

**THURSDAY, MARCH 23, 2023**

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**PRACTICAL STRESS REDUCTION for a WHOLE HEALTH  
APPROACH to PATIENT CARE and SELF-CARE for  
PROVIDERS**

**Health of body, mind, soul. Disease prevention, wellness.  
Pediatricians and family medicine practitioners usually do this; some  
other health practitioners are modifying their focus**

**WHAT IS STRESS?**

Stress is difficult to define, because it is different for everyone. Dr. Hans Selye, in the 1920's and 1930's did many experiments with laboratory animals which showed that chronic stress, using stimuli like loud noise, bright light, cold, repeated frustration, caused the animals to develop diseases resembling human diseases such as heart attacks, rheumatoid arthritis, kidney disease and strokes.

Stress was defined as “physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension” or “a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed the personal and social resources the individual is able to mobilize.” (American Institute of Stress). It was given a negative connotation, and the positive effects were overlooked.

There are acute and chronic stresses. When faced with a sudden **ACUTE** stress, (such as we may have if our house catches fire, for example) the hormonal response helps the body defend itself by “Fight or Flight”—increase in heart rate and dilatation of blood vessels to send more blood to the heart and muscles, tensing muscles to run faster, harder breathing to bring more oxygen to the muscles, glucose levels rising in the blood. After the threat passes, usually the body's metabolism returns to normal within 90 minutes. This ancient adaptation to stress still is very useful in 2023!

With **CHRONIC** stress, such as a tough job, financial insecurity, having too much to do with not enough help, having a chronic medical problem, etc.,

the repeated increased output of the stress hormones cortisol and epinephrine, can cause multiple problems such as tension headaches, coronary artery inflammation which might lead to heart attacks, and digestive changes such as reflux, nausea, diarrhea or constipation. Psychological distress can also occur. The immune system may be suppressed, leading to increased susceptibility to infections. Many more symptoms.

**BUT: Not all stress is bad!** The **good stress, or Eustress**, includes stress in daily life such as getting married, winning the lottery, getting a job promotion, having a baby, graduating from college, and making new friends, and has positive connotations and implications. This kind of stress can stimulate increased productivity and motivation, up to a point.

The **bad stress, or Distress**, daily life stress with negative implications, includes things like problems at work, being injured, having Covid-19, negative emotions or feelings, being punished or shamed, financial difficulties. These events may cause stress overload with symptoms that can cause fatigue, exhaustion, health problems, poor job performance, anxiety and depression, and burnout. Each of us has a different threshold.

Dr. Selye redefined stress later as “the rate of wear and tear on the body”, which is what biological aging is. Increased stress can actually increase components of aging. He was quoted in an interview with the media as saying “everyone knows what stress is, but nobody really knows.”

The same stressor can cause very different responses depending on who we are and how we react. People who feel they have some control over the event often do better. In life, we may have little or no control over what happens from “outside”, but we can always control our responses, and this can be taught. With people, the sense of having little or no control always is “distressful”. But there are many stress reduction techniques

### **1.DR. EILEEN’S 5 MINUTE STRESS REDUCER (guided imagery)**

Put your phone on vibrate. Go someplace you won’t be disturbed, even the bathroom. Sit with feet on floor, arms on your lap, at your sides, or on the chair arms. Tell yourself you’ll do this for just 5 minutes. (or you can set cell

phone alarm for 5 minutes). Close your eyes. Stiffen your body, contracting all muscles, for 2 seconds, then relax quickly and let your shoulders drop, your head fall forward if you like, your back slump a little. With eyes closed, gently raise your eyes to converge at the bridge of your nose, or if this is hard, just lift your eyes looking upward gently. This puts you into alpha rhythm, a more relaxed brain wave state.

Imagine yourself in a beautiful place in nature, where you've been or would like to visit, or from your imagination, a place where you feel relaxed, comfortable, and safe. Feel the air on your cheek, the temperature you like best. Look around, see what &/or who is there; hear the sounds of the lovely place; smell the smells there. Enjoy feeling relaxed and comfortable in your special beautiful sanctuary in nature. Breathe slowly, and with every breath feel refreshed, calm, and comfortable. When the 5 minutes are up, wiggle your fingers and toes, inhale deeply, and as you exhale, open your eyes and come back. Sit for one minute before getting up. The good feeling will last all day.

**IMPORTANT:** if outside thoughts intrude, just recognize them, don't be upset at yourself, and go back to relaxing in your beautiful place in nature.

This practice is good for "clearing the circuits" and giving you a "second wind". It has been used successfully for over 50 years when overloaded, tired or stressed. Make sure you turn your phone on again if appropriate.

## **2. TRACING YOUR HAND WITH BREATHS**

When you are frightened, in pain, unable to sleep, or anxious, this simple practice really helps calm you down. Great for children and adults!

Start by spreading out your left hand and with the index finger of your right hand, start at the outside base of the left thumb and gently trace the outline of the thumb, touching gently. BREATHE IN SLOWLY as you go up to the tip of the thumb, BREATHE OUT as you go down the other side. Breathe IN as you go up to the tip of the index finger and breathe OUT as you touch it downward. Continue with all 5 fingers and end at the left wrist.

Then do same for the spread right hand, using the left index finger to trace. Same breathing pattern: IN as you slowly go up to the tip of the finger, OUT as you slowly go down the other side.

