

# Stress Reduction and Relaxation Techniques



## PARTICIPANT GUIDE

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**Wisconsin Department of Health Services**

Division of Quality Assurance

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# Learning Points

Let's review the main learning points:

- Recognize our reactions to stress
- Explore techniques for stress relief
- Incorporate stress reduction practices into our daily lives



A caregiver's workday is seldom easy. Even though most caregivers take pride in knowing they are caring for some of society's most vulnerable people, their days are often filled with challenging and stressful situations.

What are some common work-related stressors that caregivers experience on a regular basis?

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Looking at this list, we can see that there are many work related stressors affecting caregivers. This is in addition to the stressors we all have in our personal lives.

# The Fight or Flight Response



When we say, “The adrenaline was really pumping,” to describe the way we felt in a threatening situation, we are really describing the fight or flight response. At such times, stress hormones like adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol are automatically released into our bloodstream. This is the body’s way of preparing us to do whatever is needed to deal with the situation. In the 1920’s, a scientist by the name of Walter Cannon was the first one to describe how the fight or flight response works.

Just as the name implies, the changes our bodies experience in the fight or flight mode are those that make it possible for us to stay and fight or to flee. We start breathing faster, and blood is directed to the muscles of our arms and legs so that we can act quickly. We barely notice pain, and sometimes we find strength we didn’t know we had.

These reactions are just as nature intended, but what if it seems like we are always under attack or threatened in some way? That’s when the fight or flight response becomes stress. When we are continually on guard for the next assault, it’s likely that our fight or flight response is always turned on. After awhile, we run out of energy and the ability to care, the classic signs of burnout.

## Recognizing the Signs of Stress

Sometimes stress buildup is gradual, and we may not even recognize just how stressed we are. That’s why many people report that they can feel stress melting away after a few days of a relaxing vacation.

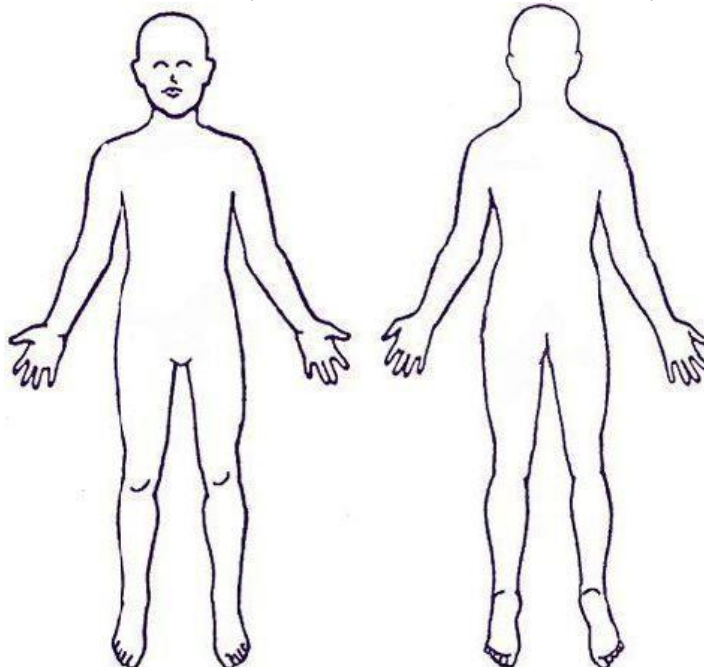
Do you ever find yourself angry, sad, anxious, or fearful for little or no apparent reason? Perhaps you are unable to concentrate or become easily frustrated. If so, it may be time to ask yourself if stress is a contributing factor. Likewise, many of our undesirable habits such as over eating, excessive drinking or smoking may have roots in stress. Recognizing the signs and symptoms of stress is the first step to a healthier lifestyle.

## Activity: Locating the Stress in Your Body

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Stress shows up in different ways for each of us. Even if we don't recognize the psychological and emotional symptoms of stress, our bodies will tell us. We may experience tension in our muscles, headache, upset stomach, racing heartbeat, deep sighing or shallow breathing. Where do you experience stress in your body?

On the outlines below, mark an "x" on the places where you experience stress in your body. Describe how the stress feels, such as "headache", "sore", or "stiff."



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## What Are the Saber Tooth Tigers of Today?

