



COHERENCE GUIDE TO BEATING **STRESS**

Dr. Sai KrupaSagar

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By

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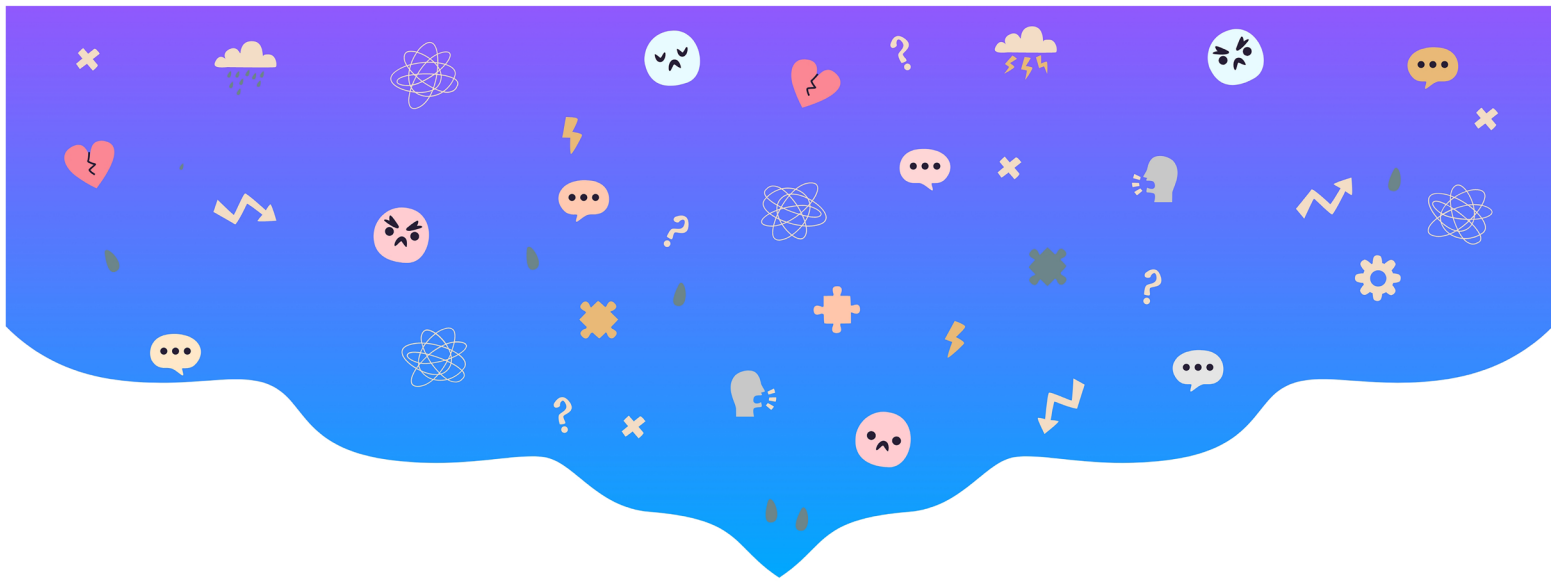
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INTRODUCTION

In these unprecedented times filled with challenges, uncertainty and worries, many of us experience increased levels of stress in our daily lives. Yet situations like these often present a precious opportunity to turn inwards, reflect on our current state of being, and make a sound resolution to improve the way we manage our response to unpleasant and disturbing situations, people and events.

This short publication “Coherence Guide to Beating Stress” aims to help you understand what stress is and how it can affect your wellbeing, at the level of your physical health, your relationships and your performance. It also demonstrates how prolonged, repeated and extreme levels of stress indicate an incoherent state of being—non-alignment of your emotions, thoughts and behavior. Finally, it offers an effective toolbox of coherence techniques that can quickly and easily bring you into a state of coherence, and help you manage any situation, irrespective of how overwhelming and distressing it might appear.

We hope that you will put aside some personal time to go through this guide and then apply the tools presented in it. In doing so, you will turn inwards and begin to connect with your true intelligence—to that source of wisdom and infinite potential. This is the key to not only living a stress-free life, but also a life up to your optimal potential.