You will feel connected to your body and calmer. Useful for insomnia, anxiety, stress, and also pain. Can repeat if needed. Adapted from Center for Healthy Minds.

### **3. DAY REVIEW: RECALL 3 GOOD THINGS EACH DAY**

At the end of the day, or when getting ready for sleep, even if you have other practices or routines, include recalling **three good positive things** that happened in the day **AND** consider what caused them—people, your attitude, unexpected good news, finishing a job, feeling a close connection to any Higher Power or connected with the Universe or to a teacher during meditation, etc. This will keep you tuned into sources of goodness in your life. If you have a bad day, you can always use “I woke up this morning”--- what’s the alternative? If you’d like, you can keep a journal or list and review it after 2 weeks, seeing what things you are grateful for.

### **4. CALMING BREATH (snake breath)**

Sit up tall. Start by blowing out the stale air through your mouth (only do this the first time). Take a deep breath in through the nose, filling up your whole body.

Pause and breathe out slowly and smoothly through the mouth, making a hissing sound for as long as you can. Drop your shoulders as you exhale.

Repeat 5 to 7 times, feeling yourself slow down and become calmer each time.

### **5. BODY SCAN MEDITATION FOR MINDFULNESS AND STRESS REDUCTION**

*The body scan can be performed while lying down, sitting, standing, or in other postures. The steps below are a guided meditation designed to be done while sitting. You are not trying to change any sensations, just to notice them in the present moment.*

Begin by bringing your attention into your body.

You can close your eyes if that’s comfortable for you.

Notice your body seated wherever you're seated, feeling the weight of your body on the chair, feel your feet on the floor.

Take a few deep breaths.

And as you take a deep breath, bring in more oxygen energizing the body. And as you exhale, have a sense of relaxing more deeply.

Now notice your feet on the floor, notice the sensations of your feet touching the floor. The weight and pressure, vibration, heat.

Now be aware of your legs against the chair, pressure, pulsing, heaviness, lightness.

Notice your back against the chair.

Bring your attention into your stomach area. If your stomach is tense or tight, let it soften. Take a few breaths.

Notice your hands. Are your hands tense or tight. See if you can allow them to soften.

Be aware of your arms. Feel any sensation in your arms. Let your shoulders be soft.

Notice your neck and throat. Let them be soft. Relax.

Soften your jaw. Let your face and facial muscles be soft.

Then notice your whole body present. Take three slow breaths. And then when you're ready, you can open your eyes.

## **6. SELF-COMPASSION BREAK**

FROM GREATER GOOD SCIENCE CENTER & DR. KRISTIN NEFF

### **TIME REQUIRED**

5 minutes. While it may be challenging to do this practice every time you face a stressful situation, an initial goal could be to try it at least once per week.

### **HOW TO DO IT**

1. Think of a situation in your life that is difficult and is causing you stress.
2. Call the situation to mind and see if you can actually feel the stress and emotional discomfort in your body.
3. Now say to yourself, “This is a moment of suffering.” This acknowledgment is a form of mindfulness—of simply noticing what is going on for you emotionally in the present moment, without judging that experience as good or bad. You can also say to yourself, “This hurts,” or, “This is stress.” Use whatever statement feels most natural to you.
4. Next, say to yourself, “Suffering is a part of life.” This is a recognition of your common humanity with others—that all people have trying experiences, and these experiences give you something in common with the rest of humanity rather than mark you as abnormal or deficient. Other options for this statement include “Other people feel this way,” “I’m not alone,” or “We all struggle in our lives.”
5. Now, put your hands over your heart, feel the warmth of your hands and the gentle touch on your chest, and say, “May I be kind to myself.” This is a way to express self-kindness. If you prefer, give yourself a BIG HUG! You can also consider whether there is another specific phrase that would speak to you in that particular situation. Some examples: “May I give myself the compassion that I need,” “May I accept myself as I am,” “May I learn to accept myself as I am,” “May I forgive myself,” “May I be strong,” and “May I be patient.”

This practice can be used any time of day or night. If you practice it in moments of relative calm, it might become easier for you to experience the three parts of self-compassion—mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness—when you need them most.

## **7. ABDOMINAL (DIAPHRAGMATIC) BREATHING FOR STRESS REDUCTION**

This stress reduction breath, abdominal breathing, is naturally done by babies and infants. It's very relaxing. Can be done sitting, standing or lying down. When people are upset, angry, frightened, in pain, confused---the

breath usually gets faster and shallow. By taking control of the breath and slowing it down, relaxation can occur in as little as two minutes or less.

Inhale slowly, expand and push your abdomen out. Exhale with no pause, drop your shoulders, and allow your abdomen to contract. Repeat for 5-7 breaths or up to 2 minutes if desired. Your breath may naturally slow down. Can repeat as needed.

## **8. LIGHT PRACTICE: SITTING IN A GLOBE OF LIGHT**

Sit upright, close your eyes. INHALE through the nose, visualizing white light descending from the top of your head down your spine to the heart level. EXHALE through the mouth, visualizing sending golden light out through your heart, in all directions (360 degrees). You end up sitting in a globe of golden light. Do the breathing for 5 minutes, as often as you'd like. This practice is very relaxing. If you prefer, you can both inhale and exhale through the nose. Also, you can drop your shoulders with each exhalation, if you'd like.