



## TBH Focus

Spirit | *Keep Emotional Balance*

- When emotions run high—or low—mental function, as well as long-term brain health, can suffer.
- Stress can be distracting, making it tough to focus and remember. Also, some studies suggest that chronic stress may cause the hippocampus, the part of the brain involved in learning and memory, to shrink.
- Activities that require mindfulness, such as meditation, can help realign our attention and relieve emotional distress. In fact, according to some research, meditation may actually help to improve brain health and even slow the progression Alzheimer's disease.

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## The TBH Science

Stress comes in all shapes and sizes, from the nail-biting anxiety of waiting for the results of a medical test to the butterflies-in-the-stomach anticipation of meeting the in-laws for the first time. And while in many ways these varieties of stress seem completely different (one bad, one good), in fact all types of stress originate from the same place: how we react to change.

That reaction sets off physiological changes that are rooted in our primitive past—the “fight-or-flight” response that once helped to protect us in the face of danger—an attacking bear, for example. Here's what happens:

- Hormones, including adrenaline and glucocorticoids, are released.
- Heart rate speeds up.
- Breathing becomes rapid and shallow.
- Stored sugar is released by the liver.
- Our senses are heightened.
- Our muscles tense up, preparing us for action.
- Blood flow to our digestive organs, hands, and feet is restricted, while blood flow to our brain and major muscles increases.

Although we rarely find it necessary to wrestle with wildlife, our innate stress mechanisms continue to respond just as strongly to stress, which most of us experience on a daily basis (stuck in traffic, a spat with a spouse, an ailing family member). Chronic stress impairs memory in a number of ways—by impacting our physical health and by distracting us, which makes it hard to focus. Research also shows that chronic stress may cause the hippocampus, the area of the brain that allows us to learn new things, to shrink—possibly because of an increase in glucocorticoids. Fortunately, as deeply entrenched as our stress response is, there are some very effective ways to uproot it and protect our brain health and memory.

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## You Will Need

- “De-Stress Yourself” worksheets (see Resources)



- Introduce the activity. Use the TBH Focus and the TBH Science to explain how stress impacts brain health and memory.
  - Use the stress assessment worksheets (“How Vulnerable Are You To Stress?”, “Holmes-Rahe Scale”, “Stress-Related Complaints”) to help participants get a sense of the stress levels in their own lives (see Resources).
  - Discuss lifestyle strategies for keeping everyday stress in balance, such as exercise, hobbies, yoga, massage, prayer, and talking to others. Use the “Lifestyle Strategies for Stress Reduction” worksheet to foster discussion (see Resources).
  - Use the worksheet to teach the BRAKES strategy for dealing with a stressful situation in the moment (see Resources).
  - Practice one or two stress reducing techniques using the worksheets (see Resources).
  - Have individuals develop personal “De-Stress Plans” using the worksheet (see Resources).
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- Introduce the activity. Use the TBH Focus and the TBH Science to explain how stress impacts brain health and memory.
  - Discuss lifestyle strategies for keeping everyday stress in balance, such as exercise, hobbies, yoga, massage, prayer, and talking to others (see Resources).
  - Teach the BRAKES strategy for dealing with a specific stressful situation (see Resources).
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Stress is the body’s “fight-or-flight” response to a threat, to change, to a new situation. It’s perfectly normal to feel stress once in awhile, but when it becomes chronic, it can affect brain health and memory. Some ways to keep everyday stress in balance: get plenty of exercise, try yoga or meditation, take up a hobby, pray (if religion is a part of your life), talk to a loved one or friend.

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## Resources

See the Resources section of your online Toolkit for all worksheets, links and additional materials for this activity.

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