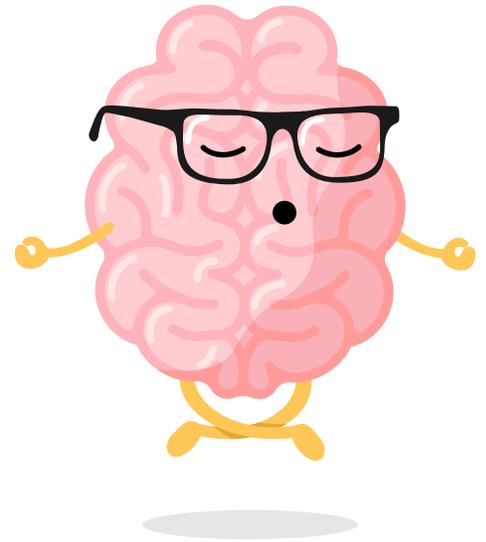


Stress Management Toolbox

At this point you may recognize how inhibitive stress is on the mind and body. We can practice healthy habits, but if we're stressed out, our bodies struggle to function and achieve optimum health. Remember—stress is a natural part of the human experience. The goal isn't to avoid stress altogether, because that's not possible. The goal is to learn to manage our stress effectively, so we can better approach the inevitable obstacles in our lives.

It's also important to recognize the difference between acute and chronic stress. As mentioned in the [lesson about the effects of stress](#) on our health, the body is able to handle stress in small doses. But when these acute stresses become chronic, the body can become overloaded and [dysregulated](#).

We must practice understanding the differences between acute stress and chronic stress in the body and mind, because different tools in our toolbox will serve us depending on the situation. Here are some options that you may choose to include in your stress management toolbox!



TOOLS FOR MANAGING ACUTE STRESS (IN-THE-MOMENT ACTIVATION)

breathe

When we're stressed or anxious, we have a tendency to hold our breath, or our breathing becomes shallow. Taking just a few slow, deep breaths can calm down the nervous system. Remember that you have access to [a few different breathing exercises](#).

ground: 5-4-3-2-1

If we're experiencing anxiety, we're typically lost in thoughts about the past or future—away from the here and now. If we can ground, we can return to this moment and experience some relief from the thoughts taking us away from the present. The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique helps you tune into the senses and brings you back to this moment in time.

- To begin, take a deep breath.
- **5 things you can see** – Out loud, say 5 things you can see in this moment (rug, table, picture frame, etc.)
- **4 things you can feel** – Pay attention to your physical body and note 4 things you can feel—externally or internally (fuzzy socks, soft pillow, tightness in the chest, etc.)
- **3 things you can hear** – Listen for and note 3 sounds that you hear (dog barking, stomach rumbling, etc.)
- **2 things you can smell** – Note 2 things you smell. If needed, move closer to something with a scent, like a candle or plant. If you don't smell anything, simply name 2 smells that you like.
- **1 thing you can taste** – Note one thing you can taste. Perhaps there's a toothpaste taste in the mouth, or faint flavors from your lunch. If you can't taste anything, name a favorite taste.

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Stress Management Toolbox

affirmations & mantras

Affirmations or mantras can be helpful reminders during activated moments, providing you with some inspiration, comfort, joy, or peace. Keep in mind, what's most important is that your affirmations and mantras are believable and meaningful to YOU personally.

Examples:

- *It's only a thought, and a thought can be changed.*
- *All feelings are temporary.*
- *I forgive myself and set myself free.*
- *I trust the process of life.*
- *I love and accept myself.*
- *I'm okay right now.*
- *I am allowed to make mistakes.*
- *Nothing lasts forever; things are always changing.*
- *I deserve compassion.*
- *I don't have to prove myself to anyone.*

exercise & movement

Stress is a cycle that must be completed. Once we experience activation in the nervous system, if we don't let it work through our body, it can build up and cause tension. Exercise and movement are great ways to physically complete the stress cycle. Even if you don't feel like working out, studies show that even a 10-minute walk can reduce anxiety and elevate mood.

crying, singing, release

Other ways to complete the stress cycle are by crying, singing, or experiencing some other physical release. If we feel like crying, the body is trying to express a need. Telling ourselves that we can't cry (or not making space for it) can "clog" us up internally. While there may be appropriate times to modulate our emotions, it's important to make the space for such release at a later time if needed.

journaling or talking to a trusted friend

When thoughts and feelings are in our heads, they can feel jumbled and confusing. Putting our feelings into words—either on paper or aloud—can turn that jumble into something concrete. Once we see or hear our words expressed, it can leave us with greater understanding and insight. Talking to someone else isn't necessarily about getting advice or hearing what they have to say—it's about having a space for you to explore and express yourself. It's important this person be someone you trust.

listen to music

Music can impact our stress hormones—such as adrenaline and cortisol—helping to relieve symptoms of anxiety. Listen to any kind of music that calls to you. Sometimes, calming and tranquil music can help. But other times, aggressive or angry music may actually help you express, release, and complete the stress cycle!

get outside and get some fresh air

Studies have shown that being in nature can reduce stress and lower heart rate. Fresh air also boosts oxygen in your brain and affects your serotonin levels, which can positively impact your mood.

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Stress Management Toolbox

TOOLS FOR MANAGING CHRONIC/SYSTEMIC STRESS

meditation & mindfulness

[Meditation](#) is a practice that's like going to the gym for your brain. When you go the gym, you may feel better after a workout—or you may not. You go trusting the process, knowing the compounded effects over time are valuable. With meditation, it's the same. You may feel better after, or you may not. It is a misconception to think that when we meditate, we should feel less anxious or stressed. Meditation is a tool for your “chronic stress” toolbox, rather than a way to manage acute stress. Moral of the story: if you don't feel relaxed after meditation, it doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong!

therapy, regular journaling

Journaling and talking about our thoughts are just as important when we're not activated as when we are. We can often make the most progress on an internal issue when we're thinking clearly and with a level head. Setting time aside to process and explore emotions in a calm state can help us untangle knots that have been unaddressed or haven't had space to surface.

regular movement & exercise

Almost any form of movement or exercise can help reduce chronic stress, so pick something you enjoy! Walking, jogging, dancing, yoga, tai chi, gardening, weightlifting and swimming are just a few options. Stress reduces blood flow. But when we move, we help blood to flow through the whole body—including our hearts and brains which, of course, impact the body and mind!

social connections & support system

Social support has been shown to minimize stress and improve health in major ways. A lack of support can lead to loneliness, so it's important to cultivate meaningful relationships. This doesn't need to be a formalized best friend—even a quick coffee break with a neighbor, chat with a co-worker, or volunteering in your community can provide these social benefits!

play, recreation, rest, relaxation, art

Our society has most of us stuck as [human doings](#), rather than human beings. Recreational activities, art, and simply rest and relaxation can be rejuvenating experiences. Most of us are so busy that we must intentionally schedule time for these activities, so consider how to build play and rest time into your life. We must fill our own cup in order to show up best for others!

prioritize sleep

Stress and anxiety can cause sleep problems. A lack of sleep can also cause high levels of stress. It's important to prioritize adequate sleep to keep the body and mind regulated, and to reduce the effects of chronic stress!