Part:1

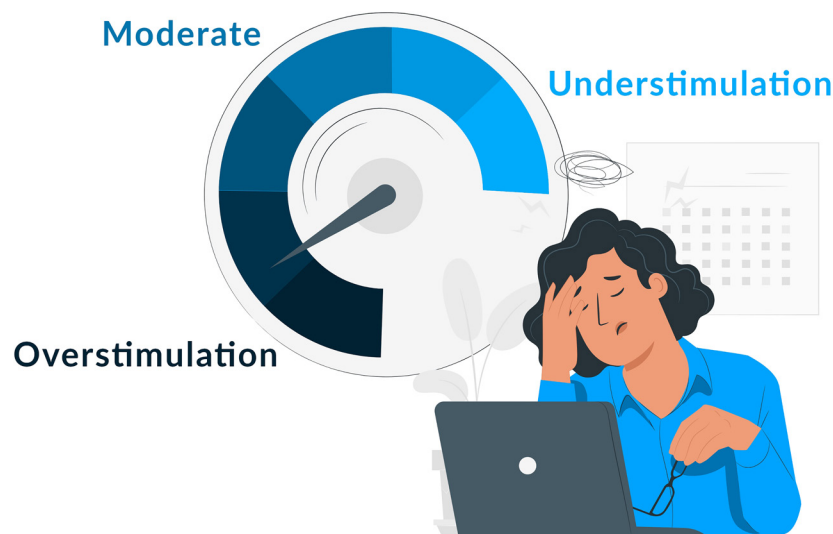
STRESS—SYMPTOMS, CAUSES & EFFECTS

1.1. What is Stress?

Stress is a feeling of physical, emotional, and mental tension that results from our perception of pressure and challenging situations. Stress is part of normal life, and it is experienced by everyone from time to time. Stress makes us feel overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure. Stress provides vital energy that can produce a positive or negative effect, based on the levels and types of stressors.

1.2. Stress Levels

There are three levels of stress:

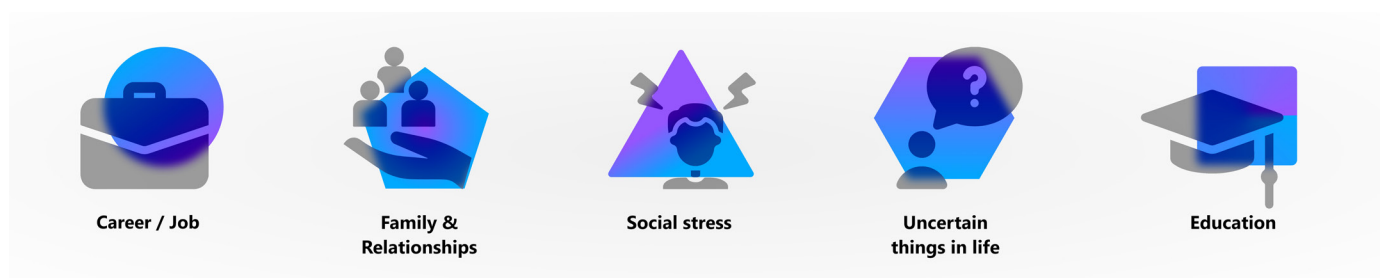


It is important to maintain moderate levels of stress, since it leads to optimal health, quality of relationships and performance (at work or in studies).

1.3. Areas of Stress

Continued or repeated stress can significantly impact the quality of your life. It is thus important to identify the critical areas in which you experience prominent stressors.

You can experience stressful situations in one or more areas of your life, including:



1.4. Why Can Stress Be Harmful?

Excessive stress (if not within the moderate limits) is harmful because:

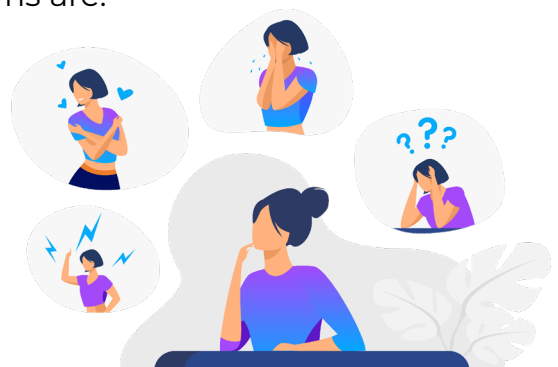
- It can negatively affect your health
- It can negatively impact your relations with other people
- It can lower your efficiency in your work or in your studies

Finally, stress becomes a vicious cycle that is difficult to break out from—stress can produce even more stress.

1.5. Recognize the Symptoms of Stress

Early Warning signs/signals of stress-related problems are:

- Moodiness
- Withdrawing from responsibility
- Trouble falling asleep
- Poor emotional control
- Severe feelings of helplessness and dependency
- Chronic fatigue and susceptibility to illness
- Marked change in appetite



When you are under stress, the condition may affect your physical, psychological, and mental wellbeing. Hence identifying the behavioral aspect of you may include any of the following symptoms:

Physical Symptoms	Emotional Symptoms	Mental Symptoms
Low energy or vitamin deficiency	Easily agitated, frustrated, angry	Constant worrying, overthinking
Constant tiredness	Lack of confidence	Forgetfulness
Aches, pains, and tense muscles	Moodiness	Inability to focus
Rapid heartbeat, difficult breathing	Difficulty relaxing and quieting the mind	Poor judgment, confusion, self-doubt
Insomnia	Low self-esteem	Seeing only the negative side
Nervousness and shaking, fainting	Feeling lonely	Unusual behaviors
Digestive problems	Depression	Suicidal thoughts
Reproductive issues	Nervousness	Nightmares, jerks during sleep
Skipping meals (lack of appetite) or overeating	Avoiding people	Poor productivity of work

1.6. Physiology of Stress



Perception of Danger

Stress is part of our survival mechanism—it is a precious evolutionary legacy from our distant ancestors. Perception of danger—whether real or imaginary—turns on the sympathetic nervous system, which then mobilizes a huge amount of energy available in the body, to best respond to the stressor (threat). This results in dilated pupils (optimized ability to see); faster heart and respiratory rates (to be able to run); a release of higher amounts of glucose into the blood (providing the cells with more energy); and direction of the blood flow towards the limbs (in order to be faster). While stress hormones (such as adrenaline and cortisol) flood the muscles, the blood withdraws from our forebrain and redirected toward the hind-brain.

