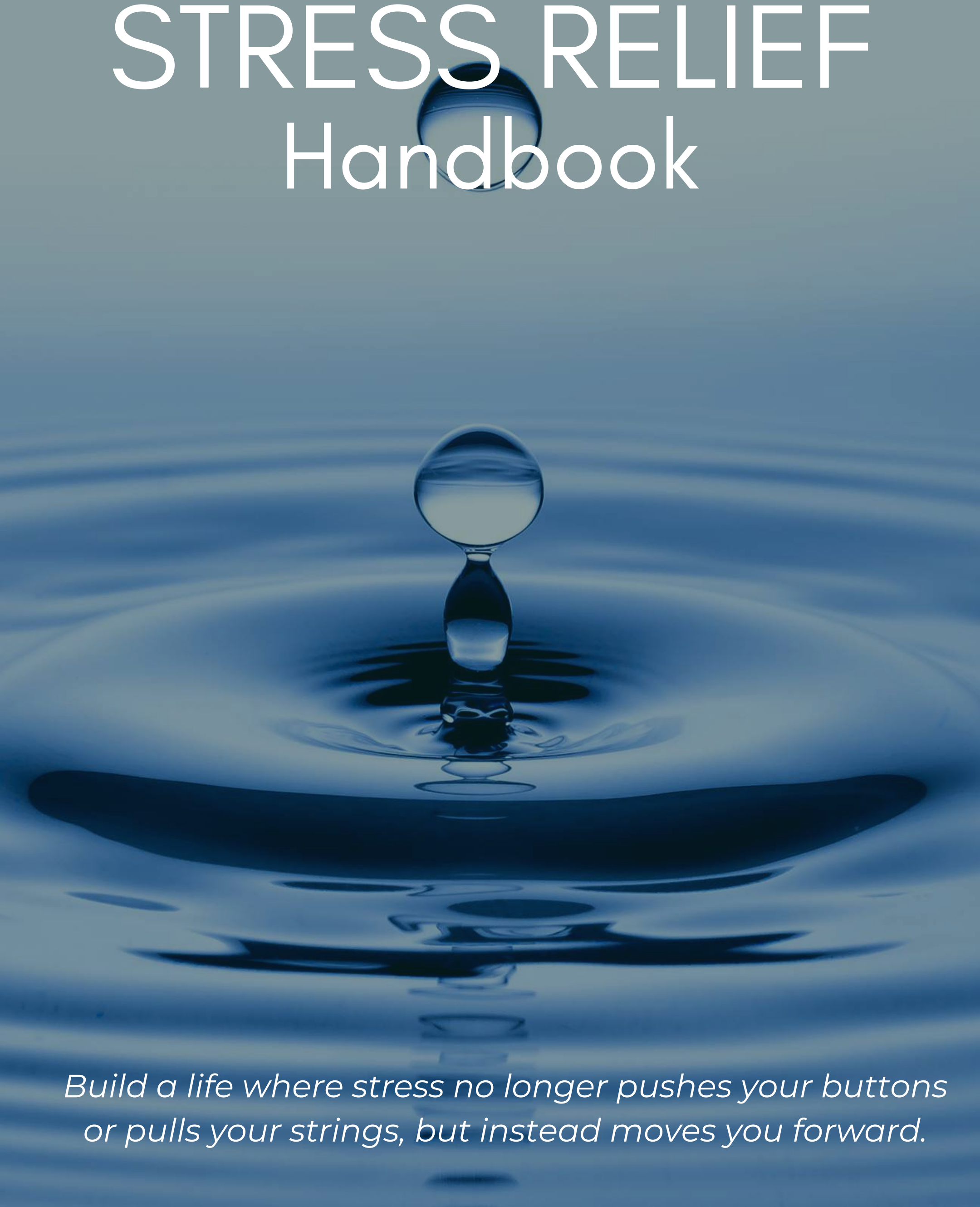
GRP

GUT REBALANCING PROTOCOL

Module 6
STRESS RELIEF
Handbook



Build a life where stress no longer pushes your buttons or pulls your strings, but instead moves you forward.

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An excellent metaphor for the importance of looking after your own health is the oxygen mask on airplanes: you are clearly instructed to put your own on BEFORE you can be of help to others - in fact, you MUST.

Stress impacts your life, in ways from small and temporary to very, very large and always-present... right up to overwhelming and crushing.

Because, like it or not, that's the range in the real world - so that's what you need to know, right? And how to prepare accordingly... and then get on with things - without obsessing, fetishising stress and anxiety, wallowing in misery, giving away your power, or sinking into victimhood and despair.

This is YOUR life and you are ultimately respons-

ible for managing your own state - because there are plenty of people and institutions who will happily do it for you - and, in fact, already are at least influencing your state... to their own advantage and your detriment.

When you outsource that power to others, such as employers, friends, family, politicians and the evening news, then you cannot help but be subject to other people's ideas about what it important to you... and FOR you.

And it's a BIG REASON many end up here on the GRP, because they've been living too long with other people's agendas, instead of putting their own health and wellbeing first, where it belongs.

This no-nonsense STRESS ARM course teaches you how your body's own threat response and stress mechanisms work and then makes that knowledge practical. It places in your hands the tools to make use of that knowledge; that - TO THE EXTENT YOU ACTUALLY PICK THEM UP AND USE THEM – will teach you how to relieve, down-regulate, as well as to anticipate and even manage the effects of existing stressors, to minimise the impacts of new ones - and even to lean assertively into and learn to make stress your friend and ally.

... Instead of your enemy - or even worse, *your assassin*.

In this course we introduce simple, but powerful tools to help you both recognise and blunt the negative impact of incoming stressors, in real time, as it is happening.

But first... let's take a look at how you got to this place - where stress and the challenge of managing and reducing stress has brought so many of us to a place of compromised health in the first place...

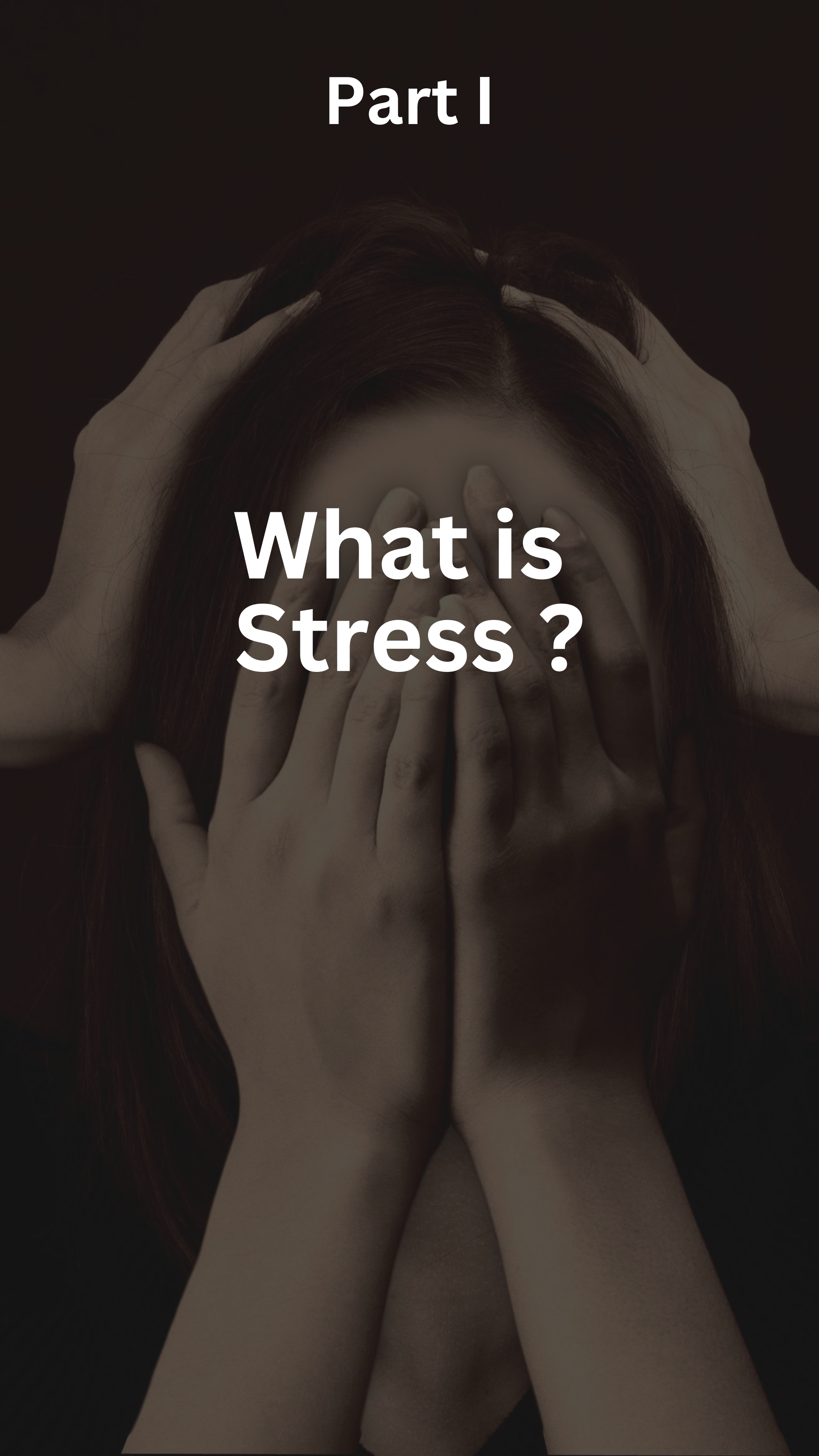
This education part is essential because medical and behavioral science in the field is extensive and becoming progressively clearer. And this is why we are confident to emphasise, that NOT understanding how stress looks, recognising it when it shows up and knowing what it can do when you are unprepared is a major reason that so many in our hectic world so drastically suffer its ill effects.

...So, are you ready...?

(Take a deep breath...)

BACK

Part I



What is Stress ?

What is Stress?

The term "stress" has become overused and pushed into the service of so many seemingly frivolous causes that its meaning has become perhaps a little obscure. The working definition of 'stress' used in the GRP has been made as specific and as clear as possible:

Stress is how our mind and body respond when exceeding our boundaries of comfort, performance or tolerance.*

This is not to say that there are not critically important psychosocial ramifications of 'distress', which are covered herein, as well as beneficial aspects of stress - known as 'eustress'.

This program works with both the physiological and the perceptual dimensions, offering practical behaviour-based solutions that will help you to to better respond to YOUR stress - instead of reacting.

But you can't assess the relative value of a solution unless you first know what the problem is, right...? And you can't define the problem without knowing (at least some of) its properties - what they ARE and also, perhaps importantly, what they are NOT.

So, if we are to offer solutions to this problem we're calling "stress", then it makes sense to first define that problem.

So let's zero-in on some of its properties, the ones we are calling "problematic":

*includes neuroceptive , or 'gut' sensations of threat and danger

STRESS IS directly associated with experiences that accompany activation of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS), specifically the 'fight or flight', or 'shutdown or withdrawal' complexes governing the threat response, such as:

- Response to a perception of events, including neuroceptive input
- Stimulus resulting in involuntary (in)action
- The discomfort of such systemic activation
- Difficulty in disengaging the response
- Focus, concentration and attention issues
- Feeling anxious or overwhelmed and issues cascading from that
- Activation of coping mechanisms , e.g., addictions
- Gut health and chronic digestive issues
- Diminished thought clarity or control
- Diminished decision-making capacity
- Excessive adrenaline and cortisol production
- Excessive noradrenaline circulation
- Chronic sleep issues
- Sweat overproduction
- Shallow breathing or hyperventilation
- Auto-immune disorders
- Social isolation and integration issues
- Other health and wellbeing issues...

In essence, stress is the result of some kind of "pressure" being exerted upon an object or system, so that it significantly exceeds "normal" operational capacity. For living systems it is, at its roots, a physiological response to a perception (including neuroception) of threat.

It is not hard to see that strees strongly influences many aspects of life (which we will examine in more detail) including:

- health and wellness
- ability to rest and relax
- ability to enjoy and take pleasure
- reduced libidinal activity
- general outlook of optimism or pessimism
- all aspects of relationships
- withdrawal and anti-sociability
- work and other performance issues
- thinking and decision making
- accurately evaluating threat and risk

'Neuroception' is a faculty that includes the safety detection mechanism of the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS), that operates below the level of conscious awareness. It's Science's term for what is known as our "gut feeling".

We've looked briefly at what stress IS, let's look also at what it is NOT.

STRESS IS **NOT**:

- A medical condition, virus, etc.
- A disease
- A mental or mood disorder
- A genetic predisposition
- An ideopathic event (i.e., without cause)

It is important to include the 'NOTs' because, for many reasons (including especially profit), there has been a trend towards medicalising stress, or otherwise treating stress in isolation from circumstances, by focusing only on its symptoms. But to do so is an absolute failure to recognise and embrace the full scope, making what is already a challenge into a much more intractable problem - and therefore not a solution but only a superficial palliative.

A useful metaphor here is the smoke-detector, that we use to sound an alarm when there's a fire. Treating the symptoms of stress without treating the cause(s) is like removing the battery from your smoke alarm because the sound has become annoying. Sounds kind of... well, crazy when you look at it that way, right...?

This is because, left untreated to become chronic or otherwise pathological, stress becomes source of many other health and even life-threatening illnesses and conditions. This is not to mention any other multiplying issues that arise from familial, social and economic impacts from failure or unwillingness to recognise or address the causes of stress.

Understand that unmitigated stress is itself a cause of FURTHER stress that, without intervention, leads to a downwards health spiral.

Intervention to arrest and reverse this potential spiral can come in any of three directions:

1. **RESTORATIVE**... the elimination or reduction of the SOURCE of stress (the 'stressor').
2. **PALLIATIVE**... diminishment of SYMPTOMS, reducing the impacts of the stressor.
3. **STRATEGIC**... implementing methods that address both restorative and palliative aspects, reducing impacts, while simultaneously addressing the stressor itself.

Understand that many of the stress relief techniques found in this entire program are wholly or partially palliative (such as Resonant Breathing), while others strategically address the stressors itself, such as The Problem Solving Framework (introduced in the next module, which builds on this one). The GRP, is itself *strategic*, in that it contains both restorative and palliative elements, across the entire health spectrum.

The Stress Management aspects of the GRP goes a decisive step beyond Awareness and Relief, helping you to take proactive action upon the CAUSES of stress, providing methodology for managing, anticipating and even pre-empting and preventing stress and the fallout symptoms - which leads to confidence, one of the best stress management tools there is.

What Is the Stress Response?

When we talk about 'stress' we are really talking about our RESPONSE to our biopsychosocial (BPS) environment. What we call "the stress response" is a number of complex interactions between the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal systems (called "**HPA Axis**"), the **Amygdala** (the most ancient part of our brain, the 'lizard brain') and the Autonomic Nervous System (or **ANS**).

And, while the GRP food and lifestyle prescriptions have a SIGNIFICANT, DIRECT and POSITIVE input into the health of the elements of the HPA Axis, this Stress Management aspect of the GRP is designed to bring understanding and teach beneficial behaviours that act directly and decisively upon the last of these elements, the ANS, specifically the Vagus Nerve, through practical application of the very latest understandings in the fields of Neurology, Neuropsychology and the Behavioural Sciences.

The ANS is a super-complex of bi-directional nerves, called "Vagus" (Latin for 'wanderer') extending from the medulla oblongata, branching into every major organ in the body, in three important, evolutionary branches (or 'complexes'). In evolutionary order, these are the:

- Parasympathetic (aka 'Dorsal' Vagal) from approximately 500m years ago
- Sympathetic, from 300m years ago
- Ventral Vagal, from 200m years

The ANS serves the life and health of most creatures in the Animal Kingdom, in some form.

It's important to understand that "autonomic" means "not consciously controllable". So most of the ANS is beyond DIRECT control - with the important exception of the BREATH, which we can both relinquish to the body to regulate autonomically, or act directly upon to consciously regulate the intensity and duration of autonomic 'events', i.e., STRESS.

The Vagus Nerve plays an integral part in:

- Heart Rate Variability (HRV) and regulation
- dilation/constriction of blood vessels
- glandular activity in the heart, lungs, and gut liver, immune system regulation
- control of gastrointestinal sensitivity
- gut motility
- inflammation
- emotional regulation and stability
- psychosocial literacy and navigation (reading social cues).

