

Stress

Stress is a concept widely discussed in the healthcare field. Broadly, the term describes bodily reactions to demanding circumstances (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Change, illness, injury, or career and lifestyle changes are common causes of stress. How you respond to the emotional pressure and tension from the little everyday hassles, such as rush-hour traffic, waiting in line, and too many e-mails, can do damage.

Stress affects you physically, mentally, or emotionally. Too much stress can contribute to and agitate health problems, such as heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, depression, anxiety, and sleep disorders.

Everyone responds to stress differently. You may review the following items to check how stress might be affecting your life:

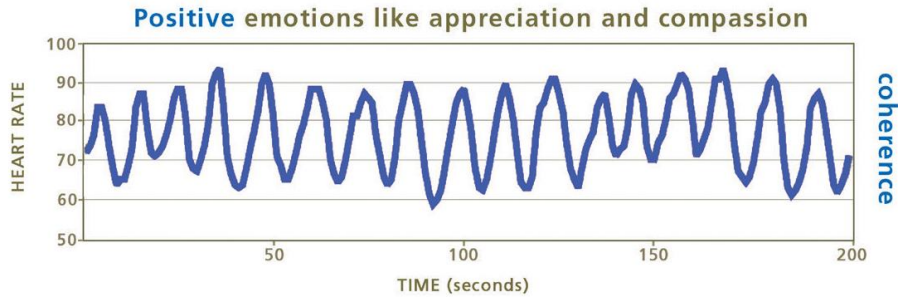
- I feel overly tired.
- I am often nervous, anxious, or depressed.
- I have sleep problems.
- I have repeated headaches or minor aches and pains.
- I worry about my job, finances, or relationships.

What can I do about stress? The first step is to understand how stress works. It's not necessarily events or situations that can harm us. It's how we respond to those events. More specifically, how we feel about them determines whether we're stressed.

Emotions or feelings can have a powerful impact on the human body. Positive emotions like appreciation, care, and love feel good and are good for us (Childre & Rozman, 2005):

- Our bodily systems synchronize and work better.
- Heart rhythms change when shifting to a positive emotion, triggering neural, hormonal, and biochemical changes that benefit the entire body. The effects are immediate and long-lasting.

When stressed, our body is out of sync (Childre & Rozman, 2005). Negative or depleting emotions that we feel when stressed, such as anger, frustration, anxiety, or worry, cause increased disorder in our heart rhythms and nervous system. In contrast, positive or renewing emotions like joy, appreciation, care, or kindness create harmony in our heart rhythms and nervous system. Other bodily systems like digestion sync up to this rhythm, which scientists call coherence.



Coherence can lead to more mental clarity, creativity, and improved problem-solving abilities, making finding solutions and better ways to handle stressful situations easier. Breath training introduces powerful tools and strategies that can increase coherence and reduce the effects of stress in daily life.

Heart Coherence

The beat-to-beat speed of your heart is constantly changing, even when you're sitting still or resting (Khazan, 2013). This is called heart rate variability (HRV): having more is good. High HRV has been linked to health improvement and performance enhancement and is considered a biomarker of total health (Porges, 2011).

Heart rate range can increase with improved fitness and when relaxed and breathing correctly. In this education, you'll learn simple and effective breathing techniques that can increase your heart rate range (maximum to minimum).

Breath training can also nurture autonomic nervous system balance to improve your heart's responsiveness to challenging situations. It's like the shifting stance of a tennis player about to receive a serve. This ready stance facilitates swift adaptation to meet your present moment needs.

Benefits

In this education, you'll learn and practice skills that can (Childre & Rozman, 2005; Fried, 1999; Khazan, 2013):

- Lower stress
- Improve performance during challenging situations
- Improve sleep
- Reduce emotional reactivity
- Reduce fatigue and exhaustion
- Increase situational awareness
- Sharpen your mental clarity and problem-solving skills
- Improve your ability to bounce back from life stressors

Heart-Brain Communication

Your heart and brain are communicating with each other constantly. In breath training, you'll intentionally direct your heart to communicate positive emotions toward someone or something important. You'll also work on generating a rhythmic change in your heart rhythm that produces a sine-wave-like form known as coherence. In a state of coherence, your brain begins to experience all sorts of benefits, like better decision-making.

So, how does breathing influence autonomic balance and improve HRV?

Your autonomic nervous system acts mostly out of awareness and regulates bodily functions like heart and respiratory rates. It's also responsible for survival responses to danger: fight, flight, freeze, or shut down. Intentional, relaxed breathing influences the autonomic nervous system and improves HRV (Childre & Rozman, 2005; Khazan, 2013).

When resting and breathing correctly, your heart rate increases when you breathe in. Inhaling activates the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. When you breathe out, your heart rate decreases. Exhaling activates the parasympathetic branch. Under resting conditions, you can use breathing to train your sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems to play well together. Each has an equal turn to play, leading to autonomic nervous system balance.

A Strategy for Building and Sustaining Resilience

The following strategy fosters regular practice and effective use of coherence-building breathing techniques (Childre & Rozman, 2005):

- ✓ **Prepare** to set the tone for the day and be more composed before stressful events.
- ✓ **Shift and Recover** to a more coherent state as soon as possible after a stress reaction to minimize energy drains.
- ✓ **Maintain** daily resilience through regular practice and remembering to refresh your composure between activities and events.

Quick Steps for Coherence-Building Breathing Techniques

Prepare Technique: Diaphragmatic Breathing

1. Position yourself
2. Breathe diaphragmatically
3. Anchor your body

Shift and Recover Technique: Recovery Breathing

1. Notice thoughts and feelings
2. Breathe and anchor your body
3. Recover positive feelings

Maintain Technique: Emotion-Focused Breathing

1. Breathe diaphragmatically
2. Activate positive feelings
3. Focus on them

References

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