MHO SAYS STRESS IS

Here's How to Turn Life's Hurdles Into Opportunities By Laurie Nadel, PhD

ONE OF THE FIRST STORIES I COVERED AS A WRITER FOR CBS NEWS concerned a man whose legs had been shot off during an argument over a poker game. Rocky, who now wheels himself around Rochester, New York, on a wooden dolly, was one of the most carefree guys you would ever expect to encounter. Every afternoon, he'd roll up to the geriatric ward of the local hospital, where he taught little old ladies how to play poker.

People often asked, "Rocky, how come you aren't mad about losing your legs?" or "Don't you ever wonder, 'Why did this have to happen to me?'" Rocky would chuckle just thinking about it. "I gotta admit, right after it happened I was mad as hell," he said. "Every day I'd say, 'God, why did this have to happen to me?' Then I realized, hell, it had to happen to someone. So I guess it might as well be me!"

DANGER AND OPPORTUNITY

Although losing your legs and being happy about it may be a somewhat drastic example of how you can transform a negative situation into a productive experience, Rocky's attitude exemplifies one of the most powerful techniques in the stressed-out male's

psychological bag of tricks: an acquired ability to recognize opportunity in the midst of adversity. The ancient Chinese believed that this ability was so essential to a useful, happy life that they incorporated it into their language. In fact, the Chinese character for "crisis" is a combi-

nation of "danger" and "opportunity."

Let's take a modern example. Louis Krouse, a 36-year-old executive for a major communications company, had been recommended for promotion to vice president. He was sent to an evaluation center where he was instructed to solve a management-crisis scenario by selecting one of three solution options. "None of those three looked like they would work, so I came up with a fourth one," Krouse recalls. "The recruiters told me the fourth one might be great, but I'd flunked the test because I didn't pick one of the three assigned options. They also told me I was not executive material."

Krouse got depressed, then mad and then he got even. His anger motivated him to leave the corporation and



biggest client was his former employer. Like Rocky, Krouse used a personal crisis to create an opportunity for himself.

HELLO, CRISIS

The key to changing a distressful situation into a positive one is by welcoming crisis, according to Andrew Slaby, MD, author of Sixty Ways to Make Stress Work For You (The PIA Press, 1988). "The fires that lead to burnout can also fuel success," says Slaby. "Conversely, the formula for success can be the same as a formula for a nervous breakdown. The difference is your perspective."

Studies of great business leaders show that the men who were healthier throughout the ups and downs of their

start his own business. Two years later, careers had one thing in common: he was a multimillionaire, and his They welcomed crisis so they could learn how to resolve it. Says Slaby, "Such men say to themselves, 'I'd rather have a crisis and learn how to resolve it than have anxiety about tant for a major corporation, says, "If what to do should a similar situation arise in the future.' They are able to regard these situations as opportunities for learning so that they can be better prepared."

PRESSED TO WIN

While much has been written about how to reduce stress, as though it were some kind of unalloyed evil, Slaby points out that stress in itself is neither good nor bad. The medical definition, as developed in the 1920s by Hans Selye, MD, states that stress is "the general reaction of the body to

change." Selve divided stress into two types: distress, from the Latin dis, or bad, and eustress, from the Greek eu, or good. Paul Karasik, a stress-management and peak-performance consulthe phone rings, it's stress. If it's the bill collector calling, it's distress. If it's someone offering you a better job, it's eustress."

Pressure appears to be necessary for us to succeed in some of life's endeavors. For example, a certain amount of stress is imperative for successful athletic performance, according to new research by Daniel Landers, PhD, a professor of exercise science at Arizona State University. Landers conducted brain-wave experiments on 34 competitive archers during practice and

competition. The brain waves monitored were alpha waves, which increase with relaxation and decrease with stress. Landers found that high alpha levels—a relaxed state—impaired athletic performance just as much as the high levels of distress indicated by low alpha scores. According to Landers, finding the "right amount of stress" was the key to excellent results. And while he says that "there is no optimum stress level for everyone, each one of us has a 'personal best.'"

DETERMINING YOUR BEST STRESS

What's the right amount of stress for you? Think back to a time when you did your best work or accomplished a training goal. Now, step into that experience and see what you saw, hear what you heard, feel what you felt. What physical sensations were occurring in your body? Was your breathing deeper or shallower than normal? Did your stomach feel relaxed or clenched? How about your neck and shoulders? Pay attention to your physiology.

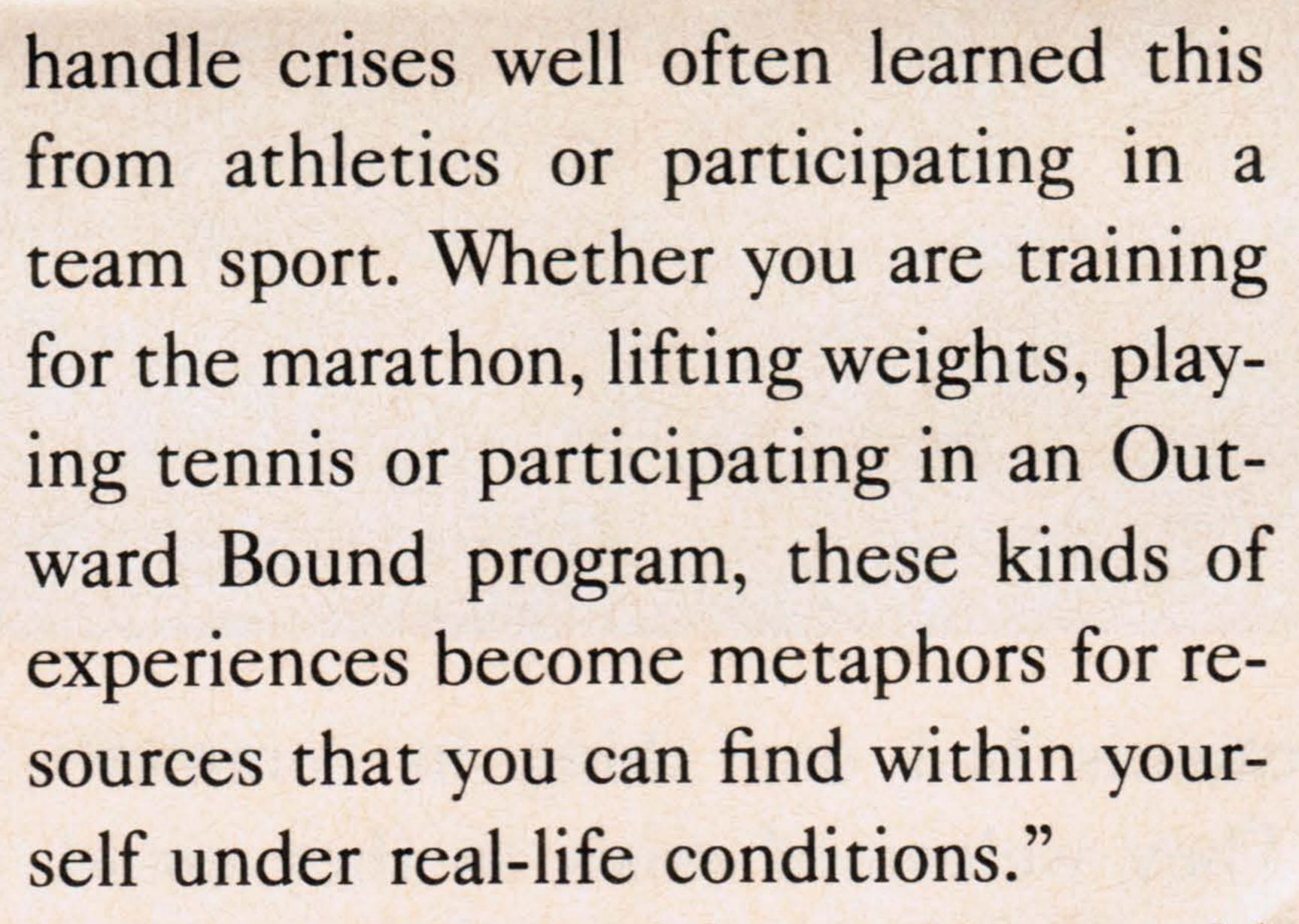
Now, on a scale of one to 10, in which one equals totally relaxed and 10 equals highly distressed, give yourself a score. This will give you a fairly good reading of your optimal stress level in a performance setting.

Think back to several times when you failed to do your best work. Choose one of those times and repeat the process of stepping into, experiencing and monitoring your internal physiology. Be sure to rate yourself on the one-to-10 scale. This exercise will reveal whether you are prone to be understressed or overstressed in these kinds of situations. The delineation is important; many men have a tendency to be too relaxed, to actually put themselves under too little pressure in performance situations.

