



# **Practical Ways to Manage Stress**

**How to Thrive, Not Just Survive**

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# Territorial Acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather, traditionally known as asiniskaw sipisis (Stoney Creek), is Treaty 6 territory and a traditional meeting ground for many Indigenous peoples. The land on which the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta is located provided a travelling route and home to the Maskwacis Nêhiyawak, Niitsitapi, Nakoda, and Tsuut'ina Nations, the Métis, and other Indigenous peoples. Their spiritual and practical relationships to the land create a rich heritage for our learning and our life as a community.

# What Are We Talking About Today?

- Stress - What is it?
- Neuroscience - Brain/Nervous System, Stress & Relaxation Responses
- PRACTICAL ways to support Nervous System well being
  - Sleep
  - Nutrition
  - Movement
  - Breath
  - Refocus Attention (Present vs Past/Future)
  - Social Connection

# What is Stress?

*“Stress is the way life talks to us.  
It tells us something is out of balance.”*

- Kris Miller MA, LMT, CHP

## FACT or MYTH: Stress is bad.

### STRESS:

- Allows physical development
- Shows where growth is needed
- In case we need to mobilize a lot of energy (emergency)
- Prepares for injury
- Learning



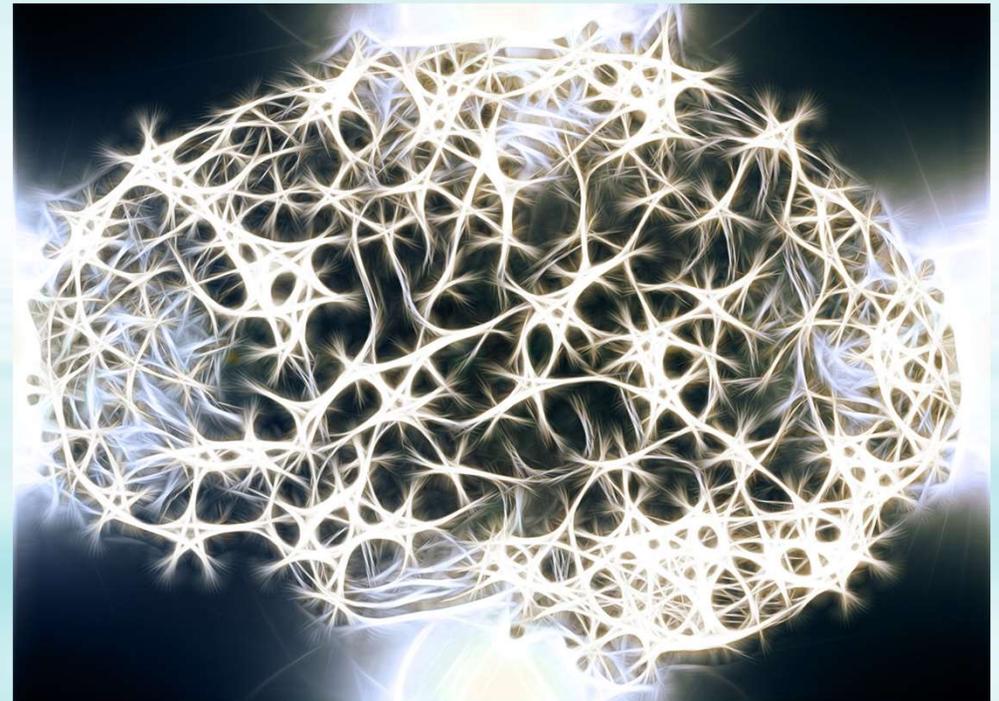
# The Brain & Neuroplasticity

Neuroplasticity - ability to form new neural connections

Amygdala - alarm!

Hippocampus - calm down

Prefrontal cortex - reason, decision making, long term planning



# Branches of the Nervous System

## Parasympathetic (PNS)

Relaxation Response

Rest & Digest



- Growth
- Fires when engaged socially, when we are in the moment, when we are digesting and resting.
- Respond (response-able)

