



Managing Stress Blog Series

Stress and overwhelm are common in today's society. Unmanaged stress has a negative impact on our health. In the following six sections, we will be discussing how to "reset" the brain with new habits using our bodies natural relaxation response.

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Section One: Defining Stress

Stress is a condition or feeling experienced when a person perceives that demands exceed their resources. In short, it's what we feel when we think we've lost control of events. Stress has been shown to lead to or exacerbate certain diseases, including:

- Heart disease
- Asthma
- Obesity
- Headaches
- Depression
- Skin rashes
- Insomnia
- Panic Attacks

Stress is partially instinctual (i.e. running from a tiger), and partially the way we think. In other words, perceived stressful situations cause extreme worry about what may or may not even occur. If we believe that the demands have exceeded our resources, we need to change our beliefs about our resourcefulness. **While not everything is within our control, we do have control over our reactions to situations.** This is important to remember. Because if we can control our minds and our perceptions of a situation, we can control our actions or reactions.

This Week's Stress Management Technique: *Recognizing Patterns and Behaviors*

We can't fix something we cannot (or will not) recognize. Noticing our stress triggers can help us develop effective ways to manage or eliminate those patterns or behaviors altogether.

Action Item

Reflect on any patterns, behaviors, or situations that are stressful. Find at least one realistic way to counter that behavior. Be patient with yourself though! Not everything can be fixed overnight. That being said, I encourage you to think outside the box! Here are Some Examples:

Stressful Behavior	Stress-Less Behavior
Taking on too much responsibility	Delegate tasks to spouse, children, coworkers, etc.
Unrealistic amount of time to complete tasks	Commit to using a planner, iCal, Asana, or other time management resource.
Long commute	Find an alternate route. Take turns carpooling. Find a podcast or internet radio station to make the commute more enjoyable!

Section Two: Improving Your Mood with Nutrition

This week, we will be discussing food, vitamins, and minerals that help improve mood and sleep. A nutritious diet is good for us in many ways. The way that food interacts with our body chemistry supports us both physically and mentally. Here is a short list of vitamins, minerals, and foods that can help boost our mood.

B12 has been found to improve moods, as well as decrease muscle pain. Foods, such as **avocados**, are high in B vitamins and **potassium** (which helps decrease muscle cramping). **Bananas** are also high in potassium, contains **tryptophan**. Tryptophan converts protein to serotonin and helps improve sleep and improve moods. **Melatonin** is a supplement that is fairly easy to find at a drugstore, that also helps with sleep. **Magnesium**, in deficient amounts, contributes to muscle cramps, anxiety, and restlessness. Soaking in an Epsom salt bath can do the trick!

Time management also effects our meal planning. Often when we lack time, we do not eat as healthy as we should. I find that crockpot meals help tremendously with this. I simply gather the ingredients, follow heat settings per the recipe, and put portions in containers for the week. Using a crockpot, along with meal planning in general, decreases the urge to buy fast food. Plus, warm foods, like soups, are calming for the nervous system. Lastly, decreasing sugar and alcohol intake can help with extreme changes in moods.

This Week's Stress Management Technique: *Healthy Meal Planning*

Action Item

For the next week, research healthy meals that will help with physical and emotional well-being. Record how you feel after the meals, particularly noting any changes in mood and sleep. Here are websites to get you started:

- 10 Healthy Foods to Boost Your Mood <https://www.everydayhealth.com/hs/depression-pictures/healthy-foods-boost-mood/>
- 51 Healthy Crock-Pot Recipes You'll Want to Make ASAP <http://www.countryliving.com/food-drinks/g3209/healthy-crock-pot-recipes/>
- 56 Genius Ways To Get Your Avocado Fix <http://www.delish.com/cooking/recipe-ideas/g2894/things-to-do-with-avocado/>

Welcome to Week Three: Breathing & Meditation

This week, we will be discussing the importance of conscious breathing and meditation. First let's look at the parts of the nervous system that involve our stress responses:

Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS): Involves in the stimulation of activities that prepare the body for action. This includes increasing the heart rate, increasing the release of sugar from the liver into the blood, and other generally considered as "fight-or-flight" responses.

Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS): Conserves energy as it slows the heart rate, increases intestinal activity, and relaxes muscles in the gastrointestinal tract. This system is also known as "rest and digest". The exercises this week activate this system.

For example, deep abdominal breathing for 15-30 minutes per day has been shown to help decrease anxiety by overriding the SNS responses to unwarranted stress. It also increases oxygen to the brain while inducing a state of calm.

Meditation is also beneficial for stress relief. It contributes to lower blood pressure and improved digestion. There are many types of meditation. Starting with only a few minutes per day can make a big difference in your mood.

This Week's Stress Management Technique: *Relaxation Techniques*

Action Item

For the next week, try each of the relaxation techniques below. Record how you feel, particularly noting any changes in mood and sleep.

1. Progressive Muscle Tension & Relaxation: Dr. Edmund Jacobson developed the technique to help patients relax before surgery. By alternating the contraction and relaxation of muscles, people learn to distinguish between tension and relaxation, and is beneficial in preventing stress related muscle tension in building up.
 - a. Tense left toes (5 seconds), then relax
 - b. Tense left leg (5 seconds), then relax
 - c. Tense right toes (5 seconds), then relax
 - d. Tense right leg (5 seconds), then relax
 - e. Tense left hand into fist (5 seconds), then relax
 - f. Tense left arm (5 seconds), then relax
 - g. Tense right hand into fist (5 seconds), then relax
 - h. Tense right arm (5 seconds), then relax
 - i. Bring chin to chest, squeeze eyes shut, and tense entire torso (5 seconds), then relax
 - j. Curl up into a ball, wrapping arms around legs, rocking back and forth, (5 seconds), then relax body to lay flat on the ground

2. Deep Breathing Counting Meditation: Exhales are one beat longer than inhales
 - a. Inhale 1 beat, exhale 2 beats
 - b. Inhale 2 beats, exhale 3 beats
 - c. Inhale 3, exhale 4
 - d. Inhale 4, exhale 5
 - e. Inhale 5, exhale 6
 - f. Inhale 6, exhale 7
 - g. Inhale 7, exhale 8
 - h. Inhale 8, exhale 9
 - i. Inhale 9, exhale 10
 - j. Repeat from (a)

Welcome to Week Four: Simple Aromatherapy for Stress Relief

Aromatherapy is the art and science of using essential oils for health and well-being. Essential oils are oils extracted from plants and flowers through a distillation process. Essential oils work in a variety of ways. They can either be diluted within a carrier (lotion, cream, massage oil) and massaged into the skin. In this method, they are absorbed directly into the blood stream. Inhalation is a common form of aromatherapy usage. When essential oils are inhaled, olfactory (smell) receptor cells are stimulated. The impulse is transmitted to the limbic system, often called our “emotional brain”. This portion of the brain is responsible for:

- Memory (Hippocampus)
- Stress and anxiety response (Amygdala)
- Emotional reactivity (Thalamus and Hypothalamus)
- Coordinating smells and sights with pleasant memories (Cingulate Gyrus)
- Our emotional response to pain (Cingulate Gyrus)

Each essential oil has a different effect on the body. When it comes to stress reduction here are a few common ones.

Relaxing: Insomnia, anxiety, stress

- Lavender
- Clary sage
- Chamomile

Energizing: Mental fatigue, low on energy, low on motivation

- Peppermint and/or Spearmint
- Rosemary
- Lemon/ Other Citrus Scents

Just because essential oils are natural, does not mean that they are safe in every instance. They can be dangerous if not used properly. Here are a few words of caution:

