



Employee Assistance Program

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Understand and Manage Your Stress Response

As we continue to receive new and evolving information on COVID-19 most people are making adjustments to work and daily routines. These changes in routines coupled with the unpredictability that can come with public health threats can create added stress on employees, the workplace, and our families.

So how do we help combat fear and stress associated with a global pandemic??

Step 1: Understand It

It has been advantageous for humans to develop a physical response to things we determine to be a threat to life and safety for ourselves and those we care about. This is our fear-response; it lives in an “older” part of our brain, and can serve us well to keep us safe and responsive when a threat is present.

This part of our brain also releases a number of stress hormones and chemicals that function to protect us when danger is near. This may include perceived or real danger, or thinking about potential future dangers. However, when it is activated, the “newer” part of our brain that helps us to communicate calmly and clearly, think critically, and manage our impulsivity becomes a little weaker; it is like a muscle that, evolutionarily speaking, we have not exercised enough. During times of stress, this can feel like:

- A sudden rush of energy
- Wanting to escape or run away
- Feeling you have something important to say, but not knowing how to say it
- Wanting to be “right”
- Feeling extra irritable or short with ourselves and others

Step 2: Acknowledge It

When we are fearful, angry, embarrassed, or ashamed, we tend to put on the back burner or forget altogether the “newer brain” skills we have learned, like remembering to speak calmly in a staff meeting or practice self-care. We just forget.

It is easy to want to blame ourselves and others when we are stressed. Brené Brown offers insight in this short and entertaining [clip on blame](#).

We ultimately are the ones responsible for managing our own stress response, the tone we set when working with others, and keeping our own emotions in check when our stress response comes face-to-face with someone else’s stress response. If you have stress and don’t like how it feels, let’s do something about it.



Step 3: Manage It

Let's practice some "brain hacks"

- **Set an alarm** on your phone to take three or more deep breaths several times throughout your day. Your brain will thank you for the pause and added oxygen.
- Engage in some form of **exercise, yoga, stretching, or "deskercise"** to help **combat** hormones and chemicals released naturally by our bodies during times of stress. This one is also easy for our brain to forget. Maybe you should set an alarm for that too.
- Consider **singing or laughing** spontaneously to yourself. Yes you just read that. No this is not reserved only for when you are happy! Singing and laughing are scientifically proven brain hacks that combat stress and rumination. (See Twelve Reasons for Singing in the [December Connections newsletter](#))
- Consider sitting in a **Cooks' Hook-up** position. It looks and feel strange, but it helps when you are feeling disorganized, distracted, having difficulty sleeping, or to take the "charge" out of a difficult situation you perhaps cannot stop thinking about. This [video](#) says to stop after 6 breaths, but if it works for you, go ahead and keep sitting in that position until you feel better.
- When you practice the **deep breathing** everyone is telling you to do, take it to the next step with this science-based tip from Heartmath. Your heart will start sending little messages to your brain to become calmer and more resilient. Check out a short guided [video](#) on this technique.
 - Step 1: Focus your attention in the area of the heart. Imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your heart or chest area, breathing a little slower and deeper than usual.
(Suggestion: Inhale 5 seconds, exhale 5 seconds, or whatever rhythm is comfortable.)
 - Step 2: Make a sincere attempt to experience a regenerative feeling such as appreciation or care for someone or something in your life.
(Suggestion: Try to re-experience the feeling you have for someone you love, a pet, a special place, an accomplishment, etc. or focus on a feeling of calm or ease.)

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