in the form of anxiety disorders, depression, and other health issues.

Functioning stage—This is where 80 percent of the population lives on a day-to-day basis. This stage is marked by general contentment with life and a fair degree of ability to handle life’s challenges. The functioning stage is average or above-average performance. It is essentially a maintenance approach in which few people rise to fulfill their full potential.

Thriving level—This is the upper echelon of achievement and performance. People who thrive deliver excellence not only frequently but also consistently in every area of their lives.

Most people dream of flying but somehow never manage to get off the ground. They survive, but that’s it. Many more make it into the air regularly (function), but only a few ever soar (thrive). For most, the problem lies not in a lack of talent or ability, but in a lack of focus and proper training.

Immediate Well-Being: Four Ways to Begin Your Stress Recovery

When a natural disaster strikes and you are affected, you will experience acute needs that must be addressed. This is a process of physical, emotional, and mental “triage,” where you attend to your most immediate needs. Only then can you move on to your long term well-being. Start by taking these steps:

PROVIDE FOR YOUR BASIC PHYSICAL NEEDS

The first step in recovering from a disaster is to make sure you provide for your own basic needs: water, food, shelter, clothing, and rest. You must help yourself in order to help others. So instead of letting your body go during a crisis, be as committed as possible to staying well hydrated, eating properly, moving and exercising regularly, and getting sufficient rest and sleep. At the beginning of traumatic stress recovery, we almost always struggle with meeting our basic needs and taking necessary steps to create stability. As you encounter struggles along the path of recovery, think in terms of your “hierarchy of needs,” taking care of first things first.



PROTECT YOUR HEALTH

Another important factor affecting recovery during a disaster is the threat of diseases that stem from less-than-optimal living circumstances, including unhealthy water, overcrowded shelters, and mosquito infestation. These conditions are a breeding ground for infection and death, especially for overstressed and weakened bodies. While in a shelter or temporary living quarters, take the following precautions:

- Wash your hands and face with soap and water regularly and ensure that your children do the same.
- Drink only water that is bottled and from a reliable source.
- Utilize the Red Cross supplies that may be available in the shelters, including cleansing wipes, bug repellent, and antiseptic solutions.
- Carefully monitor young children, as they have a natural tendency to put objects in their mouth.
- Avoid pools of water whenever possible.
- Wear long pants and long sleeves, if possible, to prevent cuts, scrapes, and bug bites.

PRACTICE THE 90/10 RULE

In times of calamity, we oftentimes add unnecessary stress by focusing on things that are not within our control. In fact, as I have found in my work as a coach and psychologist, most people spend 90 percent of their day focusing on the 10 percent of reality that they cannot change. As a result, they experience additional frustration, disappointment, and emotional upset. What good will it do to curse Mother Nature or fate? What will we accomplish by wishing that people would “act right,” especially in a

shelter with few comforts from home? Will it improve the situation to grumble about government inefficiency or greedy insurance companies?

In order to move from survival to the functioning stage, we need to focus our attention on the reality that we can change and manage while at the same time expecting success. Most of the time, we cannot change the circumstances that bring about a disaster, but we can absolutely change how we respond to it. First, we can identify what is within our control. Then we can focus on where we are and start the journey toward recovery and rebuilding for the future.

PROACTIVELY DECIDE

The English word *decide* is derived from the Latin word *decidere*, which literally means “to cut off.” When we make a decision—and most of us make hundreds each day—we are eliminating every other choice or option in that moment. The beauty of life is that you can always decide differently, which some people call “changing your mind.” In reality, we don’t change our mind; we simply make a new decision based on new information and influences. The quality of each day, therefore, is determined by the quality of decisions we make. The exciting thing is that with each decision, over the course of any day, you have the opportunity to affect your life positively.

During times of duress, you may find it helpful to make decisions and choices that are in alignment with basic and immediate considerations, such as health or life.



You might consider asking yourself questions like: Will this decision bring me and my family more health and well-being? Are my thoughts and actions supporting a healthy recovery? Will this food give me more energy? Will this decision move my life in the right direction?

If the answer is yes, that’s great! Then your job throughout the day is to match your thoughts and spoken words with the healthy choices you have made. In times of chaos, you can find great peace and comfort when you manage your life to a few important priorities.

Sustained Progress: Further Along the Road to Recovery

Once you start getting back on your feet by applying the four strategies mentioned, you can begin to focus on additional practices that will propel you steadily toward recovery. Listed are further steps for moving from a negative to a positive state. Earlier, you identified your weaknesses, so now you can incorporate helpful steps that will turn your weaknesses into strengths.

