

# STRESS FIRST AID MODEL WORKBOOK

*This workbook accompanies the Stress First Aid Response presentation developed by Dr. Joanna Cheek and Dr Ruth Stewart (adapted from the work of Dr. Patricia Watson, US Department of Veterans Affairs).*

## What is stress?

Stress is a feeling of emotional or physical tension. It can come from any event or thought that makes you feel frustrated, angry, nervous or unbalanced. Stress is your body's reaction to a challenge or demand. In short bursts, stress can be positive, such as when it helps you avoid danger or meet a deadline. But when stress lasts for a long time, it may harm your health or spiritual wellness.<sup>1</sup> The diagram in Figure 1 shows the many systems in our bodies that can be effected by stress.<sup>2</sup>

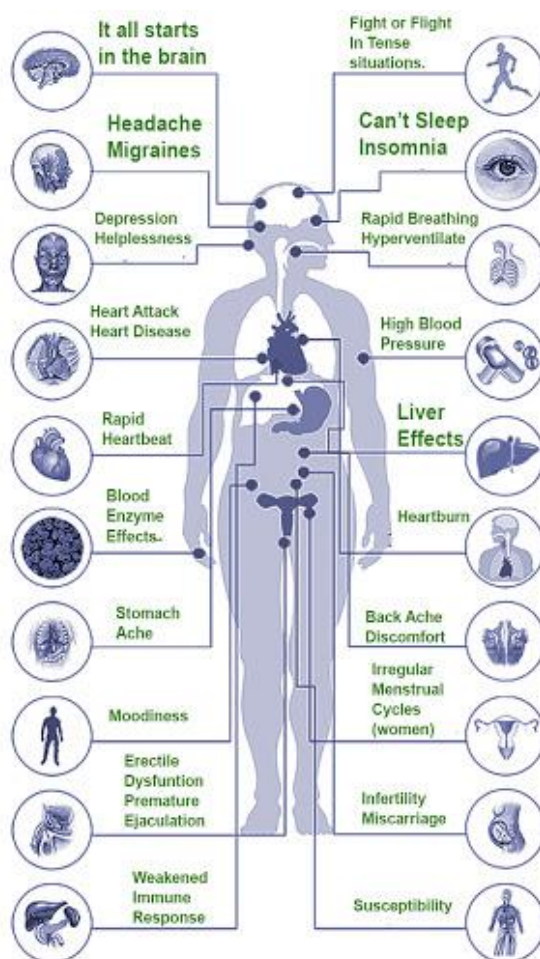
Stress is a normal part of life, but we need to be aware of signs of stress and manage our reactions so that we stay healthy and well as we navigate challenging circumstances.

## What is Stress First Aid?

Health care workers encounter serious stressors as an ongoing part of their work, which has been further intensified by the pandemic. The Stress First Aid (SFA) model is a **self-care and peer support framework** that can help you identify and address early signs of stress reactions in yourself and others in an ongoing way.

Central to the Stress First Aid module is the **stress continuum**, which is a visual tool for assessing your own and others' stress responses. The crux of the stress continuum model is that stress responses lay

**Figure 1: Effects of Stress on the Body**



<sup>1</sup> <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/003211.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.xariscreative.com/?page\\_id=168](http://www.xariscreative.com/?page_id=168)

along a spectrum of severity and type. Every person will react when faced with stressors that are severe, personal, or extended. During the course of reaction and recovery, a person's state can change from Green to Yellow to Orange to Red zone, and back again.

A **key goal of this model is to reduce stigma**. We often expect ourselves and each other to be ready or “in the green” at all times, but the reality is that we are cycling through these colors all the time.

