

Unstressed



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Exercise and Reflection

What Is Stress for You?

The reflective writing exercises contained in this book are designed to be an invitation for you to honestly reflect on the concepts you are reading about and how they play out in your own life. You have just learned that stress can be anything that throws you off your emotional and physical equilibrium, or a balanced state of body and mind. This exercise asks for you to reflect, with a possibly new and broader interpretation of stress, on the myriad of ways stress impacts your life. Write in a stream-of-consciousness style addressing some of the following questions. The questions are not meant to be answered verbatim; they are only meant to guide your writing. Let the writing “write” you.

1. What immediately comes to mind when you think about the word “stress”?
2. What causes stress for you?
3. Are there similar situations that stress you?
4. What does it feel like generally, emotionally, and physically?
5. Are there emotional repercussions for you, such as loneliness or depression?
6. With a broader interpretation of stress, are there some things in your life you now might define as stress that you would not have before?

Brainstorm on what this thing called stress is for you, and reflect on any insights you might have gained from the writing.

Exercise and Reflection

Identifying Emotional Triggers

This exercise asks you to reflect on things in your own life that may be emotional triggers for you. Remember, triggers are more specific than the generalized concept of stress and most often include an immediate, reactive response to something or a hyperalert evaluation of threat. The questions below will guide you to a better understanding of the situations that stress you out and the particular aspects of those situations that trigger you. You don't need to answer them in order; just use them as guides for your own exploration.

1. What are some situations, events, or conditions that you feel might be emotional triggers for you?

2. Do you have a strong response to different circumstances that have some similar components?

3. What situations do you seem to overreact to or often interpret in a threatening way?

4. What situations cause you to attach an emotional evaluation of yourself or the circumstance?

What did you learn? Did you gain any insights about how your triggers might be related to your emotional past? Use stream-of-consciousness writing to reflect in a way that is appropriate for you.

Exercise and Reflection

Inner Chatter

Process and reflect on the endless reels of inner chatter you play all day, every day. Write in a stream-of-consciousness style addressing some of the following questions. Remember, the questions are not meant to be answered verbatim; they are only meant to guide your writing.

1. What thoughts tend to consume you?
2. What do you tell yourself about yourself or the circumstances you experience?
3. What stories do you tell yourself as you perceive your moment-to-moment existence?
4. Do you catastrophize, and, if so, about what?
5. What dire interpretations and meanings do you bring to your daily situations and involvements?

What did you learn about your inner chatter? Can you make a connection between the nature of your inner chatter and the way your amygdala works? Process and reflect in a way that is appropriate for you.

Exercise and Reflection

Your Personal Physiological Imprint

Your fear-response drive carries a pronounced physiological imprint. Process and reflect on the myriad of ways you may physically express your fear-response drive and what you think your physically reactive patterns are. Remember, because a fair amount of your fear response may be beyond conscious awareness, noticing the way it manifests in your body is a great tool to recognize when it has become active.

Tune in to your body and reflect on the following questions, answering them in a stream-of-consciousness style. Remember, the questions are not meant to be answered verbatim, they are only meant to guide your writing.

1. What do you think your physical patterns of reactivity are?
2. How can you remind yourself to tune in and be present to their messages?
3. Where in your body are your physical patterns of reactivity most present?
4. Do you always feel them in specific patterns of response, or do different situations carry different responses? If so, what are they?
5. How can you learn from these physical cues to identify what your physical patterns of reactivity root causes are, or what may be activating you? Process and reflect in a way that is appropriate for you. Also consider how you can take the knowledge you gained from this activity and implement it in your life.

Exercise and Reflection

The Feeling States of Awareness

Part 1. Vividly write about an event or time period where you felt particularly stressed. It does not have to be the most severe time in your life, although it can be if that is what you choose. It can be a smaller stressful event that happened recently. The key is to choose a time where you really felt stress and the associated emotional upheaval and to describe, with time and thought, the event that caused it, in as much detail as possible. Include responses to the following prompts:

1. Describe the event or time period.
2. Detail how you felt generally or psychologically (such as overwhelmed, tired, anxious).
3. Detail any specific physical sensations you felt (for example, headache, racing heart, pit in stomach).
4. Describe how you physically feel right now, recalling the event (not how you felt in retrospect).

Part 2. Now write about a time where you felt particularly happy, “in the zone,” or grounded in your essence. Again, this does not have to be the most impactful time of your life, although it can be if you choose it to be. It just has to be a time when you truly felt the sensations of happiness or coherence in yourself and the situation. Write within the exact same guidelines as described above.

1. Describe the event or time period.
2. Detail how you felt generally or psychologically.

3. Detail any specific physical sensations you felt.

4. Describe how you physically feel right now, recalling the event (not how you felt in retrospect).

Part 3. Reflect, summarize, and process the exercise, the questions, and what resonated with you most throughout this experience. Write in a stream-of-consciousness style.

Remember, the questions are not meant to be answered verbatim; they are intended to guide your thinking.

1. What was this whole experience like for you?

2. How easy was it for you to think of something to write about, and how enthusiastically did you begin writing during each event?

3. Did you re-experience the same feelings as you relived the events?

What was this exercise like for you? Consider the physiological and psychological states that accompanied your experience. If you were able to deeply engage in the exercise, you likely recalled events that, for you, carried very different ways of experiencing life. In the writing about a stressful event, you likely recalled a time when your fear-response was in control and dictating your perceptions and interpretations and you were feeling its effects. You likely felt some physical and psychological effects that were deeply intertwined, creating a whole mind-body response to the situation you were experiencing. You may have even reexperienced those states as you were writing about them. This exercise is helpful in allowing you to recall the experiential aspect of your fear-response system. It is a deeply embodied, physically felt state of being. It may have been harder for you to allow yourself to focus on a happy time. However, if you were able to really focus on such a time, you likely felt a shift. You may have been able to

recall the mind-body state associated with that time, and it was likely very different from the first experience. You may have felt more expansive; you may have felt lighter. You may have even smiled a bit when you were writing and experienced those states again.

This exercise hopefully gave you an experiential lesson of your fear-response and calm-and-connection systems. While the stressful situation was probably a good representation of your fear-response system in action, the happy or joyful event was likely one of your calm-and-connection system. You may have been able to feel the difference.