MENTAL

- Focus on what is in your control.
- Look for the positive in every situation.
- Notice how you are helping the crisis and believe that you are doing the absolute best you can at this time.
- Before going to sleep, think about or write down all of the victories you witnessed or were a part of during the day. (Small things add up over time; keeping track will help you stay focused on the positives.)
- Acknowledge that certain conditions are truly temporary.

EMOTIONAL

- Talk to someone about how you are feeling. If you need support in any area—mental, emotional, spiritual, or physical—ask for help or just for someone to listen. Make a list of people you feel comfortable talking with.
- Allow yourself to experience your emotions. Pushing them down will only cover them up for a brief time. Suppressing your feelings could also result in sickness.
- Write letters or keep a journal to help process the trauma of your experience.
- Make a list of what you are grateful for and add to it every day. When you are feeling low, refer to the list.

“Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

SPIRITUAL

- Focus on your purpose for the relief efforts and on your overall purpose in life—it will give you the inspiration to continue.
- Remember the “big picture” while handling the little details of the day.
- See yourself as an humanitarian who was sent to help those in need.
- Ask yourself why you are alive, and then figure out how to help someone else in need.
- Have faith and trust that many good things will come out of this disaster.
- Take time to talk to God or ask for spiritual guidance and share how you feel.

PHYSICAL

- Take regular breaks every ninety minutes, even if it’s just for a few minutes (more on this concept to come).
- Drink water regularly; it’s critical to stay well hydrated and balanced.
- Eat small but frequent meals or healthy, low-fat, low-sugar snacks, with little food prior to bedtime. Food has a direct impact on our mood; healthy food will help to calm our nerves and tension, whereas junk food agitates and contributes to depression and anxiety.⁴ (My book *Performance under Pressure* includes a full discussion of nutrition and mood regulation.)
- Do some stretching, exercises, and breathing to keep yourself grounded and focused.
- Go to bed at the same time each night. Prior to falling asleep, focus on positive thoughts and expect a restful and restorative sleep experience.

Long Term Well-Being: Healing Practices

When you integrate the previous curative strategies into your life, you will achieve momentum leading to stress recovery from the trauma you experienced. That progress is commendable and worthy of celebration—but don’t stop there. Continue to grow, gain mental clarity, and seek ways to cleanse your emotions so you can enjoy well-being for the rest of your life. In that spirit, I offer the following practices that will help you thrive over the long haul:

Adopt a Ninety-Minute Cycle to Recharge and Recover

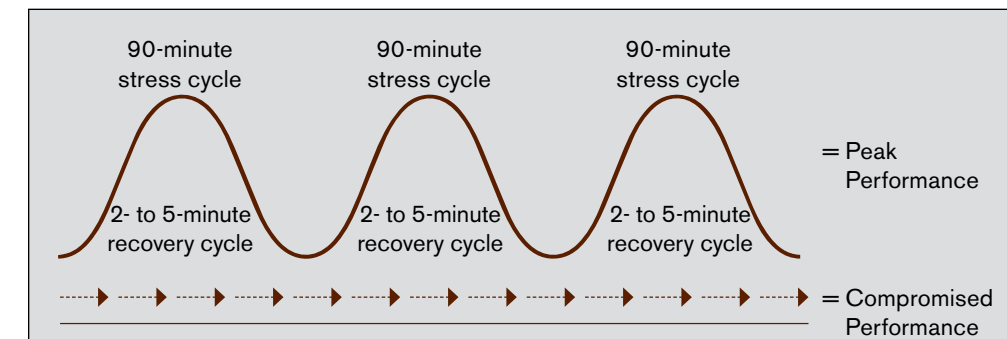
Our bodies normally operate in ninety-minute cycles of stress and then brief periods

⁴ Denis Campbell, “Eating Junk Food Raises Risk of Depression, Says Multi-Country Study,” *Guardian*, September 25, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/sep/26/eating-junk-food-raises-risk-of-depression-says-multi-country-study>.

of recovery (as shown in the chart below). The key to peak performance and sanity is to work with your body, not against it. Structure your day in ninety-minute segments, particularly during a time of crisis, and you will discover that it is much easier to deal with the stresses of the day.

