

A Mindful Approach to Stress

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Disclosures

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Has no financial relationships to disclose.

Views expressed are my own and do not represent Kaiser Permanente or any affiliated organization.

Today We'll Explore

- What chronic stress is doing to your brain and body
- How stress influences thinking, emotions, and behavior
- A few practical ways to interrupt the cycle

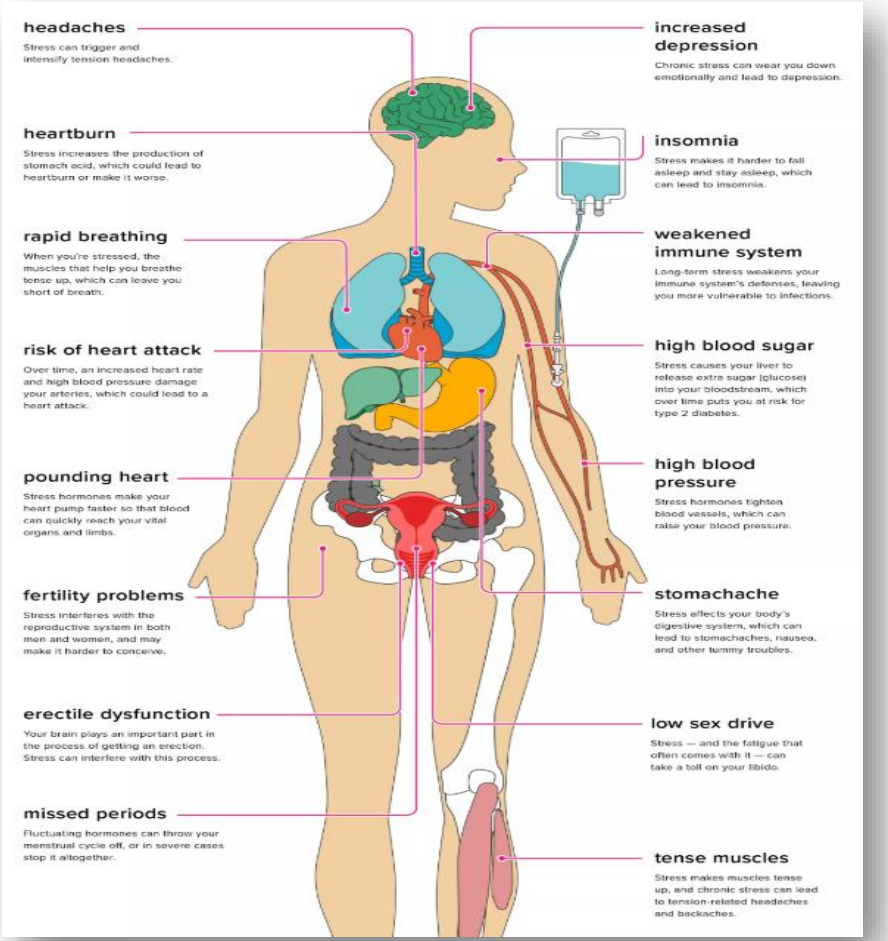
MIND / BODY CONNECTION

Stress is not a psychological inconvenience.

It is a full-system physiological event.

Ask yourself: how many patients last week had physical symptoms primarily driven or worsened by stress?

Psychosocial distress shapes symptom burden, recovery time, and immune response. This is physiology.



What is Stress?

"...your body's response to any perceived demand from outside or from within."

Sometimes real. Sometimes anticipated. Sometimes self-created.

Take a moment:

What's one stressor you carried into this room today?

ACUTE STRESS RESPONSE

Stress Was Designed to Protect Us

- **Heart rate, BP & cortisol surge**
- **Blood flows to muscles** — away from digestion
- **Focus narrows** to the immediate threat
- **Life-saving** — in short bursts



THE PROBLEM ISN'T STRESS — IT'S CHRONIC ACTIVATION

Unlike escaping a predator, our modern stressors never fully resolve.

- **Immune function** decreases
- **Sleep & emotional regulation** suffer
- **Digestion & recovery** slow
- **The body remains** on high alert — indefinitely

Many high-performing physicians adapt externally while becoming increasingly depleted internally.



How Does Stress Show Up For You?

