Stress is not only pervasive in life it is essential to it. For instance, without the stress of gravity our bones would weaken. However when feelings of stress become overwhelming and chronic, the impact on physical and mental health can be substantial. It’s important to realize that it isn’t specific situations or events that cause stress, but rather our psychological response to these situations or events that cause us to feel physical symptoms of stress (e.g. increased heart rate or a feeling of tightness in the stomach). We often can’t control the things that cause us to feel stress, but we can become more stress “hardy,” more able respond to stressful events more effectively. Stress hardy individuals are able to experience challenging situations without becoming overwhelmed. The image of a surfer being able to ride a powerful wave is an apt image of a stress hardy person.

In order to ride the wave, the surfer has to remain totally focused and present with the experience; paying attention to the body’s position on the board, the direction and force of the wave, the presence of other riders. Allowing the mind to wander even briefly can result in losing the ride and being overcome by the powerful wave. Likewise, by remaining present and focused on our direct experience of a challenging situation, we are able to bring more skill and creativity to the present circumstance.
Unfortunately we tend to get caught up in stories about the situation; imagining potential future disasters or remembering past difficulties. It is these self-generated stories that actually create a feeling of threat resulting in the experience of stress.

Stanford University professor, Robert Sapolsky, describes in *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers*, that mammals (including humans) are “hard wired” physiologically to respond quickly to a perceived threat through a complex neurophysiologic process. When the brain identifies a threatening situation, the “fight or flight” response is activated resulting in a rapid release of stress hormones (cortisol, epinephring, norepinephrie) which in turn enable the body quickly to either flee from or fight a threatening presence. This hard-wired response generally works well for mammals (such as enabling a zebra to run quickly when it notices a hungry lion approaching). Unfortunately, humans have the unique capacity to see imaginary lions lurking about (e.g. “My presentation is going to go badly and I’m going to get fired!”).

When the mind perceives a threat whether real or imagined, the stress response is activated. Allowing our mind to get caught up in frequent troubling memories or fantasies can lead to the stress activation switch becoming stuck in the “on” position. A chronically activated stress response results in high levels of circulating stress hormones that can lead to chronic health problems ranging from insomnia to cardiovascular disease.

Giving the mind a chance to tell the difference between a real and an imagined threat, allows us to push the “on” button of our stress response only
when there truly is a lion present. Even if there is a “lion in the grass” and he’s very hungry (e.g. they really are down-sizing your department), we can respond more skillfully by dealing just with what’s at hand and dropping the damaging stories that make the situation even scarier (“If I lose this job, I’ll never get another). It’s easy to have our minds spin off in a hundred “what if” scenarios; often events that never happen. We lose focus on what is happening in the present. Sometimes just slowing the spinning mind with some slow deep breathing is enough to help us see the situation with greater clarity.

Research has identified various strategies that are effective in responding more effectively to stress by increasing our capacity to stay in the present moment and not be distracted by past or future thinking. Exercise, counseling, and various mind-body techniques such as meditation, yoga, and martial arts (e.g. Tai Chi) can improve our ability to respond when feeling of stress come up. These various strategies can produce relaxation and a heightened sense of well-being while also helping to slow down the worrying mind that just keeps the stress response going.

Learning to ride the wave of a challenging situation requires skill-building in stress management. We can learn to respond more effectively to what’s happening in our lives with greater clarity and focus. We can build stress hardiness. (726 words)