

A HeartMath® Breathing Technique for Reducing Stress and Creating Better Health

What is stress?

Stress is the body's reaction to a real or perceived threat. In a "fight" or "flight" stress response your body gets you ready for some kind of action that gets you out of danger. However, most of the threats you face today aren't something you can fight or run away from. They're everyday problems and stressors you need to work through.

How does stress affect health?

Stress affects you physically, mentally and emotionally. According to the American Institute of Stress, up to 90per cent of all health problems are related to stress, including heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, depression and sleep disorders.

What do we know about stress?

The stress response has been studied in relation to cognitive and physiological processes. Cognitive processes have studied how our thinking can influence our perception of stress. Physiological processes have studied how our body responds biochemically, hormonally and physiologically to stress. More recently, stress has been studied from a **psychophysiological perspective** --- a way that helps us see how emotions are related to stress. For instance, we may describe ourselves as "stressed" in many ways (e.g., stuck in traffic, when a relationship ends, preparing for an exam, having trouble at work, dealing with serious illness). When we describe ourselves as stressed in these situations, we need to recognize that feelings such as anxiety, irritation, frustration or hopelessness play a large role in them. It's these emotions, particularly when unmanaged, that keep our stress high.

How do emotions influence stress?

Emotional processing happens at a much higher speed than our thought processing. While emotions can be brought on by thoughts, emotions may also come from subconscious memories or experiences. To understand how this works, here's an example:

Have you ever just met someone and known instantly if you like them or not? In this case, your emotions influence how you feel. In other words, not all emotions follow thoughts - in fact, emotions can be triggered without thinking at all.

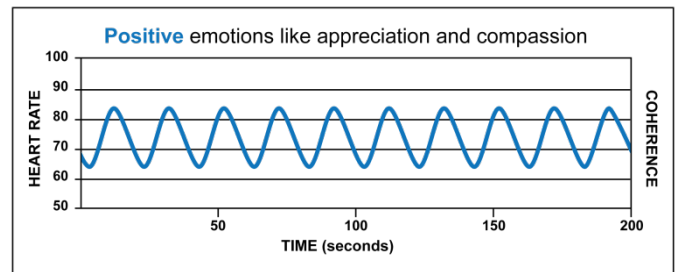
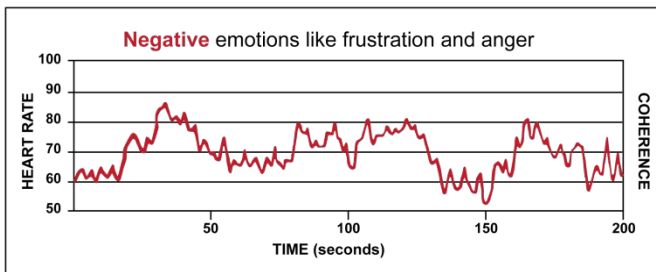
Emotions are tricky. Research has shown that thinking about a past situation that made you angry, does not make as many physiological changes in your body as if you actually re-experience the feeling of anger. The same is true for positive emotions. What is important to understand is that emotions, positive or negative, change your autonomic nervous, hormone and immune systems.

What can you do about it?

The first step is to understand how stress works. It's not events or situations that are harmful; rather how you feel about them (your *emotional response*) that prolong stress. Understanding and naming your emotions, using breathing techniques and re-experiencing positive emotions help calm a stress reaction.

How does this work?

When your body is under stress, negative emotions such as anger, frustration or worry lead to changes in your nervous system that alters your breathing and heart rhythms. You breathe faster and the speed between each heart beat becomes less regular. In contrast, positive emotions like joy, appreciation, care and kindness create changes in your nervous system that regulates your breathing and creates synchronization (a natural harmony) in the heart's rhythms and nervous system. When this happens, your body is in a state that scientists call **coherence**. And in this state you are more creative, flexible, able to problem solve and handle stress more easily.



How can I create and practice coherence?

Create yourself a schedule to practice this breathing technique 4 to 5 times a day, every day for 21 days. In addition, use this breathing any time you want, prior to, during or after any stressful events or situations that provide emotional challenges. Read through the steps before trying them.

The Steps of the Quick Coherence™ Technique:

Step 1 – Heart-Focus

Focus your attention on the area around your heart.

Step 2 – Heart-Focused Breathing

Maintain your heart focus and, while breathing, imagine that your breath is flowing in and out through the heart area. Breathe casually, just a little deeper than normal.

Step 3 – Heart Feeling.

Recall a positive feeling and make a sincere attempt to relive that feeling. You can recall a time when you felt appreciation or care for someone or something and attempt to re-experience that feeling. Once you have found a positive feeling sustain this feeling by continuing with the Quick Coherence steps: Heart Focus; Heart-Focused Breathing and Heart Feeling.