Week 4 - Stress: Responding vs. Reacting

STOP: The One-minute Breathing Space

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.
- Victor Frankl -

The basic difference between an ordinary man and a Warrior
is that a Warrior takes everything as a challenge,
while an ordinary man takes everything either as a blessing or as a curse.
- Carlos Castaneda -

I am an old man
and have known a great many troubles,
most of which never happened
- anonymous (sometimes attributed to Mark Twain) -

Stress: Good or Bad?

In modern life, our stress response, designed evolutionarily to protect us from danger, can be deadly when it is activated continually and without resolution. This is the bad news.

The good news is that stress is an evolutionary survival response and is not actually an enemy to health and well-being but is a response which can be protective and even life-giving.

This week we introduce videos, readings, and practices that illustrate the difference between being at the mercy of the stress response and utilizing it as an ally to respond effectively to difficult situations.

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Videos

We begin with **Stress - Portrait of a Killer**, featuring Robert Sapolsky, a neuroscientist at Stanford University and possibly the world's greatest authority on the causes and effects of stress. This video describes the physiology of stress and how the same evolutionary mechanism that helped us survive as a species can be deadly when constantly triggered by traffic jams and work demands.

How To Make Stress Your Friend, features Kelly McGonigal, a psychologist specializing in health medicine. She perhaps goes a little too far in saying that health-endangering stress simply comes from a "belief that stress is bad", but her video provides a good counterbalance to the idea that stress is always bad. **How Stress Affects Your Brain** is an animated video that includes both the "good" and "bad" aspects of stress. In **STOP: A Short Mindfulness Practice**, Susan Bauer-Wu describes how mindfulness can counteract a disproportionate stress reaction and introduces you to **STOP,** which you can use literally anywhere, anytime, to ground you and help you to be more resilient and effective in the face of difficult situations. The last video is **Using STOP**, from a podcast interview of Dave Potter with Yurika Vu,

Reading

Understanding the Stress Response describe the physiological and neurological effects of stress and **Harnessing the Upsides of Stress** reminds us that stress can enhance focus, energy, and resilience when viewed as a resource rather than a threat, transforming our physiological response. **STOP: One-minute Breathing Space** is a one-page description of the process you will be using for this week's informal practice, and **The Magic Quarter Second** is a short article by Tara Brach that weaves in some science to validate "STOP".

Daily Practices

Yoga 2 is introduced this week. For the **formal practice**, we alternate "Yoga 2" with the Sitting Meditation, doing either yoga or a sitting meditation for each of the six days of practice.

For the **informal practice**, you will look for opportunities to practice **STOP** during the course of the day. Don't expect to remember the precise steps of "STOP" during the most trying parts of the day - it's enough just to remember to stop and take a breath. The best way to make it second nature is to practice it when you aren't stressed, such as during the "in between" times, like waiting in line, walking from one office to another, getting in/out of your car, etc.

Mid-way Self-Assessment

By the end of this week, you will be at precisely the half-way point of the course, and that would be a good time to reflect on what's been happening so far as a result of doing this course. On the last day of your practice, instead of recording your informal practice of "STOP", please take the time to complete the **Midway Self-Assessment Worksheet** below, included with your practice sheets.

This short 3-question worksheet shouldn't take any more time than what you normally spend recording your informal practice and will help you reflect on your personal learnings as well as the things you may still be

Week 4 Materials

Video List

- ☐ Stress - Portrait of a Killer - *Excerpt from the Robert Sapolsky National Geographic Special [7 min]*
- ☐ How Stress Affects Your Brain - *Madhumita Murgia [4 min]*
- ☐ How To Make Stress Your Friend - *Kelly McGonigal [14 min]*
- ☐ STOP: A Short Mindfulness Practice - *Susan Bauer-Wu [4 min]*
- ☐ Using STOP - *Interview of Dave Potter with Yurika Vu [21 min]*

Reading List

- ☐ Understanding the Stress Response - *Harvard Health Publications*
- ☐ Harnessing the Upsides of Stress - *Harvard Health Publications*
- ☐ STOP: One-Minute Breathing Space
- ☐ The Magic Quarter Second - *Tara Brach*

Practice Sheets

- ☐ Formal Practice *[PDF] [or WORD format]* - ***Mindful Yoga (Yoga 2)*** *and* ***Sitting Meditation***
- ☐ Informal Practice *[PDF] [or WORD format]* - ***STOP: The One Minute Breathing Space***
- ☐ Midway Self-Assessment *[PDF] [or WORD format] - Complete during last day of practice*

All of the guided practices can be found through the top menu

Supplementary materials related to this week's topic *[optional]*

- The Science of Anxiety *Time Magazine article*
- The Anatomy of Fear *Discovery Magazine graphic*
- When Is Stress Good for You *article by Bruce McEwen*
- The Psychology of Stress *short video "teaser" by Robert Sapolsky [3 min]*
- Stress - Portrait of a Killer *Longer version of the Robert Sapolsky National Geographic Special [27 min]*
- Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers *book by Robert Sapolsky*
- Leaves Falling Gently *book by Susan Bauer-Wu*
- The Mindful Approach to Butterflies in Your Stomach *article by Jennifer Wolkin*
- The Other Brain Also Deals with Many Woes *article by Harriet Brown*
- How Does the Vagus Nerve Convey Gut Instincts to the Brain? *Psychology Today*

Once you have done at least six days of practice (over a span of a week or more) and feel that you've gotten the essence of this "Week" through the videos and reading, you are ready to go to Week 5. It's not necessary to read/view any of the Supplementary materials - these are totally optional.

