

A microscopic image of neurons, showing their cell bodies and branching processes, rendered in a light purple and pink color palette. The neurons are scattered across the background, with some in sharp focus and others blurred.

Practical NeuroWisdom

A Mark Waldman Series

10

Brain-Enhancing
Strategies to
Rapidly Reduce
Stress

by Kathleen Boucher

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10 Brain-Enhancing Strategies to Rapidly Reduce Stress

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This e-book is dedicated to an amazing team of professionals who work in the Intensive Care Unit at Kingston General Hospital

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I would like to thank Mark Robert Waldman for being such an excellent teacher, mentor, colleague and friend. This e-book would not have been possible without the assistance of Mark Robert Waldman and Christopher Van Buren. I am very grateful for their expertise & the stress-reducing strategies that I have learned



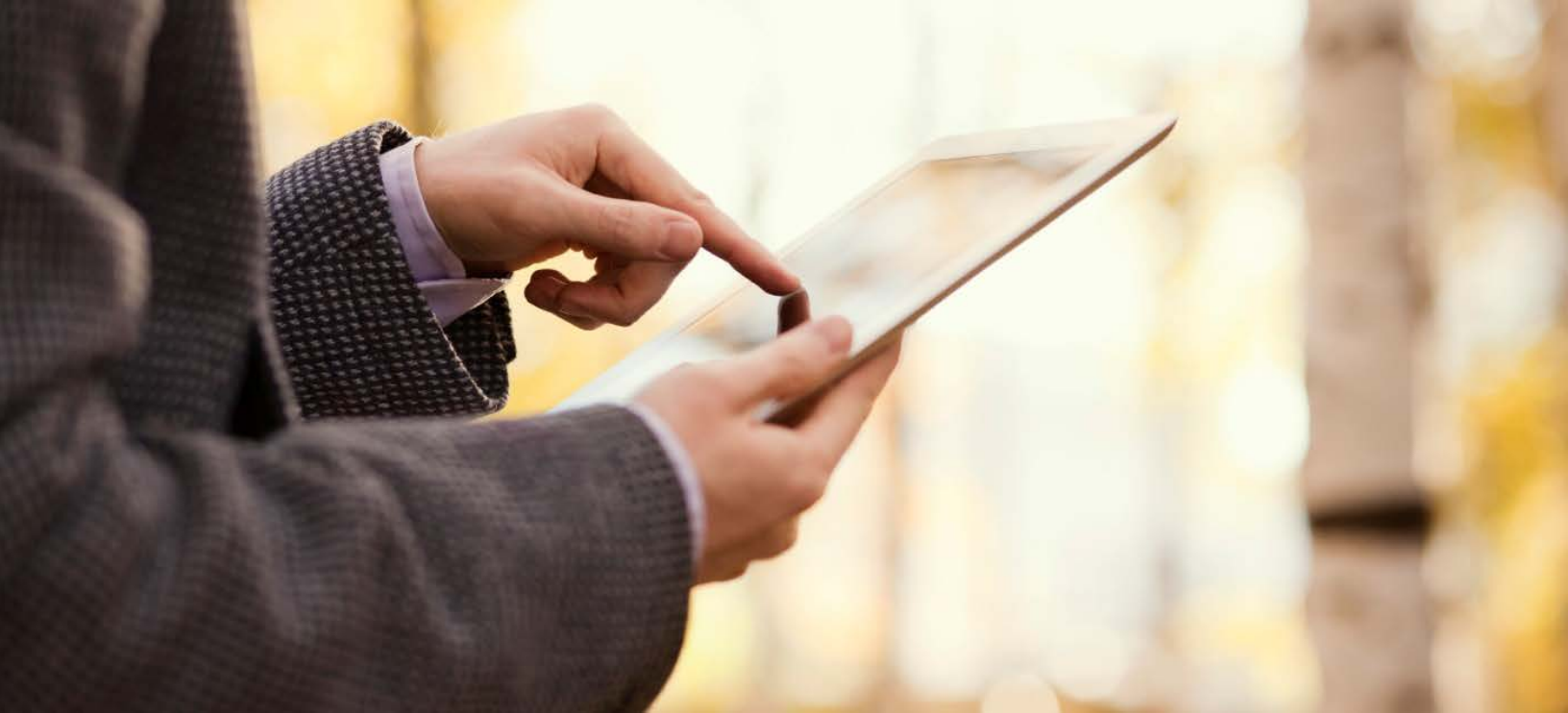
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Version 1.0 (First Edition)
Managing Editor: Mark Waldman
Design: Van Buren Publishing
Cover: Van Buren Publishing