Think of the Vagus Nerve as the binding interface between your Mind and Body. As a bidirectional nerve super-cluster, it carries information both from the brain to the body (20%), as well as from various organs back to the brain (80%).

Viewed more accurately as an indivisible, fully-integrated whole (hence the term, 'mindbody') there has been much renewed scientific interest in ancient practices and modalities that take

such a maturely unified approach to diagnosing and managing health and wellbeing issues.

...And what this knowledge really means is that it is also obviously a mistake to treat any kind of unwellness - from a 'simple' cold, to anxiety and depression, right up to life-threatening diseases such as cancer - in isolation from the events and situations occurring in and around your life... for they are ALL, quite provably, interrelated.

And hence the significance of the ANS, the Vagus Nerve and its strategic importance in bringing life's various elements into integrated balance, for the sake of health, wellbeing and your own peace.

...All of which cannot happen if you are constantly overloading with STRESS and its dampening impact on your immune response; your ability to withstand disease and illness.

So let's examine how the stress response is activated. There are two overlapping pathways, that operate interdependently:

PERCEPTION... when you consciously recognise something as being threatening to your safety or wellbeing. This may be very real, or totally imaginary... immediate, imminent, or looming at sometime in the distant future.

NEUROCEPTION... the 'gut feeling', that occurs below the level of awareness, sensing imminent danger or threat and elevating your stress response to 'high alert'.

Historically, it was arguably around the time humans developed language and communication tools such as paintings, totems and other artefacts, that the finely-honed stress response mechanism began to experience new and unique challenges to its ancient, evolved function of keeping us safe from very visible predators and mortally perilous situations.

Stories scratched onto rocks by neolithic ancestors and the advent of language gave humanity the previously unknown ability to, share, keep and access thoughts beyond their personal past and future, in records but also from even millennia before in the spoken culture transmitted between peoples and generations.

These same tools gave us the ability to share knowledge, but also, importantly, to select WHICH knowledge to share and which to withhold, thereby birthing the ability to manipulate and control perception and behaviour; also to communicate history, tradition, law, grievances, pleasures, commands, desires and express love and strike fear, with stories both real and fictional...

And the cumulative impact of especially recent communications technology upon the human ANS, as it intensifies its reach into our lives, our waking and sleeping minds - and therefore our nervous systems has been more than merely 'significant', in terms of individual and collective levels of stress.

So, while there are obviously many benefits (look at the technology enabling you to read these words, right now,) new technologies have also been wreaking havoc on our neuroceptive faculties, both at the individual and collective levels.

And this is something that is not getting less significant over time, is it...?

So... does it make more sense to you now... the importance of knowing more about and understanding how to better manage your stress response... and maybe learning some ways to help you better respond to your largely invisible but very real neureological landscape?

What follows is a summary of the function of the three Vagal branches, associated psychoaffective states (our thoughts and emotions, viewed as two elements of a single phenonemon... like 'mindbody') and the impacts to your health and wellbeing of stress and their implications for effective stress management.

Parasympathetic Complex (PC)

Also called the Dorsal vagal Complex and the oldest part of our stress response apparatus, the PC evolved some 500m years ago as the protective 'shutdown' mechanism responsible for making animals freeze when confronted by either acutely stressful or life-threatening situations.

This makes sense, as predators were large, fierce and often very fast...so the best defence for small, weak creatures - like our early ancestors - was to help them to freeze, or shrink down and be very still and very quiet.

Activation of this branch happens when direct or cumulative threat reaches a critical threshold and that shutdown function includes suppressing the immune response, invoking quiet distress or an absence of emotion altogether, psychological and /or physical withdrawal and shutdown. It is characterised in humans by curling up in the fetal position, a distinctive 'brain fog' and an inability to rocognise or respond well to environmental, social, or internal physiological cues.

...When you think about it, this is actually a kind of ‘natural kindness’, because it serves to diminish distress in the face of impending death or looming trauma.

Common signs of PC activation include dissociation, which is a break in how your mind

handles information. You may feel disconnected from your thoughts, feelings, memories, surroundings and community. It can affect your sense of identity and your perception of time.

Symptoms of a dissociative state can be:

- spacing out and feelings of “it’s all over”
- glazed, blank look, the "1000yd stare"
- mind wandering or going blank
- a sense of the world not being real
- seeing yourself from outside of your body
- detachment from identity and relationships
- out-of-body experience.

Although primitive, the activity of the Parasympathetic Complex is very visible in today's humans. Consider the following states and behaviours, when stress levels increase beyond everyday recuperative capacity, or over extended periods...

- Hypo-arousal and lethargy
- Overwhelm and inability to cope
- Hopelessness and despair
- Shame, depression and withdrawal
- Misreading of social cues and situations
- Quiet resentment and unexpressed anger
- Social disengagement
- Flattened vocal prosody (monotonal speech)
- Lack of eye-contact and minimal head and neck movement
- Catastrophising situations and events
- Suppressed immunity and frequent illness
- Dissociative collapse and paranoia
- Associated coping behaviours, such as substance abuse and withdrawal.

The PC extends into and is associated with the diaphragm, gut and viscera. Many gut-health conditions and disorders are attributable to chronic Parasympathetic activation - all of which can indicate ineffective stress management...

BACK

Sympathetic Complex (SC)

Next to evolve, some 300m years ago, the stress response typified by this branch is popularised as "fight-or-flight", typically involving a flood of cortisol into the large, action-oriented muscles of the body, making us ready for quick bursts of action in the face of a perceived threat. This includes (but isn't restricted to) fierce anger and attacking the threat, or running away from it in fear.

It increases blood flow, breathing rate, and production of energy for muscles. Your blood thickens, beginning the clotting process so that you don’t bleed to death if injured. Muscles tense as they ready for action, and postural reflexes prepare you to either stand up and attack or run away.

Endorphins are released so that pain or injury won’t slow you down. Functions not essential for fighting or fleeing, like digestion, immune response, and sexual arousal are inhibited to prioritise survival.

Activation symptoms include:

- hypervigilance, active threat seeking
- systemic hyper-arousal, darting eyes
- fast, shallow chest breathing
- inability to settle or pause
- increased blood flow
- elevated skin temperature
- fear, nervousness, anxiety
- anger, short-temperedness

- feelings of dizziness or giddiness
- 'butterflies' in the stomach
- desire to run away and/or hide
- feeling hot or sweaty
- tightness of muscles, leg or arms shaking
- short-term feats of speed, strength AND injury

It's important to understand clearly here that the issues related to stress ONLY begin to develop when this kind of stress becomes chronic...meaning when it begins and then doesn't end (or doesn't end soon), because the source of stress (aka, 'stressors') are ongoing... i.e., nothing is done to remove, or mitigate the stressor, and not enough is done to protect from or adapt to its impacts.

Chronic psychological stress is the most common and pernicious form of stress in the world. At an individual level, its manifestations include:

- suppressed immune function
- obesity and insulin resistance
- gut health issues, IBS, etc.
- eating disorders and dysfunctional attitudes to nutrition and food
- high blood pressure and hypertension
- increased chance of clots, strokes, DVT
- shortness of breath
- memory loss, neuronal cell death
- sexual dysfunction and diminished interest
- distraction-seeking behaviour
- obsessive-compulsive behaviour
- diminished decision-making capacity

- other maladaptive coping behaviours
- addiction
- sleep dysfunction
- anxiety disorders

At the social and community level it includes the statistics previously mentioned, but it may not be a stretch to include relationship and family distress and disruption to possibly even more tenuous, hypothetical conclusions such as: intergenerational friction, intolerance, elevated tribalism, political and social unrest and community frictions, even war...

What do you think...?

BACK

Ventral Vagal Complex (VVC)

You may have read this far into this Handbook and thought, *"wow, this all seems like bad news for my ability to manage stress!"* but you can let that thought go, because it is NOT "all bad news" - at all!

...Which brings us to the most evolved and critically important area of our entire threat response apparatus: the Ventral Vagal Complex...and this has never been truer than in the world we find ourselves living right now.

The VVC is integral because in all ways it functions to return our physiology to feelings of safety, calm and rest, which is the target of autonomic homeostasis. To the extent that you foster and support this critical function, you will be able to more effectively manage your stress levels and thus have a massive positive impact on both your health and the overall quality of your life. So now ask:

Do I want that for myself...?

For mammals especially, safety has a lot to do with family, tribe, community and communal coregulation, which explains why we are so attuned to social and environmental cues. In humans, the family or tribe is (or normatively considered as) synonymous with 'safety'.

But it also explains why we are so susceptible to rumours, fear-mongering and manipulation, because in a big way it is these social cues that

help us to determine our own level of moment-to-moment safety. It is so important because it is also the key to effectively managing our perceptions, which is the level at which our PC and SB stress responses kick in - for better AND worse.

The VVC also works in partnership with both the PC and the SC to place the HELPFUL, POSITIVE aspects of both in the service of homeostasis, so learning to put care of the VVC at the forefront of your stress management strategy then makes good sense, in every possibly way.

For example, it helps to disengage the other branches of the Vagal Nerve Complexes when it recognises SAFETY. In just two examples:

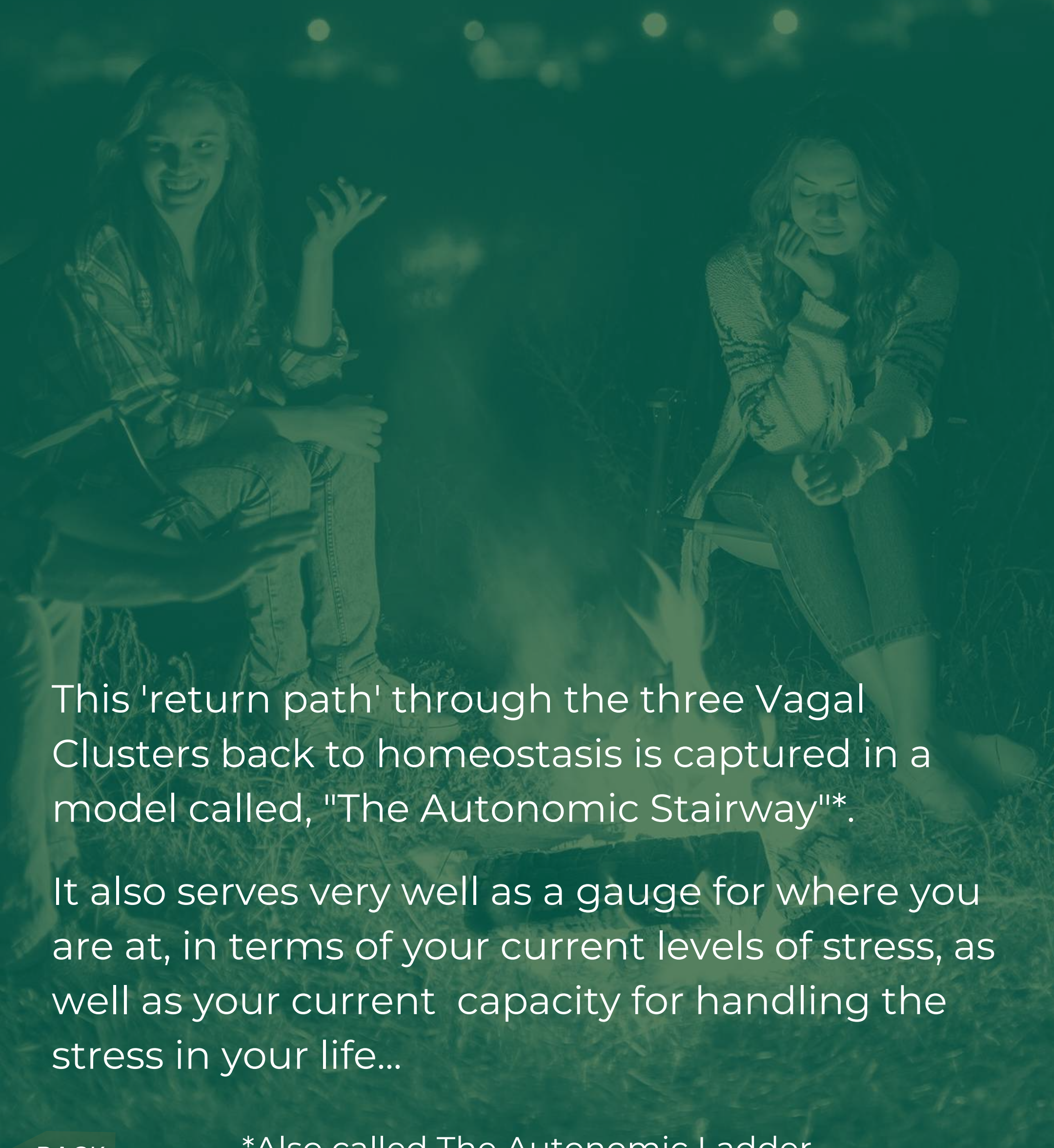
- VVC works with the SC to pump the "vagal brake", the mechanism that slows your heart when it has been racing, to reduce vigilance.
- VVC signals to the PC that it it's ok to emerge from hiding, to re-establish supportive social connection and co-regulatory relationships.

Such an approach might seem obvious when you understand better how the ANS works and if you consider where we come from, in our evolution: for the overwhelming majority of our history the biggest source of threat to our wellbeing came from the OUTSIDE, in the form of large, vicious or otherwise dangerous animals (including other humans), situations and

environments.

For our ANS, then, *"If we are not safe, we are chronically in a state of evaluation and defensiveness,"* meaning, a state of continuously elevated stress levels, forever seeking a return to homeostasis.

And so, understanding and working WITH the VVC is the most logical pathway back to especially the neuroception (the 'gut sensation') of safety - and thus homeostasis.



This 'return path' through the three Vagal Clusters back to homeostasis is captured in a model called, "The Autonomic Stairway"*.

It also serves very well as a gauge for where you are at, in terms of your current levels of stress, as well as your current capacity for handling the stress in your life...

*Also called The Autonomic Ladder

The Autonomic Stairway*

VENTRAL VAGAL

Improves:
digestion, intestinal motility, sleep quality, resistance to infection, immune response, circulation to non-vital organs (skin, extremities, genitals), oxytocin, ability to relate and connect, gut breathing, eye contact and head turning, vocal prosody.

Diminishes:
defensive and evasive responses and behaviours.

SYMPATHETIC

Increases:
blood pressure, heart rate, shallow chest breathing, adrenaline and cortisol, oxygen to vital organs, blood clotting, pupils dilate, aggressive, angry responses and behaviours, fearful flight and evasion, paranoid tendencies

Decreases:
immune response, social, sexual, digestion and elimination functions

DORSAL VAGAL

Increases:
Fear levels, increased fat storage, insulin activity, shutdown and immobilisation behaviours, endorphins (to numb and increase pain tolerance) conservation of metabolic resources.

Decreases:
Heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, muscle tone, vocal prosody, facial expression, eye contact, sexual response, immune response, depth of breathing.

BACK

Why Learn To Manage Stress?

...Indeed. If you've been paying attention till now then this is a highly rhetorical question!

In your GRP journey so far you've been armed with the deceptively basic but nonetheless critically important Resonant Breathing (RB) technique. But you are at a place in your education where you NEED to get very clear about why effective stress mitigation and management is so important to your short term feelings of health and well-being, your long-term health - even your very mortality.

Learning how to do that involves bringing your various faculties of awareness INWARD, to 'checking-in' and training yourself to pay closer attention to the sensations and processes of the body – which is why we started with the critical, normally autonomic function of breathing: it is your most immediate and thus most powerful, stress reduction tool (...can you feel it now..?)

And it is always available, whenever it's needed.

You've learned also about using this same awareness to monitor and track the thoughts and emotions that arise within you as well.

...So if there's still any lingering mystery about what is referred to here as 'awareness' ...know that it's the part of your mind that's paying attention to and taking in these words you're

reading now and viewing the images behind them ...it's this focused field of your mental-emotional energy...right HERE, right NOW.