But how do you learn to reduce the harmful effects of one while cultivating the beneficial effects of the other? Looking at emotion as “degree of system integration” provides the answer.

Exercise and Reflection

Implementing the Power of Pause

Being aware ahead of time of situations where you might benefit by using the Power of Pause, as well as the specific benefits you may incur, helps remind you to use it in the reactivity of the moment. They may be similar to the triggers you just reviewed, or in addition to those, but here, you are focusing more on the specific situations in which those triggers may manifest. The more situations you can be mindful of now, the more likely you will remember to use it when the time comes. Remember, also, that changing a reaction in the moment can profoundly change the outcome of a situation overall, possibly leading to life-changing moments.

1. List many situations in your own life, big and small, where you might benefit from taking a moment to pause.
2. What systems can you set up now to remind yourself to use the Power of Pause when the time comes?
3. What benefits overall might you incur from its use?
4. What benefits to specific situations might you realize?

Process and reflect in a stream-of-consciousness type of writing.

Once you have identified situations in which you might benefit from using the Power of Pause, it is important to actually implement it. Often people cognitively know what they “should” do, but don’t actually implement the strategies for change. Remember, it is experience that transforms. Your first contemplative practice is called the Power of Pause—the actual implementation of an intentional shift in reactivity.

Exercise and Reflection

Paying Attention to Attention

This exercise asks you to pause several times a day and reflect on where your attention is: what thoughts you are thinking, the things you may be ruminating on, the stories you are telling yourself about your circumstances, the things you are anticipating, and so forth. It also asks you to reflect on whether the typical focus of your attention allows you to be truly present with what is going on in the moment and identify reactivities you may be experiencing beyond your conscious awareness.

Make a plan to pause several times in the next day or two and notice where your attention is. You might set up a system to remind yourself by setting a timer; putting a sticky note on your rearview mirror, a mirror at home, or somewhere else you often look; or pausing every time you touch a doorknob. The idea is to just stop for a moment and bring your awareness to your attention, the words you are saying to yourself, your consuming thoughts, and your feelings and physical sensations. After you have taken notice for a few days, write in a stream-of-consciousness style addressing some of the following questions. Remember, the questions are not meant to be answered verbatim; they are only to guide your thinking.

1. Where is your attention typically focused throughout the day?
2. What are your thoughts and feelings focused on?
3. What stories are you telling yourself about your current circumstances?
4. Are you typically fully present with what is going on, and, if not, how can you become so?

5. Besides bringing your conscious awareness to only your thoughts, what is your body telling you by its demeanor?

Pause and reflect in a way that is appropriate for you. What did you learn about the focus of your attention? Did you discover any insights or surprises? Once you have spent some time just noticing the nature of where your attention is, next you will work on skills to bring yourself fully present—the next step in mindfully recognizing and reducing response.

Exercise and Reflection

Writing for Release

The writing is meant to be done for only ten to twenty minutes and is meant for emotional release. It is okay to stop writing at any time if you feel you are reliving rather than releasing. Exercise some self-care and take note as it might be something you want to focus on as the book progresses. Also, it is not meant to be a cerebral or rational process. You might not even have an idea of what you will be writing about before you start. It is as if you are letting the writing lead you, and you are observing the process with an open awareness.

1. Find some paper other than a notebook dedicated to the reflective writing here and a timer you can set for ten minutes.
2. Find a quiet place where you can get centered and will be uninterrupted for ten to twenty minutes.
3. Do the Present-Moment Awareness practice presented earlier in this chapter for two to three minutes.
4. Set the timer for ten minutes and simply begin to write whatever comes up for you, originally without prethought about content. The idea is you are providing an open awareness for emotions to emerge, not consciously directing your writing. Rest in and be present to whatever emotional cues surface for you, and start writing with an openness and acceptance, even if it seems like gibberish. Try and keep your pen to the paper, or your fingers to the keyboard, to prevent the voice of the “inner critic” from popping in your awareness. If you have trouble beginning, just start randomly writing and see where it leads you, as if you are observing the process. Some people, if they feel stuck beginning, write with their nondominant hand. It is theorized that nondominant handwriting helps to bypass your

analytical thought process and more freely access emotion. Remember, your job is to be fully present to yourself with a disengaged, nonjudgmental open awareness.

5. At the end of ten minutes, discern if you are done or if you would benefit from another ten minutes.

When you are done, you are invited to burn the paper in a safe place and as immediately as possible. However, if some important insights came up for you, it is okay to keep it. If you are called to burn it, when doing so, rest in the felt sense of release.

What were your experiences with this exercise? Did some surprising emotions or past experiences surface for you? How do you feel now? Are there some lingering questions or thoughts you have about what you wrote about? Process and reflect on what you learned by engaging in the activity.

Exercise and Reflection

Somatic Dialoguing

Somatic dialoguing allows you to communicate, in a sense, with your bodily knowledge. If you pay enough attention, you may be able to recognize that somewhere between your conscious and subconscious, there is a region of knowing that is expressed and recognized through the sensations of your body. Eugene Gendlin referred to this as a felt sense. This felt sense is often manifest as unclear inner sensations that can initially appear vague, but with gentle awareness and prompting, it can develop into a fully conscious yet novel or intuitive way of understanding. Somatic dialoguing doesn't come from a cognitive space of trying to figure something out; it comes from a gentle space of letting a different kind of information emerge. Further, in staying true to the roots of the practice of Focusing, the language is intentionally general. It is important that you let the somatic sensations of your body guide your process without too much cognitive analysis.

1. Find a space and time where you can sit quietly, get fully grounded, and bring a gentle awareness to your body.
2. Take several deep breaths and discharge any overt emotional reactivity.
3. Settle into a deep and quiet awareness of your body and notice if any physical sensations become evident. Remember, somatic dialoguing is about letting your body tell you, not the other way around. Your job is to be a patient, quiet, fully engaged listener.
4. When a physical sensation appears, ask if it has a message for you, and be fully open to receiving its message without analysis. Notice if any images, intuitive knowings, or other nonspecific information emerge. Don't push too hard or overthink it; remember, you are merely trying to gently coax what may feel murky into a more defined awareness.

