

Taking Care of Yourself and Your Stress
During the Pandemic

The Pandemic Stress Management Toolkit

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Interrupting the Stress Response

This is not an article about the physiology of stress, the biological stress response in the brain and body. For a thorough review of the impact of the stress response on the functioning of the brain and the body, see Understanding Stress: The Relationship Between Mind, Body and Behavior (<https://kevinplummerphd.com/understanding-stress-the-relationship-between-mind-body-and-behavior/>). The intention of this article is to enable people to create a toolkit so they can interrupt the stress response and reset their brains and bodies.

When stress cannot be limited we must focus on interrupting it. The negative impact from stress is not based on the intensity of stress or the frequency of stress. It's based on how chronic or unrelenting it is. The amygdala (responsible for initiating the stress response) and the limbic system in general (responsible for sustaining the stress response) can learn, just like the rest of the brain, so it can quickly become more sensitized to negative stimuli, causing it to over react (react more quickly to minor negative events) and to stay stress-reactive for prolonged periods.

The brain is shaped by whatever it spends its time doing. If you spend sustained periods in stress, the brain structure responsible for the stress response will grow and develop, in its size (volume and density) as well as its speed and efficiency. What you use in the brain strengthens that part of the brain and what you don't use diminishes that part of the brain. With an over reactive stress response system we create a new baseline of normal ongoing stress, a baseline at a chronically higher level. When we interrupt the stress response, by using the toolkit below, we are preventing that new baseline from developing. We are diminishing or reversing the growth and development of the stress response system to a more normal, less sensitized, less over reactive level, and this keeps our stress baseline (what we return to during recovery periods) where it should be. Think of an analogy to the heart. With certain heart conditions, you always have a higher pulse rate and higher blood pressure. When you exercise, it goes even higher and when you rest it returns baseline, but the baseline for resting is still what would be considered too high, so you try to do something to bring that baseline down. The same is for stress. Stress will always rise and reset, but we want the reset or resting point to be lower.

Toolkit Guidelines

This toolkit is a list of strategies, practices and exercises that you can use to construct a stress management plan that works for you, that prevents your baseline of stress from being set at a higher point. A good plan conforms to the following guidelines.

1) Variety. You incorporate a variety of strategies, not just one. At the same time, you don't try to do too many things. Maybe there are 50 things that could help. That doesn't mean that the plan is deficient if it includes far less than the 50. Nobody can do 50 things. If you can do 3, 4 or 5 things on the list, that might be helpful enough. The variety is there to give you choices, so you can find what works for you.

2) Do what works for you. You select tools that suit you (and your family members). Select things that resonate with you, that connect with your strengths and interests and that you can easily understand and learn. Select tools that you have the equipment and space for. Use tools

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that work and abandon the ones that don't or are not feasible (after you have tried hard to make them work).

3) Make a plan. Put the strategies and practices into a plan that you apply every day (and throughout the day), and this includes making a schedule for using the tools and practices that you follow with great consistency. In addition, make it a priority to create the conditions in your home that are conducive to using the strategy.

4) Prioritize. Prioritize your emotional and behavioral health the way you are prioritizing your pandemic health. Stress is a leading cause of several diseases, yet it is rarely prioritized in any family's health plans. These are unusual times. Talk to your family about making this a priority and have everyone advocating for it, supporting each other, following their own plans, talking about what is working for them, and staying with the schedule the way they are expected to follow any of the other pandemic health recommendations.

5) Frequency and consistency in small measure. Frequency and consistency is more important than the total amount of time you invest in stress management. Don't look for an hour a day that you can set aside to manage stress. You won't find an hour and you won't feel successful if you use that expectation. Furthermore, you won't be motivated to do it if it takes an hour. Commit 5 minutes multiple times a day, rather than 60 minutes once a day. You can do five minutes, and every 5-minute period will do you some good. Also, focus on doing it with precision, in a way that you can repeat and in a way that allows the exercise to have an impact. For example, don't do a breathing exercise while watching the news.

This guide includes:

- Strategies and practices that reset the body
- Strategies and practices that reset the brain
- Behaviors that prevent stress build up
- Social engagement strategies that turn off the stress response
- Behaviors that reset the stress response back to baseline.