Because, from now you'll be tossed a series of statistical 'bombs' relating to stress and its impacts... NOT to try and frighten you, but rather to help drive home - once and for all - some of the many VERY GOOD REASONS why stress awareness, management and reduction are all critical knowledge here in our 21st century...

but kinda stressful

HELPFUL STRESS FACTOIDS

As you'll learn here in your Stress Management program:

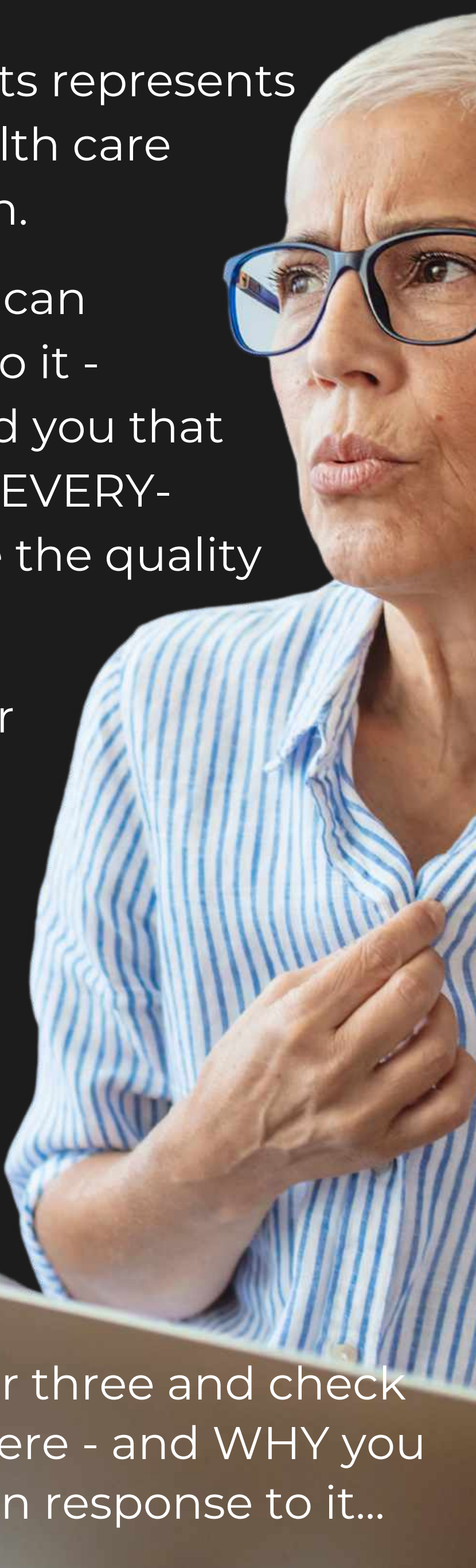
- Stress impacts you, your everyday wellbeing AND your long-term health
- Stress hugely impacts our economy and productivity
- Stress and its flow-on effects represents a massive drain on our health care system and health research.

And - because almost nobody can credibly claim to be immune to it - understand as you look around you that stress also negatively impacts EVERY-ONE you know ...and therefore the quality of ALL of your relationships.

...So you really need to ask your self:

...AM I OK

WITH THIS...?



Now, take a long, slow breath or three and check out the elephant in the room here - and WHY you need to take charge of your own response to it...

80% of GP visits are Stress-related*

According to UK stress specialist Dr. Rangan Chatterjee, stress has devastating long-term consequences for health and predisposes those unable to manage it to chronic health conditions, such as:

- Dysbiosis (arising from microbial imbalance)
- Obesity, especially abdominal and waist
- Type 2 diabetes
- High blood pressure
- Cardiovascular disease
- Metabolic Syndrome
- Alzheimer’s disease.

Stress plays a key role in:

- Insomnia
- Chronic Fatigue
- Auto-immune disease

...as well as many
mental health disorders
such as Anxiety and Depression.

*UK statistics

80%

of employees admit to being stressed and not knowing how to handle it

Looking into the workplace now, consider the ramifications, in terms of the well-known effects of stress on performance and decision-making... because this obviously includes the majority of people, and goes all the way up the entire management hierarchy.

This means that the overwhelming majority of us don't have to *imagine* the cost of ongoing workplace stress – because we are *experiencing* it directly, for a third to half or more of our adult lives.

*SOURCE: American Institute of Stress (US figures)

STRESS
releases inflammatory
CORTISOL
which is directly implicated in

gut-health issues, such as PAIN, BLOATING, ABDOMINAL OBESITY, INDIGESTION, IBS and INFLAMMATORY BOWEL DISEASES

The primary factor in these and other conditions stems from higher, sustained levels of cortisol being released into the body and the correspond-ing release of noradrenaline, (the brain's own stress hormone) ... both of which are found at much higher levels in those affected by stress.

*SOURCE: Healthline.com

When ignored or left unaddressed

Daily Stressors

exacerbate existing illness-related symptoms, such as:

- Increased pain sensitivity
- Elevated joint and muscle pain
- Eczema, Psoriasis
- Increased fatigue/lethargy
- Cold & flu symptoms
- Cardiovasuclar changes
- Elevated cortisol levels
- Decreased heart rate variability (HRV)

Aside from being the root cause of many chronic illnesses, stress contributes significantly to existing conditions, by exacerbating symptoms. Those with pain sensitivity, persistent fatigue, skin, gastro-intestinal and other anxiety-related conditions will also notice increased sensitivity and worsening symptoms during periods of high stress.

*SOURCE: Health Psychology

Chronic stress is well-recognised now as a significant contributing factor to

Chronic Pain.

In recent years, new terms have been coined to describe types and features of chronic pain. These include...

- '**Hyperalgesia**': increased pain perception, can result from lower pain thresholds and poor sleep
- '**Allodynia**': perception of pain to non-painful stimuli (because of chronic stress and central nervous system and sympathetic activation)
- '**Visceral sensitivity**': pain in the abdominal organs
- '**Aftersensation**': pain following stimulus sensation
- '**Central sensitisation**': which itself results in fibromyalgia, rheumatoid and osteoarthritis, musculoskeletal disorders, IBS, headache, inflammatory, visceral, and neuropathic pain, endometriosis and chronic pelvic pain.

- People with chronic pain have a +30-60% increased risk of Clinical Depression
- 44% chronic pain sufferers also meet the criteria for a sleep disorder

*SOURCE: FX Medicine

CHRONIC STRESS

is associated with the body losing its ability to regulate its own inflammatory response...and CHRONIC INFLAMMATION is a primary contributing factor in many kinds of CANCER...

Cortisol is DIRECTLY responsible for inflammation and prolonged cortisol release increases the risk of developing or worsening cancer progression.

*SOURCE: Prof. Sheldon Cohen, Carnegie Mellon Univ.

STRESS

is STRONGLY associated with the onset of

DEPRESSION

...and RELAPSE back into depression, in people who have recovered from it previously...

This has fed the massive increase in the past six decades in the prescription and long-term depen-dence on medications developed to manage depression and anxiety disorders.

...YEARS or even DECADES of dependence on medications that Pharma's own recommen-dations suggests should only be used for MONTHS.

*SOURCE: Prof. Sheldon Cohen, Carnegie Mellon Univ.

stress-related SLEEP ISSUES

Stress reduces REM-sleep, by maintaining high levels of noradrenaline in the brain.

REM is essential to stress management because it plays a significant role in processing strong emotional associations (eg., trauma, grief) out of our memories.

(...the emotional intensity of traumatic and stressful memories fade over time in part BECAUSE of the processes carried out during REM by the sleeping brain.)

DIABOLICALLY... this means that if your stress levels are suppressing your REM sleep, then the resulting higher noradrenaline levels also contribute to a reduced ability to recover from stress, resulting in snowballing negative spiral to your stress and anxiety levels - and further worsening your REM sleep!

*SOURCE: American Institute of Stress and Dr. Matthew Walker

The length of your TELOMERES, the little 'aglet'-type protectors that ensure your chromosomes and genes continue to healthily replicate, are heavily impacted by

how you respond to STRESS

Chronic stress both shortens your telomeres and reduces the availability of *telomerase*, the enzyme that builds and maintains healthy telomeres.

Shortened telomeres are directly implicated in compromised immunity and many forms of chronic diseases, especially cancers.

HOWEVER...Learning how to effectively manage stress not only reduces telomere shrinkage, but can actually reverse and grow healthier telomeres!

*SOURCE: Elizabeth Blackburn PhD, Elissa Epel PhD

...What you've been reading are just <u>*some*</u> of the health and social impacts of stress. The purpose for sharing this information is to help impress upon you the importance of taking care of your health by taking care of your stress.

NOW: here's another crucial thought for you about this – that is very topical for the strange and exciting times we find ourselves living...

It's well-known that we become much more impressionable and compliant when we are afraid. Politicians and the powerful; media and advertisers have been using the power of stress to influence our thoughts and behaviour, to make (and keep) us afraid or angry for a long, long time, for reasons ranging from fear of missing out (aka 'FOMO') to issues such as immigration or the ongoing 'need' for wars.

So know this... our intent here is to remind you of (or awaken you to) that reality: that there really *are* those who seek to use our natural fear and stress response mechanism against us... to keep us feeling disempowered, small and afraid, to further agendas that may not be in our interests, at all.

In fact, you may be feeling a little edgy right NOW, from thinking about the many reasons stress management is so important to your wellbeing.

BUT...we truly want you to take heart here, because there is A LOT that you can do to reclaim YOUR power!

...Which brings us to....

STRESS & THE MICROBIOME

You've already read about the central importance of the Vagus nerve to the body's ability to respond to stress. Well, now it's important to understand the intimately interrelated nature of the Vagus nerve and the Microbiome, to understand the importance of a balanced gut to the ability and willingness to regulate and even manage stress, as the following research extracts attest...

- *"Stress has the ability to alter the functional physiology of the intestine"*
- *"Exposure to physical and psychological stressors has been shown to impact the gut microbiota of both laboratory animals and humans... This study demonstrated that as little as 2 hrs of stressor exposure is enough to significantly change the structure of the microbiota associated with the colonic mucosa"*
- *"Exposure to physical and psychological stressors has been shown to impact the gut microbiota of both laboratory animals and humans... This study demonstrated that as little as 2 hrs of stressor exposure is enough to significantly change the structure of the microbiota associated with the colonic mucosa"*
- *"Many inflammatory diseases, such as Crohn's disease and other ulcerative-based diseases of the GI tract, are associated with stress"*
- *"It has been suggested that even childhood stress can lead to these diseases in adulthood"*
- *"Irritable bowel syndrome, which is a disease with an inflammatory origin, is highly related to stress"*
- *"Stress induces endotoxemia and low-grade inflammation by increasing barrier permeability"*
- *"Inflammatory responses in the peripheral and central nervous systems play key roles in the development and persistence of many pathological pain states"*

- *“Stress can trigger and/or exacerbate multiple conditions, including cardiovascular disease, migraine, multiple sclerosis, epileptic seizures, and neurodegeneration”.*
- *“The Brain–Gut axis is becoming increasingly important as a therapeutic target for gastrointestinal and psychiatric disorders, such as inflammatory bowel disease (IBD), depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)”*
- *“Under stress conditions, significantly up-regulated cortisol can have a major impact on the immune system… mainly being immunosuppressive”.*
- *“It has been demonstrated that stress can induce DNA damage… and contribute to skin aging by compromising genome integrity”*
- *“Cortisol, a glucocorticoid (GC) hormone, is known to cause a redistribution of white adipose tissue to the abdominal region and in addition increases appetite with a preference for energy-dense food (“comfort food”)”*
- *“Chronic (psychosocial) stress changes gut microbiota composition, as well as inducing behavioural and physiological deficits”*
- *“Specifically in skin, multiple neuroinflammatory conditions can be triggered or aggravated by stress, such as: psoriasis, atopic dermatitis, acne, contact dermatitis, alopecia areata, itch or Pruritus, and erythema”.*
- *"Increased long-term cortisol levels are strongly related to abdominal obesity”.*
- *“Inflammatory responses in the peripheral and central nervous systems play key roles in the development and persistence of many pathological pain states”*
- *“Stress can trigger and/or exacerbate multiple conditions, including cardiovascular disease, migraine, multiple sclerosis, epileptic seizures, and neurodegeneration”.*
- *“Finally… it is important to remark that gut alterations associated to stress facilitate the expression of virulent bacteria.”*

…Have you read enough…?

And, as you are hopefully piecing together here
(or if you didn't already know...)

How YOU manage STRESS

...is one of the best long term indicators of YOUR overall health

And HOW you manage YOUR stress has a direct bearing on your likelihood of developing any (or many!) of the kind of conditions discussed in the 'fact bombs' you've been reading here.

"How people respond to the daily stressors in their lives is predictive of future chronic health conditions."

Jennifer R. Piazza Ph.D et al

*SOURCE: Annals of Behavioural Medicine (2013)

THE MESSAGE ... is that, you will remain vulnerable and potentially at the mercy of blind chance and others who understand really well how stress works too... those able to push your buttons, pull your levers, grind your gears - and continue to set the agenda about what's important to YOU, in YOUR life and for YOUR loved ones and in OUR society.

This program is diametrically opposed to that. It aims to:

- awaken
- inform
- teach
- train and
- inspire you.

To take control and take action ...to give you tools you can use to assert your own authority over stress and, by that, assert more influence over the kind of access and impact you grant the rest of the world to affect your perceptions, your mental and emotional state, your decisions - and therefore your DESTINY.

...So, to wrap this (quite literally!) *stress-full* topic up: what are the takeaways here? Why is stress management essential?

- Unmanaged stress is directly linked to multiple, major health conditions, especially inflammation which is, in itself a major cause of chronic health issues, such as diabetes, IBS, cardiovascular, pulmonary and cancer-related diseases
- Stress is associated with the onset and exacerbation of depression, anxiety and sleep disorders
- Stress hits our economy hard, in direct and indirect costs and in lost productivity
- How much fun is it being stressed? Or being around stressed people? – what's the impact on ALL relationships, families, our children, communities, work colleagues?

...So why do we need to learn to manage stress?

Because according to the US government's own CDC, the impacts of stress are very much...

"THE Public Health Challenge of the 21st Century"

(And the REAL KICKER here? Most of the statistics presented here were tabled PRE-Covid pandemic! So just imagine what they are NOW...?)

BACK

So...Why Are We So Stressed...?

Hopefully, reading this Handbook is helping you to answer this question. But there's more:

Our threat response systems (the ANS) evolved to help us with crocodiles and sabretooth tigers...a 200m year-old solution to a problem that continues to evolve and multiply to this day.

WHAT WE INTERPRET AS THREATENING – the ‘sabretooths’ of our modern world - HAVE not just evolved and multiplied in the past 15,000 years, but their rate of evolution - in the past few decades alone - has also greatly ACCELERATED.

