



# Klinik

COMMUNITY HEALTH

## Calm in the Storm:

## Coping with the Stresses of Life

Third Edition  
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*Just Care. For Everyone.*

Klinic Community Health is grateful to the following staff for their contributions towards the production of this handbook:

Mary Jo Bolton  
Jessica Burton  
Tara Carlson  
Curt Holowick-Sparkes  
Cheryl Matthews  
Rachelle Pascal Carrick  
Janet Smith  
Kathie Timmermann  
Chris Willette  
Tim Wall



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## Introduction

We all talk about how stressed out we are. Stress has almost become an expectation for most people. There are, however, no prizes for those who are able to tolerate high levels of stress, and the price we pay can be high. While we may talk a lot about stress, most of us don't do enough about it. Instead, we simply shrug our shoulders and say: "that's the way it is," and try to go on as we have before.

We can, however, do something to manage our stress. Our health and that of our family will be improved if we take the time to learn about how to recognize our own stress reactions, how stress affects us, and how to better cope with stress and live calmer lives.

Stress is a normal reaction to situations that are perceived to be challenges, changes, threats, or even opportunities. It is our *reaction* to events rather than the events themselves that cause stress. In today's busy world there are many stressors: finances, employment, housing, health, family, relationships, environmental disasters ... the list goes on and on. Stress can be either helpful or harmful, depending on the situation, how long the situation lasts, and how effectively one learns to cope with stress. This handbook and its corresponding website ([www.de-stress.ca](http://www.de-stress.ca)) contains important information on identifying signs and symptoms of stress, as well as simple, user-friendly methods that can be used by everyone to manage their stress and improve their lives. Listed at the end of this handbook, under Resources, are toll-free numbers for the Klinik Crisis Line, the Manitoba Suicide Line, and the Manitoba Farm & Rural Support Services for those who wish to speak confidentially with a counsellor.

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## Stress

### What Is Stress?

Although we all talk about stress, most of us probably do not have a clear understanding of what stress is. Many people understand stress as something that happens *to* them — for example: a natural disaster, an injury, a job loss, or too much work. Others think that stress is what happens to our body in response to an event (e.g., heart pounding, anxiety, fear, exhaustion, or nail biting). However, while stress does involve events and our physical response to them, they are not the most important factors. It is our *thoughts* about difficult situations that are critical.

When something happens to us, we automatically evaluate the situation. If we decide that the demands of the situation outweigh our skills, then we might label the situation as “stressful” and react with a “stress response.” If we decide that our coping skills are greater than the demands of the situation, then we don’t see it as “stressful.” How we assess situations and respond to them can also be influenced by past experiences, especially traumatic experiences. It is therefore helpful to understand how trauma can affect us. There are strategies and exercises described later in this handbook that also are useful in overcoming the effects of trauma. For more information on trauma, visit [www.trauma-informed.ca](http://www.trauma-informed.ca).

Stress can be a result of any situation or thought that makes us feel frustrated, angry, fearful, or anxious. Everyone sees situations differently and has different coping skills. For this reason, no two people will respond exactly the same way to a given situation. It is not the event, but rather a person’s perception and experience of an event, which defines whether or not it is stressful.

It is important to understand that some situations that we considered positive are stressful. Examples may include the birth of a child, being promoted at work, or moving to a new home. These events may not be perceived as threatening, but may feel “stressful” because we don’t feel fully prepared to deal with them and the

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changes they might involve. Change, even when it is positive, can disrupt our feelings of confidence, safety, stability, balance, order, and control. But change can also provide opportunities to learn, grow, and develop new ways of coping that lead to new balance and deeper feelings of confidence, self-awareness, comfort, and connection.

Stress is a normal part of life. In small quantities, stress is good; it can motivate us and help us become more productive. However, too much stress, or a strong response to stress, can be harmful. If we always respond in a negative way to stressful situations, our health and happiness may suffer. But, by understanding ourselves and our reactions to stressful situations, we can learn to handle the effects more effectively. Managing stress is not about learning how to avoid or escape the pressures and turbulence of life; it is about learning how to calmly weather the storms of life. To learn stress management is to learn about the mind-body connection and the degree to which we can manage our health in a positive way.

## Sources of Stress

*We can experience stress from four basic sources:*

1. The Environment – The environment can bombard you with intense and competing demands to adjust. Examples of environmental stressors include weather, noise, crowding, pollution, traffic, unsafe and substandard housing, and crime.
2. Social Stressors – We can experience many stressors at the same time arising from the demands of the various roles we play in life, (e.g., being a parent, spouse, caregiver, and employee at the same time). Examples of social stressors include deadlines, financial problems, job interviews, presentations, disagreements and conflicts, demands for our time and attention, loss of a loved one, divorce, and co-parenting.
3. Physiological – Situations and circumstances that affect our body can be stressful. Examples of physiological stressors include rapid growth during adolescence, menopause, illness, aging, giving birth, accidents, lack of exercise, poor nutrition, and sleep disturbances.
4. Thoughts – Our brain interprets and perceives situations as stressful, difficult, painful, or pleasant. Many situations in life can be stress provoking, but it is our thoughts that determine whether they are a problem for us.

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## Signs and Symptoms of Stress Overload

It is important to learn how to recognize when our stress levels are “out of control” or affecting us negatively. The signs and symptoms of stress overload can be varied. Stress affects the mind, body, and behaviour in many ways, and everyone experiences stress differently.

***Three common ways that people respond when they are overwhelmed by stress are:***

1. An angry or agitated response. We may feel heated, keyed-up, overly emotional, and/or unable to sit still.
2. A withdrawn or depressed response. We may shut down, space out, or show very little energy or emotion.
3. A tense and frozen response. We may “freeze” under pressure and feel as if we can’t do anything. We may look paralyzed but under the surface feel extremely agitated.

The following list contains some common warning signs and symptoms of stress. The more signs and symptoms we notice, the closer we might be to feeling stress overload.

***Cognitive symptoms:***

- memory problems
- inability to concentrate or difficulty concentrating
- poor judgement
- seeing only the negative side of things
- anxious, racing, or repeating thoughts
- constant worrying
- trouble learning new information
- forgetfulness
- difficulty making decisions

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***Emotional symptoms:***

- moodiness
- irritability or short temper
- overreaction to petty annoyances
- excessive defensiveness or suspiciousness
- agitation or inability to relax
- feeling overwhelmed
- sense of loneliness or isolation
- depression or general unhappiness
- sudden attacks of panic

***Physical symptoms:***

- aches and pains, muscle tension
- headaches, jaw clenching, or pain
- diarrhea or constipation
- nausea, dizziness, or butterflies in the stomach
- chest pain or rapid heartbeat
- loss of sex drive
- fatigue or constant tiredness
- difficulty breathing
- frequent colds
- shallow breathing and sweating
- tremors or trembling of lips or hands
- light-headedness
- dry mouth or problems swallowing
- rashes, itching, or hives

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***Behavioral symptoms:***

- eating more or less
- sleeping too much or too little
- gritting or grinding teeth
- isolation from others
- procrastinating or neglecting responsibilities
- using alcohol, tobacco, or drugs to relax
- nervous habits (nail biting, pacing, feet tapping, fidgeting)
- excessive gambling or impulse buying

**Questions to Consider When Assessing for Stress**

1. How do you know when you are stressed?
2. Where do you feel stress in your body?
3. What do you notice about your body, thoughts, and feelings when things are difficult?
4. What might others tell you they notice about you when you are stressed?
5. How do you behave when you are feeling stressed out?
6. How do you react negatively or proactively to stress?
7. How do you currently cope with stress?
8. Do you...
  - regret being angry or short-tempered with others?
  - feel as if your emotions are getting the best of you?
  - use alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs to cope with stress (prescription, over-the-counter, or street drugs)?
  - have sleep problems (either sleep too much or don't get enough restful sleep)?
  - feel as if things are overwhelming or out of control?
  - laugh or smile less than you used to?