## Sympathetic (SNS)

Stress Response

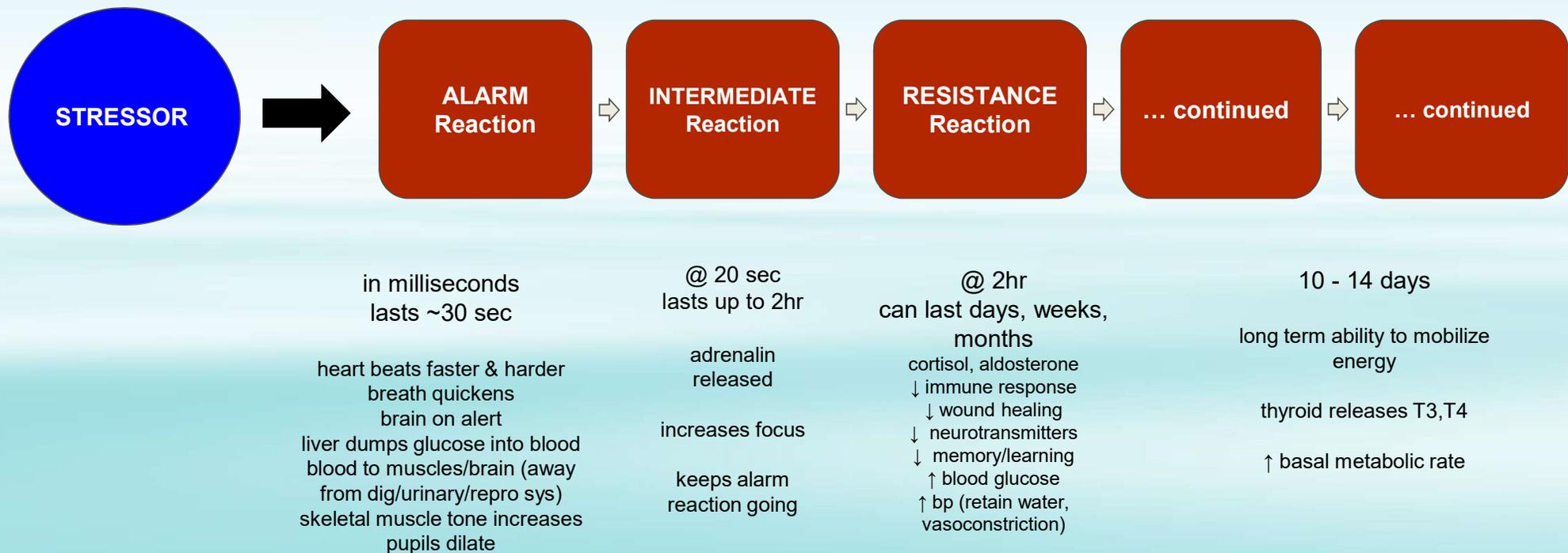
Fight, Flight, Freeze



- Protection (survival)
- Responds to perceived threats to our safety (tiger, paper tiger, tiger on tv, tiger in the mind).
- React

# The Stress Response

Informs us about something





# Signs of Chronic Stress

When under threat, prefrontal cortex less available, making us more impulsive (hand model of brain).

- Suddenly, an exam is the same as a car barreling towards me
- When our nervous system fires too high (emergency) too often, it gets used to firing too high too often.

Signs and symptoms are the body's language.

Humans are very adaptable. We can practice relaxation to make it more available.

## COGNITIVE

Anxiety  
Racing thoughts  
Feeling constantly worried  
Memory problems  
Trouble concentrating  
Poor judgement  
Seeing only the negative

## EMOTIONAL

Moodiness  
Feeling overwhelmed  
Irritability/Short tempered  
Agitated/Angry  
General unhappiness  
Sense of loneliness

## PHYSICAL

Digestive/intestinal issues  
Nausea  
Headaches, dizziness  
Rapid breathing  
Increased heart rate  
Chest pain  
Aches and pains  
Muscle tension  
Frequent colds/illness

## BEHAVIOURAL

Sleeping too much/too little  
Eating more/less than usual  
Nervous habits  
Withdrawing from others  
Procrastination or ignoring responsibilities  
Using alcohol, tobacco, drugs to cope

# The Relaxation Response

## In Rest & Digest

- Energy Conserved
- Digestion (blood flow to internal organs, digestive enzymes secreted)
- Heart beats slower and with less force
- Skeletal muscle tone relaxes
- Body can repair itself

**Thriving:** The window of tolerance is the space in which both the stress AND relaxation responses flow.



- We are designed to be in Rest & Digest most of time
- Visit Fight & Flight
- \* Then return back to Rest & Digest \*

# Sleep

Being well rested increases capacity to navigate stressful situations.

7-9 hours/night (everyone is unique)

Nudge body/mind to remember how to sleep

- Sleep Environment
- Bedtime routine ie. wind down
  - Decrease stimuli to transition to relaxation
  - Practices to engage PNS



# Why Healthy Nutrition?

A well-nourished body will give you the resources to help manage stress.

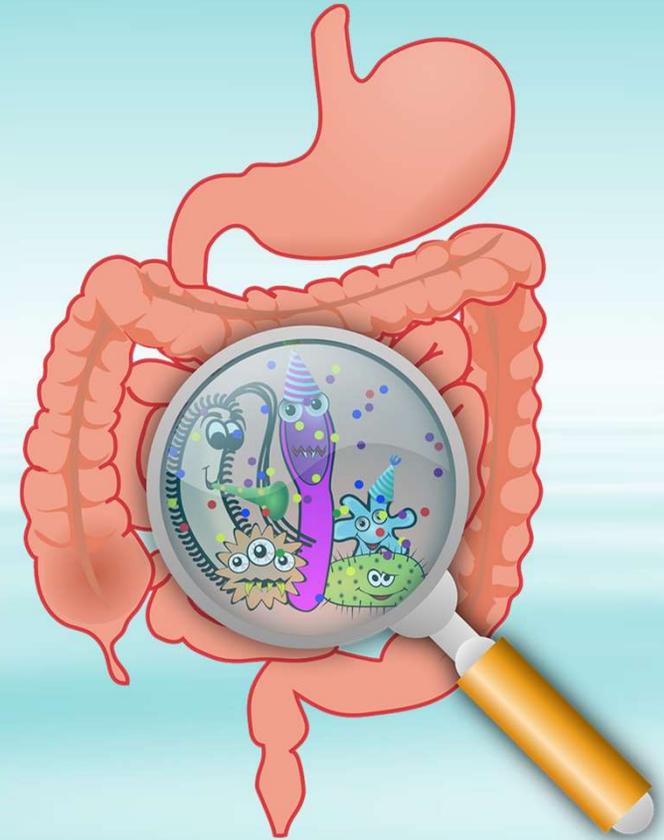
## Brain-Gut Connection

Enteric Nervous System: High concentration of nerves in intestines send messages to brain (gut feeling, feel like punched in the gut, listen to your gut)

Microbiome: Bacteria in intestines break down food into absorbable nutrients

Also produce neurotransmitters like serotonin that affect mood

What we eat affects both of these processes.



# What is Healthy Eating?

## 1. WHAT you eat

more of	less of
rainbow of veggies & fruits, whole grains (fiber feeds microbiome) water - brain & body need	caffeine & sugar - stimulate SNS fried foods - sluggishness

## 1. HOW you eat

- Be mindful of your eating habits
  - notice when hungry and when full
  - minimize distractions, take time to eat
  - rest & digest vs fight & flight
- Cook more often/Plan what you eat
- Enjoy your food
- Eat meals with others

Have plenty of  
vegetables and fruits

Eat protein foods

Make water  
your drink  
of choice



Choose  
whole grain  
foods

<https://food-guide.canada.ca/en/>



# Movement

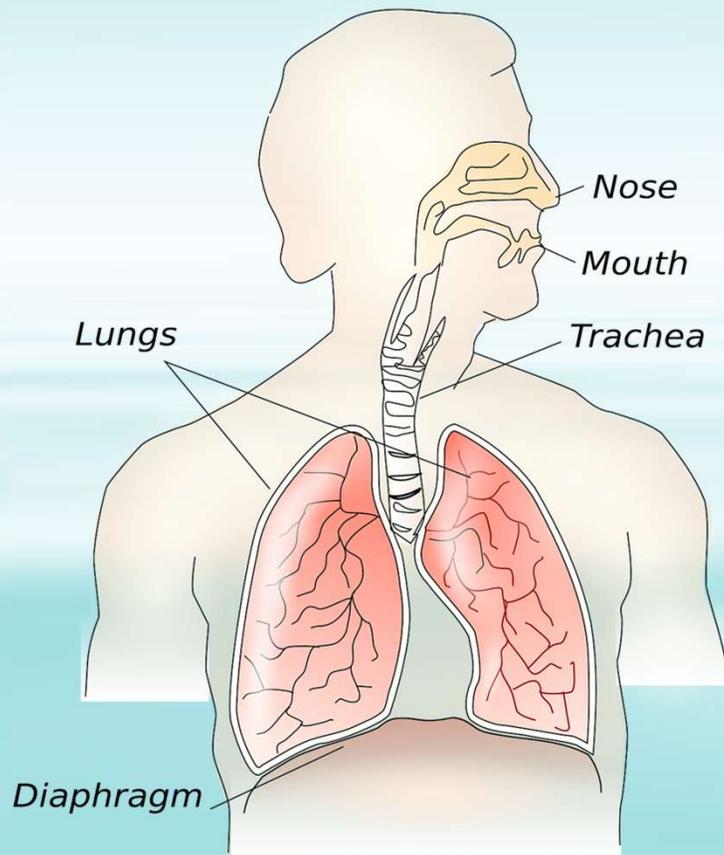
How we feel affects how we hold our body  
How hold body affects how we feel  
Held patterns → tension