Work a cycle, take a break to refocus and recover, and then repeat. Eat a meal or a snack every two cycles (or three hours), and drink water regularly in between meals. By doing this, you will have a better chance of avoiding the flat line indicated at the bottom of this graph that represents compromised performance. This happens when we hit the ground running and go full throttle without stopping all day long and then collapse into bed at night. It is critical to honor your need for recovery and work with your body’s natural cycle to avoid burnout.

This chart illustrates the difference between peak performance and compromised performance:



Here are some things you can do to recover and recharge in only minutes:

- Call a friend or family member.
- Stretch outside while taking deep breaths.
- Sit or lie quietly with your eyes closed, then envision what you most want in your life right now. See it as if it’s already happened.
- Think back to a special time that you shared with loved ones. Then describe that memory to someone.
- Meditate.
- Walk around the block a few times.
- Journal about something you have seen or learned.
- Read a chapter in a favorite book, some inspiring words or poetry, or an article in a magazine.
- Speak to a coworker or friend.
- Engage in a favorite hobby such as knitting, reading, or watching sports.
- Put on some music that you enjoy and soak it in.

“I never lost faith in the end of the story. . . . I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

—Admiral Jim Stockdale, former prisoner of the Vietnam War

While the activity of resting and recovering every ninety minutes seems small, it is one of the most critical aspects of leading a high-performance life. Here's your personal challenge: for the next thirty days, live in ninety-minute segments, taking short breaks every hour and a half and eating a small meal or snack every three hours.

Navigate Your Emotions with the “Navigram”

When dealing with intangible things such as emotions, a graphic representation can sometimes help provide understanding. The following chart—what I call the “navigram”—will enable you to visualize where you are on the emotional landscape at any time, as well as how your emotions relate to each other.

The Emotional Navigram	
HIGH NEGATIVE (Negative emotions/high energy)	HIGH POSITIVE (Positive emotions/high energy)
Angry Fearful Frustrated Anxious	Excited Connected Challenged “Pumped”
LOW NEGATIVE (Negative emotions/low energy)	LOW POSITIVE (Positive emotions/low energy)
Sad Depressed Lonely Exhausted	Calm Peaceful Relaxed Recharged

The two quadrants on the right are positive, while the two on the left are negative. At the upper right is the high positive quadrant, characterized by positive emotions with a high energy level. Below this is the low positive quadrant, characterized by positive emotions with low energy levels. The negative quadrants follow a similar pattern.

These four emotional quadrants are separated by lines, which represent a membrane or barrier that we must pass through when moving from one quadrant to another. Sometimes something happens that drags us from one quadrant to another; other times, we make a deliberate choice to move. Something may make us angry, propelling us into the high negative quadrant. Circumstances may cause us to feel frustrated, but how long we choose to stay that way is up to us. At some point, every emotion (anger, sadness, depression, excitement, calmness, joy) becomes our own personal choice. Again, while it may be difficult to comprehend that we choose our feelings (especially in the aftermath of a disaster), understanding this concept is one of the most important things that we can do to ensure a swift and complete recovery.



Life manifests itself in our bodies in numerous ways, and one of the most significant is through emotion. Like stress, emotions have gotten a bad rap in recent years. Emotions are the gauges that tell us we are alive. The issue is not our emotions; the issue is learning how to navigate our emotional landscape. We do this first by identifying the energy level or emotional quadrant we are operating from (high or low, positive or negative) and then, if necessary, making the transition from where we are to where we want to be emotionally.

“On the Ceiling” Exercise

Disasters and other traumatic experiences often leave vivid images imprinted in the mind, images that have negative emotions attached to them. Such experiences can cause the brain to become cross-wired, leaving the victim with severe anxiety disorders and excessive fears. Any word or event that the victim associates with this traumatic experience can stimulate a highly negative emotional response.

The following exercise, which I call “On the Ceiling,” helps people dissociate their unhealthy negative emotions from their mental images of the troubling event. If you have been affected by a disaster, take a few quiet minutes whenever possible, even daily, to do this exercise. Here’s how:

1. Get comfortable and close your eyes.
2. With your eyes closed, think of the experience that put you in the high negative emotional quadrant. Take a minute or two to get that event solidly fixed in your mind. Imagine it as though it has just happened and is still very fresh. Remember not only the event itself in all its detail, but also how you felt. On a scale of 1–10, with 1 being low and 10 high, where are you emotionally as you picture this event?
3. Now, see yourself stepping outside of your body and to the side, looking back as if you are watching yourself experience this event on a television screen about ten or twelve paces away. Again, on a scale of 1–10, where are you emotionally?
4. Now, imagine yourself moving even farther away to the ceiling, about twenty-five or thirty feet high, looking down on yourself in that situation. Once again, monitor your emotions on a scale of 1–10. Where are you now emotionally?