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- yell, cry, or withdraw a lot?
  - feel sad, disappointed, or worried?
  - eat too much or too little when you are stressed?
  - feel that you are not in control of your life?
  - have trouble letting go of things that are bothering you?
  - blame yourself or think that nothing goes right?

## **Strategies for Managing Stress**

*Here are 25 strategies that can help you manage stress:*

1. Accept the moment as it is: This prevents you from launching into the litany of “should have’s” that can cause stress. It also helps you problem solve. You see what is actually happening instead of what you would like to see happen or what you are worried could happen.
2. Plan ahead to remain calm: Use deep breathing as you picture yourself managing a typically stressful situation in a relaxed manner.
3. Be in charge of your body’s stress reactions: Learn to recognize and release tension in your body. Practice yoga, meditation and breathing techniques to calm your body and mind. Listen to relaxation CDs, guided relaxation, guided imagery, or make your own recording. Refer to the section in this handbook entitled “Relieving Stress.”
4. Eat healthful foods: Plan to keep track of what you eat for three days. Read the Canada Food Guide for healthful nutrition. Compare this to your food intake and decide what changes you want to make.
5. Learn stress-reduction techniques: Learn more about mindful relaxation, breathing techniques, use of imagery, and body exercises (e.g., body scans, progressive muscle relaxation, shoulder-and-neck relaxation). Refer to the section in this handbook entitled “Relieving Stress.”
6. Dance, run, skip, and walk: Regular exercise releases endorphins, our “feel-good” hormones. Then, stretch your body to eliminate pent-up tension.

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7. Try music: Listening to music can soothe and relax you. Singing really can lift your mood! The shower and car are good options for people who think their singing will cause stress for others.
  8. Cultivate a hobby: Whether it be gardening, stamp-collecting, reading, cooking, or any physical activity, hobbies add value to our lives and take us away from stresses.
  9. Use humour: Lighten up a stressful situation. Watch a funny movie, read a funny book, or laugh with your friends.
  10. Spend time in nature: Research says that even gazing out the window at a garden plot or looking at a photo of a natural setting can reduce stress. If you can walk in nature, so much the better. You don't need to go to a forest, even strolling along a tree-lined street or through a park will do.
  11. Talk to yourself: Instruct yourself not to get hot and bothered about the situation. Tell yourself to calm down, relax, let go. Challenge negative thoughts.
  12. Speak up for yourself: Allowing frustration and anger to linger is very stressful for your body. Think about enrolling in assertiveness training if speaking up is hard for you.
  13. Try aroma therapy: A few whiffs of scents like lavender, rose, and green apple can help tame tension and produce a feeling of calmness.
  14. Have a hot cup of herbal tea: Chamomile or mint tea can be especially calming.
  15. Let go of the idea of a perfect life: Not everything is going to work out perfectly, no matter how hard you want it to.
  16. Find time to play: Many adults have forgotten how to play. Play is defined as active engagement in something you enjoy. It's not just for kids.
  17. Make time for friends: Organize time to spend with old friends and allow time to make new friends.
  18. Talk to a therapist, counsellor, or spiritual advisor: Talking therapy can help restore a feeling of control when situations are overwhelming.
  19. Get in touch with your creative side: There are many ways to banish the blues through artistic expression – for example, painting, drawing, making a collage, taking photos, or shaping clay. The important thing is to externalize thoughts and feelings that are causing you stress.

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20. Write your thoughts and feelings in a daily journal: The benefits of journaling include lowering levels of stress hormones, decreasing the numbers of sick days taken, boosting the immune function, and increasing the ability to handle adversity and adjust to change.
  21. Change your environment: Lower the lights, turn on calming music, and open the curtains to let the sunshine in.
  22. Take a mini-break: Close your eyes and take three deep breaths while imagining yourself in a peaceful place — for example, in a garden or a field of wild flowers, or on a beach.
  23. Expect change: When you accept that change is inevitable, it helps you be more flexible (and less stressed) when it does happen.
  24. Take a sedative bath: Taking a bath in water that is close to skin temperature is called a “sedative bath,” or “neutral bath,” and is documented to relieve tension. For muscle soreness or tightness, experts recommend a higher water temperature, but not too hot. You should be able to easily enter the water.
  25. Smile: Research says that there is a powerful link between facial expression and emotion.

*(Note: “Strategies for Managing Stress” was adapted from Pearson 2008.)*

## **Sleep and Stress**

Sleep is an important part of our lives and certainly contributes to our ability to cope with stress. Stress can disrupt and play havoc with our sleep which in turn then affects our stress levels.

Did you know that almost 50% of Canadians say that they reduce their sleep time in an attempt to gain more time in a day. Time stressed (and/or generally stressed) individuals are more likely to have problems going to sleep or staying asleep.

The following information regarding sleep and stress is taken from a document produced by the Manitoba Farm and Rural Support Services, “Sleepless in Manitoba”. We hope that you find it helpful and puts you to sleep.

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## ***Introduction to Sleep***

*“If we live to be 75 years old, we will have spent 20-25 years (about 1/3 of our lives) sleeping or trying to sleep. We spend more time sleeping than any other single activity in our lives. Poor sleep results in poor mental and physical health, a shorter life span and a lower quality of life. We should be spending a lot more time finding out how to sleep well and how to remedy poor sleep.”*

**- Dr. Carlyle Smith**

Our bodies are designed to go to sleep soon after dark, and wake up around dawn. Ever since the invention of the light bulb, we have been compensating for disturbed sleep cycles. There are times when we don't get the amount of sleep we should, but during those times we need to focus on getting the best quality sleep. The eight hour beauty sleep is a myth. The human body is designed to sleep in 90 minute cycles that add up to 6, 7.5 or 9 hours of sleep per night. As children we try to get out of sleep, and as adults we seem to chase it. Everyone goes through periods of their life when sleep seems to be elusive; however our bodies require sleep in order to work properly. Our bodies rest, restore and grow while we are asleep. Whether poor sleep is caused by stress, life changes, hormonal changes and/or health issues, the key is to get better quality sleep.

## ***Tips for Getting a Good Sleep***

- Practice a regular bedtime routine to help relieve daytime stress
- Consistently go to bed and get up at the same time
- Take a warm bath rather than a shower an hour or so before bed. This will raise the core body temperature, thus fooling the body into turning down the thermostat before bed
- Reading calming material
- A darker room is better for sleeping
- Eat lightly in the evening. Include both protein and carbohydrates in a snack
- Avoid smoking, caffeine, and alcohol
- Go to bed when you are tired and turn out the lights. If you don't fall asleep within 15 to 20 minutes, get up and do something else
- Light exercise within three hours of bedtime, but not just before you plan to sleep

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- Have a 20-minute nap during the day
  - Sleep with the window slightly open to negatively charge the air which will improve your sleep
  - Use stress management techniques
  - Change the light bulbs in your house to broad spectrum. Broad spectrum light bulbs promote alertness during the day and result in rebound sleepiness at night

### ***The Effects of Poor Sleep***

According to Dr. Reid (Respirologist and Sleep Specialist, University of Saskatchewan) the most common effects of poor sleep are daytime sleepiness and not feeling refreshed in the morning. Research links quality sleep with healthy neurological and hormone functioning, strengthening of the immune system and cell repair.

