

The background of the page is a photograph of several white eggs sitting in a light green cardboard egg carton. Each egg has a simple, hand-drawn sad face on it, consisting of two small dots for eyes and a curved line for a mouth. The text is overlaid on this image.

# EMPOWERED STRESS STRATEGIES

# *Strategies For Managing The Stress Response*

## THE STRESS RESPONSE

The stress response is a set of events that happens when our brain senses any type of threat. It is controlled by a part of our nervous system called the Sympathetic Nervous System, which is also known as our "fight or flight" system.

Before modern times this fight or flight response helped us to survive something like a tiger attack. It gave us a quick kick of energy so we could either fight off our attacker or run from it.

In modern times, this stress response is a little overkill. Rather than being stressed because of a tiger attack, nowadays it's sitting in traffic, a financial problem, or work that causes our brain to initiate our stress response. Our brain can't tell the difference between an actual threat (a tiger) or a perceived threat (sitting in traffic) and so it will initiate this fight or flight response as if we're being attacked when we're really running 20 minutes late for work.

Our stress response is regulated and initiated by a part of the sympathetic nervous system called the HPA Axis . This is the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis.

- The hypothalamus is the control and command center of the brain and sends out orders for what needs to happen
- The pituitary is the master gland of the brain - it releases different hormones depending on what the hypothalamus commands
- The adrenals are small glands that sit on top of our kidneys - they are responsible for releasing many hormones that make up our stress response. One of those hormones is cortisol
- Cortisol is a hormone most known as being the "stress hormone". It is responsible for the body's physical response to danger and impacts many other processes throughout the body like immune and metabolism function. It also is important in blood sugar balance.

When our flight or fight response is activated, the hypothalamus communicate to the pituitary to make the adrenals release cortisol. Chronically activating this system will result in high cortisol levels. Some common symptoms of having high cortisol are anxiety, depression, irritability, increased thirst and/or cravings of salty or sweet things, high blood pressure, weight gain, and skin changes.

Not only does constant activation of the fight or flight response increase amounts of cortisol, disrupt our hormonal regulation, sleep-wake cycle, and many other essential processes, it also can send the body the message that the environment we're living in is "unsafe" and not suitable for reproduction. In order for us to change this message, we need to change the way our body reacts to the stress response and find ways of managing it.

The ultimate goal is *not* to eliminate stress! We live in a modern world and stress is just part of life. We're going to have moments when we get stressed sitting in traffic! Our goal is not to avoid everything and tell ourselves to "just be less stressed", but rather to concentrate on using strategies that help us manage the stress response's impact on our bodies.

In order to properly manage our stress, we need to know the 4 things that activate the stress response within our body.

The 4 things that push our brain to activate the stress response are:

1. Mental and emotional stress
2. Poor sleep
3. Inflammation
4. Blood sugar imbalances

When we are starting to prep our Mommy Mindset and reduce the stress response's impact on our body, we're going to use the GAMS Method daily.

The GAMS Method is 4 parts to be practiced every day:

1. Gratitude
2. Active stress interruption techniques
3. Meditation
4. Sleep

Having proper sleep is hugely important to our overall stress response but we have covered that in the Sleep Strategies section of this program. Using those techniques to help regulate our sleep cycle will also help us manage our stress response, so that's an incredibly important part of this process.

# GRATITUDE

Studies show that practicing gratitude journaling can have huge, measurable effects on our health. Those who do a daily practice of gratitude report more feelings of happiness and overall positive mood. In an analysis done of cardiac patients it was found that gratitude journaling improved sleep, lowered feelings of fatigue, and actually resulted in decreased inflammatory markers in the blood.

Gratitude is such a powerful, all-consuming feeling. You can't feel anger and gratitude at the same time, so having these daily moments of feeling gratitude serves to center our nervous system and brings us joy in the process. Practicing gratitude might seem silly or unnatural to you at first, but this act of stopping yourself at least twice per day and bringing your attention to the feeling of gratitude is incredibly important.