Did you notice that your emotional response became less intense the further away you moved from the situation in your mind? The more we learn and implement techniques to dissociate ourselves mentally from traumatic experiences, the less intense



our emotional response will be. We will be more in control and productive in our lives because we are able to focus on our present conditions and environment rather than the heavy weight of the trauma. This is very powerful and not to be overlooked, because what our mind sees, our physiology believes and experiences.⁵ When we pull away mentally from a bad experience, our emotions will follow. You can also do this exercise with a supportive family member or friend, talking through your visualizations and experiences.

Breathe Well, Live Well

Breath and emotions are interconnected, just as energy levels and emotions are.

There are many ways to recover and move from negative to positive emotional quadrants, but the quickest way is through breathing. I realize that this may sound overly simplistic, so I will explain. Oxygen is necessary for our survival. We can live days without food or water, but not even minutes without oxygen. Our bodies cannot function without it.

The athletes I work with who want to attain the highest levels of fitness know this all too well. In sports science, fitness is defined by the speed at which oxygen

⁵ Naval Medical Center San Diego, “Mind Body Medicine,” accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.med.navy.mil/sites/nmcscd/pages/care/mind-body-medicine.aspx>.

is transferred from the lungs to the heart, muscles, and blood cells of our body.⁶ A person with a high level of fitness transfers high amounts of oxygen to the body, just like a person with a low level of fitness transfers low levels of oxygen.

You may know that the word *emotion* means “to move or put in motion.” Therefore, as breath (oxygen) puts the body in motion, so do emotions put the body in motion. When you become scared and need to run from something like a burning fire, your breath rate increases. Why? Because your body needs oxygen in order to flee the scene so you can move to safety; it was the emotion that caused your breathing pattern to shift.

Doesn’t it make sense, then, that we can control our emotions and therefore our physiology with particular breathing patterns? It just doesn’t seem possible that we could stay angry while taking long, slow breaths in and out through our nose, does it? Pause now and take long, deep breaths in and out through your nose. Do you feel the difference? Below are the “breath prints” for the quadrants. Practice these breathing patterns and you will feel the connection:

Breathing for Your Emotions	
HIGH NEGATIVE <i>Shallow breath in</i> through the mouth and a <i>fast breath out</i> through the mouth . . . the beginning of hyperventilation. This is the fight or flight breath.	HIGH POSITIVE <i>Fast, deep breath in</i> through the nose and a <i>fast breath out</i> through the mouth.
LOW NEGATIVE <i>Shallow breath in</i> and a <i>slow breath out</i> through the mouth . . . the breath of a sigh.	LOW POSITIVE <i>Deep, slow breath in</i> through the nose and a <i>slow breath out</i> through the nose. It is a relaxing, calming breath. For the most relaxing breath, make your exhale twice as long as your inhale. This is the breath most often used in yoga.

Whatever quadrant we are in emotionally, we breathe according to the breath print of that quadrant. The fastest way to change emotional quadrants is by breathing according to the breath print of the quadrant where we want to go. For example, if we are in the high negative quadrant (angry or fearful) and want to move to the positive side, the quickest way is to take three high positive breaths: deep in through the nose and fast out through the mouth.

This process transports enough oxygen into our bloodstream so that our system

⁶ Roland Pittman, “Oxygen Transport in the Microcirculation and Its Regulation,” US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, February 2013, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3574207/>.

interprets that we are moving in that direction physiologically. Our emotions must follow because emotions and breath are interconnected. Practice this consciously every day and you will not only gain critical awareness about your body, but you will also gain control over your emotions. Regulating your emotions is critical to good health, peak performance, and full recovery from traumatic stress.

Fall Forward: Recovery Is Possible

It happened many years ago but it still feels like yesterday. On February 6, 2005, after a long journey, I arrived in Bangkok, Thailand, and headed to Phuket.

Trying to figure out what is going on in the middle of a disaster zone is always challenging. As expected, I encountered several obstacles right away, including a Thai officer saying that they were doing “fine” and in no need of assistance. To say his assessment was ridiculous would be an understatement. I knew how widespread the damage was. I asked a second time to make sure I’d heard correctly. I had, but he was seriously mistaken about the condition of his homeland and the magnitude of the destruction.

