

Module 22 Resources

Chronic Stress

Mindfulness and meditation:

- These two concepts are central to stress reduction and I speak about them with almost every patient I meet. As a faculty member at the Center for Mind Body Medicine, I've seen the impact of these techniques as we have taught them to groups as critical for our self-care. Jim Gordon, MD and his team provide wonderful training if you are looking for an intensive, supported introduction to these skills. Mindfulness and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a well-researched program and revolves around improving our mind's ability to focus and be present in the moment. Popularized and researched by Jon Kabat-Zin, there are many trainings, both virtually and in-person, that over 8 weeks teach you the fundamentals of mindfulness. There are many ways to practice mindfulness, so remember what is most important. Find a practice that works for you and make it a regular, ideally daily, ritual. However, almost all mindfulness work involves a focus on your breath. I find this is a great place to start if this is new to you. Often I see patients who are a bit intimidated or skeptical or feel they "can't meditate." They can simply begin with several slow deep breaths, inhaling through their nose and exhaling slowly through pursed lips for as long as possible. Focus on your breath.
- [Jon Kabat-Zin Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future](#)
- [The Center for Mind Body Medicine](#)
- [Mindfulness Practices from The Mayo Clinic](#)

Physiological sigh: I'm a big fan of this technique that I learned about from Dr. Andrew Huberman at Stanford University. To hear him explain more about this technique watch [this video](#), specifically starting at the 19:45 mark. Essentially, this practice involves two, rapid inhales through the nose followed by an exhale through the mouth. It's something that you can do in just 5 seconds, so it's a great tool when you are short on time, or feeling overwhelmed.

Exercise:

- Exercise can be a fabulous way to reduce and manage stress. In fact, it's one of the most evidence-based tools out there for battling [depression](#), [anxiety](#) and [stress](#). This can be as simple as going for a walk or bike ride...and remember that for mental fitness we asked you to consider all movement as important. For more ideas on types of exercise make sure to watch module 21 and see the resources section.
- [Exercise for depression](#)
- [Regular exercise is associated with emotional resilience to acute stress in healthy adults](#)

Yoga: Yoga is a popular way to help manage stress. It is a form of exercise but also has a focus on breathing and being present. Taking a yoga class or simply practicing at home can trigger the parasympathetic nervous system to kick in and you likely feel much more relaxed. Studies have shown how beneficial this is for reducing stress as well as alleviating symptoms of anxiety and depression. You may feel the effects of yoga in the moment and right after, but continuously practicing is best for keeping stress at bay.

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Biofeedback: Watch yourself reduce your stress. Few things are as powerful as seeing our mind's ability to reduce our stress on display. This is what happens during biofeedback...in fact if you bought a pulse oximeter during the COVID-19 pandemic, you already got a taste of biofeedback. This device measures the oxygen saturation of our blood. As we breathe more slowly and deeply, we can see this increase slightly. There are a variety of biofeedback techniques from holding a [digital thermometer](#) in your hands and increasing its temperature or monitoring your brainwaves with a personal EEG device like the [MUSE headset](#).

Monitor your sleep: As you've heard throughout this course, sleep is absolutely central to brain health. As we can increasingly monitor our rest with sleep trackers, this becomes a powerful metric as you consider your stress management. During sleep, our brains consolidate memories and digest the emotional content of our day so make sure to make sleep a priority.

Time in nature: By far one of the most underrated but beneficial ways to relieve stress is to return to our roots. By that I mean return to the lush green environments in which we have evolved. This can be especially impactful for those of us that live in a metropolitan area or spend most of our time in an office setting. Countless studies have shown reduced cortisol levels (stress hormone) in those that have regular access to natural environments.

Belly breathing/breathwork: Great for beginners, breathing meditation incorporates the use of deep, synchronized in and out breaths and holds. When practicing, special attention should be paid to the out breath, as this is when your parasympathetic nervous system (relaxation response) is engaged. This can be used on the go, to great effect before meetings, public speaking etc.

Talking it out: Whether it's with a friend, family member, or a professional, talking about what's causing you to feel stressed with someone you trust can be helpful. You will feel supported and it fosters connections from which everyone can benefit.

Life inventory: There are many things we can all do to help cope with and reduce stress reactivity in our lives, but sometimes the best solution can be as simple as removing the very things that are triggering stress. Spend some time thinking about the modifiable things in your life that are causing you stress. I find often with patients and in my own life, there are often actions we can take even though we feel helpless. Most important in your life inventory are the things going well. Nothing reduces your stress like reminding yourself of the things you are getting right.

Journaling: Here we're talking about expressive writing, or writing about negative thoughts and feelings that may have arisen during the day. This is particularly effective for people who have experienced stressful or traumatic events. One reason expressive writing may be effective is that it allows you to think critically and intellectually about an event and therefore avoid excessive rumination or cyclic thinking. We enable ourselves to express the negative emotion associated with an event and then move on. We also get to celebrate our wins and express positive emotions. Seeing your victories, gratitudes and achievements in your own writing is really powerful.

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Setting boundaries to slow down: We all have a finite, limited bandwidth and sometimes stress revolves around giving our brains and bodies a chance to recover. If you find that you're feeling overwhelmed and short on time for self care then slowing down to give yourself space might be the way to go. This often involves "setting boundaries" as therapists like to say. This means saying no sometimes, or protecting what is most important to you, perhaps your Sunday Brunch with friends or your weekly yoga class. We set boundaries when we choose foods that feed out mental health and when we commit to a life of purpose.

Touch/massage: Touch can have a tremendously therapeutic effect. Stress often results in tension in the body and massage is an extremely effective way to relieve this tension and facilitate the relaxation response, or parasympathetic nervous system. After a hectic day our fight-or-flight system has likely been overactive, and massage, aside from increasing oxytocin, can help to tune the parasympathetic nervous response, acting as a counter-balance to a stress-filled day. If you live alone, you can practice self massage or try a weighted blanket.