### ***Other effects of poor sleep may include:***

- Lack of concentration
- Forgetfulness or memory loss
- Errors in judgment
- Depression
- Irritability
- Reduced reaction time leading to increased risk of injury
- Decreased motivation and reduced productivity
- Contribution to obesity
- High blood pressure

### ***Organizing the Bedroom***

*“The mattress should be the best piece of furniture in the house”*

***- Jon Shearer***

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Your bedroom is an important aspect of sleep planning:

- Change sheets regularly.
- Acquire a pillow to suit you and change every 6 months.
- Get dust mite covers for mattresses and pillows.
- The bedroom should be 3 to 4 degrees cooler than the rest of the house.
- Keep bedroom well-ventilated (with fresh air) and at a comfortable temperature throughout the night.
- Darken your room to simulate night time.
- Keep the clock face turned away from you, and don't look at it if you wake in the middle of the night.
- Use the bedroom for sleep and sex only. All other activities should take place elsewhere.
- The bedroom should not be used as an office.
- Remove TV's, computers, and other electronic devices from the bedroom.
- Acquire a firm, comfortable mattress.
- Consider painting your room a soft, relaxing colour.

### ***The Power Nap***

*“Napping is probably closer to what nature intended for humans than the single sleep period that our culture has adopted”*

*- Dr. Carlyle Smith*

Unfortunately, Canadian society is not structured in a way that encourages nap taking. The remedy for unwanted sleepiness is often caffeine and/or sugar. If you are unable to take a nap during the day, you can also combat afternoon sleepiness by going for a short walk or drinking a large glass of water instead of indulging in caffeine and sugar. Recent research has demonstrated that a well-timed nap can be extremely beneficial to the body. Naps can be planned, in that the nap is taken before the person actually gets sleepy. There is also emergency napping that can be used to combat fatigue during an activity (dropping off to sleep while driving is an obvious example). As well, there is habitual napping, with the nap taking place at the same time each day.

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### ***Benefits of Napping***

- Naps restore and increase alertness in the first few hours after awakening from the nap.
- Naps enhance performance on any physical task, from manual activities to sports.
- Naps reduce opportunities for accidents and injury.
- Naps increase psychological well-being while reducing negative moods.

### ***Napping Tips***

- A natural body nap time occurs between 1-4 p.m. (sometimes called the “post lunch dip”). It is relatively easy to fall asleep in this time period.
- The nap length should be 10-20 minutes long. If the napper sleeps longer than this, s/he often has trouble waking up again and feels quite drowsy.
- Find a quiet restful place to nap, so that you actually fall asleep.
- Don’t nap too late in the day. An evening nap may interfere with the ability to fall asleep at normal bedtime.

### ***Other Considerations***

- Napping too long (more than 20 minutes) can leave a person with sleep inertia, which is a persistent drowsiness and inability to fully awaken from the nap.
- Napping is sometimes considered a mark of laziness and only for children. In fact it is very good for both adults and children, in terms of physical and mental health.
- Napping enhances memory formation.

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### ***Foods That Help You Sleep***

The best foods for stimulating sleep are those that contain tryptophan (a naturally occurring amino acid). L-Tryptophan is used by the body to make the sleep inducing neurotransmitters of serotonin and melatonin. The digestion process is complex, and the best procedure is to have a food rich in tryptophan along with some complex carbohydrates. The carbohydrates induce insulin which essentially clears the blood stream of other amino acids that compete with tryptophan and allows it to do its work of manufacturing serotonin and melatonin, two substances important for sleep. Another helpful agent is Calcium, which can be found in a variety of dairy products. It aids the brain to use tryptophan.

### ***Foods That Help You Sleep***

Here are some foods combinations that normally induce sleepiness. These example combos work better than single foods alone.

- Whole grain cereal and milk.
- Peanut butter on toast.
- Cheese and bread or crackers.
- Banana and milk.
- Turkey sandwich (modest size).
- Hard boiled egg and toast.
- Almonds or almond butter and a glass of warm milk.

### ***Foods to Avoid***

Foods high in protein and containing tryptophan eaten alone are less helpful as they also likely contain amino acids like tyrosine that make you more alert. Carbohydrates alone are also of limited help. Further, the carbohydrate portion of your late evening meal must not have carbohydrates that have too much sugar, such as sweet pastries, which will put you on a sugar high, followed by a sugar low, and the release of stress hormones that will keep you awake.

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### ***Tips for Bed Time Snacks***

- The best bedtime liquids are non-alcoholic, non-caffeine drinks like milk and herbal teas (such as chamomile tea, decaf green tea).
- Drinks can be taken warm but not HOT. Your body temperature must go down if you are to sleep at all. Hot liquids push back sleep onset by reversing the natural temperature drop.
- Keep liquid volume modest to avoid too many awakenings for trips to the bathroom.
- Avoid large volume meals, as digestion will interfere with sleep.
- Avoid sweet, spicy or fatty foods that are hard to digest.
- If you suspect certain foods keep you awake even in small amounts - you may unknowingly have an allergy.
- Avoid caffeine at least 3-4 hours before bed.
- Avoid alcohol 4-5 hours before bed. Alcohol at bedtime can ensure a quick sleep onset, but in several hours, middle of the night awakenings occur and it is very difficult to get back to sleep. As well, alcohol induces abnormal sleep so that the person awakens deprived of normal sleep. This sleep deprived effect is part of any “hang-over” feeling.



## Mental Health

Stress can have a profound effect on our mental health. Good mental health can protect us from the harmful effects of stress.

### **What is Mental Health?**

Many people confuse the terms mental health and mental illness. People often think that mental health is simply the absence of a mental illness. Mental health is the presence of a feeling of well-being that comes from knowing that you can cope with the challenges life sends your way and feeling satisfied with your life. Mental health is about our ability to enjoy life, deal with challenges and life events, and experiencing positive and meaningful connections with other people. Mental health is about balance between all aspects of our lives – social, physical, spiritual, and emotional. Good mental health is essential to good health and quality of life.

### **Are there Different Degrees of Mental Health?**

Mental health can range from “flourishing” (good) to “languishing” (poor). Unfortunately, many people are languishing, which means that they experience few of the signs of good mental health and simply accept their present state as normal for them. People can experience poor mental health and yet not have a mental illness, and people living with a mental illness can also experience good mental health.

But none of us (even those who may be languishing or experiencing a mental illness) needs to settle for poor mental health. If we can recognize our strengths and address those areas in which we struggle, we can move closer to flourishing instead of just getting by. It is possible for each and every one of us to enjoy life more.

### **Achieving Good Mental Health**

We can all improve our mental health, in the same way that we can our physical health. We can practice good mental health habits and exercise our strengths and coping strategies. We can build good mental health, one step at a time.

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## Knowing Yourself and the Signs of Good Mental Health

Below is a list of things that contribute to good mental health. By taking time to think about these different aspects of life, you get to know yourself better, and identify those areas of your life that you might wish to pay closer attention to in order to enjoy life more and experience a greater sense of well-being. No one feels happy and fulfilled all the time and everyone can learn and grow. Achieving good mental health is a life long journey and may start by asking yourself some simple questions in order to better understand your strengths and those areas in your life you might wish to strengthen. Asking ourselves questions and exploring these different parts of yourself is not about trying to figure out what's wrong but rather it's all about discovering and unlocking your full potential and learning how to get the most out of living.

