

# Stress Management and Mental Wellness

Mass Health Officers Association  
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# Survive vs. Thrive

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- ▶ Survival mode for your body is intended to get you through a short period of intense danger.
- ▶ When you are in survival mode, your body shuts down everything not needed right now to survive.
- ▶ You cannot thrive, live your happiest, best life, when you are in survival mode. In fact, your health, happiness, and quality of life will suffer. A lot.



# Stress Response

▶ Your nervous system toggles between two primary settings:

- THRIVE: Things are going along, everything is pretty normal
  - Rest and digest
- SURVIVE: OMG, a tiger is about to eat me –
  - Fight
  - Flight
  - Freeze
  - Collapse

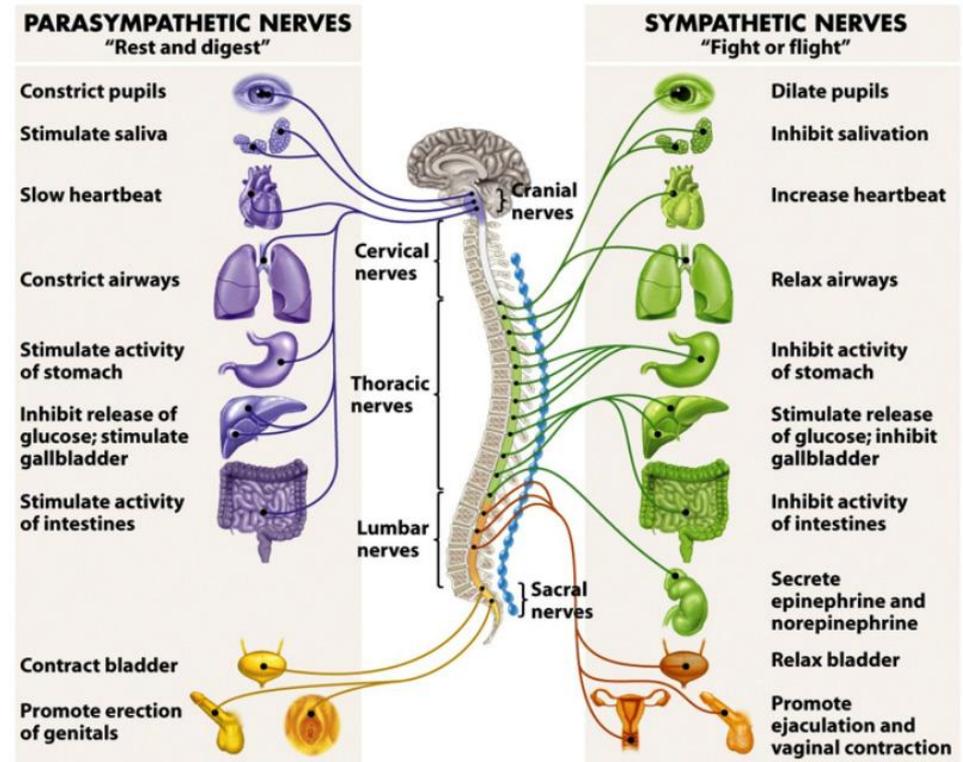


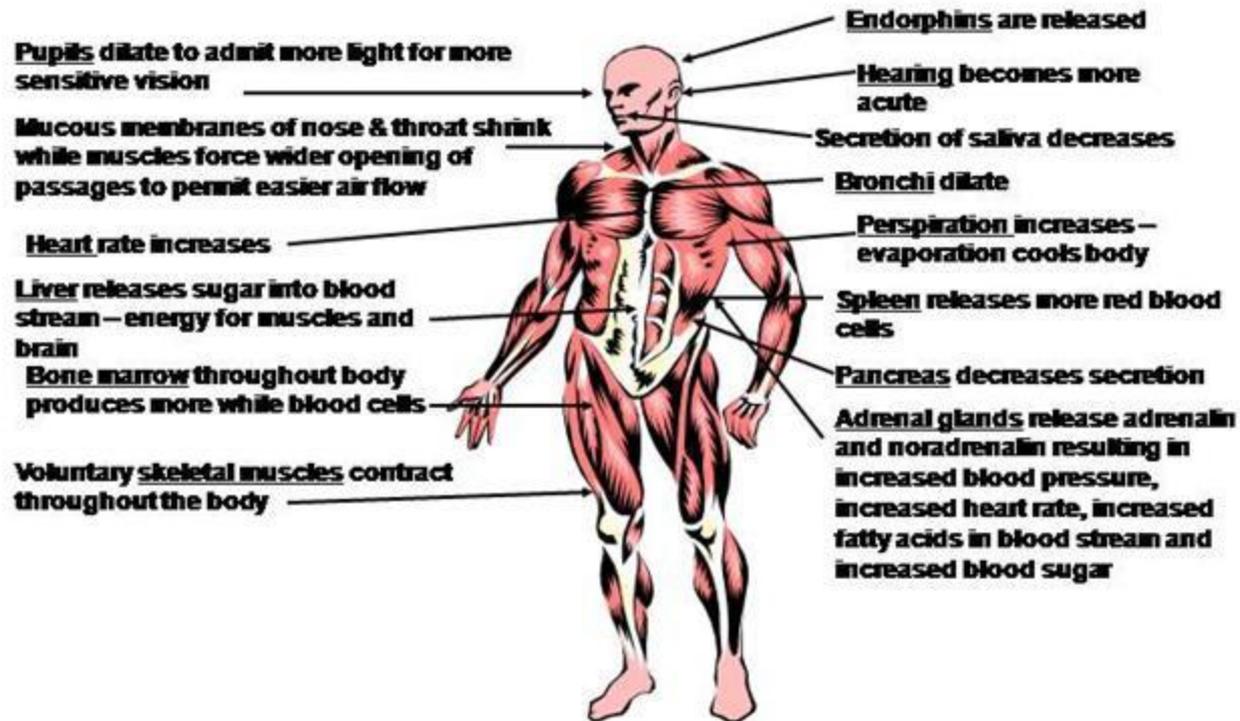
Figure 45-20 Biological Science, 2/e  
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# How Does it Affect You?

- ▶ Increased heart rate
- ▶ Rapid, shallow breathing
- ▶ Primitive parts of the brain take over
- ▶ Release of chemicals such as adrenaline
- ▶ Muscles get ready for action

## Physiological Responses to Stress





# What is Stress?

- ▶ The “fight or flight” setting in your nervous system was designed to keep you safe when under extreme danger.



- ▶ It is designed to be switched on for a short time, and then you return to normal. Unfortunately it is more common in modern life to get stuck in the stress reaction.



# Modern-Day Stress Triggers

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- ▶ Actual threat to physical survival – covid pandemic.
- ▶ Things that mimic a threat to survival when the human physiology was developing.
  - Relationship problems.
  - Not enough connection / community.
  - Financial troubles.
  - Job troubles, unemployment.



# What is Chronic Stress?

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- ▶ Chronic stress is when your brain and nervous system get frequently stuck in survival mode.