5. If an image, a more defined sensation, or other nonspecific information emerges, gently sit with it and see if the original sensation shifts a bit. This is how your body responds. You will feel an “intuitive yes” if you are on the path to revealing the emotional truth that may lie beneath the sensations. It is a delicate dance between the emerging sensations and images, your receiving, and further testing your embodied response for validity— but when the original felt sense shifts in its bodily expression, you know you are on the path to discovery.

6. Keep with this process until you feel a noticeable shift in bodily sensations and a better cognitive understanding of their message. In other words, often, when you come to a conscious and emotional understanding of what is beneath the surface of your somatic awareness, you will feel a shift in bodily sensations; they may shift in placement, lessen in intensity, or diminish altogether. It is often experienced as that moment of aha!

After you have spent some time in somatic dialoguing with the sensations you feel, write in a stream-of-consciousness style to process your experience. You can use the writing as an extension of your dialog or even as the tool to help you receive the information in the first place, as if you are in conversation with the felt sense. The writing, connected with the dialoguing itself, can be a powerful combination in consciously recognizing what your body already knows.

Exercise and Reflection

Emotional Charting

You are going to use the following chart to discern what, for you, are generative and heartfelt emotions, or related concepts, and what emotions are degenerative. In your journal, draw a horizontal line halfway down a fresh page. Write “generative emotional experiences”—ones that give you a felt sense of integration, resonance, or coherence—above the line, and “degenerative emotional experiences” below the line. Assign a height value for your embodied experience of each: the more heartfelt they are, the higher they should go on the page, and the more destructive, the lower.

Remember, what you’re listing here are not things or situations, but the feelings that certain things or situations bring up for you. The feelings you list are not meant to be listed in columns or ordered in any way, except assigned a height value for intensity; you should brainstorm freely, writing the feelings down all over the page. For instance, above the line, for me, I might write love, compassion, connection, serenity, gratitude, hope—any emotion that gives me a sense of authentic groundedness and clarity, not fleeting or shallow emotional responses. Meanwhile, below the line, I might write disconnection, worry, anxiety, fear, insecurity, guilt, and so on—emotions that are reactive and keep me from really, freely living. These, too, would carry a felt sense—but one of uneasiness, agitation, anxiety, or disconnection. Finally, I would assign a height to each emotion based on how they affect me and what kind of deep felt sense they provoke in me, with the most generative at the top and the most degenerative at the bottom.

Again, let your embodied experience of the exercise guide you, not your cognitive appraisal. Write as quickly as you feel comfortable to access your intuitive sense when writing. Notice if you are critical of what you are writing and pause to remember to be authentic to your own experience. Above all, remember: *there are no right or wrong answers*.

Let’s process what the chart reveals for you. For now, let’s just look at what you wrote above the line. Process and reflect why these states hold importance for you, what situations

bring them present for you, what they mean to you, and how you feel when you experience them. Were there any surprises? Did you notice if you felt you should write something you didn't really feel? Did you judge yourself for anything you felt called to write? Explore, now in a narrative sense, what emotions are most heartfelt for you, where you experience them most in your life, and what they feel like when they are most embodied.

Write in a stream-of-consciousness style and engage this exercise on a deep level, as these felt-states will be used as a foundation of understanding throughout the rest of this text.

There is a lot to be learned from this chart, and throughout the next chapters, you will revisit it often. Remember, the trajectory here is designed to have you start with basic understanding and implementation and work at ever deepening your experience. Look at the top of the chart and the words you listed above the line. Just by definition of the way I asked you to write them down, they are life-generating. In other words, all the physiological responses that you gain from cultivating these states create adaptations that lead to deeper capacities to live in those states more often. Simply put, they begin to rewire your stress response from one of fear and anxiety to one of calm and connection. These are the ones that, for you individually, carry the biochemical, neural, or electrical changes associated with generative transformation. Choosing to intentionally cultivate these states begins to transform you all the way from the level of your cells to your lived experience.

Exercise and Reflection

Apply the Ratio and Create Micromoments

Refer to the Emotional Charting Exercise and Reflection. Building on the general concepts you identified in those exercises, what are specific and concrete ways you can tip the three-to-one ratio in favor of heartfelt emotion in your daily life? How can you create micromoments of connection throughout the smaller moments of your days? Use stream-of-consciousness writing to process and reflect in a way that is appropriate for you. Identify as many situations as you can think of and how you can intentionally and authentically engage in the opportunities.

Exercise and Reflection

Note Your Shifts

As you begin to implement the skills of heartfelt engagement in your everyday life, take notice of any shifts that may occur, and briefly record them in your journal. Notice both small, everyday occurrences—for instance, you might find shifts in the way you perceive certain things; maybe something that has bothered you in the past may not be so dominant anymore—as well as bigger shifts; maybe your overall demeanor has improved or you are becoming more resilient to difficulties. Keep in mind the above list of benefits documented by research, but don't limit your experience to what was listed above; just notice when an upturn of awareness has occurred for you. Ultimately, this is best done as an ongoing reflection as you continually employ the practice of heartfelt engagement. How you record your moments of shift is up to you. You might want to make a note of them as they happen and keep an ongoing list, or you may want to reflect daily or weekly on anything that you have noticed. It is just important that you do take note of them as they begin to occur.

Exercise and Reflection

What Are Your Gorillas?

In this exercise, the term “gorilla” represents the good things in your life you may overlook or not routinely “see” in their full presence. What graces in your life are you overlooking? What are your gorillas? Write and brainstorm about the wonderful things in your life you may be overlooking because your awareness is directed at your many challenges. Write in a stream-of-consciousness style, and let the writing lead you. What are you overlooking? What might be different if you gave it more of your heartfelt engagement?

Exercise and Reflection

The Gratitude Journal

For the next four days, pick one to three things in your life to journal about. Rather than listing many, the idea of this activity is to authentically engage with fewer, at a deeper level. Aim to write for about twenty minutes and focus on what it is about your objects of gratitude that you are truly thankful for. Focus on the details that bring up the felt response of gratitude and be especially aware if other contradictory feelings surface, such as guilt, unworthiness, or distressing indebtedness. If any other feelings surface, notice without judgment and switch to something else that you can experience authentically.

