

2017

An Analysis of Kelly McGonigal's TED Talk: How to Make Stress Your Friend

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Recommended Citation

Joiner, Ransey, "An Analysis of Kelly McGonigal's TED Talk: How to Make Stress Your Friend" (2017). *Scholars Day*. 35.
http://scholarlycommons.obu.edu/scholars_day/35

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An Analysis of Kelly McGonigal's Speech Using Lloyd Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation (Transcript
of Presentation)

No matter what type of difficult things that we have going on in our lives, or how many things that we have to do, or which people we're around day-to-day, it always seems like one thing is present in our lives, to some degree: and that's stress. It eats at our well being, it clouds our consciousness and we rack our brains in effort to get rid of it to experience relief. But what if there was another side to stress that most people are missing? -and what if this 'other side' of stress that people are missing is closely related to the reason that in times of strain and pressure that we can tend to perform tasks worse than normal instead of performing them *better* than normal? What if the reason that we experience this is simply tied to our mind and our perception of stress? These questions are a fair representation of some of the ideas that are talked about in Kelly McGonigal's TED talk on stress, called "How to Make Stress Your Friend."

As you know, today I will walk us through my analysis of her speech and give my greatest effort to you to describe why her speech is so great. To do this, we'll study Kelly McGonigal's speech using Lloyd Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation as our rhetorical lens. But first, let's go ahead and watch a segment of her speech so we can all get a better feel of what her message really is.

[VIDEO [1:10 - 6:52](#)]

Alright, now that we've listened to *part of* her speech, let's get into the analysis. As a reminder, I'm using Lloyd Bitzer's Rhetorical Situation as our rhetorical lens to guide us through our study today. So first, we'll start by covering the exigence of the speech, then the audience





who the message was directed toward, and then we'll finish by studying the constraints of her message. (EYES) So. Let's get started.

Exigence is a word that holds the idea of a "need," so what is the need that this talk is addressing? Really, it's a need that everyone can identify with: the need to learn how to deal with stress properly. No matter who you are or where you're from or how long you have dealt with stress, the need to learn how to deal with stress properly is something that **everyone** deals with and Kelly McGonigal understands this, probably much more than most people do. I say that she understands this need much more than most people do, because, while we weren't able to catch the part of the video that says this, she is a health psychologist. Her mission is to help other's be happier and healthier. So for years it has been her **job** to help people deal with anxiety. Ultimately, the need that she addressed in her TED talk is one that applies to **everyone** and she has lots of experience that helped her to address it.

One of the first ways that she addressed her audience's need to learn how to deal with stress was first by addressing the perspective that many people have on stress—that it's bad for you and that you need suppress the feeling of it. In her speech she effectively argued that it is this belief that keeps people from making stress their friend.

After that, she provided scientific studies—even more than what I was able to include in my speech today—that actually showed that **believing** that stress is bad for you can have negative effects on someone's life expectancy. Through this, she helped draw in her audience as they realized, "Oh no. I could end up **being** one of those people." It could be considered that if the **need** is what she ultimately addressed that, by drawing her audience in this way, she more effectively addressed how people deal with stress, thus meeting her audience's need even more.

She continued through the studies about stress and revealed the solution to this urgent problem. The solution to not allowing stress to hurt you, she says, is as simple as understanding that it truly **doesn't**—it is our **belief** that it's harmful that causes us to experience negative side effects.

Next, let's talk about the audience. Sure, we all **saw** the audience sitting right in front of her during her talk, but TED talks   weren't just created for the crowds that attend their conventions. TED believes in sharing ideas that are worth spreading ultimately to people like us, so that we can take it upon  ourselves to spread it to  others. Because of this, while there was an audience that was there with her during her speech, McGonigal's audience became ultimately anyone who watches TED's videos.

But I don't want to ignore that first audience. Let's talk about them first. What is unique about them? From the looks of the video, her audience seemed to be middle-to-older-aged people. -and although it might sound rude, let's be honest with ourselves here: when you confront middle-to-older-aged people with something that proves that their belief about something could cause them to die soon, they will **surely** be more alert than a younger audience might be. So for the crowd that McGonigal was in front of that day, I would say that this topic probably hit them in a unique way that we may not experience in this part of our lives.

Next, let's talk about the rest of the audience: us, and people everywhere who watch TED talks. Although it might be hard to say much about such an incredibly large crowd, it can be noted that TED.com is the 859th most-visited website in the world according to alexa.com, and ScientificAmerican list's it's videos as having over 1 **billion** views from all across the globe. You might think, "Well because the talks are in English they probably aren't watched in places that English isn't spoken," but actually, that isn't true. Transcripts of TED talks are available in 40 languages. From this, we can see the huge contrast of this much larger audience compared to

the smaller one actually present at the conference. In summary, TED talks reach those across an extensive demographic.

Last, let's talk about what constrained, or influenced, the speech's ability to create the change that's desired by the speaker. While I'm talking about this I'll use the words "constraint" and "influencer" synonymously. One influencer of the message is how Kelly presented herself on stage. She used lots of body language, remained strong eye contact with her crowd, and various ways in which she personally conveyed her message also effected how well her audience was able to interpret it. She didn't **begin** her speech with tons of facts about how stress is bad for you, although she did include a lot of that type of information in her speech. She **began** her speech with a belief: she **believed** that stress wasn't inherently bad and she wanted to help her audience understand that, too. She then moved to how she knew that. She had seen multiple studies done which showed strong, concrete, and convincing evidence that made her personally change her mind about the nature of stress, even after years of teaching that it was bad for you. Finally, she conveyed what her audience could do to resist suffering the negative side effects of stress.

Another thing that influenced her speech was the time limit. As we've talked about in class, the time limit for TED talks is 18 minutes. This amount of time may seem long to us, but think about other instances in which we listen to people speak for much longer on subjects all the time: We might have meetings at work, we listen to professors during our classes, and sermons at church on Sundays. The reason that these examples of [AIR QUOTES] "speeches" take a long time is because it's challenging to get an audience to understand a large amount of information in a **short** amount of time. So for this TED talk being just under 14 and a half minutes, I think Kelly did very well with this constraint of time.

Another constraint is her audience's personal ability to listen to what she said and apply it. Some people who have heard her TED talk did not apply what she said and some have. This may be for various reasons, but even for some of the ones who **wanted** to apply her message, the facts and ideas that she shared in her talk simply didn't stick around a long time because it's **human nature** to hear something and then to struggle to immediately apply it to our lives.

So. There are many reasons that I think that this speech is so great. First being that it addresses an issue that **so many** people face **so** often. The scale of the effect that a message like this can have is as big as it gets, just about. I really like thinking about how just one person, through speech, can have **that** profound of an impact.

Another reason that I believe that this speech is so great is that the core of the message isn't calling on people to simply adhere to a belief, but to **experience** the **effects** of the belief. Not only should we believe that stress isn't bad after hearing this talk, but if we truly believe it talks about, we can experience a difference in our lives. Like she said, "A pounding heart is [just] preparing us for action. [-and if] we're breathing faster, no problem. It's getting more oxygen to your brain." These realities being shown to us allow us to not only have a higher level of comfort during stress, but it allows us to experience, in some ways, our lives differently.

So let's be sure to apply what we have learned from this TED talk, and if you haven't already, check out the video of it. Because maybe by being sure to apply what Kelly McGonigal talks about we can be a part of addressing the same need that she did. Thanks.

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