



## Channel Stress for Peak Performance

**A**s a leader, how do you channel stress? How do you use stress to your advantage?

More than ever, it's critical that we take care of our bodies and mind. After all, our success depends on being able to function in a healthy, productive manner.

So when your flight, fight, freeze, or fawn response is triggered, how do you respond? How do you signal to your body when you are in real danger, and when you are experiencing stress?

The term "stress" is overused and often misunderstood, as it's bandied about to describe both cause and effect:

- Cause: "There's a lot of stress at work these days."
- Effect: "I'm so stressed that I can't think straight."

It's interesting to note that while neuroscience has taught us a great deal about stress, we cannot always distinguish between the psychological state of stress and the physiological response to it.

What is clear is that if we're in a chronic state of high-level stress, emotional strain leads to physical consequences. The body responds with anxiety and depression, as well as high blood pressure, heart problems and cancer. Chronic stress eats away at the brain's connective tissue.

We can't completely eliminate stress. But, we can better manage our body's natural responses to stress. We can take control, ground ourselves, and even improve our brain's ability to function.

### *A Message from Nancy...*

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "*what got you here may not get you there.*"

At **Proffitt Management Solutions** we are fully committed to providing a unique blend of team and individual development and executive coaching sessions where participants achieve more focus, a sense of purpose, and better results in their leadership roles.

Find out how services such as individual or team coaching and development, motivational and skills workshops, seminars may help you better answer those 5 questions and benefit you...

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## The Science

Severe stress activates the “emergency phase,” commonly known as the fight-or-flight response. It’s a complex physiological reaction that marshals resources to mobilize the body and brain to peak performance. Fortunately, it engraves the memory so we can avoid this stressor in the future.

Our ingrained reaction is essentially a three-step process:

1. Recognize the danger.
2. Fuel the reaction.
3. Remember the event for future reference.

Unfortunately, any amount of stress triggers neurological systems that manage attention, energy, and memory. Moreover, we can find ourselves in a constant state of stress. You see, the mind is so powerful that we can set off a stress response just by imagining ourselves in a threatening situation. It’s time to take good care and ground ourselves.

Grounded is a state of being when you’re feeling your emotions and you’re aware of your present moment experience. Being grounded also means that you’re feeling responsible for your safety and well-being. Grounding is an effective therapeutic approach for managing stress, anxiety, and improving overall mental health.

## Stress and Your Autonomic Nervous System

The human body is pretty amazing. Not only can most of us choose if, when, where, how, and why to use it, there are systems that automatically work for us. Our autonomic nervous system (ANS) regulates our breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, and many other functions that allow us to survive.

The traditional view of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) is that of a two-part system:

1. **Sympathetic nervous system (SNS)**, which is more activating, and can be triggered by stress to fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. The burst of cortisol may cause our hands to sweat, voice to shake, and stomach to clinch as our pulse rate and blood pressure rise. These are the physical manifestations of anxiety.
2. **Parasympathetic nervous system (PNS)**, which counter-balances our SNS and supports health, growth, and restoration. When our brain believes we are safe, we slow down and our systems reboot.

## The Vagus Nerve

Our vagus nerve (pneumogastric nerve) is difficult to track, but we know that it is the longest nerve in the ANS. It extends throughout our thorax (esophagus, trachea, heart, and lungs; respiration and circulation) to the abdomen (stomach, pancreas, liver, kidneys, small intestine, and portion of large intestine; digestion and elimination). The vagus nerve can be very powerful, especially when we are feeling stress:

1. It can trigger the parasympathetic response.
2. Communicates from the brain to the body and from the body to the brain.

Dr. J. Eric Vance, MD, writes in [\*Psychiatric Times\*](#) (May 2018) that we are in a constant state of surveillance for risk, safety, threats, and opportunities to respond. He refers to this process as “neuroception.” Fortunately, we can practice calming techniques that send a signal from our body to our brain that we are safe.