Variation. Write a letter of gratitude to someone to whom you are grateful. They can be living or deceased, and the letter does not have to be delivered (although research has shown a powerful effect, if they are still living, when the letter or message is delivered in person [Seligman 2011]). The idea is to write descriptively enough to elicit a felt response within you as you bring your awareness to the recognition of your gratitude for the other.

Exercise and Reflection

Cultivate Self-Empathy

Turn back to the emotional charting exercise you did in the last chapter. Look at the difficult emotional states that you wrote below the line. Pick one that you would like to work on. See if you can disengage from any emotional reaction you might have as you entertain the difficult feeling. If you cannot, if it is too powerful, pick another one that you can work on first. After you have disengaged from any reactivity, imagine a best friend experiencing the difficult feeling. From a nonreactive, nonjudgmental stance, write, in a stream-of-consciousness style, why your friend may experience that difficult emotion. Do not try to “figure it out” as much as just hold and understand your friend’s experience. You might even write, in the third person, from the standpoint of your friend, why they feel that way. Notice if any images come up for you. They may be images of you in the past or related past memories. Remember, it is crucially important that you do this from a nonreactive, nonjudgmental, “observing” or “witnessing” point of view, maybe even with a little curiosity or surprise. You might simply ask your friend, “What is your story?”

Exercise and Reflection

Cultivate Self-Compassion

Extending now the Cultivate Self-Empathy exercise, reengage with the image of the best friend experiencing the difficult emotion. Write, from a stream-of-consciousness style, what you would perceive that best friend needs for healing. And, remember, it is important to write from a third-person point of view, as if it were a best friend, possibly even a twin or a somewhat removed sense of yourself. It is also important to let “them” tell you what they need, not try to figure it out from a cognitive, first-person point of view.

It is fundamentally important to remember, however, that when working with memory rescripting, the “need” is often not in present time. In other words, it may involve what you needed in a past scenario that you didn’t get; this imagery is what recodes the problematic implicit memory. Further, it doesn’t have to be grounded in reality. Like the man with the magic tricycle, what he needed was merely an image he could give to his “child” to heal his emotional memory. Be creative in what imagery works for you.

Let the writing lead you. Sufficient space and time for “them” to really be able to express what they need is important in this exercise. Also of importance is that you receive this information from a non-judgmental and nonreactive full presence. You might simply ask your “friend,” “What do you need?”

Exercise and Reflection

Empathy for Another

Pick someone for whom you would like to develop empathy and compassion. Turn back to the Emotional Charting exercise in the last chapter. Create an emotional chart for them as you think they would experience it. Once you have completed the chart, pick a difficult emotion at the bottom of the chart that you would more fully like to understand how they experience. Write, as if they were telling you their story from their point of view, why and how they experience this emotion. As you write, imagine you are listening to their story, and write in a stream-of-consciousness style from a nonjudgmental point of view. Just witness and hold their story. It is important to note that you don't need to know their complete factual story. Just intuitively let your writing lead you to what you think their emotional experience might be. Also, notice any reactivity that may come up in you. Hold your responses as well in a nonjudgmental and witnessing stance.

Exercise and Reflection

Compassion for Another

Extending now the Empathy for Another exercise, re-engage in your mind with the person for whom you would like to develop compassion. Write, from a stream-of-consciousness style, what you would perceive them to need for healing as they are experiencing this difficult emotion. It is also important to let them tell you what they need and not try to figure it out from a cognitive, first-person point of view. Again, you are writing as if they are telling you, and you are able to receive this information from a full and loving presence. Let the writing lead you. Sufficient space and time to nonjudgmentally listen to them authentically express what they need is important in this exercise. Also of importance is that you receive this information from a nonjudgmental point of view and be aware of any reactions you may be experiencing that block you from being able to be with this information in a loving and compassionate way.

Exercise and Reflection

What Went Well, and Why?

This exercise is inspired by Martin Seligman (Seligman 2013). The invitation of the exercise is to identify at least three things during your day that went well and describe why you think they went well. Draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. On the left-hand side, write at the top “What went well?” and title the right-hand side “Why?” For example, on the left side, you might write that you and your partner got along well after work, and on the right side, you might write that you were fully present in the conversation you shared about your respective days. Or, on the right side, you might write that a project at work went well, and on the left side acknowledge that you were prepared when working on it. Focus on your contribution to what you noted went well and let yourself appreciate the impact of your agency—or the hand you played in it going well. The list does not need to comprise major things in your day if that does not feel authentic. Small but sincere things will do fine.

What did you learn? What roles do you or did you play in the things that are actually going right for you? Can you identify some of your personal strengths through this process?

Exercise and Reflection

Discern Clarity

In this exercise, you will write a specific, detailed description of the aspects of a situation in your life in which you would like to see change. Draw a line down the middle of a page. On the left side, write in depth about the specifics of the situation that are not working. Pay attention to detail. This is not meant to be an exercise in which you immerse yourself in a sense of hopelessness as much as a mindful and observational approach to discerning, from a disengaged point of view, exactly what is not working. On the right hand of the paper, write, also in depth and with detail, what the situation would “look” like if it were working. Heartfully engage and get as clear as you can about the vision and detail of how the improved situation would appear in your life.

You can write narratively or write a bulleted list, but the greater the detail, the more the potential for hope. An important aspect of this exercise is that you do not have to figure out the means whereby or how to get there yet. First, you only bring awareness to what it would look like if it were working. The more in depth you can write about the detail of the problem and what it would look like if it were truly working, the more likely the answers of the means to get there will automatically emerge.

Add-on exercise. If, when you were completing the above exercise, steps you can take to implement change began to appear, address them in a stream-of-consciousness style.

What did you learn? How has clarity shed new light on your issue? Process and reflect in a way that is comfortable for you.

Exercise and Reflection

Bring a Heartful Approach to Your Subjective Interpretation

Genuinely and honestly reflect on your tendencies in the area of subjective interpretation. What stories do you tell when multiple versions are possible? What specific events or situations in your life could change with a different interpretation? If it feels comfortable to do so, pick a specific event that you could have interpreted differently and reflect how the outcome might have been different. Write in a stream-of-consciousness style, and process and reflect in a way that is appropriate for you. Additionally, you can be preemptive about the future. What are some future situations that you typically see one way that might lend themselves to a different, more generative interpretation?