This physiological survival mechanism is adaptive and it keeps us alive. But it also deprives us of our capacity to rationally think and analyze the situation, forcing us to rely on our instinctive reactions. We either fight or run away from the place of danger. In other words, in a survival mode, we rely primarily on our senses and we narrow our focus to the danger in front of us.

Dangers of Chronic Stress

Sporadic and short episodes of stress are tolerable and generally do not adversely impact our wellbeing as, once the threat is gone, the body re-establishes its equilibrium. The problem is that the predator animal of our ancestor's distant past is now replaced with a multitude of modern stressors, related to our jobs, relationships, 24/7 exposure to news and other day-to-day struggles. The brain is always in a state of extreme alertness and arousal. It habitually narrows its focus and keeps shifting its focus from one stressor to another, resulting in inefficiency.

This way we remain in a state of maladaptive chronic stress, and the stress chemistry is always “on.” Severe trauma and prolonged or repeated exposure to stress compromises the body’s ability to bounce back to a state of balance. Since in a state of stress all our energy is directed peripherally (to deal with the danger), healthy expression of the genes is down-regulated, the immune system weakens and the body loses its capacity for growth and repair.

Keeping Stress Alive Through Negative Thinking

One of the worst ways in which we keep the stress “alive” is by constant thinking about problems and worries, by remembering and re-living the negative experiences of the past, and by projecting negative anticipations about our future. Since the body is not able to distinguish between an actual and a perceived threat, it biochemically responds to our troubled thoughts in the same way it would have responded had the threat been real.

By focusing on a memory of a particular negative experience from the past, we enter a vicious circle—neural pathways associated to that memory get strengthened, the body relives the same negative emotions, and the stress hormones keep getting released into our bloodstream. The negative event from the past becomes imprinted into our neural architecture. So when we encounter any new situation or a person which reminds us of that past negative experience, our brains trigger the same biochemical response. Physiologically, the body is dangerously stuck to the past. This is the devastating impact of the emotions of the past stored in our bodies.

Addiction to Stress

Chronic stress weakens our immunity, and compromised immune system leads to illness and disease. With time, one can become addicted to the stress, i.e. to the chemicals (the stress hormones), as they provide a rush of energy and lead to a heightened state. When that happens, the baseline emotional state determined by the corresponding internal chemistry becomes stronger than any new external conditions, and the person tends to slip back into negativity even after the external conditions have improved.



Part:2

STRESS & COHERENCE

2.1. What is Coherence?

Being susceptible to stressors and living in a state of perpetual stress is an indication that you lack coherence—balance, harmony, alignment and integration at the level of body, mind and soul's intelligence.

- Coherence is an alignment with the present moment;
- Coherence is a state of harmony and connectedness;
- Coherence is being in tune with your authentic self;
- Coherence is thinking, feeling and behaving in synchrony with your innate nature;
- Coherence is the absence of fear, doubt, regret and clinging.

In the language of science, coherence is a state characterized by waves which are in synchrony with each other. This synchrony results in constructive interference (formation of a bigger wave with higher amplitude). The power of coherence is often illustrated using the laser metaphor: ***Coherence can be compared to the incredible intensity of a laser beam. While the light waves of an ordinary flashlight are spread out or scattered, laser beams are highly organized. They are directional*** (narrow, parallel, with minimal divergence), ***and “in step”*** (frequency and waveform are identical)¹. ***As a result of this directionality, the energy or power in the laser beam is amplified.***

Dr. Bruce H. Lipton—an acclaimed developmental biologist, author and lecturer—gives a strikingly simple definition of coherence:



“Coherence means that it is all lined up together; incoherence is when the energies are dissipated.

If you take a 10W light bulb and turn it on, you are going to get a glow, but you can barely read a book under it. But if you take those photons, and instead of dispersing them randomly you make them coherent, streaming down in a narrow beam, a 10W in a laser will burn a hole in your wall.”



This is why achieving a lasting state of inner alignment or coherence should be everyone's goal. Coherence is not only a solution to the problems that trouble us. Coherence is a way of aligning and focusing all our energy and resources. Coherence results in intuitive creativity and spontaneous solutions.