READY (Green)	REACTING (Yellow)	INJURED (Orange)	ILL (Red)
<b>DEFINITION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Optimal functioning</li> <li>Adaptive growth</li> <li>Wellness</li> </ul> <b>FEATURES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At one's best</li> <li>Well-trained and prepared</li> <li>In control</li> <li>Physically, mentally and spiritually fit</li> <li>Mission-focused</li> <li>Motivated</li> <li>Calm and steady</li> <li>Having fun</li> <li>Behaving ethically</li> </ul>	<b>DEFINITION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mild and transient distress or impairment</li> <li>Always goes away</li> <li>Low risk</li> </ul> <b>CAUSES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Any stressor</li> </ul> <b>FEATURES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling irritable, anxious or down</li> <li>Loss of motivation</li> <li>Loss of focus</li> <li>Difficulty sleeping</li> <li>Muscle tension or other physical changes</li> <li>Not having fun</li> </ul>	<b>DEFINITION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>More severe and persistent distress or impairment</li> <li>Leaves an emotional/mental “scar”</li> <li>Higher risk</li> </ul> <b>CAUSES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Life threat</li> <li>Loss</li> <li>Moral injury</li> <li>Wear and tear</li> </ul> <b>FEATURES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Loss of control</li> <li>Panic, rage or depression</li> <li>No longer feeling like normal self</li> <li>Excessive guilt, shame or blame</li> </ul>	<b>DEFINITION</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clinical mental disorder</li> <li>Unhealed stress injury causing life impairment</li> </ul> <b>TYPES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>PTSD</li> <li>Depression</li> <li>Anxiety</li> <li>Substance abuse</li> </ul> <b>FEATURES</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Symptoms persist and worsen over time</li> <li>Severe distress or social or occupational impairment</li> <li>Hopelessness</li> </ul>



## Your Stress Signature

We all have different “stress signatures”, or patterns of thinking, feeling, behaving, and relating that show up when we are distressed. While everyone’s stress signature is unique, we tend to react to stress with similar patterns each time we are faced with stressful situations. We can learn to identify and monitor ourselves for these unique stress signs to help us quickly recognize when we are moving towards the right of the stress continuum.

It can be helpful to reflect on and identify what stress looks like and feels like for you:

QUESTIONS	READY	REACTING	INJURED	ILL
What thought and emotions do you notice?				
What behaviours do you notice?				
How are your relationships impacted?				
What is happening in your body?				

It is important to recognise that people respond differently to situations and events. What is traumatic and/or stressful for some people may not affect others in the same way. People who have experienced previous traumas or people dealing with stressors related to identity factors like race, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, ability etc., may react differently to new events based on existing stress levels. The most important thing is to know yourself and be aware of how **you** tend to react and respond when you are stressed.

It is very easy to get out of balance under stress. Many indigenous peoples have used the **medicine wheel** for thousands of years to represent wellness and balance. There are many versions of the wheel but generally, the circle shape represents the interconnectivity of all aspects of one's being and is said to be the circle of awareness of the self, the circle of knowledge that provides the power we each have over our own lives.<sup>3</sup>

What parallels and similarities can you see between the stress signature table and the medicine wheel?



*"Helpers who seek wise practices must seek their own healing. They need to be able to truly listen to their own heart before they can hear the heart of another."*<sup>4</sup>

How might listening to your own heart more often/more fully change the way you work?

---

---

---

---

---

\*Optional group exercise: *The Sacred Medicine Wheel: Finding Inner Harmony and Balance in the time of COVID*

## Core Actions of the Stress First Aid Model

Stress First Aid is based on a set of five evidence-based elements that have been linked to better functioning after stress and adversity. These elements are:

1. **COVER** - Regaining a sense of physical, spiritual and psychological safety.
2. **CALM** – Reducing the intensity of physiological, emotional and behavioral stress reactions.
3. **CONNECTION** - Feeling connected to sources of nourishing social support
4. **COMPETENCE** - Increasing a sense of self-efficacy (feeling competent to handle situations and emotions).
5. **CONFIDENCE** - Experiencing hope, or confidence, in yourself, your community, and the world.

