



## *Managing Stress for a Healthy Heart*

### *The Stress Reaction & the Relaxation Response*

1. When we see, hear, feel, smell, taste, touch or imagine something that the brain interprets as a threat to our well-being (physical or emotional) →
2. The brain signals the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) to initiate →
3. **The Stress Reaction** – AKA: Fight or Flight (and sometimes Freeze)
4. When the perceived threat has been overcome by fighting it, fleeing it, or freezing until it passes by →
5. The brain signals the ANS to initiate →
6. **The Relaxation Response** - AKA: Rest and Digest

#### Characteristics of the Stress Reaction (action of the sympathetic nervous system – arousal function)

- Heart rate and blood pressure increase
- Muscles become tense
- Blood flow is directed away from digestive system and toward the heart (so that it can be available to bring oxygen and nutrients to the muscles of the arms and legs)
- Levels of glucose and cholesterol in the blood stream increase
- Immune system is weakened
- Mind is hyper-vigilant, focused only on the “threat”

#### Characteristics of the Relaxation Response (action of the parasympathetic nervous system – calming function)

- Heart rate and blood pressure decrease
- Muscles relax
- Blood flow is available for the digestive system
- Levels of glucose and cholesterol in the blood stream decrease
- Immune system can function normally
- Mind is calm and open - able to be creative, see the “big picture”

## Four Step Model for Reducing Stress

Adapted from *The Wellness Book* by Herbert Benson, MD and Eileen M. Suart, R.N., C., M.S.  
New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992

STOP	Step off the train of thought and ground your attention in your body.
BREATHE	<p>Breathe is shorthand for “relax”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progressive Relaxation</li> <li>• Breathing techniques: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Diaphragmatic Breathing (abdominal or “belly” breathing) – slow, deep, long, even</li> <li>○ Breathing for Anxiety – exhale longer than inhale</li> <li>○ Breathing for fatigue/depression – inhale longer than exhale</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Meditation: Counting Breaths, Focus Word with Breath (use with affirmations)</li> <li>• Visualization</li> </ul>
REFLECT	<p>Ask yourself these questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What am I stressing about?</li> <li>• What am I believing or assuming about this stressful circumstance?</li> <li>• What emotions are coming up in relation to this circumstance and what action are they calling for? How am I relating to my feelings? With criticism, negative self-talk? Or, with kindness, acceptance?</li> <li>• What does my body need right now?</li> </ul>
CHOOSE	<p>Then <b>choose</b> to . . .</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change the stressor, stressful circumstance or situation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Prioritize</li> <li>○ Simplify – Let go of low priority activities</li> <li>○ Say “No” to requests for your time that will take away resources for your priorities</li> <li>○ Ask for help – accept offers of help</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Change attitudes, beliefs, assumptions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Change your perception - Look at things a different way</li> <li>○ Look for what’s right with you</li> <li>○ Replace negative self-talk with affirmations</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Take care of your body <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Schedule some kind of aerobic exercise into your day (even if it is just 10 minutes)</li> <li>○ When you feel tightness/tension in your body do a few stretching exercises with some deep breathing</li> <li>○ Check in to your posture frequently. If you find yourself “guarding,” bring the body into an upright position, straightening the spine, opening the chest, relaxing the face, smiling</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Use some other tool from your Coping Skills Toolbox</li> </ul>

## Mind-Body Skills for Reducing Stress

### **Mind-Body Exercises Using the Breath**

#### Using the Breath for Focus, Energy and Calm

- For increased focus: make the inhale and exhale EQUAL
- For energizing: make the INHALE LONGER than the exhale
- For calming/relaxation: make the EXHALE LONGER than the inhale

#### Calming Breath

- Slowly take a deep breath in.
- Purse your lips as if you are going to whistle or blow out a candle. This will help you control your exhale so you can make it longer than the inhale.
- Breathe out until you have emptied your lungs

#### Five-fingered breathing:

Trace along the outside of one hand with the finger of its opposite hand. Start at the base of the thumb. As you breathe in slide up the outside of the thumb . . . as you breathe out slide down the other side . . . Repeat for each finger. Let the breath and movement of the tracing finger be slow and smooth. When you get to the outside of the little finger trace your way back to the outside of the thumb. Continue breathing in and out and tracing the fingers of the hand. Notice without judgment the times your attention gets hijacked by thoughts that pull you away from being fully present to this work of 5 fingered breathing: worrying, regretting, planning, judging what you are doing and how you are doing it. Without patience and kindness return your attention fully to the task.