Another way to understand the power of coherence is by looking at resonance. The phenomenon of resonance occurs when an external force has a matching frequency with that of a target object. The object then absorbs more energy and starts vibrating with higher amplitude. Resonance is what explains the ability of a human voice to break a crystal glass; the speed of cooking in a microwave oven; and the breaking of gall stones using ultrasound.

2.2. Types of Coherence

From psychology to neurophysiology to behavioral science, coherence is in the focus of exciting interdisciplinary research. To better understand the relevance of coherence to our own lives, it is useful to look at its distinct aspects or facets: physiological, psychological and existential coherence. When these three levels of coherence are achieved, we begin to live in alignment with the intelligence of our body, mind and soul, fully experiencing physical wellbeing, harmonious relationships and peak performance.

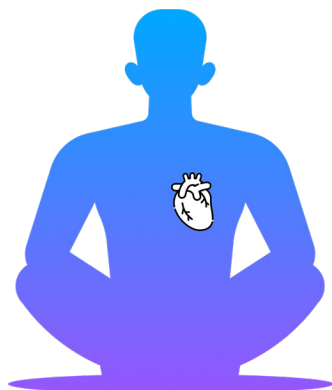
Physiological Coherence (Body)

This is the biological bedrock of coherent living. “***Physiological coherence is inner alignment at the level of our body.***”² Physiological coherence is achieved through brain coherence and heart (cardiac) coherence. Physiological coherence means that all our body systems and functions are attuned and working in unison. Physiological coherence ensures that we are in control of our energy, can recuperate/regenerate fast, and can perform efficiently.



Brain coherence

In neuroscience, brain coherence is achieved when different areas of the brain are in synchrony, and the corresponding groups of neurons fire together. The state of brain coherence is a state of **high focus, clarity, harmony, and peak efficiency.**



Heart coherence

Cultivation of elevated emotions stabilizes the heart rhythm and makes it more coherent. It is a state of heart coherence, the heart rate variability trace shows a smooth, wave-like pattern.³ When the heart generates coherent signals, it positively affects all other physiological organ systems in the body. Our energy increases, our emotions stabilize, and we are more in control of our words, decisions, and actions.

Psychological Coherence (Mind)

This is the alignment of one's emotions and thoughts. Psychological coherence therefore consists of emotional and cognitive coherence. When our emotions and thoughts are in sync, there is no inner conflict and self-sabotaging behavior. Put simply, we are in full control of how we present ourselves to the external world and how we interact with it.



Emotional coherence

This aspect of coherence assumes that, rather than being reactive to external triggers, we respond to them. Such a mastery over our own emotions can happen once we start paying attention to how our emotions are stimulated, internalized, and reinforced. Emotional coherence is a “harmonious state of sustained, self-modulated positive emotion.” When the brain and the heart are in coherence, emotional coherence follows automatically.



Cognitive coherence

When our thoughts are clear, sharp, and insightful, we possess cognitive coherence. We no longer suffer from brain fog, clouded judgment, or brain shutdown. Instead, we become capable of cognitive breakthroughs, and demonstrate superior problem-solving skills. Coherent mind produces coherent thoughts leading to enhanced creativity and imagination.

Existential Coherence (Intelligence / Consciousness)

We have disconnected from our true nature and we need to awaken to our true intelligence. Doing so can help us tap into our latent abilities and can lead us toward fulfillment of our highest potential. It is through our innate intelligence that we can access intuition, encounter synchronicities, experience higher awareness, and gain insights beyond the limits of the rational mind. Existential coherence is an alignment with non-local consciousness / life purpose / One Mind / Universal Intelligence.

When our thoughts, feelings, and actions are aligned with the universal intelligence, there is a shift from chaotic to structured mode of being that brings numerous benefits and mastery of one's life. Randomness and disorder get replaced by synergies which strengthen and empower us. By tapping into our innate intelligence, our performance improves, we become more successful in dealing with people and situations. We become better at influencing and negotiating with others. Individuals with a high degree of coherence are not only healthy, happy, and successful, but also capable of positively affecting other people, groups, and communities.

2.3. What Prevents You From Being in Coherence?



Fear

Fear of damage to one's identity triggers emotions like anger, aversion, hate and resentment. Long or frequent bouts of fear affect the body, impair immunity and cause disease. Fear of the unknown and fear of future lead to anxiety and stress. When we are in a state of fear, our thoughts, words and actions are not in alignment.



Confusion

When we are unable to decide on what to do or which approach to follow, we base our decisions on our programmed beliefs and assumptions. We always worry about the 'right' thing to do, the 'right' words to speak and the 'right' image to maintain, even though 'right' is always relative, afraid of losing importance, we speak and act in contrast to our feelings and conscience.



Doubt

Not knowing the extent of our innate intelligence and our inherent power to create, we rely on external situations, people and things to keep us happy and successful. When we realize the fragility of these external factors, we begin to feel disconnected, lose trust and start doubting the mechanics of life. Lack of confidence is a major reason for not living up to our maximum potential.