1171 S. Robertson #124
Los Angeles, CA 90035
www.VanBurenPublishing.com



Take Inventory of How You Feel

According to the World Health Organization, excess stress is the number one health problem in most people's lives and a leading cause for anxiety, depression, work burnout, cardiovascular disease, neurological disorders, divorce, and even death. But are you aware of your stress levels? Use this list below, adapted from *The American Institute of Stress* website¹. Check off the items that apply to you. Then, for the next 7 days, take a mental inventory of your life and write down other things in your life that cause you undue stress.

1. Headaches, jaw clenching or pain
2. Gritting or grinding your teeth
3. Stuttering or stammering
4. Hand tremors or trembling of lips, hands
5. Body aches and muscle spasms
6. Faintness or dizziness
7. Nervous sweating
8. Cold hands or feet
9. Dry mouth, problems swallowing
10. Frequent colds, infections, or herpes sores
11. Rashes, itching, hives, or goose bumps
12. frequent "allergy" attacks
13. Heartburn, stomach pain, or nausea
14. Excessive belching or flatulence
15. Constipation or diarrhea
16. Difficulty breathing or tightness in chest
17. Frequent anxiety or feelings of panic
18. Chest pain, palpitations, rapid pulse
19. Frequent urination
20. Diminished sexual desire or performance
21. Ruminating on worries, fears, and doubts
22. Frequent feelings of guilt or shame
23. Frequent anger, frustration, or hostility
24. Depression
25. Mood swings
26. Increased or decreased appetite
27. Insomnia, nightmares, or disturbing dreams
28. Difficulty concentrating, racing thoughts
29. Trouble learning new information
30. Forgetfulness, disorganization, confusion

31. Difficulty concentrating
32. Difficulty in making decisions
33. Feeling overwhelmed
34. Frequent crying spells or suicidal thoughts
35. Feelings of loneliness or worthlessness
36. Little interest in appearance
37. Nervous habits or fidgeting
38. Increased irritability
39. Frequently feeling annoyed
40. Increased number of minor accidents
41. Obsessive or compulsive behavior
42. Reduced work efficiency or productivity
43. Urge to lie or make excuses
44. Rapid or mumbled speech
45. Feeling defensive or suspicious
46. Discomfort when talking to others
47. Feeling social anxiety
48. Constant tiredness, weakness, or fatigue
49. Frequent use of over-the-counter drugs
50. Weight gain or loss without diet
51. Increased smoking, alcohol, or drug use
52. Excessive gambling or impulsive buying

Everyone will feel some of the symptoms above, but each one generates physical and neurological stress, and the more stress you have, the more symptoms you are likely to feel until your mind and body gives in to the excess pressures in your life. So try out the following “NeuroWisdom” exercises that have been shown to rapidly reduce stress in a matter of minutes!

Strategy 1: Create a C.R.A.P. Board

I'll bet you have never created a C.R.A.P board before. It is intensely satisfying! Start by writing down on a piece of paper all the crap in your life, which is one of the fastest ways to reduce stress by interrupting your brain's natural propensity to ruminate on negativity. C.R.A.P. stands for *Conflicts, Resistance, Anxieties*, and any other *Problem* you think you have, and when you write these things down your brain begins to dissociate from the words on the page. You'll actually turn off the negative emotional circuits that shut down the decision-making processes in your frontal lobe.¹

Take a blank sheet of paper and write down 10 problems you think you have, and also write down the weaknesses your friends would say you have. Then write down the strengths that your friends and colleagues have complimented you on. Finally, write down 3 of your deepest values that give your life meaning and purpose. When completed, just relax and gaze at your C.R.A.P. board without judgment. Notice how all of your problems quickly lose their emotional charge.