Exercise and Reflection

Rewrite Your Stories and Scripts

What are the narratives or stories you tell about yourself? About others? What are the scripts that you write for yourself or others? What would happen if you let go of some of your limiting stories? Are you allowing room for growth or another, more heartfelt story to be told? Write in a stream-of-consciousness style addressing some of the above questions. Remember the more you deeply engage, the more room you provide for transformation.

Opportunities to change your stories and write new scripts play themselves out every day in the tapestry of your life. Every day you are provided with new openings, tangible and specific ways to live a new narrative. What if you could write new stories and scripts for the way you interpret your life and life's events?

Exercise and Reflection

Shift Your Time and Energy to Life Generation

Following are some common considerations that may add to or detract from your personal energy stores. This is, in no way, meant to be an exhaustive list. It is meant to help you explore how this phenomenon plays out in your own life. Consider the following, but also consider what may be personal “energy influencers” in your own life. Remember, the type of energy you expose yourself to determines the embodied experience of the moment, and the embodied experience of all your moments become your life.

How do the people in your life contribute to or detract from your personal energy stores? Admittedly, there are those that you have no choice about, but there are others you do. Think about the relationships in your life: the more pronounced ones and the ones you have lesser contact with. How do you feel when you are engaged in these relationships? What is your authentic embodied response when you are in their presence? Take a few moments and reflect. Close your eyes, rest in the physical sensations of your body, and imagine the various people in your life. Notice how your physical sensations shift when different people are brought into your awareness. Be sure to stay with the sensations long enough so you know your embodied response is a genuine one, not just an immediate reaction. How can you maximize your time and contact with the people who nurture a sense of generation and lessen contact with those who do not? If you cannot change your exposure to some people in your life who are energy draining, how can you shift your interaction with them to reduce their impact?

What about media? Which forms of media leave you with a feeling of life-generation, and which do not? Are you a person who is particularly sensitive to the media exposure in your life? Think about media in all forms in your life and remember that your brain does not know the difference between what is vividly imagined and what is real. Think about the various movie, television, computer, and smart-phone interactions you have each day or just the

amount of time you spend involved with them, and reflect on how they make you feel from a deeply embodied perspective. What shifts are you called to make?

Reflect on your environment and how sensitive you are to the space that surrounds you. Environmental concerns can include everything from your immediate environment to the time you spend in nature. What is your embodied reaction when you think of your environmental needs? What are your needs for simplicity? Do you need more simplicity in your environment? Do you need more simplicity in life in general? Many of the moments that you spend overly stimulated by your environment, your countless demands, and your latest acquisitions might be better spent in more life-generating activities and places. Could you benefit from voluntary simplicity in which you make a conscious choice to reduce the inner and outer clutter in your Life?

How can you be more intentional about self-care and personal time? Remember that your time budget is made up of the moments of your life, and the more you spend your moments on life-generating activities, the more you transform. How can you extend this concept to the personal care of your physical body, as in nutrition and exercise? Reflect on ways you might allocate more time to the things that feed you on a deeper level. Do you have enough silence or contemplative practice in your life? Do you make sure you dedicate time to generative or inspired activities, and what do those look like for you? Do you spend time processing and exploring the synchronicities that show up in your life? Are you taking time to foster meaningful connections? To laugh? To smile? All these things create the biochemical shifts throughout your body and brain that engage your calm-and- connection system and rewire your stress response at a fundamental level. How can you incorporate more of them in your life?

Think about your time as a valuable commodity and an investment in who you are becoming. After reflecting on what you just read, identify what shifts can you make to allocate more time to those things that are, for you, life-generating. What specific steps can you take to incorporate them into more moments of your life? Write in a stream-of-consciousness style, and process and reflect in a way that is appropriate for you.

Practice: The Power of Pause

The Power of Pause invites you to pause in the moment of reactivity and adopt a different posture toward it altogether. It invites you to simply pause, recognize the trigger from a nonreactive stance almost as if you are observing it from a third-person point of view, and refrain from evaluating it or its emotional significance. It is an “in-the-moment” practice, meaning you can do it any place and time you want to cultivate a nonreactive response to your triggers.

When you are triggered in your mind or body or both, do the following:

1. Recognize the trigger without engaging in it, evaluating it, or suppressing it.
2. Disengage from its emotional and somatic (or bodily) hold, as if it were someone else’s experience. Become the observer and be with it from a nonreactive, nonjudgmental stance.
3. Take several very intentional breaths, including intentional sighs if it feels comfortable to do so, and let your awareness settle on the experience of breathing.
4. When you can begin to feel your reactivity subside, reassess the situation from the grounded state of the pause.

What were your experiences practicing the Power of Pause? Was it effective for you? Could you remember to practice it when you were triggered? Did your responses and interpretations of the moment change?

Practice three to four times a day for the next week and record your experiences. There is a downloadable practice record log available online at <http://www.newharbinger.com/42839>. I encourage you to download this log and record every time you engage in one of the practices and your experience with it. As I stated in the introduction, recording your responses to the practices offered in this program is an important component along your path from stress and anxiety to resilience and well-being.

Practice: Present-Moment Awareness

The practice of present-moment awareness is also an in-the-moment practice, meaning you can do it any place and time you want to get grounded or remain grounded. It only takes a few minutes, although you can remain in this state of mind-body awareness for extended periods of time with practice. It invites you to first recognize where your attention is, both mentally and physically; note if there are present issues you need to address at a later time; commit to do that; and disengage your attentional hold. Once you disengage your attention from where it was, you bring it fully present to the moment you are experiencing. You are not consumed with worries about the future, anxieties about the present, or regrets about the past. It often helps if you can hyperfocus on your physical senses, your immediate surroundings, or both.

1. Notice where your attention is, physically, mentally, and emotionally, and disengage from its hold.
2. Relax the muscles around your eyes, shoulders, and chest, and take a releasing breath or intentional sigh.
3. Continue to breathe comfortably and naturally as you bring your attention to your immediate environment and your physical senses.
4. Pause and experience your senses, including the sights around you, as if you are hyperaware of the encounter. Notice what it feels like to be fully present.
5. Maintain this state of awareness as long as is comfortable or appropriate.