- ▶ Most of us experience this to some degree because of the nature of modern life.
- ▶ The intense pressure of serving as a health officer during the covid pandemic likely induced frequent stress.



# What is Trauma? PTSD?

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- ▶ Trauma is created by an event or events that put you into heightened/extreme survival mode.
- ▶ The strong physical survival response gets imprinted into your mind/body in connection with the memory of the event.
- ▶ For severely traumatic events, and/or repeated traumatic events, this can cause permanent changes to the brain, causing PTSD.



# What is Trauma? PTSD?

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- ▶ Reliving the memory of the event, or a trigger or similar situation, launch the strong physical survival response. This response feels horrible and can be overwhelming. This creates the extreme suffering of PTSD.
- ▶ There are methods to unhook this physical response from your memories.



# Harm to Your Body

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- ▶ Chronic stress causes:
  - Reduced immune function
  - Increased inflammation
  - Basically, it's easier to get an illness, and harder to heal from one when over-stressed
  - Effect on heart rhythm coherence
  - Cortisol, adrenaline released



# Harm to Your Body

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- ▶ Stress causes tension in the musculoskeletal system, which increases risk of injury
- ▶ Stress contributes to every major illness (heart disease, cancer, diabetes)
- ▶ Reducing stress helps prevent/improve every major illness



# Harm to Your Life

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- ▶ Chronic stress can lead to:
  - Rash decision-making.
  - Damage to relationships.
  - Substance abuse/addiction.
  - Just feeling terrible, reduced quality of life.
  - Anxiety / Depression.
  - Suicide risk.