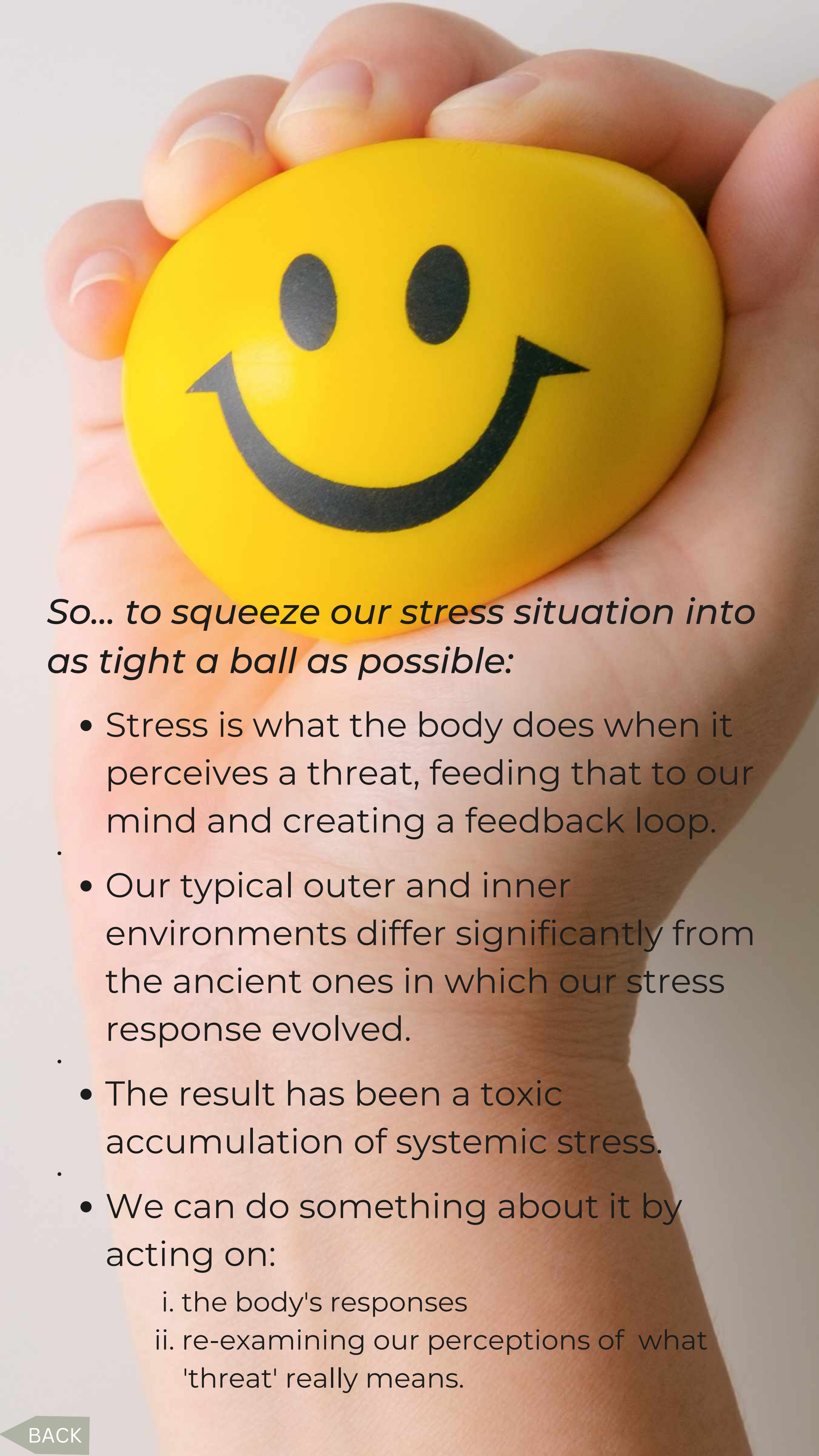
Our typical 'threats' these days are no longer physical objects in the outside world, but in the intangible, complex inner workings of OUR OWN MINDS, arising from interactions with other minds. These are the results of not only immediate perceptual and subconscious neuroception, but now also the weight we, each of us and collectively, carry...our personal histories, our memories and the stories we create and share about our life experiences - our very cultures - which shape and are re-shaped and amplified by these same perceptions.

And - despite its many wonders- the dawn of this Digital Age brings with it some very serious ramifications for this

issue of stress accumulation and management.

And it strongly suggests a need for solutions that act at the source: in both our physiology and in our perceptions. And this goes a long way to explaining the benefit and need of seeing the mind and body as two aspects of the same entity: a 'mindbody'... maybe even opening ourselves to the likelihood that there is much that we still don't understand about how the world... and ourselves... actually function.

Suggesting further the advisability of opening ourselves to a potentially huge field of possibilities...



So... to squeeze our stress situation into as tight a ball as possible:

- Stress is what the body does when it perceives a threat, feeding that to our mind and creating a feedback loop.
- Our typical outer and inner environments differ significantly from the ancient ones in which our stress response evolved.
- The result has been a toxic accumulation of systemic stress.
- We can do something about it by acting on:
    i. the body's responses
    ii. re-examining our perceptions of what 'threat' really means.

BACK

Stressor Types

Typical things that may be stressing YOU... as well as everyone you know or interact with...

PHYSICAL

- injury (pain, redness, swelling),
- illness (cause by bacteria, fungi or virus)
- disability
- noise (acute and chronic)
- environment (heat, cold, pollution etc),
- chemical, personal, home care products.

PSYCHOLOGICAL

- mental or emotional
- family
- relationships
- financial
- work
- ill-health
- past situations
- current circumstances
- decision making
- too big to-do lists
- deadlines
- pressure, hassles
- worrying conflicts
- overthinking
- inability to say 'no'
- feeling overwhelmed
- frustration
- tension
- grief
- strain, etc.

EXTERNAL

- catastrophes
- natural disasters
- wars
- economic downturn

LIFE EVENTS

- moving house, Birth of a child, death, marriage, separation, divorce, job loss, change, etc.

INTERNAL

Stress placed on internal organs by:

- inflammation
- dehydration
- diet
- over-exercise
- alcohol
- addications

...to name but a few...

BACK

The Elephant in the Room

Now, here's the thing: you can't fix a problem that you don't know or won't acknowledge is there... you already know that, right...?

Unfortunately, for most it is part of our social conditioning to want to BE SEEN as COPING. The desire to be seen as carefree means that many stress-related issues get swept under the carpet ...where they fester out of sight - or even worse: out of awareness.

These include:

- AVOIDANCE – If I can forget or don't think about it, it'll go away
- AWKWARDNESS – I feel embarrassed, inadequate or weak talking about it
- RELUCTANCE – I don't want to talk about it
- SILENCE - I'll say nothing and hope it stays unnoticed, or "we don't talk about such things"
- IGNORANCE – these symptoms are unrelated to stress, they're just random, 'ideopathic' events
- DENIAL – there's nothing wrong...maybe I'm just tired..? Such things never used to bother me!
- DIVERSION – It's just been a long day... what's for dinner? How's my team doing?
- **(TRUNK)** – y'know...sometimes it really HAS 'just been a string of long days'!

BACK

The Hand Grenade

Here's a useful metaphor for you to keep in mind while you are here, learning about your threat response system; about the importance of awareness in determining how well you respond, mitigate, manage or avoid your stressors:

Yes...it's a hand-grenade.

Now, imagine yourself holding a grenade in one hand... and the pin in the other, already pulled.

That is you, at the very moment a stressful situation arises.

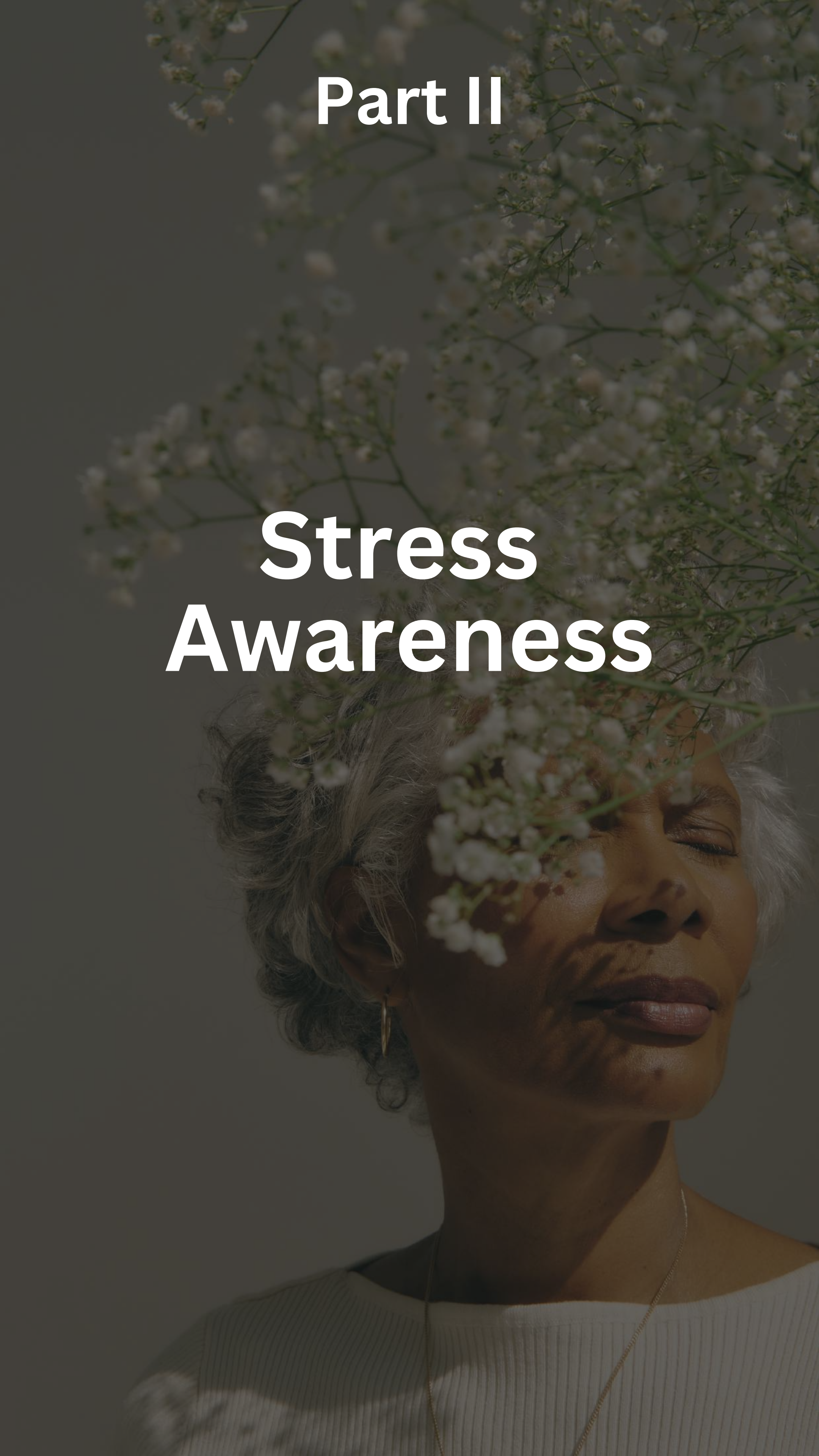
If you are unprepared, you are probably also alarmed, so your first reaction might be to either quickly throw it, or just stare at it till it goes...

'BOOM!'

Either way it's going to cause mayhem - and maybe someone is going to get hurt.

Effective stress management, then - starting with AWARENESS - is how you learn to put that pin back into the grenade... and later on, you'll also learn how to KEEP it in the grenade.

BACK



Part II

Stress Awareness

What is Awareness?

Your microbiome hears everything your mind thinks

'Awareness' is your primary tool of 'stress-readiness' – directing your power of focus and intention to look both within and without. You need to understand WHAT stress is; HOW it shows up, both psychologically and in your physiology; and you need to know WHY it is so important you learn to understand and be aware of it better than you already may be.

Becoming sustained WITNESS to thoughts, feelings, sensations and events in life is of supreme value because – with practice and over time - you will no longer be subject to or victim of them.

The state when I believe the thoughts and feelings that waft through awareness are 'mine' and/or 'reality' is called "fusion" and psychologically speaking generally considered unhelpful, in terms of effective mental and emotional hygiene.

Recognising the false identification inherent in fusion, and awareness that you are NOT the OWNER of those thoughts and feelings but the OBSERVER of thoughts and feelings is called 'defusion' and is a key attribute of positive mental hygiene...and being able to chill out.

Learning to apply this distinction allows you to take conscious control of how you respond to situations and events and make practical, affirming CHOICES that are congruent with your own values. It means taking charge of how you view the world, events and our own circumstances.

And needless to say: it is a supremely empowering skill to develop and continue to refine - and that ongoing 'polishing' of these skills is a fundamental aspect of this course.

This module is a deep dive into the importance of AWARENESS, and connecting it to your current state, to your thoughts and feelings, and what is happening around you. You will get insights into and notice connections (and false connections) between events, people, circumstances and your reactions, feelings, thoughts, motives, values, and biases. You will also begin to use awareness and see how it can reduce, arrest or even reverse the impacts of stress on your health.

It's important at this stage NOT to labour over trying to understand WHY you react or feel the way you do ... but rather to focus on WHAT your 'awareness' itself is showing, upon WHAT you're experiencing and whatever immediate connections you can establish - and to learn to implement immediate stress relief, in that moment.

While you often cannot control events, other people, or circumstances, by focusing and directing your AWARENESS you will learn what you DO have control over... in terms of your own perception of the world, what you choose to focus upon and your behaviour in the moment.

You will learn in this module that STRESS... does NOT arise from events, people, or circumstances, but from your PERCEPTION of those things.

"If it's out of your hands, it deserves freedom from your mind too."

- Ivan Nuru

Much of what stresses us also occurs in the buildup of small, non-obvious stressors – thoughts and feelings that arise from not just a single, visible source, but rather from accumulating and 'banking' - without discharging - many small, instances of fear, apprehension, shock, disappointment, guilt, shame, worry, overthinking, anxiety, embarrassment, anger, overwhelm, etc... (the list goes on and on – see the Feeling Chart at the end of your Lifestyle Prescription).

And often these stress sensations appear well before you are even aware of any single STRESSOR. E.g. you find yourself ANGRY and FRUSTRATED on the road going to work or dropping off kids at school.

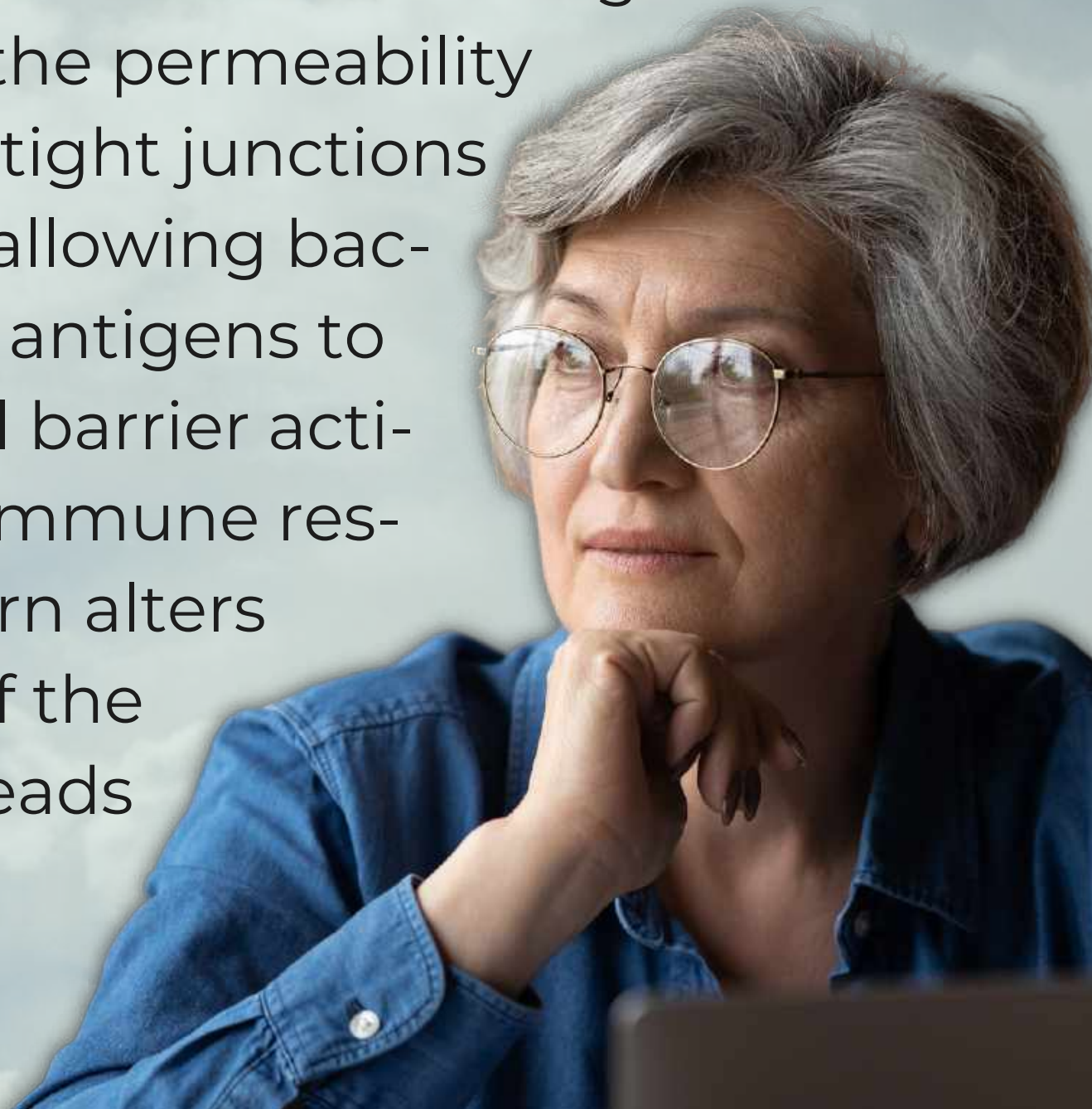
The point is, that when you start to improve your awareness around what's going on for you, then you also become more aware of cause-and-effect and other subtleties that resulted in you experiencing (or inflicting!) stress during that event, with that person or in that circumstance - and feeling the way you did as a result.

e.g. *"I drive more erratically when I'm feeling stressed...and now I also see it's at these times I'm short-tempered and keep getting cut off in traffic , which makes it all worse! ...So what's my part in this - and how can I do something about it...?"*

Bringing awareness to and examining each day's events will improve your awareness and ability to spot 'them' - your non-obvious stressors. Bringing your awareness into this usually unconscious space empowers yourself to take better action NEXT time... with Resonant Breathing and space to reflect on progressively better strategies to help you respond and act.