ATHLETICS AS METAPHOR

Any good athlete knows that unless you stress your muscles, you cannot succeed. "You have to be able to stress your muscles in such a way that you can perform under any of the many different unexpected stresses that your body might encounter," Slaby says. "The same holds true for psychological stress. Men who are able to

"Men who are able to handle crisis well often learned this from athletics or participating in a team sport. These experiences become metaphors for resources you can find within yourself under real-life conditions."



Michael Hendricks, a 33-year-old from Islip, New York, knows how to build relationships that generate positive stress from negative. When he lost his job and house after a year of unemployment, he managed to keep his self-esteem intact by staying in close contact with friends. "My friends put me in touch with contacts for future jobs and, whenever possible, gave me odd jobs," Michael says. "My best friend kept tabs on me and made sure I went running with him three times a week, even when I didn't feel like it." The experience showed him who his real friends were. "It also made me more concerned for other guys who are having a hard time," he adds.

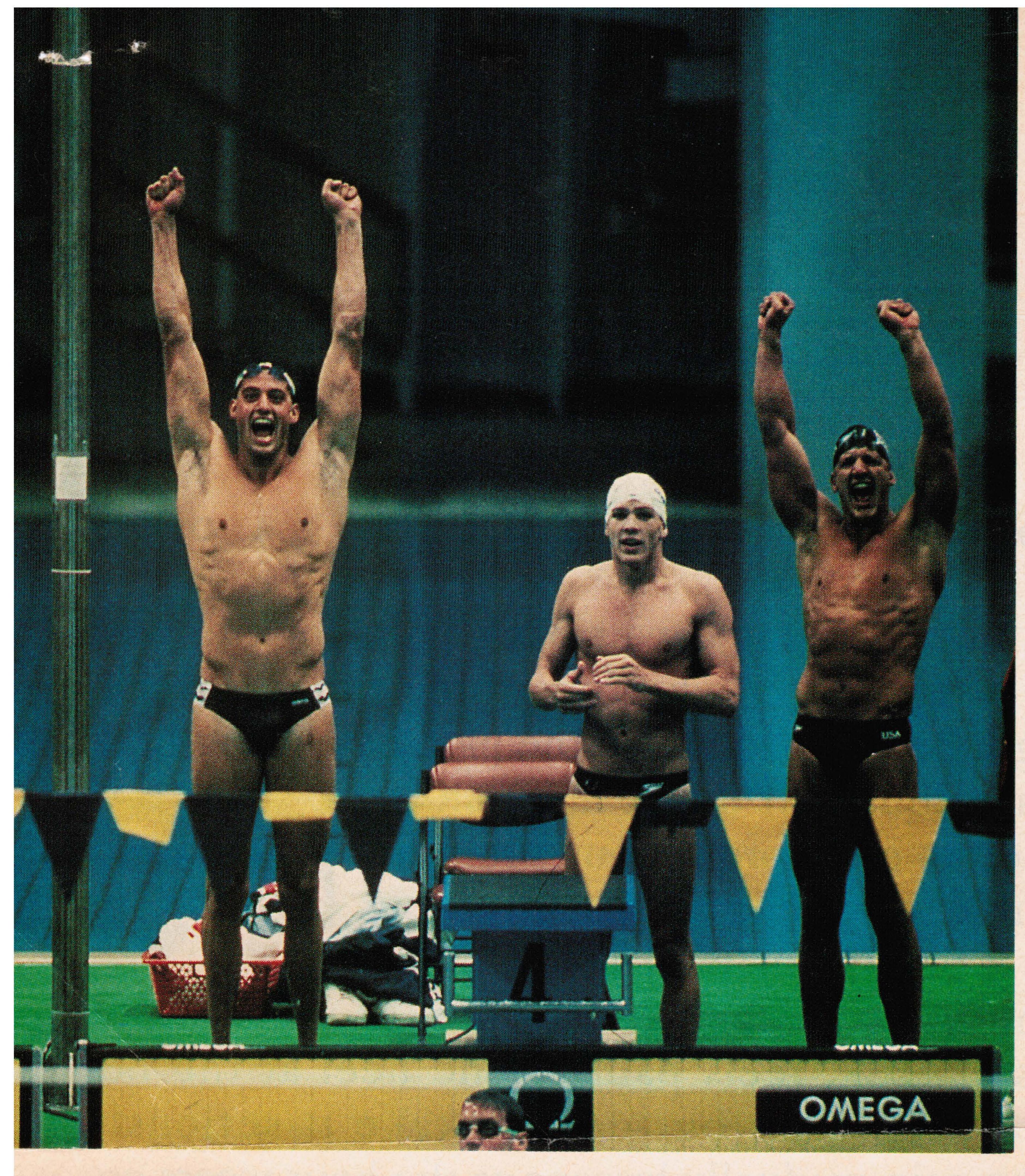


"Just like an athlete has built his endurance for a challenging event, Michael had his team in place," Slaby says. "If you know how to play every single position on a football team, you're not going to win. You must have other people who can play those different positions, and you must know how to choose the best one for each position. The same thing is true in real life."

For example, if a man finds out that his wife has been having an affair with his best friend for years, and the marriage he thought was perfect falls apart, that could be a recipe for disaster. "But if, over the years, this man has built up a team"—a team that includes people beyond the ex-wife and ex-friend—"to help him deal with the stresses of life, he'll be able to survive," Slaby says. "And, as the shock and pain heal, he may fall in love again and build an even better marriage the next time."

A SMALL DOSE OF STRESS

While unexpected distress cannot be scheduled, learning how to transform crises is a skill that can be learned us-



ing what Slaby calls "stress inoculations." By taking a predictable distressful situation, such as having to tabulate receipts at tax time, and developing a manageable strategy before the lastminute deadline, you can inoculate