Physical	Behavioral	Emotional	Spiritual
• Fatigue • Sleep disruption • Muscle tension • Appetite changes	• Difficulty concentrating • Forgetfulness • Catastrophizing • Racing thoughts	• Irritability • Feeling overwhelmed • Anxiety • Numbness	• Feeling disconnected • Loss of meaning • Lack of balance • Unfulfilled

The Stress Cycle

Under stress, thinking narrows, hardens, and loses flexibility.



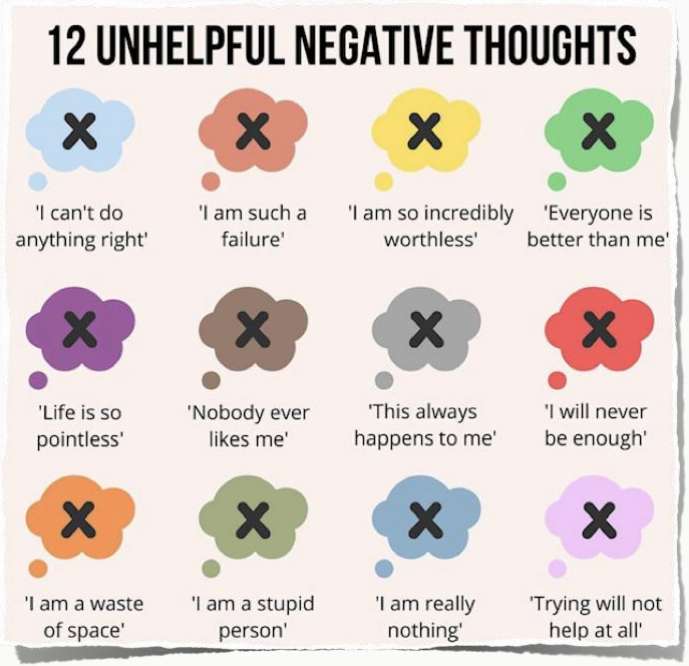
Example:

"I'll never catch up" → Anxiety & frustration → Withdrawal, poor sleep → *More overwhelm*

You can interrupt this cycle at any point — any entry will do.

Cognitive Distortions: Stress-Driven Thinking Traps

- **All-or-Nothing Thinking**
  "If it's not perfect, it's a failure."
- **Over-Generalization**
  One setback = a never-ending pattern of defeat
- **Mind Reading**
  "They're reacting negatively to me"
- **Emotional Reasoning**
  "I feel overwhelmed — therefore I am failing."



Which one is your personal favorite under stress?

THE POWER OF THOUGHTS

What we do with automatic thoughts

1. **Notice**
   automatic thoughts without judgment
2. **Pause**
   before reacting — create a gap between stimulus and response
3. **Challenge**
   harsh self-talk: Is this true? Is this helpful?
4. **Refocus**
   attention on what is accurate and useful



The goal is not to eliminate negative thoughts. It's to reduce their authority.

Where We Place Our Energy Matters

One of the most powerful shifts under stress is becoming intentional about where we direct our attention.

Within Your Control

Your attitude & mindset · Effort & focus · How you respond · Boundaries & self-care

Within Your Influence

Relationships · Team culture · How you communicate with colleagues and patients

Outside Your Control

Other people's behavior · Organizational decisions · The past

Energy directed toward what we cannot control is energy we won't get back.

BREATHE

The fastest reset available

Deep abdominal breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system and interrupts the fight-or-flight response.

Even 60 seconds helps.

Try it now: breathe in for 4 counts · hold for 4 · out for 6

Three Lenses for Reframing

- ***Reverse Lens***

  What would the other person say? How might they be right?