I recommend practicing gratitude daily in the morning and evening. The best way to do this is to write down 3 things morning and evening that you're grateful for - it can be anything at all. A person, the weather, something that happened to you, etc. Whatever it is that gets you to feel the feeling of gratitude is perfect and I want you to really concentrate on that feeling. One thing I would like you to get into the habit of is writing down 1 thing each morning and evening that you're grateful to yourself for. During this particular exercise I want you to turn those feelings of loving gratitude in towards yourself.

So get yourself a journal and put it in a place you can sit and write down 3 things you're grateful for morning and evening. I find my nightstand is the best place for me.

Examples:

- 1) I am grateful that my husband washed the dishes and cleaned the kitchen so that I could do my castor oil pack. I appreciate his loving support!
- 2) I am grateful that my dog is healing well after her injury and she seems happy again
- 3) I am grateful to myself because I was able to try a new food that previously freaked me out - and I discovered that I kinda like it!

Your personal "gratefuls" as I like to call them can be *anything you want*. No judgements. Just you, your notebook, and some feelings of gratitude.

# ACTIVE STRESS INTERRUPTION TECHNIQUES

These are daily techniques you can use to help your body maintain a restful state, or to bring active feelings of stress out of the fight or flight response mode.

## **Vagal Stimulation Techniques**

The vagus nerve is the largest nerve of the parasympathetic nervous system. While our fight or flight response is controlled by our sympathetic nervous system, our "rest and digest" response is controlled by our parasympathetic nervous system. These two systems are separate - when our fight or flight response is active, our brain is not prioritizing the processes in rest and digest.

The rest and digest system is important in fertility, so we want this to be the primary state we are in. We can use vagal stimulation exercises to send a message to the brain to switch over into a more rest and digest state.

### **Vagal techniques include:**

- **Deep breathing**
  - When we are in a calm rest and digest state we breath deeply and slowly. In the fight or flight we breath fast and shallow. Consciously changing our breathing to slow and deep helps send the message to the brain to that we are in a safe space and can be in rest and digest.
  - Breathe out all your air, breath in through your nose over 5 seconds, then breath out through your mouth for 5 + seconds. Do 10-30 times.
- **Lion's Breath**
  - This breathing technique helps relieve tension in jaw and face, and also helps relieve stress. There is a connection between jaw and lip tension and cervical tension, so this type of breathing exercise can help us be more open in general.
  - Inhale through your nose, open your mouth wide and stick out your tongue pointing down toward your chin, exhale forcefully from your abdomen letting the breath move over your tongue while making a breathy "haaaa" sound, Do 5+ times with normal breathing between.
- **Gargling**
  - This helps stimulate the part of your vagus nerve in your neck muscles. When you gargle you contract these neck muscles and stimulate the vagus nerve.
  - Get water in the back of your throat and vigorously gargle several times over 1 minute. This type of gargle should feel challenging and will take some practice so be careful you don't choke on the water when you first start. Go slow if necessary!

- **Humming, chanting, or singing**
  - These all stimulate the vagus nerve, especially singing. Turn that music up and start singin' along!
- **Body massage**
  - Massage is extrordinarly powerful in sending a message to the brain. There is actually a lot of research showing how massage interrupts certain pain signals in the spinal cord, so this used in pain management as well
- **Going outside**
  - Getting fresh air and sunshine has been shown to improve autoimmunity activity
  - Garden, hike, walk barefoot in the grass
- **Exercise**
  - Not only is exercise hugely important for other aspects of your health and fertility journey, it can be a useful way of helping to bring yourself out of acute stress. Yoga is particularly good.
- **EFT Tapping**
  - This method of tapping certain nerve points on the body helps to reset the nervous system and move you into rest and digest. I highly recommend the app The Tapping Solution, and this technique can be used anywhere at any time.

Other acute stress interrupting techniques you can use are meditation, gratitude journaling, prayer, laughter. Listening to rhythmical drumming music or 432 herz music has also been shown to have some efficacy in reducing the stress response.