Your stress management plan will give you moments of calm, peace, and feelings of well-being. Do not set the expectation that your plan will eliminate your stress. Do not set the expectation that your plan will substantially change the quality of your life (your quality of life will improve when the pandemic is over). At best, it will interrupt your stress and allow you to reset. It will prevent your baseline stress from being set on a high level.

It's never easy to learn a new skill or to practice a new routine enough for it to become a new habit. This takes work and commitment, but remember this. You are not alone. There are millions of us working on this, figuring this out for ourselves and our families, and we can do this. We care about each other and we will get through this together.

Stress Management Toolkit

Strategies, Exercises, Behaviors and Practices

Body Resets

Stress causes changes in the body that get you ready for fight or flight (activation of the sympathetic nervous system) and then the relaxation response (triggered by the parasympathetic nervous system) returns your body to homeostasis, after the source of the stress is past. Your brain assesses the condition of your body through the vagus nerve (the largest nerve of the body, frequently called "the nerve of compassion"). The information gathered by the vagus nerve about your internal bodily state signals the passing of the danger. When you are in chronic stress, your body continues to signal the brain that danger is still present (muscles stay tight, heart beat and blood pressure are up, throat is dry, breathing is more shallow, stomach/digestive area is cramped from lack of blood flow and feeling "nervous" from stress hormones), so your brain continues the stress response, keeps producing cortisol, keeps activating memories of similar experiences that can easily blend with and distort your current experience. The brain changes the body and the body changes the brain. The body can sometimes convince the brain that there is a stressor even when one isn't present. Someone could have a breathing problem due to an allergy on a particular day, but if they are unaware that it is due to an allergy, their brain could interpret it as a stress response and this could trigger the hippocampus (central memory center of the brain) to recruit memories of stress, which could initiate a stress response in the brain.

Just as the body can trigger a stress response in the brain, we can do things to relax the body in a way that will signal to the brain that the stress episode is over, the danger has past. Most of our stress is not caused by things that are happening to us. Instead, most of our stress is caused by things that we are thinking about that might happen, or things that happened and are over, but we're still thinking about them. This is encouraging, because we can impact on that source of stress. We can use our control of the body to shut down the stress response in the brain (temporarily interrupt it). Every pandemic stress management plan should start with items from this category. Pick the exercises and practices that you find suitable, learn them well and practice them frequently.

1) Breathing. Certain breathing techniques interrupt the type of breathing related to stress, thereby interrupting the stress signals to the brain coming from the lungs. In addition, these same breathing techniques also stimulate the vagus nerve to initiate the body's calming response. Find a quiet spot in your house, away from noise, people and commotion (and your phone and the TV). Stare straight ahead with a relaxed/unfocussed gaze. Sit up straight. Breathe in through your nose while counting to three or four, hold your breath for a count of one, then let it out slowly through your slightly open mouth for a count of 6 to 8. Pause after letting out your breath, then repeat until you've completed 15 breaths. This may take 3 or 4 minutes. When you are finished, sit for a minute and note how you feel. Try to do this at least four times a day (put it into your schedule with a deliberate plan to complete the exercise at certain points in the day), or whenever you feel your stress is getting too high. Everyone knows how to breathe, even without ever thinking about it. But this type of breathing is intentional, under your conscious control. It takes practice and focus before it becomes a healthy habit. This will lower heart rate and blood pressure as well as the production of stress hormones.

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Important Points. Make it a priority to designate an area free from intrusion. Close the door to the room you are using for a psychological as well as a physical barrier to intrusion. Use noise cancelling headphones, if you have them. Don't put it off. It only takes 3 or 4 minutes. Be patient with yourself. Sometimes you will notice a profound effect and other times only a little effect. Stick with your routine of doing it. Over time, you will condition your brain and body to work together and the results will be more reliable. Remember, if you have good and healthy control over your breathing, you can feel more in control than you do when stressed.

2) Breathing with physical stimulation. In addition to the standard breathing exercise, there are a variety of physical interventions that can enhance the effect. While breathing, hold one hand over your heart while putting the other behind your head. Stimulation in these areas is comforting. In addition, with your hand behind your head, your ribcage is lifted and it's easier to get a deep, full breath, more easily enabling your diaphragm to press on your vagus nerve. With your hand on your chest, you are not only administering self-comfort, you are using your hand to feel the breath as your chest raises and lowers, giving you a better focus on your breath and a better chance for your breathing to be under good conscious control.