**CHECK** is the starting point, recognizing that we can't address what we aren't aware of or don't acknowledge. We need to be observing ourselves and others for signs of stress.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ictinc.ca/blog/what-is-an-indigenous-medicine-wheel>

<sup>4</sup> Nabigon & Nabigon (2014) <https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/thesescanada/vol2/OSUL/TC-OSUL-1981.pdf>

**COORDINATE** is about thoughtfully linking to supports as needed. The five C's above are part of our natural resilience processes for recovering from stressful events – we often do them without even thinking. Sometimes however, these recovery processes get interrupted and we must be more intentional about addressing the needs within each Core Action.

We **check** and **coordinate** as needed in every step of the process.

**Figure 2: The Stress First Aid Model's Core Actions**



## Check Actions:

**Pause:** In prolonged crisis mode, we can get so caught up in doing and reacting that we lose sight of what is happening within and around us. Pause doesn't have to be long, just long enough to take stock.

**Observe:** What am I feeling? What am I doing? What are others doing around me? Am I noticing Irritability, frustration, feeling checked out, or making mistakes? Where are you on the stress continuum? Where is your co-worker, your team?

**Approach with nonjudgmental curiosity**

- State your observations - just the facts, without interpretations or judgments
- State why you are concerned about the behaviour
- Try to understand the other person's perception of the behaviours

**Respond:**

- What do I need? What do you need?
- What can I/we do to help?
- Provide the other C's below as needed.

## Coordinate Actions

**Involves: getting help or more information, referring to outside resources as needed, in the most respectful and acceptable way for the individual.**

**Signs that external resources might be appropriate:**

- They (you) are in the red zone, or in the orange zone and have been for a while.
- The need you or the other person is having is beyond the capacity of peers to support.

**Resources to consider:**

- Trusted friend or family member
- Supervisor, team lead
- Elders, Friendship centres
- Spiritual Health
- Employee Assistance Program or Physician Health Program

**In order to help you know what to do in practical terms to support yourself and your colleagues when you're observing stress reactions, the following suggestions are offered under each Core Action.**

## 1. Cover Actions

Cover is about safety: physical safety and psychological safety. A constant state of fear and threat is hard on the body, leading to exhaustion and illness. In order to cope with the intolerable sensations, our minds may check out with avoidance and disconnection, making it more difficult to pay attention in situations where it is needed.

Practice these yourself, model them, encourage and support others:

- Take breaks from high stress, high demand environments, so your body and nervous system can recover. This may look like ensuring your workplace has a breakroom where it is possible to let down your guard a little. Create these spaces at home as well.

- Seek out and provide the most accurate and credible information about risk. Listening to and talking about only worst case horror stories undermines the ability of both you and your team to manage stress and choose wise actions.
- Learn, teach, and follow good safety procedures, and remind each other that you are doing things that are in your control to protect yourself and others. Doffing and donning buddies for PPE can be one way to do this.
- Do your part to make your workplace a space that is kind, tolerant, and inclusive. If you don't have psychological safety at work, ensure you connect with safe friends and family regularly. This action is especially important for people who have experienced indigenous specific racism, other forms of racism, homo/transphobia or discrimination or harm based on other identify factors.

---

*Question: How might you and your team integrate more Cover actions into your workflows? Examples might include building in pauses into your workday/workflows and supporting each other to take those moments, be intentional about engaging in one act of kindness per day, or having the courage to voice a safety concern you have!*

---

## 2. Calm Actions

Calming is about reducing the **intensity** of physiological, emotional, and behavioural stress reactions - both in the moment and with practices for long-term sustainability. Practice these yourself, model them, encourage and support others:

- Just in time interventions meet immediate needs. Them might include:
  - **Grounding exercises** help you get out of your head (worries about the future, fretting over the past) and connect with the present moment. This calms you, helps you notice what needs attention (e.g. bodily needs) and helps you return to a more effective state of focus.
    - Pause, drop your shoulders back, sit or stand up straight. What hurts? What could use a stretch, a different position?
    - Look around, take an inventory of your senses. What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel/touch?
    - Attend in detail to the physical sensations and sequences of regular activities, such as handwashing, doffing and donning PPE, eating a snack.
  - Does your **body have what it needs** to function: food, water, rest? When was the last time you or your team member ate, drank water, got to use the bathroom, sat down?
  - Calm your body intentionally with skills that **settle your nervous system** quickly:



