

Katniss turns it out when the stakes are high, a telltale sign of a warrior. Find out if she's your stress-type doppelgänger....





Are you a warrior... or a thinker?

How do you handle stress? Identify your type and learn to use it to your advantage.

By Molly Triffin

Even if you're not fighting to survive in an evil dystopian society, everyone needs help when life slings arrows our way. To find your best stress strategy, start with figuring out the unique way your brain reacts under duress. Groundbreaking new science suggests that our response is genetically influenced. Understand how you're wired and it could help you thrive when the pressure is on—a key talent in an age when we're juggling a million things at once.

Here's your crash course on the way stress plays out in your brain: An optimal level of the neurotransmitter dopamine helps your brain's prefrontal cortex with tasks like planning and decision making. But some people metabolize dopamine more slowly than others, so they have higher dopamine levels and can become overwhelmed when they face extra stress. Others metabolize this neurotransmitter more quickly, which can make them unmotivated in their day-to-day.

What influences levels of dopamine? A gene known as COMT. COMT controls an enzyme that acts like a vacuum, clearing the extra dopamine hanging around in the prefrontal cortex. You were born with one of three combinations of the COMT gene that plays a role in stress response—you're either a warrior, a thinker or a combination of both. Stress experts helped us formulate this quiz to help you ID your type—and the personalized plan to help you crush it in the pressure cooker of life.

Discover your unique stress type

How would you rate your tolerance for physical pain?

- a Embarrassingly low. Even a deep-tissue massage makes me cry uncle.
- b Short of a sprained ankle, not much bothers me.
- c I wince when I get a shot, but I shake it right off.

Before an important job interview, you always feel...

- a Super nervous (sweaty palms, heart pounding, shallow breathing).
- b Energized and focused—it's go time!
- c A little anxious and jittery, but once I'm in there I'm pretty focused.

Where do you do your best work?

- a Somewhere quiet where I can hear myself think
- b In a bustling go-go-go environment. The energy energizes me.
- c Somewhere in the middle—not too quiet or I'll doze off, but not so busy that I'll get distracted

Mostly As: You're a thinker

Thinkers are born strategists—you like to plan ahead, steering clear of potential obstacles well in advance. That's partly because your COMT gene helps you maintain the optimal amount of dopamine during everyday activities, keeping you alert and self-motivated. While other people are binge-watching Netflix in their free time, thinkers (dubbed worriers by scientists) are more likely to check off as many things as possible on their to-do list. And the advantages keep coming. "This group tends to be able to switch back and forth between tasks quickly, plus they have a better short-term memory and sharper attention span than most people," says David Goldman, M.D., chief of the Laboratory of Neurogenetics at the National Institutes of Health and author of *Our Genes*,

Think back to the last time you were in a potentially panicky situation—like your car broke down or you got stuck in an elevator. How did you react?

- a I got really worked up and couldn't think straight.
- b It's like I clocked into the zone—I felt calm and clearheaded.
- c I didn't react as rationally as I would have liked, but I could still function.

While you're giving a presentation at work, your boss asks a question you aren't prepared to answer. Your reaction:

- a Anxiety spike! I do better when I know ahead of time what questions will be asked.
- b Whip out a sharp, pointed response—I think best when the heat is on.
- c I can usually come up with something semi-intelligent.

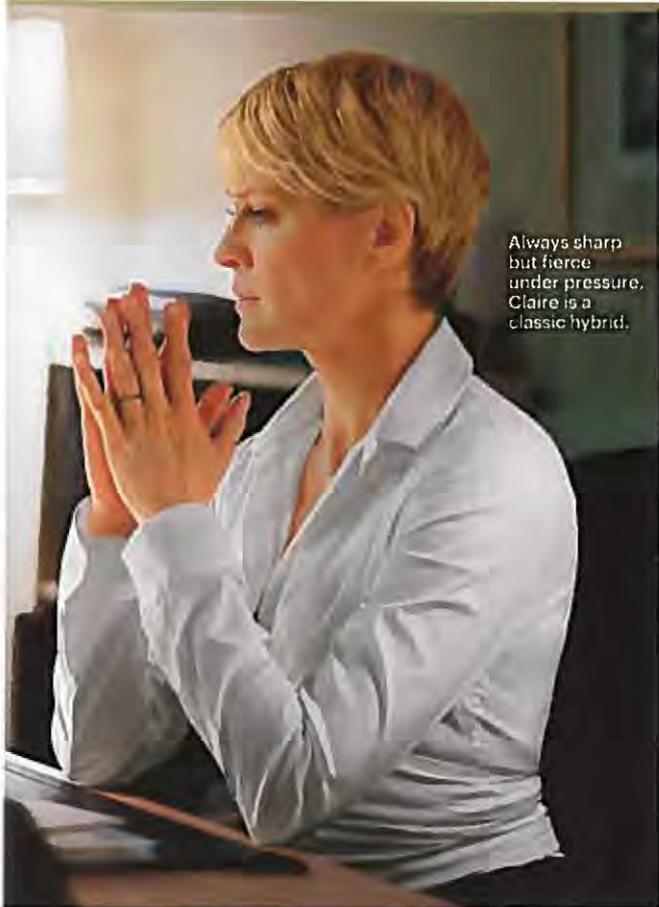


"Many people don't think to self-examine when it comes to how we react to stress. The ones who do have a leg up."

Our Choices. All great. But there's a weak spot. You're probably not great at winging it. The high-stakes situations when you really need to be on the ball—an impromptu meeting with a top client, dinner with your new boyfriend's mom—are also when your prefrontal cortex is flooded with dopamine, which your COMT enzyme can't clear quickly. The effect is kind of like a surge of traffic that crashes a website. "You freeze," says Julian Ford, Ph.D., professor of psychiatry at the University of Connecticut in Farmington and coauthor of *Hijacked by Your Brain: How to Free Yourself When Stress Takes Over*. "You feel paralyzed, and then the physical and emotional exhaustion of this state leaves you working doubly hard to cope with the situation and with your body's stress reaction."