You will also develop awareness around how these 'stressors' and 'non-obvious stressors' play a PIVOTAL, perhaps even CAUSAL ROLE in the development of low-grade inflammation and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including depression, chronic fatigue syndrome, obesity, anorexia, bulimia, common cold, immune suppression, IBS, PMS, Thyroid disorders, metabolic syndrome, autoimmune conditions, chronic heart failure, type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and inflammatory bowel disease.

Stress-related emotions and resulting tensions increase the permeability of and disrupt the tight junctions of the gut barrier, allowing bacteria and bacterial antigens to cross the epithelial barrier activating a mucosal immune response, which in turn alters the composition of the microbiome and leads to enhanced HPA drive.



"HPA overdrive is activated by factors such as unremediated or poorly managed stress, over-exercise, poor sleep, caffeine, alcohol, chemicals (personal/home care), environmental toxins, infections... even antibiotic and medication use"

This enhanced HPA drive creates a physical stress in the body which results in detrimental symptoms. These detrimental symptoms then lead to more stress...

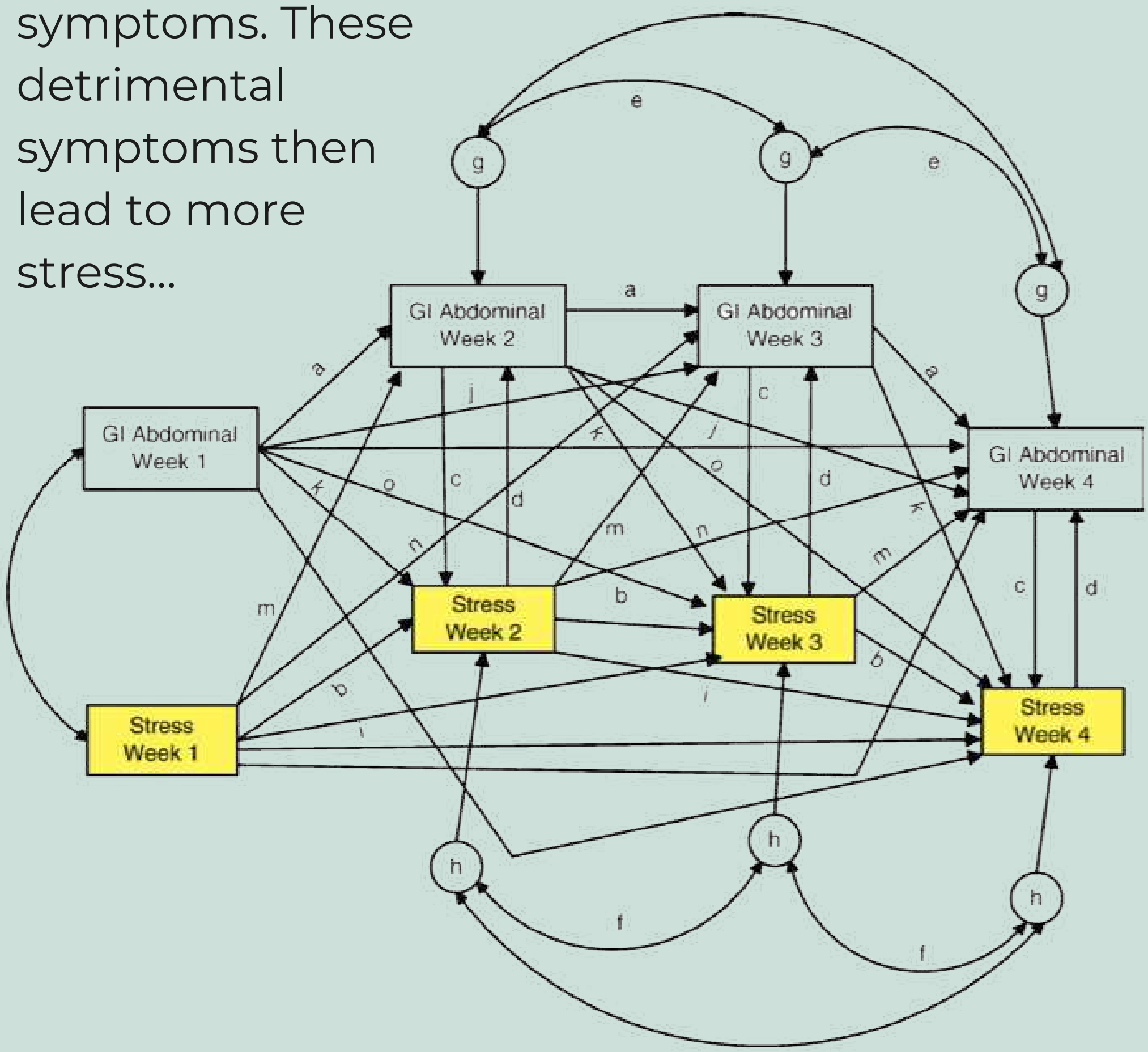
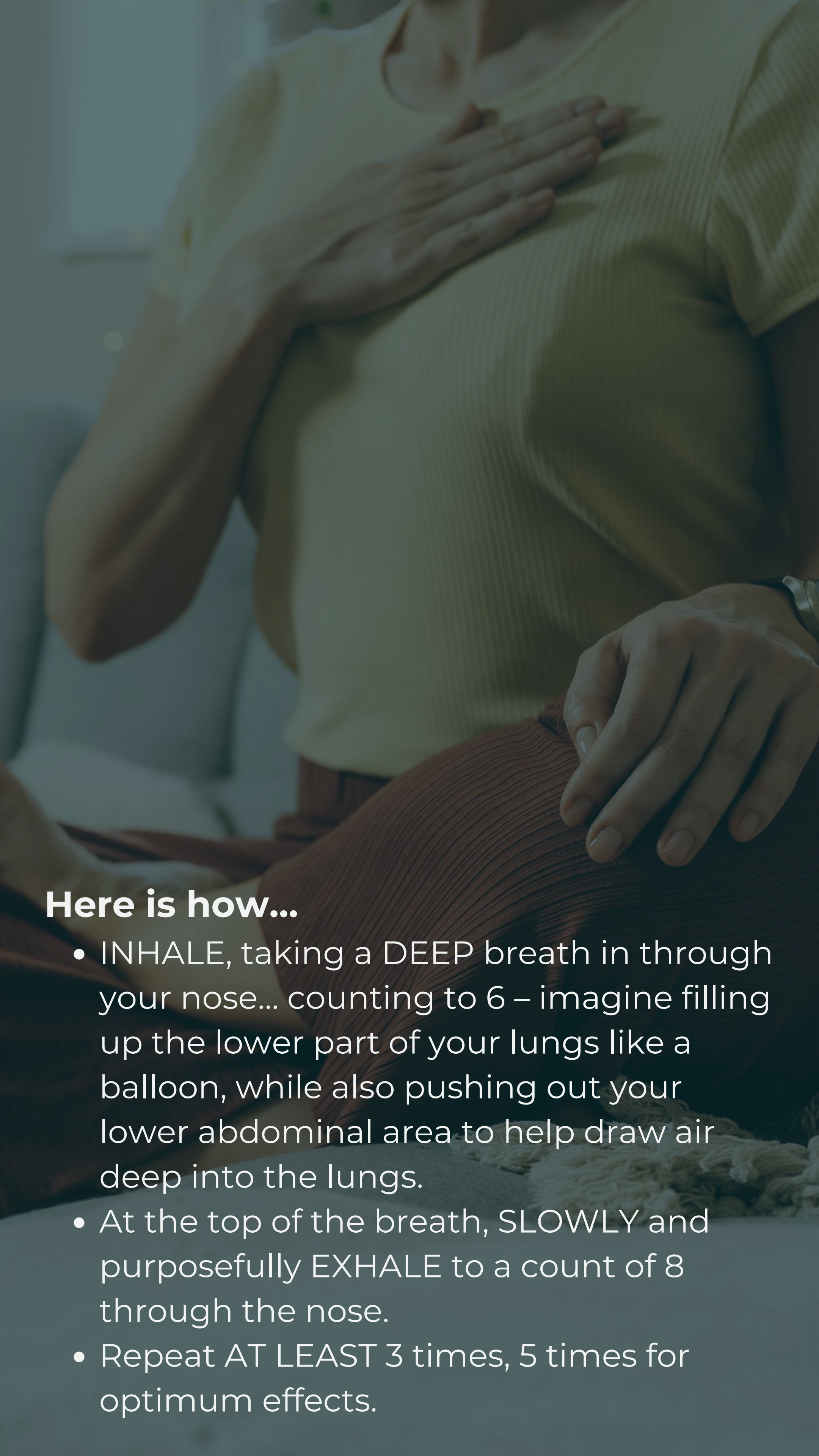


Fig. 1. Longitudinal model of causal relations between stress and GI symptoms.

... and the vicious cycle continues.

In this phase you will be using RESONANT BREATHING, day in and day out, as soon as you become aware of a stressor: an emotion, a sensation or a situation that initiates a stressful response in you.



Here is how...

- INHALE, taking a DEEP breath in through your nose... counting to 6 – imagine filling up the lower part of your lungs like a balloon, while also pushing out your lower abdominal area to help draw air deep into the lungs.
- At the top of the breath, SLOWLY and purposefully EXHALE to a count of 8 through the nose.
- Repeat AT LEAST 3 times, 5 times for optimum effects.

Becoming more self-aware provides practical opportunities you will use to develop an effective Resonant Breathing PRACTICE - while also mitigating and healing the damage caused by previously unmanaged ‘stressors’.

Extensive clinical studies show that implementing simple stress interventions (such as Resonant Breathing) when experiencing a stressful episode, activates the Ventral Vagal System (REST and DIGEST), directly stimulating the Vagus nerve. This increases overall vagal tone and induces a positive cycle of improved mood. It also decreases pain and anxiety levels... and best of all, improves your overall ability to both respond to and cope with stress!

The Vagus nerve is an essential part of the brain–gut axis and plays an important role in modulating inflammation and maintenance of intestinal homeostasis.

Remember: your health is now your priority and you NEED to make time to implement and learn Resonant Breathing.

...And if you are struggling, reach out in the GRP Hub, in Q&As and During live Round-tables, so we can help you find a way to make Stress Awareness and Resonant Breathing more effective for you.

BACK

CHECK-IN: Activating Awareness

Have you ever been at a meeting or group setting where you were all asked to check-in at certain stage(s) of the session? Pause here and consider: *what was that about?*

Chances are those running or attending the event wanted 'a feel' for where attendees were at, maybe their level of optimism about something; support of or resistance to ideas presented; to ensure that everybody was switched on, focused and engaged with what's happening – or even just to take the group's temperature or gauge their enthusiasm for being there.

Why? Because, when taken both mindfully and seriously, check-ins ENGAGE our AWARENESS, making us reach within ourselves and look more closely at where we are at in this moment of here-and-now, bringing it into FOCUS. It makes a great starting point for any endeavour. This can be very helpful at a group level for GATHERING people around an idea, or topic as well as anticipating obvious problems that might crop up. It makes sure that all are "aboard the same flight, enroute to the same destination"

Now here's a useful thing to know: ***check-ins work equally well when you're working alone, with just yourself.***

Why? Because consciously bringing awareness to something is the best way to really start to look at and engage with the thing at hand. So... here you are right now, about to start...

BACK

The 'Deep-Dive' Check-In

... please take this opportunity to do, a more structured, comprehensive check-in with yourself before you go further.

HERE'S HOW...

- Sit in a comfortable position,
- Inhale slowly and deeply but without excessive effort into your belly, taking your breath as low into your abdomen as you can.
- Exhale slowly and evenly.
- Repeat this cycle two more times, then relax and breathe naturally.

- As you are breathing, bring attention to different areas of your body, in no particular order, and notice how each bit feels, e.g., tense, relaxed, sore, energised, neutral, etc. This should take no more than a minute or so.

- Next, and *without dwelling upon any of it*, calmly consider and compare one area to another, one side to another (eg., your shoulders and hips) any current levels of stress you may be experiencing in the various areas of your life. To get you started, consider from the following:
  - Your health
  - Your partnership situation
  - Your work
  - Your finances
  - Your children
  - Your parents
  - Your general domestic situation, home, etc.
  - Your neighbourhood and larger community
  - Your nation's economics and politics
  - Global economics and geopolitics
  - Any other sources of stress that occurs to you.

- Now you have a quick snapshot of your own current stress 'landscape', taken at a time of relatively calm and objective observation, just as it is, without judgment or wishful thinking.

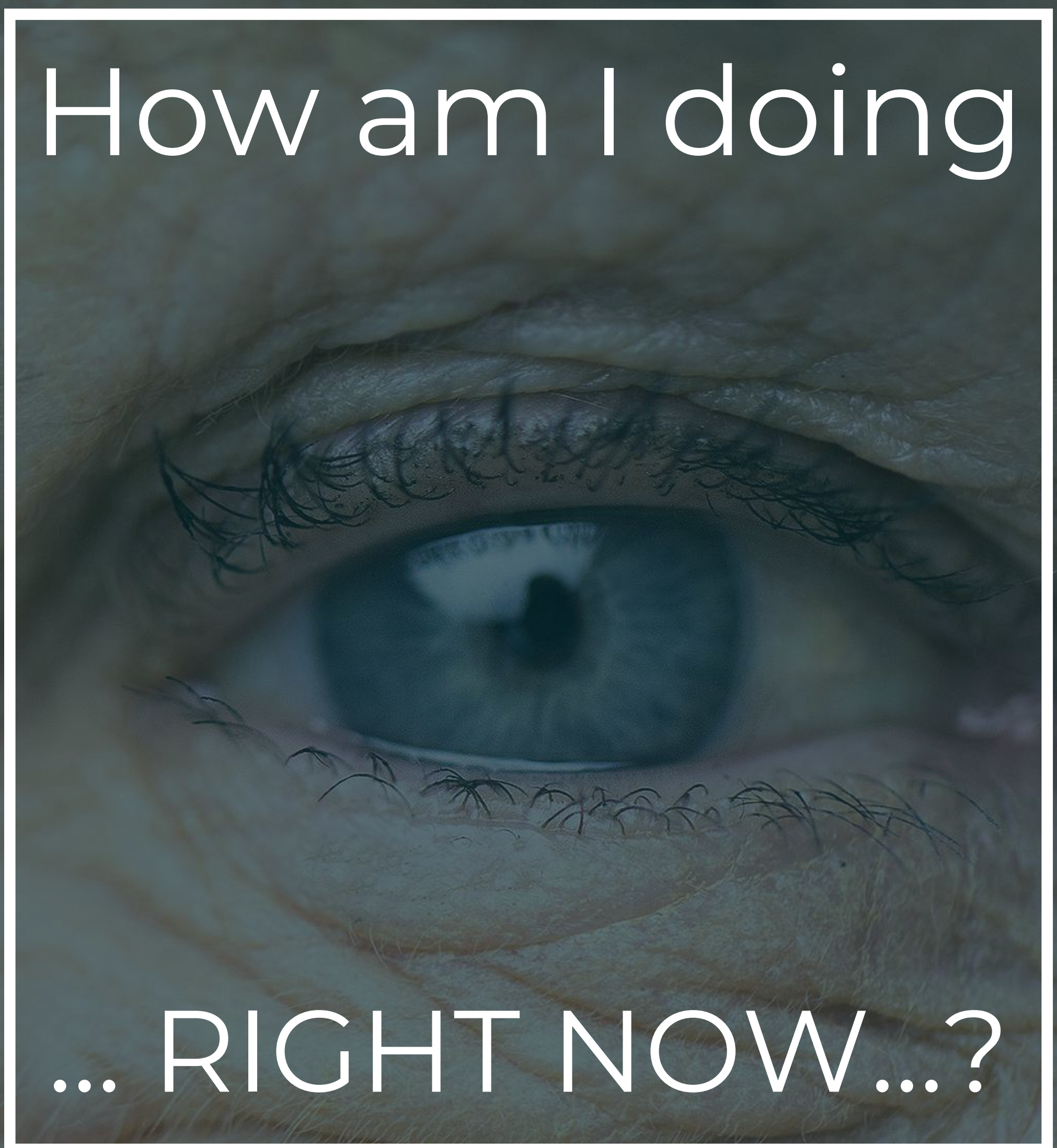
- Next, take a few moments to consider further the expectations you are bringing with you to this Program.
  - What do you already know about stress - especially your own?
  - What new knowledge are you hoping for?
  - What kind of skills would you like to pick up?
  - Are there any particular areas of your current stress landscape you are hoping to address before others?
  - Do you have a "hierarchy of stressors"? If so, what is it?