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Practice Log - Week 4

FORMAL PRACTICE: Practice at least six times this week, alternating Mindful Yoga 2 with the Sitting Meditation. As before, don't expect anything in particular from doing these. In fact, give up all expectations about it. Just let your experience be your experience. ***As with all the weeks, one of your six formal practices can be one of the live group meditations listed in the Zoom Meeting page.*** *Once you have done at least six days of practice and feel that you've gotten the essence of this "Week", you may go to the next week, although you can stay here longer if that feels right.*

INFORMAL PRACTICE: Read the description of STOP: One-Minute Breathing Space. Carry the Informal Practice Log with you during the day, and at least once during the day (waiting in line, just before getting in or out of your car…), practice using "STOP", and record it on the Informal Practice Log when you can.

NOTE: On the last day of your practice, instead of recording your informal practice of "STOP", please take the time to complete the Midway Self-Assessment Worksheet which was included with your practice sheets (see Week 4, under "Practice Sheets").

Date	Formal Practice Comments (Yoga or Sitting)
7th day & beyond is optional	

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Informal Practice Log (STOP: One-Minute Breathing Space) – Week 4

What was the situation?	What was going on with you when you thought to take a Breathing Space? (body, mind, emotion)	What did you notice WHILE you were doing the Breathing Space? (body, mind, emotion)	What did you notice AFTER you did the Breathing Space? (body, mind, emotion, action)	What did you learn?
EXAMPLE *I was in a meeting where someone was saying something I knew to be untrue.*	*My heart was pounding, my stomach was tight, I felt angry and I thought "He KNOWS that's not true!"*	*Noticed my shoulders were tight, too, but when I paid attention to breath, I felt things start to loosen a bit.*	*My stomach and shoulders were a little looser. I did say something, but it came from a much calmer place.*	*Without the break, I would have reacted automatically and said something I'd regret. I can use getting aroused as a signal to use a Breathing Space.*
7th day & beyond is optional	***NOTE:*** *On the last day of informal practice, instead of (or in addition to) recording your experience with "STOP" that day, complete the* ***Midway Self-Assessment Worksheet*** *that was included with your practice sheets (see Week 4, under "Practice Sheets").*			

Mid-way Self-Assessment

So far, you have experienced the three main formal practices (body scan, sitting meditation, yoga) and a number of informal practices (simple awareness, mindful eating, awareness of pleasant/unpleasant experiences, STOP/one minute breathing space). ***Even though you won't be sharing this with anyone else, it can be helpful to actually write down your thoughts at this point, reflecting on your personal learnings as well as the things you may still be struggling with****. A likely outcome of this awareness and active appreciation will be a strengthening and reinforcement that can naturally carry forward to the end of this course and beyond.*

What do you notice already starting to happen? What are you encouraged by?

What is not happening yet – what are you still struggling with?

Take a moment to see if you can recall a specific incident in your life that stands out that somehow relates to the work you have done so far in this course (if no incident comes immediately to mind, it might be helpful to review your informal practice worksheets). What was the situation and what happened?

One-Minute Breathing Space

Haven't there been times when you just needed some "breathing space"?
This practice provides a way to step out of automatic pilot mode and into the present moment.

What we are doing is creating a space to reconnect with your natural resilience and wisdom.
You are simply tuning in to what is happening right now, without expectation of any particular result.

If you remember nothing else, just remember the word "STOP".

S – Stop and take Stock *Checking in to Head/Heart/Body*

Bring yourself into the present moment by deliberately asking:

What is my experience right now?

Thoughts… (what are you saying to yourself, what images are coming to mind.)
Feelings… (enjoying, neutral, upset, excited, sad, mad, etc.)
Sensations… (physical sensations, tightness, holding, lightness, etc.)

Acknowledge and register your experience, even if it is uncomfortable.

T – "Take" a Breath *Directing awareness to Breathing*

Gently direct full attention to breathing, to each inbreath and to each outbreath as they follow, one after the other.

Your breath can function as an anchor to bring you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness.

O – Open and Observe *Expanding awareness outward*

Expand the field of your awareness around and beyond your breathing, so that it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture, and facial expression, then further outward to what is happening around you: sights, sounds, smells, etc. As best you can, bring this expanded awareness to the next moments…

P – Proceed / new Possibilities *Continuing without expectation*

Let your attention now move into the world around you, sensing how things are ***right now***. Rather than react habitually/mechanically, be curious/open, responding naturally and with kindness. You may be surprised by what happens next after having created this pause…

** This is an adaptation of the "Three Minute Breathing Space" from Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy*