



# Practice Self-Regulation™

A Trauma-Informed Approach for Health and Well Being



## Tips for Optimizing Resilience Wherever You Are

### Know Your Stress Hormones

When your brain, mind, and body perceive a threat, stress hormones alert you by immediately pumping throughout your body. Pay attention and embrace the experience so you can practice optimal coping skills.

**Example:** You're late for an important activity. Your heart starts racing, you're upset, have trouble collecting your thoughts, and realize you forgot something you need. You notice internal sensations causing you tension and anxiety. You discover it makes you grouchy, impatient, and intolerant.

### Observe Your Internal Experience

The first step in developing healthy coping strategies is to pay attention to your thoughts, feelings and physical reactions when something uncomfortable is happening and your stress hormones start pumping. Acknowledging and embracing these experiences promotes healthy action.

**Example & Tips:** When someone's behavior is upsetting, you may:

- Think, "Uh oh", "What's up with this?" or, "Oh no!"
- Feel uncomfortable, ill at ease, and unsafe.
- Experience heat, increased heart-rate, blood rushing to your neck and face, and clenched fists

### Self-Regulation

This involves breathing deeply to organize your thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions and choosing coping behaviors that promote health and well-being.

**Example & Tips:** You're stressed, not particularly upset, but you're craving relief through unhealthy eating and drinking. Instead of eating processed junk food, sugary drinks, or too much alcohol, you might:

- Make sure to have healthy options available wherever you are
- Keep a list of healthy things you enjoy doing, so you're prepared and don't get frustrated trying to think of better choices
- Do something soothing
- Move your body in joyful ways, such as the NY Times 8-minute Joy workout: [nyti.ms/3lpdNx0](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/02/well/move/8-minute-joy-workout.html)

### Fight, Flight, or Freeze

Self-protection involves defending yourself, taking off, shutting down, or experiencing any combination of these reactions. Pay attention to them so you can plan ahead and optimize healthy choices when you're getting upset or feeling out of control.

**Example & Tips:** When you're upset:

- Communicate your needs clearly and respectfully rather than being aggressive, or picking a fight
- Move your body in healthy ways rather than fleeing by taking off in unsafe places, driving indiscriminately, or trying to escape through unhealthy substances
- Breathe deeply to help organize your thinking and prevent your brain from shutting down or freezing up

## Belly Breathe

Very deep breathing that inflates your diaphragm and pushes out your lower abdomen is the foundation for self-regulation and healthy coping skills. Breathing in for a count of 4, holding your breath for 1 count, and exhaling for another count of 4 or 5, activates your brain in ways that help you to organize your thinking and make healthy decisions. Inhaling speeds up your heart and gives you energy, while exhaling slows it down and has a calming effect.

**Example & Tips:** When life doesn't seem to be going your way:

- If you are feeling down, lethargic, demoralized, or empty and need some energy focus on inhaling to activate some energy
- If you are agitated and overstimulated lengthen your exhale to help you calm down
- Consider yoga!

## Rhythmic Soothing

What the heck is this? Ever realize that you often do repetitive things that have a calming effect? Things you might not even have noticed before now. Repetitive practice of anything that does not cause harm has potential to be soothing.

**Example & Tips:** Bored, irritated, agitated, nervous, tired, and can't relax or sleep?

- Ever twirl a pen, pencil, or marker between your fingers?
- How about walking, jogging, biking, or any rhythmic body movement
- Sewing, knitting, practicing a musical instrument, playing solitaire
- Think of any repetitive activity you enjoy and build time for it into your day, particularly when you can predict stressful situations or times
- Such activities can have a meditative effect, clear your mind, and actually promote creative thinking

## Returning to Baseline

Ideally, stress hormones provide a lightning fast response to threat, then quickly simmer down. Paying attention to how long it takes them to return to a calm state is critical for optimal self-care. This involves both individual and collective effort.