Practice Present-Moment Awareness three to four times a day for the next week. Record your experiences in your practice record log.

What was this experience like for you? Did this sense of presence feel different from the typical sense of presence you bring to your everyday moments? What did you learn from engaging in the practice, and what adjustments might you make?

Practice: Somatic Clearing

The practice below provides for somatic releasing through releasing specific muscle groups known to be associated with emotion. You can follow the instructions on the list by memory, record yourself reading the narrative, or access the associated audio file, available online at <http://www.newharbinger.com/42839>. You may want to play relaxing music in the background.

Find a comfortable place where you can lie down for approximately twenty minutes uninterrupted, and do the following:

1. Let your awareness find your breath at a focal or still point somewhere in your torso that is comfortable for you. Take several releasing breaths, repeating the word “release” on the out breath and physically feeling the sensation of release throughout your body. Maintain this type of breathing for several minutes, continually releasing deeper and feeling your body becoming heavier, as if it were melting into the surface below you. Keep this pattern of breathing throughout the practice.
2. Bring your awareness to your eyes and spend some time releasing all the tiny muscles surrounding them. Do the same with the rest of your facial muscles. It might feel as if you are letting go of any expression on your face.
3. Release all the tightness throughout your shoulders, and bring your focused awareness back to your chest and your released breathing.
4. Starting at your toes, progressively tighten for a three-

count and then release the following muscle groups: your lower legs from your toes to your knees; your upper legs from your knees to your hips; your whole torso, front and back; both arms simultaneously from your shoulders to your hands.

5. Now, imagine a wave of release starting at your toes and very slowly and systematically coming all the way up through your body, creating a profound release as it passes each area.

6. Bring all your awareness back to your breath, as if your body has melted completely into the surface below you.

If it feels comfortable to do so, cultivate a tiny smile.

7. Rest in this state for the remainder of the twenty
Minutes.

After practicing the somatic clearing exercise described above, record your experience in your practice record log. How did it feel? Were you able to feel a physical and emotional shift? How do you feel right now in an emotional sense? How might you incorporate this practice in your life to reap its benefits? Process and reflect in a way that is appropriate for you. This is also a rich time to journal, as often through a somatic release, new emotional insights open up.

Practice: HEART in the Moment

1. *Notice* your reactivity in your thoughts, emotions, and bodily responses and disengage from it or witness it.
2. *Refocus* your physiological response by releasing the muscles in your eyes and shoulders, dropping your attention to your torso, and establishing a grounded breathing pattern.
3. *Nurture* the felt and embodied experience of a heartfelt emotion, possibly holding an image in your mind and heart as you do so. Soak in the experience.

Practice Variation: HEARTful Outlook

HEARTful Outlook follows the same basic steps as HEART in the

Moment: you notice reactivity mindfully, refocus your physiological response to open space to engage your calm-and-connection system, and deliberately nurture the experience of a heartfelt emotion.

However, in the nurture step, you engage an emotion that is the opposite of the stressed one you're feeling. This is designed to replace a specific problematic attitude with one more conducive to resilience or well-being in that particular moment. For example, let's say you were about to give a speech, and you were very nervous. Practicing HEARTful Outlook would invite you, during the nurture step, to feel and breathe a sense of confidence, to directly counteract the nervousness that might be challenging your emotional balance. The difference in HEARTful Outlook is that it is designed to counteract a specific and challenging mindset with another, more emotionally grounding one.

Practice: Sustained HEART

Sustained HEART lays the foundation for all the HEART practices throughout the rest of the book. It follows the generic steps of notice, refocus, and nurture as outlined above but is designed to be done at a deeper level for a sustained period of time, so each step is expanded for depth and breadth. The explanation of the practice is more at length here, as the specialized variations you will engage as the book progresses builds from it. You can commit the steps to memory, record them, or have someone read them to you. Sustained HEART is, as are all the longer HEART practices throughout the rest of the book, available as a guided audio if you prefer to have me walk you through the practice. You can find the audio online at <http://www.newharbinger.com/42839>.

Begin by sitting comfortably in a position you can maintain for a sustained period of time. Notice your thoughts, emotions, and body sensations and disengage from their hold. The notice step in Sustained HEART is similar to HEART in the Moment; however, you might not be having any obvious reactivity. The notice step in this practice asks you to take a brief inventory of the mental, emotional, and physical states of your body.

Take a few intentional breaths and begin to establish a natural and calm breathing pattern. From the point of view of the witness, or observer, notice any thoughts or mental activity you might be having. Again, don't let the thoughts take you away or engage in them; you are just witnessing or observing them.

Next, notice your emotional activity. Your emotional activity may or may not be associated with your thoughts. Are there any feelings that stand out? Are your emotions harbored in a different spot in your body than your thoughts? Again, you are just noticing or observing your emotional activity and its nuances without letting it consume you. You're not "thinking about" as much as you are just "being with."

Now, notice the physical sensations in your body. Are your shoulders or any other areas of your body tight? Do you feel anxious? Scan your body. How does it feel? Are any areas harboring stress or tightness? If you feel stress, tension, or tightness anywhere in your body, make a conscious effort to release it. If it feels right, you can also begin to repeat the word “release” silently on the out-breath and imagine yourself releasing all the tension from your body.

Refocus the physical tension in and around your eyes, your shoulders, and your torso. Breathe. The purpose of the refocus step is to refocus the physical attributes of your body to bring you deeper into the experience and make you more receptive to the next step. The two main parts are first, refocusing and releasing through the eyes, the shoulders, and the torso and second, deepening your breathing.

As you continue to ground yourself in your breath, focus your attention on your eyes, and release all the tiny muscles around the eyes and the eye sockets. It might feel as if you’re losing the expression on your face. Again, you can continue to repeat the word “release” on the out-breath if it feels comfortable to do so. If you are repeating the word “release,” physically feel the sensation of release throughout your body every time you repeat the word. Now release any tension, tightness, or stress in your shoulders. With every out-breath, physically feel the sensation of release a little bit more acutely. Now, bring all your awareness to an area in your torso that feels comfortable for you. It could be your heart; your solar plexus, which is right below your heart; or it could be deep in your belly.

