

# **STRESS & SOCIAL CHANGE**

a workbook for managing  
through challenges



## Hey there, your work matters.

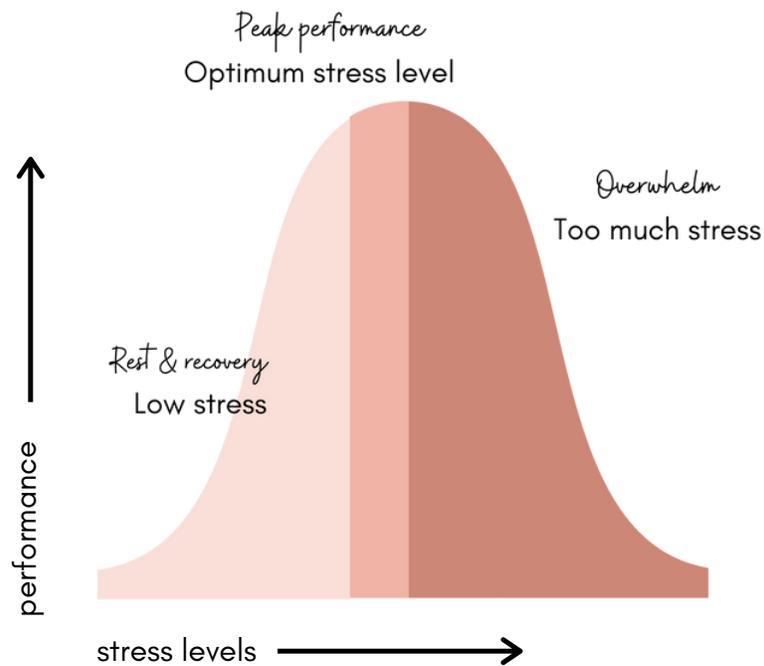
Most social change leaders are well adapted to many of the stressors of their work. They put up with those stressors because they feel passionately about the issues involved, and they're often naturally well suited to work in challenging conditions. It's why you have made it so far and are here today!

But natural ability will only carry you so far in the face of long term or unusual pressures. We instinctively know this and that is also probably why you're holding this workbook. As we seek to experiencing well-being and even flourishing in this space- not only to be "successful" but to truly live life well- we must be intentional about the way we respond to stress and care for ourselves.

You can build those unique strategies for yourself as well. We know that the more intentional and proactive you are about cultivating flexibility, the more meaningfully engaged you will be. For this reason, we created this workbook to help you understand stress, and develop ways to build flexibility as both a preventative and life enhancing strategy.



# How does stress affect us?



Stress is our natural response to life's high demands on us. At certain levels, stress allows us to react and perform under pressure. This simple chart shows the impact of stress on our performance and engagement at work or in our homes and communities. As stress increases, we approach our peak performance. But if it increases too much, or for too long, we enter a state of overwhelm where our ability to perform or engage falls.

It tends to be most healthy for us to manage our stress levels so that we go back and forth between "Peak Performance" levels and "Rest & Recovery" levels.

## When stress becomes unhelpful...

Sometimes stress can lead to negative outcomes, particularly if there is just too much of it, or it lasts for too long and we don't get a break. Signs of unhelpful stress are:

- Sleep problems
- Anxiety and irritability
- Fatigue
- Memory and concentration difficulty
- Inefficiency and reduced impact
- Eating problems
- Restlessness
- Tension and headaches
- Poor immune system
- Heart disease





# Chronic stress

The chart on the previous page is a simplified depiction of the effects of stress. But in the real world, there is also a third axis to the stress chart: **time**. Without rhythms of rest and the chance to restore, true optimum stress is impossible to maintain. **Even stress that was helpful to us in the past can start to take on the feeling of more chronic and unhelpful stress in the face of prolonged crisis.**

The problem is that with so many challenges worthy of our best efforts, those of us in social enterprise can often just keep pushing even when stress keeps accumulating. Who can blame us? Not only does it often work (at least in the short term), but the world also needs social enterprise more than ever.

Still, it's important to address chronic stress and resist the narrative that we can "just keep pushing." The better we understand the sources of chronic stress and its particular signs, the more quickly we can address it before we reach a point of overwhelm or burnout.

## Sources of chronic stress

There can be numerous sources of chronic stress in our lives. In fact, a number of items on this list can be pretty manageable for a short period of time. However, many of them tend to have a longer duration.

- Excessive workload
- Competing demands & priorities
- Personal finances & housing
- Funding uncertainty
- Travel
- Feeling under-appreciated
- Conflict with colleagues
- Stressed colleagues
- Family—chronic illness or special needs



Journal, discuss, or reflect: Do any of these challenges resonate with you right now?





# Traumatic & Vicarious Stress

While this workbook does not dive deep into these two additional forms of stress, it is important to be aware of them in our work as social entrepreneurs. A pandemic can create traumatic stress on top of chronic stress. For example, many people are experiencing the death of loved ones and/or have a reasonable fear of grave illness or death themselves.

Vicarious stress is another type of stress that can accumulate over time like chronic stress. The difference is that it is a kind of combination between chronic and traumatic stress. When we are exposed to intense stress or trauma in other people's lives, it affects us too.

