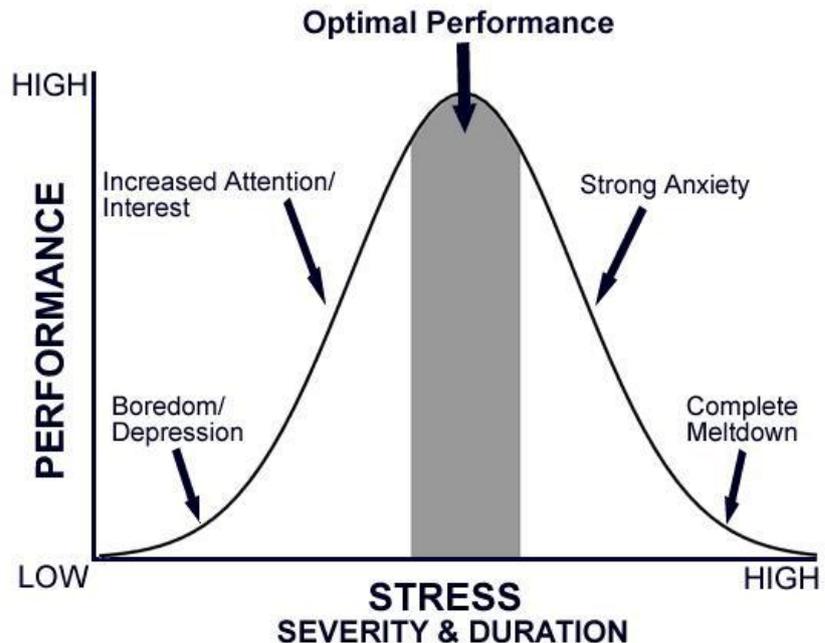


## How Successful People Stay Calm

Dr. Travis Bradberry provides some advice on how successful people stay calm.

Ever wondered how some people remain calm under pressure? TalentSmart has conducted research on why top performers are skilled at managing their emotions in times of stress in order to remain calm and in control.

We all know stress can wreak one's physical and mental health. The tricky thing about stress (and the anxiety that comes with it) is that it's a necessary emotion. Our brains are wired such that it's difficult to take action until we feel at least some level of this emotional state. In fact, performance peaks under the heightened activation that comes with moderate levels of stress. As long as the stress isn't prolonged, it's harmless.



A study, found that the onset of stress entices the brain into growing new cells responsible for improved memory. However, this effect is only seen when stress is intermittent. As soon as the stress continues beyond a few moments into a prolonged state, it suppresses the brain's ability to develop new cells.

Besides increasing your risk of heart disease, depression, and obesity, stress decreases your cognitive performance. Fortunately, though, unless a lion is chasing you, the bulk of your stress is subjective and under your control. Top performers have well-honed coping strategies that they employ under stressful circumstances. This lowers their stress levels regardless of what's happening in their environment, ensuring that the stress they experience is intermittent and not prolonged.

Some of these strategies may seem obvious, but the real challenge lies in recognizing when you need to use them and having the wherewithal to actually do so in spite of your stress.

### They Appreciate What They Have

Taking time to contemplate what you're grateful for. It improves your mood, because it reduces the stress hormone cortisol by 23%. Research conducted at the University of California, found that people who worked daily to cultivate an attitude of gratitude experienced improved mood, energy, and physical well-being. It's likely that lower levels of cortisol played a major role in this.

### They Avoid Asking "What If?"

"What if?" statements throw fuel on the fire of stress and worry. Things can go in a million different directions, and the more time you spend worrying about the possibilities, the less time you'll spend focusing on taking action that will calm you

down and keep your stress under control. Calm people know that asking “what if?” will only take them to a place they don’t want (or need) to go.

### They Stay Positive

Positive thoughts help make stress intermittent by focusing your brain’s attention onto something that is completely stress-free. You have to give your wandering brain a little help by consciously selecting something positive to think about. Any positive thought will do to refocus your attention. When things are going well, and your mood is good, this is relatively easy. When things are going poorly, and your mind is flooded with negative thoughts, this can be a challenge. In these moments, think about your day and identify one positive thing that happened no matter how small.

