



## Episode 6: To Tackle Stress, Start with These 2 Questions

Welcome to *In the Right Direction* podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum, and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb, and today we're talking about stress. Actually, what I want to talk about is not all the things in life that might be stressing you or me out, but rather how to have a stronger handle on stress. How to look stress square in the eye and say, "I see you, and I know how to deal with you despite all the stuff you're throwing at me."

It's a given we all have stress. I mean, we live in a 24/7 world. We have lots of expectations, lots of things on our plates, and lots of worries. So, today, I'm going to share two powerful questions that will change your perspective and how you look at life because when you change your perspective, you can see possibilities where you never saw them before.

Before we get to my favorite two stress-busting questions, let's get clear on stress and its danger. I define stress as anger, worry, or overwhelm that, and here's the important part, gets in your way. Stress is anger, worry, or overwhelm that has the potential to undermine your thinking, undermine how you feel, and communicate and act, and stress is dangerous because it takes away your power and puts your focus on the wrong things. It puts your focus on external constraints and falsely tells you that there's nothing you can do. When I hear clients say that, I know that they're in the clutches of stress and that they've given over their power and responsibility, and that it's time to take a bit of that personal control back. Stress causes us to believe that we don't have any control, and even though the pressures and constraints we face are real, here's the truth. There's always more in our control than we think.

If you want to take back some of your control over stress, grab a paper and pen right now and write down these two questions. First, "What is not in my control?" Underline the "not," what is not in my control. Second, "What is in my control?" Underline the "is," what is in my control. These questions will change your relationship with stress because rather than focusing on the external constraints and pressures that you cannot control; these questions will shift your thinking to your inner doer who knows that you have control over your thoughts and your actions.

Here's an example from one of my clients to illustrate how to use these questions in real life. I have a client who works at a nonprofit organization, and review time is coming up. She's had an amazing past few years there. She loves her job, she's aligned with the organization's mission, and she's taken on increasing roles of leadership and oversight recently. She really wants her efforts and contributions to be recognized with a promotion and a higher leadership title. Now, the problem is that when she's casually broached this to her boss, he says, "I'm aware" and then changes the subject.

So, here's my client desperately wanting something that she's not sure how to make happen, and this is causing her stress. In our coaching call the other day, we spent time on these two questions. First, I asked, "What's not in your control?" The key with this question is to get very specific, to list everything out so that later you can set it aside because when we give attention to things not in our control, we're wasting our valuable mental and physical energy. So, list the things not in your control and then set it aside. When I asked my client what's not in her control, here's some things she said: "It's not in my control what my boss thinks of me, how much money the organization has, who decides about promotions, when they decide, how they decide, and if they decide to hire someone else."

Then I had her set this list aside so we could put our attention to the question, "What is in your control?" Recognizing what is in our control and choosing intentionally is empowering and makes us feel more confident, calm, and hopeful. In talking with my client, she realized that she actually had a few areas of control that she could maximize. She realized that she could schedule a meeting specifically to talk about the promotion, rather than just talk about it in casual conversation. She realized that she never told her boss what this promotion meant to her, and so she decided to think and write out talking points about its significance and how it would benefit the whole organization. She also realized that it was in her control to remind people about the timeline, that they've been discussing this promotion in an offhand way for the past two years.

By the end of our coaching, she had a list of action steps. She had questions to answer for herself, talking points to prepare, and a meeting to schedule. She felt more hopeful, confident, and in control, and even though she truly has no control over whether or not she gets the promotion, she does have control over her thoughts, her communications, and her actions. These two questions, "What is not in your control?" and "What is in your control?" are powerful.

Here's a personal example from my life. So, if you know me, you know that I love the beach. It is my happy place where I can think and breathe and where I feel calmest, and in an ideal world, I would be living near a beach, but in reality, I'm not. I live west of Boston, and the closest, loveliest beaches are at least an hour away, which is too far for a spontaneous 20-minute beach break. A few years ago, after getting tired of hearing myself complain all the time, I decided to coach myself with these two questions.

What is not in my control? It's not in my control where we own a house, which is close to my spouse's work and close to my child's school and close to extended family, and then I asked myself what is in my control, and after thinking about it, I realized there were two things. That first, although I'm most familiar with the beaches about an hour away, I decided to research to see about local beaches - were there any beaches in the city - and we found a few about 25 minutes away with sand and waves and a horizon, all the things that ticked off the boxes for a quick-ish beach fix. Second, I realized that I could bring the beach to me. Well, not literally, but I could surround myself with things that reminded me of the beach. I poked around online, and I found these great wall sticker posters. So now I have a two by four poster of the beach, right behind my computer where I can see it all the time. All for \$15.99.

Let's bring this to you. The next time you hear yourself saying, "There's nothing I can do," I want you to stop, pause, exhale, and then coach yourself with these two questions. First, "What is not in my

control?" Get specific, list everything out and then put that list aside. Second, ask yourself, "What is in my control?" It might be something big like planning a trip, or something small like writing out your thoughts or brainstorming with a friend. With these two questions, you can lessen the grip that stress has on you and take back your power and your agency because you get to create your life one baby step at a time.

Remember, stress lies to you. It tricks your thinking and tells you there's only one perspective, and that is not the truth. In every situation, there's always more in your control than you think. There's always something you can do. If you need help brainstorming about your specific situation, please email me at [deb@debelbaum.com](mailto:deb@debelbaum.com) - I would love to hear from you. Until then, remember there's lots in your control, and you've got this.

Until next time!