yourself against distress and enjoy the eustress of performing under conditions that you have decided to control.

"One way is to use a computer program. Each week, you enter the amounts of your receipts according to

specific categories. Whether you file quarterly or annually, all you have to do is press a button and get the total for each category. You can also do this manually," says Slaby. Either way, "It's great stress inoculation."

LOOKING FOR THE SILVER LINING

Many self-help seminars for cancer patients teach people to look for a hidden message in their illness, a signal that can help them see their disease as an opportunity to make needed lifestyle changes. The first step is identifying the sources of psychological distress that contributed to a patient's getting sick.

After Robert Koshinsky developed prostate cancer in his mid-forties, he realized that the disease forced him to slow down and enjoy some of life's simple pleasures. When he recovered and returned to work, Koshinsky made sure that his schedule included more time off to be with his wife and family. "I never would have thought of cancer as a blessing in disguise," he says, "but it got me to look at how I was rushing around and working too hard. And it got me to the point where I had to make a more pleasurable life for myself."

Of course, you don't have to become seriously ill in order to perceive a negative situation as a stepping-stone for positive growth. Turning a situation to your advantage can be an art in itself, a skill as challenging and satisfying as a martial arts maneuver. Steve Heddleson recalls the time a neighbor chewed him out over a dispute involving trash cans. "That idiot called me a fat slob," Heddleson recalls. "It got me so angry that, then and there, I put myself on a diet and lost 30 pounds. Then I got even. I went up to this jerk and said, 'Thank you for helping me lose weight. If it wasn't for you, I'd still be fat."

Heddleson laughs, "Even though it's true and I'm glad I lost the weight, the greatest kick was seeing the guy's stupefied expression." In the end, as Bertrand Russell once said, "It's not the experience that happens to you; it's what you do with the experience that happens to you."

Laurie Nadel is a New York City writer and therapist who specializes in behavior modification.

Eustress or Distress?

