



## Mind-Body Skills for Reducing Stress

### *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)

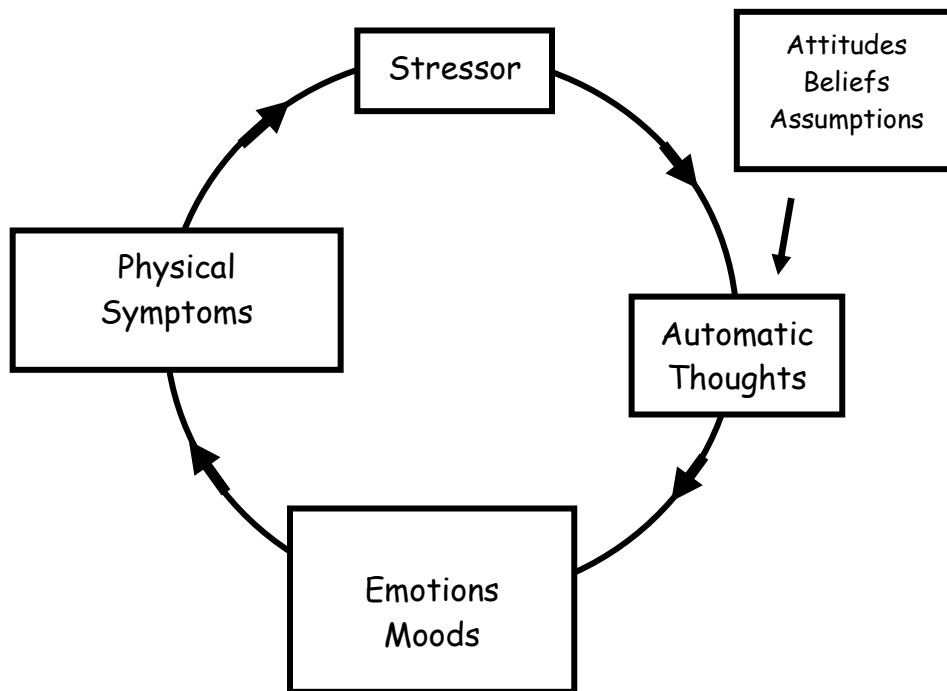
- Heart rate and blood pressure increase
- Muscles become tense
- Blood flow is directed away from digestive system and toward the heart (so that it can be available to bring oxygen and nutrients to the muscles of the arms and legs)
- Levels of glucose and cholesterol in the blood stream increase
- Immune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