The above might take perhaps a few minutes. You are (of course) welcome to pause and jot notes about it, if you prefer. It might be useful or interesting to be able to refer back to where you are now at some future point.

All of which brings us to this present moment, NOW... where you're asked to consider the most important stress-related question there is, via...

The 'Snap' Check-In

Is far more intuitive, and goes like this...
Ask yourself...



THEN, without thinking about it long,
take your awareness deep into your body
and choose a number from 1-to-10,
to reflect where you're "at", in this moment...

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

As you can hopefully see, the check-in is a tool for explicitly INCLUDING YOURSELF and how you think and feel in your consideration of situations and events. It can report to you very clearly HOW and WHY (and even IF) you care about what's going on, as part of the specifics of any situation that arises, by bringing the 'ME' part into your conscious awareness.

This means not just overall thoughts and feelings that arise – but also your reactions: for example if your first reaction to this topic of check-ins was something like, *"This is a waste of time, give me something useful!"* and then you found yourself trying to resist or push that thought away and concentrate harder, then the check-in helps you make note of it ALL ... *Does the importance of check-ins make sense to you?*

I invite you to pause for a moment and find YOUR answer to the above question...

And if you didn't accept the invitation to pause... perhaps you thought, *"I'll just keep going and think about it later"*, then I'm going to really force the point here, to ask you to consider an even more important question for YOU...

Why the hurry?

Think about it...*exactly where are you rushing off TO...?*

You really need to get this point: that it's this very action of sprinting away from THIS moment and into some more important future that is a major aspect of the stress problem you came to the GRP

to address... but perhaps aren't yet ready to recognise.

So please bookmark this moment and ponder the impact such a "pause-and-consider" approach might have and the help it can offer you - especially if you caught yourself trying to rush "ahead" just now.

You are embarking on a program that tells you over and over that, to achieve optimum results, you need to be TEACHABLE and COACHABLE... And the course is now asking you to SLOW DOWN, to STOP and to do something, in real time...

...RIGHT NOW.

This point has to make sense or resonate in some way with you, because it is NOT A SMALL ONE!

BACK

Your Lungs and The Stress Response

Your SECOND stress-related 'super-power' may seem one of the most mundane things imaginable - yet this is exactly why it is so often overlooked. It comes from one of the body's most powerful muscles: the DIAPHRAGM, that fills and empties the lungs, starting just after we are born until the end of our days - with only the occasional hiccup (literally!) but mostly unconsciously and mostly without thanks.

Stress registers in your body and is regulated by your Autonomic Nervous System (or ANS). As mentioned previously, this is the largest nerve cluster outside of the brain, attached to the brain stem. The stem is the oldest part of your brain and this last fact is important because evolution has played a major part in how we have come to respond to stress.

This dense super-complex of nerves is a major player in how the body communicates to the brain and how the brain, in turn, communicates back to the body.

And, of ALL the organs and tissues serviced by the ANS...Only your LUNGS are under BOTH conscious as well as autonomic control, which makes them an ABSOLUTELY CRITICAL stress regulating tool!

...You may just experience a new sense of gratitude for your breath once you understand it's mechanics, function and importance a little better!

REMEMBER: “Breathing is the basis of relaxation”

As we become stressed for ANY reason we instinctively shift towards and into shallow breathing. In evolutionary terms it makes sense, as this way of breathing enhances short-term alertness and greatly increases our immediate agility, making us more adept at fleeing from ancestral predators and perilous situations. The action consists of drawing air into the lungs, using the intercostal muscles between the ribs instead of the diaphragm. As a result, the chest expands instead of the belly.

You may have noticed yourself, that after periods of intense activity, such as a sudden fright or even bursts of energy associated with 'fun stuff' like sports or exercise, you might suddenly push out your belly, inhale through your nose and give out a "sigh of relief", often through your mouth (try it now, and see if it feels familiar).

This is just one part of the complex physiology of your body's inbuilt desire to return to the rest state ('homeostasis'), using the diaphragm and drawing air to the bottom of the lungs. And because this is one element of an evolved suite of response mechanisms, chest breathing isn't merely associated with stressful events, it can itself activate the stress response - whether you are actually experiencing anything stressful or not.

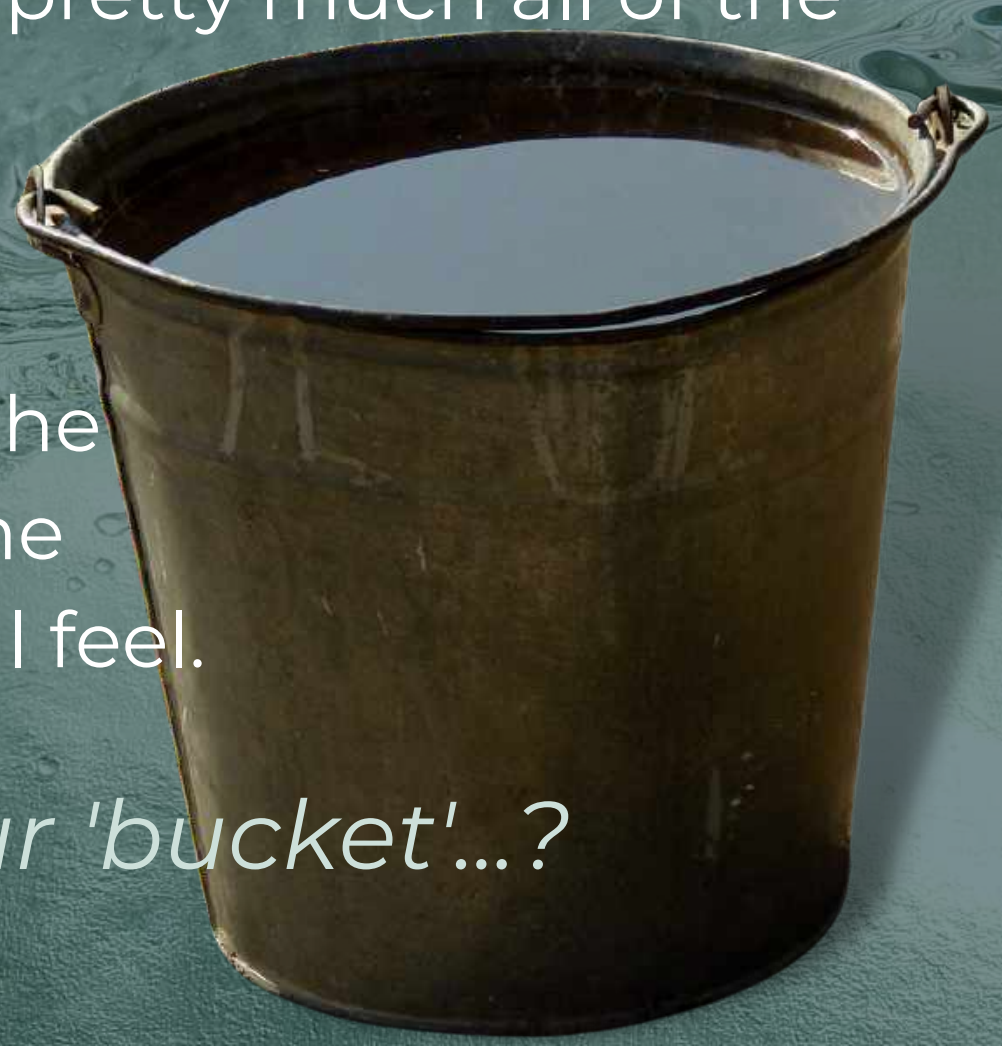
One problem with this for 21st century humans is the social stigma associated with having a protruding belly that makes it simply unattractive.

...This means that many of us spend our days habitually breathing only from the chest, as an ingrained habit - which thus keeps many in a constantly elevated state of artificially-induced stress.

Shallow breathing is associated with anxiety disorders, panic attacks, hyperventilation, shock, asthma, pneumonia, pulmonary edema, and a buildup of carbon dioxide in the body known as hypercapnia...So imagine the mixed messages being sent and received throughout your body? To your subconscious? To your immune system?

Such a continuously activated stress response presents us with some serious health, social and economic problems, for all of the reasons detailed in the next section - but there's more: our ability to hold onto and function under stress works kind of like a bucket. And if your 'bucket' is near to full, from an accumulation of such stress 'miscues' - not to mention ACTUAL stressors - then it doesn't take much to begin to feel overwhelmed as a result.

The good news is that you can train yourself to breathe diaphragmatically pretty much all of the time. It just takes practice, like any muscular skill. The more often you practice diaphragmatic breathing, the more habitual it will become - and the less stressed you'll feel.



...How full is your 'bucket'...?

BACK

Stress First Aid: RESONANT BREATHING

A Refresher

To use this simple diaphragmatic breathing tool for the first time, start by finding a comfortable, seated position, sitting up relatively straight but not rigidly. Once familiar with it, you'll find you are able to do it in any position - even while walking.

1. Starting down at your lower abdomen, INHALE GENTLY, DEEPLY and SLOWLY through both nostrils, inflating your belly and then lungs, like balloons, to a count of six.
2. Just as your lungs reach their capacity (ie., without strain or overfilling them) GENTLY release your breath, exhaling SLOWLY and with control to a count of eight.
3. Repeat steps 1 and 2 twice more to complete a single cycle.

Resonant Breathing brings the power of focused attention into the body's rest-state breathing apparatus . It exaggerates and simulates the breathing pattern associated with calm relaxation, acting directly on your ANS to dampen and down-regulate the body's stress responses. It also feeds this same calming information back into the ANS and back up into the brain, sending neuroceptive (the body's internal, pre-conscious, physiological intercom-munications system, centred in the gut) signals that calm your physiology and cut stressful feedback loops that can further excite the brain and then feed unhelpfully back to the ANS.

"Willing yourself to breathe heavily for a short, intense time...can be profoundly therapeutic. It's only through disruption that we can be normal again... [It] snaps the body out of its funk so that it can properly function... Conscious heavy breathing teaches us to be the pilots of our autonomic nervous systems and our bodies, not the passengers." **- James Nestor, "Breath – The New Science Of a Lost Art"**

You NEED to apply the Resonant Breathing technique immediately when you notice stress. You can do it anywhere, anytime to instantly lower your physiological stress response. When it comes to super-effective first aid... breathing is where your unconscious and conscious minds meet. Deep, slow diaphragmatic breathing stimulates both your Parasympathetic and Ventral Vagal branches of your ANS which function together to disengage your Sympathetic nervous response.

Abdominal breathing with a slightly longer exhale has a quite noticeable physiological calming effect, sending a neuroceptive message of safety, helping to calm the mind and prepare the body for relaxation.

The SOONER you use it, the more preventative effect it will have, saving you from the harmful effects of your body being flooded with Cortisol (the body's stress hormone) and your brain and nervous system with Noradrenaline (the stress neurotransmitter). The sooner also it will help to mop up and flush already circulating Cortisol from your system, so you're not tainting or influencing subsequent experiences and interactions with the poisoned chemistry of hypervigilance and threat.

BACK

SO...WHAT DO WE DO WITH AWARENESS...?

The first role of bringing awareness into any situation is so you can mitigate the symptoms and make the most accurate appraisal of what that particular situation is about - ie., assessing why it is stressful for you.

The NEXT thing is to get clear about WHY it had the effects it had on you.

Why is it important to understand why something is stressful for you...?

Think about it: if you aren't clear about WHAT IS DISTURBING for you in or about a given situation... then how can you know... how can you be clear or confident about WHAT THE BEST RESPONSE to it is...?

BACK

REFLECTION - WHAT'S GOING ON IN ME?

Without extensive practice, the middle of a stressful situation is probably the hardest time to reflect on what is REALLY going on for you...

But how useful... how POWERFUL would it be if you could get yourself to do just that...?

Tactically speaking, as mentioned the first step in any kind of stressful situation is always going to be to bring down your level of unhelpful vagal activation. This means that you will always be better served by beginning resonant breathing as soon as possible... that is, as soon as you become aware that activation is about to happen... or is happening... or has just happened.

...And, when you think about it...acting from a place of relative calm makes for a far better quality response to what's going on as well...? Far better than just reacting... right?

And after you have done that, then whenever you are able to reflect upon the situation, ie., when you no longer need to act, but while it is still as fresh as possible in your mind, you will also be greatly served by then reflecting on exactly what led to a stress response activation.

When it comes to it, however, many bog themselves down into DESCRIBING THE EVENT, instead of the actually important part: looking at WHAT ABOUT THE EVENT is disturbing to them.

BACK

FINDING THE 'ROOT' DISTURBANCE

Think about the difference between the following reports about the same disturbance...

REPORT 1

"I blew up up at the kids tonight because they were sitting around scrolling on their phones when I got home from work and they hadn't done any of their chores. My son had the gall to ask me, "What's for dinner...?" without even saying "Hi" first! I just had a meltdown!

They never do their chores or contribute to the home without me nagging - it's easier to just do it myself. It makes me so angry at times I just snap at them. And then they avoid me and the air is really heavy for the rest of the night.

And even when I do ask nicely, they say they are busy with assignments - yet they seem to have all the time in the world to scroll or binge watch something. It's really getting me down and my husband is no help as he's never home till dinner."

...That sounds like a fairly common situation, doesn't it...? But even so....What is really going on? What is so upsetting about this situation?

REPORT 2

"I blew up up at the kids tonight they were sitting around scrolling on their phones when I

got home from work and they hadn't done any of their chores.

It's disturbing because it feels so unfair - I feel like everybody's slave, doing all the work around the house, while my needs, wants and feelings are never considered – I don't feel I am important to them at all, except in terms of how quickly I can satisfy their needs!

It's disturbing to think that my kids don't actually see or care about me as a person... about how hard I work and how tired I am when I get home... that their love is conditional upon what I DO, not who I AM to them.

I am disturbed about my relevance in the home ... maybe completely irrelevant - except as an unpaid 'maid', who does everything!

It also disturbs me to think about my parenting abilities and whether I'm failing (- or have failed!) in this area.

It's disturbing also in that I don't feel supported by those who matter to me most - husband included here - who SAY they love me but do little to SHOW it (beyond some easily purchased gift for my birthday or Christmas)

It's disturbing most of all because I have no idea what to do about it... what I'm left with seems to be nagging and alienating the people I love the most... who I fear may reject me if I really speak up and try to change things."

... Do you see the difference?

BACK

Part III

Stress Relief

Introduction

Your Stress Relief Module contains essential information and straightforward yet practical and powerful techniques you CAN implement to help relieve symptoms of stress, giving you the mental/emotional 'space' to better work out HOW you will manage the physical, mental and/or emotional stressor(s) behind it.

Think of it as learning a new language or sport... It takes time and dedication to become skilled. You need tools such as the ones offered here AND you need opportunities to practice and improve them - which life gives you, for free!

You must be persistent and very patient and compassionate with yourself while learning. But make no mistake: YOU hold the key to your health, and learning effective stress relief techniques is a game changer.

First and foremost... remember that stress is NOT an event but a physiological state and part of your response to circumstances you perceive (including unconsciously, via neuroception) to be threatening, adverse or highly demanding.

Obvious symptoms may include sensations of strain, pressure, anger, fear, overwhelm, frustration, tension, nervous tension, worry, anxiety, nervousness, trouble or difficulty, distress, trauma, pain, grief, sadness, hassle or even just annoyance.

Understand... events can be like the weather and are very often out of our control ... But to a very large extent you CAN train yourself as to HOW you respond to events and situations in your life - and the contents of this course will help you learn to do that.

...And remember...

"You can't control the wind... but you CAN control your sails."

BACK

YOUR UNDERTAKING

During this phase of your GRP you are expected to learn the important relief techniques herein and to thoroughly explore each and every one of them and start to develop skills in using the ones you determine suit you best.