Having flown halfway around the globe only to be told that things were okay inspired me even more to do my work. I persisted—not for myself, but on behalf of the many grieving Thai people. Thankfully, I prevailed and began the process of “falling forward” that would consume all my time and energy for the next three weeks. (Falling forward is a term I use with my clients as a reminder that failure is part of the success journey—as long as we can learn from our mistakes and continue inching toward our intended goal.)

Eventually, I landed in the middle of Wat Yen Yao temple, a beautiful monument of worship turned to a makeshift mortuary with several thousand dead bodies awaiting identification and placement with their grieving families. The sheer agony of this disaster was instantly obvious. Yet something inside told me to just keep going. So I continued to fall forward every day and began to learn how to lean into success that is not yet seen. I moved by God’s grace and the belief that someday things would be okay again. I moved where the doors of opportunity unlocked, striving to help people, as best I could, out of their immediate pain and anguish.

As demanding and heartrending as it was to assist scores of disaster survivors struggling through unbearable sorrow—and as challenging as it was to come alongside first responders strained to the point of exhaustion—I counted it a privilege to participate in the healing and recovery of so many people.

Of course, you have your own experience with disaster and the long journey to well-being. Prior to the crisis you endured, you were moving forward with your



dreams, desires, and aspirations. As you know, your dreams will always meet resistance due to the day-to-day challenges of life. But what happens when those dreams are suddenly extinguished and you endure profound loss? It is at this point that opportunities will arise for you to fall forward through the process of recovery, not knowing exactly what will become of your life, except that you will soon be okay again. And in many cases, your life will be more than okay.

It is during tragic times that many of us embrace the greatness of life and give thanks in a way that takes us to another level of happiness and acceptance. With that said, if you believe in the success of a healthy life that is not yet seen, your relationship with these tragedies and with life itself will be greatly enriched from this day forward.



Dr. Terry Lyles holds a PhD in psychology and is recognized as an international educator, author, and speaker to universities, schools, Fortune 500 companies, world-class athletes, and public audiences. He teaches groups of all ages how to navigate life's storms and enhance performance through integrating psychological and physiological tools, metrics, and practices.

info@TerryLyles.com

TerryLyles.com

To book Terry for your next event, please contact info@southwesternspeakers.com.

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Elevate Events

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Southwestern Consulting:

Tim Nowak, Chief Financial Officer and Senior Partner

Katherine Rowley, Content Manager

sales@southwesternconsulting.com

southwesternconsulting.com | 615-391-2834

Southwestern Publishing Group:

Christopher G. Capen, President

Betsy Holt, Publisher

Vicky Shea, Art Director

Kristin Connelly, Managing Editor

Keith Wall, Developmental Editor

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“This recovery manual provides proven strategies for dealing with stress after a traumatic event. We’re offering this complimentary recovery manual because we care deeply about the well-being of all communities affected by natural disaster.”

—Dustin Hillis, CEO, Southwestern Family of Companies

“Dr. Terry Lyles has found the formula to help all of us live above our fears, frustrations, and anxieties that life’s storms often bring.”

—Robert Polito, Former Penn State Football Player

“I have been through many storms in my life and thought that I had learned the answers about dealing with them. . . . I realized how much more I needed to learn after working with Terry’s program. I know that you’ll feel the same way after reading this powerful material.”

—Pat Williams, Senior Vice President, Orlando Magic

“Dr. Terry Lyles . . . is so full of wisdom and truth. . . . He pulls this wisdom from his huge pot of life experiences and research and blesses all the people around him with sage advice and wonderful encouragement.”

—John Li, MD, ENT, Allergy Associates of Florida



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Lyles holds a PhD in psychology and is recognized as a national and international educator, author, and speaker to universities, schools, Fortune 500 companies, world-class athletes, and public audiences. He teaches groups of all ages how to navigate life’s storms through life-balance training.

Dr. Lyles has trained thousands of individuals, ranging from fire rescue workers at Ground Zero to international forensic medical teams in tsunami-torn regions, sharing his time-tested, scientifically measured approach to stress utilization.

Major corporations such as DaimlerChrysler, Banana Republic, Macy’s West, Pfizer, Universal Studios, and Tommy Hilfiger have also benefited from his training. Dr. Lyles has appeared on CNN, FOX, CBS, NBC, and ABC and has been featured in *USA Today* and *U.S. News & World Report* as a Corporate Performance Enhancement and Life-Balance Specialist. He hosted a popular talk show sponsored by *Success* magazine and was heard in South Florida as the “Stress Doctor.”