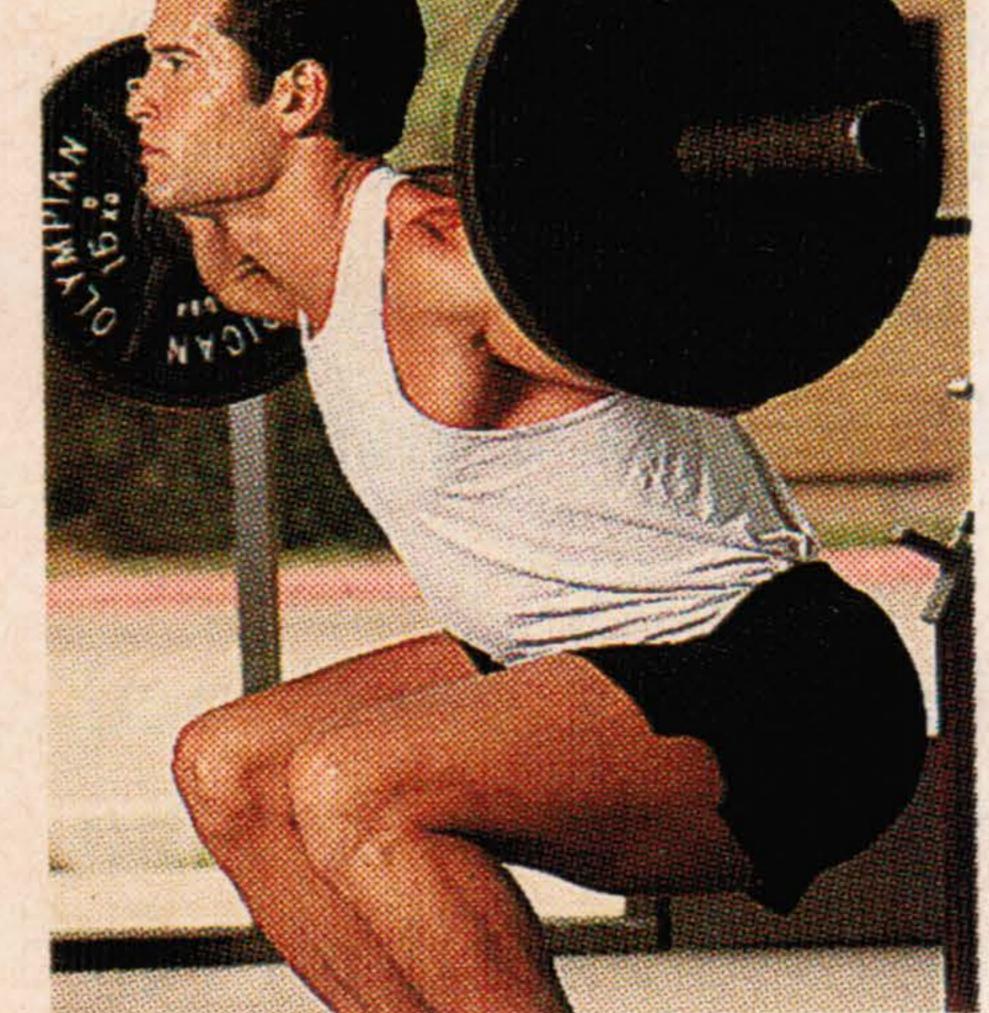
How good are you at transforming distress into eustress? Answer True or False to the following questions.

- 1. When I have to wait more than 15 minutes for a business appointment, I enjoy using the time to review my notes before the meeting.
- 2. I find deadlines stimulating.
- 3. I can accept my own mistakes without blaming myself.
- 4. When someone criticizes me unfairly, I can say, "That's easy to fix. Do it yourself!" and blow it off as ridiculous.
- 5. I find emergencies and crises to be great for learning how to solve problems.
- 6. When my girlfriend cancels a date for the weekend, I watch TV, drink beer and feel rejected.
- 7. I procrastinate when facing large deadlines.
- 8. When I get angry, I blame someone else for "making me" mad.
- 9. I get anxious when I think about all the things I should be doing.
- 10. I hate unplanned, unexpected change.

If you answered True to questions 1–5 and False to questions 6–10, you know how to change distress into eustress. If you answered True to questions 6–10, you need to reread this article and practice your mental martial arts.

