

Proven Tools for Living Well

gilchrist

Cherish every moment of life.





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OUR MISSION

To provide counseling, support and care to anyone with a serious illness, so they may live life to the fullest.

OUR VISION

We are deeply committed to giving people the clear information and loving support they need to make informed choices about their care.

PROVEN TOOLS FOR LIVING WELL

INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

At Gilchrist, we are committed to providing whole-person care using all the tools in our health and wellness toolbox. We can help you manage pain, anxiety, fatigue, trouble sleeping, stress and more so that you can maximize your well-being and enhance your quality of life.

This booklet will help you understand the impact of stress on your health and, more importantly, teach you evidence-supported tools to support your health and well-being. You will learn simple but effective techniques to stimulate the relaxation response, manage your symptoms and enhance your physical and emotional health.

Part One: The Stress Response

Stress is an inevitable part of daily life. Whether you're stuck in traffic, worrying about a work deadline or facing an illness, your body reacts to stress in the same way. The stressor (the thing that triggers the stress) is what the body views as a threat. The way we respond to stress has a lot to do with the hardwiring we have inherited from our ancient ancestors, who had to react quickly to physical danger to stay alive. The Stress Response has also been called the fight, flight or freeze response. In prehistoric times, this was a protective response that allowed our ancestors to make a split-second decision about whether they needed to run or stay and fight the threat. Some people shut down (freeze) in response to stress. This response is still useful when we are in grave danger. It allows us to see an oncoming car and get out of the way quickly without even thinking.

Fortunately, we no longer face daily threats from the natural world like our ancestors did. Although we are usually not in life or death situations, the way we perceive stress causes our body to react as if we are being threatened with bodily harm. We feel stressed whenever we are faced with a situation that feels threatening and which we don't feel able to manage. It doesn't matter that the threat is not life-threatening. Our body's reaction to a dreaded meeting with the boss feels the same as our ancestor's reaction to a potential attack from a wild animal.

Our body cannot tell the difference between a real threat (wild animal about to pounce on you) or a perceived one (a meeting with the boss may mean you are in trouble).

Activation of the Stress Response by the stressor causes a chain reaction of events in your body triggered by the release of hormones. This chain reaction causes your heart rate to increase, your muscles to tense, sweating, pale or flushed skin, dilated pupils and rapid breathing. In the short term, stress can be helpful to get you through a situation. After the body feels

FIGHT or flight?



headache



neck and
shoulder pain



trembling



rapid heartbeat
& breathing



tightness in
stomach



changes in
bowels

like the threat is gone, it can take quite a while for your system to return to normal. However, stress becomes concerning when it becomes a routine, constant way to deal with the daily hurdles we face in life. Constant activation of your Stress Response can cause ongoing health problems that affect your daily well-being.

Stress hormones affect all our major organ systems, including:

Nervous System (Physical): The control center in your brain (the hypothalamus) sends the message to your body to release the hormones needed for fight or flight. If your body doesn't return to normal after a stressful event, the hormones continue to circulate through your body, keeping it in a constant state of high alert.

Nervous System (Mental/Emotional): Ongoing stress can affect the way our brain works and how we feel. Memory issues, trouble concentrating, racing thoughts, and constant worry can be related to chronic stress. Emotionally, stress can cause depression (or generally feeling unhappy or overwhelmed), anxiety, irritability and anger.

Respiratory and Cardiovascular System: Under stress, you breathe faster and your heart pumps blood faster. Chronic stress makes your heart race and raises your blood pressure. Higher blood pressure increases your risk of having a stroke or heart attack.

Digestive System: Constant stress can cause increased heart rate and breathing. It can also upset your digestive system and increase your chances of having acid reflux, diarrhea, constipation, nausea, vomiting or stomach ache.

Muscular System: Your muscles tense up when they are stressed to prepare for fight or flight. Muscles that stay tensed can cause headaches, neck, back and shoulder pain.

Immune System: Over time, constant release of stress hormones tends to weaken your immune system, which protects your body from infection. If you have chronic stress, you are more likely to get the flu or a cold. Stress also makes it harder for your body to recover after an illness or injury.

Reproductive System: Stress exhausts both the body and the mind. It is common to lose your interest in sex when you're feeling constantly stressed. Long-term stress can negatively affect both men and women. It can increase the probability of erectile dysfunction and worsen the physical symptoms of menopause.

Behavioral Symptoms of Stress: You may experience changes in eating (more or less), sleeping too much or too little, isolating or withdrawing from others, putting off or neglecting your responsibilities, and using alcohol, drugs or cigarettes to wind down. You may also develop nervous habits like pacing or nail-biting.

As you can see, chronic stress causes physical and mental/emotional responses that impair our ability to feel well and cope. The good news is that there are many things we can do to counteract this response. There are different methods you can use that can trigger the **Relaxation Response**. These methods will allow your body to put down its guard for the times you don't need it and help you learn how to respond to common daily life stressors in a less extreme and more helpful way.

Part Two: The Relaxation Response

Now that we know what the Stress Response does, we can talk about what the antidote is: The Relaxation Response. It brings the body back to pre-stress levels, increases blood flow, improves sleep, helps muscles relax, decreases anxiety, improves breathing and just generally makes us feel better. If the Stress Response is the “on” switch for our bodies, the Relaxation Response is the “off” switch. As noted previously, there are many negative health consequences for being in “on” mode all the time. Learning how to occasionally go into “off” mode helps us rest and recharge, which replenishes our resources to cope with illness and the other challenges life throws our way.

During stress, our bodies put out hormones that help us prepare for a threat. One of these stress hormones is called cortisol, and it works like the gas pedal of a car to keep us revved up and ready to go. It is partly the overexposure to cortisol that causes all the physical problems and illnesses related to stress. To reduce the levels of cortisol in our bodies, we can learn to put the brakes on by activating the **Relaxation Response**.

There are a variety of things you can do to trigger the Relaxation Response, which will be addressed in the next section, Wellness Tools.

The *Relaxation* Response



improves
sleep



reduces anxiety
and depression



reduces overall
pain



slows heartbeat &
calms breathing



stimulates
digestion



improves
energy levels

Part Three: Wellness Tools

There are many ways to help manage your stress and uncomfortable physical symptoms, including relaxation exercises, positive psychology techniques, creative arts, therapeutic sound, journaling, biofield therapies, acupuncture, massage and meditative movement. Complementary and integrative techniques such as these have been shown to help reduce stress, anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress, as well as enhance sleep and quality of life.

Shallow breathing can increase feelings of anxiety. Breathing exercises can be used to decrease the stress response and stimulate the relaxation response. Techniques such as slow breathing, breathing into the belly rather than the chest and making the exhale longer than the inhale can all help stimulate the Relaxation Response. These techniques can decrease heart rate, breathing rate, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed. It can even decrease the level of stress hormones.

Breathing Techniques

Diaphragmatic Breathing:

As you breathe in, try to breathe down into your belly, rather than into your chest. You may notice that your lower abdomen bulges out a little—this is good! Don't worry if it's difficult in the beginning. It gets easier with practice. One tip is to lie on your back, place a piece of paper on your lower abdomen and try to lift the paper as you breathe in.

Longer Exhale:

Count to 5 as you breathe in, pause briefly and then count to 7 as you breathe out. If this doesn't feel quite right, you can breathe in for 6 and breathe out for 9. Or in for 4 and out for 8. Try different numbers to find your natural deep and slow breath rate. The important part is that the exhale should be longer than the inhale.



Counting Breaths:

As you breathe in, think to yourself “one”
As you breathe out, think to yourself “calm”
As you breathe in, think to yourself “two”
As you breathe out, think to yourself “calm”
As you breathe in, think to yourself “three”
As you breathe out, think to yourself “calm”
Continue this pattern until you reach “ten”

When to count breaths:

- First thing in the morning
- Before a meal
- When you’re feeling agitated or frustrated
- Every hour on the hour
- When you’re waiting for something
- As you lie in bed at night

Aromatherapy

Aromatherapy is a holistic treatment that harnesses the power of essential oils and the sense of smell to promote healing. Aromatherapy is normally used through inhalation. Oils can be evaporated into the air using a diffuser container, spray or oil droplets, or breathed in using a personal inhaler. Used in conjunction with the breathing exercises described above, aromatherapy can provide an effective antidote to stress.