### *The things that contribute towards our well-being include:*

1. Emotions: Am I normally happy and interested in life? Do I smile a lot? Can I tolerate and cope with such difficult emotions as anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness?
2. Self-acceptance: Do I like who and what I am? Can I acknowledge both the positive and negative parts of myself.
3. Personal growth: Do I recognize my own potential and feel a sense of continued development? Am I open to new experiences and change?
4. Purpose in life: Does my life have direction and meaning?
5. Mastery of the environment: Do I address my needs in a positive, constructive, and non-violent way?
6. Self-reliance: Do I live according to my own standards and values? What are the personal beliefs that guide me? Do I accept without question what other people tell me or do I weigh them? Do I feel able to ask questions and challenge others in a respectful way? Do I recognize my own needs and am I able to communicate them to others?
7. Positive relationships with others: Do I have warm, trusting, and meaningful personal relationships?
8. Social acceptance: Am I positive toward others and accept their differences? Do I trust people?

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9. Attitudes about people: Do I believe that people and society in general have potential and can grow positively?
  10. Contribution to society: Is what I do every day useful to and valued by others and by myself?
  11. Interest in people: Am I interested in people, society, and the world around me? Am I concerned for the welfare of others?
  12. Sense of belonging: Do I feel that I belong to my community and that it supports and comforts me?
  13. Quality of life: Am I normally highly satisfied with my life?

Hopefully these questions have been helpful and have got you thinking and talking more about mental health/mental wellness. Talking and listening is always an important part of personal growth, it's how most of us learn. Include trusted friends and family members in these conversations and remember other resources can include your doctor, spiritual health care provider, or other health care providers such as mental health professionals.

*(Note: This section on Mental Health was adapted from material originally produced by Corey Keyes, 2007.)*

## **Knowing What Gives You Strength**

We can derive strength from a variety of sources — both from within ourselves (such as things we do that help us cope with the ups and downs in life) and from outside ourselves. Examples are:

- family
- friends
- mentors – people who guide, teach, and challenge us
- healthful activities – leisure and creative activities, sports, exercise, reading, and activities that distract and entertain us
- spirituality – faith, and those qualities that provide meaning and purpose, the way we experience a connection to others, to nature, the earth and the world around us

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- mental health – doing something each day that is important to you and that makes you feel better about the day and yourself, managing stress, paying attention to the moments when you are feeling good, not only when you are feeling bad
  - access to medical services and support
  - generosity – giving back to your community, being interested in and helping others, volunteering

Look at the list above and determine which are sources of strength for you right now.

Which areas would you like to strengthen and pay closer attention to?

Over the last year or two, is there an area that has become stronger?

*(Note: “Knowing What Gives You Strength” was adapted from Sources of Strength, [www.sourcesofstrength.org](http://www.sourcesofstrength.org))*

Researchers in the U.K. have identified five strategies that contribute most to mental health and that can be sources of strength:

1. Give – help others, volunteer, give back to your community.
2. Keep learning – learn and try new things, find a mentor (someone who will challenge you in positive ways), become a student of life.
3. Be active – be physically and mentally active, exercise, keep moving.
4. Take notice – be curious and adopt a beginner’s mind, observe the world around you.
5. Connect – connect with others, cultivate and nurture relationships, get involved in your community, connect with yourself, pay attention to your needs, wants, feelings and experiences.



## Relieving Stress

### **Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is about paying attention to and becoming more aware of ourselves and the world around us, without judgement. It is about being more present in our own lives — being in the moment.

Meditation, which cultivates mindfulness, can be particularly effective at reducing stress, anxiety, depression, and other negative emotions, and therefore at improving our mental health. Rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past, meditation switches our focus to what is happening at the moment.

Mindfulness meditation is not the same thing as zoning out. Rather, it teaches us how to observe our thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations without judgement. It is this non-judgmental approach that allows us to promote attitudes of openness with an overall attitude of gentleness and nurturing towards ourselves and others. Fortunately, mindfulness is not something that you have to work at to acquire. It is already within us — a deep internal resource available and patiently waiting to be recognized and used in the service of learning, growing, and healing.

### ***How to Bring More Mindfulness into Your Life***

Have you ever started eating an ice cream cone, taken a lick or two, then noticed that you had only a sticky napkin in your hand? Or been going somewhere and arrived at your destination only to realize you haven't noticed anything or anyone you might have seen along the way? Of course you have. We all have! These are common examples of mindlessness, or “going on automatic pilot.”

We all fall into habits of mind and body that result in times of inattention — that is, not being present in our own lives. The consequences of this state of inattention can sometimes be quite costly: we can miss some really important information and messages about our life, our relationships, and, indeed, our own health.

Often our reactions to the stressful events in our lives are habitual (that is, they occur essentially outside of our awareness) until, because of physical, emotional,

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or psychological dysfunction, we cannot ignore them any longer. These reactions can include tension in the body, painful emotional states, panic attacks, depression, and negative self-talk such as obsessive list-making or intense, even toxic, self-criticism.

An important antidote to this tendency to “go on automatic pilot,” is to practice mindfulness — that is, to pay more careful attention and to do it in a particular way. We all have the capacity for mindfulness within us: it is the quality of awareness that enables us to know what is in the present moment. We know what is going on outside our own skin, and we also know what is going on inside our own skin. However we experience life, through all our senses (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and even the mind itself), mindfulness enables us to know that seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, or even thinking is happening in the present moment.

We can practice mindfulness and become more present. All we have to do is to establish attention in the present moment and to allow ourselves to be with what is here, to rest in the awareness of what is here, to pay attention without trying to change anything, to allow ourselves to become more deeply and completely aware of what it is we are sensing, to be with what it is we are experiencing, and to rest in this quality of being — of being aware — in each moment as our life unfolds.

To the extent we can practice “being” and becoming more present and more aware of our life, what we do about it, will be more informed, more responsive, and less driven by the habits of reaction and inattention.

See for yourself what it might be like to pay more careful attention and to allow yourself to experience directly what is in the moment, especially including what is in your own body, heart, and mind. Some possibilities are: beginning a meeting with two minutes of silence and attention to your breathing, taking a few mindful breaths before entering someone’s office, and focusing on your breathing before starting your exercise routine. In the middle of an on-going situation or process like washing dishes, eating a meal, walking the dog or doing a job, bring attention to your breathing or to the sensations arising. Or, when you are just waiting, in between the items on your schedule for example, gently bring attention to your breathing. Or pay attention to the sounds, sensations, sights, or even your thoughts while at a red light, in a line at the bus stop or grocery store, or waiting for someone else to arrive.

In such situations as these, use the sensation of breathing as the “anchor” for awareness in the present moment. Allow yourself to feel the breath as it goes in and goes out, and the pause between in and out. Do not try to control the breath. Simply let it come and go. Bring as much attention, as completely and continuously as you can, to the direct sensation of the breath.

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After a while, if you wish, when you have established awareness on the breath sensation, you could widen the focus to include all body sensations along with the breath sensation. Again, don't try to change anything at all, but simply allow yourself to feel, to be aware of, the changing sensations in the body.

Again, after a while, if you wish, you can further widen the focus to include all that is present. This means paying attention to whatever you are hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, touching, or even thinking. Just practice being with these different experiences as they unfold, allowing yourself to feel your life in the moment.

Any time you feel lost, confused, or frustrated, gently narrow the focus and return awareness to the sensation of the breath. You may have to do this frequently. That is okay. Or, you may wish to concentrate mainly on the breath, especially if you are new to meditation. That, too, is okay. The important thing is the quality of awareness you bring to the moment. One moment of mindfulness, even one breath when we are truly present, can be quite profound. See for yourself!

