



How  
to  
cope  
with  
stress





## HOW TO COPE WITH **stress**

I'm so excited that you've decided to download and read this small booklet! You're taking an amazing step toward self care, self love, and a happier and healthier life.

### **WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN REGULAR STRESS AND SOMETHING MORE?**

These days, we have more access to information and research about mental health than ever before. With an excess of information available to us, I think it's important to begin this by taking some extra time to focus on some definitions and establish the difference between acute stress, chronic stress, everyday anxiety, and anxiety disorder.

### **WHAT IS STRESS?**

Stress is the normal response our bodies have to any change—positive or negative. Early humans developed a stress response as a way to protect themselves from danger and stay on high alert. Nowadays, we're stuck with that same stress response with WAY less to be scared of!

Since you downloaded this it's likely that you've experienced stress and know what it feels like to be stressed out. You might get headaches, sweaty palms, a racing heart, general aches and pains, insomnia, changes in appetite, GI symptoms, or pain in your jaw from clenching or grinding your teeth. These symptoms are incredibly frustrating and can get in the way of your life.

Acute stress usually surrounds a specific event or upcoming change that you have less control over than you would like. Typically, once the stressful event (like a presentation, first date, or traffic jam) passes, symptoms will subside.

Chronic stress occurs when you are exposed to stress or trauma for a prolonged period of time. Chronic stress is more severe than typical stress in that it creates a more uncomfortable biological environment for the body. It can overwhelm the nervous system to the point where physical issues, such as heart disease and high blood pressure, can start to develop.

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## WHAT IS ANXIETY?

Everyday anxiety is a normal response to situations that would cause any person to be fearful, worried, or embarrassed. The difference between anxiety and anxiety disorder is the degree to which unsubstantiated or irrational worry creates meaningful stress in your life.

If your worries are causing you to avoid your loved ones, cancel plans, lose focus, or make you uncomfortable to a degree in which you're forced to take time off from school or work, it's wise to get evaluated by a professional.

If you're experiencing symptoms of anxiety or believe that you could be living with a mental health disorder, the information I'll be covering in emails to come will be great tools you can use to cope with stresses that cause pain and frustration in your life. Just please keep in mind that for certain circumstances, additional support from a professional may be needed.

## UNDERSTANDING FIGHT, FLIGHT, FREEZE

The fight-flight-freeze (FFF) response is your body's natural reaction to danger. Our ancient ancestors developed this response as a tactic to keep them safe from perceived threats, and thousands of years later, we're still living with it.

## LET'S EXPLORE THIS PHENOMENON ON A MORE CELLULAR LEVEL

After the amygdala (the part of your brain responsible for perceived fear) sends a distress signal, the sympathetic nervous system is activated and responds by sending signals to the adrenal glands, which sit right above your kidneys. The adrenal glands pump out epinephrine, also known as adrenaline, into the bloodstream, which sets off a series of physiological changes that allow our bodies to act quickly.

Specifically, our heart rate gets faster, oxygen flows to major muscle groups (often making our hands and feet cold), our pain perception drops, hearing sharpens, pupils dilate to allow more light in and help you see better, and your skin produces more sweat.

After this initial surge of adrenaline, the brain activates a second stress response system, regulated by the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and adrenal glands (aka HPA axis). These three parts of your body work together to keep you on high alert, releasing cortisol until the danger has passed, and the parasympathetic nervous system can kick in to relieve the HPA axis of its duties.



Chronic stress occurs when the brain cannot find a way to relieve the HPA axis and put the brakes on the stress response. When the HPA axis is activated for too long, too often, your body pays the price. High levels of constant adrenaline can damage blood vessels and arteries, increasing blood pressure and raising risk of heart attack or stroke. Elevated cortisol levels deplete energy stores, which can inadvertently contribute to fat tissue buildup and lead to increased appetite.

Unfortunately, the body can overreact to stressors that are not life-threatening—like traffic jams, work pressure, family difficulties, or a looming deadline—and the nervous system responds the same way it would if a lion were running toward you.

Fortunately, there are ways to counter that stress, which we'll finally be getting to next!

## **SLEEP IS A POWERFUL STRESS REDUCER**

Following a regular sleep routine calms and restores the body, improving concentration, regulating mood, and sharpening decision-making skills. In other words, you're a better problem solver, and are therefore better able to cope with stress, when you're well-rested.

Despite what some workaholic friends might try to tell you, sleep is a necessary human function that allows our brains and bodies to operate optimally. When we don't sleep well enough or long enough, our bodies don't work as well as they could—no matter how much coffee you drink the next day!

To aid in your sleep routine, follow these tips:

- Use your bed for nothing except the 3 S's: sleep, sex, and sickness
- Remove clutter and keep anything that might trigger stress (like a work desk, pile of laundry, etc.) out of sight
- Keep electronics that emit blue light (televisions and phones) out of the bedroom, as blue light sends signals to your brain to stay alert
- Keep your room at a cool temperature—the body naturally cools down as it winds down, so turning on a fan can help with that process
- Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day (as best you can), no matter the day of the week
- Make your bedroom a calming oasis by installing soft lighting, calming colours, and curtains to block out outdoor light, if necessary.





If you find yourself stressed out, lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, staying in bed could actually be counterproductive. If you can't fall asleep within 15 minutes of going to bed, try getting up and relocating to another space to read, meditate, or listen to music. Avoid your phone or TV unless you have a trusty pair of blue light glasses.

If you're consistently having trouble sleeping or getting to sleep for more than three months, you could be suffering from insomnia, a sleep disorder that affects between 10-30% of adults. Insomnia stems from stress, so if your lack of sleep is starting to interrupt your daily life, it's all the more important to partake in stress management.

## **WELL-NOURISHED BODIES ARE BETTER PREPARED TO COPE WITH STRESS**

Everybody is different, which means that an individual's dietary needs can differ depending on a variety of factors, including the amount of physical activity and genetics. Some people might find that their bodies respond better to a diet that's gluten-free, dairy-free, soy-free, or meat-free. If you're curious to see what a dietary change could do for your stress levels, let me know and we can talk about it!

Generally speaking, it's a good rule of thumb to eat plenty of vegetables, drink plenty of water, and eat a wide variety of foods. A few things that you might want to limit or avoid include caffeine, sugar, and alcohol. Caffeine stimulates the nervous system and is technically considered a psychoactive drug. Too much caffeine can have a negative effect on your adrenal system, keep you from sleeping, and generally have a negative effect on your well-being.

Like caffeine, sugar gives you a temporary "high" which often ends in a crash of mood and energy. This stimulant also pushes the buttons of your nervous system, which you're trying to keep calm!

Lastly, alcohol. While it seems like alcohol can have a calming effect on the body, it actually causes higher amounts of cortisol to be released, which alters the brain's chemistry in an attempt to reset your body to a "normal" state. On top of that, alcohol disrupts your sleep.

Now, onto the topic of gut health! Research has proven a strong link between the gut and the brain. You might know of this first-hand, like if you get a stomach ache when you feel nervous. A troubled intestine can send signals to the brain, just as a troubled brain can send signals to the gut. While it can be difficult to decipher which comes first, we know for a fact that there is an intimate connection.



That's why many people who struggle with IBS (irritable bowel syndrome) also struggle with mental health issues—because the GI tract is sensitive to emotions! I have seen this with my own daughter now while writing prelims.

## **STOP SWEEPING YOUR STRESS UNDER THE RUG!**

One of the worst things you can do to cope with your stress is to ignore it. If something bothers you at work, in your relationship, or with a friend, keeping your thoughts to yourself could form resentment, which typically pops up in an outburst somewhere down the line anyway. Many people believe that their thoughts and feelings aren't worth sharing with others or that no one in their lives would care to talk with them about their issues. Usually, this is far from the truth.

Instead of biting your tongue and shying away from expressing your feelings, try these strategies to ease your mind:

- **Journal.** Oftentimes, it can feel like our mind is racing with so many thoughts that there's no way to focus on anything else in our lives. Usually, it's just a couple of thoughts and feelings running on a loop. Writing these thoughts down helps you process what you're thinking, and can help free up room for more productive brainpower.
- **Talk to a therapist or mental health professional.** This can be a big step for many people, especially those unfamiliar with the concept of working with a psychologist or psychiatrist. In practice, therapy is a lot like talking with a trusted friend who is focusing all their attention on YOU. It's an intimate relationship, so finding a therapist that you vibe with can be tricky. Luckily, there are plenty of online resources to help you find someone who meets your needs.
- **Talk to a friend.** Everyone needs a few friends that they can vent to! Just be mindful before you unload too much on someone; you don't want to stress them out in the process! Check-in beforehand by saying something like, "I've been having a really hard time lately, and I think it would help me to talk with you about it. Are you in the mental space to take that on right now?"

Sharing feelings and emotions with someone can be a way to bond, create intimacy, and strengthen relationships, but helping someone with their feelings and emotions is also an act of labour.

If you're finding yourself stressed out by taking on the emotional labour of helping people around you, remember that it's okay to set a boundary and say something like, "I'm sorry but I'm having a hard time myself right now, and I don't think I have the mental capacity to help you in the way I'd like to." A good friend will understand!



## WHAT IS THE MEANING OF MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness practice helps to reduce the amount of activity going on in your amygdala, or the part of your brain that processes fear. It's a practice that has been studied for many years and has been proven to benefit both physical and mental health.