Not every technique will suit you and some will be more helpful than others at different times - BUT without using each one, you will never know. Therefore, you need to EXPLORE ALL of them, with an open-minded spirit of willingness to be surprised and delighted.

Think of it as trying on a pair of jeans and finding ones that FIT you perfectly! Of course, jeans can become ill-fitting over time, which means it's time to go exploring again!!

Throughout this phase you are required to implement EACH technique listed in this HANDBOOK, until you are clear on which techniques are / are not helpful to you and in what kind of situations each can be helpful.

For example, chanting "Om" in the middle of a meeting might not be the most effective tool to use, whereas resonant breathing would be entirely appropriate and yet also quite unobtrusive.

The ultimate effectiveness and comfort or even enjoyment you derive from EACH and EVERY Stress Relief technique you adopt and own is utterly dependent upon HOW DEEPLY you take your awareness into it ... how engaged you are in the activity itself... paying close attention to WHAT and HOW you are doing, in that moment.

The tendency when NOT taking your mind with you into your activity is that your body may be doing one thing on 'auto-pilot', while your mind is a million miles away, still stewing over problems.

And this detachment greatly diminishes (but doesn't negate) effectiveness...and may even be unsafe!

REMEMBER: It can take time to learn 'how to' pay attention, so be patient and just keep practicing!!

BACK

STRESS RELIEF

Here you'll refresh your understanding of how Stress impacts your Microbiome (and thus your health) and learn a number of stress relieving strategies to implement so you can relieve it IN THE MOMENT while you work on improving overall stress management over the course of the GRP.

Why is implementing RELIEF techniques SO important and KEY to transforming your health?

STRESS... in the form of fear, overthinking, worry, anxiety, anger, overwhelm (and this is not evening touching on 'bigger picture' stressors) plays a pivotal, perhaps even causal, role in the development of low-grade inflammation and non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including but not limited to depression, chronic fatigue syndrome, obesity, anorexia, bulimia, common cold, immune suppression, IBS, PMS, Thyroid disorders, metabolic syndrome, autoimmune conditions, chronic heart failure, type 2 diabetes, rheumatoid arthritis, non-alcoholic fatty liver disease and inflammatory bowel disease.

Stress induces increased permeability and disrupts tight junctions of the gut allowing bacteria and bacterial antigens to cross the epithelial barrier and activate a mucosal immune response, which in turn alters the composition of the microbiome and leads to enhanced HPA drive. This creates a vicious cycle of stress causing a physical stress in the body which results in detrimental symptoms and more stress.

In fact, it has been well documented that VERY short stressors (i.e. over a short 2-hr period) can significantly impact the microbiota and actually change the community profile and reduce the relative proportions of the main beneficial microbiota and facilitate the expression of virulent pathogenic bacteria.

Not for you to be SCARED but PREPARED.

You have a choice, to be REACTIVE or PROACTIVE!

Your GRP stress relieving techniques are all about being PROACTIVE.

Stress is the WEATHER to your inner garden. You cannot avoid it, nor in some instances prevent it, but you CAN be proactive in the moment and choose how to react, to mitigate immediate and ongoing damage.

Stress relief and the management of stress (which we will be covering in future phases) is KEY to your recovery and essential for a robust and healthy functioning Gut Microbiome.

Research has provided invaluable insights into the brain-gut axis. An amazing bidirectional communication (crosstalk) reveals a complex communication system between the brain and your Microbiome.

STRESS RELIEF interventions activate the Parasympathetic nervous system, directly stimulating the calming aspect of the Vagus nerve and improving 'vagal tone'.

This in turn creates a positive cycle of improved mood, decrease in pain and anxiety levels... and best of all improved stress coping.

Your Vagus nerve is an essential part of your brain–gut axis and plays an important role in the modulation of inflammation and the maintenance of intestinal homeostasis (stability)

There is clinical evidence for the efficacy of stress relief strategies used in the GRP, that lead to an increase in Ventral vagal tone and reduced Sympathetic activation.

The result is an overall downregulation of the stress response and a great improvement in Gut Microbiome health... which means a huge improvement in YOUR health.

Remember YOUR health is YOUR priority and as such you NEED to make time to implement Stress relieving strategies.

If you are struggling, reach out.

Struggle is a stressor - and not always a negative one. But if you would welcome support, then you are welcome to book a private consult and let us help you find a way to more fully engage with what is both a critical area of the GRP and a major factor in your own life.

VAGAL TONING PATHWAYS

Vagal Toning is about improving your Heart Rate Variability (HRV), a critical marker of overall systemic health and important indicator of stress levels.

Toning is carried out along two distinct and overlapping pathways in the three, interconnected branches of the massive Vagus Nerve complex, that makes up our Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)...

As we know, the three branches are:

- Parasympathetic
- Sympathetic
- Ventral Vagal

The two pathways are:
VENTRAL VAGAL & SYMPATHETIC and
VENTRAL VAGAL & PARASYMPATHETIC

BACK

VENTRAL VAGAL & SYMPATHETIC

Co-activation of these two branches, the **Ventral Vagus** *(the social connectivity and co-regulation, head, neck, sternum branch)* in conjunction with our **Sympathetic** *(fight or flight, upper torso region)* branch enables us to happily engage in activating, energising activities. Think of kittens or bear cubs playing; there's some competitive friction, lots of fun action and the occasional, short-lived spillover into mild but actual aggression, as social bonds, hierarchies and boundaries are tested and reinforced by enacting what are literally danger and stress 'simulations' carried out in a climate of overall safety.

Sports are a classic example, that adds rules, equipment and goals and helps to maintain and strengthen this co-activating relationship between these two branches.

This is desirable because the more often these two branches activate together, the greater likelihood that both branches will also be activated during moments of genuine stress, creating the space also for a healthier, higher-quality response to the situation.

HOWEVER... many sports and exercise activities can also worsen existing inflammation conditions and are NOT RECOMMENDED for the duration of the GRP...Which is why you will be learning and adapting to the kind of movement activities in the following section...

VENTRAL VAGAL & PARASYMPATHETIC

When our Ventral Vagus is activated in conjunction with our Parasympathetic *(shutdown & immobilisation, dorsal and gut region)* branch, it enhances our capacity to down-regulate BOTH our stress response AND any existing systemic inflammation.

This type of stress relief and movement activities are especially favoured during the GRP, as they help you to move more quickly and effectively towards improved Gut Microbiome health and overall systemic homeostasis.

Such activities involve the quietening, dampening movements and especially connection-based activities. Think: Yin yoga, meditation, PMR, massage, cuddling a friend, pet or teddy. And it includes any number of everyday activities, done in any number of practical ways - for their own, pleasurable sake and not just for when you are feeling stress or anxiety.

But they are effective as relief too, and best applied as soon as you feel stress levels rising.

Movement affects your state and - if it's the right kind - will shift your physiology away from stress. But because the source of stress is neuroceptive (unconscious sensation felt in the nervous system) and perceptive (conscious sensory input) and not in any event or circumstance itself, the kinds of activities that follow are of great help in relieving the stress response - and can act quickly, IF you prioritise it by acting quickly.

BACK

IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIES WITH PURPOSE

Before you start trying out the Stress Relief techniques listed in this handbook... it is important that you understand that the KEY to getting the positive health benefits of each, is to do each of them with **PURPOSE**.

When a stressful event, occurence, thought or otherwise occurs immediately do your Resonant Breathing (RB)... this helps to reduce the cascade of inflammatory hormones from the stress response and will allow you to get into a 'calmer' state to implement your RELIEF technique.

RB is your 'first aid' like applying a compression bandage to a wound to stop the bleeding.

Next decide WHICH Stress Relief techniques you will use and then draw your mind into the immediacy, reality and sensation of the activity, and carefully monitor how it brings down physiological stress markers and how your mind slows down and releases unrelated thoughts.

Think of this as the releasing the compression bandage and now applying essential treatment.

Tapping (Emotional Freedom Technique)

TAPPING, or EFT, is considered a psychological acupressure tool and the form known as 'Clinical EFT' is recognized by the American Psychiatric Association as an effective - even potent - stress as well as pain relief technique, and derives its nickname from the simple practice of TAPPING a selection of acupuncture meridian points, anchoring that behaviour to the unhelpful thought, feeling or sensation, pairing a SETUP phrase with a SELF-ACCEPTANCE phrase, for example:

- *"Even though I'm scared of spiders, I accept this about myself"*
- *"That thought about <xyz> has returned and I can be ok with it."*
- *“Even though I'm worried about my financial situation, I deeply and completely accept how I feel.”*

Or even,

- *"I accept this situation and myself"*.

HERE'S THE THING: the clearer you can be about WHAT is disturbing you, then connecting that to a willingness to unconditionally accept and support yourself while your course of action for resolving that disturbance becomes clearer is the most empowering course of action in that moment.

Tapping (EFT) Technique

Before you dive into doing the EFT Tapping technique (taught in its most basic form below) ensure you practice a few times, when relaxed, so that you can easily practice.

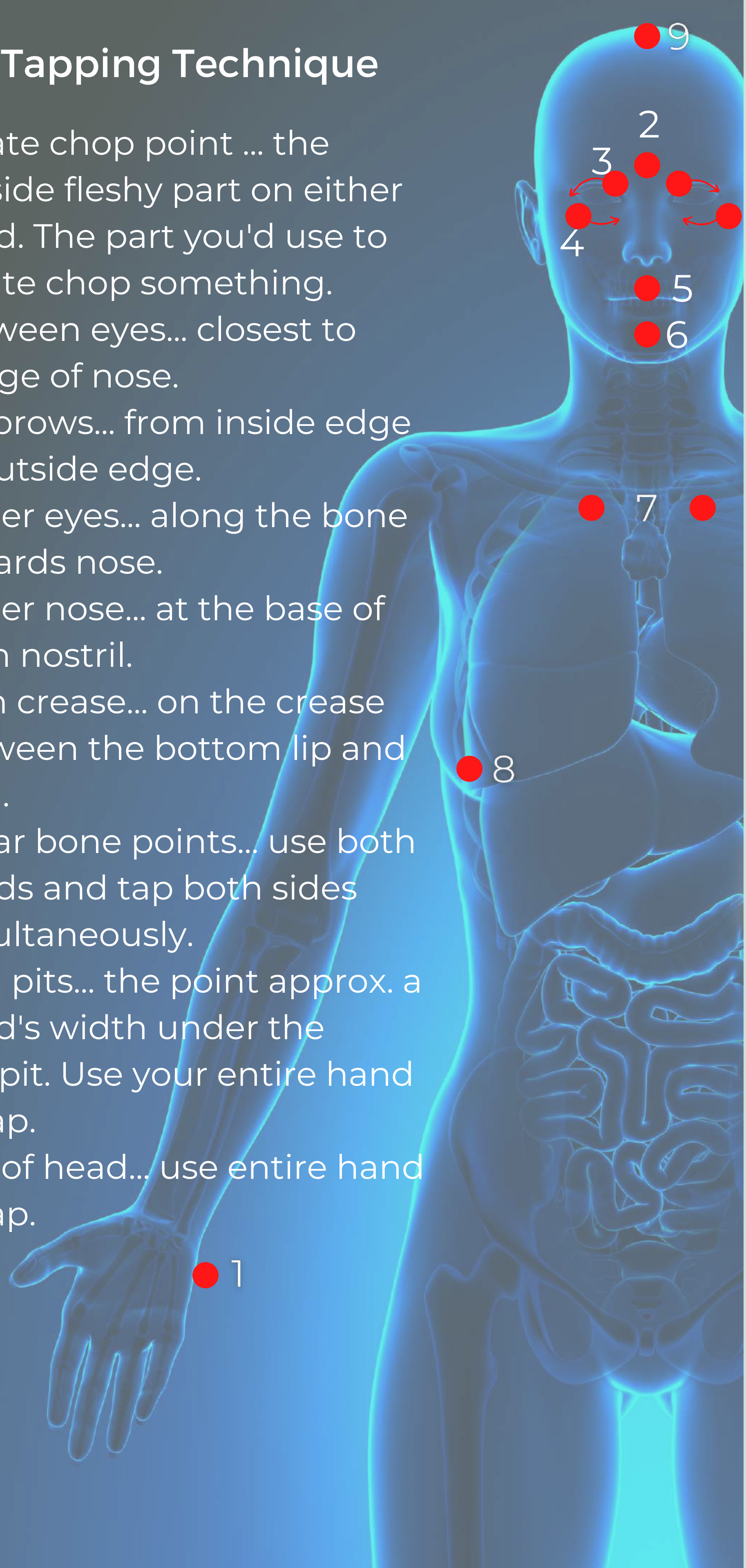
We highly recommend you jot these instructions into your Stress Relief Notebook so you have it with you at ALL times.

This way you will be comfortable with the process and be able to refer to it, in the moment, with ease.

1. Write down the SETUP phrase paired with SELF-ACCEPTANCE phrase (as per examples of previous page).
2. You will use either your forefinger and/or middle finger to tap. However, for some you will use your entire hand.
3. Say the SETUP phrase paired with SELF-ACCEPTANCE phrase THREE times, out loud, while tapping on the first point (diagram on next page)
4. Then move to the second point tapping on each acupressure point (2 to 9) repeating the phrase until finished

EFT Tapping Technique

1. Karate chop point ... the outside fleshy part on either hand. The part you'd use to karate chop something.
2. Between eyes... closest to bridge of nose.
3. Eyebrows... from inside edge to outside edge.
4. Under eyes... along the bone towards nose.
5. Under nose... at the base of each nostril.
6. Chin crease... on the crease between the bottom lip and chin.
7. Collar bone points... use both hands and tap both sides simultaneously.
8. Arm pits... the point approx. a hand's width under the armpit. Use your entire hand to tap.
9. Top of head... use entire hand to tap.



BACK

CHANTING... This is closely related to *Resonant Breathing*, in that it purposefully engages and channels deep, abdominal breathing, but instead in the service of generating a vocal resonance, which has further calming effects on the Ventral Vagus Nerve, via the Auricular Branch (in your ears).

Maybe the most famous worldwide is the "Om" chant, and there are other chants used ceremonially in many cultures to prepare the mind for religious services, for prayer and for meditation and/or to close out a practice. when developed into a practice, chants become a subconscious cue for deep calm, harmony and release - making them an excellent Stress Relief tool.

A close relative of the chant is the activity of **HUMMING,** which you will notice that many people do instinctively when stressed, nervous or excited. **SINGING** is much the same and, like chanting, both serve to improve overall Vagal Tone.

There are many 'chants' and you'll find 'Om' both easy, relatively convenient and very relaxing. And you can do it in meditation, while barefoot walking, driving, cooking, in the shower or on the toilet.

HERE is an example where you can chant along with music, created just for that!

While there's a lot to be said for just cranking up your favourite playlist, even more effective for down-regulating your stress response is to listen to chanting, especially those such as by Buddhist or Christian monks... Like your playlist, they are also more fun and effective when you get to know them and can join in!

BACK

GARGLING ... An easy one to do ANYTIME.

Excuse yourself from the stressful occurrence and either head to your bathroom at home, or at work, or grab your water bottle and head outside.

Cold water is best as it stimulates the area and doing it LOUDLY is even better as it activates your vocal cords in a resonant way that, like chanting, activates the Ventral Vagus.

Gargle with a mouthful of water for 15-seconds. Spit out and then repeat 3 times.

LAUGHING... Seriously: when is the last time you REALLY laughed?

You've heard the saying..."Laughter is the best medicine"... and research concludes that laughter oxygenates your blood, decreases cortisol and increases endorphins the feel-good hormones.

Finding it difficult to laugh? Think about a comedian you love and some of the 'statements' they make, that you love and laugh too. Also catch up with friends who make you laugh, or you can laugh with. Or sit down and watch a funny sit-com or stand up comedian.

BACK

MUSIC... Listen or play...a slow tempo will quieten your mind, help relax your muscles (especially if accompanied by massage, acupressure or PMR), helping you feel soothed while releasing the stresses of your day. Music is used in therapy to help reduce both the sensation and distress of chronic pain and reduce anxiety and depression.

DANCE... is a great stress reliever. As the body moves, and relaxes, so does the mind. It releases neurotransmitters and endorphins which serve to alleviate stress. You don't need to go to a dance class, just pop on some music at home and dance.