Meditation

Meditation is a simple mind-body practice that anyone can learn. It does not require belief in any religious or spiritual system and can be done while sitting, laying down or even while walking. Meditation involves simply paying attention, without judgment, to something in your present experience—sometimes called a “focus.” This focus can be almost anything, including a sound, a word or phrase, a picture, a behavior (such as breathing or walking), a candle flame or simply the experience of being in the present moment.

When your mind wanders (which it will!), simply bring your attention, without judgment, back to your focus. You will need to bring your attention back repeatedly and that’s OK. Some people think that they “can’t meditate” because their attention frequently wanders. This simply isn’t true. In fact, noticing that your mind has wandered, and redirecting your attention where you want it to go, may lead to much of the benefit of meditation. Just as repeatedly lifting weights creates stronger muscles, repeatedly noticing your thoughts and choosing not to get carried away by them increases mindfulness, which leads to improvements in anxiety and depression.

Meditation with the breath as a focus:

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. If you feel comfortable doing so, let your eyes close. Bring your attention to your breath as you breathe in. Follow your breath all the way in and imagine your lungs expanding with this breath. Pause for a moment, then follow your breath as you exhale. Pause for a moment after your exhale, then bring your attention to your breath as you breathe in. When your attention wanders, simply bring your attention, without annoyance, back to your breath. Continue actively paying attention to your breathing for 5-10 minutes. Some people spend 20-30 minutes each day in meditation but not everybody chooses to do that. Any amount of time spent in meditation, even if it's two minutes a day, can be helpful.

If sitting still is too difficult for you, walking meditation may be more helpful.

Walking Meditation:

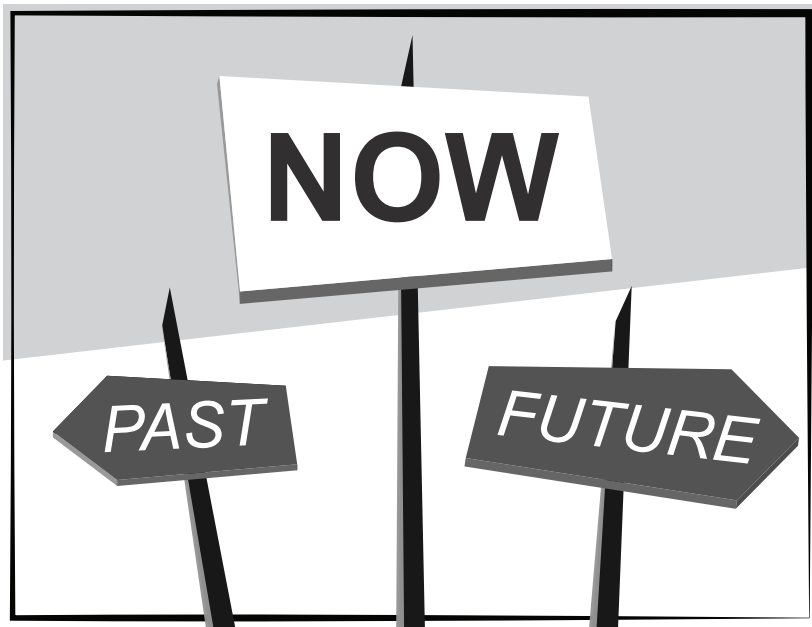
Be sure that you are in a safe place to walk. Bring your attention to your steps—first the right foot, then the left, then the right, then the left. Notice how your steps feel and how they sound. When your attention wanders, simply bring your attention back to your steps. Keep your attention on your steps for as long as you want to continue your walking meditation.

Mindfulness

The idea of mindfulness is that it can be helpful to bring your attention, without judgment, to the present moment (the actual moment that you are living) rather than letting your mind spend too much time in the past or the future. You can accomplish this with meditation, but mindfulness can also be achieved by simply redirecting your attention as you go through your regular day. Anxious thinking generally involves allowing your thoughts to wander to the future, imagining the many terrible things that might happen. Depressive thinking often involves

ruminating about negative things that have happened to you in the past. Therefore, intentionally focusing your attention on the present moment can help improve anxious or depressive thinking. It can be helpful to use an anchor such as taking a deep breath, rubbing the hands together or pressing the thumb and forefinger firmly together to help bring your attention back to the present moment.