My Deepest Values

My C.R.A.P. Board:

What my friends and colleagues say are my weaknesses:

What my friends and colleagues say are my strengths and qualities:

Put your C.R.A.P. board in a place that you can see it on a daily basis, but don't throw it away.

Otherwise your brain will start worrying again and all of your "crap" will return!

Now that you have your crap board here is another tip I would like to share that has helped me when I've had a bad day at work, a quarrel with my spouse or kids, or a day where everything seems to go wrong. For example, let's say that I have locked myself out of the car or one of the tires has a flat. Or, I have been stuck on the highway for hours due to a bad accident. You get the picture.

I take a piece of paper and write out all the things that are bothering me. I have been known to invent swear words and come up with some very colorful adjectives! I brainstorm all my frustrations on to the paper. I continue to do this until I feel that I have wrung out every vexation that I can think of. I know I am done when I feel lighter as though a burden has been taken off of my shoulders. I place my notes next to my C.R.A.P. board where I can refer to them whenever I feel the need. You may want to do the same. That is all there is to it!

I have taught this technique to my clients as well and they love it!

Strategy 2: Reduce Anger with these Strategies

People who are stressed frequently succumb to bouts of anger and irritability. The popular belief is that people need to express their feelings of frustration to effectively process negative feelings. Neuroscience does not agree; it simply makes you more cranky.¹ Ask yourself, "Is being angry worth it?" Screaming or shouting at someone will make them defensive and they may also respond with anger.

What makes anger so dangerous is that when you are caught up in it you may not even be aware of your anger, and this gives you a false sense of certainty, confidence, and optimism.² In fact, even harboring angry thoughts will interfere with your brain's ability to make rational decisions.³

Here are a few proven ways to deal with anger:¹ Observe it inwardly, without reaction, in a non-judgmental way. Next, consciously make an effort to reframe each negative feeling and thought by shaping it into a positive, compassionate, solution-based direction.

1. Generate at least three to five positive thoughts for every negative thought. Research by the esteemed psychologist Barbara Fredrickson shows that this is the fastest way to build permanent optimism.
2. Express appreciation. Make sure these expressions are genuine and heart felt.
3. Stop complaining! Observe the negative things, but savor all of positive things that are constantly occurring in every day of your life. The brain is unable to focus on negative and positive thoughts at the same time, so give it the choice of focusing on positivity.

I find I get *brain drain* when I am around angry people. I'll tell them about Barbara Fredrickson's work and how by replacing a negative thought with three to five positive thoughts it builds optimism. They usually laugh and say that they are doomed to negativity then. It always boils down to having the correct information to make the best choice.



Strategy 3: Talk It Out

Talking it out is a simple effective strategy to relieve stress. Almost everyone will agree that speaking with a trusted friend or colleague helps alleviate some of the stress that incurs when working through obstacles.

Jane B. Lemaire and Jean E. Wallace, who researched how physicians cope with stress, say that talking with colleagues is a common way of coping with stress that does not cause emotional exhaustion. Physicians feel that by discussing how they feel with their colleagues they are no longer alone in their experiences and by sharing information they get support and cope better.

Outside of work physicians also say they reduced their stress levels by:

- Spending time with their family, talking to their spouse
- Spending time doing leisure activities, exercising or having quiet time
- Switching off mentally and detaching from work¹

Have you ever just needed to vent, and once you vented your anger lessened or dissipated altogether? I don't get angry very often but when I do I find someone to talk to and this helps me to release frustration. I make sure that the person to whom I am venting is not vested in the issue I am discussing. And I am crystal clear that I will reciprocate the favor. It works both ways, although it's ok if the person who receives your venting does not want to vent back to you.



Strategy 4: Use Math to Eliminate Worry

Did I detect a groan? What...don't you like math? Well, I'm going to give you a great reason to "practice" it because it's one of the fastest ways to eliminate worry or anxiety or stress. All you need to do is to count backwards from 100 by sevens. Try it right now! Start with 100- 93-86-79 all the way to 0.