You may get an enhanced effect by following the breathing exercise while you are receiving input from a weighted device (pillow or blanket or shoulder wrap) that you can put on your shoulders or lap. The same could apply to using heat. Heating pads can be used on your neck and shoulders, just as there are shoulder and neck pads that can be heated in the microwave oven.

3) Breathing with bilateral tapping. While following the breathing protocol, keep one hand on each thigh and tap alternately, one hand and then the other. Tap at a slow rate, matching the breath as you let it out, a slow count to 6 or 8, then repeat. Another technique is to cross your arms and tap by each shoulder or upper arm (but this can also feel constricting while breathing in). You can also tap your feet in an alternating pattern. Pick a method that works for you. Rhythmic bilateral stimulation helps with emotional regulation, giving some order, organization and integration to emotion that might otherwise feel random, fragmented and out of our control.

4) Breathing with music. While following the breathing protocol, listen to soothing, slow paced music that you enjoy. The music can help you block out background noise and it can trigger soothing memories and feelings, enhancing the effects of the breathing exercise. Try to find the volume that allows you to hear it well enough and block out enough of the distractions but not so loud as to distract from the sound and movement of your breath.

5) Breathing with scent. While following the breathing protocol, use incense or a scent diffuser to create a scent that you find relaxing. The sense of smell is the only sense that is wired directly into the amygdala (the brain's stress alarm center) and many smells evoke positive and calming emotions.

6) Focus on the pulse. This is not a breathing exercise; this is just a conscious focus on the pulse. If you find your pulse and sit quietly while monitoring it, feeling it, counting it, noting the pace of it, your pulse will come down. Your heartbeat and blood pressure both rise in response to stress. Even when you are not stressed, a racing heart can cause you to have a stress reaction (unless you know that your racing heart is due to something within your control, such as exercise). Even if you do nothing else but feel the pulse and pay attention to it for three

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minutes, it will slow down and decrease in intensity. The focus on the pulse is a mindfulness exercise and the slowing of the pulse and the decrease in intensity is a function of the parasympathetic nervous system, the system that resets and quiets the stress response and returns your body to homeostasis.

7) Exercise. Exercise that involves vigorous movement and an increased heart rate is a stress reducer because it relaxes the resting tension of muscles and tendons (by tensing and relaxing, which is the way muscles are required to work to execute any movement—one set tenses while the opposing set relaxes). Muscle and tendon relaxation (particularly when the exercise period is over) signals calm to the brain and interrupts the stress response.

Exercise also increases the production of neurotransmitters that inhibit activity in the stress center of the brain. During exercise, the body metabolizes tryptophan (an amino acid) to sustain physical exertion, and one of the byproducts of this is Serotonin, which quiets the stress response. Exercise also creates a focused distraction. It's compelling. You have to pay attention to it, so it brings you into the present and away from your stressful thoughts. This is a mindfulness experience, a respite period for the brain.

8) Exercise and Deep Pressure Stimulation. Weight lifting or heavy work (e.g., pushups, kettlebells) creates stimulation in the deep tissue of our bodies. This creates an increased sense of body awareness. As you are more aware of how your body feels in specific areas and as you are more in conscious control of providing that bodily sensation, you develop increased feelings of security and control and you trigger better emotional regulation. This happens because deep pressure stimulates the part of the brain that links how your body feels with emotional intensity (insular cortex).

9) Exercise and routine. When you do the same exercises in the same way you create a predictable routine that has a soothing effect, even as the rest of your day may have so much other unpredictability. You have control over your circumstances while you're exercising, control over your body (instead of feeling hijacked by stress-related emotions) and it's giving you an experience of familiarity. These conditions create a brain settling neurochemistry with neurotransmitters that inhibit the activity in the stress center, reducing the production of cortisol (which is the hormone that sustains the stress response in the body).

10) Exercise with focus and control. Do your exercise with focus (don't check your phone or engage in other activities). Get your head into the experience. Count the repetitions, take timed rest periods, repeat exercises in sets, focus on your form and your movement. The more organized you are and the more focused you are on what you are doing, the more mindful and present you are. Being this focused and present shuts down the stress response.