The solution: Operate on autopilot.

Navigating a new situation (a first date or an interview) or being in the spotlight (like making a speech) triggers an increase in your levels of dopamine and other stress hormones, potentially overwhelming your prefrontal cortex. So, your move: "Take away as many unpredictable elements as you can," suggests Joseph Shrand, M.D., instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and coauthor of *Manage Your Stress: Overcoming Stress in the Modern World*. Propose meeting your date at a place you know well. Minor prep work helps you feel in control of the issue as much as you can be, so ticking off things on your list—something as simple as choosing the outfit you'll wear on your interview the night before—will help you sidestep the uncertainty that can overwhelm thinkers. And before giving a presentation or a wedding speech, practice it extensively. "This helps you circumvent executive functions so you operate on automatic, like driving a car, allowing you to perform more effortlessly and mindlessly," says Adele Diamond, Ph.D., professor of developmental cognitive neuroscience at The University of British Columbia. Any amount of familiarity breeds comfort and confidence.



Always sharp but fierce under pressure, Claire is a classic hybrid.

But sometimes you can't predict when you'll be confronted with a surprising challenge. When anxiety creeps in, turn to mindfulness, Diamond says. Checking in with your reactions can short-circuit the thinker's natural stress response in a crisis situation. Ask yourself two questions: What's my stress level on a scale of 1 (none) to 10 (worst ever)? Then ask what your level of personal control is—meaning your ability to handle the situation—on a scale of 1 (I got nothing) to 10 (I can make this better). While you might be a 9 on the stress scale, it's possible you might have more control over the situation than you first realized. And since thinkers excel when they have control, this awareness could help center you.

Mostly Bs: You're a warrior

About to interview for your dream job? You're juiced for the challenge. Giving a TED talk? Bring it on. Kitchen fire? Under control. Your baseline dopamine levels in your prefrontal cortex are lower than a thinker's, so a little bit of stress can bring them up to the perfect level for peak performance. You're usually ready for battle when things get intense, because you can react quickly. "In the midst of chaos, warriors can rapidly home in on the matter at hand," Ford says. But there is a drawback. Under low-stress circumstances, your system eliminates too much dopamine. Without its energizing effect, you might have trouble getting motivated and can be less productive than others. You actually need some pressure to pull out your best stuff, and that means you might be a procrastinator. "Warriors tend to leave assignments until the last minute and cut corners, which can compromise quality," Dr. Shrand says. When you procrastinate to the point of being faced with a huge task and no time to complete it, you experience stress, too. You've probably spent some time lying wide awake in your bed, worrying about all the projects that have piled up on your

desk—and the blowback you'll get when you hand it, that doesn't reflect your best abilities. And when was the last time you didn't have to hustle to file your taxes?

The solution: Simulate that rush.

Since pressure can fuel you to perform at the top of your game, you have to find ways to stay on edge but still make headway on big assignments. Set mini-deadlines and benchmarks for yourself to intensify urgency and create a sense of progress. Then plan for a big finish. Being under the gun may improve a warrior's performance, so although you don't want to have too much work to do at the last minute, you do want to play to your natural strengths. "Overplanning to the point where you eliminate spontaneity goes against your natural aptitude," says Po Bronson, coauthor of *Top Dog: The Science of Winning and Losing*. So if you have a major project in the pipeline, reserve the final push for just before D-day, when you'll have naturally elevated levels of dopamine.

Another way to drive your daily to-do list? Harness your emotions. Remember a time you felt angry, vengeful or jealous—say, a senior staffer took credit for your idea, or a coworker scored the assignment you'd been angling for. "You can harness aggressive emotions and use them to motivate you," Bronson says. "Tell yourself, 'He doesn't think I can do it, so I'm going to show him he's wrong.'" That kind of self-talk can help warriors get hyped up and motivated.

Mostly Cs: You're a hybrid

You have a combo COMT gene—half warrior, half thinker. This means you have more baseline dopamine in your prefrontal cortex than warriors but less than thinkers. For you warrior-thinker blends, you can handle a bit of stress (e.g., a tight deadline). You want enough pressure to keep you on your toes but not so much that it shuts down your brain. "The key is to find your sweet spot," Diamond says.

The solution: Track your tendencies.

Make a check mark next to everything on your calendar that you feel psyched for and an X next to deadlines and events you're dreading. After a few weeks, look over your list for patterns—maybe you get excited about a lunch with your top client but freak that you'll flub your bridesmaid toast. That might mean you shine when it comes to important meetings (so try a warrior tip, like preparing while leaving space for spontaneity), but being in the spotlight puts you in a nail-biting thinker mode (so practice mindfulness).

Pay attention whenever people praise you for something that you pulled off in the 11th hour. That's a tip-off that your inner warrior is emerging—you held it together in a circumstance that others found stressful. Likewise, are you more productive when the office is quiet and your coworkers haven't arrived yet? If you're motivated in a lull, that's a very thinker quality, and you could plan to be in the office early a few days a week, when it's deadsville, to supercharge your efficiency. "Many people don't think to self-examine when it comes to how we react to stress. The ones who do have a leg up on everybody else," says Sian Beilock, Ph.D., a psychology professor at The University of Chicago and author of *Choke: What the Secrets of the Brain Reveal About Getting It Right When You Have To*. Stress is always going to plague us, so rather than relinquish control, take charge and get ahead of it. ■