	Traumatic stress	Vicarious stress
sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposure to intense events (such as death, injury, crisis)</li> <li>• Examples: natural disasters, abuse, violence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exposure to the suffering of others</li> <li>• Hearing stories from those who suffer</li> </ul>
common responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intrusive worries, memories, and/or dreams</li> <li>• Feeling on guard and hypervigilant</li> <li>• Persistent negative thoughts and feelings</li> <li>• Avoidance of trauma reminders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling overly responsible and burdened</li> <li>• Feeling guilty</li> <li>• Questioning purpose of our work</li> <li>• Compassion fatigue</li> </ul>



Please refer to the following resources as starting points to better understand traumatic stress and vicarious stress:

- [Traumatic stress](#)
- [Vicarious stress](#)





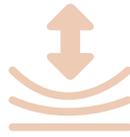
# Reflect & Explore

Now that you've learned about the basic sources and signs of stress, we encourage you to take some time to reflect on these themes and discuss them with a friend or team member. Here are some questions to guide you.

- What are the greatest sources of stress for you?
- What elements have become more challenging recently?
- What is your most noticeable stress reaction?



Use the space below to write or draw your thoughts:



# Let's talk about **flexibility**.

Why is flexibility important? **The idea of flexibility refers to our ability to change the way we respond to difficult experiences, so that we can move in the direction of our personal and communal values.** Rather than ignoring, denying, or struggling with our pain, we can redirect our energy and focus toward the things and people that matter most to us, even when faced with hardship.

Psychological flexibility is a well-researched construct with many benefits. It can be helpful in learning to live with difficult health conditions of all kinds. It is a useful tool for experiencing stability in the midst of ongoing crisis. And it can help us access well-being and flourishing without perfect external conditions.

In other words, flexibility gives us the ability to access more internal freedom so that we can choose what to do next.

## 3 components of psychological flexibility



Be present: finding stability in the present moment



Open up: holding our whole selves with curiosity and willingness



Do what matters: identifying choice points to move toward our values





## Be present

The skills involved with **being present** help us to become aware of what is happening not only outside of us but also within us: the thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations that may be part of our experience at any given time.

The challenge with being fully present is that our minds like to "time travel". We ruminate on the past, and worry about the future. **To be fully present is to experience the fullness of this moment in time— enough to be able to imagine what is possible right now.**

One way to practice being present is to take a moment to simply notice, without judgment, what is happening within us. In many ways, this helps us to re-inhabit our bodies, releasing where we may be clenching tightly, and finding a brief moment of relaxation.

**Try this:** When you notice yourself feeling stressed or anxious, practice a bit of grounding and stabilizing. Here's what that might mean:

- Taking a few deep, slow breaths, particularly taking your time on the exhale.
- Pushing your feet into the floor, and noticing the sensation of support of the ground beneath you.
- Responding to tension in your body with some gentle stretching, directing care and compassion toward that part of you.
- Noticing what your five senses are picking up on: colors, textures, sounds, smells, and taste.





## Open up

The skills involved with **opening up** allow us to approach our overall experience with more acceptance, willingness and curiosity. Some of our experiences are painful, so acknowledging them can be quite difficult! However, learning to fully accept our experiences as they are— the pleasant and unpleasant— allows us to live into the wholeness of being human.

Part of opening up is taking a step back and learning to observe the content of our thoughts, beliefs, emotions, convictions, doubts, and hopes, separating all of these from our sense of self. **We might think of ourselves as the *context*, or the holder, of all of this content.** When we practice this kind of perspective taking, we can begin to be more open and curious about the stories we tell ourselves. Maybe there's a new way of looking at things.

Furthermore, learning to open up to our own experiences gives us the capacity to kindly do so with those around us. They are holders of many stories and experiences as well. And if we bring the same openness toward others, we can show up with greater compassion, generosity, and other ways of being that we value in leadership.

**Try this:** Here are a few journaling and conversation prompts that can be helpful in building the *open up* skills:

- Think of the various stories that you have told about yourself, or that others have told about you. What do they say? What if you could hold those more gently, allowing them to be just one story about you, but not definitive of who you are?
- What are some aspects of your experience that have felt neglected lately? What have you noticed yourself avoiding, denying, or trying to control? Would it be possible to allow those experiences to exist alongside you, like passengers in a car or clouds in the sky?





## Do what matters

The skills involved with **doing what matters** allow us to take all of the presence, awareness, and perspective-taking abilities and leverage them in the direction of our values. In order to do what matters, however, we must know what values are most important to us. This can require some reflection.

First, it is important to distinguish values from *feelings* and *goals*. Values are ways of being: the kind of person we want to be as we move about our lives and engage with the world. They can also be thought of as a chosen direction or an orientation on a compass. We can move toward them as in an ongoing journey.

**Once we are clear on our values, we can regularly ask ourselves which concrete steps or actions align best with our chosen qualities.** What would it look like to exhibit kindness, courage, competency, or another value, in this moment? How does this translate into a meaningful response that we can commit to today?

**Try this:** Discovering or refining our personal or communal values takes intentional reflection. We recommend dedicating some time and mind-space.