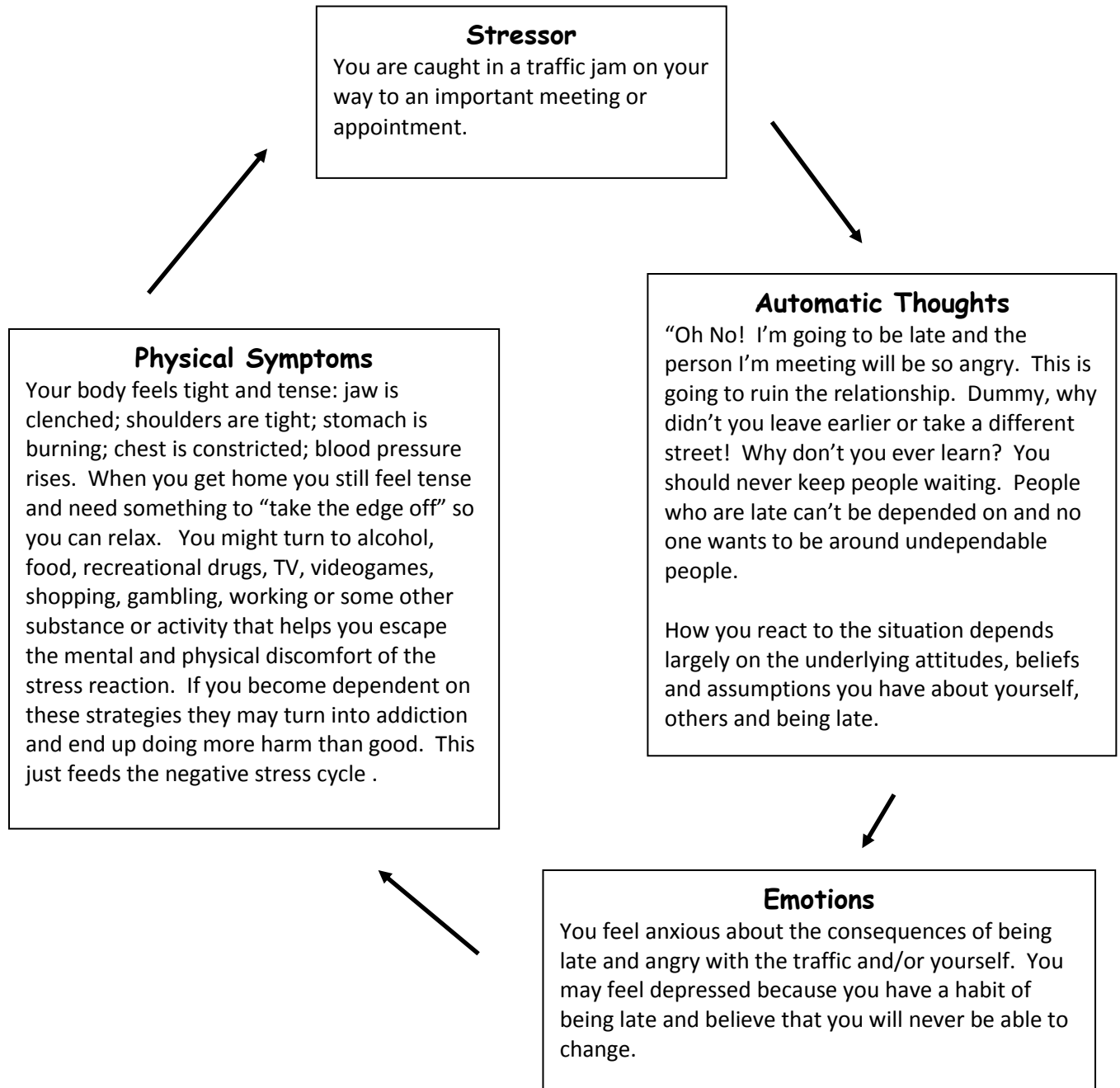
The **Negative Stress Cycle** (see diagram below) is another way of understanding how mind and body interact to create stress. When we understand how this works we can develop strategies to counteract the cycle and reduce stress.

## Negative Stress Cycle



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

# The Negative Stress Cycle in Action



## The Problem

The Stress Reaction is a survival mechanism that was meant to "turn on" occasionally to get us out of an immediate life-threatening situation (e.g. - a car swerving into your lane or an attacker coming at you with a knife). In today's world, rarely are we in immediate danger of death. However, modern medical research is finding that many people in our society live a chronic state of stress. Why is that? Because most of the "situations" (circumstances) of our modern life that trigger the Stress Reaction are problems that we can't immediately fight or flee. So the Stress Reaction "button" gets stuck in the "ON" position and our nervous system never triggers the Relaxation Response.

Chronic Stress is a contributing factor to many diseases:

Hypertension (high blood pressure)	Chronic Pain	Diabetes	Depression
Heart attack	Obesity	Anxiety	Poor leg circulation
Stomach ulcers	Stroke	Irritable bowel	
Some forms of cancer			

## The Solution

Learn ways to trigger the Relaxation Response.

- Diaphragmatic Breathing
- Progressive Relaxation
- Meditation (Focused awareness)
- Guided Imagery
- Yoga
- Aerobic exercise
- Mindfulness
- Changing Your Mind

# The Mindfulness Prescription

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.*

Throughout the day, when you need to de-stress,  
use the mindfulness prescription:

**Pause** *Relax* **ATTEND**

**Pause** – Stop whatever you are doing and check in to

- the level of tension in your body
- the theme of your thoughts, and
- your mood/emotional state.

Acknowledge what you find without judgment.

*Relax* – Take a few deep breaths and invite your body to relax.

**ATTEND** – Gather your attention from preoccupation with past or future and focus completely on the present moment and whatever you are doing without judgment.

# Changing Your Mind

Cognitive therapy reduces stress by changing the patterns of thinking that feed into a stress reaction. It is based on 2 premises:

- Much of our stress and emotional suffering comes from the way we think (how we perceive a situation).
- The thoughts that cause us stress are usually negative, unrealistic, and distorted.

When feeling stressed pause for a moment, take a deep breath and identify any negative automatic thinking that is fueling the stress. Then ask:

- Is it really true?
- Is it to my advantage to think this way?
- Is there another way to look at the situation?
- Is it really as bad as it seems?
- What's the worst that could happen?
- Can I handle it?

Choose to think about the situation in a more positive, realistic and undistorted way

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## 3-Minute Breathing Space

### 1. Awareness

Bring yourself into the present moment by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified posture. If possible, close your eyes. Then ask:

“What is my experience right now . . . in thoughts . . . in feelings . . . and in bodily sensations?”

Acknowledge and register your experience, even if it is unwanted. “OK, that’s how it is right now.” Let go of any resistance to how things are in this moment.

### 2. Gathering

Then, gently redirect full attention to breathing, to each in-breath and to each out-breath as they follow, one after the other.

Your breath can function as an anchor to bring you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness.

### 3. Expanding

Expand the field of your awareness around your breathing, so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression. Follow the breath now as if your whole body is breathing – holding it all in this slightly softer, more spacious awareness. Let go of the need to *do* anything about what you are experiencing and just allow yourself to *be*.

*The breathing space provides a way to step out of automatic pilot and reconnect with the present moment.*

(from *Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy*, Segal, Williams, and Teasdale [2002]. Copyright by the Guilford Press – used with permission)

# Be Where You Are

Where is your mind most of the time? Many would say “all over the place – past, future, fantasy.” How often is your mind in the same place as your body? The practice of mindfulness helps us “be where we are.” Anchoring the attention in present moment reality with acceptance helps us to let go of reliving stressful memories from the past and imagining stressful situations that may or may not become a reality in the future.

Mindfulness is the skill of “being where you are.” Sylvia Boorstein defines mindfulness as “the aware, balanced acceptance of present experience . . . opening to or receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting it”.

The body with its sensory experience is an excellent anchor for present moment awareness because it cannot exist in the past or in the future. Thus, whenever we come back to the body, we come back to the present in which there is probably no problem.

- Begin by finding a comfortable, supported position sitting in a chair or lying on a comfortable surface.
- If you wish, close your eyes and take a few deep breaths – invite your body to relax and your mind to stay alert to whatever you are experiencing.
- Don’t worry if your mind gets distracted by thoughts not related to your present moment experience. Just notice that you got caught in your thinking and come back to “where you are” right now.
- Let your attention move to different parts of your body and just be aware of what sensations are present – what you feel in that part of the body. You can create sensations by moving if you wish. Example: move your toes inside your shoes, rub your fingers together, alternate smiling and frowning, etc.
- Let yourself be completely and fully present to whatever you are experiencing in your body here and now, pleasant or unpleasant . . .
  - physical sensations being felt in the body
  - sounds being heard
  - aromas being smelled
  - flavors being tasted
  - light, colors and forms being seen.

Adapted from *Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life* by Steven Hayes, PhD

# Noticing You are All Right, Right Now

- Begin by taking a few moments to invite your body to relax
- Then check in with yourself – in this present moment are you all right, right now?
  - Are you relatively safe?
  - Is your body functioning well enough?
  - For today - do you have enough food, clothing, shelter and access to medical care?
  - Let yourself settle into the reality that *in this present moment* I'm all right – in the same way you might settle into a big, overstuffed comfy chair in a pleasant room on sunny day.
- Become aware of the rise and fall of your breath – feel the physical sensation of inhale/exhale, the release and relaxation of the exhale and invite your body to relax just a bit more.
- As you inhale, silently say: I'm all right,
- As you exhale, silently say: Right now.
- Continue joining these 2 phrases to the inhale and exhale
- With each exhale relax into the comfy chair and the safety and sufficiency of this present moment.

Inspired by Rick Hanson, PhD in *Just One Thing*

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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)

#### 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

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

# Resources

## **Books**

Author: [Jon Kabat-Zinn](#)

- Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment – and Your Life
- Full Catastrophe Living
- Wherever You Go, There You Are

Author: Mark Williams and Danny Penman

- Mindfulness: an 8-week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World

Author: Bob Stahl and Elisha Goldstein

- The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook

Author: Chade-Meng Tan

- Search Inside Yourself: The Unexpected Path to Achieving Success, Happiness (and World Peace)

Author: Herbert Benson, MD, et al

- The Wellness Book

Author: Rick Hanson, PhD

- Just One Thing
- Hardwiring for Happiness: the New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm and Confidence

Author: Steven C. Hayes, PhD

- Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life

## **Apps**

- Headspace
- Insight Timer
- 10% Happier
- Mindfulness

## **Chair Yoga**

There are many ideas on the internet for stretching exercises that can be done at a desk. Do a search on “chair yoga for office workers” or “desk exercises for office workers.”