

SMART about the Relaxation Response and Stress

S- STRESS hormones allow us to be physically powerful, mentally alert and ready to act during a crisis. Chronic stress results from frequent episodes of stress and inadequate periods of recovery. Chronic stress is a risk factor for heart disease because of harmful effects on the heart, blood vessels and other organs. Under chronic stress people have difficulty adopting and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Stress hormones raises blood sugar and can harm the heart by constricting blood vessels, increasing heart rate, blood pressure, stickiness of blood cells and irregular heart rhythms. Psychosocial risk factors such as social isolation, chronic mood states of anxiety, depression, anger as well as poor sleep are all related to chronic stress. Situations that can provoke stress may range from major life changes (such as being hospitalized with a cardiac event) to daily hassles such as traffic jams. Studies provide evidence that learning how to manage stress benefits patients enrolled in Cardiac Rehabilitation programs.

M - Learning how to Modify the way we **react** to difficult situations whether it is life changing events or “hassles” can lower cardiac risk, enhance resiliency and improve quality of life.

A - Acknowledge situations that you frequently experience stress by completing the Hassles Inventory (attached). Attention to hassles can be a good place to start today to bring more ease into your life and reduce stress. Increase **Awareness** of how you feel, physically and emotionally, your thought patterns and what you do when experiencing stress by completing the Stress Warning Signs worksheet (attached).

R - Our bodies are wired for both a Relaxation Response and Stress Reaction.

The **Stress Reaction**, sometimes described as “fight, flight, or freeze” is designed to protect us from harm when faced with threats of a physical or psychological nature. Here is a brief description of what occurs and health problems that may result when chronically activated.

- **Physical:** Muscles tighten for protection, but chronic stress can result in headaches, muscle tension, indigestion, fatigue, difficulty sleeping, etc. Blood shifts away from digesting food to muscles needed for action such as your arm or legs resulting in indigestion if chronically activated.

- **Emotional:** Emotions are designed to get our attention and alert us to take action. Chronic stress diminishes uplifting emotions and can increase frequency and intensity of anger, irritability, frustration, worry, nervousness, lack of interest, loneliness, feeling numb, etc
- **Cognitive/Thinking:** Stress hormones, such as cortisol, help us focus on what is wrong. A narrow point of view may be helpful in emergencies where an immediate course of action is needed but is not helpful for creative problem solving. Chronic stress can result in negative, distrustful/cynical attitudes, chronic disappointment and believing life lacks meaning.
- **Behavioral:** While attempting to cope with stress and feel better, we might do things which result in more stress. For examples skipping meals may lead to overeating later or craving high fat, hi sodium and sugary foods. Speaking critically, yelling, swearing, criticizing others may increase relationship stress. Under stress people tend to drive fast and aggressively, rush around, isolate oneself, drink more alcohol, smoke, miss taking meds, sleep erratically etc

Our **Relaxation Response** or “rest and digest” period helps us recover from stressful events and promotes healing. It shifts us from “survival mode” to “time to thrive”. During the Relaxation Response muscles relax, heart rate decreases, breathing slows and blood pressure decreases. Blood flow to our internal organs such as the heart and stomach increases. Positive emotions and states of peace, calm, contentment can be experienced. Clarity of mind, insight into our thinking and creative problem solving are enhanced. The **Relaxation Response** can be elicited by letting your body relax by assuming a comfortable position and letting your mind relax by focusing on your breathing for 10-20 minutes. Engaging in diaphragmatic breathing or “belly breathing” promotes deep relaxation. You are “belly breathing” when you allow the belly to rise with inhalation and fall with exhalation. During your participation the MGH Cardiac Rehabilitation Program, you will have several opportunities to learn and practice this technique and be guided in a variety of mind-body practices that will elicit the Relaxation Response.

T - Choose to THRIVE by learning to live with EASE every day.

- **E - Eating Healthy**
- **A - Staying Active**
- **S - Sleeping Well**
- **E - Every day engage in mind-body relaxation**

In the next Mind-Body class learn more about how these everyday activities that reduce cardiac risk greatly promote resiliency, recovery and well-being.

Hassles Inventory

What gets your goat?