You can practice mindfulness in this way throughout the day and night. Practice for a few breaths at a time. And, if you wish, you can make this a more "formal" meditation practice by setting aside some time, from a few minutes to an hour or more; make sure you are free from other activities or distractions so you can devote full attention to simply being present. Over time, you may find that the "formal" practice supports and strengthens your ability to practice "informally" throughout the day and night in different situations.

***Here are five helpful hints for practicing mindfulness:***

1. Expect your mind to wander. Practice kindness and patience with yourself when this happens and gently return awareness to the breath sensation.
2. Notice any tendency to "be hard on yourself" or to feel frustrated or a failure. See this kind of judgement as just another kind of thinking and gently return awareness to breathing.
3. Expect to feel some relaxation, especially if you practice for even a few breaths or for a few moments. This relaxed feeling is an ally. It helps us to be more present, more mindful. However, relaxation alone is not what mindfulness is about. Rather, it is about being present with awareness.
4. Expect to become more mindful with practice. Expect to notice more things, including painful things. This actually represents progress. You

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are not doing anything wrong. Quite the opposite is true: you are increasing mindfulness for all things. When you begin to notice painful things, see if you can hold yourself with compassion and kindness, and continue to bring open-hearted awareness to the experience that is unfolding. By practicing staying present, not turning away from the pain in our lives, we can learn to remain open to all the possibilities in each situation. This awareness increases our chances for healing and transformation in facing the pain we feel. And it gives us a way to be present in those situations when there is nothing we can do to “get away from the pain.” We can discover that the quality of mindfulness is not destroyed or damaged by contact with pain, that it can enable us to know pain as completely and fully as it can any other experience.

5. Be careful not to try too hard. Don't try to make anything happen or to achieve any special states or effects. Simply relax and pay as much attention as you can to just what is in the moment, whatever form that takes. Allow yourself to experience life directly as it unfolds, paying careful and open-hearted attention.

*(Note: “How to Bring More Mindfulness into Your Life” was adapted from material produced by Jeffrey Brantley, MD, Jeffrey Brantley is a consulting associate in the Duke Department of Psychiatry and the founder and director of the mindfulness-based stress reduction program at Duke University’s Center for Integrative Medicine.)*

### ***How to Do a Mindfulness Exercise***

1. When you practice meditation at home, choose a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. Find a comfortable place to sit. Keep your posture straight but relaxed, feet flat on the floor, hands in your lap, making sure you are not rigid or stiff. Do not slump or slouch. Or, if you wish, sit cross-legged on a cushion on the floor. Now, close your eyes.
2. You should feel comfortable, but not so comfortable that you fall asleep. While practicing mindfulness, it is important to stay alert.
3. Focus on your breathing.
4. Concentrate your attention completely on your breathing. Become aware of the sensations inside your air passages as the air enters the nose. Just become aware of that feeling as your breath goes in and out. Do not attempt to influence or check your breathing, just let it happen naturally. Marvel at the quality and precision of internal sensations that are normally ignored. Wonder at how deeply you can sense the air inside

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you. Just allow yourself time to be aware of the air going in and out, and nothing else. Keep your mind on your breathing. Become one with your breathing.

5. It's okay if thoughts come into your mind. The mind will not clear completely. Examine the thoughts for what they are, as if they were some strange animal that wandered into your sight. When these thoughts come into your mind, allow them to wander off on their own and wish them well on their way. Do not get involved in the thought. Just notice that it is there and return your focus to your breathing.
6. Treat each thought as a guest. When a thought or feeling arises, simply observe and acknowledge it. There is no need to interpret it or to use it. You might wonder where it came from, what caused it to surface at that particular time, and what purpose it serves. Notice it like a precious jewel, turning it this way and that. If you feel yourself drifting away on a thought, then just return and refocus on your breathing. Use your breathing as the anchor for your mindfulness.
7. Stay in the moment as long as you can. Continue to focus on your breathing. Aim to clear your mind completely for five minutes. With practice, you will be able to extend the time to 20 minutes or more.
8. Notice the repeating thoughts. As you progress, you will come to recognize that the same thoughts are appearing over and over, even in your calmest moments. Notice them and let them pass by, returning your attention to your breathing.

***Following the meditation exercise, ask yourself these questions:***

1. How was that for you?
2. Were you able to keep your attention focused on your anchor?
3. Could you experience your breathing?
4. Where did you feel it?
5. What sensations did you feel?
6. Did you experience a wandering mind? It is very persistent, isn't it?
7. Can you see how a wandering mind might get you into trouble if you are not aware of where it has wandered off to?
8. Did you notice your patterns of thought and with no judgment?
9. Were you able to bring your attention back to your anchor each time it had wandered away? It takes a lot of practice, doesn't it?

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## ***Ten Simple Ways You Can Practice Mindfulness Each Day***

1. As you awaken in the morning, bring your attention to your breathing. Instead of letting your mind spin off into the previous day or the next, take mindful breaths. Focus on your breathing and sense the effects of breathing throughout your body.
2. Instead of hurrying through your usual routine, slow down and enjoy something special about the morning — a flower that bloomed, the sound of the birds, and the wind in the trees.
3. On the way to work or school, pay attention to how you walk, drive, or ride the transit. Take some deep breaths, relaxing throughout your body.
4. When stopped at a red light, pay attention to your breathing and enjoy the landscape around you.
5. When you arrive at your destination, take a few moments to orient yourself. Breathe consciously and calmly, relax your body, then begin.
6. When sitting at your desk or keyboard, become aware of the subtle signs of the physical tension and take a break or walk around.
7. Use the repetitive events of the day (the ringing telephone, a knock at the door, walking down the hall) as cues for a mini-relaxation break.
8. Walk mindfully to your car or bus. Can you see and appreciate something new in the environment? Can you enjoy walking without rushing?
9. As you return home, consciously make the transition into your home environment. If possible, after greeting your family or housemates, give yourself a few minutes alone to ease the transition.
10. As you go to sleep, let go of today and tomorrow. Take some slow, mindful, deep breaths.

By following the main elements of mindfulness, combining awareness of your breath and focusing on the activity at hand, you will be able to experience every moment as fully as possible.

## **De-Stressing Exercises**

There are many different mindfulness based techniques that can help bring relief from stress. What follows are some other de-stressing and meditation exercises you might find helpful. We encourage you to try them and find what works best for you. There are also websites you can visit that provide both

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audio and video tapes that will walk you through stress reduction and meditation exercises. These include:

- [www.mindful.org](http://www.mindful.org)
- [www.mindfulcompassion.org](http://www.mindfulcompassion.org)
- [www.mindful-solutions.com](http://www.mindful-solutions.com)
- [www.quietmind.com](http://www.quietmind.com)

## **Relax in a Hurry**

Mini-relaxation exercises help reduce anxiety and tension immediately, and you can do them with your eyes open or closed. You can do these exercises anywhere, anytime, and no one will know that you are doing them.

***Some good times to do a mini-relaxation exercise are when you are:***

- stuck in traffic
- put on hold during a phone call
- in your doctor's waiting room
- upset by what someone says to you
- waiting for a phone call
- sitting in a dentist's chair
- feeling overwhelmed by what you need to accomplish in the near future
- standing in line
- in pain

The basic method for doing a mini-relaxation exercise is quite simple: Put your hand just below your navel. Take a deep breath, bringing the air in through your nose and out through your mouth. You should feel your stomach rising about an inch as you breathe in and falling about an inch as you breathe out. If this is difficult for you, lie on your back or on your stomach, where you will be more aware of your breathing pattern. Remember to relax your stomach muscles.