### They Disconnect

Given the importance of keeping stress intermittent, it’s easy to see how taking regular time off the grid can help keep your stress under control. When you make yourself available to your work 24/7, you expose yourself to a constant barrage of stressors. Forcing yourself offline and even—gulp!—turning off your phone gives your body a break from a constant source of stress. Studies have shown that something as simple as an email break can lower stress levels.

It is extremely difficult to enjoy a stress-free moment outside of work when an email that will change your train of thought and get you thinking (read: stressing) about work can drop onto your phone at any moment. Choose blocks of time where you cut the cord and go offline. You’ll be amazed at how refreshing these breaks are and how they reduce stress by putting a mental recharge into your weekly schedule.

### They Limit Their Caffeine Intake

Drinking caffeine triggers the release of adrenaline. Adrenaline is the source of the “fight-or-flight” response. The fight-or-flight mechanism sidesteps rational thinking in favor of a faster response. This is great when a bear is chasing you, but not so great when you’re responding to a curt email. When caffeine puts your brain and body into this hyper-aroused state of stress, your emotions overrun your behavior. The stress that caffeine creates is far from intermittent, as its long half-life ensures that it takes its sweet time working its way out of your body.

### They Sleep

Sleep is so important to your emotional intelligence and managing your stress levels. When you sleep, your brain literally recharges, shuffling through the day’s memories and storing or discarding them (which causes dreams), so that you wake up alert and clear-headed. Your self-control, attention, and memory are all reduced when you don’t get enough—or the right kind—of sleep. Sleep deprivation raises stress hormone levels on its own, even without a stressor present.

### They Squash Negative Self-Talk

A big step in managing stress involves stopping negative self-talk in its tracks. The more you ruminate on negative thoughts, the more power you give them. Most of our negative thoughts are just that—thoughts, not facts. When you find yourself believing the negative and pessimistic things, your inner voice says, “It’s time to stop and write them down.” Literally stop what you’re doing and write down what you’re thinking. Once you’ve taken a moment to slow down the negative momentum of your thoughts, you will be more rational and clear-headed in evaluating their veracity.

When it feels like something always or never happens, this is just your brain’s natural threat tendency inflating the perceived frequency or severity of an event. Identifying

and labeling your thoughts by separating them from the facts will help you escape the cycle of negativity and move toward a positive new outlook.

#### They Reframe Their Perspective

Stress and worry are fueled by our own skewed perception of events. It's easy to think that unrealistic deadlines, unforgiving bosses, and out-of-control traffic are the reasons we're so stressed all the time. You can't control your circumstances, but you can control how you respond to them. So before you spend too much time dwelling on something, take a minute to put the situation in perspective. If you aren't sure when you need to do this, try looking for clues that your anxiety may not be proportional to the stressor. If you're thinking in broad, sweeping statements such as "Everything is going wrong" then you need to reframe the situation. A great way to correct this unproductive thought pattern is to list the specific things that actually are going wrong or not working out. Most likely you will come up with just some things—not everything—and the scope of these stressors will look much more limited than it initially appeared.

#### They Breathe

The easiest way to make stress intermittent lies in something that you have to do every day anyway: breathing. The practice of being in the moment with your breathing will begin to train your brain to focus solely on the task at hand and get the stress monkey off your back. When you're feeling stressed, take a couple of minutes to focus on your breathing. Close the door, put away all other distractions, and just sit in a chair and breathe. The goal is to spend the entire time focused only on your breathing, which will prevent your mind from wandering. Think about how it feels to breathe in and out. This sounds simple, but it's hard to do for more than a minute or two.

This task may seem too easy or even a little silly, but you'll be surprised by how calm you feel afterward and how much easier it is to let go of distracting thoughts that otherwise seem to have lodged permanently inside your brain.

#### They Use Their Support System

It's tempting, yet entirely ineffective, to attempt tackling everything by yourself. To be calm and productive, you need to recognize your weaknesses and ask for help when you need it. This means tapping into your support system when a situation is challenging enough for you to feel overwhelmed. Everyone has someone at work and/or outside work who is on their team, rooting for them, and ready to help them get the best from a difficult situation. Identify these individuals in your life and make an effort to seek their insight and assistance when you need it. Something as simple as talking about your worries will provide an outlet for your anxiety and stress and supply you with a new perspective on the situation. Most of the time, other people can see a solution that you can't because they are not as emotionally invested in the situation. Asking for help will mitigate your stress and strengthen your relationships with those you rely upon.