If you are anything like me than simply focusing and concentrating on working backwards by sevens doesn't leave you much time to ruminate about anything else. Therapists have been using this technique for years to interrupt thoughts. Remember that this technique may yield you temporary results and is most useful for extreme anxiety.

The novelty of counting backwards by sevens and the fact that you have to focus and concentrate so much may make you laugh! Be mindful of where you are when you practice it. You wouldn't want to do it out loud at a stressful board meeting for example.



Strategy 5: Yawn and Stretch Your Way to Stress-Free Productivity

Yawning has been proven to be the most effective way to reduce mental stress, but a mindful yawn is more powerful. What do I mean by a “mindful” yawn? Simply this: If you pay close attention to how the yawn affects your awareness and mood, your brain becomes more focused.

Start off by faking a few “normal” yawns and notice how it makes you feel. Then do three mindful yawns, pausing between each one to notice how it affects your mind and body. You may even find that you cannot stop yawning. This is a good thing because it means that your brain is ridding itself of excess stress that has built up over the past few days. Yawning also helps your brain quickly shift between the highly focused demands of decision making and the restful daydreaming state that gives you access to creative problem solving skills.¹

In addition to yawning, practice stretching super slowly to be aware of what is happening in your body. Mindful yawning and super-slow stretching will bring you into the present moment where you’ll feel more relaxed and alive.

Here are 10 great reasons to yawn, documented by over 40 evidence-based studies:

1. Stimulates alertness and concentration
2. Optimizes brain activity and metabolism
3. Improves cognitive function
4. Increases memory recall

5. Enhances consciousness and introspection
6. Lowers stress
7. Relaxes your upper body
8. Fine-tunes your sense of time
9. Increases empathy and social awareness
10. Enhances pleasure and sensuality²

Practice mindful yawning and stretching when you wake up, when trying to solve a problem, and especially when you are feeling stressed out at work.

Executive MBA students at Loyola Marymount University are encouraged to download a mindfulness app onto their computers and phones. Set your mindfulness clock to go off every thirty minutes. When you hear the bell, spend 10 to 30 seconds doing one mindful yawn or one super-slow stretch. Here are two apps you can try, one for your computer, and one for your phone:

- <http://fungie.info/bell/#>
- www.InsightTimer.com

Or go to Google Play or iTunes and search for “mindfulness bell” “mindfulness clock” or “mindfulness app.”

When I first learned about mindful yawning and super slow stretching to wake up or reduce stress at work, I thought it was nonsense. Then I gave it a try and discovered that it works. So, if you have reservations as to the effectiveness of this strategy, just try it and see how you feel.

Practice mindful yawning and stretching and keep a record of your energy level and focus. Teach your friends and colleagues the techniques that work for you. You'll be doing them a favor as they'll reduce their stress levels as well.

Write down what comes up for you. Gaze at the three words on your paper and concentrate on the word that has the most emotional impact for you. Repeat it to yourself and notice how it makes you feel. Congratulations! You can do this anytime you want to change or add to your list of value words.

According to researchers at the University of California, "Reflecting on personal values can keep neuroendocrine and psychological responses to stress at low levels."^{1,2} By repeating one of your value words throughout the day it can turn on thousands of stress-reducing genes.³

I have found that I feel energized when I reflect on one of my value words during the day. Would you like to have more energy, too?

Some of my values words are love, integrity and enthusiasm!

What are your value words?

Strategy 7: Eliminate Anxiety with Optimism

Don't you just love being around optimistic people? They just seem to radiate an ability to cope with stress. Optimism actually affects the brain, the orbitofrontal cortex (OFC) to be precise, and it actually helps you cope better in stressful situations. Optimism builds stronger, healthier neural circuits throughout many areas in your brain.

Here is a simple exercise you can use to reduce stress in your life and build greater optimism: Take this sentence "I breathe in _____, I breathe out _____". Put a value word in the first space, and a problem from your C.R.A.P. board in the second space. Here are some examples:

- I breathe in PEACE. I breathe out STRESS.
- I breathe in LOVE. I breathe out HATE.
- I breathe in PROSPERITY. I breathe out DEBT.
- I breathe in CONFIDENCE. I breathe out FEAR.¹

There are so many combinations that you can come up with that are in alignment with the number of value words that appeal to you. Try it right now. Can you feel your stress level going down?

Here is my perspective on being optimistic. I often joke that I was born optimistic. Maybe because I've had polio I am optimistic. Who knows? That sounds a bit backwards doesn't it? How can having polio make you optimistic? I believe that overcoming adversity often makes you stronger. Optimism flourishes when you realize how resilient you are.

When I was four years old I was told I would never walk. I remember the conversation because I was sitting on the pediatrician's examining table. I told him in no uncertain terms that I would walk even if he believed I couldn't and I did! My level of optimism is strengthened by a profound sense of gratitude over my ability to walk pain free.

What are you grateful for?



Strategy 8: Set Your Body and Brain in Motion

Exercise has received a lot of attention as a way to de-stress, but many people just don't feel motivated to do it. But did you know that you can get an aerobic workout in less than a minute, which means you can take a stress-reducing exercise break at work?

Here's all you need to do the next time you feel anxious, tired, or irritated:

- Start running as fast as you can for the next 10 seconds. Stop and remain quiet for the next 10 seconds. Observe how your body feels.
- Run again as fast as possible for 10 seconds. Stop again and notice your emotional state. Nearly all of your stress and anxiety will be gone.¹

Your stress level goes down; your energy level goes up. Outstanding! Try it now and then mindfully notice how you feel.

Put on some music that you love and spend time dancing. Get your kids, your spouse, and your friends involved. Notice the smiles and laughter that erupt while you move to the music. This is a wonderful way to relieve stress and get some exercise at the same time.

Strategy 9: Motivate Yourself with Visualizations

Never underestimate the power of visualizing when you want to achieve a goal. Gabrielle Oettingen¹, a highly respected research psychologist, came up with a remarkable discovery: Visualizing your goal and your obstacles allows you to create simple plans to achieve virtually anything you want.

She designed an acronym called WOOP to help you improve your motivation to turn your dreams into reality.

W stands for Wish. Pick a wish that you are confident that you can attain in a year, a month, a week or a day. The time frame is your choice. The only stipulation is that you are confident that you can achieve your wish, and then use your imagination to visualize that desire or goal.

O stands for Outcome. Visualize the outcome down to the tiniest of details. Take a few minutes throughout your day to hold this vision in your mind. Believe it to be real and already achieved.

O stands for Obstacle. Decide upon the greatest obstacles standing in your way of getting your wish. Visualize the obstacle as best you can.

P stands for Plan. Make a plan to overcome each obstacle: "If this happens... then I will do this." Visualize yourself carrying out your plan.

This simple technique, which you can do a dozen times a day, empowers you to embrace obstacles and increases your motivation.

Try it right now: Visualize your stress level melting away and now visualize how you will feel. Then ask yourself what obstacle stands between your image of a stress-less life and then visualize a simple activity that you know will help you relax. Congratulations...you've just WOOPED your problem!

One of the problems that I encounter as a nurse is being at risk of getting a sore back if I don't have proper body mechanics when I lift patients. I discovered that if I have tight hamstrings then my lower back may get injured.

Try touching your toes. If you cannot touch your toes than you probably have tight hamstrings too! This WOOP acronym helped me stay on track and do my stretches every day. This is what it looks like:

W stands for Wish. My wish is to be able to touch my toes.

O stands for Outcome. My outcome is that I protect my lower back muscles by stretching my hamstrings on a daily basis.

O stands for Obstacle. My obstacle is that I cannot touch my toes and it hurts to do so. Therefore, I am hesitant to do it.

P stands for Plan. I always try to do what I dislike doing the most, first thing in the morning. My plan is that I'll stretch my hamstrings for 3-5 minutes every morning. Once I am able to touch my toes I am going to purchase a new pair of walking shoes.

