



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Build Your Resilience to Stress

*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. **Today, we talk about reducing the impact of stress on your brain health.***

When it comes to risk factors for our brain health, how we respond to stress is near the top of the list. We all feel stress from time to time, but it is how we perceive, respond, and cope — our resilience — that can make the difference in our brain health.

The stress response begins in the brain where a natural alarm system in our bodies controls our mood, motivation, and fear. When our brain senses a threat, a distress signal is sent to the rest of the body through a combination of nerve and hormonal signals. This signal tells our adrenal glands to release a surge of stress hormones. Adrenaline increases our heart rate, elevates our blood pressure, and boosts our energy supplies. Cortisol, the primary stress hormone, supports our fight-or-flight response. Once the threat passes, our brain sends a signal telling our body to stop the response.

Significant problems begin when our stress response does not turn off, resulting in chronic stress. Chronic stress is like a motor that is constantly running too fast. The ongoing heightened level of energy produced with chronic stress increases our risk factors for brain illness — high blood pressure, heart attack, inflammation, obesity, and brain illnesses including depression, anxiety, dementia, and stroke. According to the American Institute of Stress, chronic unmanaged stress accounts for up to 90 percent of doctors' visits in this country.

Once we are aware of our stress and its causes, we need to learn to cope with it in a positive way and regain a sense of control. Research shows that people who are resilient have lower rates of depression, increased longevity, and greater satisfaction with life. And the best tool for managing our stress is learning to relax.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

At this time of year, you tend to be more stressed. Between work, school, the pandemic, the upcoming holidays, and life in general, it's hard to find time to relax. The BHI and [Harvard Health](#) offer these simple tips for coping with stress and learning to be more stress resilient.

- **Meditate.** Meditation and guided relaxation can help you learn to relax and lower your stress. Deep abdominal breathing, focusing on a soothing word (such as “peace” or “calm”), visualizing a tranquil scene, yoga, or tai chi can all help relieve your stress. The [Benson-Henry Institute](#) offers guided relaxation exercises to help you get started.
- **Reframe.** Much of life’s stress comes from how you view your situation. By reframing your stressors and changing your perspective, you can often relieve some of the stress in your life. Learning more about reframing in this [Brain Boost](#).
- **Exercise.** Physical activity reduces cortisol levels and can improve your mood. If sticking to a daily exercise schedule is a source of stress, maybe you are doing the wrong kind of exercise. Do something you enjoy — walking biking, gardening, yoga, or swimming are physical activities that can reduce your stress. The key is to find an activity that motivates you and helps you destress and recharge. Suggestions for activities that boost your immunity and brain health can be found in this [Brain Boost](#).
- **Take control.** Being disorganized may be the sources of some of your stress. Create a system for organizing your time and possessions to help reduce these small nuisances like losing your keys or running late for meetings. Schedule your day so there is time for exercise, to plan healthy meals, and sleep. If you know you’re going to be encountering a stressful period, like a big deadline at work, plan your strategy for managing your stress.
- **BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle** that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:
 - 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 approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is

creating brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address 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](#).