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Managing Stress and the Emotional Impact of Cancer



*Empower healing and well-being
with understanding and strategies
that make a difference*



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This content is for educational purposes only and is not a substitute for therapy or crisis support.

This webinar is intended to provide a detailed overview, but will not offer a deep dive into the topics we discuss.

Always discuss your mental health concerns with a therapist or a trained mental health provider.





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“Did you know that when you put your hand on your chest it lights up the same part of your brain as when you get a hug?”

Leave it on there for a couple of minutes when you’re feeling anxious and you’ll start to feel more relaxed and peaceful.”



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COMMON CANCER STRESSORS

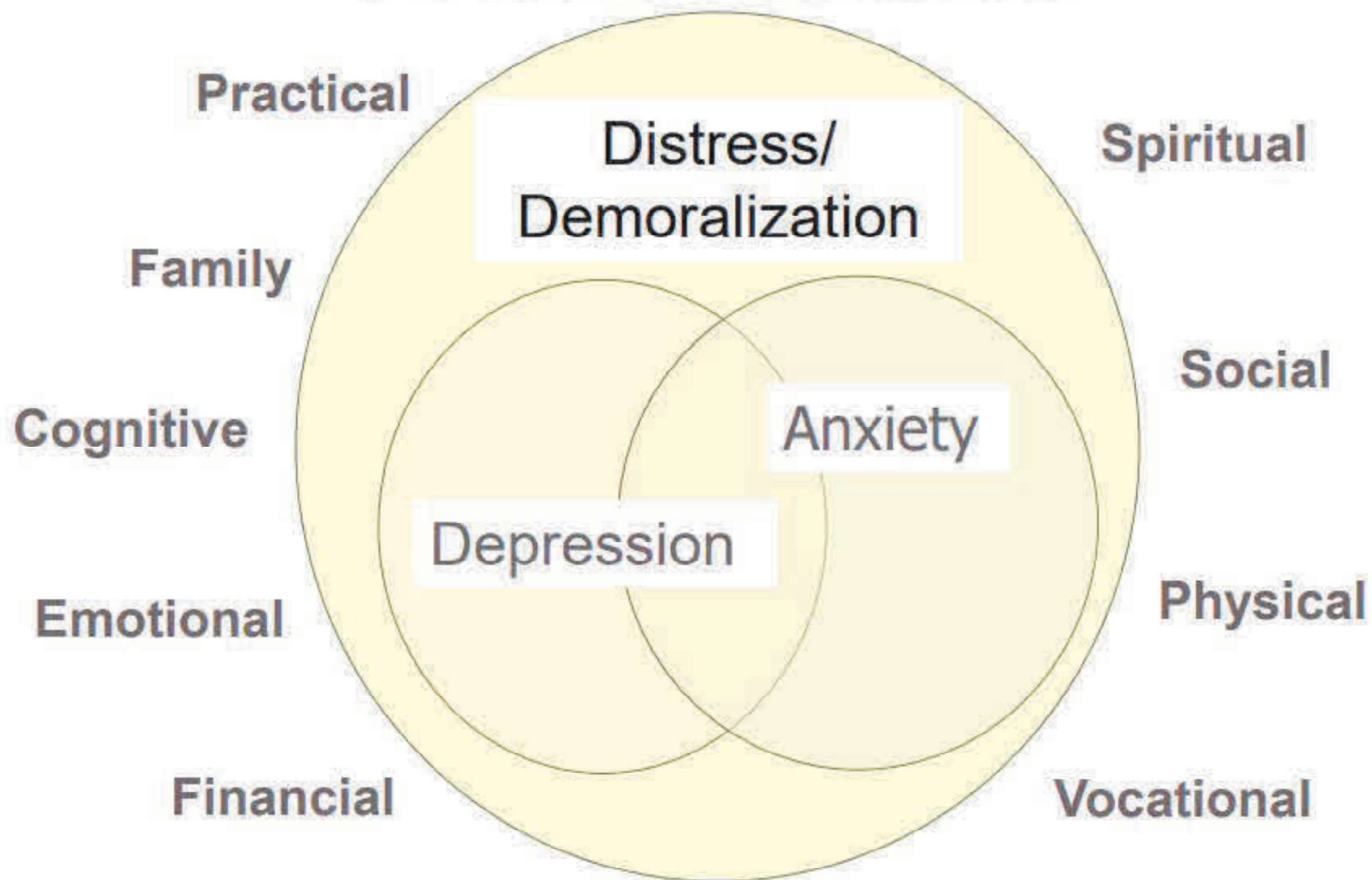
- Uncertainty of the future
- Effectiveness of treatment
- Fear of recurrence
- Pain/other side effects from treatments
- Social isolation due to disruptions in normal schedules
- Transportation/scheduling issues
- Financial/Health Insurance
- Fear of/resistance to asking for help
- Cultural or religious barriers to care

What other sources of stress are you experiencing?