#### Progressive Relaxation

With a total of five diaphragmatic breaths, you can relax body parts sequentially within a thirty to forty-five second period.

- As you exhale from the first breath, allow your jaw to relax (let go, become heavy and loose).
- As you exhale from the second breath, allow your shoulders to relax.
- As you exhale from the third breath, allow your arms and hands to relax.
- As you exhale from the fourth breath, allow your legs to relax.
- As you exhale from the fifth breath, allow your whole body to relax.

#### Focus words

Bring your awareness to your breathing. As you inhale, mentally say to yourself, *I am . . .* and while exhaling say . . . *relaxed*. Or use whatever phrase is meaningful and relaxing for you. Repeat several times.

# Mindfulness

Research indicates that mindfulness can contribute to

- reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression
- improving mood
- strengthening the immune system

People who practice mindfulness have reported

- increase in ability to concentrate
- greater relaxation
- less reactivity in stressful circumstances
- better self-care

Mindfulness is  
paying attention on purpose  
to your experience  
in the present moment  
in a non-judgmental way.

Jon Kabat-Zinn – *Wherever You Go, There You Are*

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Consciously bringing awareness  
to your here-and-now experience,  
with openness, receptiveness, and  
interest.

Russ Harris, MD – *The Happiness Trap*

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## The Three Steps of Dropping Anchor

Most

Step 1: Acknowledge Your Thoughts & Feelings

*Notice whatever thoughts and feelings are present & name them in some way: “Anger”, “Anxiety”, “Worrying”, “Daydreaming”, “Beating myself up” etc.*

Step 2: Get Into Your Body

Reconnect with your body: e.g. stretch, breathe, move, straighten your spine and notice the sensations arising in the body.

Step 3: Refocus Your Attention

Focus your attention on 3 sounds you can hear, then 5 things you can see. Notice where you are & what you’re doing, and refocus your attention on whatever is most useful for the task, situation or activity at hand.

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## RAIN: Using Mindfulness for Difficult Experiences

### **R = Recognize what's going on**

You can awaken recognition simply by asking yourself: “What is happening inside me right now?” Call on your natural curiosity as you focus inward. Try to let go of any preconceived ideas and instead listen in a kind, receptive way to your body and heart, and bring awareness to whatever thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations are arising right here and now. Recognizing can be a simple mental whisper, noting what has come up.

### **A = Allow the experience to be there, just as it is**

Allowing means letting the thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations we have recognized simply be there, without trying to fix or avoid anything. You may feel a natural sense of aversion, of wishing that unpleasant feelings would go away, but as you become more willing to be present with “what is,” a different quality of attention will emerge. Allowing is not about making yourself happy with what you are noticing, it is a simple acknowledgment that things are the way they are in this moment.

### **I = Investigate with interest and care**

Once we have recognized and allowed what is arising, we can deepen our attention through investigation. To investigate, call on your natural curiosity—the desire to know truth—and direct a more focused attention to your present experience. You might ask yourself: What most wants attention? How am I experiencing this in my body? What am I believing? What does this vulnerable place want from me? What does it most need? Whatever the inquiry, your investigation will be most transformational if you step away from conceptualizing and bring your primary attention to the felt-sense in the body. When investigating, it is essential to approach experience in a nonjudgmental and kind way. This attitude of care helps create a sufficient sense of safety, making it possible to honestly connect with our hurts, fears and shame.

### **N = Nourish with Self-Compassion**

The first three steps of RAIN require some intentional activity. In contrast, the N of RAIN expresses the result: a liberating realization of your natural awareness. There's nothing to do for this last part of RAIN—realization, if it happens, arises spontaneously, on its own. We simply rest in natural awareness.

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## Coping Skills Toolbox

*Coping is the art of finding a balance between acceptance and action, between letting go and taking control.*

### **Problem solving**

When a problem is causing stress take direct action: brainstorm possible solutions; weigh the pro's and con's of the solutions; try solutions that seem most acceptable and feasible.

### **Distraction**

You put aside a problem until you can deal with it more effectively – when you or the other person is ready to confront issue. This is different from procrastination which is putting off confronting a situation because delay is easier than dealing with it.

### **Relaxation**

Practice some form of deep relaxation at least three times a week. Deep relaxation exercises include meditation, imagery, yoga, etc.