Furthermore, exercise is controlled movement with predictable body sensations. Controlled movement gives you a sense of control over your own body, whereas stress creates body sensations that seem unpredictable and out of your control. Taking back control over your body, even for short periods of time, can reset the stress response.

11) Massage and Muscle Stimulation. Massage can create stimulation in the deep tissues of our bodies, releasing muscle tension and creating an increased sense of body awareness (just as in heavy work activities). Roll (press down) a tennis ball over your arms, legs and shoulders. Use a

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massage chair if you have one or a handheld massager or a massage pillow that fits around your neck and rests on your shoulders.

12) Progressive muscle relaxation. Progressive muscle relaxation is another way to change how your body communicates with the stress center of your brain. Tense the muscle group or area, hold for a few seconds, and then release the tension. Do this to each area a few times. The most important areas to tense and relax are the stomach and abdominal areas. This will directly stimulate the vagus nerve in a way to engage the relaxation response. Otherwise, start at the toes and feet and work up the body through the legs and abdomen, torso, arms, shoulders and neck, and end with the muscles of the jaw and face. The muscles of the face communicate emotion to the brain. Anger, frustration, sadness, worry, and stress all activate muscles in the face that stimulate emotional centers of the brain. You may not be upset at all, but if your face is held too long in a frowning position (or stressed position) you will eventually feel somewhat upset.

13) Heat and weighted blanket. Heat from a heating pad or electric blanket can bring blood flow to the skin and relax the muscles in a way that can trigger a relaxation response, a comfort response that engages the parasympathetic nervous system (the rest and relax system) to shut down stress hormones. Also, consider combining this intervention with the breathing exercises, to enhance the effect of breathing on the stress response.

Brain resets

When people get stressed or overwhelmed (or experience any emotion, for that matter) their brains recruit mood congruent memories, memories that were made and stored about experiences that made you feel the same way (so you can be well-prepared to deal with what you're facing in the present). This is an automatic and involuntary process and sometimes it isn't as helpful as it is intended to be. It isn't helpful when these memories further worsen our mood and make our current stress worse than it has to be. It isn't helpful when these memories pull us out of the present and cause us to become preoccupied with the past. It isn't helpful when we get stuck in a negative mindset and can't get out of it. When we are unable to recover from negative thinking, when the present circumstances don't enable us to let a difficult mood fade on its own, we can use brain resetting interventions. It may also be wise to schedule these brain resetting experiences into the day for short and frequent periods, rather than longer and sustained periods which are not practical. Five to ten minutes with a brain resetting activity can have a very positive effect.

1) Meditation. Meditation is the most well-known and best researched brain resetting exercise. Meditation takes training to have profound effects, but even without any formal training, people can learn to meditate and experience some benefit. Meditation usually starts with a few breaths using the techniques presented in the first section (including the posture and the unfocused gaze). It may also help to have soothing music playing. The next stage of the meditation is increasing awareness, scanning over your body and checking in on how it feels. Usually the eyes are closed at this point and for the rest of the session. Then the focus turns to your breath, noticing your breathing and where you feel it and then counting your breaths up to 10, then starting the count again. If you are distracted with thoughts, which always happens, just notice that (don't be upset about it) and return to a focus on your breathing, counting your breaths. You will experience frequent distractions, evidence of how busy your mind is even when there is no problem right at the moment. Just keep noticing that and returning to a focus on your breath.

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Figure out a way to time the meditation. For example, if you're using music, plan to stop after two or three songs, or maybe after you have counted to 10 breaths 5 times (or set a gentle timer, not an irritating sounding alarm). Meditation takes practice so don't get discouraged, but it's an attempt to give yourself a brief period of peace, so it's worth a try. Your area has to be free from distraction and commotion and private enough for you to feel comfortable closing your eyes. Using noise cancelling headphones can help as can listening to music. There are also countless meditation web guides that you can use, but in the interest of time you might just want to try to establish a simple routine as outlined in the preceding paragraph and get what you can from that.