Now, deepen your breathing. When you are at the breathing step of Sustained HEART, your conscious attention is keenly focused on an area of your torso that feels comfortable for you and on the process of breathing. Again, this is where some people really find it helpful to focus on the word “release” on every out-breath and vividly feel

the sensation of releasing throughout the body. Some contemplative traditions recommend you count each breath. In Sustained HEART, during the refocus step, you might find that helpful.

If you choose to, count each in-and-out cycle as one breath. Many people count from one to ten and then go back to one, while others count from ten down to one and then go back to ten. The idea is not to count how many breaths in total you are taking, for example ending at 565; it is to engage your mind just enough not to have it on a hundred other things. Counting your breaths is just a tool to keep your awareness focused on your interior process and further let your body settle. Again, if your attention is keenly focused on your breathing, it won't be on anything else.

The main concept to remember in the refocus step is that you are physiologically readying yourself to deeply engage a heartfelt contemplative experience.

Nurture a deep experience of a heartfelt emotion. Once you begin to feel a deepening of your physical experience, make a conscious and intentional shift to a heartfelt emotion. The main goal of this practice is that you maintain a heartfelt emotional shift long enough and deep enough that you begin to make foundational shifts in your whole mind-body complex. It can't be faked. It can't be forced. Sincerely felt heartfelt emotion creates physiological, biochemical, and neural response patterns that are very real and very powerful and create profound change if you practice regularly.

While keeping an intentional breath somewhere in the background of your awareness, shift your attention to something that engages your heart. This could be an image that you listed in the last exercise, something that sincerely generates "felt states" above the line on the heartfelt awareness chart, or something that is currently more heartfully present for you. It could be reexperiencing a time when you have felt it before, or what you imagine it would feel like. If using an image helps you to create or maintain this

engaged state, it is a good tool to use. However, it is important to remember that the image is just a tool, and a genuine heartfelt focus is the most important aspect of this practice.

Occasionally, I have participants who, theoretically, have something above the line that they think should bring up heartfelt emotions; however, in reality, they don't. If

you find yourself becoming saddened, angered, or frustrated by an image or if you find yourself shifting from image to image, try to settle on an image that brings up authentic heartfelt states for you. Don't think about it too much. Let the practice guide you. It's the sincere engagement that is most important. Also, remember that some people are not image-based. In other words, just resting in the *felt experience* is sufficient.

Bask in this felt state, while continuing your breathing pattern, as if it were soaking every cell in your body. If your mind wanders, just gently bring it back. Maintain this state for as long as is comfortable, trying to extend the time to twenty minutes if possible.

Practice Sustained HEART at least three times this week and record your experiences in a few paragraphs of narrative. In addition, record brief comments in your practice record log or in your journal. You might entertain some or all of the following questions: How did it feel? Were you able to settle into the practice? What might you change next time? Did you gain any insights from the practice?

Practice: Everyday Gratitude

When you bring conscious awareness to any moment and focus on the felt experience of that moment, you bring an embodied awareness that helps you store it as such. In other words, hyperfocusing on moments of your life, as if you were trying to make a physiological imprint of those moments right in that moment, actually helps to do just that. The practice of Everyday Gratitude takes merely noticing moments of gratitude one step further. It invites you to pause, reflect, and intentionally soak up the felt experience of that moment. This practice not only deepens the physiological experience of the moment, creating shifts in your temporary point of view, it also creates long-term foundational changes in your embodied capacities for gratitude. When you have identified a moment for which to be grateful, soak up that felt experience as if you were trying to cement the memory in your cells. Sustain this felt experience as long as is comfortable and appropriate for the situation.

Practice: Grateful HEART

Grateful HEART is an extension of the other HEART practices in that it is built on the steps of notice, refocus, and nurture—with the nurture step, in this case, centering on the heartfelt experience of gratitude for the things in your life you can really embody or have a sustained felt sense of gratitude toward. Again, it is built from the Sustained HEART practice, and you may want to reread the longer description (in chapter 5). A shorter description follows. For a recording of these instructions, go to <http://www.newharbinger.com/42839>.

1. *Notice*: Notice your thoughts, your emotions, and your bodily sensations and disengage from them, or witness them, without judgment.
2. *Refocus*: Release all the tension—in the muscles around your eyes, in the muscles of your shoulders, anywhere in the body it might be. Let your awareness drop to a place in your torso that feels comfortable for you. Focus on slow, natural, comfortable breaths at that focal point.
3. *Nurture*: Hold a person or several people for whom you are authentically grateful in your awareness. You do not need to feel gratitude for a specific thing or act, but rather, you are focusing on a general sense of appreciation. Let the practice lead you. In other words, do not think too hard about trying to figure out whom to focus on; let the images or sensations come to you as if you were scrolling through various aspects of your life and letting certain people emerge. Hold these people in a felt sense of appreciation and notice what is about the role they have played in your life that you are grateful for.

Try to rest in a deep sensation of gratitude for ten to fifteen minutes.

Notice through subsequent days whether more people appear in your awareness during the practice and throughout the day.

Maintenance. Spend at least ten minutes every day on your gratitude journal. Practice Everyday Gratitude in all the moments it feels comfortable to do so and practice Grateful HEART at least once a week.

Practice: HEART for Holding and Healing Self

Remember, in all the HEART practices, the notice and refocus steps are the same. The nurture step in HEART for Holding and Healing is to first let your “best friend” or “twin” share with you why they feel the way they do when they experience this difficult emotion. Don’t try to figure it out too much; just let the meditation guide you. Let it organically unfold with your “friend” sharing their experience. Your job is just to hold them and witness their story from an empathic yet nonreactive presence. Second, after giving sufficient time for fully witnessing their story, let them tell you what they need now or needed then—it may include both. To listen to a recording of this practice, go to <http://www.newharbinger.com/42839>.

1. *Notice* your reactivity in your thoughts, emotions, and bodily responses and disengage from it, or witness it.
2. *Refocus* your physiological response by releasing the muscles in your eyes and shoulders, dropping your attention to your torso, and establishing a grounded breathing pattern.
3. *Nurture*: Once you are deep into the meditative state, revisit the Cultivate Self-Empathy exercise. Give yourself sufficient time to resettle in to a place of nonjudgment and full listening. This should take several minutes to fully engage with your “best friend,” how they experience this difficult emotion, and any story behind it. After you have settled into the “holding” place of deep empathy, begin to envelop this image in a healing presence by extending loving compassion. Next, deeply imagine giving them what they need or needed at another time and didn’t get.

