Week 4 - Stress: Responding vs. Reacting

**STOP: The One-minute Breathing Space**

This week's 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, in modern life, our stress response, designed evolutionarily to protect us from danger, can actually put our lives in danger when it is activated continually and without resolution. This is the bad news.

The good news, *How To Make Stress Your Friend*, comes from Kelly McGonigal, a psychologist specializing in health medicine, who puts stress in perspective, re-framing stress, not as an enemy to health and well-being, but as a response which is protective and even life-giving. 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 counter-balance to the idea that stress is always bad. In the last video, *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.

Reading

*What Is Stress?* distinguishes between acute stress, which is short-term and adaptive, and chronic stress, which is the primary cause of stress-related health problems and *Anatomy of Fear* is a graphic depiction of the stress response. *Understanding the Stress Response* describe the physiological and neurological effects of stress and *Harnessing the Upsides of Stress* talks about the power of recognizing and acknowledging stress, providing specific situations in which it is true that simply believing that the stress response is healthy can make it so, without making the claim that this is true in every situation. *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 Z" is introduced this week. For the *formal practice*, we alternate "Yoga Z" 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 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.

Below are your materials for this week:

**Videos**

- Stress - Portrait of a Killer - National Geographic Special with Robert Sapolsky [77 min]
- How To Make Stress Your Friend - Kelly McGonigal [46 min]
- STOP: A Short Mindfulness Practice - Susan Bauer-Wu [4 min]

**Reading**

- What Is Stress? - Discovery Magazine graphic
- The Anatomy of Fear - Harvard Health Publications
- 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
- **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

**Supplementary materials related to this week’s topic**

- **The Science of Anxiety** [Time Magazine article]
- **The Anatomy of Anxiety** [Time Magazine graphic]
- **When Is Stress Good for You** [article by Bruce McEwen]
- **The Psychology of Stress** [short video “teaser” by Robert Sapolsky (3 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 Daniel Brown]
- **How Does the Vagus Nerve Convey Gut Instincts to the Brain?** [Psychology Today]

**NOTE:** If you are compiling a manual based on the suggestions in **MBSR Manual**, you would print a copy of this page as well as the Readings and Practice Sheets given above. For a version of this page which has been reformatted for your manual go to the printer-ready version of this page.