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Sometimes, we still face actual physical dangers. Thankfully, they are far fewer than our ancestors coped with, such as jungles full of saber tooth tigers on the prowl! Nonetheless, the automatic fight or flight response is there for us when we sense danger and need especially sharp minds to react quickly in a particular situation. Think about stories of a heroic parent protecting a child or a first responder defying all odds to rescue a victim.

When saber tooth tigers retreat (when toddlers take naps), the hyper-vigilant state of fight or flight can return to normal. It becomes a problem when modern-day “tigers” such as rush hour traffic, household bills, disagreements with family members, or work-related stressors don’t go away.

Most stressors today are not life threatening. However, our bodies react to them in the same way our ancestors’ did, by dumping the fight or flight hormones into the bloodstream to ready us to act. Unless we take steps to bring ourselves back to a state of calm, the buildup of stress hormones becomes toxic and undermines our health and sense of well-being.

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## Reducing Stress to Prevent Abuse and Neglect

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Getting a handle on stress is important for many reasons. One of the most important is reducing the potential for stress-related abuse and neglect. When we are caught up in the physical and emotional responses to stress, we are “not ourselves.” Tragically, we may act in ways that we will regret later when we “come back to our senses.”

A caregiver may be “stress contagious,” negatively affecting everyone with whom they come in contact. Think of the person who waits on you in a restaurant or a store. Most of us notice the energy of that person. We are affected by it consciously or unconsciously, and for better or worse. Now consider specifically the impact caregiver stress might have on the person in your care. Consider some of the stressors that we just identified on the body outlines.

How might a stressed caregiver behave or respond to a challenging resident? Jot down some possibilities below:

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What are some immediate steps that a caregiver can take when a situation with a resident or client feels out of control? Take a moment to jot down some strategies that you have used or observed.

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Unmanaged stress can lead to neglect or even abuse of those we care so much about. Knowing ourselves is the key, which also means knowing when to get professional help with stress. Asking for help is a sign of strength and maturity.

We will now explore some strategies that you might find useful for controlling your stress. We encourage you to keep an open mind. After you have been exposed to all of these strategies, you will have an opportunity to identify those that might work for you.

## Reducing Stress Symptoms and Restoring Calm

Life is stressful, and there's no getting around it! Sometimes the stress is what we might call "good stress," caused by positive and exciting things happening in our lives (like getting married or moving to a nicer home.) More commonly, stress is caused by what we see as negative or difficult situations, some of which are a part of everyday life.

Some people seem naturally able to take things in stride. Even if this is harder for you, we can all learn to incorporate helpful practices to reduce stress and help us stay centered when difficulties arise. Sometimes, our habits contribute to our stress levels. Consider the following information.

Habit	Effect on Your Body
<b>Too Little Sleep</b>	New research says that your immune defense system functions best during sleep. (Seven to eight hours is recommended.) Sleep deprivation increases susceptibility to colds, flu viruses, disease, illness and even allergic reactions.
<b>Drinking Caffeinated Beverages</b>	Caffeine increases heart rate and blood pressure, triggers insomnia, causes coldness in hands and feet, and increases lactic acid in skeletal muscles resulting in stiffness, achiness and increases susceptibility to strains and sprains.
<b>Consuming Sugar</b>	Sugar increases heart rate and blood pressure. It also causes an "alarm reaction" in your glucostatic (blood sugar) system. The pancreas responds by over-secreting insulin, thus bringing your blood sugar level down to a hypoglycemic (abnormally low) level. This may result in moodiness, fatigue, sleep difficulties, reduced mental alertness and increased sugar cravings. Sugar also weakens physical strength and endurance. Sugar affects the immune system just like any other addictive substance.



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## Activity: What Do You Do to Relax?

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Most people have some favorite stress-relieving habits. These habits probably all work in the short run, but some (such as smoking and too much alcohol) can be harmful in the long run.

Think of one of your favorite healthy ways to relax.

Write a few sentences describing it, being specific about where the activity takes place, when, how often, colors, smells, texture, etc. When you finish, share that habit or practice with a partner.

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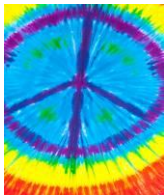
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## Peaceful Reality

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What do you think of when you hear the word “peace”? For some, our thoughts turn to the international symbol. Others might imagine a tranquil lake or complete silence.

Whatever our perceptions, we can all agree that peace is a desirable state, absent of stress and tension.