2.4. Why Coherence Matters?

When you feel bad about things, people or situations, you are not in coherence. When you feel confident, clear and enthusiastic, you are in coherence. Coherence is being in sync, being in tune with your innate potential, powers and purpose.

When you catch yourself thinking one way, feeling another, and then behaving in a random or inconsistent manner, you are not in coherence. When you experience problems related to your health, relationships, and performance, you are not in coherence. The non-alignment of thoughts, feelings and actions is a key characteristic of incoherent living.

As long as we remain in an incoherent state of living, we unconsciously forsake many qualities of a healthy, happy and successful life. We often feel tormented by base emotions of fear, sadness and anger. We do not utilize the highest potential of our intellect. Far too often we feel devoid of energy, will and enthusiasm. We take too long to rejuvenate or heal. We doubt our abilities, skills and capacity to succeed. We perceive our environment as being innately hostile. We react by being either overly defensive or too aggressive. In a long run, all this leads to fatigue, exhaustion, clouded judgment, burn-

out, frustration, depression, and other forms of deterioration in our overall state of being. We realize that we lack agency over our lives, and that we do not live to the fullest.

2.5. Why Coherence Seems Difficult to Achieve?

When we occasionally enter a state of flow, in which **elevated emotions, clear thoughts** and **high levels of energy** are all aligned to give us the right push, we experience the amazing power of coherence. Yet if we cannot access this state at will, nor remain in it for prolonged periods of time, we start to feel that coherent living might be out of reach to us. There are two main reasons why we might feel that way.

- When coherence occurs spontaneously, it is contingent and impermanent. Research has shown that certain life circumstances and events (such as great happiness, euphoria, sudden insightfulness) can push us into spontaneous states of coherence. However, in addition to being accidental, these sporadic occurrences typically have a limited duration, and we cannot exercise any control over them. It is for this reason that we ought to learn methods and techniques through which we can intentionally induce and cultivate sustained states of holistic coherence.
- Another reason why coherence appears difficult to achieve and maintain is that we, as humans, are evolutionary wired to have negative thoughts and emotions. Our ancestors lived in constant state of danger and unpredictability — from predators to harsh environmental conditions, there were numerous threats that demanded vigilance and preparedness to fight or flight. To such a state of alertness, fear and danger anticipation, there is a corresponding physiological response. Our brains switch to default beta brainwaves. Our glands start releasing higher amounts of stress hormones. That state is a state of Incoherence.

2.6. Stress Resilience

The Two Modes of Being: “Fight-or-Flight” Vs “Rest-and-Digest”

Our nervous system—an organized group of cells (neurons)—is the major regulatory system in the body, or the body’s “command center.” The two main parts of the nervous system are the central nervous system (the brain and the spinal cord) and the peripheral nervous system (the nerves branching out from the CNS all over the body). The peripheral nervous system has two divisions: the somatic nervous system (guiding the voluntary movements) and the autonomic nervous system (controlling the involuntary physiological processes, such as the heart rate, blood pressure, respiration). The autonomic nervous system is further divided into two distinct branches: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems.

The sympathetic nervous system activates every time you feel threatened, fearful, agitated or angry. It prepares the body for the “fight-or-flight” response—it is responsible for increasing your alertness, heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tone, etc.

When the threat is over and the danger is gone, the parasympathetic nervous system does the opposite—it signals the body to “rest-and-digest,” decreasing the heart rate, blood pressure, etc. It is a natural healing mechanism of the body. It is associated with slow and deep breathing, decreased muscle tone, lower heart rate, decreased blood pressure, and relaxation.

Healthy Balance

A sign of a healthy system is a balance between the activity of the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems. Prolonged or repeated stress compromises this balance, causing adverse effects on the physical, emotional and mental health. Initially, one experiences certain levels of worry, tension and general discomfort. With time, however, these difficulties can progress to sleep disorders, irritability, daytime fatigue, anxiety, depression etc. Subsequently there can lead to chronic psychosomatic illnesses.

When a person is highly adaptable, and their nervous system readily shifts between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, he/she is said to possess stress resilience. In that case, it is possible to reverse stress accumulation into a relaxation response.

The relaxation response is characterized by an increase in the levels of serotonin (“hap-

piness hormone”), endorphin (“pain relieving hormone”), melatonin (“sleep hormone”), restored circulation, decreased muscle tension, slower heart rate, improved digestion and enhanced immunity. This is our normal, natural, and healthy state of being. It activates our innate capacity for self-healing and rejuvenation, leading to optimal health. With the improved sense of well-being, we also improve our ability to communicate effectively and better manage life’s demands.

Everyone has capacity to increase their stress resilience. We just need to turn up the healing, recharging part of the nervous system (the parasympathetic branch), and tone down the overactive part of the nervous system (the sympathetic branch). Techniques such as breathwork, meditation and gratitude allow us to trigger the relaxation response.



