

## Becoming Your Best at Stress

Stress Defined:

**“A physical response generated by the nervous system to a challenge or threat, whether real or imagined, and from either internal or external sources.”**

*Crisis, Trauma Resource Institute, 2019*

**“The quest for certainty blocks the search for meaning. Uncertainty is the very condition to impel man to unfold his powers.”**

*Eric Fromm*

One of the primary struggles that people have is the unknown. While we know that 91% of people who contract the virus will have mild to no symptoms, we often focus on the other 9%. We listen to the news and are often bombarded with the most ‘horrific and shocking’ stories. This stress management program is going to invite you to focus on doing what they know and doing it well.

My quote of the day is as follows:

### **In This Time of Unfamiliarity – Do What You Know Works and Do It Well.**

We need to focus only on what we know works in a time of unknown outcomes. Worrying about things, we have no control over can lead to depression and anxiety. When working with a critical circumstance, research shows that using acceptance-based strategies can be helpful. Acceptance based strategies focus on dealing with what is presented in front of us versus fighting reality by perseverating or ruminating (thinking and thinking and thinking - I call it the shitty committee). When we fight reality, we automatically put ourselves in a losing battle. However, when we accept our circumstances and work to deal with it, we often move forward. We do not give power away.

There is an exorbitant amount of research on the topic of stress. In many respects, people see stress as a mortal enemy. Many believe that it will kill us, and in fact, recent research is showing that if we believe that stress can hurt us, we are more likely to have stress-related illnesses that can lead to death. However, if we believe that stress can benefit us, we are much more likely to be healthy when in stressful situations.

Inviting people to embrace stress and look at what it can do for us during a pandemic may seem ridiculous! At the risk of being perceived as ridiculous, I am going to suggest that we use this time as an opportunity to develop a new relationship with stress. Our mindset about stress is something that can be debilitating or helpful, but it is also something that we can control. Stress can be something that focuses our attention on the things we know we have to do.

Ironically, doing the things we know we need to do can help us manage our stress. Things we know that are potentially obvious, like: if you are not at work, then stay home. Below is a list of things that people can look at when Think about some of these other daily activities that can keep you safe:

1. **Go on an Attention Diet**
2. **Have agreements at the base**
3. **Practice gratitude daily**
4. **Use your stress as a motivator**
5. **Be assertive**
6. **Focus on what we can control**
7. **Connect with people**
8. **Make a schedule and create structure**
9. **Move your body**
10. **Use music to help you relax**
11. **Get to know your stress**
12. **Be Intentional – “Get Type A About Self Care”**
13. **Practice, practice, practice**
14. **Talking to Kids about the Coronavirus**

### **1. Go on an Attention Diet**

Pick a good source of where you get real information. Once or twice a day, listen up and learn what is happening, then shut it down.

### **2. Have agreements at the base**

Have agreements at the base about the amount of time spent thinking or talking about COVID-19. Like the attention diet, talk about it when it is clinical or essential but not for the whole day. Remember, relevant information is essential. Constant talk of worst-case scenarios is not vital to your health and well-being. Invite people to have a different discussion.

### **3. Practice gratitude daily**

Some people say in the morning, and some say in the evening. If you are having a hard time choosing between the two, then I would suggest you do both

- a. Gratitude does not have to be for special events that occur.
- b. Gratitude can be for the person who asked you if you are doing okay;
- c. Gratitude can be for the fact that you are healthy or that your family is healthy, etc.
- d. The research shows that using gratitude as an exercise before going to bed can help us shut down the negative thinking that can occur during times like these.

This recommendation comes from psychologists who are finding that mindset about these difficult situations can be the very thing that helps us to stay well.

#### 4. Use your stress as a motivator

If you are not comfortable, speak up and **use that stress as a motivator**. For example, I was not thinking about my spacing when working with a colleague recently. At one point, for one reason or another that I cannot remember, I touched his arm. He looked at me and, without skipping a beat, said, “is this Ornge’s new social distancing?” Some people might think it was a little sarcastic, and some might think that they would be too embarrassed to say it, and all of you would be right in your way. For me, it was the perfect use of humour, clarity and the necessity of having an adult conversation to keep each other safe.