Sometimes we need to change our lives to achieve a peaceful state-of-mind, perhaps by leaving a particular environment or finding ways to make it safer physically, emotionally, or spiritually. At times, there is little we can do to change a difficult reality, and in those cases, we may need to change the way we look at that reality. As the old saying goes, “*When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.*”

A good way to get to that peaceful reality is first to become aware of the many negative, anxiety-producing thoughts we routinely entertain. Let’s look at a few examples of some common negative thought patterns.

## Negative Thought Patterns

- **“I have to be perfect.”** Unless your performance is flawless, you see yourself as a complete failure.
- **“I can’t do anything right.”** You view a simple mistake as evidence that you are incompetent. You take the opportunity to punish yourself mentally over and over.
- **“If they only knew the real me.”** You reject positive feedback from others because you couldn’t possibly deserve it. You keep that belief firmly in place even in light of everyday events that tell you otherwise.
- **“That person must think I’m an idiot.”** You decide arbitrarily that someone is judging you negatively or dislikes you. You don’t use facts to get to this decision. In truth, you discount facts and assume you can read minds.
- **“What if ‘x’ happens?”** You forecast disasters and worry excessively about situations that almost never happen. This negative thought process is likely to manifest itself in the middle of the night, when you can’t do anything about the “problem” anyway.
- **“I can’t believe I did that. I’ll probably get fired.”** You put the smallest slip-up under your personal microscope and focus in on it until it becomes a huge catastrophe. In the reverse, you put others’ achievements under that same microscope until they are blown completely out of proportion as well.
- **“I trust my feelings.”** While acknowledging your feelings is important, you sometimes see negative feelings as facts. Just because you feel a certain way doesn’t mean that it’s based on actual circumstances.
- **“I should have done...”** You apply an emotional yardstick to past actions. When your actions don’t measure up, the result is guilt. When you use “should have” statements with others, you are usually conveying anger, resentment and/or frustration to that person.
- **“It was all my fault.”** You take responsibility for some negative incident that you weren’t responsible for in the first place.
- **“I’m such a dope!” or “S/he’s a lazy bum.”** You verbally beat up yourself and others by applying labels. Sometimes you say these things in jest, sometimes not. In any case, a negative thought pattern casts a dark shadow over your perception of yourself and others.

# More Stress-Reducing Practices

The remainder of this training is devoted to examples of stress-reducing practices. While not every practice will appeal to you, try to find a way to incorporate some favorites into your daily routine.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Consult your doctor or other health care professional before beginning any physical exercise routine.

Let's start by becoming aware of how tense our muscles become when we are feeling stressed.

## Activity: Muscle Relaxation

As you begin this activity, FREEZE!  
Don't move a bit.  
Now pay attention to your body.

**Can you drop your shoulders?**

If so, your muscles were unnecessarily raising them.

**Are your forearms able to relax more?**

If so, your muscles were unnecessarily tensing them.

**Is your body seated as though you are ready for action?**

If so, your muscles may be unnecessarily contracted.

**Can your forehead relax more?**

If so, those muscles were tense for no useful purpose.

**Are other parts of your body contracted unnecessarily?**

Check your stomach, buttocks, thighs and calf muscles.

Unnecessary muscular contraction can cause tension headaches, neck aches, or back problems. Be mindful of contracted muscles as you go through your day, and concentrate on letting your muscles relax as much as possible.

## Physical Exercise

Remember that the fight or flight response is intended to induce vigorous physical activity, either fighting to protect ourselves or running away from a life-threatening situation.

Physical exercise can take the place of fighting or fleeing, neutralizing those stress hormones and restoring our body and mind to a calmer, more relaxed state. Five minutes of vigorous exercise - 50 jumping jacks or sit-ups, running up or down stairs, or just running in place - can do wonders.

Longer exercise periods are needed to achieve fitness and contribute significantly to our overall well-being, but mini-exercise sessions are very helpful when needed to relieve stress, and they're short enough and easy enough to fit into any busy schedule.

## Meditation



If you've ever tuned in on your everyday mind, you understand why the term "monkey mind" is such a good description for what goes on in your brain. The mind is constantly chattering and jumping from one branch of thought to another.

Some of that chatter is very useful as we navigate through our busy workday, plan for picking up the kids from school, preparing dinner, etc. However, we can also get stuck in unproductive worry and anxiety, at times becoming "expert worriers." As Mark Twain said, "I've experienced many terrible things in my life, a few of which actually happened."

