

Stress-Proof Brain Activities and Worksheets

Measuring Your Level of Stress

For each item, circle the number that best represents your answer.

0 = never, 1 = occasionally or almost never, 2 = sometimes, 3 = fairly often, and 4 = very often.

In the past month, how often have you:

Been upset because of an unexpected event or frustration?	0	1	2	3	4
Believed that you couldn't control important life outcomes?	0	1	2	3	4
Felt "on edge" and "stressed out"?	0	1	2	3	4
Believed that things weren't going your way?	0	1	2	3	4
Felt irritable and impatient about small things?	0	1	2	3	4
Felt your heart racing or butterflies in your stomach?	0	1	2	3	4
Been unable to sleep because of your worries?	0	1	2	3	4
Felt anxious when you woke up in the morning?	0	1	2	3	4
Had difficulty concentrating because of your problems?	0	1	2	3	4
Tally each column					

If you circled at least two 2s, 3s, or 4s, you are probably feeling at least moderately stressed. If you circled many 3s or 4s, you are probably under high stress and aren't managing it well on your own. It is suggested that those with many 3s or 4s consider obtaining professional help with stress.

Assessing Your Major Life Events

Place a check mark next to all the events that don't feel completely resolved for you. Put a DOUBLE CHECK if they occurred during the past year.

- _____ the death of a loved one or pet
- _____ an unwanted pregnancy or abortion
- _____ infertility, miscarriage or still-birth
- _____ (you or your partner) getting fired from a job or experiencing unemployment
- _____ academic failure
- _____ being turned down for a promotion, position, or program
- _____ (you or a family member) being diagnosed with a serious or chronic health problem
- _____ your partner having a physical or emotional affair
- _____ the breakup of a romantic relationship
- _____ a falling-out with a co-worker, supervisor, or close friend
- _____ an elderly family member needing care
- _____ serious financial or legal problems
- _____ a car or bicycle accident
- _____ relocation
- _____ other major life events (describe):

_____ **Total**

Assessing Your Chronic Stressors

Place a check mark next to all the stressors you experience on a regular basis.

- _____ fights with your partner, roommates, or neighbors
- _____ financial stress, too much debt
- _____ a partner, child, or parent with a mental or serious physical illness
- _____ a partner, child, or parent who abuses substances
- _____ caring for a child, adult, or pet with serious illness or disability
- _____ a high level of stress or demands at your job
- _____ academic or achievement difficulties
- _____ loneliness
- _____ difficulty fulfilling responsibilities because of time, money, or health issues
- _____ a lack of support or cooperation from others
- _____ negative interactions with friends, family, or co-workers
- _____ a noisy, crowded, or uncomfortable living situation
- _____ chronic pain, disease, or disability
- _____ monotonous work or not feeling valued for your contributions
- _____ excessive travel (for example, a long daily commute or weekly travel for work)
- _____ chronic dissatisfaction with you weight
- _____ an eating disorder
- _____ dealing with a difficult ex-partner or blended family situation
- _____ other chronic stressor (describe)

TOTAL _____

How Stressful Is Your Job

The following items describe some of the most frequent types of job stress. For each type of stress that you are currently experiencing, write a number for 1 (not at all stressful) to 7 (extremely stressful) that best represents how stressful this aspect of your job is to you.

- _____ high demands for productivity/performance
- _____ insufficient time, equipment, and/or people to do the job
- _____ not enough authority or control over decisions
- _____ difficult or demanding people
- _____ having to be constantly “on duty” without a break
- _____ a lack of meaning in your job or the company’s mission
- _____ work interfering with family life
- _____ a hostile or unreasonable boss
- _____ a lack of appreciation or reward for your work
- _____ a lack of support from co-workers
- _____ monotonous or boring work
- _____ job insecurity
- _____ not feeling fairly treated or compensated
- _____ feeling burned out or exhausted

Pay particular attention to any items you gave a 6 or 7. These aspects of your job could be chronically stressing your body and it may be time to evaluate your options. Depending on your circumstances, you might want to speak up, ask for more resources or training, develop a better attitude, delegate more tasks, let some things go, or look for a different job.