***Here are some variations:***

### **Mini-Version 1**

Count very slowly to yourself from 10 down to zero, one number for each breath. With the first breath, you say 10 to yourself, with the next breath, you say nine,

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and so on. If you start feeling light-headed or dizzy, slow down the counting. When you get to zero, see how you are feeling. If you are feeling better, great! If not, try doing it again.

### **Mini-Version 2**

As you inhale, count very slowly up to four. As you exhale, count slowly back down to one. Thus, as you inhale, you say to yourself, one, two, three, four. As you exhale, you say to yourself, four, three, two, one. Do this several times.

### **Mini-Version 3**

After each inhalation, pause for a few seconds. After you exhale, pause again for a few seconds. Do this for several breaths..

## **Relax Your Body at Work**

One of the most common questions asked about stress is “What can I do to de-stress during a busy day?” Fortunately, there is something you can do for yourself when you need to release tension and stiffness or simply refocus your mind.

The following body-centred exercises work well in an office setting; all you need to do is sit forward on a chair with your feet flat on the floor. You may increase the number of repetitions as your body grows stronger and more flexible. Take a few minutes at the end of the exercise to sit comfortably, noticing your breath and releasing tension with each exhalation. You’ll be ready to return to work feeling more comfortable and refreshed.

*Here are some good relaxation exercises for the office:*

### **Feet and Legs**

*With legs outstretched:*

- Alternate curling and stretching the toes. Repeat three times and relax.
- Alternate flexing (bending) and extending (stretching) the whole foot at the ankle. Repeat three times.
- Rotate the ankles to the right as if drawing circles with your toes. Repeat three times.
- Rotate the ankles to the left. Repeat three times.

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## Arms and Hands

*With arms extended out in front of you:*

- Move your hands up and down, bending from the wrist. Repeat three times.
- Alternate stretching your fingers, then making a fist. Repeat three times.
- Rotate your wrists three times, first to the right, then to the left. Relax. Repeat three times.

## Shoulders

*Either sitting or standing:*

- Raise your right shoulder up toward your ear. On the exhale, release your shoulder down. Repeat three times.
- Move your right shoulder forward. On the exhale, return it to the starting position. Repeat three times.
- Move your right shoulder back. On the exhale, return it to the starting position. Repeat three times.
- Repeat the sequence on the left side.
- Bring both shoulders up towards your ears, tense, then drop your shoulders down as you exhale. Repeat three times.

## Head and Neck

Hold each of the movements described below, take three easy breaths and relax tension with each exhalation, then return your head to the upright centre position before doing the next movement.

- Drop your chin to your chest. Feel the weight of your head stretching out the back of your neck. Hold.
- Look as far as you can over your right shoulder. Hold.
- Look as far as you can over your left shoulder. Hold.
- Drop your right ear to your right shoulder. Hold.
- Drop your left ear to your left shoulder. Hold.

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## Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Be careful. Take care not to hurt yourself while tensing your muscles. You should never feel intense or shooting pain while doing this exercise. Make the muscle tension deliberate but gentle. If you have problems with pulled muscles, broken bones, or any medical issue that would hinder physical activity, consult your doctor first.

Progressive muscle relaxation is an effective and widely used strategy for stress relief. It is a great technique for reducing overall body tension. It involves a two-step process during which you tense and relax different muscles in the body. With regular practice, progressive muscle relaxation helps you become aware of what tension and its opposite — complete relaxation — feel like in all parts of the body. This awareness helps you spot and counteract the first signs of the muscular tension that accompanies stress. As your body relaxes, so will your mind. You can combine deep breathing with progressive muscle relaxation for an additional level of relief from stress. As you practice tensing and relaxing all the muscle groups in your body, you can move to a shortened procedure, when you rapidly relax your whole body. As you reduce the tension you carry in your body, your whole being will feel less stress, and you will enjoy increased physical and emotional health.

### ***Here's how to get started:***

1. After finding a quiet place and several free minutes to practice progressive muscle relaxation, sit or lie down and make yourself comfortable. Loosen your clothing, take off your shoes and get comfortable. Take a few minutes to relax, breathing in and out in slow, deep breaths.
2. Begin by tensing all of the muscles in your face. Make a tight grimace, close your eyes as tightly as possible, clench your teeth, even move your ears up if you can. Hold this for a count of eight as you inhale. Now exhale as you relax completely. Let your face go completely lax, as though you were sleeping. Feel the tension seep from your facial muscles and enjoy the feeling.
3. Next, completely tense your neck and shoulders, again inhaling and counting to eight. Then exhale and relax. Continue down your body, repeating the procedure with the following muscle groups: chest, abdomen, entire right arm, right forearm and hand (making a fist), entire left arm, left forearm and hand (again making a fist), buttocks, entire right leg, lower right leg, right foot, entire left leg, lower left leg, and left foot.

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4. For a shortened version, focus on the following four main muscle groups: face; neck, shoulders, and arms; abdomen and chest; and the buttocks, legs and feet. You can use progressive muscle relaxation to quickly de-stress anytime.

## **Deep Breathing**

Deep breathing is a relaxation technique that can be self-taught. Deep breathing releases tension from the body and clears the mind, improving both physical and mental well-being. We tend to breathe shallowly or even hold our breath when we are feeling anxious. Sometimes we are not even aware that we are doing it. Shallow breathing limits your oxygen intake and adds further stress to your body. Breathing exercises can help to reduce this stress.

The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the abdomen, getting as much air as possible into your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the abdomen, rather than taking shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel. This kind of breathing is called diaphragmatic breathing.

The importance of good posture while doing deep breathing exercises (or at any time, for that matter) cannot be overstated. While sitting, we tend to slouch, which compresses the diaphragm and other organs, resulting in shallow breathing. Slouching also strains muscles in the neck and back. It is helpful to sit in a chair with good back support.

### ***Here are some deep breathing exercises:***

1. Sit comfortably with your back straight. Place one hand on your chest and the other on your abdomen. Breathe in through your nose. Try to make the hand on your abdomen rise, while keeping the hand on your chest still. Exhale through your mouth, pushing out as much air as you can while contracting your abdominal muscles. The hand on your stomach should move in as you inhale, but your other hand should move very little. Continue to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to inhale enough so that your lower abdomen rises and falls. Count slowly as you exhale. If you have a hard time breathing from your abdomen while sitting up, try lying on the floor.
2. Sit back in your seat. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath. Breathe again. Now make your hands comfortable while keeping your eyes closed. Choose to place:

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- one hand on your belly, one on your chest
  - the palms of your hands on your knees, or
  - your hands folded in your lap
3. Sit back in your seat, feet on the floor, hands comfortable. Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose. Feel your stomach expand as your lungs fill with air. Now exhale through your mouth to the count of five. Pause. Repeat while inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your mouth; slowly count to five. Again, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, counting to five. Sit and enjoy the calmness for a few minutes.
  4. Turn your attention to breathing your tensions away. Focus on your feet. Feel all the sensations there: your feet and socks inside of your shoes, the pressure on the floor, and any other sensations. Now, as you take a deep breath, breathe all those feelings and sensations up into your lungs and then exhale them away. Now, breathe in all those tensions in your legs and hips; take a big breath in and exhale those tensions away. Now do the same for your shoulders, arms, and hands — breathe those tensions away. Do the same for your neck, jaw, eyes, and forehead. Breathe away those tensions. Now, with two final deep breaths, go back and breathe away any residual tensions.
  5. Sit up straight. Do not arch your back. Exhale completely through your mouth. Place your hands on your abdomen, just above your waist. Breathe in slowly through your nose, pushing your hands out with your abdomen. This shows that you are breathing deeply. Imagine that you are filling your body with air from the bottom up. Hold your breath to a count of two to five, or whatever you can handle. It is easier to hold your breath if you continue to hold out your abdomen. Slowly and steadily breathe out through your mouth, feeling your hands move back in as you slowly contract your abdomen, until most of the air is out. Exhalation takes a little longer than inhalation. You can also do this exercise lying on your back. You can use deep breathing exercises to help you relax before you go to sleep for the night, or fall back asleep if you awaken during the night. You can also practice deep breathing exercises standing up (e.g., while standing in line at the grocery store). If you are really tense and feel as if you are holding your breath, simply concentrate on slowly breathing in and out.