## Movement

- increases circulation (brings oxygen and nutrients to brain)
- improves function of all body systems (immune, digestive, respiratory...)
- releases tension
- helps the body/mind to quiet

# Breathing & the Nervous System



Autonomic Nervous System controls respiration so we don't have to think about it AND we can control consciously for specific effects

## Communication System:

- check in with how I'm doing
- send message to brain that it's ok to relax

## Breathe for Relaxation (stimulate PNS)

- Belly/Diaphragmatic Breath
- Lengthen Exhales (double length of inhale)

# Refocusing Our Attention

PAUSE - interrupt pattern

Once we become aware of where our attention is going, we can move it.

- 90 second life of thought

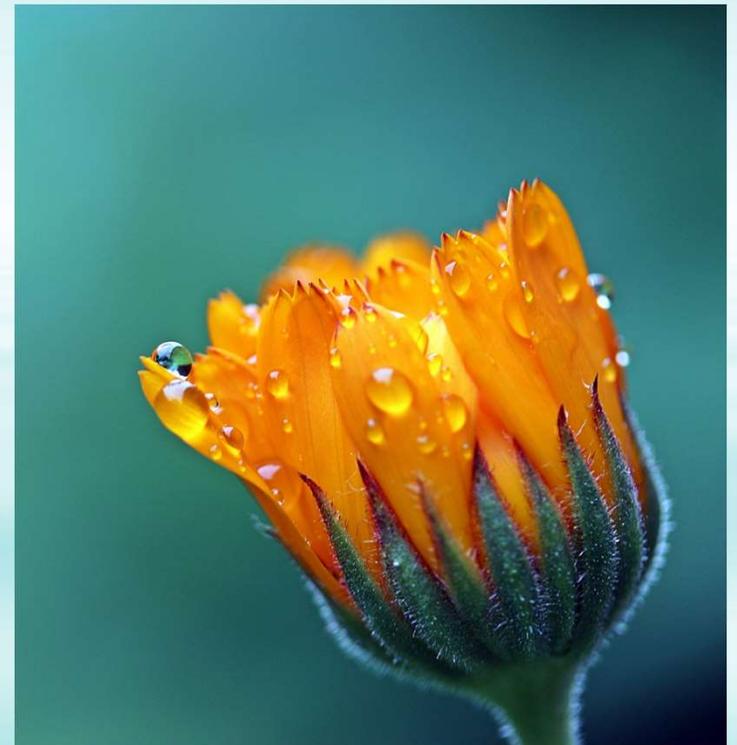
NOTICING is the practice

REFOCUS - present moment

- surroundings (I spy...)
- physical sensations
- breath

Mindfulness

Equanimity: non-judgemental awareness



# Social Connections

Tend & Befriend: activates relaxation response

Humans are social beings

Face to face interactions

Friendships benefit physical health



## Seek Joy & Fulfillment

- laugh, play
- practice gratitude, curiosity
- what gives meaning to your life

# Awareness ➡ Choice

What we practice gets easier and stronger

- Habits that promote stress response
- Habits that promote relaxation response

## HABITS - Daily Practices

### Small, consistent changes

Some possible examples:

- replace afternoon chocolate bar with fruit and handful of nuts
- make bed first thing in the morning
- roll shoulders down and back at start of every class
- go for a 10 min walk after last class of the day
- practice deep breathing for 3 min before bed



# Questions



A top-down view of a wooden desk with a white smartphone, a blank sheet of paper, and a white pen. The smartphone is on the left, the paper is in the center, and the pen is on the right. The text is centered on the paper.

Write down one comment or  
question about this workshop.