Part:3

THREE SIMPLE COHERENCE TECHNIQUES TO BEAT STRESS

Tips to Manage Stress

You can maintain good balance of stress levels in your life by following these steps:

1. Pay attention to any stress signals or symptoms
2. Identify your areas of stress and your stress triggers
3. Follow a few simple principles that can help you deal with stress:
 - A positive attitude makes a difference.
 - Controlling your diet can control stress—eat healthy, fresh food, rich in fruits and vegetables.
 - Exercise may help you to manage stress.
 - Setting realistic goals helps reduce stress.
 - Seek help when a problem is discovered—your partner, family and friends can often provide precious support.
4. Regularly practice the three simple coherence techniques presented here.

The following three techniques are, in fact, three steps of a daily routine we recommend to you. Although each of them can be used as an independent, standalone technique performed anytime during the day, they work best when done together, as a three-part series of an integrated daily practice.

The first step—the coherent breathing technique—will relax your body and calm your mind, gently inducing you into a state conducive to the second step—breath mindfulness meditation. The meditation session can then be followed by a practice of gratitude (appreciation), acting as a bridge between your inner state, and your experience with the outer world.

3.1. Coherent Breathing: An Instant Calming Technique

During the day, there are moments and situations when we feel overwhelmed and stressed. At times, we are rushed to quickly finish one task after another. We might experience financial pressure. There may be tension in our interactions with colleagues and supervisors. At other times, a sudden thought about the future can instantaneously deprive us of peace and focus.

Various daily life situations can create such an overwhelm—some trivial, while others with a potential to yield long-term consequences. Familiar situations include interview anxiety, missing an important appointment, angry interactions with a spouse, children, parents, or other family



members, etc. Whenever this happens, you can apply a simple technique to quickly enter a state of ease, relaxation, and elevated emotions, while retaining full alertness.

This is a simple breathwork technique which is based on the idea of “equal breaths”—equal time allotted to the inhalation and the exhalation parts of your breath cycle. A version of this technique is also found in the yogic tradition of pranayama, where it is known as sama vritti. The technique is helpful because it can activate the parasympathetic nervous system and to relax your mind and body. You can perform this breathwork technique anywhere you like.

Procedure

Step 1:



Posture

- Choose a comfortable seating or a comfortable standing position
- Straighten your spine and relax your shoulders
- Close your eyes gently and start observing your breath

Step 2:



Breathing

- Breathe in through your nose to a count of three
- Breathe out through your nose to a count of three
- When you feel comfortable and ready, slow down your breathing to the count of four, and then gradually to the count of five, lengthening both your inhalation and exhalation proportionately
- Repeat the cycle for 10 minutes

With time, as you progress in your practice, aim at reaching the target of breathing at the count of 5–6. Breathing at the rate of five breaths per minute is known as Coherent Breathing. Modern science calls this rate the resonant rate. However, over the centuries, many spiritual traditions have recognized that this breathing pattern has optimal effects on one’s physical health, quietens the mind while inducing calm alertness, and brings emotional resilience. When coupled with meditation, coherent breathing can also lead to elevated states of consciousness.

Benefits

- Coherent breathing relaxes the central nervous system—it calms the body, reduces tension, and leads to a state of deep relaxation
- Coherent breathing calms the mind, reduces the mind chatter, and induces a state of calm alertness
- Coherent breathing improves your focus and concentration
- Coherent breathing establishes a rhythm for your practice
- Coherent breathing helps you to access your full breathing capacity
- Coherent breathing reduces anxiety and insomnia, symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and attention deficit disorder (ADD)

Tips

- Sitting cross-legged is optional. You can make your back straight if that is more comfortable.
- Relax your jaw, throat, neck, and shoulders throughout the exercise, letting go of any unnecessary tension.
- Your breath should never be forced or strained. If necessary, you can alter the pace of breathing.

Best Time to Practice Coherent Breathing

- Immediately after you wake up in the morning
- Anytime during your work, when you need to take a break and relax
- Anytime in the day

3.2. Breath Mindfulness Meditation

This meditation is called **Anapanasati**. In Pali language 'ana' means in-breath, 'apana' means out-breath and 'sati' means mindfulness. In English, this meditation on the breath is referred to as 'breath-mindfulness' meditation.

Anapanasati meditation is done by sitting very comfortably, joining both the hands, closing the eyes, and paying attention to in-breath and out-breath. Nothing else is required to be done. There is no need to visualize anything. There is no need to think of any God or guru figure because breath is your guru. Your breath itself is your guide. There is no need to change the rhythm of the breath.



Here are detailed steps for the posture and procedure to do the 'Breath-mindfulness' meditation.

The Posture

Sit easy and normal on the **floor, couch, bed** or chair.

Back and neck should be straight but relaxed. You do need to keep them stiff.



You can sit cross-legged (also called half-lotus position) on the floor or bed or couch. Or you can sit normally on the chair with feet resting on the ground and legs crossed at the ankle. This means the right leg over the left ankle or left leg over the right ankle. Clasp your palms—fingers into fingers. Leave your hands relaxed by your sides and wrists resting on your lap.