# MEDITATION

Meditation is a very powerful practice that can help our bodies achieve more than we ever thought possible. While we're going to harness the power of the mind-body connection of this practice as we move into the Amplify stage, right now we want to use it to help bring our body into a relaxed rest and digest state.

In 2000, Fertility and Sterility published a single-blind study examining the effect of psychological interventions on women experiencing infertility. It showed that women who were assigned relaxation techniques like meditation, muscle relaxation, imagery, and yoga resulted in significantly higher rates of pregnancy. This isn't just a one-off study, either. Another randomized controlled trial using meditation and mindfulness practices showed a significant reduction in perceived stress in women with recurrent pregnancy loss over those not practicing meditation.

In fact, there are dozens upon dozens of studies all examining the health effects of meditation and relaxation techniques. Meditation has been shown to significantly decrease blood pressure, cortisol levels, and several studies found meditation and yoga practices helped with insulin resistance, metabolic syndrome, and cardiovascular disease.

For us we want to use meditation to pull our brain and our body out the fight or flight state and into a rest and digest state. There are many different kinds of meditation and you may find that you like one type but not another. That's ok, continue to experiment with what works for you.

## **Mindfulness Meditation**

Mindfulness meditation can be done anywhere at anytime and it's all about you being mindful about your breath. You turn your entire concentration on your breathing, and when you find your mind wandering (which it will), you simply return your attention on the breathing. You notice how the air feels going in through your nose, how it feels in the back of your throat, you feel your chest rise and fall, notice how your shoulders rise and fall. When you first start this kind of meditation, you'll find your mind wanders very quickly and easily. The act of redirecting your attention is an important part of this meditation. As you practice, the time you're able to concentrate on one thing for an extended period of time will increase. You do not need to meditate for an hour to get the full benefit! Even if you just do it for a few minutes every day you will start to gain benefits.

## **Visualization Meditation**

This is by far my favorite kind of meditation. This is where you concentrate on visualizing something that evokes calmness and serenity for you. For instance, you may close your eyes and imagine standing in the sand at the beach watching the waves tumble in. You get very specific here: imagine the color of the water, the sunlight glistening off of it, the bubbles and froth the water kicks up as the waves crest over on itself as it nears the sand. See rocks and pebbles tumbling in the water and up onto the sand.

If water terrifies you, then obviously don't use waves crashing all around. You can choose anywhere you love and find peace in. You can imagine lying in the grass looking up at a big oak tree swaying in an early spring breeze; the colors of the leaves as they sway back and forth, the sound they make, watch a leaf as it falls off a branch and tumbles with the wind. You are going to imagine and see every detail your brain can possibly come up with and then you're going to imagine you are really there.

One thing I really like about visualization is that you can tailor it to your specific need as well. When feeling acute feelings of stress, you can visualize the adrenal glands themselves feel relaxed and release less cortisol. This type of mindful visualization can be done about any ailment and can have powerful effects through the mind-body connection.

You can use visualization meditation yourself or with a guided meditation, which is very powerful. You can YouTube this and/or use the meditations made available to you within the program.

If sitting still and quieting your mind is difficult for you or you have past experiences of trauma that makes this near impossible, then I recommend starting up some yoga as this is considered an active body meditation. You're still in the moment and concentrating your mind on your body, and there is a lot of research to show that yoga is a powerful stress reliever.

### **To Review:**

- GAMS = Gratitude, Active stress interrupting techniques, Meditation, Sleep
- Write down 3 gratitude statements each morning and each evening, with at least 1 of those being directed towards yourself
- Find which active stress interrupting techniques you like the best and use them throughout the day as needed
- Meditation should be something you integrate daily for at least 5 minutes. Doing a meditation during your castor oil packs is a perfect way to use that time. If you have trouble doing meditation, then try doing yoga as this is a form of body meditation.
- Work on your sleep using the Sleep Strategies download.