STATE CHANGE... you may be noticing that the effectiveness of so many of your new stress relieving tools can be traced back to a common factor: that changing your physical state is *super* effective at discharging unhelpful mental and emotional energy.

The takeaway here is that you can CHOOSE to act. And action has demonstrated effectiveness at dissipating physiological, emotional and psychological fallout of stress. And THE SOONER THE ACTION, the greater the positive influence on the thoughts and feelings which activate and maintain the stress response.

BACK

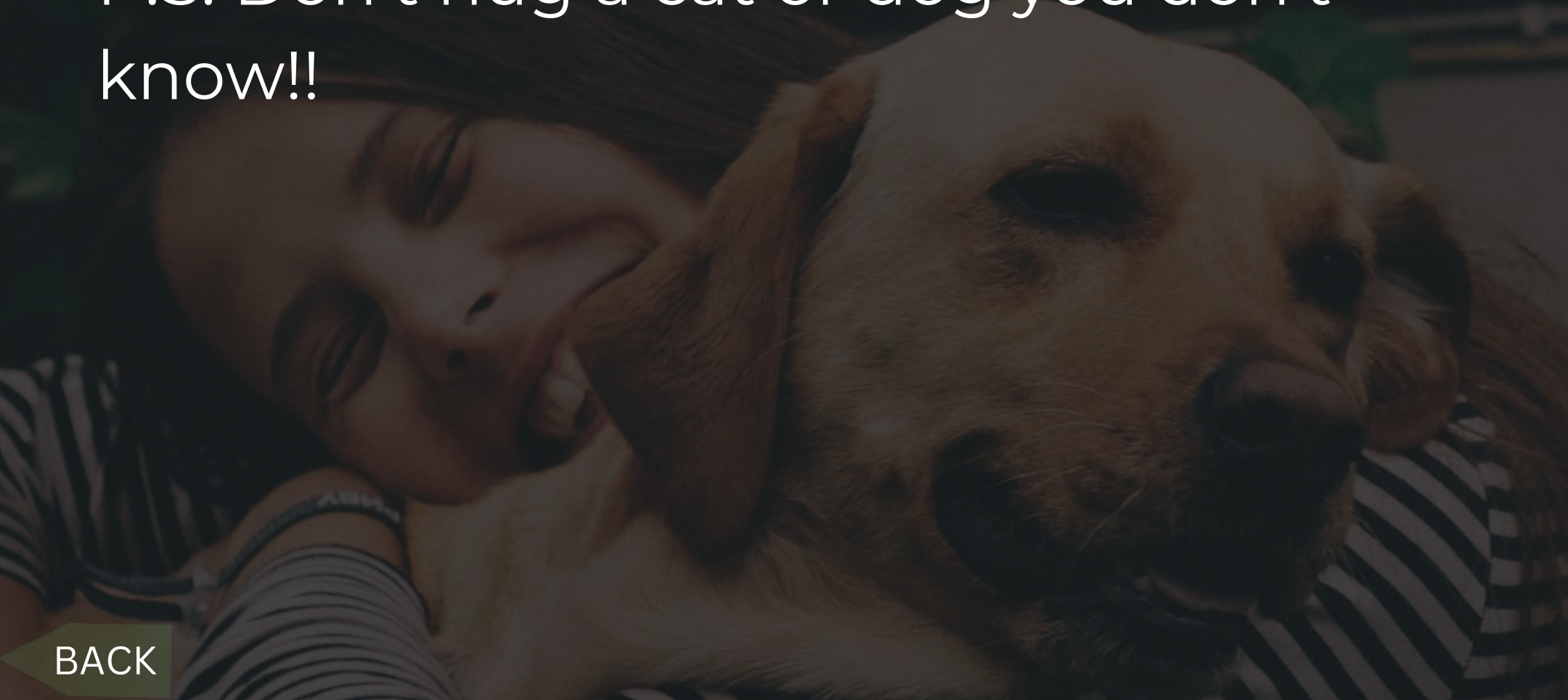
HUG AND TOUCH... Interpersonal touch is a fundamental component of social interactions because it can mitigate physical and psychological distress.

Research suggests that even physical contact with a ‘huggable’ medium such as a pillow or a teddy-bear can be used effectively for mental stress relief.

Hugging reduces cortisol (stress hormone) and elevates oxytocin levels a hormone associated with empathy, love, affection, trust, sexual activity, and relationship-building.

Studies about interpersonal touches between couples show that oxytocin increases and cortisol decreases. Also, social isolation without hugging and touching can result in decreased microbial diversity. So... get hugging!

P.S. Don’t hug a cat or dog you don't know!!



BACK

ACUPRESSURE HAND MASSAGE... It has been well documented and established that acupressure is a low cost, simple and safe practice that provides immediate relief from stress and anxiety. Another bonus is that it increases flexibility and mobility and assists in relieving joint pain a definite 'must do' if you use a computer or mobile device.

It also feels great!

How to ...

1. Can be done with a dry hand or apply a little hand cream or oil to make the massage easier.
2. Relax your left hand.
3. Use your right thumb and rub the heel of your hand (just above the wrist) gently in a circular motion applying as much pressure as comfortable.
4. Then, starting from the base of your thumb, gently and slowly rub in small circles making your way up to the tip of your thumb then gently pinch the end of your thumb.
5. Next, gently give your thumb a VERY gentle pull to stretch.
6. Repeat 4 & 5 with each finger on your left hand.
7. Finally, gently use your thumb to massage the entire palm of the hand.
8. Repeat 3- 7 using your left hand to massage your right hand.

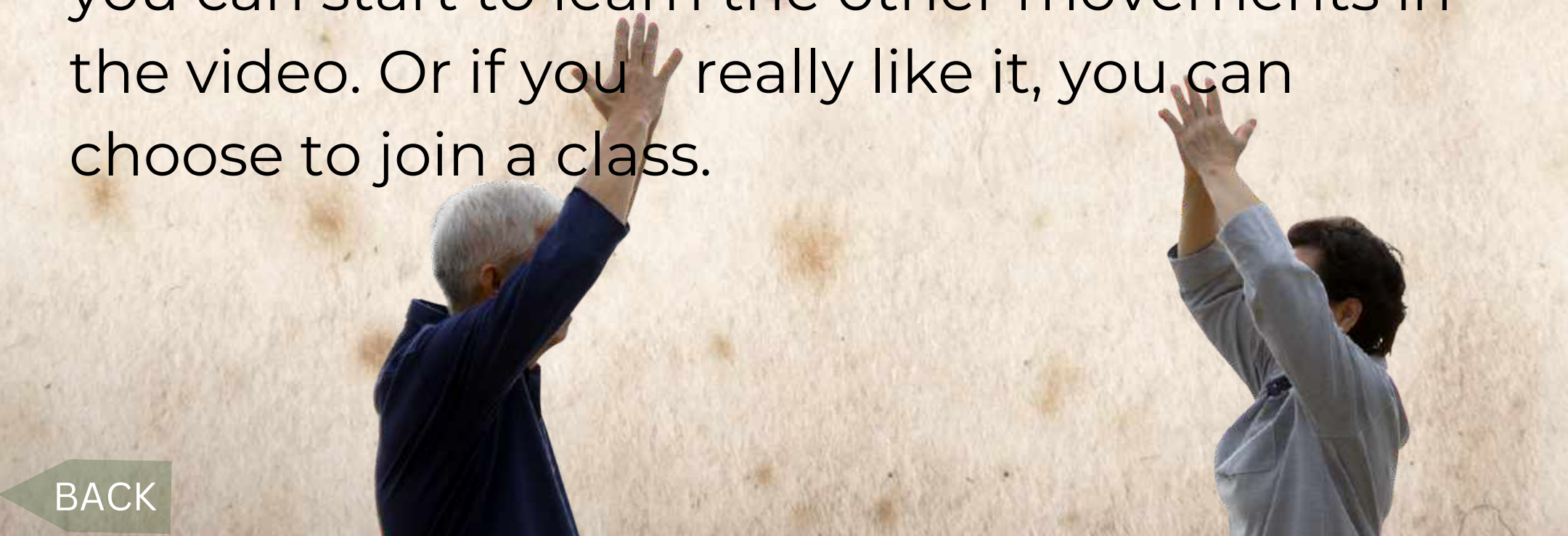
BACK

TAI CHI OR QI GONG... Tai Chi translates to mean, 'Grand Ultimate', and was a concept built on martial arts and meditative movement. Qigong is a system of coordinated body-posture and movement, breathing, and meditation. The practice of these are known to enhance physiological and psychological function.

A compelling body of research emerges when Tai Chi and Qigong studies are combined with evidence suggesting there are a wide range of health benefits in practicing these meditative movement forms... "numerous outcomes with varying levels of evidence for the efficacy for Qigong and Tai Chi, including bone health, cardiopulmonary fitness and related biomarkers, physical function, falls prevention and balance, general quality of life and patient reported outcomes, immunity, and psychological factors such as anxiety, depression and self-efficacy".

Watch this 15-min Tai-Chi video and choose JUST one movement that you will master and practice during this phase.

If you like this one movement and find it helpful you can start to learn the other movements in the video. Or if you really like it, you can choose to join a class.



BACK

MASSAGE AND/OR REFLEXOLOGY SESSION...

People often say... “I can’t afford massages” ... but a better question is... “Can you afford NOT to have an occasional, or even regular massage?”

Studies are conclusive... massage increases blood and lymph circulation (and thus waste elimination), reduces stress and anxiety, enhances Ventral Vagal tone, thereby releasing oxytocin, increases natural immune killer cells and has the ability to inhibit, or even reverse potentially damaging stress effects on the body.

So ask yourself: *"Aren't I worth it?"*

Then do yourself a HUGE favour and book in a massage or reflexology session. Or if an appointment is not readily available... ask your partner, friend, child etc. to give you a 15-min foot, back OR head and shoulder massage.

And an important tip... after your massage or reflexology session ensure you get back onto your stretch-hydrate-decompress every 30-mins. Hydrating is especially important as it supports your body’s process of expelling waste. You cannot 'flush' toxins out but you can support your body to safely remove them.

BACK

COLD THERAPY… A safe, but chilly, practice but one that demonstrates that COLD stimulation can activate the vagus nerve, lowering your sympathetic (fight/flight) response and increasing the parasympathetic response (shutdown). While a dip in the cold ocean or lake or standing outside in the cold are good examples, it is not always readily available or convenient to do so. It is also relevant to note that 'cold water immersion' is effective at short time intervals e.g., 5 minutes at 14°C (57°F).

Simple 'cold therapy' strategies that are accessible on any given day are…

- Splash your face 3-4 times with cold water.
- Immerse your face into a bowl of cold water for 30-seconds at a time. This helps to decrease your heart rate, stimulates the vagus nerve and immune system
- Cold stimulation of the lateral neck region activates the parasympathetic nervous system in ways that resemble significant research findings in vagus nerve stimulation and cold water face immersion……
- With your hand, locate the muscle that runs from the base of your ear to base of your neck.
- Gently turn your head to the right so that your ear is nearing your shoulder and apply the cold compress on the left muscle for up to 5-minutes. Repeat on the other side.

Finish your shower with 30 second of cold water. Do this by gradually turning off the hot water until ONLY cold water is running.

BACK

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION... (or PMR), is a technique originating with American physician Edmund Jacobson in the early 1920s. It involves progressing through the body, from toes to head, gently tensing then relaxing muscles, bringing awareness into your physiology and breathing and greatly reducing stress.

The long-term benefits include: “reduction of salivary cortisol levels and generalized anxiety, decreased blood pressure and heart rate, including decreased headaches”.

The Australian Department of Health recommends this as a regular practice that can greatly assist in stress reduction and relief and, with practice, you can do it on the bus or train, in bed at night, lying on the beach or sitting in a park.

Only through practice can you learn to distinguish and become more aware of the many different muscles in each area of your body, how they feel when flexing and relaxing, how to better recognise when they are under tension and what works for you to release that tension.

1. **SIT, RECLINE or LIE** in a comfortable, supported position and give yourself permission to relax and close your eyes.
2. **BREATHE** slowly and deeply, in and out, from the belly - 3 times.
3. **On the 4th inhale...** tense your TOES, then as you exhale, slowly and completely relax your TOES. Observe all the sensations, including how smoothly your muscles tense and relax and how slowly you can stretch out your exhale and relaxing the body part.
4. Once you have finished the toes, progress UP your body i.e. next do your calves, then thighs, then hips and buttocks, then stomach, then chest, then shoulders, then neck, then back, then upper arms, then forearms, then hands, then fingers, then head and finish with your face.
5. Ensure each part is fully relaxed before progressing to the next.

BACK

CHANGE YOUR SCRIPT... There are various ways to change unhelpful, habitual thought patterns. You can 'reframe' your view of the situation, or of yourself and others involved.

Every time you catch yourself in an unhelpful (e.g.., negative) thought pattern, mentally ‘arrest’ it.

First notice the 'script' you are running - then change it up, to something more helpful.... for example as soon as you recognise a thought like...

“I can't do this, I'm so disorganized" tell yourself,

"This pattern doesn't serve me. I'm letting it go."

Then change your focus by *immediately* changing your physical state, eg., if you're sitting, then stand, breathe deeply and walk purposefully to get a glass of water, tidy something small, shake your hands and/or laugh... i.e.., get it out of your head by changing your focus. You're not trying to distract yourself, but rather re-focus towards a more positive way of seeing your attributes, skills and abilities in the situation.

When practicing... CHANGING YOUR SCRIPT... understand it takes time and practice.

If your 'old' unhelpful script persists, don't give up (remember that you learned it in the first place by not giving up).

Extend your refocusing activity: go for a walk WITH someone, cook something, do some gardening – do something that gets you moving and is energizing. It doesn’t have to be a long time, just 10-15 minute break, that can help change the script. DO NOT choose a sedentary or merely distracting task (like scrolling social media!)

This activity creates the 'space' needed to re-write the mental and emotional script that you've been running - use that to help you write a new, more helpful one, eg., why not start with, *"I'm always open to learning better ways of doing things."*

IMPORTANT... when using the CHANGE YOUR SCRIPT in your Stress Relief Tracking Sheet... ensure you state the OLD script and the new one you replaced it with.

BACK

GET CONNECTED... Face-To-Face, socially. Research shows that those who communicate face-to-face with others have fewer depressive symptoms and handle stress better.

Social interaction, which naturally leads to support, is associated with elevated levels of oxytocin, a hormone that stimulates the Ventral Vagal branch of your Autonomic Nervous System, decreases anxiety levels and increases confidence levels. This in turn has a self-perpetuating positive cycle of seeking out more social connections.

A 2013 study looked at increased positive emotions, increased vagal tone, and increased perceptions of social connections. The results suggested that positive emotions, positive social connections, and physical health influence one another in a self-sustaining upward-spiral dynamic.

Make sure that during this phase you get connected with someone (anyone) in a relaxing uplifting way.

And for future social connections... check out MEETUPS for your area, join a sporting club (bowls, tennis), book club or other group... so many of them are FREE!!

BACK

SUPPORT OTHERS... it's a well-known aspect of our shared humanity that helping and supporting others helps balance your perspective and perception of your own 'problems' - at very least, it serves to get you out of your own head.

Acts of compassion and kindness not only make you feel good but lowers your stress levels. And what more wonderful way to do that, than by supporting and helping others....?

REMEMBER: Your GRP Hub is a great place to demonstrate support for others, as your start. Don't just 'emoji' a comment but genuinely reach out and leave a comment that shows support. But don't lose sight of the many opportunities to help others, from a platform of your own EXCELLENT health and strength, by volunteering in your own community.

BACK

LET IT GO... Don’t waste your thoughts and energy on negative thought patterns, worries or hassles – let them all go.

Instead, focus on the positives in your life. Be grateful about what you HAVE not what you don't have. Be grateful for what IS working, not what isn't working.

Stop focusing on what others aren't doing correctly (or the way you'd do it). Focus on YOU.

IMPORTANT... when using the LET IT GO tein your Stress Relief Log... ensure you state 'what' you're letting go of, and what you are grateful for (i.e. what you will keep)

BACK

Stress and fear are natural parts of life, but you are not meant to be paralysed by either. So learn to deal with stress... and go ahead and be afraid - *then act anyway...*

You've got this!

"Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that frightens us most.

We ask ourselves, 'Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and famous?'

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that people won't feel insecure around you.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in all of us. And when we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

- Marianne Williamson

BACK

Stress Relief Handbook
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