### **Exercise**

Do some kind of exercise that increases your breathing and gets your heart rate up as many days a week as possible. Find something that you can enjoy. Start with baby steps: e.g. Walk for 15 minutes in the neighborhood 2 days a week. As you succeed with realistic goals that you can achieve easily, you will be more motivated to increase your time exercising.

### **Have fun**

Do something you enjoy and that relaxes you. Studies show that people who take time to play, laugh, and relax are more productive and content.

### **Connect with like-minded people**

Join a social or activity group that meets at least once a month (other than your family).

### **Pursue a hobby**

Find something that interests you: bird-watching, crafts, “collecting” (stamps, frog figurines, sports memorabilia, etc)

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**Reframing**

Reframing is the ability to look at an event from a different perspective. Is the glass half empty or half full? If you have a belief that you are a failure because you did not get a job that you wanted, you can reframe that distorted view by telling yourself, “I’m not a failure if I don’t succeed . . . I’m a success because I tried.”

**Affirmations**

Short positive messages that you address to yourself that affirm your worth and your abilities. Affirmations are good tools for reframing negative self-talk into a positive message

They reduce the stress created by undermining automatic thoughts.

**Social support**

Talking out a problem with a friend or mentor aids in letting off steam and getting another perspective.

**Spirituality**

Many find it helpful to call upon their personal belief system to help them cope with stressful situations.

**Catharsis**

Find a safe, nurturing form of emotional release such as letting yourself have a good cry or good laugh.

**Journal writing**

Write things down to get them off your chest. A psychologist in Texas found that writing in order to get in touch with our deepest thoughts and feelings can measurably improve physical and mental health. Write about things that cause you stress AND about life’s pleasures, too: example, a gratitude list in which you write down all the things for which you are grateful.

**Practice acceptance balanced by action**

The Serenity Prayer expresses this strategy:

May I have serenity to accept the things I cannot change (acceptance), courage to change things I can (direct action), and wisdom to know the difference.

Successful coping results from gaining wisdom to achieve delicate balance between: Acceptance and action; Letting go and taking control

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## Resources

### Suggested Reading

- *Mindfulness Meditation for Beginners: 50 Meditations to Practice Awareness, Acceptance and Peace* by Dawn Mauricio
- *Mindfulness for Beginners: 4 Weeks to Peace, Gratitude, and Focus* by Ashley Sharp
- *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment - and Your Life* by Jon Kabat-Zinn.
- *Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics* by Dan Harris (New York: Random House 2017)
- *The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook* by Elisha Goldstein, PhD, and Bob Stahl, PhD
- *The Happiness Trap: How to Stop Struggling and Start Living* by Russ Harris (Boston: Shambala Publications, 2008)
- *The Illustrated Happiness Trap* by Russ Harris (Boulder: Shambala, 2014). The concepts in *The Happiness Trap* condensed and presented in cartoon form.
- *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* by Rick Hanson (New York: Harmony, 2013)
- *Just One Thing* by Rick Hanson, PhD (Oakland: New Harbinger Publications, 2011)
- *Unwinding Anxiety*, by Jud Brewer, MD
- *The Craving Mind* by Jud Brewer, MD

(Continue on the next page for a list of helpful “apps”)

## Apps

- Insight Timer: Free with limited access, then various subscription options. Thousands of guided meditations, talks and courses on a variety of mind-body health topics.
- 10% Happier: Free with limited access, then various subscription options. Very good resource for learning and developing the practice of mindfulness.
- Headspace: Meditation and mindfulness for any mind, any mood, any goal
- Calm: an award-winning app for guided meditation and sleep, a tool to improve one's mental health and sleep by watching unique and calming audiovisual content.
- Actcompanion: Free with limited access, then various subscription options. Provides the basics of ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy). Very helpful for those dealing with stress, difficult emotions, negative thought patterns, chronic pain, addiction and more.
- Craving to Quit: <https://www.cravingtoquit.com> Craving to Quit® is a 21 day mindfulness-based wellness program based on a successful smoking cessation curriculum developed and tested at Yale, and proven to be twice as effective as a leading quit smoking therapy.
- Eat Right Now: <https://goeatrightnow.com> The Eat Right Now program will help you rewire your brain to identify stress and emotional eating patterns, reduce cravings and build sustainable, healthy habits. Naturally.
- Unwind Your Anxiety: <https://www.unwindinganxiety.com/> Evidence-based daily guidance designed for anyone suffering from anxiety. In around 10 minutes a day: uncover what triggers your anxiety; identify your "Anxiety habits"; break the cycle of worry & panic; learn specific anti-anxiety tools.