The good news is that, underneath that constant stream of ever-changing thought is a place of calm and quiet, sometimes known as the "observer" or "witness." We can learn to access that quiet place through meditation.

Meditation has been used by many to relieve stress and achieve a more peaceful sense of well-being. Its many benefits such as lowered blood pressure, lowered pulse rate, and increased alpha brain waves (associated with relaxation), can be easily measured. Just 10 or 20 minutes of meditation, once or twice a day, can reap these benefits.

Some of us have never practiced meditation. Here's a quick activity that will help you decide whether it might appeal to you.

## Activity: Practice Meditation

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- Sit quietly in a chair with your back straight, your shoulders relaxed, and your feet flat on the floor.
- Close your eyes.
- Release any tension you may be holding in your feet, legs, abdomen, hands, shoulders and face.
- Breathe naturally through your nose, keeping your shoulders still and focusing your breath in the abdominal region. (When you breathe abdominally, the belly rises with the in-breath.)
- Now start counting to ten with each breath, gently saying to yourself “now” on the in-breath, and “one” on the out-breath,” “now” on the in-breath again, “two” on the out-breath, and so on, to ten.
- Continue breathing this way, mentally counting to ten with each in-breath and out-breath, and then start over again with “one.”
- If you find yourself distracted (actually “when” you find yourself distracted), simply say “oh well”, or “thinking” and return your focus to the breath and counting.
- Continue for ten to twenty minutes. You can check the clock by opening your eyes briefly.
- When you’re finished, don’t open your eyes immediately. Just sit quietly for a moment or two and wait a few more moments before standing up.

Note: You can replace the “now” and numbers with any quieting words you like, or not even have words, simply focusing on the in-breath and out-breath. Remember, the point of meditation is not to stop your mind from thinking (Good luck with that!) but rather to let go of your thoughts instead of being caught up in them. When you realize that your mind has wandered, it’s important not to become frustrated or judgmental.

## Breathing



When we become anxious or stressed, we tend to hold our breath or breathe very shallowly, both of which are associated with the fight or flight response. The simple act of deepening and slowing down our breathing is the easiest, fastest, and most effective stress reliever we can employ. Remembering to do it in the middle of an anxious moment is not so easy, however.

The way we ordinarily breathe, even when we are not feeling stressed, is also important. To find out how you breathe, try this: take a deep breath. Which expands more with the in-breath, your chest or your belly? (If you can't tell sitting up, try lying down.) Most people say that it's their chest. Chest breathing utilizes only the middle and upper portions of the lungs, resulting in an inefficient exchange of oxygen as compared to when we bring air down into the lower portion of the lungs. Learning to breathe like a baby again, (all infants are abdominal breathers) can relax our muscles, calm our minds, and relieve stress.

There are many simple variations on the basic deep breath that can be used to relax and relieve stress. We can use these "mini-vacations" anytime to refresh our bodies and minds, and they don't cost a cent. Let's take a look at four examples:

## Activity: Three Breathing Exercises

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- Take a deep breath through your nose. With your mouth still closed, slowly let it out while relaxing your jaw. Continue breathing slowly and deeply through your nose into your abdomen, making your abdomen rise with the in-breath while your chest and shoulders remain still. Follow the in-breath with a slow, even exhalation.
- Close your eyes and breathe in through your nose, becoming aware of the air coming into your nostrils. As you breathe out, become aware of the air passing back out. Notice that the air coming in is slightly cooler than the air passing out (in...cool, out...warm). Continue to breathe for a few minutes in this way, focusing on the air coming in and out of your nostrils.
- Inhale deeply through your nose while counting to eight. With pursed lips, exhale slowly through your mouth and count to 16 (or for as long as you can concentrate on the long sighing sound and feel the tension dissolve.)

## Self-Acupressure

The roots of acupressure date back to ancient Chinese medicine. It is a simple technique of applying pressure with the fingertips on certain points of the body. As you apply pressure, breathe slowly and deeply with your eyes closed for three to five minutes.

Let's look at some places on the body where pressure can help relieve stress.

## Acupressure Points for Stress Relief



### Two Points at Base of Skull

Interlace your fingers and place your hands behind your head. With your thumbs, press the two points at the left and right sides of the base of the skull in the indentation between the muscles and bones.