- Some essential oils may not be safe for those who have **epilepsy**, are currently **pregnant**, or **breast feeding**. Check with your healthcare provider to see which essential oils are safe for you.
- If you plan on using essential oils on your skin, **do not use without diluting in a carrier**. A carrier medium is a base used to dilute the essential oil to make it safer to use. Common carriers are olive oil, unscented lotion, and shea butter. Essential oils are very concentrated so only a few drops will do the trick. Try using 4 drops/ounce of carrier medium. Even after diluting the essential oils in a carrier, test on a small patch of skin to make sure you aren't allergic.
- Phototoxicity, or photosensitization, is a reaction caused when essential oils on the skin are exposed to UV light – whether from the sun or from a tanning bed. **Reactions can be severe, and even permanent**. Here are some of the signs of phototoxicity:
 - severe sunburn
 - blistering

- changes in the color of your skin
 - edema (swelling)
- **Here is a list of essential oils along with the maximum number of drops allowed per ounce of carrier oil before they will cause phototoxic reactions:**
 - Bergamot – 1 drop
 - Bitter Orange – 8 drops
 - Grapefruit – 24 drops
 - Lemon (cold pressed) – 12 drops
 - Lime (cold pressed) 4 drops

This Week's Stress Management Technique: *Using aromatherapy!*

Action Item

There are many ways to use aromatherapy. Below are suggested ways to safely incorporate them into your life. Try at least one, but preferably more, to see how the essential oils effect your stress levels. Choosing the appropriate kind of essential oil can be as simple as smelling it and seeing if you resonate with the scent. Here are ways to use aromatherapy:

- Car diffuser: This connects the cigarette lighter in your car and disperses the scent you add. Just be sure **not to use any essential oils that will cause to relax too much!** One of the energizing blends would definitely be more beneficial and safer.
- Flameless electronic diffuser for home or office
- Essential oil candles
- Sprays
- Roll-Ons
- Massage
- Salt/Scrubs
- Scented cotton ball
 - Add one or two drops of one of the relaxation essential oils to a cotton ball. Place under your pillow at night.
- Add a few drops of one of the energizing essential oils to a piece of cloth. Carry it with you and breathe into the cloth when you need a little pick me up.
- Steam Inhalation: Boil 2 cups of water. Carefully, pour the water into a bowl. Gradually add essential oils, one drop at a time. Some oils are stronger than others so you may need more or less. Around 3-7 drops should do, but use your discretion. Inhale the oils from about 12" away from the bowl. Take a few breaths in at a time. Stop if you notice any irritation or discomfort. Use energizing or relaxing oils based on what you feel you need at the time. Along with stress relief, steam inhalations can also be great during cold season to open the sinuses. Eucalyptus essential oil is great for this,

Welcome to Week Five: Movement

When stress allows excess energy to build up, movement is a great way to expel it! For me, walking does the trick. Being an avid walker allows me to clear my mind, commune with God, and take care of my body. It is truly a body/mind/spirit practice that I take part in daily. If you are not into walking, there are plenty of other activities that you can do. Swimming, group fitness classes, even playing with your kids and grandkids can help decrease stress levels.

This Week's Stress Management Technique: *Do something physical!*

Action Item

For at least 30-minutes a day, do sort of physical exercise. This can include walking, gardening, jogging...it's your choice! Write down your experiences in your journal to keep track of your progress.

Welcome to Week Six: Putting it All Together

We have been discussing a plethora of ways you can be proactive about combatting stress. I hope that you found a few things that resonated with you and that you can implement into your life. That's the key really...finding something that works for YOU! How do you know what works for you? Below I have some quizzes available from the American Institute of Stress. They may help you figure out which areas are unbalanced and causing the most stress in your life.

- Stress 360
http://www.assessmentgenerator.com/sys/?module=assessment&action=assessmentDisplay&assessment_id=2895
- Stress Sensitivity Scale
http://www.assessmentgenerator.com/sys/?module=assessment&action=assessmentDisplay&assessment_id=2895
- Workplace Stress Survey <http://www.stress.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Workplace-Stress-Survey.pdf>
- Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory <https://www.stress.org/holmes-rahe-stress-inventory/>

After taking the quizzes, go back over the week's lessons and assignments and see which activity works best for managing stress in your life.