Assessing Your Daily Hassles

Place a check mark next to the hassles you experience on a regular basis.

- _____ traffic delays; slow or aggressive drivers
- _____ costly or time consuming home or car repairs
- _____ computer or equipment problems
- _____ regularly misplacing your keys, your wallet, your phone, or other important items
- _____ work or household chores piling up
- _____ difficult logistics of child care
- _____ other people not doing their share
- _____ problems with wildlife, rodents, or pets
- _____ demands from family members or friends
- _____ too many emails, too many calls, or too much paperwork
- _____ (you or your family members) having frequent colds or flu
- _____ other daily hassles (describe):

TOTAL _____

There are many reasons why daily hassles can engage your amygdala's "fight, flight, or freeze" response:

First, they may block you from an important goal and you may see them as unnecessary or due to incompetence.

Second, when daily stresses accumulate, you don't have enough time to recover from one problem before another problem occurs.

Third, when you are already stressed over a major life event, you have fewer resources left to deal with the unexpected things or day-to-day turmoil of life.

Mindfulness of Your Breath

1. Sit comfortably on the couch with an upright yet relaxed pose. Now close your eyes or maintain a soft gaze. Let your mind and body begin to settle into the practice, noticing what your body feels like.
2. Focus your attention on your feet. Notice all the parts of your feet that are touching the floor. Notice your toes; where your toes join your foot; the middle of your foot; your heel; your ankle; the whole bottom of your foot - the inside and the outside.
3. Let your feet sink into the floor, noticing the support of the earth and feeling it ground you.
4. Begin to notice all the parts of your body that touch the couch - the back of your thighs, your seat, perhaps your back, your arms, and your hands. Let your hands and feet sink into the support of the couch and floor. Notice how your body feels as you sit, supported by the couch and the floor.
5. Begin to notice your breath. Just breathe easily for a few breaths, noticing where your breath goes as you breathe in and as you breathe out. Notice the pause between your inhalation and exhalation. If your mind wanders - as it probably will - just notice where it goes for an instant and then slowly, gently, direct your attention back to your breath. Continue to do this as you begin to notice your breath in your nose, chest, and belly.
6. Slowly, bring your attention to your breath as it enters your nostrils. Notice whether it's hot or cold, light or heavy, and slow or fast. How does it feel? Notice where your breath touches your nostrils as you breathe in and exhale. Continue to notice your breath in your nostrils for a few minutes.
7. Begin to notice your breath in your chest. Notice how your chest moves up and down with each breath like a wave, moving up as you inhale and down as you exhale. Just notice your chest as it expands and contracts with each breath. Watch the rhythmic wave in your chest as you inhale and exhale. Continue watching your chest for a few minutes.
8. Direct your attention toward your belly. Put your hand on your belly to help you connect with the area just below your belly button. This spot is the core and center of your body. Notice how your belly moves when you inhale and exhale. If your mind wanders, bring it back to your belly kindly and gently. As you observe the breath in your belly, notice whether your breath changes or stays the same. Notice the rhythm of your breath in your belly.
9. As you notice the breath in your belly, begin to expand your attention outward toward your whole body. Begin to notice your whole breathing as a single unit - inhaling and exhaling out in a slow, steady stream. Notice the waves of breath as they move in and out of your body - filling your nose, the back of your throat, your chest, your ribcage, your belly, and your whole body with cleansing air. Notice how your breath travels through your body and see whether it seems to open up any space in the area it touches. Just notice the rhythm of your whole body breathing as one: first the inhalation, then the pause between the breaths, and finally the exhalation. Breathing in and out ...
10. Slowly, begin to bring your attention back to the couch, to your hands and feet, slowly open your eyes and begin to notice the room around you. Take your time, and notice how your body feels now. Is there any difference from when you began this practice?

Mindfulness of Your Senses in Nature

As you walk or sit in nature, begin to notice your surroundings as a whole, noticing also how you feel in these surroundings. Notice that you're not alone- you're a part of the rhythm and pace of nature.