**Example & Tips:** Most people experience differing stress levels throughout the day. Pay attention to when you feel most stressful and try to make those settings as soothing as possible by collaborating with others to promote a calming environment. You can do this at home, work, in nature, your car, and even school settings sometimes.

- When everyone commits to self-regulation, everyone's stress hormone levels benefit by a calmer and more soothing environment
- Talking with others about this can include time for assessing and improving an inclusive, equitable, resilience-based, and trauma-informed setting
- Wherever you are, no matter who is around, you can always take a quick break, even if it's just to take some slow deep breaths when the going gets tough to reduce stress hormone levels

## Slow Down to Get There Faster

This paradox is the realization that when we slow down, observe what is going on, and effectively implement healthy coping strategies we actually speed up and streamline self-regulation. This in turn builds the foundation for life-long resilience.

**Example & Tips:** It's been a hard day and you feel like you're being pecked to death by a bunch of ducks:

- Review the Expert Tips for Resilience (Charney & Southwick, 2012) and identify one or two you want to focus on throughout the day (This can even be done with others to optimize support for everyone)
- Tell your plan to a valued colleague or friend. Remember we get by with a little help from our friends
- Have easy access to favorite healthy food and drinks
- At the end of the day assess your experiences and tweak them to maximize effectiveness tomorrow

## This Will Pass

The voice inside our head, also known as our cognition, which is the way we think, plays an oversized role in how we manage stress. Controlling that voice can sometimes be a life-long challenge, especially in a high-stress environment.

**Example & Tips:** When the going gets tough, what do you need the most? Often it's reassurance that things will be okay, and you will be able to handle and manage the situation effectively.

When you feel threatened, pay attention to what the voice inside your head is saying, and the message it is giving. If it's not compassionate and supportive, consider how you might change it

- Create a couple very short scripts of what you might genuinely and realistically say to yourself to get through a difficult situation or communication flashpoint
- Practice those scripts and tweak them until they are exactly what you need to hear when the going gets tough

## Stepping Out

There is a big difference between a "flight" response, and stepping away from a potentially escalating situation, or confrontation. Mindfully realizing that taking a few minutes to slow down, collecting, and organizing your thoughts can go a long way in optimally managing a difficult situation. That is not running away from a problem, it is honoring your brain, mind, and body's need to effectively carry out an optimal response.

**Example & Tips:** When you can't think straight:

- Identify a potentially safe and soothing place in your setting that allows you a bit of space from a stressful situation
- Let others know you need a minute to think through the situation
- Go to this place and take time to collect your thoughts in ways that can reduce your stress hormone levels
- Identify what you need and how you will go about optimally managing the situation for the rest of the day

## Trusting Connection

Depending on your job, school or neighborhood, you may or may not be surrounded by supportive others on a daily basis. If you are, it's wonderful, if you aren't, you're not alone! Many people have stressful situations that put them in potential physical and/or emotional danger every day, and everyone needs a trusting connection to get by in life.

**Example & Tips:** For whatever reason you don't trust everyone in your environment and you know resilience depends in part on supportive others:

- Always assess the trustworthiness of others you spend time with
- Try to identify 3 people in your work, school, or neighborhood setting who are trustworthy
- If there are not 3, identify others in other parts of your life who can support you if you are struggling
- Let those people know you want their support and tell them what you would like that support to look like when you need it
- When the going gets tough reach out to them as planned and let them know what's up

## Practice Makes Proficient

Healthy coping can be really hard in high stress situations potentially under threat from external forces. Education does not equal change, practice does.

**Example & Tips:** Relentless stress throughout particularly difficult times can potentially take years off of your life. Health and well-being rely on all of us to recognize the vital need for life-long self-care in order to thrive in such challenging situations. You can:

- Remind yourself daily of your important contributions
- Celebrate ourselves
- Practice compassion and embrace it from others
- Maintain trusting connections and speak truth to power!
- Strive for health and well-being