



BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Calm Your Mind to Reduce Risk of Brain-Triggered Stress Reactions

*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. **Triggers are actions or situations that cause an emotional reaction. They can have serious consequences when the stress they create adversely affects our brain and our bodies. Today, we will look at emotional triggers and the role our brain plays in how we respond.***

How your brain perceives stress and how your mind and body respond speak much to your ability to be resilient to the stressors in your life and the implications to your health, longevity and well-being. What are your emotional stress triggers? What can cause your heart to pound, your mind to race, your stomach to flip? Is it when you feel rejected? Betrayed or dismissed? Is it seeing a person who has hurt you? Is it simply the memory of that pain?

Whatever it is that causes an intense emotional reaction is a brain trigger for you. And it can have serious repercussions to both your physical and brain health and well-being unless you find a way to manage your response.

There are four main types of brain triggers, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

External triggers, such as becoming overwhelmed by media reports.

Internal triggers, like feelings of inadequacy and despair after a break up or divorce.

Trauma triggers, such as visiting the site of traumatic events in your past.

Symptom triggers, when a physical condition, such as fatigue, brings on or worsens anxiety.

You won't be surprised to learn that the physical reactions to our triggers have their origin in the brain. The amygdala, a small, almond-shaped area deep in the brain, processes emotional reactions like anxiety, fear, and stress. [A 2017 brain-imaging study by Harvard Medical School](#) linked heightened activity in the amygdala to increased bone-marrow activity, artery inflammation, and a higher risk of heart attack and other cardiovascular events. A more recent [study released by the American Heart Association](#) found people with recent heart attacks have

significantly higher activity in the amygdala along with greater inflammation in arteries.

So how do we reduce the adverse reactions? A key is responding in the moment to stress with non-emotional resilience techniques when we are triggered. The Harvard-affiliated Benson-Henry Institute for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital came up with the [Stress Management and Resilience Training \(SMART\)](#) program. Its quick and calming response has two easy steps:

1. Choose a calming focus, such as your breath, a sound, a short prayer, or a positive word or phrase. Repeat it aloud or silently as you inhale or exhale. Something like, this too shall pass or I have got this.
2. Let go and relax. If your mind wanders, take a deep breath and say to yourself “thinking, thinking” and return to your calming focus.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Coping strategies seek to eliminate, avoid, and reduce the impact of emotional reactions and triggers. You might try these strategies, brought to you by the BHI, the next time you are under stress to find out what works best for you.

- **LEAD A BRAIN HEALTHY LIFESTYLE.** Include exercise and mindfulness techniques like yoga and meditation. They are good proactive resilience builders to stress and anxiety.
- **LEARN FROM THE PAST.** Remember patterns and signs of risk in previous triggers, such as who was involved, where it occurred, when and why it took place.
- **BE READY.** Plan ahead for how you will react to triggers. Speak to those close to you to let them know how to help.
- **USE THE DIRECT APPROACH.** Seek a head-on solution to your stressor. If going to the grocery store causes you stress, ask someone else to do your shopping or use a delivery service.
- **FOCUS ON THE EMOTIONS.** When forced to interact with a trigger, seek to reduce your reaction. Breathing and meditation are options.
- **OPEN UP.** If a person is causing you stress, talk to them about what triggers you and seek solutions. Be open to options. If the person is not sensitive to your request, you might want to set boundaries.
- **SEEK HELP.** There are types of therapy that have been proven effective in addressing stressors. Exposure therapy and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing are among them.
- **CHECK YOUR FACTS.** Before thoughts and emotions begin to escalate, take a moment to do a reality check to make sure your reaction is reasonable and appropriate.
- **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.** Making your brain health a priority can build defenses against future triggers. Talk to a loved one or try journaling or deep breathing.

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), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building 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](#).