As somebody who has ADHD and often is not as thoughtful about things like physical distancing, this comment made me look at myself. In a time like this, we have a right to invite people to look at themselves and the impact they have on the world. As a result, I invite you to give yourself permission to use assertiveness as a way to keep yourself safe. I hope that in practicing assertiveness during this time, you will permit yourself to live this way going forward.

#### 5. Be assertive

I invite you to give yourself permission to be assertive. For example, when your family or friends would welcome themselves into your house, or plead for you to come over, it is okay to say no. Let them know that you are interested in connecting when you are able. In this way, you are renegotiating the relationship and ensuring people understand it is about the situation.

Listen to your stress. It is trying to keep you safe and healthy. Be controlled and precise about what you want. If your survival intuition is saying, “this is not a good idea,” then listen! That intuition is always right about one thing, your health!

It can be helpful to have a strategy to support your assertiveness, to avoid unnecessary escalation of conflict and support your understanding of what you want. One example is known as BIO: State the **Behaviour**, state the **Impact** and then talk about the **Outcome** or **Options** you would like to give them.

**Behaviour** – you have asked me a couple of times to come over, and I am not sure if you understand how serious it is right now and how important it is for us to stay home and keep our families, each other and our communities safe.

**Impact** – when you ask me over and over again, it makes me feel like you think that I do not want to come over, and I always enjoy your company.

**Outcome/Options** - I am going to ask that until the sanctions are lifted, we have our conversations over FaceTime or the phone, and understand that we cannot connect personally until then.

## **6. Focus on what we can control.**

Do not get caught up in the media; being kind to people; helping a neighbour or friend or colleague; offering the last roll of toilet paper and not cleaning the shelf of all toilet paper; respecting your colleagues and keeping a safe distance from them etc.

## **7. Connect with People**

Do not isolate. If there was ever a time for us old folks to recognize the importance of catching up in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - now is the time! We can accomplish catching up by using virtual platforms that include but are not limited to Skype, Zoom, FaceTime, WhatsApp and VSee to connect with people. Keeping people safe, while staying connected is essential as our attachment, mitigates the threat response and supports people to feel safer. It is an attachment with healthy figures that can help us to co-regulate and to feel connected.

## **8. Make a schedule and create structure**

Make a schedule that will provide structure and some degree of certainty. It is the uncertainty that can push people to the point of becoming unravelled. If you are that person who struggles to maintain or follow through with things, ask someone to keep you accountable. Publicly sharing that you are going to do something can be helpful to ensure that you follow through.

## **9. Move your body**

Ensure that your schedule includes some form of exercise. That may be intense physical exercise, or it could be walking, hiking or enjoying the outdoors.

## **10. Use music to help you relax**

Music is the relaxer of all relaxers. Music can give you a feeling of solace, safety and calmness, or it can rile us up to get energized for exercise or even difficult situations. Create a playlist that will remind you of helpful things rather than taking the chance that it will bring up heartache and sadness from your past. I invite you to ensure that your playlist does not have any music that can or will stimulate difficult emotions. If there are times that you want to have memories about different things that music brings up, then create that list!

## **11. Get to know your stress**

Remember that stress is your body's way of trying to keep us safe. You do not need to fight yourself on this or be self-deprecating. Just acknowledge the stress and say to yourself, "we got this" rather than beating yourself up. Use the pressure to help you

make healthy decisions and to think through things. If we allow the stress to control us, we are unable to access logic in high-stress situations.

**12. Be Intentional – “Get Type A About Self Care”**

To become Type A about self-care, one needs to be intentional about their self-preservation. We need to use all the skills that we know and sometimes even teach people. It means being self-reflective, creating a ritual around self-care daily. Make a plan, being scheduled and organized is a priority. Other words that we can use in describing the concept of being intentional are habitual, methodical, deliberate, routine and calculated.