Orthotics: one solution for nagging injuries

BY GORDON BAKOULIS BLOCH

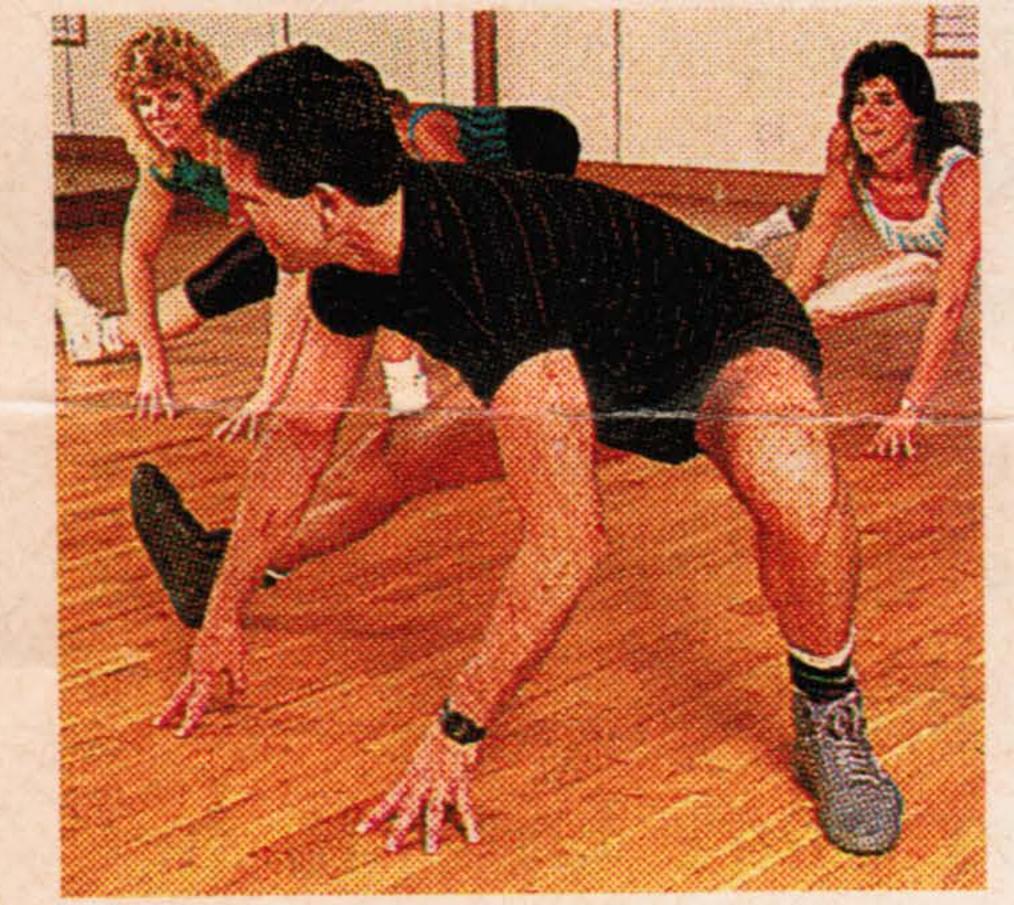


carl has been feeling lower-back pain for the past month. A weight lifter who runs three times a week, Carl thought he could alleviate the pain by cutting back

on his heavy squats. It didn't help. BRAD, a cyclist, recently decided to get more serious about his

training. He had no trouble increasing his distances, but now he's mystified by a persistent pain in his shins.





five times a week, feels pain in one heel at the beginning of each class but doesn't take it seriously because the pain gradually lessens as the hour wears on.

THREE ATHLETES, three sports, three complaints. Yet

all their problems may have one solution: orthotic devices for their feet.

Unfortunately, orthotics aren't magical cures for training injuries. They're expensive and, in some cases, abusively overprescribed. For every glowing testimony to orthotics' ability to cure foot pain and other sports-induced maladies, there's at least one horror story of endless experimenting with various types and receiving countless "adjustments"—ending only when the athlete decided that orthotics were making the problem worse instead of better.

Most athletes' experiences with orthotics lie somewhere between the two extremes. Injuries may lessen or disappear when one starts using them, but it may be unclear whether the improvement was due to the orthotics or to something else, such as strengthening exercises, a change in footwear, training adjustments or the body's often-remarkable ability to heal itself. Some wearers say that while orthotics didn't make matters worse, they didn't help, either.

The key to avoiding frustration with orthotics that either don't work or actually worsen a problem is knowing what orthotics are, how they work and what they can and cannot do for various athletes and conditions.

WHAT ARE ORTHOTICS?

Properly called orthotic devices or orthoses (from the Greek word ortho, to correct), orthotics are removable, custom-molded shoe inserts designed to correct a foot misalignment, deformity or dysfunction. "They realign the foot with the surface with which it comes into contact and with the rest of the body," says Thomas Novella, DPM, a New York City podiatrist who treats many athletes. Orthotics are not the same as the "arch supports" or "inserts" found in drugstores. Those purport to serve the same purpose without being tailored to an individual's feet or prescribed for a specific problem.

Orthotics can help athletes with a variety of problems in the feet, ankles, knees, legs, hips and back. Athletes are more likely than sedentary people to have problems orthotics may help. "In inactive people, inborn biomechanical abnormalities—such as one leg's being shorter than the other—can exist for years without causing problems," says Roy Corbin, DPM, a podiatrist in Bangor, Maine, and president-elect of the American Academy of Podiatric Sports Medicine. "Putting the body under the stress of sports or fitness activities can cause pain or injury."