- ***Long Lens***

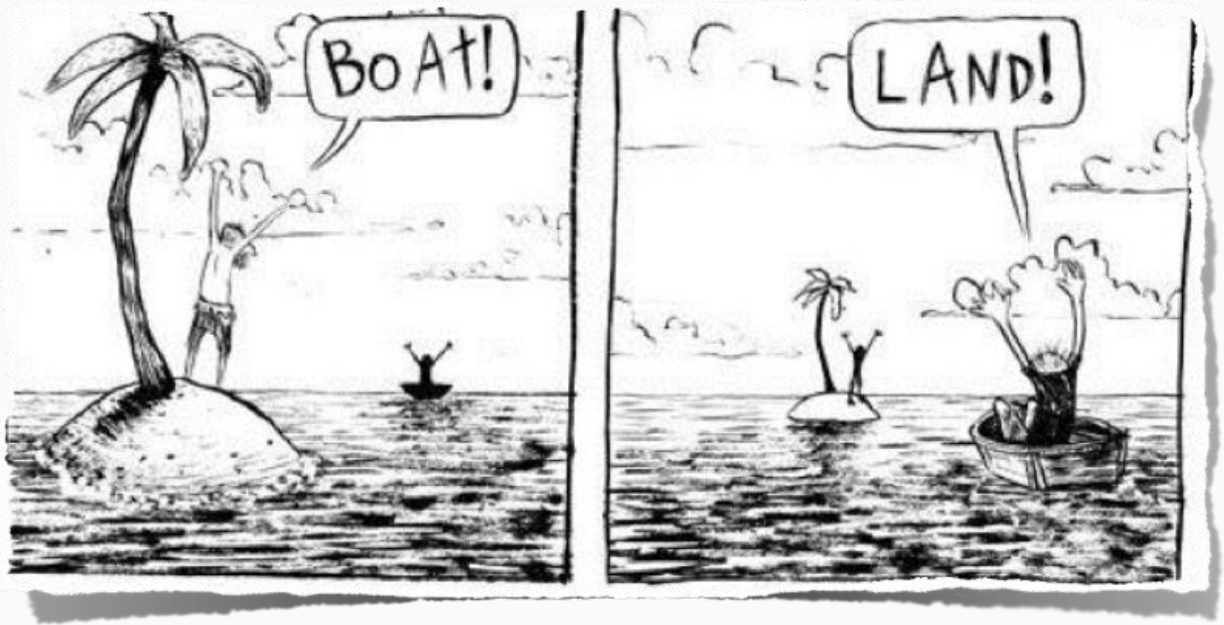
  How will I view this situation in six months?

- ***Wide Lens***

  What can I learn or grow from in this?

Under stress, we default to the narrowest lens

How Does Your Perspective Influence Your Emotions?



Same ocean. Same island. One sees “stranded.” One sees “saved.”

RENEWING PHYSICAL ENERGY

Our nervous systems were designed to complete the stress cycle — not to live in it.

- **Notice early depletion signals:** restlessness, yawning, difficulty concentrating
- **Protect sleep** — it's the foundation of cognitive performance
- **Move your body:** cardio and strength training are evidence-based stress reducers
- **Fuel well** — blood sugar dysregulation amplifies stress reactivity
- **Take brief recovery breaks** at specific intervals — not when you crash



Protecting What Sustains You

Mental Energy

- Guard against interruptions
- Reduce multitasking
- Limit constant stimulation
- Prioritize ruthlessly

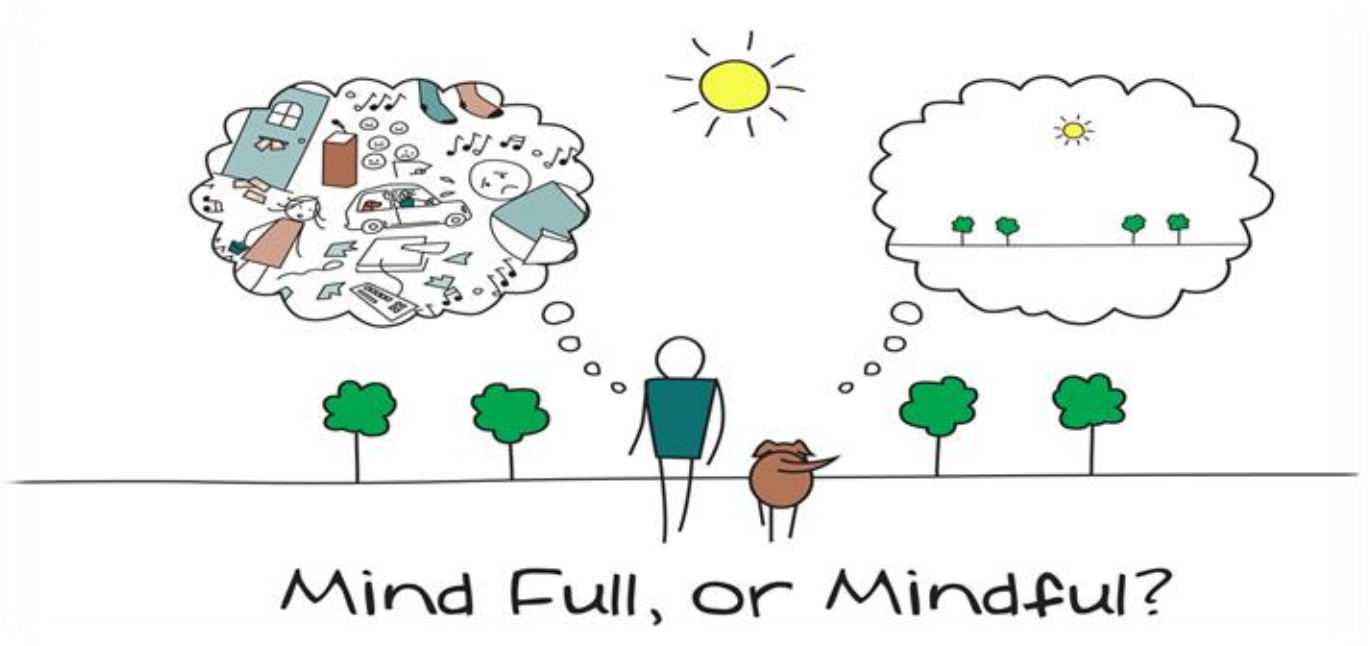
Human Spirit

- Reconnect with meaning
- Clarify your values
- Nurture connection
- Build in reflection


STARBUCKS
COFFEE
29
PLEASE

MINDFULNESS is not meditation.

It is paying attention, on purpose, without judgment.



NEUROPLASTICITY

What we practice grows stronger

Consistent mindfulness practice:

20 min / day · 8 weeks · measurable brain changes

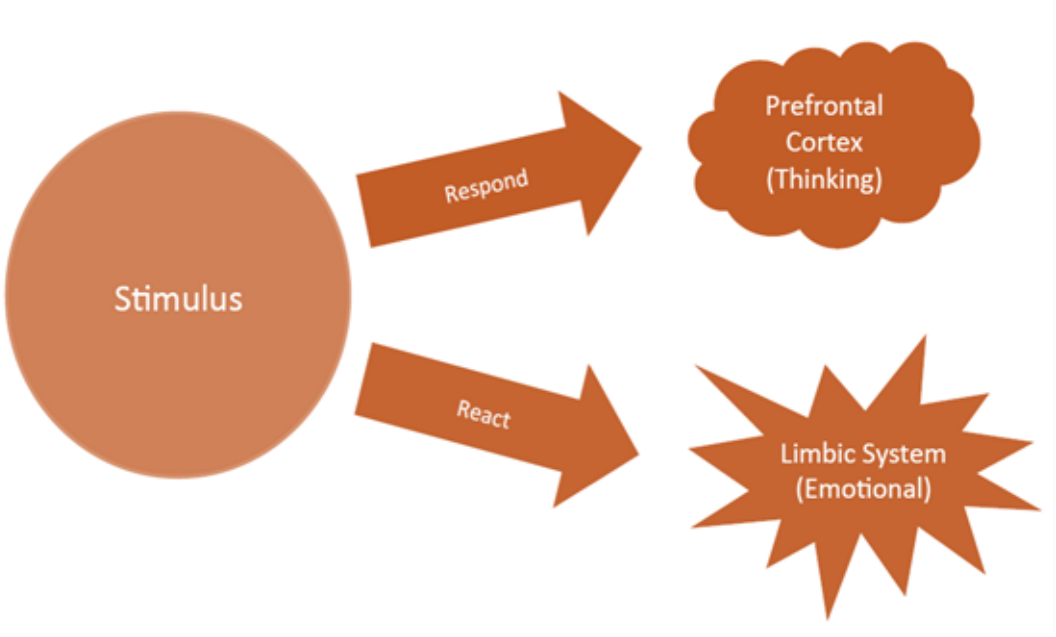
↓ **Amygdala**
smaller = less threat reactivity, less emotional flooding

↑ **Prefrontal Cortex**
larger = better focus, judgment & regulation



Mental Regulation: Respond vs. React

Every moment contains a choice.