I invite you to think about creating a ritual for going home. Going home for you might be a five-minute walk or an hour drive. Either way, when you are on your way home, I invite you to check in with your own levels of stress.

**Practice, Practice, Practice**

I remember in my second or third year working at Ornge. One of the paramedics that I was working with said with frustration, “this shit is not easy, do you just have a pill to fix this.” I laughed and jokingly said, “that would be the psychiatrist, Dr. or the drug dealer.” The only way that people get better at things is to practice them.

That is how everybody got their jobs at Ornge. They were good at something, and they worked hard at it. In today’s quick-fix society, one common belief is that stress management just sort of miraculously happens. Stress management includes a myriad of complex issues that include a synergistic effect between the environment, our brains and our bodies. Without strategies to self-regulate, people working in the first responder community will struggle to stay afloat. Below are some strategies that I invite you to practice:

<b>Situational Skills/Coping Strategies</b>		
Accept what you cannot control	Anticipate change and challenge	
Avoid time wasters	Be more assertive vs aggressive	
Break tasks down	Choose your battles	
Delegate	Set goals, visualize the success of goals, manage self-talk, block breathing	
Make a plan	Do not personalize	
Mentally rehearse	Set Limits	
<b>Self-Care/Coping Strategies</b>		
Enjoy sauna	Be positive	Limit cigarettes/ drugs/ caffeine/ alcohol
Journal	Drink plenty of water	Exercise
Laugh – use YouTube if you have to	Use positive imagery	Use positive self-talk

Be positive	Find emotional catharsis/shower sobbing	Remember – Time does not heal, it is what you do with the time
Read	Stretch/yoga	Shed the superwoman/man image LOL
Talk versus listening to yourself	If you are a worrier, schedule your worry time	Be positive

## 15. Talking to Kids about the Coronavirus

**Do not be afraid to discuss the coronavirus.** Most children will have already heard about the virus or seen people wearing face masks, so parents should not avoid talking about it. Not talking about something can make kids worry *more*. Look at the conversation as an opportunity to convey the facts and set the emotional tone. “You take on the news, and you are the person who filters the news to your kid,” explains Janine Domingues, Ph.D., a child psychologist at the Child Mind Institute. Your goal is to help your children feel informed and get fact-based information that is likely more reassuring than whatever they are hearing from their friends or on the news.

**Be developmentally appropriate.** Do not volunteer too much information, as this may be overwhelming. Instead, try to answer your child’s questions. Do your best to answer honestly and clearly. It is okay if you cannot answer everything; being available to your child is what matters.

**Take your cues from your child.** Invite your child to tell you anything they may have heard about the coronavirus, and how they feel. Give them ample opportunity to ask questions. You want to be prepared to answer (but not prompt) questions. Your goal is to avoid encouraging frightening fantasies.

**Deal with your anxiety.** “When you are feeling most anxious or panicked, that is not the time to talk to your kids about what is happening with the coronavirus,” warns Dr. Domingues. If you notice that you are feeling anxious, take some time to calm down before trying to have a conversation or answer your child’s questions.

**Be reassuring.** Children are very egocentric, so hearing about the coronavirus on the news may be enough to make them seriously worry that they will catch it. It is helpful to reassure your child about how rare the coronavirus actually is (the flu is much more common) and that kids seem to have milder symptoms.

**Focus on what you are doing to stay safe.** An important way to reassure kids is to emphasize the safety precautions that you are taking. Jamie Howard, Ph.D., a child psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, notes, “Kids feel empowered when they know what to do to keep themselves safe.” We know that the coronavirus is transmitted mostly by coughing and touching surfaces. The CDC recommends thoroughly washing your hands as the primary means of staying healthy. Remind kids that they are taking care of themselves by washing their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds (or the

length of two “Happy Birthday” songs) when they come in from outside before they eat, and after blowing their nose, coughing, sneezing or using the bathroom. If kids ask about face masks, explain that the experts at the CDC say they are not necessary for most people. If kids see people wearing face masks, explain that those people are extra cautious.