### Third Eye Point

Feel for a sensitive area in the indentation between the eyebrows where the nose connects with the forehead.



### Point in the Outer Wrist

Press the point in the indentation on the outside of the crease of the wrist, down from the small finger.



### Point on Top of the Shoulders

With the fingertips of both hands, hold the points on top of the shoulders. The arms may be crossed if this position is more comfortable.



### Sore Spot

Locate a sore spot in the left side of the chest about two to three inches down from the collar bone and about two inches to the side of the sternum.



## More Acupressure Points

### **Two Points on Eyebrow-Nose Ridge**

Look for these two points on the face where the bridge of the nose meets the ridge of the eyebrow: above and behind the area where eyeglasses rest on the nose.

### **Two Points on Back of Neck**

These points are located approximately half an inch below the base of the skull between the muscles of the neck and about one half inch outward from either side of the spine.

### **One Point at Base of Skull**

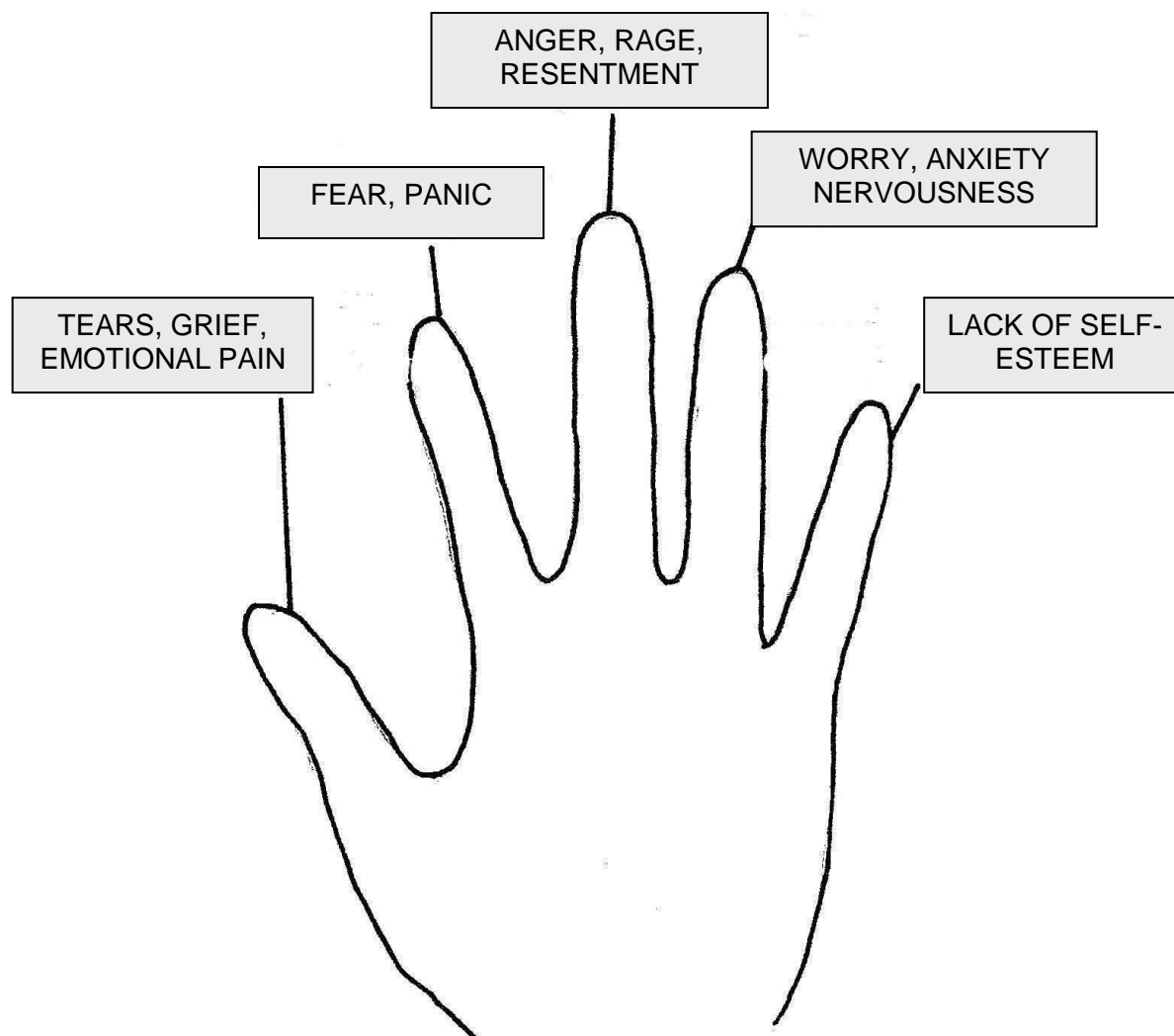
This point is found at the base of the skull at the center of the back of the neck.