2) Immersion tasks, focus tasks. Activities that require concentration, particularly visual activities (coloring, tracing, completing mazes, finding hidden objects or pictures, Sudoku, puzzles, tangrams, origami) bring your brain into the present. Shifting a stressed mood is not done by trying to solve problems that can't readily be solved, even though that is what our instinct tells us to do. Shifting a stressed mood when problems cannot be readily solved is often a matter of finding a way of letting stressed thoughts and feelings fade more to the background by giving the mind something else to do. While immersed in the visual problem, you are using your analytical part of your brain which enables the emotional parts of your brain to rest and reset.

Pick an activity that fits your interests and strengths, one that will cause you to be immersed but not cause you to be frustrated, and give yourself a diet of involvement with this activity a few times during the day (or as needed). Five or ten minutes is plenty of time to reset. For more information about this type of intervention see 1) <https://kevinplummerphd.com/using-classroom-routines-to-create-a-therapeutic-brain-settling-effect/> and 2) <https://kevinplummerphd.com/reset-break/>.

3) Leisure tasks. Leisure tasks are activities that give you great comfort and satisfaction. They are brain resetting activities because they soothe you, because they are associated with comfort and enjoyment, because they cause you to feel productive or skilled at a time where you might be prone to feeling helpless and less effective. Remember what you enjoy and get back to that. Maybe you like to knit or draw or cook or sew, or read or play games. Label the activity (it's a leisure break) so it has a defined purpose, and schedule it as if you need a diet of leisure in your day. For more information about this type of intervention see 1) <https://kevinplummerphd.com/leisure-breaks/> and 2) <https://kevinplummerphd.com/important-things-to-remember-about-restorative-breaks/>

4) Nature. Listening to or viewing traffic or city scenes is processed automatically by the subconscious as stress, whereas listening to or viewing nature scenes is processed automatically as calming and relaxing, lowering arousal and alarm. People heal faster when they can look out the hospital window to see natural environments. Natural environments turn down the stress response because they create a broader view of things (stress narrows our view) and they put things into a greater context and connect us with something much larger than ourselves and our current problems. Nature is very often timeless. We see trees that are more than 100 years old, stone that is thousands of years old, waves that roll in endlessly forever and stretch across to other continents—regardless of what is happening in our small piece of the world. Our expanded view of time takes us out of the urgency and the pressure of the moment. Whatever you are dealing with, the birds still wake up singing, the flowers display their beauty and it's all there any time you are ready to notice.

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Take a walk in a natural environment. It will shift your scene and shift your context. Engage your senses. Breathe deeply, listen to the sound of the wind and the birds and the running water, look at the color and the shape of the leaves on the plants reaching for the sun, feel the warmth of the sun on your face, watch the dragonfly perched on the railing, the butterfly balanced on the top of the flower. Use your walk in nature to look for things and find things. In this way, it will bring you into the present and reset your stress response.

Behaviors to prevent stress build up

There are many behaviors we can employ and habits we can adopt to limit our exposure to stress, just as there are behaviors and habits that routinely restore us. Much of this is covered in the documents pertaining to supporting the home during a stressful time, so it won't be detailed here. Please see the following link for information about establishing structure and routine, limiting exposure to stressful information, and building restorative time into the day.

<https://kevinplummerphd.com/support-your-children-at-home-during-a-stressful-time/#athome>

The following is a partial list of recommendations taken from those documents.

1) Limit the input of stressful information. Do not watch every newscast on TV or continuously check your computer for Covid 19 updates. Add up how much time you spend consuming news and set a goal for reducing that. The volume of information can be overwhelming for your brain and the content can be emotionally upsetting. Be aware that the news is always skewed to the negative, as a way of capturing viewers, but it's even more skewed to the negative now because the intent is to prepare people by forecasting the worst and to motivate people to stay safe by alarming them about the dire consequences if they don't. This is why you want to limit your exposure. It is giving you a skewed and hopeless perspective and your stress will be based on that.

2) Limit the circulation of disturbing information. The more often you repeat and spread negative information the more indelible the memory of it becomes in your own mind and the more it becomes your reality. In addition, limit how much you discuss bad news with members of your family. Try to avoid creating a culture of hopelessness. You may not be able to create a culture of hope (but you could try, many people are doing just that), but at least limit how much you contribute to the family's level of despair. That takes awareness and self-control but it can be done. It is within your immediate ability to accomplish that.