**Stick to routine.** “We don’t like uncertainty, so staying rooted in routines and predictability is going to be helpful right now,” advises Dr. Domingues. This is particularly important if your child’s school or daycare shuts down. Make sure you are taking care of the basics just like you would during a spring break or summer vacation. Structured days with regular mealtimes and bedtimes are an essential part of keeping kids happy and healthy.

**Keep talking.** Tell kids that you will continue to keep them updated as you learn more. “Let them know that the lines of communication are going to be open,” says Dr. Domingues. “You can say, ‘Even though we do not have the answers to everything right now, know that once we know more, mom or dad will let you know, too.’”

<https://childmind.org/article/talking-to-kids-about-the-coronavirus/>

## More Stress Management Tools

### Like In Our Medicine, Let's Become the Best with Stress

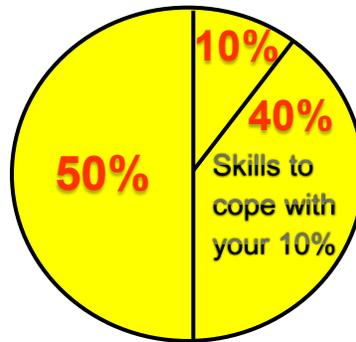
The next few pages are going to focus on different strategies you can use to cope with stress. Everybody has their style and may make different choices around how to do this. I am urging that people be intentional about self-care, that they embrace stress by getting better at it through daily practice. One strategy used to engage in daily practice is bracketing.

**Bracketing** – Bracketing is a useful tool if you are struggling with perseveration (overthinking something, “shitty committee”). Consider some of the following examples:

- An argument you had with someone,
- You made a mistake at work or are struggling with a colleague,
- You just got a call from your family that was stressful.

We use bracketing when we need to focus on the task at hand. We then schedule a time the next day to address the situation. Any time that thought comes back into our mind, we say to ourselves, “I have scheduled a time, and I am going to work through that later today or tomorrow, I do not need to think about it now.”

### HAPPINESS



**Biologically 50%** of our happiness is already decided (our allostasis). That is why we can be at a funeral and still laugh with some embarrassment. We always come back to our 50%!

10% of our happiness is due to circumstances. You know, the good and bad things that occur in our lives. Some of us would call it fate, good karma, bad karma, either way, circumstances arguably equate 10% of our happiness.

Research shows that the remaining 40% are the skills that we use to cope with our 10%, i.e., the stressors in our life. When you are struggling with your 10%, you could use self-talk and say to yourself, “okay, this is happening, what am I going to do with my 40%?” I invite you to reflect on the following:

- You are feeling anxious about something - **what can you do with your 40%?**
- You are in a difficult discussion with \_\_\_\_\_ and are getting anxious - **what can you do with your 40%?**
- If you are ruminating on an issue, you have no control over it - **what can I do with my 40%?**

When thinking further about this, remember your 40% is all the skills that you have in your back pocket. Some of those skills have been discussed earlier, like using the BIO strategy to have difficult conversations.

When going into a stressful meeting or situation, you can use the “**Big Four**” (below) for planning and working through the situation.

- **Goal setting** (what needs to happen, visualization, self-talk and box breathing) to be able to relax and think. Use the big four and set goals as to what needs to happen on the call for it to go well.
- **Visualize** the call going well and what may need to happen for that to occur.
- Check your shitty committee at the door and keep the **Self Talk** more positive.
- **Use box breathing** throughout the process to keep you grounded.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Goal Setting</b></li> <li>➤ Provides direction, feedback and motivation</li> <li>➤ Specific, measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timebound</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <b>Visualization</b></li> <li>➤ Used to rehearse</li> <li>➤ Helps to prepare for challenges</li> <li>➤ Mentally preparing yours</li> <li>➤ Work towards solutions in advance</li> </ul>
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### EFT - Emotional Freedom Therapy (EAP)