Mindfulness Exercise:



This image can be used as a quick reminder to notice if your mind is in the past, present or future. You might choose to place this graphic around your home as a reminder to notice if your thoughts are in the past, present or future, and to redirect your attention back to the present as needed.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a successful and standardized mindfulness program that is widely available in the U.S. and has been shown to improve sleep, stress, anxiety, depression, pain and more. The training is 8 weeks long and includes weekly sessions, a day-long retreat and home practice. There is usually a cost associated with MBSR programs. An internet search of MBSR and your city will likely provide options for training.

Guided Imagery

Guided imagery uses imagination and visualization to bring about positive health and wellness outcomes. It can be delivered live or from a recording. Potential images are unlimited and may include progressive relaxation of the muscles, being in a relaxing location, wrapping painful body parts in bubble wrap or white light, or stimulating an activated immune system to attack cancer cells. Those who have PTSD may benefit from imagery involving an ‘inner sanctuary’ while those facing difficult medical decisions might be offered imagery of a wise ‘inner advisor.’ Once a script is listened to repeatedly, you can recall the images in your mind whenever you choose to. There are many guided imagery recordings available on the internet for low, or sometimes no, cost.

Creative Arts

Creative arts such as therapeutic music, harmonic sound, visual arts, and writing for wellness can be used to help manage stress, anxiety, depression and even pain. These techniques can enhance mindfulness, stimulate the relaxation response, support self-awareness and help you to find meaning in difficult experiences.

Therapeutic Music

Most of us are aware of the ability of music to enhance mood. We are familiar with the use of lullabies to calm, soothe and comfort babies and young children. It should not be so surprising then that music can continue to be therapeutic throughout our lives. Listening to music can raise our spirits and distract from difficult emotions, especially during times of illness and stress.

Visual Arts

Therapeutic art can be used to enhance coping skills and relaxation. Simple techniques such as coloring and mandalas are enjoyable, inexpensive and portable and can be used to focus attention and facilitate relaxation. Therapeutic visual art interventions can also be used to identify coping strategies and personal strengths. One helpful exercise involves drawing a “hole” that represents a difficulty with which you are coping and then drawing how you would get from one side of this hole to another. Perhaps your drawing would show other people helping you, perhaps animals would help or perhaps you would use your creative skills to build a bridge. Reviewing your picture can help you identify your strengths and coping skills.

Writing for Wellness

Journaling may help manage stress-related physical symptoms, manage negative thoughts and assist with problem-solving. Journaling techniques are varied and can be targeted to your needs. Examples of journaling techniques include:

“Dumping Journal”

In this form of journaling, the writer’s goal is simply to release worrisome thoughts that seem “stuck.” The technique involves writing quickly, without stopping or censoring, and without attention to punctuation or spelling. It can also be helpful for those who are having trouble sleeping. The journal may be kept at the side of the bed and used when distressing thoughts are

getting in the way of sleeping. The process of releasing those worries or thoughts in writing allows your brain to “let go” so you can sleep.

Writing to a Symptom

In this form of journaling, you choose a symptom that is bothering you, such as headaches, sleeplessness, back pain or anxiety. You will write first as yourself and then as your symptom, continuing this written dialogue back and forth for approximately 10 minutes. You will then review what you have written, looking for any insights that have emerged. For example, in response to the question, “Anxiety, why won’t you leave me alone?” the response might be “I’m just trying to keep you safe.”

Responding to Prompts

Writing prompts can be helpful for self-discovery and identification of personal resources. Examples of writing prompts include:

- Words I like to live by are...
- Things I can do to be kind to myself include...
- Things that inspire me and give me hope include...
- Ways that I cope effectively with difficult things are...

Gratitude Journaling

Developing a regular gratitude practice has been shown to improve well-being and positive emotions. Gratitude journaling can be both a daily practice and an exercise that you can use to help you cope with a difficult experience.

- For daily gratitude journaling, write 3-5 things every day for which you are grateful. The most important thing is that each day the list must be different from what was written the day before. This trains your mind to look for the good even on difficult days. It is important to point out that listing things for which you are grateful does not in any way minimize

any sadness, worry or grief that you may be experiencing.

- Another method of gratitude journaling involves listing, in one sitting, a full page of things for which you are grateful. The list could include large things ('my daughters get along so well'), small things ('that great restaurant I found'), conveniences ('air conditioning in my car') and personal traits ('my sense of humor').

