

By Lacy Wolff, ERS Health Promotion Administrator



No one is immune to stress. While it is always present to some degree, most of us rarely stop to notice how stress may be affecting our mental and physical health. April is Stress Awareness Month, an ideal time to think about your relationship with stress and learn strategies and skills that you can use throughout the year to handle the challenges that are thrown at you!

The word “stressful” doesn’t seem dramatic enough to describe the year we have had, from dealing with the global pandemic to surviving a winter storm that left many without electricity and water for multiple days. There are varying degrees of stress and it affects us all differently, depending on many factors, including:

- your past experiences;
- how your childhood role models, including mentors, parents, and teachers, positively or negatively handled stress;
- and TRAINING!

Of all of the things that affect how we manage stress, our training is the one we have the most control over. This month we are offering lots of training opportunities to learn and practice skills that, according to research, can help you handle whatever life throws your way. They include:

- A two-part meditation course (Intro to Mindfulness & Building Your Practice)
- A five-day mindfulness boot camp. Each day for five days you will receive a recorded link to a 10-minute mindfulness meditation that you can complete on your own to help you build a daily habit and practice of meditation. Register through the [Mediation Re-Boot Camp Registration Form](#).
- Webinars to help you manage and thrive during times of stress including: Introduction to Mindfulness, Building a Meditation Practice, Nutrition to Manage Stress, and Managing Stress with Physical Activity! Learn more and register for these and more events through the [ERS Wellness Events Calendar](#).

During times of stress, we humans naturally go into survival mode. In this state, our stress response system activates a cascade of hormones and other physiological responses, such as increased heart rate, respiration rate, blood pressure, and perspiration. These can be helpful if we face a physical threat, like a predator, that we need to fight or flee from. This is what the stress response system was designed for.

The challenge is that in our current environment, most of our stress comes from work overload, relationship challenges, watching the constant stream of negative news, or worry for things beyond our control. When these trigger our stress response system, it can distort our perspective and how we see the world in unhelpful ways.

For example, have you ever noticed how you feel when you receive a message from your supervisor with words like, “call me”? Without context, our brains can quickly create interesting stories, our heart rate and respiratory rate (breathing) starts to increase, and you may notice that your palms are sweaty and your blood pressure rises. These reactions are just a few of the physiological symptoms of stress. In this state, our prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that does complex and rational thinking, is not working at its full capacity and this is NOT what we want when facing a phone call with our supervisors! In reality, we want to make that call in a cool and collected manner with our full mental capacity.

When our brains are in survival mode, we understandably may not be able to engage in activities that calm us down or clear our heads, like going for a walk, meditating, doing a breathing technique or journaling. We are so focused on the struggle before us that we can be distracted from the things that can be most helpful in dealing with stress! That’s why the wellness trainings this month are focused on the skills and strategies to help us become better at managing our stress, and become happier and healthier as a result. If we learn these skills and put them into practice on a regular basis, we become more resilient and ready for the next challenge (stress) that presents itself.

We hope you will join us, our community of state employees and anyone else that is interested in self/health improvement in exploring ways to better manage stress.

Please email me if you have any questions, comments or concerns at wellness@ers.texas.gov.