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Heart, Hope, Healing

Mountaintop Wisdom: We're Wired for the Climb

BY KARYN SHANKS MD | MARCH 16, 2019



What are the best solutions when life gets tough?

Stop our lives? Hang out on the mountain top? Get a divorce? Find a new job? Send the kids to boarding school?

Hmmm... sounds tempting, doesn't it?

Yah, I want to get rid of the friction too sometimes.

I want to go straight to the bliss.

But what if I told you we thrive the most when we're challenged? That we figure things out and grow our strength by being smack in the middle of our messy lives?

It's the climb that matters. It's through the long hikes and traversing those tricky rocky passes that we learn, grow, and truly live.

Not sitting at the top. Not in the bliss.

You see, we're wired for challenge. We're made better by challenge. That friction we'd rather do without is the guide that leads us to exactly what we need. And when we face it straight on every day by showing up and staying present, we get to the bliss too.

How's that work?

Challenge changes our genetic expression, which leads to improved performance, learning, strength, and resilience.

We build strength and resilience in our bodies.

Muscles become more powerful when we work them. Bones become stronger when vertically loaded. Blood flows better when we move. Mitochondria make more energy when we exert ourselves. Immune cells are better primed to protect us when exposed to pathogens. Detoxification pathways ramp up in the face of toxins.

We build strength and resilience in our minds.

Our brains grow and make more connections when they're challenged. This is neuroplasticity, the science and promise of healing and maturation when we're called to step up or figure things out. When life gets hard and we show up, our brains get better, our *minds* get better.

We get better at stress.

Stepping up to pain, suffering, and trauma, hard as they are, mobilize the energy and internal resources we need to heal via neuroplasticity and genetic enrichment.

We see this in the innovative [work](#) of psychologist, Alia Crum. She showed that when people perceive stress (=challenge) as something constructive and positive, their lives improve compared to their challenge-averse counterparts.

People who avoid challenge have dramatically increased mortality during times of high stress and their biological stress markers are more dangerous. By avoiding the challenges of life, they miss precious opportunities to let those experiences bolster their genetic expression, performance, and resilience under stress.

A client of mine spends hours each day in meditation and attends week-long silent retreats to manage his suffering. He feels better temporarily, but when he re-enters his life, he's more anxious, disconnected, and he suffers more deeply than ever.

How we *behave* in the face of challenge determines the outcome.

Rather than avoidance, numbing out, or finding distractions, when we face challenges head on, we allow stressful experiences to fuel and support us: we accept the truth of the challenges before us, we plan strategies for tackling them, we mobilize needed resources,

and we discover the meaning in what's happened.

And our bodies, right down to the level of our genes, rise up to support us now and for all future challenges.

See how this works?

Challenge is what moves us closer to our potential. It allows us to thrive.

Not stepping out of our lives. Not living in bliss on the mountaintop or in our meditation rooms.

The mountaintop challenge:

Go up to that mountaintop and have yourself a good look at the terrain, breathe in the cool air, take in the sunrise, get yourself a big dose of bliss. Then come straight home to your loud, chaotic, messy, challenging life.

And while the life you show up for, breathe into, and stay present for will certainly challenge you, it will also make you strong, resilient, and wise.

And the bliss we all seek?

It's not a destination or reward for doing things right.

Bliss is a gift. It comes when we're paying attention, when we show up, when we accept the challenges, and when we stay present for all the nitty gritty of our lives.

Sigh of relief! Yes, we're in just the right place.

Have a Beautiful day!

Karyn

Further Reading:

Alia Crum, et al. [The role of stress in shaping cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses to challenging and threatening stress](https://doi.org/10.1080/106158806.2016.1275585). Anxiety, Stress, & Coping. 2017: dx.doi.org/10.1080/106158806.2016.1275585.

Kelly McGonigal, PhD. [The Upside of Stress](#). Penguin Random House, 2016.

From my Archives:

[On Being Calm and Strong: the Surprising Feet-Brain Connection.](#) 2018.

[Slow Healing Power Tools.](#) 2019.

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Karyn Shanks, MD, is a physician who lives and practices in Iowa City. Her work is inspired by the science of Functional Medicine, body-mind principles, and wisdom gleaned from the transformational journeys of thousands of clients over her twenty-five-year career. Her work honors each individual and the power of their stories, their inner wisdom, and innate healing potential. She believes that the bones of healing are in what we do for ourselves. She is the author of *Liftoff*, a manual of energy recovery and healing through essential self-care practices.

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