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## Guided Imagery

Guided imagery is a convenient and simple relaxation technique that can help you quickly and easily manage stress and reduce tension in your body. It is virtually as easy as indulging in a vivid daydream and, with practice, it can help you ease any tension and stress that you feel. When used as a relaxation technique, guided imagery involves imagining a scene in which you feel at peace, free to let go of all tension and anxiety. Choose whatever setting is most calming to you, whether it be a tropical beach, a favourite childhood spot, a therapist's chair, or a quiet place in the woods.

### *Here's how to get started with guided imagery:*

1. Get into a comfortable position. If lying down will likely put you to sleep, try sitting cross-legged, or reclining in a comfy chair. Close your eyes and breathe deeply, focusing on breathing in feelings of peace and breathing out feelings of stress.
2. Once you get into a relaxed state, begin to envision yourself in the midst of the most relaxing environment you can imagine. This might be floating in the cool, clear waters on a tropical beach and listening to smooth music playing in the background. Or it might be sitting by a fire in a secluded snowbound cabin deep in the woods, sipping hot chocolate and reading a good novel while wrapped in a plush blanket and fuzzy slippers. Use whatever personal scene is most calming for you.
3. As you imagine your scene, try to involve all of your senses. What does it look like? What does it feel like on your skin? What special scents are involved? What is around you? Who is there or not there with you? What sounds do you hear? Do you feel any other sensations?
4. Stay here for as long as you like. Enjoy your surroundings and let yourself be far from what stresses you. When you're ready to come back to reality, count back from 10 or 20 and tell yourself that when you get to number one, you'll feel more calm and refreshed, like returning from a vacation. But you won't even have left the room!

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## Self-Massage

Getting a massage provides deep relaxation, and as the muscles in your body relax, so does your overstressed mind. There are many simple self-massage techniques you can use to relax and release stress.

*Here are some self-massage techniques:*

### **Scalp Soother**

Place your thumbs behind your ears while spreading your fingers on top of your head. Move your scalp back and forth slightly by making circles with your fingertips for 15-20 seconds.

### **Easy on the Eyes**

Close your eyes and place your ring fingers directly under your eyebrows, near the bridge of your nose. Slowly increase the pressure for 5-10 seconds, then gently release. Repeat 2-3 times.

### **Sinus Pressure Relief**

Place your fingertips at the bridge of your nose. Slowly slide your fingers down your nose and across the top of your cheekbones to the outside of your eyes. Repeat 3-4 times.

### **Shoulder Tension Relief**

Reach one arm across the front of your body to your opposite shoulder. Using a circular motion, press firmly on the muscle above your shoulder blade. Repeat on the other side.

### **Foot Massage**

Sit in a chair or on the floor. Get comfortable. You may or may not want to use lotion or oil. If you are sitting up, rest one foot on the opposite leg. Put one hand on top of the foot and the other closer to your toes, then stroke smoothly from your toes to your ankles. Glide your hands to the sole of your foot and massage the underside of your foot. Support your foot with one hand and with the other make a fist. With a circular motion, move along the sole of your foot. Support your foot with one hand and work on each toe individually. Squeeze and gently twist and stretch each toe. Stroke around the ankle with your fingertips as you stroke up toward the leg and then glide back to your toes. Finish by stroking your entire foot again. Do the same for the other foot.

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## Spiritual Practices

During times of fear, anxiety and stress, your own faith and spiritual practice can be a powerful resource. Your spiritual practices may not always prevent these times of stress, but they can help you through them.

Some people are unaware that they actually have a spiritual side to their being. Most people actually routinely make use of spiritual practices but just not in a formal way or may not identify them as being spiritual.

Some routinely listen to music, take a walk, read inspirational words, or look at the stars. Some spend time gardening or in such creative activities as art, writing, or dance. Some participate in yoga, swimming, or body-energy healing. All of these practices hold within them a potential that is more than just exercise for the body. It can also nurture the soul, restore of mind, and deepen our connection with the world around us. Many people who no longer attend formal religious services still continue to pray regularly, and this can often take the form of an inner conversation with a divine being.

When experiencing the stresses that come with living and change, it can be helpful to discover or reclaim your spiritual practices, whatever they might be; let them be part of your strength to heal and your pathway to health.

## Aboriginal Teachings

For many First Nations communities and peoples, traditional teachings based on the Medicine Wheel are important sources of strength. Some First Nations people follow the ancient philosophy of life known as “the good way or the Red Road.” This philosophy is based on the connection among all living things, to the Great Spirit, or Mother Earth, and to one other. The Seven Sacred Teachings or Seven Virtues remind us that we are all one, connected to each other. This sense of connectedness is central to individual and collective well-being. All the significant stages of life are marked by ceremonies that signify these stages. The most common are smudging and drumming ceremonies, sweat lodges, feasts, and sharing circles. These practices can have tremendous benefits in promoting health and well-being and in managing stress. Elders play a special role in Native society and can be a significant source of knowledge about traditional practices. To learn more about traditional teachings, consult the websites provided at the end of this handbook.

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## Practicing Compassion in Times of Trouble

It is hard not to get overwhelmed when we are caught up in a crisis that affects the health and well-being of ourselves and our neighbors. We feel the stress in our own bodies and see it reflected on the faces of people in our community. There are times when very little can be done to solve the problems facing us, the event(s) has already happened or all the practical things that are required are getting addressed or have been done. That doesn't mean that our attention and intentions to help are not needed or useful.

We can use our mindful attention to hold compassion for our own suffering and the suffering of others. Although we think of compassion as a concept or a feeling that may naturally be present when we experience difficult situations, we may underestimate how valuable it can be. It is a force that can counter troubling emotions like fear and anger.

Compassion is also a skill, a spiritual practice that all the wisdom traditions of the world recognize. Our very nervous systems are wired to connect with each other. We *physically as well as emotionally* respond to the kindness of those around us by feeling happier.

Some psychologists and researchers have been curious about the nature of compassion and how it might differ from other experiences. They found that compassion has three components: first, there is an awareness of suffering; second, there is the realization that all of us experience emotional and physical pain in our lives as we are part of a common humanity; and third, there is a sincere desire to help.

The ability to be compassionate is a skill that can be nurtured. We can learn to be with pain in a way that opens our hearts rather than walling off difficult experiences. When our hearts are open, we can connect with others and break the isolation that is so harmful to our well-being. Although there may not be things we can do to change what has already happened, we can offer our sincere desire for better outcomes for everyone impacted by tragic events.

In the Buddhist tradition the practice of "Loving Kindness" is a formal way of putting our compassionate intentions into words by first directing well wishes toward ourselves and then extending them to others and finally to all beings everywhere.