1. Bring your attention slowly to what you see. **Notice the colors:** the rich browns of the earth, the greens of the trees, or the blues of the sky or water. Are the colors bright or muted? Notice which ones draw your attention. Notice light and shadows, shapes and textures. Which surfaces are smooth and which are uneven? Which are shiny and which are dull? Which have sharp angles and which are rounded? Just notice everything you see. Now pay particular attention to one object- perhaps a tree or a flower- and notice its color, shape, and texture.
2. **Focus on what you hear.** Perhaps you hear the chirping of birds, the sound of the wind, or a babbling brook. Notice the sounds your feet make as they crunch on the gravel or sink into the earth. Do you hear people's voices? Do you hear a dog barking? Notice the pitch and rhythm of the sounds. Which ones draw you in? Notice how the sounds emerge and then fade away. Try to notice the silence between the sounds. Now pick one of these sounds to focus on. Notice its tone, pitch, and rhythm. Notice whether it stays the same or changes.
3. **Notice what you smell.** The smells around you may be sweet or spicy, earthy or fresh, faint or intense. Now pick just one smell to focus on- perhaps the breeze, the earth, or the flowers- and notice everything you can about it.
4. **Notice what you feel.** Notice the temperature of the air. Notice the feeling of the sun or the fresh breeze on your skin. Notice whether the air is moving fast or slow. Notice the feeling of the ground beneath your feet.
5. **Notice how you feel inside your body.** What's it like inside your chest, your back, and your belly? Do you feel any more spacious and calm than when you began this practice? Do you feel any part of you letting go of tension?
6. **Notice how your feet feel as you walk.** Try to slow the pace of your walking so that you notice each step. Right foot up, moving forward, and then down. Left foot up, moving forward, and then down.

For a short version of this practice, pay attention to just one sense. For example, focus only on what you see, hear, smell, or feel. Or just notice each step you take as you walk, without focusing on your surroundings. You can also do this practice just about anywhere, at any time- not just in nature.

Allowing in Your Emotions

Sit in a quiet place and let your breath settle. Take a few breaths, following your breath through your body as you inhale and exhale. Now think about a stressful situation that you're currently facing. Find an image in your mind's eye that represents the worst or most important aspect of the situation- for example, a pile of unpaid bills or the face of an irate boss. Focus on the image until it's really clear. Now notice how the image makes you feel in your body.

Now check in with your body and notice any areas of discomfort, tightness, or tingling. You may notice these sensations in your head, neck, shoulders, chest, solar plexus, belly, feet, or other parts of your body. Notice any feelings of anxiety, panic, or being speeded up such as a racing heart or your breathing becoming shallower. These are the "fight, flight, freeze" signs. Try to name these sensations such as a tight chest or butterflies in your stomach.

Try to attach an emotion word to these body sensations. Are you feeling fear, anger, sadness, guilt, shame, or a mixture of these? Say silently what you feel such as "I'm feeling fear" or "I'm angry". At the same time, notice if you have any aversion or resistance to this emotion. Notice any negative labels or judgments you attach to the emotions, such as "I can't stand feeling this way". After acknowledging that these judgments are there, try to hold them a bit more lightly and refocus your attention on your bodily sensations. Notice the difference between the emotion itself and your resistance to it. Say to yourself "It's okay to let myself feel this emotion".

Focus again on the emotion in your body and notice whether the emotion in your body has changed or stayed the same. Is there any difference in intensity since the beginning of this practice? Stay with the emotion for a few more moments and then bring your attention slowly back to the room. Do you see the stressful situation any differently?

Surfing the Wave of Your Emotion

You can't stop the waves from coming but you can learn to surf so that you don't get knocked down.

1. Sit comfortable on a chair, a couch, or the floor, and maintain an upright yet relaxed pose. Begin to bring your attention to your breath, watching it go in and out. Notice the pause between the breaths. Do this for a few seconds.
2. Begin thinking about your stressful situation. Try to get a clear image that represents the worst or most important aspect of your stressor. Notice what you feel in your body and where you feel it, and give the emotion a name, such as anger or sadness. You may feel more than one feeling and that is fine.
3. Rate the intensity of your feeling, from neutral (1) to extremely intense (10). After you have a number in mind, keep watching the feeling in your body while continuing to breathe. Just notice the feeling and try to adopt an open, accepting, curious attitude toward it. If you notice any tightness or tension, send some breath into that area of your body. Notice any judgments you have about the feeling, and try to hold them less tightly or picture them floating away.
4. Keep watching this feeling, noticing any change in intensity over time. Do this for 15-20 minutes, noting the intensity every 5 minutes or so.
5. Did the feeling get more intense and rise to a crescendo, then gradually fade away?