- Paced breathing: With one hand on the chest and one hand on the belly, with each breath try to breath more from the belly (diaphragmatic breathing). Slow down the breath and try making the outbreath longer than the in breath.
- If you have the option, try brief intense exercise such as walking up the stairs. (Relay race with your team to beat your previous time!)
- If available and feasible, ice or very cold water on the face can rapidly settle escalating feelings of distress (check with your doctor first if you have a heart condition).
- Thinking interventions help you turn the way you think into an advantage, rather than a stressor:
  - Focus on what is in your power to **control**, rather than ruminating about what is out of your control.
  - “**Taking in the good**” is a practice of balancing the negatives that naturally draw our attention by intentionally noticing and giving time to goodness. This may be seeking out good news, acts of kindness, things of beauty – whatever reminds you that the world is not 100% dangerous and ugly.
  - **Mental hygiene** means being thoughtful about what you consume. Consider limiting exposure to social media, choosing one or two trusted sources of information and looking at them once a day. Make a conscious habit of taking in accurate information about risk.
  - **Practice compassion** for yourself and others. We are all human, all uncertain, and we all want the same things: to feel safe and secure, to be healthy, to be happy, to be loved, to know our loved ones are well. The three components of Self-Compassion are:
    - **Practicing mindfulness** – acknowledge moments of suffering
    - **Common Humanity** – remember that suffering is common human experience
    - **Kindness** – offer understanding and nurturing to self
- **Body-Mind Maintenance:** This is a marathon, not a sprint and the race started before we knew we were supposed to train. We can start to make time for practices that keep us resilient in the long haul, such as sleep, play, exercise, rest, nutrition, and mindfulness practices such as yoga or meditation. This is about doing what works to stay healthy, and revising as needed, not beating ourselves up with unrealistic resolutions.
- **Mindfulness/Meditation resources:**
  - [Wa AH Wiss](#) (Sitting Together in Meditation) – BC First Nations guided rumination
  - [A meditative journey of Native American spirituality](#) (great for everyone!)
  - Sites and apps - [bCalm](#), [Liberate](#) (BIPoC specific), Headspace, Simply Being

---

***Question:** How might you and your team integrate more Calm actions into your workflows?  
Examples might include modelling self-compassion out loud, starting off team meeting or huddles with a grounding exercise or sharing a resources you’ve found helpful.*

---



### 3. Connect Actions

Connection involves **actively restoring or increasing nourishing social support and contact**. Connection helps us in many ways. **Be With. Promote Connection. Reduce Isolation.**

- Co-regulation refers to the idea that calm and kindness are contagious, both emotionally and physically. Seek out calm and grounded people, and when you are able, remember how valuable that kind of presence can be for your team.
- Connecting with spiritual or traditional cultural and healing practices can be very nourishing.
- Belonging to a group enhances an individual's sense of safety and multiplies the resources for problem solving and tangible support. It can be tempting to isolate under stress, but this undermines our unconscious sense of safety.
- Reach out to those who may be vulnerable and isolated and be open to receiving outreach from others. **Invite and Include.**
- Be aware that experiences of discrimination and exclusion might make some people wary of connection. Reach out anyway, but be sensitive – ask permission, respect cultural differences.
- Clear boundaries help to ensure that connection is positive and sustainable. It is OK to say no, and to share the supportive role with others.
- Remember that connection also includes expert resources such as counselling, indigenous healing circles, ceremony and medical care.