This practice can be secular in nature and is offered in the hope that it will be useful to those who may not have a faith tradition. Feel free to adopt a practice that strengthens compassion from your own spiritual background and community.

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## *Loving Kindness Meditation*

Beginning by settling your mind and body with several minutes of focusing on the breath (see the previous sections on mindfulness).

Then calling to mind an image of a beloved friend who consistently makes you happy, a teacher, mentor or Divine Being, picturing being surrounded by the wonderful qualities of this presence...

Sitting quietly, saying to yourself:

May I be safe  
May I be healthy in body and in mind  
May I be happy, truly happy  
And may I live my life with peace and ease

Then expanding the circle of well wishes to include people closest to you, as well as pets or animals that also might be frightened or in pain at this time....

May you be safe  
May you be healthy in body and in mind  
May you be happy, truly happy  
And may you live your life with peace and ease

Circles of connection can expand as far as you are willing; well wishes can expand toward first responders, volunteers, helpers of any kind.

Compassionate wishes can also be extended to people who, because of their own struggles and histories, have not been helpful or kind, who may have even harmed others. *(NOTE: this is a difficult practice but may be worth the extra effort it takes to see the humanity in everyone.)*

Finally, compassionate wishes expand to include all beings everywhere without exclusion or exception.

The practice ends with sitting quietly for a few moments, allowing the sensations of warmth and kindness toward all living creatures to soak into our minds and bodies.

Repeat as often as you wish. Compassionate presence deepens with practice.



## Psychological Trauma and Stress

*Trauma is when we have encountered an out of control, frightening experience that has disconnected us from all sense of resourcefulness or safety or coping or love.*

*(Tara Brach, 2011)*

Traumatic events are an unavoidable part of the human experience. The effects of trauma can be felt across the life span. A traumatic event may involve a single experience, or enduring repeated events, that can completely overwhelm the individual's ability to cope or integrate the ideas and emotions involved in that experience.

While trauma is often associated with acts of violence, physical and emotional abuse, bullying, war, crime and sudden death, recent research has revealed that emotional trauma can result from such common occurrences as an auto accident, sudden job loss, relationship loss, a humiliating or deeply disappointing circumstance, the discovery of a life-threatening illness or disabling condition, natural disasters such as floods or other similar situations.

Traumatizing events can take a serious emotional toll on those involved, even if the event did not cause physical damage. This can have a profound impact on a person's sense of identity, resulting in negative effects in mind, body, and spirit.

Regardless of its source, trauma contains three common elements:

- It was unexpected.
- The person was unprepared.
- There was nothing the person could do to stop it from happening.

Simply put, traumatic events are beyond a person's control.

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**It is not the event that determines whether something is traumatic, but the individual's experience of the event and the meaning they make of it.**

Traumatic events, especially those that occur early in life, can have long-term effects on our emotionality and how we respond to stress and react to environmental challenges or changes. Trauma can affect our ability to cope with the normal stresses and strains of daily living, to manage emotions, thinking, and our behavior. Trauma can also affect our relationships, how we relate to others, our ability to trust and ask for help. It is not unusual for people affected by traumatic events to be hyper-vigilant or always being on guard, looking for possible threats and sometimes responding to a situation as if it were a threat when no threat actually exists. This is all very normal and understandable.

The severity of the impact of trauma depends on the age and development of the person at the time of the traumatic event and the source of the trauma; i.e. whether the trauma was relational and perpetrated by someone close, a natural disaster, war, or by a person outside of the family or social network. Also the impact of a traumatic event may be experienced more intensely if the individual has a previous history of trauma. The capacity to manage and cope with traumatic stress is directly impacted by previous traumatic experiences. A current experience of trauma may trigger a trauma that has occurred in the past.

Traumatic events often cause feelings of shame due to the powerlessness they create, which can lead to secrecy further embedding the experience of shame. It then becomes something to be greatly feared and avoided. It is at this point that negative coping behaviours start and may continue until a person decides to face the difficult emotions that surround the traumatic experience.

## Hyperarousal

The body's natural and adaptive way to deal with the threat of trauma is fight, flight (flee) or freeze. Some indications of this might include behaviour such as:

### **Flight:**

- Restless legs, feet /numbness in legs
- Anxiety/shallow breathing
- Big/darting eyes
- Leg/foot movement

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- Reported or observed fidgety-ness, restlessness, feeling trapped, tense
  - Sense of running in life - going from one activity to next
  - Excessive exercise
  - Feeling frightened or scared

**Freeze:**

- Feeling stuck in some part of body
- Feeling cold/frozen, numb, pale skin
- Sense of stiffness, heaviness
- Holding breath/restricted breathing
- Sense of dread, heart pounding
- Decreased heart rate (can sometimes increase)
- Constantly looking for potential threats

**Fight:**

- Crying
- Hands in fists, desire to punch, rip
- Flexed/tight jaw, grinding teeth, snarl
- Fight in eyes, glaring, fight in voice
- Desire to stomp, kick, smash with legs, feet
- Feelings of anger/rage
- Homicidal/suicidal feelings
- Knotted stomach/nausea, burning stomach
- Metaphors like bombs, volcanoes erupting
- Feeling angry

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Those who feel supported (through family, friends, spiritual connections, etc.) after the event, and who had a chance to talk about and process the traumatic event, often go on to integrate the experience into their lives, like any other experience.

It is not unusual for current events that might seem far removed from past traumatic events to trigger difficult, distressing and painful emotions associated with the emotional experiences tied to the original traumatic event. Events, for example a flood or another natural disaster, can stir up painful emotions associated with an event from our past where we felt unsafe, threatened, hurt, and that we had little or no control. Many of the stress-reducing exercises in this handbook are also helpful for coping with traumatic stress responses, such as when we feel frozen or when we are getting ready to fight or flee.

## Being retriggered

To learn more about trauma recovery, refer to [www.trauma-informed.ca](http://www.trauma-informed.ca).



## Klinic Resources and Crisis Services

Crisis Line (24 hour)

***(204) 786-8686***  
***Toll Free 1-888-322-3019***

Manitoba Farm, Rural &  
Northern Support Services

***Toll Free 1-866-367-3276***  
***www.ruralsupport.ca***

Manitoba Suicide Line (24 hour)

***Toll Free 1-877-435-7170***  
***www.reasontolive.ca***

Calm in the Storm (website & free app)

***www.calminthestormapp.com***

For other resources, visit Klinic's website

***www.klinic.mb.ca***



## Suggested Readings

Germer, Christopher.

*The Mindful Path to Self Compassion.*

Jacobs-Slewart, Therese.

*Paths are Made by Walking:  
Practical Steps to Attaining Serenity.*

Kabat-Zinn, Jon.

*Full Catastrophe Living:  
Using the Wisdom of our Body and Mind  
to Face Stress, Pain and Illness.*

Mate, Dr. Gabor.

*When the Body Says No:  
The Cost of Hidden Stress.*

Williams, Teasdale, Segal, and Kabat-Zinn.

*The Mindful Path Through Depression.*



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This handbook is not, and is not intended to be used as a substitute for professional advice, treatment or service. Always seek the advice of your physician or a qualified mental health professional or service provider if you are experiencing significant mental health distress and prolonged stress reactions that are affecting your quality of life and health.



870 Portage Avenue  
Winnipeg, MB R3G 0P1

E-mail: [klinik@klinik.mb.ca](mailto:klinik@klinik.mb.ca)  
[www.klinik.mb.ca](http://www.klinik.mb.ca)

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