

# E A M E S S E N G E R P

A quarterly  
newsletter  
of INVEST EAP

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## Supporting a Healthy Organization

Volume 20

Issue 3

Summer 2018

### Think Your Way Out of Stress

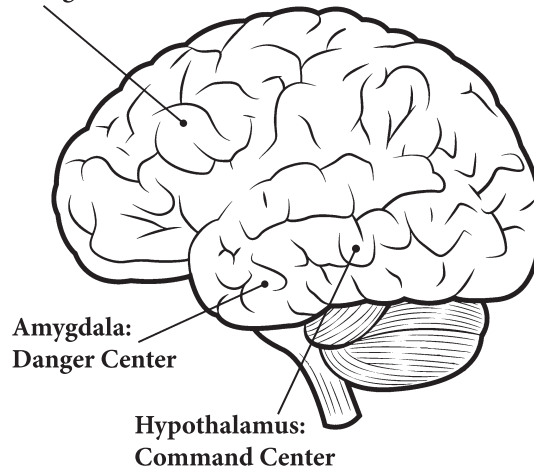
Humans are wired to find comfort and protection and then fight to sustain it in a world that is constantly throwing curve balls and disrupting our desired equilibrium.

The way we respond to change can be a major source of stress. Change requires that we adjust. Sometimes it's positive and thrilling, while other times it's associated with feelings of fear and anger. Either way, the stress we feel during change revs up the body, and chronic stress can impact health.

#### Responding to stress - what's happening?

The human brain has a mechanism that prepares us physiologically to respond to threats. It worked well for early humans in the wild, mobilizing their bodies for action in the *fight, flight or freeze response*- otherwise known as the *stress response*- and it continues to serve us today in times of real danger. It begins when the brain's amygdala senses a threat. When triggered, the amygdala alerts the hypothalamus to signal the release of stress hormones: adrenaline, cortisol, norepinephrine and others. They travel to particular

Prefrontal Cortex:  
Logic/Processor



locations in the body to bring about specific physiological, psychological, and emotional changes that augment the body's ability to deal with the threat.

The stress response is useful during tangible threats to our safety. Those in high risk professions such as law enforcement, fire and EMS experience it so routinely that its effects often go unnoticed. *All* of us can remember times when we were so escalated during a crisis that we fought off or escaped the danger with heroic speed and force. The stress hormones released into the bloodstream are credited with our sudden emergency readiness.

Our brains cannot distinguish between real and *perceived* danger, though, so the moment we think we're in danger, the body triggers fight, flight or freeze. Perceived threats *feel* dangerous yet are non-life-threatening: worrying about consequences of arriving late to a meeting, fear of job loss during a critical performance evaluation, quitting a task (freezing) for fear that I can't do it perfectly.

The stress response can occur multiple times a day, in times of actual danger, and at times when we are overly tired or agitated. When feeling threatened, it's harder to access the rational part of the brain (prefrontal cortex), and our bodies revert to our primal stress response. These include increased heart rate and blood pressure, tightened muscles, shallow breathing and a rush of energy to fight or protect. When this happens, the prefrontal cortex has gone offline to some extent as the body shifts into survival mode.

#### Lower your stress - improve your health

Unfortunately, regular surges of stress hormones can take a toll

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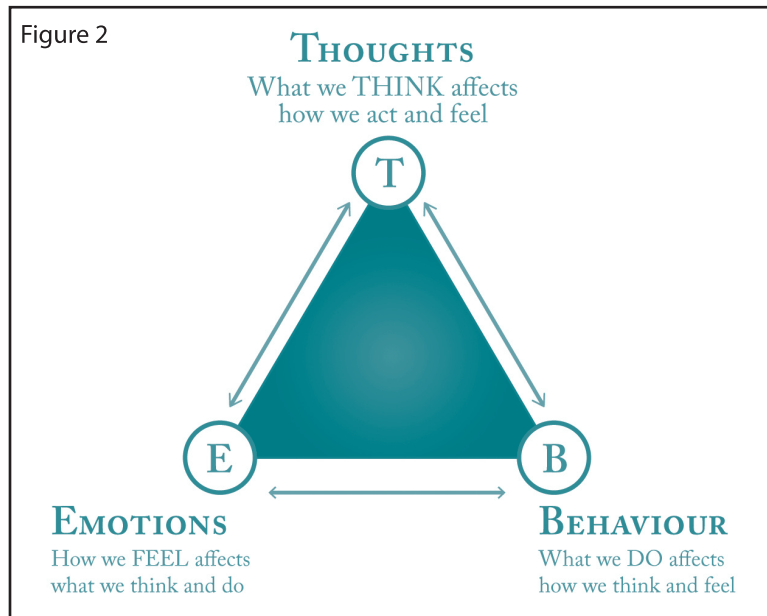
on the body over time, and low-grade chronic stress can lead to health problems that include high blood pressure, anxiety, and muscle tension. In addition, our effectiveness at work and home is diminished.

We face change frequently and unpredictably, and we need to find effective ways to manage our response to maintain our equilibrium and health. The good news is that researchers and psychologists have discovered that we can train the brain to find a more fitting response which helps to decrease anxiety and fear, enhance self-confidence, and improve health. Two effective strategies are learning to reframe how we think about a situation and simply paying attention to our breath.

### Reframing

Reframing is a beneficial tool emanating from cognitive-behavioral theory and is often taught during Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) interventions. In CBT, we learn that our personal frame of reference contains unquestioned beliefs and values associated with “automatic thoughts” that we use to attach meaning to situations. If any part of that frame is changed (yes, we have the power to change our automatic thoughts when we “reframe”), then the meaning we attach to any situation will change. **Negative Frame:** “My supervisor is useless and I have no support.” **Reframe:** “My supervisor may be a resource to help me get what I need. I will strategize how to ask for help.”

Figure 2 depicts how our thoughts affect how we feel and act, and our behavior affects how we think



and feel. Negative thoughts can be grouped into patterns called **Unhelpful Thinking Styles** <https://psychologytools.com/unhelpful-thinking-styles.html>.

These unhelpful thinking styles can become habits, but they are not set in stone. We can shift them into more helpful and positive frames (reframing) which will stimulate the part of the brain that uses reasoning skills, and as a result, boost more positive feelings. This effort can be challenging because it involves breaking long-term habits. It takes practice to see the results.

### The Relaxation Response

Researchers have found that the brain can be changed through healthy behaviors such as focused breathing. The Relaxation Response (<http://www.apa.org/monitor/2008/10/relaxation.aspx>) is a type of focused breathing that brings awareness to the body, deactivates the toxic effects of chronic stress and quiets the mind. Deep, diaphragmatic breathing while focusing on a single word or phrase on the in and

out-breaths is the core of this simple yet powerful tool.

Managing stress is as important to health as a nutritious diet and regular exercise. The intensity of stress that we feel changes daily based on whatever is happening in life, so it is helpful to practice reframing and focused breathing regularly to allow the body and mind time to recover.

Invest EAP offers help with managing stress and rethinking change. EAP is confidential and free

of cost to you. Call 1-866-660-9533 to speak with a trained counselor, or visit [www.investeap.org](http://www.investeap.org) (create a login) for more information.



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