*Used with permission Capacitar International Body-Mind-Spirit Practice*

## Finger Holds to Balance Emotional Energy

The theory behind this practice is that through each finger runs a channel or meridian of energy connected with the different organs of the body. As you hold a finger, usually within a minute or two you will feel an energy pulse or throbbing sensation. This indicates that the energy is flowing and balanced, and usually the strong feeling or emotion passes.

Finger holds may also be done for relaxation with music, or be used before going to sleep to release the problems of the day and to bring peace to body and mind.



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## Activity: Finger Holds

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Take a moment to practice any finger hold of your choice. You may do the finger holds with either hand. NOTE: The hold should be firm, but not too tight or painful in any way.

Begin to be aware of how you hold your hands and fingers at different times and how this may relate to your feelings. Many of these finger holds occur naturally without consciousness.

### Thumb

*For tears, grief, emotional pain*

Hold the thumb, breathe deeply and exhale all the grief and sorrow you feel. Breathe in to fill yourself with **peace** and **comfort**. Hold until you feel a pulsation of energy.

### Index Finger

*For fear*

Use of the index finger is a good way to learn how to work with fear, rather than be a victim in the grip of fear. While holding the index finger, exhale and let go of fear.

Inhale **courage** and **strength of being**.

### Middle Finger

*For anger and rage*

Hold the middle finger, exhale and let go of all anger and rage, inhaling **compassion**, **energy**, and **creative passion** into your life.

### Ring Finger

*For anxiety and nervousness*

Breathe deeply holding the ring finger. Exhale, letting go of all worry and anxiety.

Inhale a deep sense of **peace** and **security** in the midst of life's problems, knowing that you are held and cared for in spirit.

### Small Finger

*Low self-esteem, feelings of unworthiness*

Hold the small finger, breathe deeply, exhaling and letting go of insecurity and unworthiness. Breathe in **gratitude** and **appreciation** for the gift of life.

*Used with permission Capacitar International Body-Mind-Spirit Practices*

## Tai Chi and Yoga



The ancient mind-body disciplines of tai chi and yoga originated in China and India thousands of years ago. They began gaining momentum in this country in the 1960s. While quite different, both consist of graceful, fluid body movements synchronized with the breath, and both have many health benefits, including stress relief.

You have probably seen yoga demonstrated on television. If you've ever visited a large city on the west coast, such as Oakland, California, you may have seen the slow, beautiful choreography of tai chi practiced daily in public parks by the many Chinese people living there. It can be relaxing just to watch them move together in this meditative way.

Many communities offer classes in tai chi and yoga, and there are many videos, as well as television shows, demonstrating these practices for all levels and abilities. You can try meditative movement right now while you're sitting reading this:

- Slowly straighten your upper body and relax your shoulders and jaw
- Soften your gaze, relax your belly and begin to take a slow, deep breath while raising your arms over your head, wrists limp
- Then with a long, slow exhalation, lower your arms
- Repeat this movement, focusing on your breathing, three times. Notice how you feel when you've finished!

## Journaling



Some people find it helpful to keep a daily journal, writing for a few minutes first thing in the morning or at night before turning out the light. Recording our thoughts and questions about life can be like talking with a good friend. Reading past journal entries spanning weeks and months may help us recognize patterns in our lives we might otherwise miss.

One very effective method of journaling, which takes practically no time at all, is to keep a gratitude journal. Naming the things that make you happy in a day: the smile of a particular resident, a delicious homemade cookie, a warm shower, is an excellent way to practice seeing the glass half-full. An even simpler version of this is to name those "happy-making" things as you close your eyes to go to sleep. Getting in the habit of noticing the small things we often take for granted can make a big difference in our attitude about life in general.

# Seven Quickies



Here are some quick relaxation techniques that you can practice almost anywhere. You may even get a laugh or two when you're practicing!

