

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Managing Stress Makes a Difference and Brain Health Matters

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **April is Stress Awareness Month and today we're talking about managing stress and protecting your brain health.***

Stress—that heart pounding, muscle tensing, breath quickening, stomach churning feeling has been our constant companion for the past 12 months. It’s our body’s “fight-or-flight” response to a perceived threat and while a little bit of stress may be good for us, chronic stress can lead to long-term health problems.

Throughout time, the brain’s release of stress hormones has helped humans survive threats like animal attacks, fires, floods, and conflict with other humans. Today, the dangers that trigger our stress response tend to be things like traffic, money issues, our jobs, societal tensions like race relations and inequality, politics, the news, and COVID-19. Understanding the stress response and learning how to manage it is the key to protecting our brains from stress.

Our stress response begins in the brain. Our brain senses the threat and sends a distress signal to the rest of the body activating a burst of energy — the heart pumping, muscles tensing sensation we know so well. This all happens within an instant. When the threat passes, our brain sends a signal stopping the response. But when we experience chronic stress, we never seem to be able put the brakes on our stress response. Like a motor that is constantly running too fast, this heightened level of energy increases our risk of high blood pressure, heart attack, obesity, and stroke — all risk factors for brain illness.

What’s the best tool for managing our stress? Learning to relax. Relaxation increases brain and physical health protective factors by slowing the release of stress hormones and blocks our fight-or-flight response. When we relax our heart rate slows, blood pressure drops, breathing slows, muscles relax, and digestion improves. Without those stress hormones we can better manage our blood sugar, our immune system functions better, and we sleep better.

Fortunately for us, there are several techniques to help us learn to relax, manage our stress, and protect our brain health. Herbert Benson, MD, director emeritus of the Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital, has devoted much of his career to the [Relaxation Response](#) as a way to combat chronic stress. His techniques include deep abdominal breathing, focusing on a soothing word (such as peace or calm), visualization of tranquil scenes, repetitive prayer, yoga, and tai chi.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Practicing your relaxation response can help you manage your stress, protect your brain health and fight brain illness. The Director of the Benson-Henry Institute and one of the BHI's Advisory Council members, Dr. Greg Fricchione, has shared a number of [guided relaxation exercises](#). Minimizing the factors that increase stress can also help protect your brain health. Here are some suggestions from [Harvard Health](#) and the BHI.

- **Take control of your situation.** Instead of focusing on things outside your control, put your efforts into the things you can control. Predictability combats stress.
- **Get a good night's sleep.** Stress can disrupt your sleep and lack of sleep can make stress worse. The areas of the brain that handle higher-order functions don't work as well when you are sleep deprived. Maintain a regular sleep schedule, avoid caffeine after noon, and create a relaxing sleep environment.
- **Get organized.** Managing your workload can reduce stress. To avoid being overwhelmed, creating a daily to-do list can help prevent the feeling of being bombarded and provide you with a clear stopping point for the day. A list can also help you predict when you may get the most stressed and need to practice some relaxation techniques.
- **Understand stress.** A certain degree of stress is helpful for growth and happiness. Instead of avoiding stress focus on having a healthier response to stress.
- **Get help if you need it.** Getting help to manage your chronic stress can make you more resilient, protect your brain health, and reduce the risk of stress-related complications such as heart disease, high blood pressure, and obesity.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote:
 - Stress resilience
 - Nutrition
 - Physical activity
 - Sleep
 - Social connection
 - Emotional wellbeing
 - Meaning and Purpose
 - Cognitive stimulation and creativity
 - Engaging with nature
 - General health
 - Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is a cutting-edge, new approach to protecting brain health, optimizing brain performance, and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is a collaborative effort with Massachusetts General Hospital, a Harvard Medical School Teaching Hospital, to build brain healthy communities through education, collaboration, research, innovation, and action, with a specific focus on *brain health promotion, prevention, early detection, evidence-based intervention, and optimization of performance*. The BHI is creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the ***Be Brain Healthy*** movement, ***because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference***. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).