3) Create periods of respite. Set up your house to enable people to find some peace and solitude, time away from each other, time away from commotion and each other's stress. Stress is an infectious emotion. One person's stress can be easily absorbed by a nearby person. Your mood, voice tone, level of agitation, choice of language, speed and intensity of words spoken, suddenness and quickness of movement, expressions of despair and hopelessness, breathing that shows distress, exclamations and gestures that show lack of patience, etc. are all processed subconsciously (without awareness) by people nearby and it's all added to the stress that they already have.

In addition to finding ways to organize the house so that people can enjoy respite, you also want spaces that promote relaxation, places where you can meditate or do the breathing exercises undisturbed. Perhaps there is a corner of your bedroom that can be set up for this. Children can

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use their own bedrooms, or if they share a bedroom, time alone for each child can be scheduled.

4) Make a list. Make a list of things to do and accomplish each day. Let that list help you focus on the day in front of you instead of the block of days ahead where the unknown awaits. Live in that day and take one day at a time. Before the day is over, start your list for the next day and wake up with a sense of purpose and a feeling of control over some things. When the day is over, review your list and note your accomplishments.

5) Set up schedules. Set up schedules and create routines for organizing the day. Routine creates a mind and body settling effect. Routine quiets the stress response through the production of serotonin and the primary neurochemical inhibitor GABA. People taking medications that increase brain serotonin don't feel better because serotonin is a mood enhancer. They feel better, less anxious, because their anxiety response is quieted, their sympathetic nervous system is less reactive. A less reactive nervous system provides the feeling of calm and well-being. Routine creates this serotonin effect.

Create a schedule for each day and post it. This could include what you expect to accomplish, what needs to get done, who is going to do it and when it will happen, estimated time for meals and other activities, etc. Also, make a schedule for your stress management program. What will you try to do and when will it happen. Monitor it, cross it off as you complete it. For more information structure through schedules and routines see 1) https://kevinplummerphd.com/wp-content/uploads/Support_Your_Children_While_They_Are_Home_during_COVID19.pdf 2) <https://kevinplummerphd.com/using-classroom-routines-to-create-a-therapeutic-brain-settling-effect/>

Social engagement

The safety precautions recommended to limit the spread of the Coronavirus drastically limit our social contact. Social contact is one of our primary means of managing stress. We gather in groups of friends and listen to each other, support each other, understand each other and share in our common experiences. These experiences were eliminated just as the stress level around the world dramatically increased. This is one of the primary reasons that individuals are suffering from an unregulated stress response.

1) Attunement. Strive for online social interactions that enable you to achieve a genuine connection. This can't be achieved with all your interactions, but spend as much time as possible connecting with people who usually help you feel good about yourself, people who appreciate you and genuinely care about you, people who encourage you and lift you up.

Social interactions that promote empathy, bonding, genuine caring and attunement create an oxytocin effect. Oxytocin is detected by receptors throughout the brain, but particularly in the limbic system (including the amygdala which is responsible for initiating the stress response). Oxytocin triggers the release of serotonin and stimulates the vagus nerve (the "nerve of compassion") to engage the parasympathetic nervous system to calm the body. Oxytocin reduces activity along the stress axis (HPA Axis—Hypothalamus, Pituitary gland, Adrenal gland). The amygdala (the stress initiator) is richly populated with oxytocin receptors so higher levels of oxytocin can quiet the activity of the amygdala.

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Attunement is best achieved in person-to-person contact and particularly through direct eye contact, as well as processing the emotion communicated by the face and conveyed in voice tone. We all feel more comfortable and secure in the presence of a compassionate person who can achieve emotional attunement during social contact with us. We get this effect from certain friends, certain coworkers, and our team members. We have to attune from a distance and with less access to the stimuli that enables attunement, so connect through "real time" visual and auditory means if possible (not just written—texts and emails and social media). Focus on the faces and voice tones of the people you are communicating with, their posture and gestures.

2) Reach out. Make a list of people you care about, friends, relatives, coworkers, neighbors. Check in with them, reach out and ask how they're doing (periodic texts and emails). Just asking about them and checking in with them is an act of caring that will help you feel connected and quiet your stress response. Schedule online meetings with your work friends, book groups, etc.

3.) Limit caustic engagement. Limit caustic engagement, negative exchanges online, and limit the social support you seek through catastrophizing and bonding around how awful things are in the world and in your life. People might want to share their complaints with you because they want to feel understood and supported. It's certainly okay to seek support from others, but resist the temptation to bond socially by looking for and amplifying your own misery and sharing that with others.

4) Share the uplifting. Share uplifting videos, stories, and anecdotes. Witnessing acts of kindness, compassion, generosity and selflessness can promote feelings of elevation, the inspiration emotion you feel when witnessing humanity's higher or better nature, that warm feeling in your chest, the lump in your throat and the swelling of your heart. This emotion is caused by oxytocin and its stimulation of serotonin and the vagus nerve. Just witnessing an event can cause that effect, substantially lowering your stress response.

5) Pet therapy. Research has shown a reciprocal oxytocin effect achieved in pet owners and with their dogs as well as their cats (although oxytocin levels in cats are lower). The look in your dog's eyes and the feel of the cat purring on your lap can create this effect, lowering your stress response. Research has not extended to other pets, but the effect can probably be expected from an encounter with any furry and cuddly pet with which you have formed an emotional bond.

6) Nurturing activities. When you engage in nurturing and caring activities you can lower your stress response. Nurturing and caring activities include cooking for others, taking care of a garden, helping a child learn how to do something (e.g., how to bake cookies, how to make a paper airplane, how to throw a Frisbee), reading to a child, making something that shows you care, etc. When people engage in acts of nurturance, caring for the welfare of others, they experience elevated levels of oxytocin and lowered levels of stress hormones.

Other behaviors to reset the buildup of stress.

1) Show your appreciation. Show your appreciation, give a shout out, a compliment, write a note. The act of appreciating certainly has an effect on the recipient, but the most profound effect is with the person who does the appreciating. If you can increase your attention to what you appreciate, you will achieve higher levels of calm and lower levels of threat and alarm in your stress response system. The more you are able to see that is worth appreciating the more you will be training your brain to look for it and the less your subconscious process will be

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focused on assessing threat and building stress. Your expression of appreciation is more for you than it is for who you are appreciating.

2) Clean and organize. Clean and organize your house, your basement, your garage, your car. When you engage in restoring order you develop a greater sense of control. Stress makes us feel out of control and causes us to lose sight of just how much control we have. Fix, repair, build something, improve something, make something better than it was. You will feel capable and competent and in more control. In addition, it will be a distraction and possibly a form of physical exertion, taking advantage of those other methods of stress reduction. Furthermore, when your place is neat and in order you feel less stressed. Clutter and disorder or chaotic environments are processed subconsciously as a stressor.

3) Sleep. Focus on good sleep hygiene and habits that promote good sleep. Sleep produces an abundance of serotonin, shuts down the production of cortisol, and it resets the stress response. Even a short nap can reset the stress response. Create a routine that settles you before going to bed. Control the level of commotion you expose yourself to, do not eat right before going to bed (the digestive activity will interfere with sleep), do not spend time in bright light just before bedtime (the kind of light coming from the computer), ensure that the room is quiet, dark and cool enough. Promote healthy sleeping the way you would promote healthy eating. They both feed the body and the brain.

4) Stay hydrated. Drink plenty of water and fluids that do not contain an abundance of sugar. Dehydration not only creates decreased alertness and energy; it can also increase irritability and induce a stress response. Mild to moderate dehydration on a chronic basis can lead to inflammation because of the body's inability to easily rid itself of toxins. Cortisol is an anti-inflammatory as well as a stress hormone. Higher levels of inflammation trigger cortisol, the primary stress hormone, as the body's anti-inflammatory response.

5) Sensory intervention. Certain smells can trigger positive emotion and states of calm and well-being. This will take some experimentation, but it is worth exploring, because it's a relatively easy intervention to set up once you have the right smell and the right way to dispense it (e.g., incense, diffuser, etc.). Listen to soothing music, schedule it into your day, use headphones so you can get the effect without interference. Music is often associated with mood and it's certainly associated with memory of positive experiences. Use music that relaxes or soothes and music that is uplifting or reminds you of enjoyable experiences.