Once you have the “emotion surfing” technique down, you can use it when you feel a difficult emotion arising or when you have to do something that makes you feel uncomfortable. Putting emotions into words also makes the right hemisphere (which is more spatial and holistic) work together with the left hemisphere (which is more linguistic and detail-oriented). You can bring in your WHOLE brain and create a more balanced reaction to the stressor.

Learning Cognitive Flexibility

1. **Think about a stressful situation that you're currently facing. On a piece of paper, write a brief (2 or 3 line) description of your situation.** Now think about the way you see this situation. Is it a threat, challenge, loss, or all of the above? If it is a threat or loss, is there any way to see it as a challenge? What do you have to lose and what do you have to learn? What are your priorities and goals in dealing with this situation?
2. **How controllable do you think the situation is?** If it is a changing situation or has an uncertain outcome, write down some ways it may change over time or some possible outcomes. Do you need to modify your view of the situation, priorities, or goals to deal with these potential changes?
3. **How have you been coping with the situation?** Is this the same way that you typically cope with stress? How well is it working for you? What are the pros and cons of using this approach? Is it helping you feel better? Is it solving the problem?
4. **How successful has this strategy been for you in the past?** Is the current situation similar to what you've faced in the past, or are there differences? If there are differences, do you need to adjust your strategy? If you're using a strategy that hasn't been successful in the past think about why you're still using it. What's keeping you from trying something new?
5. **Now think about other people involved in the situation (including the person you're having conflict with, if appropriate). What's their view of the situation?** Do they see it as a threat, a challenge, or a loss? What are their most pressing priorities and goals? Is there anything you can do to reach a compromise or work together with these people, or do you need to set better boundaries for yourself?
6. **Now try to find the most objective viewpoint.** How might neutral observers see the situation? How might they see your role in the stressor? What do they see you doing that is helping or hurting? How might they see the other people's roles and contributions?
7. **Think about someone you know who copes well with stress, or someone you admire.** How might this person see the situation? Would this person see it as a threat, a challenge, a loss, or all three? What would this person's most important goals and priorities be? How would this person cope with the stressful situation?
8. **Is there anything you can learn from considering these different viewpoints?** Are there any new perspectives or strategies that might be helpful to you? How might you implement them? Are there any internal or external barriers that you need to overcome?

An arrow can only be shot by pulling it backward. When life is dragging you back with difficulties, it means it's going to launch you into something great. So just focus and keep aiming.

Putting Your Stress Away

Before you begin, if you could hold your worries and fears about the uncontrollable parts of your stressor in a container of some sort, what type of container would you choose?

Examples of containers are a big oak barrel, a sturdy trunk, a metal safe, and a large vase.

1. Once you have decided on a container, bring up a mental picture of it. Be very specific about its size, shape, color, and texture. You may want to imagine labeling your container with descriptions such as “Fears About My _____.” You can also imagine writing or drawing on the container or decorating it in whichever way you choose.
2. Imagine putting all of your worries and fears about uncontrollable outcomes of your stress into the container. Visualize yourself packing them in, or see your worries as a stream of smoke, light, sand, or water that flows into the container. Give them the form that feels right to you.
3. Once all your worries are in the container, imagine sealing it. You could use a lid, a lock, chains, plastic wrap, or all of the above. It’s up to you. When your container is sealed tight, imagine storing it somewhere. You could bury it deep underground, put it in a cave, stow it in an attic, load it onto a boat, or send it into space in a rocket ship. Anywhere you want to store it is okay.
4. When your container is sealed and stored, imagine yourself walking away from it and back into your life. You can come back and open it if you need to, but for now it’s safely put away.
5. Set an intention to focus your effort and energy on the parts of your stressor that you can control.