I call it “acupuncture without needles.” Yes, it looks incredibly strange. But it works! It does not always permanently fix the problem, but it has always helped the people I work with to “self-regulate” in the moment. Check it out. See below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfZBHWSbrsq>

## A Quick Guide to Stress Reduction Practices From YOUR LIFE AFTER TRAUMA (by Michele Rosenthal)

1. **Change your Physiology in Two Minutes:** Inhale through your nose; exhale through your lips as if they were wrapped around a straw.
2. **Breathwork:** Inhale (4 counts) + hold (4 counts) + exhale (6 counts) + hold (2 counts). Repeat cycle eight to ten times.
3. **Naturally Produce Oxytocin:** Hug yourself or your life partner or kid or anyone else where it is appropriate. Oxytocin is our stress drug that tells us we need to connect with people.
4. **Ninety-Second Rule:** The chemicals connected to any emotion naturally subside in ninety seconds *if you shift your attention to a different thought*. Count to ninety, sing, imagine your most favourite place, laugh, call a friend, or do any other activity that distracts your focus and allow your mind's chemicals to reset.
5. **Interrupt Negative Responses:** Follow these five steps: (1) Pause. (2) Step back. (3) Ask (empowering questions). (4) Assess (your choices). (5) Act (on a decision).
6. **Relabel and Redirect:** Observe, identify, and name your behaviour or response; engage in a replacement activity.
7. **Meditation:** Choose any of the options to train your brain; focused attention, open monitoring, automatic self-transcending.
8. **Mindfulness:** Remember to be present, acknowledge and allow what you feel and experience, and suspend judgment.
9. **Practice Gratitude:** Seek things to be grateful for; take a moment to reflect on and embrace the feeling of gratitude, and what about you allows you to connect with it.
10. **Power Position:** Sit on the edge of your seat, feet a foot apart, palms down on your thighs, hips rolled forward, shoulders back and down. (You can do this in a standing position as well).
11. **Progressive Relaxation:** Starting with the top of your head, focus your attention on each body part, deliberately relaxing it as you move down to your toes.
12. **Refocus Your Intention:** Fill in the blanks with what you want, why it is essential to you, and what you will gain by having it: "I want \_\_\_ because \_\_\_ so that\_\_\_."
13. **Shift to "I Can Handle It!" Thinking:** Replace fear by giving yourself three reasons you will be able to handle approaching the thing you are afraid of.
14. **Fact-Versus-Fiction Thinking:** Ask yourself the following questions: *How accurate is this thought? How do I know it is true (what is the proof)? Would everyone else believe this is true? What are other possible interpretations of this moment?*
15. **Clarify Your Thinking:** Dismantle assumptions, interpretations, limiting beliefs, and the negative commentary of your inner voice by identifying how to be present in the moment and find alternative details, narratives, and responses that lead to empowered actions.
16. **Slow Down:** Find a way to reduce the speed of your thoughts, emotions, reactions, and physical actions.

Rosenthal M,(2015) A Quick Guide to Twenty Stress Reduction Practices. In *Your Life After Trauma, Powerful practices to reclaim your identity* (1st ed.). W. W. Norton & Company. Appendix A.