If you are wearing spectacles, please remove them. Close your eyes. Relax your forehead and eyebrows. Please ensure your posture should always be relaxed. If you feel discomfort in your legs, hands, back, shoulders, neck, forehead, please feel free to move/relax those parts. But never open your eyes till your meditation session is complete. For those of you not used to sitting straight for a long time, you can use pillows/cushions to support your back. If you sitting cross-legged on the floor or bed or couch, you can relax and move to a normal sitting-on-the-chair posture (with your feet on the floor).

The Procedure

- Bring your attention to a point where you can feel your breath — the tip of your nose or your upper lip. Start observing your breath.
- Pay attention to your in-breath and out-breath. Your breathing should be normal, natural and gentle. No specific deep breathing or restrained breathing is required.
- If you have a hard time watching the breath, start 'counting the breath.' One count equals one full cycle of inhalation and exhalation. Count up to 20 and then slowly start focusing on your breath at the tip of your nose.
- You might find it easy to observe the movements on your chest or belly as you breathe in and breathe out. Feel these movements as you inhale and exhale.
- Continue to watch your breath. Your focus might be disturbed by thoughts. This is called 'mind-wandering.' That is normal. If you realize you are not focused on your breath, slowly bring your attention back to your breath.
- Be with your breath. Be aware of your body while you continue to observe your breath. Do not try to focus too hard by stressing your eyes, eyebrows or forehead. Relax.
- Gradually, you will start feeling sensations in different parts of your body. These are due to your increased awareness of energy flows. While you feel these 'energy currents' across your body, anchor yourself on your breath. Continue to watch your breath consciously.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Meditative music: You can use soft, instrumental music to help you relax during the initial stages of your practice. Over time you will overcome the need for music or guidance and prefer meditating in silence.
- Duration of meditation: Beginners should practice meditation for at least 30 minutes every day. Once you feel you are able to focus more continuously on your breath with little mind wandering, the recommended duration is as many minutes as your age. For example, if you are 25 years old, then you should meditate for at least 25 minutes.
- Time of meditation: Any time of the day or night is good for this meditation practice. For a productive meditation session, you should leave a gap of around 2 hours after a heavy meal. Early mornings are recommended as ideal time for a meditation practice.

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Duration for meditation:

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Once you feel you are able to focus more continuously on your breath with little mind wandering, the recommended duration is as many minutes as your age.

For example,

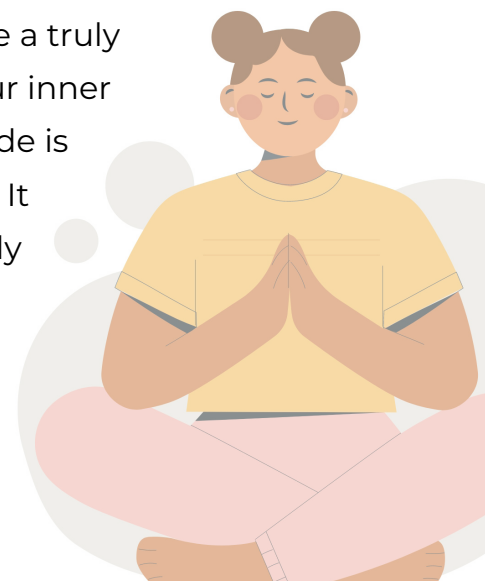
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Time of meditation: Any time of the day or night is good for this meditation practice.

For a **productive meditation** session, you should leave a gap of around **2-hours after a heavy meal**. Early mornings are recommended as ideal for a meditation practice.

3.3. Cultivating Gratitude

Gratitude is one of the simplest and most powerful techniques of entering a state of coherence and overcoming stress. Gratitude is both a personality trait and a skill that can be practiced and developed. Cultivating an attitude of gratitude can be done on a daily basis, and when done sincerely, it can be a truly rewarding practice. Gratitude can quickly bring into balance our inner state of being and our experience with the outer world. Gratitude is about taking the time to recognize the good things in your life. It is about saying “thank you,” either directly to a person, or silently in your heart. Gratitude is a positive emotion, a positive state of being, an acknowledgment paired with deep appreciation for something or someone that has enriched our life in some way. Gratitude figures prominently among the factors that enhance human life. There are numerous science-backed benefits of being in the habit of gratitude—it is said that gratitude is good medicine that boosts our physical, emotional and mental wellbeing.



Heart-Centered Breathing

This simple technique allows you to embrace and internalize the grace, blessings and fulness of the day. During a gratitude meditation, the focus is on the heart, and on the positive, uplifting emotions of acknowledgment, appreciation and thankfulness for all the good people, circumstances, things and events that have touched you and made a positive difference in your life. This exercise immediately puts you in a state of heart-coherence, and your heart begins to send positive signals to your brain, elevating your thoughts and triggering 'good chemistry' in your body.