# Stress and Job Safety

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- ▶ Why is stress a problem for being safe on-the-job?
  - Hard to concentrate – YOU DO NOT SEE HAZARDS
  - Poor judgment, bad decisions, the thinking part of the brain is switched off
  - Agitation, jumpiness
  - Slowed reactions
  - Overreactions
  - Freeze reaction
  - Insomnia, so tired at work

# Neural Pathways – “Grooves”



- ▶ Being in survival mode repeatedly will create favored neural pathways, or grooves, which will then automatically push you into this response.
  - “Neurons which fire together wire together.”





# Shifting the Grooves

- ▶ Through re-training of the nervous system / brain / body, you can create new grooves.
- ▶ You can shift yourself out of automatically following the neurological grooves that cause suffering, by creating and living in new grooves that cause happiness.
- ▶ This is “Neuroplasticity.”





# Factors that Deepen the Suffering

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- ▶ Difficult Life Situations
- ▶ Traumatic Experiences
- ▶ Congenital Conditions
- ▶ This can lead to:
  - Extreme levels of stress
  - Anxiety
  - Depression
  - PTSD
  - Substance Abuse: drugs and alcohol
  - Suicide Risk
  - Other Symptoms/Concerns



# Can This Be Fixed?

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YES!!

You can RE-TRAIN the brain / nervous system / body / mind...

...back to the natural and more beneficial responses,

...back to how you were originally designed to live and thrive.



# Can This Be Fixed?

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- ▶ You can create different grooves by giving the nervous system/mind/body a different experience
  - Re-wiring deeply grooved neural pathways over time using repetition
  
- ▶ You can learn to tap into and use the body's positive responses with the breath and other methods
  - Use the senses to be in the present moment
  - Release happiness chemicals
  - Trigger different nerve pathways
  - Connect with the always calm part of the brain – equanimity



# Can This Be Fixed?

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- ▶ Re-wiring to go to THRIVE mode more automatically (instead of SURVIVE mode)
- ▶ Shifting/managing overwhelming negative survival response feelings in the moment
- ▶ Disconnecting the physical trauma response from memories
- ▶ Releasing the trauma response from your body immediately after intense / traumatic events

# Difficult/Overwhelming Times

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- ▶ You will build up a “bank” of positive nervous system responses that you can call on. Your body will remember all of the peaceful and healing experiences you gave it.
- ▶ REMEMBER the times you were using a technique and felt really good when you need to get back there.
- ▶ This will get more and more powerful over time.



# Deeper Benefits

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- ▶ Gives an on-going method for increasing positivity and well-being.
- ▶ Can be done by yourself every day. Can be used in the moment when overwhelming feelings arise.
- ▶ Ability to help yourself gives back a feeling of control.
- ▶ Re-wires brain over time.
- ▶ Can provide permanent release to the physical response connected with trauma and negative memories. This is what is needed for those with PTSD.
- ▶ Can provide an alternative to substances (alcohol, drugs) for managing stress, overwhelming emotions, trauma response.
- ▶ Provides a glimpse of peace and hope, and can go to a deeper connection. This is important for those at risk of suicide, to see that glimmer of light at the top of the dark hole.

# What Do You Need Right Now?

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## Contemplating Suicide:

- ▶ A way to bear the emotional pain.
- ▶ Hope. A belief that you will not always feel this way.

## PTSD:

- ▶ A way to come back to the present, get out of the “triggered” state.



# The Techniques

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- ▶ Diaphragm breathing
- ▶ Heart Breathing
- ▶ Meditation
- ▶ Tapping
- ▶ Mindfulness



# Tapping (EFT)

- ▶ Brings a positive experience to the nervous system simultaneous with feeling a negative emotion, or physical sensation, or reliving a negative memory.
  - This can strip the physical response to trauma from the memory, so the memory goes back into the brain with the negative charge detached.
  - Can have a powerful calming effect during times of stress or feeling overwhelmed.