## Research Shows

- There is a 100000 cell structure called the dorsal raphe nucleus (DRN), which is deep in the limbic system. With constant ambient stress, our DRN can fire off and produce a sense of helplessness.
- **For humans, the firing of the DRN is the default reaction to adverse events that continue to occur.**
  - When trying to change a culture at an organization, it is integral that you understand the default reaction. For people who have gone through chaos, it makes it easier for them to go to and stay in that default place.
- **The human's default reaction is to give up when adverse events continue to occur.**
  - Ornge has a difficult history of ranging from being leaders in transport medicine to struggling with problems between frontline and management to a very public scandal.
  - For many people at Ornge, their job description includes 'ambient chaos.' As a result, it is easy for people to continue to go to that default. An example of that is when people at Ornge hear statements like:
    1. Did you hear what management has decided? or
    2. There they go again, people not on the front line making decisions without consulting!
  - What happens to your nervous system when you hear these comments? What are the questions do you ask yourself or the comments might you say? When people go to their default the following typically feelings typically occur: helpless, angry, frustrated, disgusted, fearful or anxious (hyper-aroused) or just hypo-aroused (who gives a shit).
- **What stops our default from firing off?**
  - How we respond to the default firing off is what can help us.
  - There is a part of our brain called the ventral medial prefrontal cortex (VMPC), which inhibits the dorsal raphe nucleus. When we are intentional and interrupt the triggering of the dorsal raphe nucleus by intentionally coping or shifting our perception by reframing what people are saying, we can turn off our learned helplessness.
- **The VMPC can turn off the dorsal raphe nucleus when we have the skills to cope, and we use them.** We do not wait for their nervous system to regulate; we make it happen.
- **In the next section is a wellness plan for people.** The wellness plan invites people to move towards solutions versus problems. Focusing on our default keeps us in the process of rumination and potentially helplessness.
- **Martin Seligman – Keeping Track of our Default Reaction**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HH0sssQzQGg>

**Wellness Plan**

**Becoming Type A about Self Care**

Please take a look at some of the following options for staying healthy. Additionally, please add your own list of things that you do to stay healthy - physically, psychologically and spiritually intentional.

1. Over the past month, have you done any of these things to stay mentally healthy at work?  
Are you regularly:

- \_\_\_\_\_ Being Type A about Self-Care, which means being intentional about your health:  
 Exercising, Eating well,  
 Getting enough sleep, Dealing with things as they arise

***If all this is not working, then phone a therapist, i.e. a “people mechanic” and do a tune-up.***

\_\_\_\_\_ Focusing on what is going well versus the negative issues?

\_\_\_\_\_ Debriefing after difficult calls?

\_\_\_\_\_ Venting for a “designated” amount of time about the organization, i.e. “20 minutes versus the entire 12-hour shift”. Venting always needs to be followed by problem-solving. A strategy that works very well for first responders is using the big four seen below:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <b>Goal Setting</b></li> <li>&gt; Provides direction, feedback and motivation</li> <li>&gt; Specific, measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timebound</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; <b>Visualization</b></li> <li>&gt; Used to rehearse</li> <li>&gt; Helps to prepare for challenges</li> <li>&gt; Mentally preparing yours</li> <li>&gt; Work towards solutions in advance</li> </ul>
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Once done, venting take a look at the situation and set some goals. The goals can be what we call smart goals. Subsequently, we visualize what will occur (i.e. a difficult conversation with a colleague, manager) and use this as an opportunity to prepare ourselves mentally and work toward solutions in advance.

\_\_\_\_\_ Holding yourself accountable for making suggestions regarding the things you are having

a tough time within the organization? (Learned helplessness creates further potentiation of compassion fatigue which can make us more susceptible to vicarious trauma and PTSD).

- \_\_\_\_\_ Having fun in moderation, so it does not interfere with work and home life, e.g. nights out.?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Protecting your free time versus filling it with work (both internally and externally to Ornge)?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Setting aside relaxation time?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Talking to a peer support person - names and numbers on LMS?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Calling Peer Support Program
- \_\_\_\_\_ Doing something you enjoy every day
- \_\_\_\_\_ Engaging in crucial conversations in productive ways (i.e. when upset about something, do you develop a plan or strategy to communicate the issue in a positive/respectful way)?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Using the gym/yoga/running?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Mindfulness activities, e.g. yoga, meditation, deep breathing, body scan?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Using EAP when needed.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Intentionally moving around throughout the day rather than sitting at a desk or TV.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Keeping a to-do list?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Although not in person, staying connected to people using social media?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Laugh – watch a comedy – connect with people – play?

What other things are on your list?

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1. What could you do more of?

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2. What do you need to do less of?

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3. What needs to happen now in order for you to feel confident and comfortable in beginning to follow through with the above? If you have any questions please do not hesitate to connect to someone you feel comfortable and confident will be able to support you.