## Rag Doll

- Sit down and pretend for a few seconds that you are a rag doll.
- Your legs are like spaghetti.
- Your arms are dangling.
- Your head is hanging - you are completely relaxed.

## Eye Rolls

- Roll eyes clockwise, starting at 12:00 position.

## Tongue Stretch

- Open your mouth wide, stick out your tongue as far as you can.

## Full Body Stretch

- Stand on tiptoe.
- Lift your arms over your head with fingers pointing toward the ceiling.
- Inhale and stretch for the count of 10.
- Exhale and let your body drop to a slouched position.

## Neck Roll

- Roll your neck in full circles, first one way and then the other.

## Turtle

- Raise your shoulders up to your ears as you inhale, release, exhale.

## Shoulder Roll

- Roll your right shoulder forward- center- back 10 times. Repeat with the left shoulder.

## Your Personal Network



A list of people who touch our lives in a significant way can become a useful tool when we feel the need for more support in our personal or work lives. We often turn to certain people instinctively for help, but identifying others can help us to realize an even broader support network.

If you are interested in expanding your support network, it may be useful to use the chart below to help identify areas where you have support as well as areas where you might look for more support.

### Activity: Personal Network Profile

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Let's look at the following Personal Network Profile and see how many people you can identify as members of your personal network.

1. In each category, write the names of up to four people you turn to for support in that category.
2. Assign each person a number based on how helpful they are (1=not helpful, 5=very helpful).
3. Circle the categories where you feel that you need or would like more support.
4. Put an "x" by members of your network who you rely on too much.
5. Put a star by people you might rely on more often.

## Personal Network Chart

### The People I Turn To:

<b>For Close Friendship</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>For Expert Advice</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>To Socialize With</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>To Energize Me</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>When I Am Hurting</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>As Helpers</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>As Mentors</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>For Acceptance and Approval</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>To Help Me Discover and Try New Things</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____
<b>For Professional Contacts and Access</b>	_____	_____	_____	_____

As you fill out the chart, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there areas where I need more support?
- Do I rely on one person too much (need a broader perspective?)

## Closing Activity: Choose an Exercise

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Just as stress comes from many different sources in our lives and affects each of us differently, the effectiveness of stress management practices will vary from person to person. Which exercises appeal most to you? Selecting and learning those exercises that are best for you is a major step forward in taking control of the stress in your life.

Take a few moments to look at the list of stress reduction exercises on the handout and check those that appeal to you and that you are willing to try.

### Stress-Reducing Exercises

- ☐ Relaxing tight muscles in face, arms, legs, and shoulders
- ☐ Changing negative thought patterns
- ☐ Five minutes of intense physical exercise as needed
- ☐ Meditation
- ☐ Breathing exercises
- ☐ Self-Acupressure
- ☐ Finger Holds
- ☐ Tai Chi and/or Yoga
- ☐ Rag Doll
- ☐ Eye Rolls
- ☐ Tongue Stretch
- ☐ Full Body Stretch
- ☐ Neck Roll
- ☐ Turtle
- ☐ Shoulder Roll



# Wrap-Up

Our bodies are wired to react with the flight or fight response when we detect danger. The hectic and demanding lives that many of us lead cause these same automatic responses in our bodies. When the reaction in our bodies lasts too long and occurs too often, we experience increasing stress. By integrating stress-reducing practices into our lives, we can feel better about ourselves and be better caretakers of the residents with whom we work.

## Learning Points Review

Let's review the learning points from today's training:

- Recognize our reactions to stress
- Explore techniques for stress relief
- Incorporate stress reduction practices into our daily lives

**NOTE:** This material was developed by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services-Division of Quality Assurance and the UW Oshkosh Center for Community Development, Engagement and Training (CCDET) as part of the federal Caregiver Abuse and Neglect Prevention Project.

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# Training Materials Checklist

## For this training, you will need:

- Laptop computer ( recommended)
- MS PowerPoint (PPT Viewer can be downloaded for free at [Microsoft.com](http://Microsoft.com))
- LCD Projector (recommended)
- Screen for viewing the PPT (recommended)
- Flip chart and markers
- Printed Participant Guides
- Pens or pencils
- Flip chart paper with outlines of the human body
- Evaluation (optional)
- Certificate of completion (optional)

Note: It is strongly recommended that the PPT be viewed using an LCD projector. If that option is not available, the PPT may be downloaded and printed as a handout. At least one large, color set of brain images should be available for reference.