In basic terms, mindfulness is a state of intentional, non-judgmental focus on the present moment. To practice mindfulness is to bring awareness and attention to what you're sensing in the present moment - not worrying about last week or tomorrow. It is also recognizing and accepting that thoughts, feelings, and emotions are temporary and fleeting, so you should observe them objectively without judgment.

## ARE YOU READY TO GET STARTED?

Dip your toe into the waters of mindfulness by taking a moment to ***focus on your breath***. This is called mindful breathing. Spend as little as 20 seconds doing nothing but focusing on your breath and the air entering and leaving your body.

Next, you can try a ***body scan***. While seated or lying down, gradually focus your attention on one body part at a time, starting at the soles of the feet, up to the ankles, calves, etc. Notice any tension or physical sensations, but don't react to them or judge yourself for having them. This practice of focusing on your breath and the sensations of your body can also be applied to activities like moving (walking, yoga, etc.), and eating.

## SETTING BOUNDARIES

Personal boundaries are guidelines, rules, or limits that a person creates to identify reasonable, safe, and permissible ways for other people to act toward them. When boundaries are crossed, you get stressed!

## HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF BOUNDARIES THAT SOMEONE MIGHT HAVE:

- Not going to bed past 10h30pm
- Not working past 7 PM
- Not answering emails on the weekend
- Speaking up when someone expects you to do something you didn't agree to - Walking away from people who are verbally abusive
- Not lending anyone more than R1000 - Not greeting a stranger with a hug





Boundaries are an important part of self-care, and they're healthy, normal, and necessary.

Another way to think about boundaries is to think about where you draw your line. If your friends are all partaking in another round of drinks and encouraging you to do the same, but you don't want to, saying "No I'm good," is a way of setting your boundaries.

Nowadays, an important boundary that we each need to set is in regard to our relationship with social media. Social media platforms were created to engage with our brains in a way that keeps us coming back for more. What this means is that the content we see on social media is having a large impact on our mental health, stress levels, and perception of the world.

If you're guilty of comparing yourself to the people you see on social media and put your phone down feeling more stressed and less happy than you were when you picked it up, try setting some boundaries by blocking or removing people from your feed who make you feel "less than." That might mean fitness models, celebrities, or friends from high school who seemingly have a picture-perfect life. No one is forcing you to check in on them, and nothing will happen if you stop doing so... except you might start feeling happier.

Another important boundary that we need to set is in regard to our work-life balance. For example, will you answer work emails on the weekend? Will you stay up late to cram in work that you put off earlier in the day, or will you stick to the schedule that you signed up for? Will you take on extra projects without thinking twice, or will you speak up and say that you need some time to consider whether you can take on the additional work?

By setting boundaries and communicating them with the people around you, you're setting a precedent for how people treat you. Don't be afraid to speak up!

## **MOVEMENT IS A MAJOR TOOL FOR STRESS REDUCTION**

I'm not going to sit here and tell you that exercise is always fun and delightful and amazing. But it is necessary for helping your brain and body move through the stress cycle. If you're new to exercise, or haven't been in a regular routine for a while, those first few steps will be hard. In the beginning, it may even seem more like work than fun. However, as your body begins to build strength and develop new muscles, you'll begin to adapt to exercise, then you'll enjoy it and may even begin craving it.

When it comes to regulating stress, aerobic exercise is key. In fact, aerobic exercise is a common treatment for endurance athletes living with depression or anxiety disorders!

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## BUT HOW?

It all goes back to the chemicals that are released during fight-flight-freeze response: cortisol and adrenaline. When you're constantly stressed, and those hormones are pumping through your body on a consistent basis without relief from the parasympathetic system - whose job is to tell the body that you're out of danger. Instead, that cortisol and adrenaline just keeps going through your bloodstream.

Exercise reduces those hormones. It also stimulates the production of endorphins, the body's natural pain killer and mood elevator, responsible for the "runners high" that many people experience. On top of that, the act of pushing yourself past your perceived limits and getting stronger is in and of itself a confidence booster that can help you feel better about yourself. The increased energy you get from those endorphins will help boost your mood. Lastly, you'll sleep better after getting a good workout in.

The good news is that exercise and movement doesn't discriminate. If you're into jogging, great. If you'd prefer to dance around your bedroom, that's cool too. If you want to spend an hour in a yoga studio, that's fantastic. If you'd prefer to break up your workday with 20 jumping jacks every hour, that works too. The bottom line is this: movement that works for you makes you stress less!

I have a wonderful 3 month Stress course which goes more deeply into all these topics PLUS you will receive eating programs to go with it. Its 3 months of finding yourself, 3 month health plan and 3 months of full support.

Register online for December 2021 and yes- it's the ***perfect time to start to make January 2022 your best year ever.*** Cost for the 3 month program, R2000.

Yours in holistic health & wellness

*Christine*