- For inspiration of different personal core values that might provide meaning and purpose to your work use this [Values Checklist](#).
- Values come alive with action. Take a big picture look at committed action with this [worksheet](#) and lay out the [visual "choice point"](#) to pursue your valued direction.
- Connect with a friend or colleague over this question: What are some of the moments that make us feel a deep sense of vitality or purpose? What are some of the qualities, or values, that we embody in those moments?





## More well-being practices

In addition to the psychological skills described above, you may be wondering what other practices can support well-being. Simple practices can boost our physical and emotional strength, giving us the ability to respond to stress. Here are a few that you can try.

**How to begin:** Commit to just one or two of these practices for 30 days. Invite your family, friends, or team to keep you accountable.

### **Go on a brisk walk daily, aiming for 30 minutes total.**

Leading experts recommend that you aim for 30 minutes per day in total of physical activity. This activity should be at about the effort level of walking quickly when you are behind schedule. They also recommend that you aim for 3 different 10 minute chunks if it doesn't feel like you have 30 minutes. When we chunk it, we are more likely to at least get the first 10 minutes in which can have dramatic differences over the course of our lives. Of course, more effortful exercise is beneficial, but if you are struggling, start small!

### **Brief, simple yoga or stretching.**

Yoga is a great way to release muscle tension, build strength, and connect our mind and body. Not only does it integrate the practices of physical training with mental focus, but it also helps us to appreciate our bodies and develop a deeper attitude of self-care and awareness. If you're looking for friendly, free yoga training at home, we recommend these very approachable videos by [Yoga with Adriene](#).

### **Pause for deep breathing throughout the day to recalibrate your body.**

Breathing seems so simple that we can hardly call it a practice — but it can be a powerful tool especially when we're stressed or anxious. When we breathe, the increase of oxygen in our blood slows our heart and tells our brain that our body is safe. In other words, we can "trick" ourselves into experiencing physical calm in the midst of crisis simply by taking several slow breaths.



### **Commit to sleeping 7-8 hours per night.**

We all know that we should sleep more, but we often neglect this when we have too much to do. The best way around this is to consider the increased efficiency of our mind and body when we have had sufficient rest. The extra hours of sleep are worth the improvement in your ability to engage, not to mention your long-term health. If you're struggling with a mindset around sleeping, we recommend reading the book *Rest is Resistance* by Tricia Hersey.

### **Try mindfulness meditation 1-2 times a day**

Mindfulness has become a popular word that is often misunderstood. Mindfulness is not simply a way to relax (although sometimes it has that side-effect). Instead, using apps such as [Headspace](#) or utilizing free recordings from places like [UCLA](#) can help us to train our attention and change our brains and bodies at a fundamental level. Consistent mindfulness meditation practiced over a few months rewires our brain to boost our default network and even changes how our genetics are expressed.

### **Develop a gratitude practice: write down 3 things you're grateful for**

While simple, there is overwhelming evidence that gratitude can play a role in our overall wellbeing. To cement this practice, dedicate a notebook to writing down 3 things you are grateful for every evening. Make sure they are specific to the day, rather than general (e.g., "receiving a kind text from my brother" vs. "family"). The more detailed you can be, the better.

### **Use spiritual practices to connect to purpose in the midst of stress**

Research shows us that spiritual practices such as prayer can enhance our wellbeing. Regardless of your tradition, you can leverage the practice of exploring your concerns and desires through writing or meditation. In this process, release from your own shoulders the burdens that are not yours to carry, including what is beyond your control. This is a time to both acknowledge the challenges you face and experience compassion.

### **Identify and reset your intentions as you transition between activities**

When there are many demands on us from work and personal life, we tend to rush from one obligation to the next without pausing. Integrate a pause between activities by taking 30 seconds to reflect on the following: *What did I appreciate about the last hour that I want to hold onto? What do I want to release? How do I want to show up in this next activity?* If you can, integrate some physical stretching as you do this.





## Reflect & Commit

Now that you've learned about 3 keys to building psychological flexibility and have some ideas at your fingertips, it is time to reflect on what you need most and make a commitment to move forward. Remember that while these concepts and actions are simple, they can also be very impactful when implemented with consistency.



Use the space below to write or draw your reflections:

1) Which aspect of flexibility will you focus on this week?

2) Which 1-2 practices do you plan to try?

3) Who will you invite to keep you accountable?



## a final word from the authors

An endeavor as important as social change is almost always, by definition, fraught with difficulty. As we advance equity, justice, peace, opportunity, well-being, and a better future, we place ourselves in the uncertain space between the world as it is and what we can create together. In this space, it is easy to see ourselves as small and insignificant while also bearing immense burdens that come from the very systems and assumptions we hope to transform. Do not allow this to lead you to neglect yourself, particularly as it pertains to stress. We need you in this for however long you feel called to it. We hope you will choose to cultivate well-being for the sake of yourself, your family, and your community, and that you will invite others into your practices too. While you do, we'll cheer you on and accompany you, because we go far when we go together.

*Daisy & Aaron*



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[admin@startbrio.org](mailto:admin@startbrio.org)