## Activate Your Parasympathetic Response

Your parasympathetic response (PNS) is your body’s way of returning to rest or calm. Think of it like this: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) works to stimulate fight, flight, freeze, or fawn—ways to keep us alive when in danger. The parasympathetic response system is our parachute out of danger: this system regulates our emotions in stressful situations.

Fortunately, there are ways we can strengthen our parachutes:

1. **Practice deep-breathing** (engage vagal tone). Your vagal tone is a measurement of your heart rate variability when practicing slow, deep breathing. A stronger vagal tone leads to better blood sugar regulation, heart health, and digestion; a reduction in migraines; and greater emotional stability and resilience. Lower vagal tone is associated with mood instability, depression, PTSD, diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, cognitive impairment, and inflammation. Fortunately, deep, slow breathing can increase your vagal tone and trigger parasympathetic response.
  - a. To determine your vagal tone, find your pulse. Notice any change as you slowly breathe in and out. If it increases as you breathe in and decreases as you breathe out, you have a stronger vagal tone.

- b. To strengthen your vagal tone, practice slow, deep-breathing.
2. **Soften the eyes/gaze** (use peripheral vision). Softening the gaze, or focus, relaxes nerves in and around the eyes. This often occurs naturally when you are lost in thought or daydream. Conversely, when your SNS has been triggered you may experience tunnel vision. When we use peripheral vision, we signal the brain and trigger the PNS.
- a. To soften your gaze, squeeze and relax your eyes.
- b. Expand your vision to the sides: notice what is at the outer edges of your vision.
3. **Valsalva maneuver** (increase chest cavity pressure). This practice can trigger the heart to slow down.
- a. To practice this, bear down to compress your stomach to your pelvic floor. Alternatively, you can close your mouth, pinch your nose, and try to exhale as you would to alleviate ear pressure.
- b. Breathe in slowly for five seconds, hold the breath while bearing down, and then slowing exhaling. Do this once or twice, then breathe normally for 30 seconds, and repeat the cycle.

## Channel Your Stress

**N**ot all stress is bad. When we can mindfully engage in the three-step process to recognize, fuel, and remember, stress becomes a building block for wisdom. If we can avoid panic, fear, or pessimism, stress can help us achieve peak performance.

This is not always easy, especially for intelligent, creative leaders who can overthink themselves into a frenzy. But remember: stressful challenges allow us to grow and learn when we employ active coping methods and move out of pessimism, fear, and retreat. Just as the mind can affect the body, the body can affect the mind.

Most people know that when they exercise, they feel better—but they cannot explain the connection. They assume they're burning off stress, reducing muscle tension or boosting endorphins, all of which are true. There's more to it than that.

It's hard to remember that our bodies and brains were built to move. Our brains need physical activity and stimulation. We need to exert more energy than "keyboard calisthenics" allows.

Exercise is crucial to the way we think and feel. It:

- Cues the building blocks of **learning** in our brains
- Improves **mood**
- Lowers **stress** and **anxiety**
- Improves our ability to **pay attention, focus, and concentrate**
- Helps stave off the deleterious **effects of hormonal changes**

Exercise increases levels of serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine—key neurotransmitters that traffic in thoughts and emotions. People with low levels often suffer from clinical depression and stress, which can erode the connections among the brain's billions of nerve cells. Chronic depression actually shrinks certain areas of the brain.

Conversely, exercise unleashes a cascade of neurotransmitters and growth factors that can reverse this process. This is why active coping is so important in our stress-filled workdays.

## Get Physical

Along with developing and practicing grounding techniques, channel your stress with physical activities:

- Take 10-minute walks to move, stretch, and relieve stress. If possible, change locations: go outside your normal workspace to change your scenery.
- With doctor approval, try squats, pushups, or other types of intense activity for 60 - 90 second intervals. Ideally, your weekly total exercise should accumulate to 150 minutes of aerobic activity and target (strengthen) major muscle groups at least twice.
- Play. Identifying physical activities that you enjoy, alone or with others, can help you channel stress, and set SMART goals: a tool that will help you and not add to your stress.

A qualified coach or therapist can help you develop and practice grounding techniques and set SMART goals for peak performance.



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