

Focus, Instead of Going Unconscious

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

I used to live in a house that had a room overlooking my neighbors' backyard. I had a little exercise area with an elliptical machine and a StairMaster set up in one corner of the room, and whenever I would exercise, I could look directly out to my neighbors' yard and see whatever was going on there. It was generally a pretty bucolic scene with a nice garden and some trees.

About once every two or three months I would be exercising on the weekends and I would see the man of the house come into the backyard, and then walk over to an area to the side of his garage (which was not visible to the people inside of his house) with a couple of beers. He would drink the beers in less than five minutes. Then, maybe 30 minutes later or so, he would come out again and do the same thing.

In the afternoons, the man could never see me exercising, because the sun would have blocked his view, but I always saw him. The funny thing about this was that in the few years I had lived in the house, I learned to recognize a pattern. I realized that if the guy was drinking behind his garage, it meant his daughter and her husband were visiting. I knew this because I could always look outside at their cars in the driveway. Something about having his daughter and her husband over every few weeks obviously stressed the man out, and in order to deal with this stress, he decided to shotgun beers. I should point out the man was also a grandfather at the time, probably in his late 60s; however, he had developed this *beer ritual* as a coping mechanism, in order to deal with the stress that seeing his son-in-law and daughter apparently caused him.

I am sure you have all sorts of coping mechanisms that you too use to deal with the various stresses in your environment. We all have various coping mechanisms that we use to distract ourselves and help us deal with stress.

- I have seen people who hear about something awful that just happened to someone, or someone they know, and they immediately say, "I need to take a run." In the midst of hearing about some terrible tragedy or other sort of stressful news, they immediately sit up and go out for a long run.
- I have seen other people who have had an incredibly tough day at the office, stop by the grocery store on the way home from work and buy \$20 worth of ice cream, and then spend the evening gorging on it.
- I have known people who had several bad experiences at parties, and decided never to attend any parties ever again.
- As a student, I knew people who refused to eat lunch with other students and instead went to the library at lunchtime each day to have alone time.

These are all methods that people adopt in order to dissipate energy that is coming at them that is too stressful to deal with head-on. I am sure you have had a lot of these experiences before, wherein the input from the environment is overwhelming. Everyone has experiences like this, and everyone deals with stress in different ways.

One of the greatest challenges that people face in their jobs and all around them is stress. In fact, the threat of stress and the strong natural inclination to avoid it can prevent an incredible number of people from ever reaching their full potential in their relationships, careers, and lives. It is this fear of exposing ourselves to more stress that can ultimately keep many of us from moving forward at the rate we should.

The people who end up achieving the most in the world are the ones who are willing to do that which others are unwilling or afraid to do.

One of the great risks of the pursuit of success involves generally exposing and subjecting yourself to more and more stress. However, the key to excelling, even under extremely stressful situations, is to not allow the stress to affect you in a negative way. Many people can adapt quite easily to all sorts of stresses in their environment, and due to this, they are typically better off than those who cannot adapt so readily.

There are three common ways that we tend to deal with stress in the environment. Each of these is essentially a method of *going unconscious*, instead of dealing with the stress head-on:

1. We do something to divert our attention away from the stress. Eating lots of ice cream, using drugs or alcohol, watching television, and so forth can all draw our attention away from the problem and stress we are facing. So too can engaging in reckless sex, spending all of our time reading, or doing other things that place our attention on something other than the problem at hand.

Diverting our attention away from the stress we are facing is something that is very common for most people. Many people even do this when they have certain tasks to complete at work that are difficult for them. They might talk on the phone, work on other meaningless projects, and do all sorts of things that are not relevant to the task at hand, because working on the task may cause them stress.

2. We simply avoid the stress. In this method of coping, people may isolate themselves and avoid stressful situations by calling in sick to work or finding other reasons not to participate in the stressful situation. In my career I have seen numerous people do everything they can to avoid certain kinds of stressful situations. It could be as simple as *not going to the dance* or *not coming out to play*. Isolation can be an effective form of avoidance.

Depression in many cases is also related to the isolation coping mechanism. When people are depressed, it changes their physiological state. They breathe much slower and move more slowly. People who are depressed do not typically get excited, and they are typically withdrawn from the world around them. Depression is another way of avoiding stress.

When I was in [law school](#), I remember studying for exams with a friend of mine who had graduated from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University before going to law school with me at the University of Virginia. We were taking a break

in the student commons one day, where we had been studying for exams.

"This is pretty stressful," I told him at one point.

"It sure is. A bunch of the kids I knew when I was at Harvard Law School went and got Prozac prescribed to them during exams because it helped them study," he said.

He proceeded to tell me that Prozac helped the kids study and be more focused, rather than being completely overwhelmed with stress. I am certainly not advocating this; however, I thought what he was saying was very interesting because it showed that people of high achievement were relying on something external to help them move forward, instead of allowing the stress to make them withdraw, or suffering a complete breakdown. People are certainly extremely complex in terms of how they operate in the world; nowhere is this more apparent than in how each individual handles different types of stress.

3. We dissipate the energy that the stress is causing us. When the energy becomes too much, people will often do everything they can to alleviate it in some manner. For example, people may exercise, talk or complain to others, get angry, cry, or do anything that helps them release the stress they are feeling.

The problem with each of these three coping mechanisms is that, most often, they do not allow people to deal directly with the issues that are affecting them, and instead, they can create a whole separate set of problems. The things we do to comfort ourselves when we feel stress do not necessarily help us in the long run. Isolation, dissipation, distraction, and so forth all prevent us from dealing with the "root cause" of our problems.

In the case of my neighbor, he may have had some issues with his son-in-law. Instead of dealing with these issues, he decided to get drunk, and this may have created an entirely new set of problems for him. In the case of the person who calls in sick to work instead of dealing with stress, not coming into work may create an entirely new difficult situation. People who deal with considerable stress by getting angry may cause other problems with their anger. It is important to understand that, unless we deal with stress in an effective and efficient manner, we are likely to experience numerous problems.

When you look at most people who are not achieving what they are capable of, a large part of the reason for their lack of success often comes down to how they deal with stress. Similarly, when you look at most people who are achieving a lot, a large part of their success comes down to how they deal with stress. Accordingly, how you deal with stress in your environment, and whether or not you can deal with it effectively, has a lot to do with how well you will ultimately do in everything.

Many of the things we do when we find ourselves feeling stressed out are symptoms that we are *going unconscious* as a method of avoidance. In the book *Focusing*, by Dr. Eugene Gendlin, the author discusses the process of what he called "*focusing*." Dr. Gendlin is a professor at the University of Chicago who studied what types of therapy he believed were most effective for helping people deal with issues and move forward in a positive manner. After an extensive study, Gendlin concluded that there was not one form of therapy that seemed to work better than others. For example, regardless of what the particular therapeutic approach was, there were some patients who benefited and healed from therapy and there were other patients who did not.

Because Dr. Gendlin could not find any form of therapy he believed was more effective than others, he began studying what similarities were shared by those patients who did get better. What Dr. Gendlin discovered was that the patients who improved were doing something called "focusing," which involved being quiet and understanding the body's felt sense of what is occurring. "Felt sense" refers to the person's acceptance and being a part of whatever stress is going on. It means not analyzing what is going on, but just being with the emotion, stress, or fear, and allowing the body to accept the feeling that is occurring. *Felt sense* is not conscious, nor is it necessarily verbalized. It is experienced in the body, a [physical feeling](#) that one gets. It is something that is difficult to express and is even a bit vague. After being immersed in *felt sense* for some time, a person can experience what Dr. Gendlin calls a "felt shift."

According to Dr. Gendlin, the process of focusing can take 10 minutes or longer. However, after allowing your body to be within the emotion, you will develop a new way of seeing things. It will feel good and you will diminish the pressure of what you are feeling. Instead of resisting whatever is causing you to feel angry, depressed, fearful, withdrawn, and so forth, you will, instead, accept whatever it is. When you focus, you begin to realize that it is the resistance to the stress that causes pain, and not really whatever it is that is causing the stress. Once you are able to get in touch with the feeling that a stressful situation gives you, you no longer seek to go unconscious in the face of this stress.

What I am suggesting you do with every stress you encounter is, instead of going unconscious, choose to remain conscious. The focusing technique is an extremely effective method for remaining conscious and dealing with the sorts of emotions and stresses you may encounter.

You need to recognize when you are going unconscious and take steps to deal with this. The more you go unconscious in your life, the more problems you will have and the less effective you will be. Instead, you need to understand how to remain conscious and do everything within your power to move forward consciously. Think about how often you go unconscious and exhibit behavior that has nothing to do with the issue at hand. Not dealing with these issues is something that can harm you tremendously and make life very difficult for you. You need to focus and remain conscious, in order to move forward in your life.

THE LESSON

Do not be affected by stress; instead, adopt a coping mechanism to either divert or dissipate stressful energy. The threat of stress and the desire to avoid it prevents many people from reaching their full potential in many areas of their lives. Rather than succumb to stress or the fear of stress, position yourself for success by doing the things that others are unwilling to do.