Self-Reflection: Assessing how your weaknesses can also be strengths

Write down 5 weaknesses and then write down how those weaknesses can also be strengths. For example:

Weaknesses	Strengths
I'm too emotional and overly sensitive	→ I have a lot of empathy for other people
I'm too judgmental	→ I can identify problems that need to be solved
I worry a lot	→ I have ideas of how to keep myself and loved ones safe
I take on too much	→ I care about getting important things done
I avoid thinking about things that are scary	→ I can keep going when things are hard

Biofield Therapy

Biofield Therapy, sometimes called ‘Energy Medicine,’ refers to approaches that work with the subtle energy fields surrounding the body. Many cultures incorporate the concept of ‘energy’ in discussions of health and wellness, using terms such as ‘life energy,’ ‘chi,’ ‘prana’ and others. There are varied approaches to energy medicine, including Healing Touch, Reiki and others. Receiving this type of therapy involves you lying on a massage table fully clothed. Sometimes the practitioner may gently lay their hands on you and other times they put their hands near you without touching you. It is generally accepted that biofield therapies are safe.

Massage and Touch Therapy

The sense of touch can also be used to facilitate healing, and massage can be used to alleviate pain, increase relaxation, improve sleep and more. Massage is something that you can easily do on your own, or you can receive it from a practitioner. Self-massage can be done using a massage ball or even just a tennis ball. You can use the ball to exert gentle pressure to certain trigger points (the spots that feel like knots in your muscles) on your body to release the tension held there. Your practitioner can provide further guidance on self-massage techniques.

When doing self-massage, it is important to avoid putting pressure on joints or bones. Your goal is to help muscles to relax. If you receive massage from a practitioner, look for one who is licensed or certified. It is important to note that medical massage is different from massage provided as part of a spa treatment for relaxation. A clinical or medical massage has a defined purpose of addressing pain or tension in specific parts of the body. A spa massage is usually more general with the goal of relaxation rather than pain or symptom relief.

Acupuncture

Acupuncture is a practice that is part of Traditional Chinese Medicine. It is used to treat pain and has also been used to maximize wellness. It is used to treat pain and has also been used to maximize wellness and relieve symptoms. Acupuncture involves inserting very thin needles through your skin at strategic points on your body. Chinese medicine is based on the idea that we all have a flow of energy or life force (referred to as Chi or Qi) that flows through pathways (meridians) in your body. Acupuncture is used to balance your energy. The insertion of the needles typically does not cause much discomfort. They stay in place for 10-20 minutes while you relax and stay still, and then they are removed. Acupuncture can be a helpful technique for pain and other symptoms alongside more conventional modes. You can receive acupuncture by scheduling an individual appointment with a specialist or by partaking in community group sessions for a reduced rate. Acupuncture is sometimes covered by insurance.

Meditative Movement

Yoga, Tai Chi and Qigong are all examples of practices that coordinate breath with movement so that you can use your body to bring yourself into the present and cultivate mindfulness and awareness of what is going on within. Tai Chi and Qigong are both ancient Chinese traditions. Yoga originated in India and is based on a series of postures (called asanas) that you are guided through by an instructor (in person or online.)

Summary

These are some techniques and approaches that could be used to help with managing stress and promote healing. Learning mindfulness, stress management skills and practices to support self-reflection can facilitate coping and resilience. All the evidence-based complementary and integrative approaches listed here can effectively help you manage your stress and distress. While we can provide education about these options, it is up to you to determine which of them is most appropriate for your situation. We encourage you to try the techniques that seem to be the best fit for you. The most effective method is the one that you will do!

For more information on our Integrative Medicine program, visit
gilchristcares.org/integrative-medicine

“Our patients have told me they are very grateful to now have an Integrative Medicine program, under the keen leadership of Dr. Delia Chiaramonte. **This holistic approach really resonates with them** since it expands our ability to care for them as a whole person.”

– *Dr. Robert Donegan*

“Integrative medicine has the potential to not just cure, but also alleviate, strengthen, nurture and sustain. This is the direction that medicine is moving because we yearn for a culture of wellness and see **clearly the benefits that our patients experience** when we use an integrative approach.”

– *Dr. Melissa Sparrow*

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