<input type="checkbox"/> Misplacing or losing things	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficult customers/clients
<input type="checkbox"/> Troublesome neighbors	<input type="checkbox"/> Preparing meals
<input type="checkbox"/> Social obligations	<input type="checkbox"/> Auto maintenance
<input type="checkbox"/> Concerns about money	<input type="checkbox"/> Too many things to do
<input type="checkbox"/> Someone owes you money	<input type="checkbox"/> The weather
<input type="checkbox"/> Favorite team loses	<input type="checkbox"/> Hassles from boss/supervisor
<input type="checkbox"/> Wasting time	<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulties with friends
<input type="checkbox"/> Not enough time to get things done	<input type="checkbox"/> Not enough time for family
<input type="checkbox"/> Practical mistakes (e.g., forgetting where the car is parked)	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation problems
<input type="checkbox"/> Having to wait in lines	<input type="checkbox"/> Not enough time for recreation
<input type="checkbox"/> Unexpected company	<input type="checkbox"/> Yard work/outside maintenance
<input type="checkbox"/> Too many interruptions	<input type="checkbox"/> Concerns about current events
<input type="checkbox"/> Care for pets	<input type="checkbox"/> Noise
<input type="checkbox"/> Housekeeping responsibilities	<input type="checkbox"/> Traffic
<input type="checkbox"/> People not following rule (e.g., someone in the 10-item line with more than that)	<input type="checkbox"/> Commuting
	<input type="checkbox"/> Poor service when getting food
	<input type="checkbox"/> Cell phone/technology issues

What else? You may also include other stressors of a more serious nature that you are coping with at this time. In the next class we will address healing and recovery from a cardiac event.

Stress Warning Signs

Everyone reacts, perceives, and experiences stress differently. Recognizing your personal stress warning signs can allow you to take effective actions to manage stress. Review the following list and check all that apply to you.

Physical:

<input type="checkbox"/> Headaches	<input type="checkbox"/> Pounding heart
<input type="checkbox"/> Tightness in neck/shoulders/back	<input type="checkbox"/> Sweaty Palms
<input type="checkbox"/> Dry mouth/throat	<input type="checkbox"/> Fatigue
<input type="checkbox"/> Indigestion	<input type="checkbox"/> Restlessness
<input type="checkbox"/> Difficulty Sleeping	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:
<input type="checkbox"/> Dizziness	

Emotional:

<input type="checkbox"/> Irritability	<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of interest
<input type="checkbox"/> Impatience	<input type="checkbox"/> Crying
<input type="checkbox"/> Anger	<input type="checkbox"/> Boredom
<input type="checkbox"/> Nervousness, Anxiety	<input type="checkbox"/> Powerlessness
<input type="checkbox"/> Worried	<input type="checkbox"/> Loneliness
<input type="checkbox"/> Unhappiness	<input type="checkbox"/> Emptiness
<input type="checkbox"/> Numbness	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:
<input type="checkbox"/> Getting easily upset	

Cognitive/Thinking:

<input type="checkbox"/> Loss of humor	<input type="checkbox"/> Indecisiveness
<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of concentration	<input type="checkbox"/> Mind racing
<input type="checkbox"/> Forgetfulness	<input type="checkbox"/> Mind going blank
<input type="checkbox"/> Reduced creativity	<input type="checkbox"/> Preoccupation with the past
<input type="checkbox"/> Lack of attention to details	<input type="checkbox"/> Resistance to new things or change
<input type="checkbox"/> Meaninglessness	<input type="checkbox"/> Cynical
<input type="checkbox"/> Untrusting	<input type="checkbox"/> Other:

Behavioral (actions we do):

<input type="checkbox"/> Compulsive Eating	<input type="checkbox"/> Drinking more alcohol
<input type="checkbox"/> Smoking	<input type="checkbox"/> Yelling and/or swearing
<input type="checkbox"/> Criticizing	<input type="checkbox"/> Blaming
<input type="checkbox"/> Rushing	<input type="checkbox"/> Aggressive or very fast driving
<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawal from others	<input type="checkbox"/> Talking rapidly
<input type="checkbox"/> Bossiness	<input type="checkbox"/> Other: