



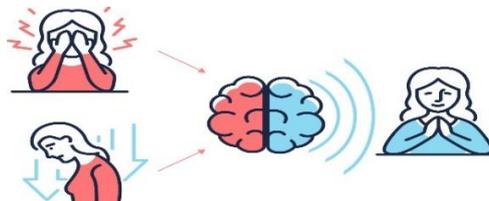
## Turning a Crisis into a Challenge

As we come to the end of another academic year, one that presented challenges like no other, we come also to our penultimate Mental Health Note for this year. Recent topics covered have been imbedded in a framework that describes people as systems. We have presented the four areas (Thoughts, Feelings, the Body & Behaviour), including a strategy within each to help us navigate uncertain times and practice good mental health fitness. In this week's Mental Health Note we look to the work of Professor Ian Robertson, a neuroscientist and clinical psychologist at Trinity College Dublin, to see how we can harness the energy generated by our stress to benefit us.

Last week we mentioned ways our body responds to stressful situations e.g. increased heart rate, sweaty palms, blood rushing to our muscles, trembling, stomach churning etc. These are all symptoms related to the activation of the autonomic nervous system. Interestingly this '*ready for action*' response is common for a number of emotions, such as, anger, fear, anxiety and excitement.

Consider the example - you are asked to make a speech at your friend's wedding – if you see this situation as a potential '*threat*', (e.g. fear you'll make a fool of yourself) you are more likely to anticipate failure, you may even recall negative memories of similar past experiences, you are more likely to tap into the negative bias that is so prevalent in humans. This can result in a vicious cycle of heightening your body's response: making you feel more anxious; think more negatively and behave in a more fearful way.

If, on the other hand, you reimagine the stress as a '*challenge*' rather than threat, you can immediately reframe your thinking and the messages you are telling yourself. In the example above, you could **change** the threat into a challenge by setting yourself an internal goal - "I'm going to deliver a good speech". You will still feel the symptoms of arousal such as, knots in your stomach, racing heart and sweaty palms, but you are now experiencing these symptoms in the '**challenge mind set**'. Your attention will now be biased towards the positive so that you are more likely to tune into positive memories of similar experiences and you are more likely to anticipate success. You can now use the activation of the autonomic nervous system to your advantage. Sharpened focus, heightened attention, energy bursts, can all be used to meet the 'challenge', the internal goal you have set.



In his campaign speech John F. Kennedy stated - "When written in Chinese, the word "crisis" is composed of two characters-one represents danger, the other represents opportunity."

Learning to attribute excitement rather than anxiety to our physiological symptoms, allows us to see the 'opportunity' in a stressful situation. In doing so we can, within limits, turn stress to our own advantage and build up our resilience.