RESPOND

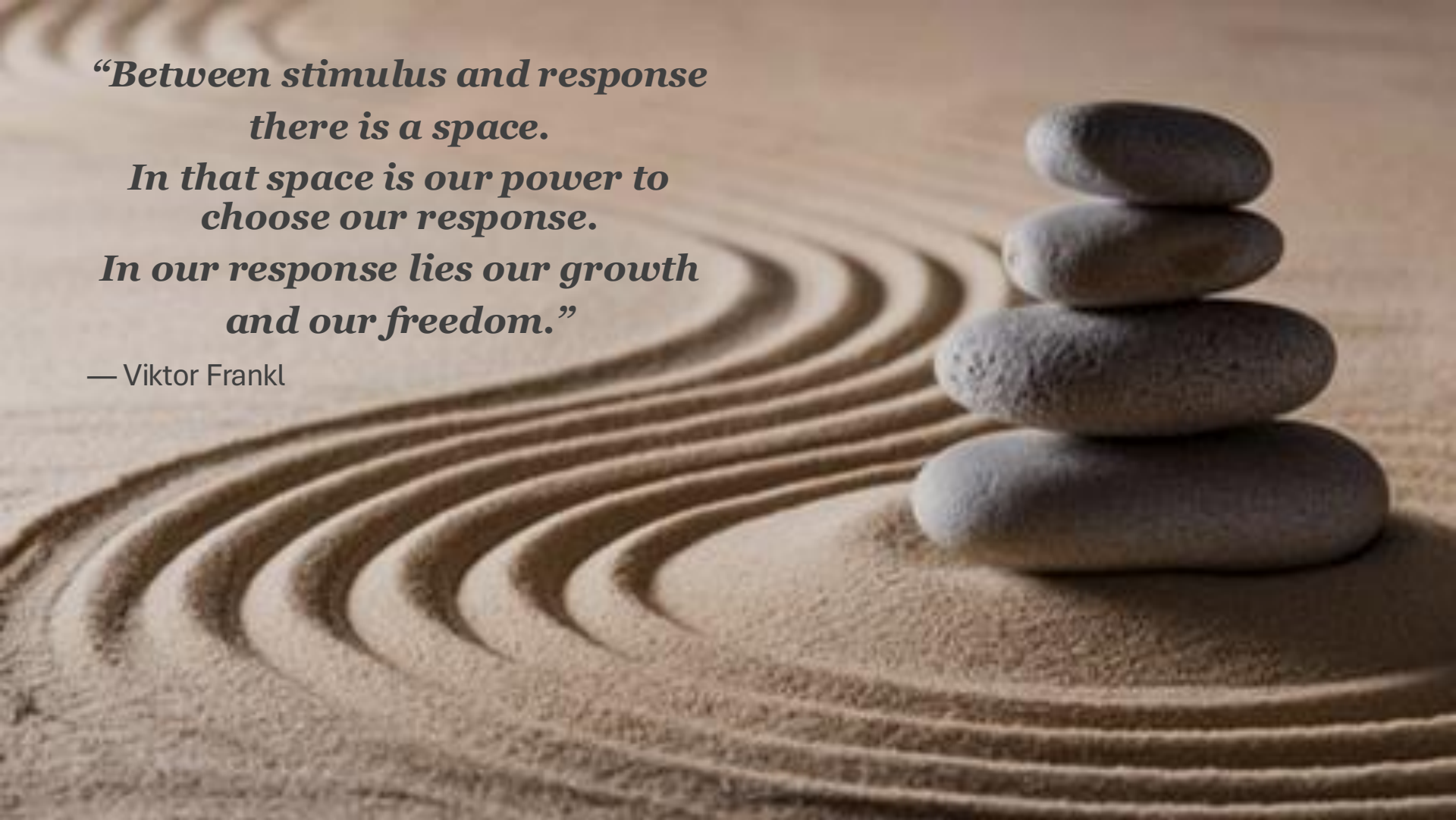
Prefrontal cortex · Thoughtful
Intentional · Values-driven

REACT

Limbic system · Fast · Automatic
Stress-driven · Emotion-led

The pause

Even 3 breaths shifts your brain from reactive to responsive mode.


“Between stimulus and response there is a space.
In that space is our power to choose our response.
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”
— Viktor Frankl

Just Breathe

A Practice for Right Now



Your Mindful Stress Toolkit

1. **Name It**
   Notice and name what you're feeling. Labeling reduces limbic activation.
2. **Breathe**
   3–5 deep breaths activate the parasympathetic system in under 60 seconds.
3. **Reframe**
   Use the Reverse, Long, or Wide Lens to shift perspective.
4. **Move**
   Even 10 minutes reduces cortisol and clears cognitive load.
5. **Focus**
   Direct energy toward what you can actually influence.
6. **Practice**
   One moment of intentional attention, once a day.

Questions & Reflection

