

ADDRESS YOUR STRESS

RECOGNIZING THE SIGNS OF STRESS

Physical Symptoms	Mental Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Behavioural Symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased heart rate • Increased blood pressure • Rapid, shallow breathing • Sweaty palms or general sweatiness • Urge to urinate • Dry mouth • Muscles tense • Butterflies or knot in tummy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty concentrating • Difficulty making decisions • Racing mind • Blank mind or brain fog 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety, nervous, agitation, jittery, on-edge, irritable, frustrated, impatient, short-tempered. • May also feel depressed, flat, sad or blue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fidgeting, nail-biting, compulsive eating, smoking and other substance use, blaming, cursing, etc.

What are some of the signs in YOUR body that your stress response is being activated?

* Please note that this handout is for informational purposes only and is not intended to diagnose or treat any conditions nor is it intended to replace any guidance or support from a professional healthcare provider



UNDERSTANDING THE STRESS RESPONSE

The **Sympathetic Nervous System** is our emergency response system in the body and the brain. It elicits our 'fight or flight' response to inner and outer dangers. Physically, it diverts our blood flow away from the digestive and reproductive organs and skin (Hence, issues with digestion, bowels, intimacy, and skin during times of heightened stress) and instead, directs the blood flow towards the heart, brain, and muscles to prepare us for action- Think: Running away from a tiger in the wild! Our heart rate and blood pressure increase, our muscles become tense, our digestion and reproduction are slowed down or stopped completely and our breathing becomes rapid and shallow (Occurring primarily in the chest). Psychologically, we feel nervous and anxious. Physically, we feel tense. Nature intended this response to enable humans to escape physical threats and danger, i.e. the aforementioned tiger. The problem, however, is that for many of us, these physical dangers have been replaced by psychological perils and *perceived* dangers. As a result, humans are seldom completely relaxed, even in the absence of any real physical threat. The majority of us are living in a chronic state of fight or flight!

In contrast, the **Parasympathetic Nervous System** elicits our relaxation response. It is in the driver's seat when we are in a state of rest, digest, relaxation, and healing. The blood is pumped to our skin, and our digestive and reproductive organs. Our muscles are relaxed and we generally feel calm, relaxed, and peaceful. Our heart rate and blood pressure also lower and our energy is conserved. GOOD NEWS: We can activate our parasympathetic nervous system at will!

General activities that may help to promote relaxation and activate the parasympathetic nervous system:

- ⚙ Slow, deep, diaphragmatic breathing
- ⚙ Yoga, Meditation, Tai-Chi, Qi-Gong
- ⚙ Massage
- ⚙ Spending time in nature
- ⚙ Muscle relaxation & mindfulness of the body



PRACTICAL EXERCISES TO CALM THE NERVOUS SYSTEM DURING STRESSFUL TIMES

1. **TIPP SKILLS** in moments of distress for when stress is rated 7 or higher out of 10: *Temperature*- Ice pack on cold water on face or back of neck to quickly slow heart rate; *Intense Aerobic Exercise*- short aerobic exercise to re-regulate the body & reduce emotional intensity when we are highly aroused & prepared for action; *Paced Breathing* (See below); *Progressive Muscle Relaxation* (see below).

2. **Paced or Guided Breathing:** Find a comfortable seated position. Lengthen through your spine and crown of the head and allow your shoulders to drop away from your ears. Inhale through the nostrils, for a count of 4; exhale through the nostrils, for a count of 6. Proceed for 1-5 minutes or longer if desired. The goal is slowed breathing with longer exhales.

Suggested Apps: Pranayama; CALM; Stop, Breathe, Think

3. **Progressive Muscle Relaxation:** Find a comfortable seated or lying down position. Begin to breathe, slowly and deeply. With eyes opened or closed, begin to work from your feet, all the way up to your face, tensing the muscles for 3-5 seconds and releasing. (Suggested body parts to tense/release: toes/feet, calves, thighs, abdominals, chest, shoulders, back, face, hands/fingers). *Note: There are many guided scripts you can find on YouTube if you search "Progressive Muscle Relaxation."

4. **Moment of Mindfulness:** Wherever you are, pause, and engage all 5 senses. What do you see? What do you hear? What do you taste? What do you smell? What do you feel? This helps to ground us in the present moment, when being hijacked by past, harrowing memories or worries about the future.



RESOURCES

- COAST 24-hour Crisis Line: 905-972-8338
- Distress Centre Halton: (Oakville): 905-849-4541 (Burlington) 905-681-1488
- Salvation Army Suicide Prevention Services: 905-522-5244
- Good Shepherd Centres: 905-529-4343
- Good Shepherd Centres Women's Services: 905-523-6277
- Halton Women's Place 24 Hour Crisis Line: 905-332-7892 (Burlington & Oakville)
- Interval House of Hamilton: 905-387-8881
- Trans Lifeline: 1-877-330-6366
- Native Women's Centre: 1-888-308-6559
- Salvation Army Halton Lighthouse Shelter: 905-339-2918
- Sexual Assault Centre Hamilton and Area: 905-525-4162
- SAVIS Sexual Assault & Violence Intervention Services Halton: 905-875-1555
- Femaidé Crisis Line for Francophone Women: 1-888-336-2433

PERSONAL SUPPORTS/PEOPLE I CAN CONTACT:

My Coping/Relaxation Strategies:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____
- 4) _____

