

# Managing Stress:

## Turning Challenges into Blessings

**C**hallenges are a little like rain showers on a summer day. They make life interesting. They water our plants. They support life. Of course, big storms may frighten and flood us too. They can drown our crops and ruin our parties.

In your everyday life, you probably experience the full range of weather—and challenges. There are sunny days when everything runs smoothly. Other days there are challenges that inconvenience us, but also stretch us and benefit our lives. Then there are the big storms that frighten us and throw our lives off course.

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Sometimes we don't realize that even daily hassles can be overwhelming.

They can wear us down and stress us out. For example, imagine a day when you discover an unexpected fee on your phone bill; you try calling customer service but you can't get a real person to help you. In addition, some guy tailgated you all the way home and then, to top it all, you burned your dinner.

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There are things we can do—  
and ways we can think—  
that help us turn challenges  
into blessings.

Or imagine an evening at home. You are tired, the children are fighting, your spouse is distracted, and you have a headache. You feel your blood pressure climbing. Maybe there was no single event that would explain your frustration, but it would be quite natural to feel overwhelmed, defeated, and even angry because of the combination of problems.

At the other end of the spectrum, there are times when a single event overwhelms us—maybe

a terrible storm, a setback at work, or the loss of a loving relationship. Major events can knock us down and make us feel hopeless and helpless.

So, whether our challenges come as a pack of hassles, a handful of disappointments, or a single traumatic event, it is easy to get overwhelmed. It has happened to all of us.

One of the surprises about challenges is that even happy events can be challenging. Getting married or building a new house can push most people to the limit of their endurance.

Yet there is good news. There are things we can do—and ways we can think—that help us turn challenges into blessings. But before we talk about how to deal with challenges, let's talk about your challenges.



# Your Challenges: What have you faced?

“Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.”

Theodore Roosevelt

All of us regularly face small, medium, and even large challenges. We all know that too many challenges can be overwhelming. Research has made some surprising discoveries about the benefits of our challenges. They can help us draw closer to other people, develop greater compassion, learn to value the small things in life, and build a more satisfying philosophy of life. Our challenges can actually bless us!

Take a few minutes to think about the various challenges you have faced in the course of your lifetime. List some of your challenges in the table below. You might do this together with a family member or friend.

Then consider how working through those challenges has helped you grow and become a better person. Have you learned to be more patient, loving, and wise? Have you developed

greater compassion for people who suffer? Write your ideas in the table below.

Challenges can help us see the big picture in life. We can learn not to panic when difficulties arise. Looking on the bright side of life’s challenges can help us live better, stronger lives.

	What challenges have you faced in the past?	What have you learned from those challenges?	How are you better because of them?
Small:			
Medium:			
Large:			

## Your Resources: What tools do you have?

Challenges don't have to lead to frustration and stress. For example, even the breakdown of a car might not seem so bad if you had plans to buy another one and had the means to do it.

In contrast, a simple flat tire might devastate us if it is raining and we are late for an important appointment. So, having resources and knowing how to use them is very valuable.

Another example: A mother may not be able to complete a project because of the constant demands of little children. She thinks she will go crazy—until she realizes that she has friends who would gladly help her. She talks to friends who volunteer to care for her children while she finishes her project.



# Clear Skies Ahead

**W**hen a hurricane knocked trees down and caved in the roof of the family home, the owner was overwhelmed. He worried about his insurance, the costs and quality of the repairs, and the challenges of putting the house and yard back in order. After two weeks of fretting, he found that he was depressed. As he thought about the problem, he realized that he should be sharing his feelings with his wife, he should be patient, and he should be making room in his life for some of the things he loved to do. So, in spare moments, he began doing some woodworking projects. He found that making time for joyous activities actually provided more energy for him to do the things that had to be done! Enjoyable hobbies are one resource that can help us with challenges.



# Your Meaning: How do you make sense of challenges?

It is popular to say that the challenges that don't kill us make us stronger. This idea is easy to believe when the challenges belong to someone else or when we can see an end to our own challenges.

However, when challenges land unexpectedly in our lives and we cannot see our way through them, it is hard to feel good about them.

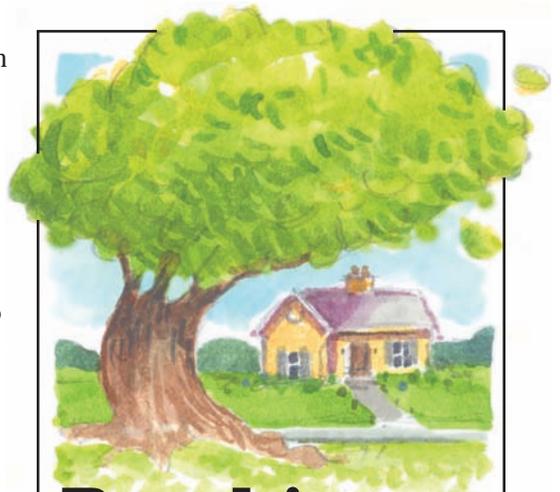
One of the odd things about challenges is that a big thing to me may seem small to you. And, what seems small to either of us today may seem enormous to both of us tomorrow—under some circumstances.

Challenges provide an opportunity for our minds to do their best work, which is to make sense of our life experience.

Our minds can find benefits in even the greatest challenges. For example, some families see difficult economic times as an opportunity to pull together and use their combined resources. A farmer may see a crop failure as an opportunity to diversify. A couple may see an unexpected child as an opportunity to learn to love effectively. A chronic health problem can be seen as an opportunity to learn compassion.

Research shows that people who suffer terrible traumas often find positive meaning in the experience. As a result of the trauma, people often change their priorities, caring less about unimportant things and caring more about small but important things. We can turn lump-of-coal experiences into diamonds by the way we think about them.

The lessons learned from challenges can be woven into a person's life story, a story in which a person is changed, refined, redeemed, or blessed.



## Breaking Free

A little girl grew up in a home that encouraged drug use and destructive behavior. In adulthood she transformed her experience into greater commitment and sensitivity to her own children, becoming an excellent mother. This process was made possible by her determination not to be trapped in the story that her parents were living. She refused to be held hostage to the past.

Can you think of people who have been refined by their challenges, who overcame them and accomplished amazing things? What inspires you about their stories?

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Write examples from your life story that commemorate the blessings you have received as you have dealt with life's challenges.

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# Challenges: Your opportunity for growth?

Children face a steady stream of challenges: learning to walk, to talk, to read, to do math, and so many other difficult things. And, because of those challenges, they grow.

As adults, challenges can help us grow. In the course of a lifetime, each of us will face rejection, illness, failure, disappointment, loneliness, inadequacy---the list goes on and on! Challenges can make us tired and unhappy or they can awaken us to new growth.

## Inspiring

Helen Keller faced terrible challenges. As a child, she became both blind and deaf. Think how discouraged she could have become! She could have easily shut herself off from the world in an attitude of self-pity and resentment. Instead, she turned her challenges into blessings. She became a great author, activist, and speaker who inspired millions of people. Here is how she summarized her life:

Is it not true, then, that *my* life with all its limitations touches at many points the life of the World Beautiful? Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence . . .

Sometimes, it is true, a sense of isolation enfolds me like a cold mist as I sit alone and wait at life's shut gate. Beyond there is light, and music, and sweet companionship; but I may not enter. Fate . . . bars the way. [I] would question [fate's] decree; for *my* heart is still undisciplined and passionate; but *my* tongue will not utter the bitter, futile words that rise to *my* lips, and they fall back into *my* heart like unshed tears. Silence sits immense upon *my* soul. Then comes hope with a smile and whispers, "There is joy in self-forgetfulness." So I try to make the light in others' eyes *my* sun, the music in others' ears *my* symphony, the smile on others' lips *my* happiness.

We will never have lives without challenges. We would probably be bored if we did! The surprise is that we have more control than we realize. We don't have to give up. We can call on our resources and change the way we think about our challenges. When life gives us lemons, we can squeeze them and make lemonade, or lemon meringue pie, or frosted lemon cookies! What we do with our challenges is up to us.

Sometimes challenges will overwhelm us. We will be discouraged. That is an ideal time to use this workbook to consider what resources you have and how you want to write your life story.



Thanks to The Helen Keller Foundation for Research and Education, [www.helenkellerfoundation.org](http://www.helenkellerfoundation.org) for permission to use the quote.

See Keller, H. (2003). *The Story of My Life* (The restored classic 1903-2003). New York: W. W. Norton. Quote found on pp. 107-109.

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**(Your name)**

As you think about your life, how would you like to be remembered? If you were writing the story of your life now, would you want to be remembered as a kind person, a strong person, a compassionate person, a smart or talented person?

Write out the key elements of your life story including the future that you would like to have:

As challenges arise, how do you see yourself dealing with them in order to move your life in the direction of your dreams?

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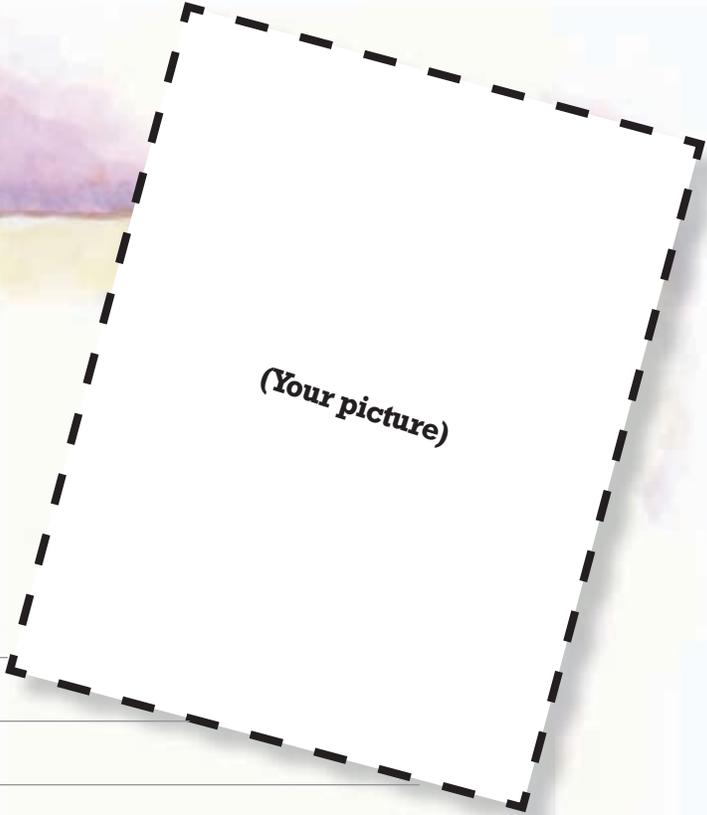
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**(Your picture)**

We all face challenges throughout our lives. Some are big, others are small, but they all provide us with opportunities for growth. One of the key messages of this workbook is that challenges don't have to destroy us. There are things we can do—and ways we can think—that help us turn challenges into blessings.

**Recommended reading:**

Martin Seligman's *Authentic Happiness* (2004, Free Press).  
Martha Davis and colleagues' *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook* (2008, New Harbinger).

**References:**

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Thanks to: Lindsey Underwood, Melissa Potter, Katie Baney, Rebecca Simon, Kathryn Justice, Joy Buffalo

Thanks to: C. Bruce Dupree, Artist

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