See how easy it is to use this acronym. Now it is your turn. Pick a goal that you would like to accomplish and figure out what obstacle is stopping you from achieving it.

Strategy 10: Take Time to Play

If you were to ask anyone who feels stressed when was the last time they took the time to play they may look at you as though you've lost your mind! "I don't have time to play! Are you crazy?" Well, it's time to alter your perspective and have some fun! You are going to create a "Play Board." That's right, I want you to write down on your "Play Board" all the playful activities you've done in the past. After you've filled out your paper, relax and mindfully gaze at your list. Which ones would you like to do over the next 7 days? Make a promise to yourself to follow through and take action. Just imagine how you're going to feel this week. So exciting!

The famous neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp¹ has shown that play is essential to protect our brains. As children, we use play to learn how to socialize with others in caring and respectful ways, but as adults we often forget that playfulness is as important as food and rest for maintaining a high-performance brain.

It is not uncommon when I ask my coaching clients what they did for fun since our last session that there is a long pause. People forget to make time to do something just for the pure delight of it. When was the last time that you were just plain silly? I bet you can't remember.

It is my belief that all work and no play makes you grumpy, dissatisfied with life and tired. My challenge to you is to figure out a fun activity that is silly, the sillier the better. Do you have any ideas?

Make a commitment to get together with friends, family members, and colleagues to have playful exchanges in your conversations and to do playful activities with others on a daily basis. And remember: the brain is in a constant search for anything that is pleasurable. Playful activities form happy memories, and both are simple to reduce physical and mental stress.

Here's your homework assignment: think of different ways to bring playfulness into the workplace and share those ideas with your colleagues.



About the Author

Kathleen Boucher is a registered nurse with over 30 years of experience; she works full time in an Intensive Care Unit. Boucher is a certified professional lifestyle coach, an award winning children's author, and she is studying neuro-coaching taught by Mark Robert Waldman.

For more information, see

- www.kbouchercoaching.com
- www.greatkidsandme.com

Many of these strategies, plus 50 other amazing stress-reducing and positivity-enhancing exercises can be found in the audio program [NeuroWisdom 101](#).

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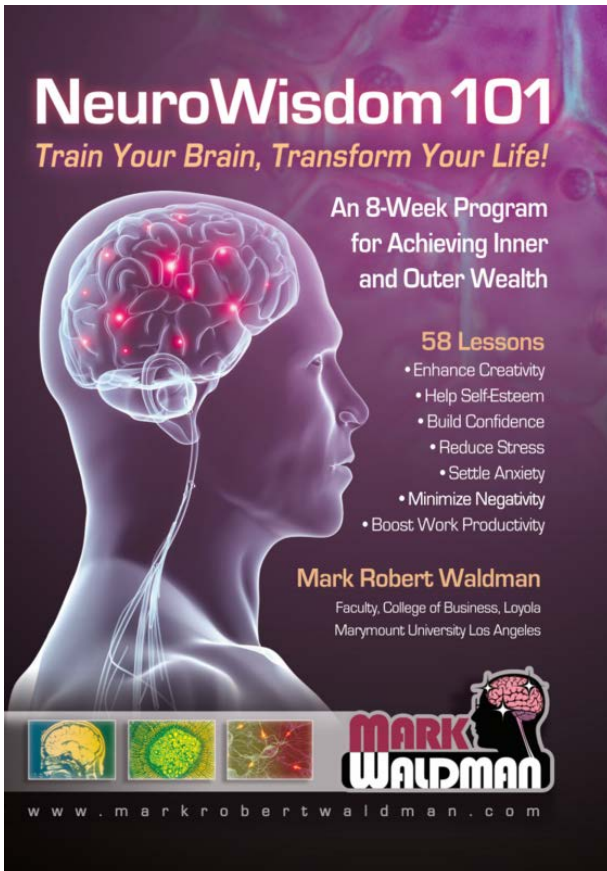
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Mark Robert Waldman
Faculty, College of Business, Loyola
Marymount University Los Angeles

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