It is also important that it be a *felt experience* of extending love and compassion, and also of receiving it, as the felt experience is what creates the physiological changes necessary for true healing. In this practice, you are at once both the giver and receiver of deep compassionate feelings. Hold this deep connection for approximately ten minutes, or as long as is comfortable.

It is often helpful to journal after the practice, as additional and important insights may come up.

Practice: HEART for Holding and Healing Another

After performing the notice and refocus steps of the standard HEART protocol, this practice invites you to engage in an empathetic and compassionate encounter with another. Your job is just to contemplatively hold them and witness their story from an empathic yet nonreactive presence. Second, after giving sufficient time for fully witnessing their story, let them tell you what they need now or needed then—the response may include both.

To listen to a recording of this practice, go to <http://www.newharbinger.com/42839>.

1. *Notice* your reactivity in your thoughts, emotions, and bodily responses and disengage from it, or witness it.
2. *Refocus* your physiological response by releasing the muscles in your eyes and shoulders, dropping your attention to your torso, and establishing a grounded breathing pattern.
3. *Nurture*: Once you are deep into the meditative state, revisit the empathetic understanding for another you gained in the associated exercise, and imagine yourself “holding” the other’s experience in a state of full empathy. Give yourself sufficient time to settle in to a place of full listening; this should take several minutes to fully re-engage with the previous exercise. After you have settled again into the holding place of deep empathy, begin to be with this person by extending loving compassion. If it feels comfortable to do so, imagine yourself giving to them what they expressed they needed in the previous exercise. It is important to imagine the “core” of you extending this love and compassion to the “core” of them. It is also important that it be a felt experience. Hold this deep connection for

approximately ten minutes, or as long as is comfortable.

Supplemental activity. This is an extremely rich time to journal. If it feels comfortable to do so, journal about your experience with the practice and notice any additional insights.

After engaging in the above practices, it is important to reflect on your experience. What did it feel like? Were you able to fully engage? What insights did you gain?

Maintenance. Practice HEART for Holding and Healing Self and HEART for Holding and Healing Another as often as you are called. If it feels comfortable, do so at least twice a week. Also, when you are working on self-empathy and self-compassion, you might continue to work with other emotions below the line for continued emotional balance and healing. You can make these practices an ongoing part of your practice repertoire for continual growth and resilience from reactive patterns.

Practice: HEART for Hope

HEART for Hope invites you to take what you learned in the previous exercise for clarity and create an image of yourself flourishing in those areas you wrote about. In this practice, you will hold an image of yourself already beyond the struggle. Pay attention to specific details in the practice and let yourself feel the experience. Again, feelings around this image must be authentic. If negative thoughts, feelings, or doubts surface, switch to an image to which you can feel a hopeful connection. If an image is hard for you to authentically feel, start slowly with an image in your past where you felt something similar—it can be as simple as learning to tie your shoes—and work your way up. To listen to a recording of this practice, go to <http://www.newharbinger.com/42839>.

1. *Notice* your reactivity in your thoughts, emotions, and bodily responses and disengage from it, or witness it.
2. *Refocus* your physiological response by releasing the muscles in your eyes and shoulders, dropping your attention to your torso, and establishing a grounded breathing pattern.
3. *Nurture*. Hold yourself in a state of loving connection to the life that is possible and assure yourself that you deserve all it has to offer. Pay attention to specific details and let yourself feel the experience. As vividly as you can, hold this image and experience the loving connection and hope it generates.

The following practice is a variation and uses the HEART protocol to nurture a sense of clarity. It can be used to foster clarity on a specific issue or more general directions for your life.

Variation: HEART for Clarity. HEART for Clarity uses the basic steps of the HEART for Hope protocol above with the intention of gaining clarity on a specific question, problem, or issue.

Before you begin the practice, write down a question, issue, problem, or any life circumstance you would like some clarity on. During the practice, do not overtly focus on this question, just go into the practice with the intention of holding a subconscious awareness of this question. After the practice, notice any answers, intuitive insights, bodily sensations, or other ways of knowing that may surface. These knowings may appear in a variety of ways. Be open. Pay attention. Write down the first things that come up without conscious filtering. Let your writing lead you. In addition, pay attention in the hours and days following the practice. Answers and clarity may emerge at the times you least expect it.

Maintenance. Spend at least ten minutes every day reflecting on what went well and why. Practice HEART for Hope at least once a week and HEART for Clarity when called to do so. Make sure to record your experiences in a practice log.

Practice: HEART for a New You

To listen to a recording of this practice, go to <http://www.newharbinger.com/42839>. Take some time before the practice and get extremely clear on an image or components of different images you would like to bring forth and the way you would like your life to speak. Briefly reflect on the images you want to leave behind, just enough to unlock the associated neural networks and destabilize them. Again, and importantly, it is enough to just bring them to mind without letting them consume you or your emotional equilibrium. Next, bring to mind your new and desired self-image and engage in the following.

1. *Notice* your reactivity in your thoughts, emotions, and bodily responses and disengage from it, or witness it.
2. *Refocus* your physiological response by releasing the muscles in your eyes and shoulders, dropping your attention to your torso, and establishing a grounded breathing pattern.
3. *Nurture*: Hold a picture of yourself truly embodying your new self-image. Imagine yourself in the details of this perception, as this will solidify the encoding of the new image. Notice the sounds, smells, and sights, and especially focus on the felt experience of the new image. It is okay if it is not static, if it moves and shifts. You may have pieces of the image shift and come in and out of conscious awareness; that is fine; most images actually are dynamic. The important thing is that you rest in the felt experience and notice the details when they do come

up. As deeply and as honestly as you can, fully immerse yourself in the vision and sensation of this new image.

Hold it as long as it is comfortable, or for fifteen to twenty minutes.

After the practice, if you are called to do so, journal about your experience. This can solidify the practice even more. It is also important to come out of the practice slowly and reflect as you do because doing so integrates the more conscious parts of your brain with the parts that just experienced the practice. Journaling helps you recall the experience of the practice in the more conscious moments of your day and act accordingly. Soak in the richness of the experience.