---

***Question:** How might you and your team bring more moments of connection into your workspaces? Examples might include devoting the last 5 minutes of every shift/workday to share something with a colleague that you saw them do well or something you appreciate about them, creating a support team to check in with team members, or inviting a team mate for a walk or coffee. Bring a bit of fun into your workplaces where and when you can too...it's a great way to strengthen workplace relationships and reduce stress.*

---

### 4. Competence Actions

The anxiety equation states that worry and stress are proportional to our estimation of the size of the risk divided by our estimation of our ability to cope with it. We have already talked about ways to be more accurate in thinking about risk. Competence is about our belief in our skills to cope, solve problems, and obtain resources. Competence can be individual, but it is also a quality of teams and communities that pool their skills and resources. Actions that support competence include:

- Identifying skill gaps and **learning new skills builds competence**. We are all in a position of having to do unfamiliar things – we can address this proactively by seeking out or asking for training.
- Taking some time to **engage in activities where we feel confident of our skills**: this can help to remind us how capable we really are.
- **Teaching and mentoring peers** improves their competence and reconnects us with our own.
- Remembering past times where we have coped with unfamiliar situations and unexpected stressors can boost our feelings of competence.
- Working as a group to increase access to resources increases our faith in the competence of our community.

---

*Question: What can you and your team do to support a sense of individual and shared ability handle any situation? Examples might include remembering a challenging care situation you handled in the past or creating a buddy system where someone who is really good at something teaches the rest of the group their secret to success!*

---

## 5. Confidence Actions

Confidence taps into ideas of hope, optimism, values, and meaning. It goes beyond just meeting the demands of the next task in front of us and reminds us why we do what we do. This may look like:

- **Reconnecting with our values** and deciding how to live those out in our daily lives at home and at work. Sometimes the constraints of a crisis may challenge the ways we thought we were going to practice those values, and we may want to connect with trusted friends, a counsellor, an Elder or spiritual advisor to help us recover our bearings.
- **Practicing gratitude, remembering the good**.
- **Practicing kindness and compassion** – helping others find hope and optimism can powerfully enhance our own ability to feel it.

---

*Question: What can you and your team do to build and strengthen your individual and shared confidence? Examples might include discussing what kind of experience we want our team or our patients/clients/residents to have, create a gratitude board where we regularly write things we are grateful for, or identify where you see Island Health CARE values in action in your program or area.*

---

## Remember:

- We need **self-care and team care** - sometimes looking out for each other is more likely to happen than taking time for ourselves.
- We need to **be aware of the signs of stress vulnerability** in ourselves and others and actively check in. The stress continuum is a shorthand for sharing how we and others are doing

Cover: how has the pandemic affected your sense of safety?

---

---

---

Calm: what changes have occurred regarding sleep or ability to keep calm?

---

---

---

Connect: Has there been an impact on how you connect with others?

---

---

---

Competence: Do you have any concerns about being unable to do anything?

---

---

---

Confidence: Have you noticed any change in your confidence in yourself, leadership, equipment?

---

---

---

## Team Action Plan:

It's important to take what has been learned in the video and handout and put it into action!

What do we want to focus on?	What are we going to do?	Who is going to do what? By when?

## References:

Watson, P (2020). Caring for Yourself and Others in the COVID-19 Pandemic.

<https://www.theschwartzcenter.org/webinar/caring-for-yourself-others-during-the-covid-19-pandemic-managing-healthcare-workers-stress>

VA National Center for PTSD (2018). Stress First Aid Self-care/Organizational Support Model.

<https://www.theschwartzcenter.org/media/Stress-First-Aid-Self-Care-Organizational-NCPTSD10.pdf>

Nabigon & Nabigon (2012) "Wise Practices": Integrating Traditional Teachings With Mainstream Treatment Approaches. *Native Social Work Journal*. Vol 8 p 43-55. Accessed on the www November 9, 2020 at

[https://zone.biblio.laurentian.ca/bitstream/10219/1981/1/NSWJournalV8\\_article2.pdf](https://zone.biblio.laurentian.ca/bitstream/10219/1981/1/NSWJournalV8_article2.pdf)

Nash, W. P. (2011). US Marine Corps and Navy combat and operational stress continuum model: A tool for leaders. *Combat and operational behavioral health*, 107-119.