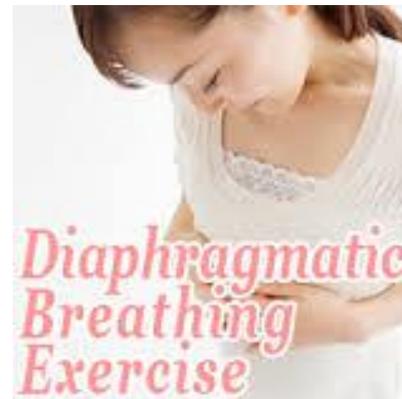




# Breathing

## ▶ USE YOUR BREATH

- Specific types of breathing can immediately pull your nervous system out of “fight or flight”
  - Engage the diaphragm
  - Long, full exhalations



- Focusing on the breath brings your attention back into your body and helps you:

**BE WHERE YOUR FEET ARE**

# Meditation



- ▶ Helps you learn to sit with discomfort (mental and physical) and not react to it, not feel afraid, or think the experience is negative.
- ▶ This helps calm your everyday reactions to stressors and problems and gives you access to the part of your mind that is always calm. “The witness”



# Mindfulness

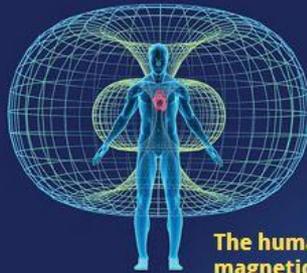
- ▶ You can learn to bring your mind into the present moment.
  - Go to the senses.





# Heart Breathing and Focus

## Did you know?



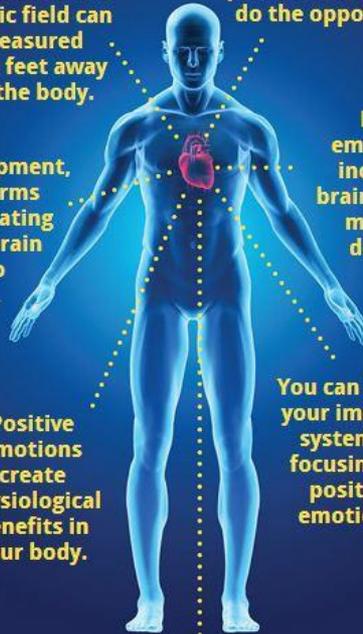
The human heart's magnetic field can be measured several feet away from the body.



Negative emotions can create nervous system chaos, but positive emotions do the opposite.



In fetal development, the heart forms and starts beating before the brain begins to develop.



Positive emotions can increase the brain's ability to make good decisions.



Positive emotions create physiological benefits in your body.

You can boost your immune system by focusing on positive emotions.





# More Stress Reduction

- ▶ The brain is wired to focus on and remember negative events much more powerfully than positive events, this was a survival strategy.
- ▶ To overcome this:
  - When negative thoughts come up, intentionally focus on something positive at the same time. This will change the memory in your brain, it goes back in as different. Tapping works this way.



- When something good happens, really think about it and feel good about it for at least 30 seconds.



# More Stress Reduction

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- ▶ **Gratitude** is the most powerful antidote to an on-going state of bad thoughts and feelings.
- ▶ Think of all the unseen people who contributed to your day today, your meals, your clothes, your drive to work, your utilities. This can help you feel less alone, and less like no one is there to help you.



# Other Tools

- ▶ Binaural beats.
- ▶ Yoga nidra.
- ▶ Other meditation techniques.
- ▶ Progressive muscle relaxation.
- ▶ There is an incredible range of these types of tools and techniques available through phone apps, youtube, etc.
- ▶ Reiki, other energy healing.
- ▶ Try different things and find what is helpful. If it's working you will feel it. Look for methods which provide deeper relief and healing for long-term.





# Where Do I Start?

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- ▶ Do 7 minutes of deep diaphragm breathing every day.
- ▶ Throughout the day as often as possible, come back to the present moment through your senses.
- ▶ When feelings of stress start to come up, use your favorite technique.
- ▶ After difficult incidents, clear the stress/trauma residue. Trauma is sticky – it gets harder to clear the longer it stays.
- ▶ Add breathing techniques.
- ▶ Add a meditation practice.



# Benefits of Reducing Chronic Stress

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- ▶ Significant Physical and Mental Health benefits
- ▶ Better sleep
- ▶ Increased well-being, you just feel better
- ▶ Improved relationships
- ▶ Improved safety at work
- ▶ Reduced Healthcare Costs
- ▶ Feeling of calm control over your life, you're running your life, your life isn't running you

# Having Suffered and Survived...

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- ▶ You really, really appreciate it when things are good.
- ▶ You can experience a greater sense of joy.
- ▶ You have more compassion and empathy for others. This helps relationships.
- ▶ Life's complications and difficulties bother you less.
- ▶ You have less fear because you know you are a survivor. You did it, you know how to do it again.
- ▶ You can help family members, colleagues, friends, and show them the way out.