Instructions

This simple and highly effective technique of conscious breathing consists of the following steps:

- Place your hand over your chest and direct your attention toward your heart. Your breathing should have a steady rhythm, yet deeper than normal, with inhalation lasting 5-6 seconds and exhalation lasting 5-6 seconds. Breathe in this manner for a couple of minutes.
- Imagine that you are inhaling and exhaling through your heart. Continue breathing in this way for a while.
- Feel emotions of gratitude and kindness.
- Think about three things you feel grateful for.
- Express "Thank You" in your mind.

This exercise will immediately make you feel calm and at peace. You can do it anytime you feel stressed. It can be your quick-recharge technique that will make you stronger, more focused, and more resilient.

This simple technique is a scientifically validated tool that increases emotional and mental self-regulation. It stabilizes the heart rhythm pattern (heart variability rate), establishing a state of heart coherence. As a result, the neural signals which travel from the heart to the brain become ordered, positively affecting our thoughts and cognitive functions. Many people who have practiced this breathing technique routinely experience balance, peace, and elevated emotions. They overcome feelings of isolation or estrangement and develop a feeling of connectedness and fulfillment.

The technique can also be used during a break—simply take a time-out to quickly recharge your batteries. You will soon begin to notice that the usual stressors no longer have a hold of you.

Benefits of Cultivating an Attitude of Appreciation (Gratitude)

Some of these positive effects of gratitude are:

- 1. Gratitude improves physical health**—Gratitude lowers blood pressure, enhances the immune response, and improves the quality of sleep. It alters the body's chemicals in a good way—for example, it maintains higher levels of good cholesterol, low levels of cortisol, bad cholesterol and creatinine.
- 2. Gratitude improves mental health**—People who cultivate gratitude are less neurotic and at a lower risk of developing states of anxiety and depression. By blocking toxic emotions and stimulating positive emotions, the individual experiences happiness.
- 3. Gratitude promotes positive behavioral traits**—Grateful people are more optimistic and thus they make better choices, they exercise more, they are less prone to substance abuse and to developing eating disorders, and they establish healthier social relationships.
- 4. Gratitude improves the mood** and strengthens the coping mechanisms—Gratitude offers a great support in dealing with the post-effects of a stressful event. Physical symptoms of stress reduce, negative emotions associated with an incident recede, lowering the risk of depression.
- 5. Gratitude makes us less self-centered and better members of the society**—Acts of kindness inspire others to also act in a selfless and empathetic way, which in turn creates a positive loop of goodness, and strengthens interpersonal relationships and the social fabric of society.
- 6. Gratitude strengthens close relationships**—Expressing gratitude towards the close family members or friends strengthens the bond and makes people more sincere in expressing themselves.
- 7. Gratitude increases the sense of coherence**—Psychologists define a sense of coherence (psychological coherence) as a set of beliefs that life is meaningful, comprehensible and manageable. Scientific research has confirmed that people who nurture an attitude of gratitude are good at positive reframing (a process of seeing/interpreting stressful or negative events in positive light).

More Ways to Cultivate Gratitude

When you feel stressed, estranged from your environment, divided and anxious, gratitude literally creates miracles. There are many ways in which one can cultivate gratitude. The following list includes a few simple approaches which do not require any special preparations, arrangements or facilitation:

- 1. Journaling**—Every day write in your journal at least 5 things that made you feel grateful that day. The things in the list can be anything—from a friendly chat with a colleague in your office to a lucky coincidence (synchronicity) to a compliment received from your partner.
- 2. Gratitude Jar**—If you do not (yet) have a journal, you can keep a gratitude jar. Find a large jar, personalize it with a few stickers and decorations, and place it in a dedicated corner of your room. Whenever something nice happens throughout the day, note it down on a piece of paper (you can include colored paper or post-it notes), and place it in your gratitude jar. The jar becomes your visual reminder of all the blessings in your life.
- 3. Saying “thank you” more often**—We have a tendency to take the good things for granted. Such an attitude not only deprives you of the opportunity to count your blessings, but it also deprives others of the feeling of being appreciated and significant. Try and develop the habit of expressing gratitude (especially to people) more often. It does not take much to express your gratitude—you can do it by sharing a few words, sending a small card, sharing a small gift, and sometimes even by just offering a genuine smile.
- 4. Engaging in volunteering activities**—Almost every social organization—from religious to corporate to nonprofit—recognizes the endless benefits of selfless service, both for the benefactor and the beneficiary. Volunteering for a social cause (for the benefit of for those in need) makes you almost instantaneously put your life circumstances in perspective. It helps you understand that all people struggle with some things in life, makes you recognize your privileges, removes your egotism and directs your attention towards others. You slowly become more grateful for the things that go well in your life, but also grateful for the opportunity to be able to help others. It makes you feel more connected with the community, develop a sense of oneness with the whole world, and thus appreciate the gift of life.

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Endnotes

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