Which ones are affecting you the most today?

Sources / Types of Distress

(occurs on a continuum)





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When Stress Becomes Unhealthy

- **Stress** is your body's normal response to a perceived threat, worry or tension caused by a difficult situation.
 - Have capacity to adjust to and accommodate; achieve some resolution
- **Distress** occurs when the situation overwhelms our ability to cope.
 - Takes over our mental resources
- **Long-term or chronic stress is damaging.**
 - Changes our neurophysiology; floods your body with cortisol.
 - Weakens immune system and accelerates aging.
 - Negatively affects cancer treatment outcomes by impacting treatment completion, reducing the effectiveness of therapies, and promoting cancer progression.

Reducing the impact of stress is a necessary and important part of cancer treatment and survivorship.

Learn to regulate your brain when it hijacks your emotions

HOW Trauma IMPACTS THE BRAIN

Trauma can alter the
structure and functioning
of the brain.

⌵
**Ventromedial
Prefrontal Cortex
(shrinks)**

This area is
responsible for
mood and emotion
regulation &
rational thought.

⌵
**Hippocampus
(shrinks)**

This area is responsible
for differentiating
between the past &
present.

⌶
**Amygdala
(overactive)**

This area is
responsible for
responding to stress.

It causes higher-order
processes like problem-solving
to become underfunctioning,
while processes geared
towards defense become
overactive.

@laci.mcgarra

** Childhood adversity
rewires brain circuits
that control emotion,
memory, and attention.*

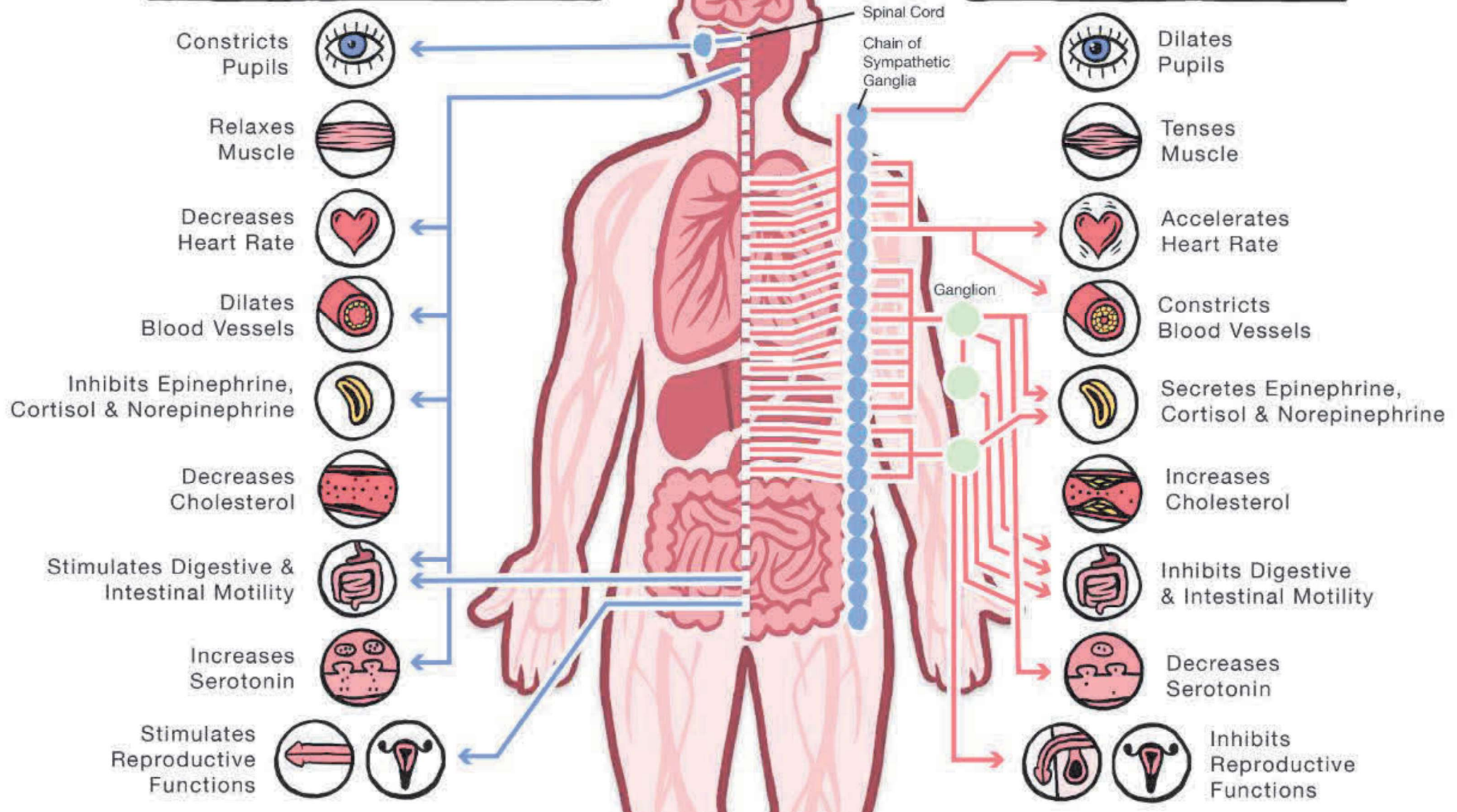
Learning,
Thinking,
Reasoning,
Decision-
making.
Guides
behavior by
integrating
emotional
information.

**Emotional
Processing Center.**
Stores long-term
memory. Triggers
physical responses.

AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

Parasympathetic Nervous System (Relaxation-and-Digest Response)

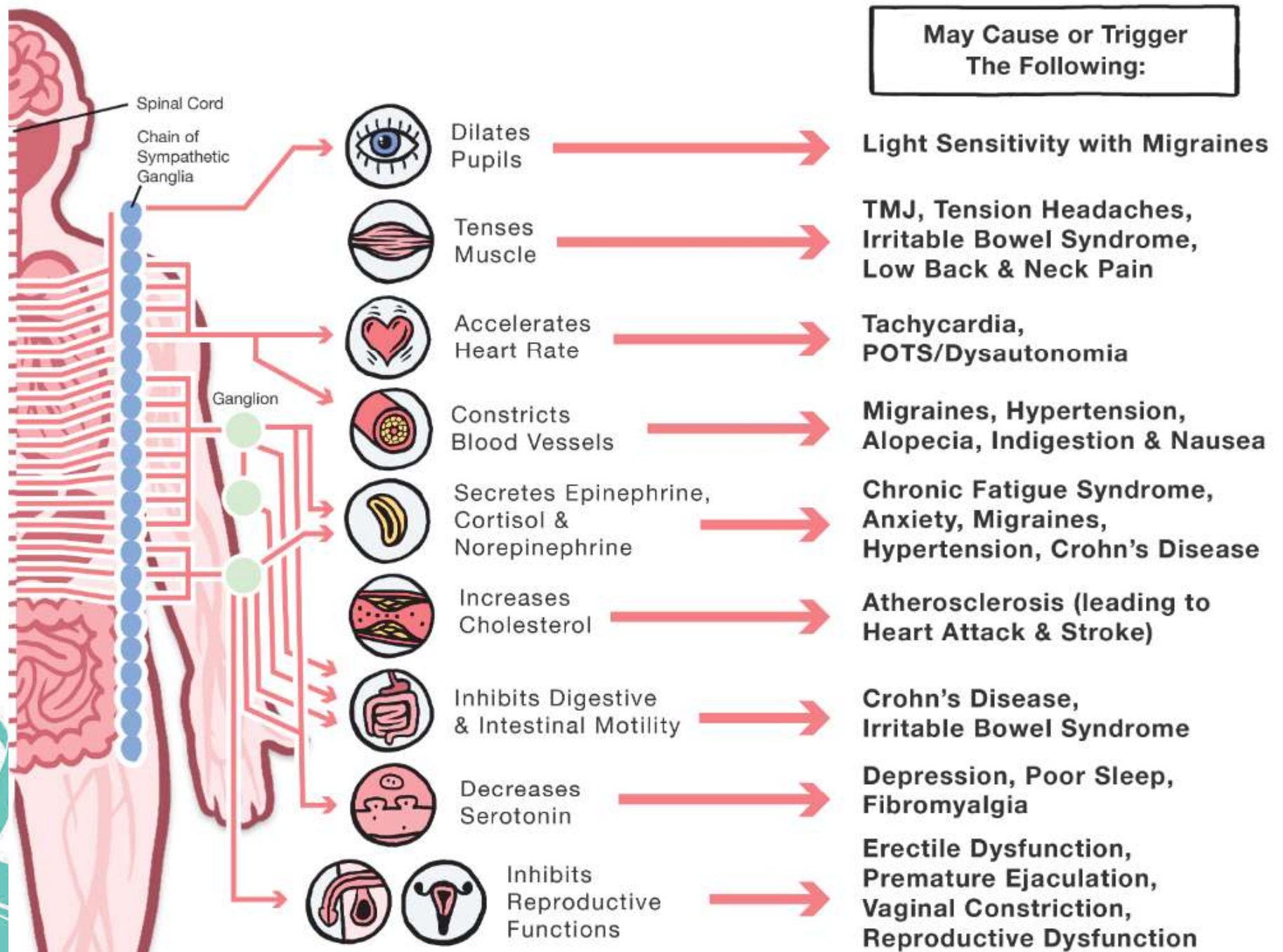
Sympathetic Nervous System (Fight-or-Flight Response)



Happiness isn't just in our heads, it's in our nervous systems, too.

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SYMPATHETIC OVERDRIVE





Vagus Nerve

Key component of the
**parasympathetic
nervous system.**

Bidirectional.

Regulates
heart rate, digestion,
immune system
responses, hormones,
metabolic activity,
mood, relaxation, etc.

Vagus Nerve Stimulation (VNS)

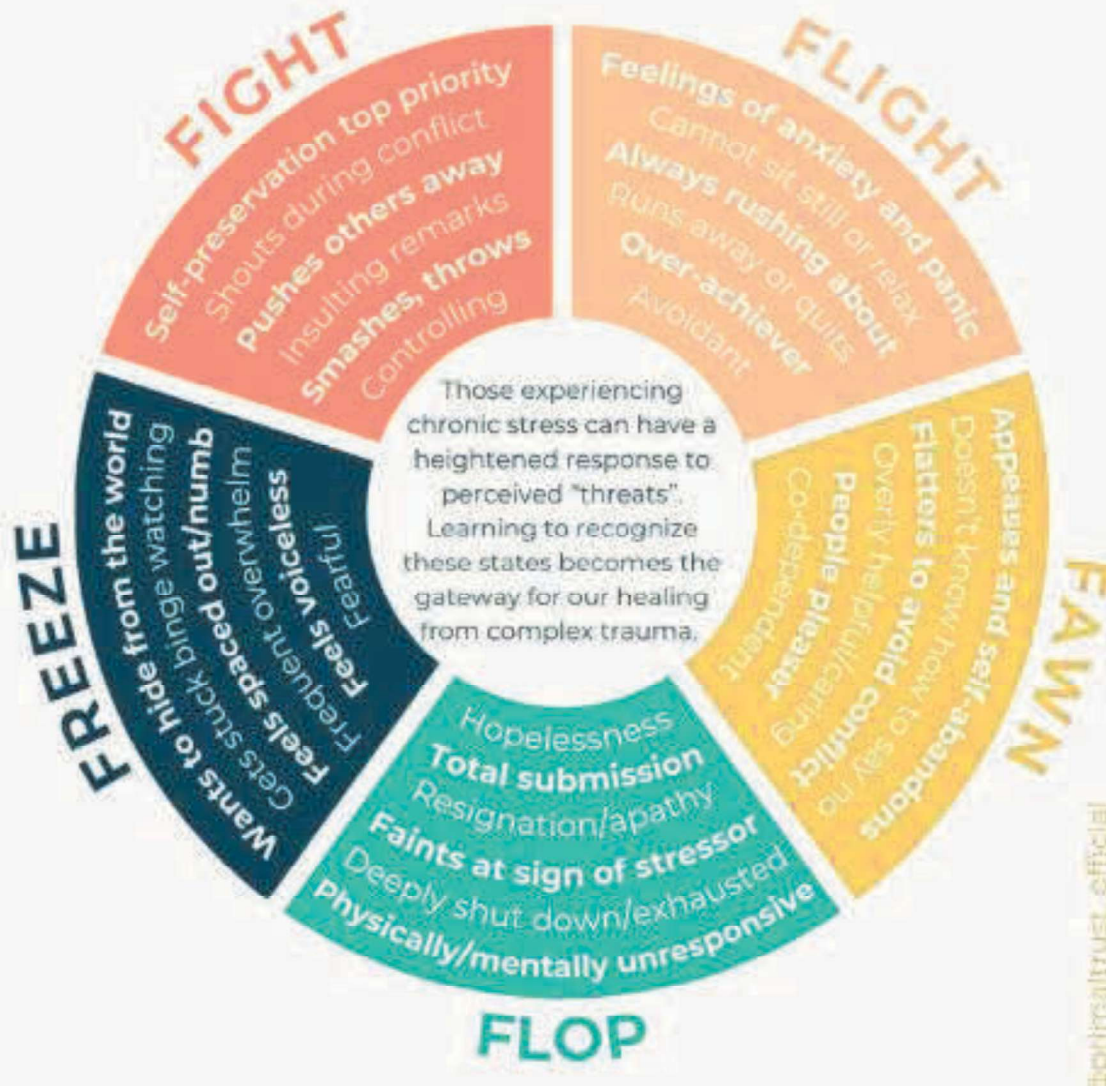
offers real
medical benefits
(July 2025)

Involuntary!*

Confront danger directly. Asserts dominance. May perceive criticism or disagreement as threats.

Mental/physical shutdown in face of danger; unable to take action; retreat into passive activities for comfort

THE 5 STRESS RESPONSES of the *Autonomic Nervous System*



Protective
How you survived

Escape threatening situation. Avoidance, immerse in activities to escape uncomfortable emotions. Busy, driven. Anxious, panic attacks.

Appeases in face of threat; eager to please or placate.
Prioritizes other's needs, often at expense of own needs

****Trauma is not an excuse for bad behavior.
We/they still have a responsibility to heal it.***

Feel completely overwhelmed by the situation.
Numb, disoriented, faint.

Stages of the Stress Cycle

1. **External** stressor or triggering event
2. **Internal** appraisal: senses take in information & determines something is wrong or you're in danger
3. **Physiological** responses occur: **Sympathetic** nervous system activates fight, flight, or freeze responses. **Parasympathetic** nervous system is suppressed → immune and digestive systems shut down.
4. **Consciously** become **aware** of the stress: heart rate, pain, upset stomach. Increased worry, anxiety & dread.
5. **Coping Strategy**: What you are doing something to either relieve or increase stress.
 - What helps you feel better (healthy coping) or worse (maladaptive coping)
 - **"Complete the stress cycle"** to *reduce* the impact of stress
 - *Move the stress through our body*



*Use what is most
helpful and
meaningful to
YOU!*



7 ways to complete the stress response cycle • 'Burnout' by Emily and Amelia Nagoski

Self-Care

IDEAS FOR A BAD DAY



**10 min - Less
Stress, Mentally
Sharper & Focused*

BREATHE DEEPLY

EXERCISE

TRY AFFIRMATION

GO FOR A
LONG WALK

Massage

WRITE IN YOUR
JOURNAL

REFRESH
MORNING ROUTINE

Take Stress
Seriously

GET OUT INTO
NATURE

COOK YOUR
FAVORITE MEAL

CALL A FRIEND

LISTEN TO YOUR
FAVORITE MUSIC

Daily Self-
Compassion

Get adequate
sleep/rest

**20
seconds
of
self-compassion**

20-second Practice Quickly Lowers Anxiety

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Common Emotions Following a Cancer Diagnosis

- **Worry/Anxiety**
 - “Scanxiety”
 - Panic Attacks
 - PTS, PTSD/C-PTSD
- **Sadness/ Grief**
 - Depressive Episodes
 - Major Depression
 - Prolonged grief
 - Suicidal thoughts

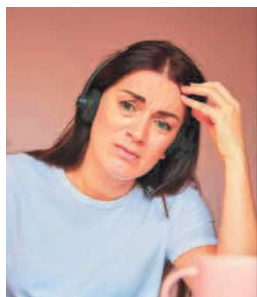
11%-17% of gyn cancer survivors experience both





Can anxiety be helpful?

- Mobilizes us to consider a situation and take action
- Sounds the alarm when something doesn't feel right
- Prompts us to be more alert or adjust our behavior



Who Suffers from Anxiety?

- Most common mental disorder in the world
- ~50% of gyn cancer survivors
- **PTSD:** 15.6% probable (likely); 20% possible (may occur)
 - Women with pre-existing PTSD have 2 times risk of ovarian cancer

Uncontrolled Anxiety leaves us:

- Disempowered, helpless, hopeless
- Nervous, moody, sleepless
- Unable to make decisions or remember
- Limited mental resources; less effective problem-solving





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Characteristics of Unhelpful Anxiety

- Thrives on belief that uncertainty is a bad thing
- Tells us we are not capable of handling big changes or challenges
- Convinces us that there is only one right answer or solution, and *we must find it* (black & white thinking)
- Narrows our focus and worldview
- Leads us to grieve what we haven't lost yet
- Dismisses possibility of things going/getting better
- Makes us believe that worry prevents bad things from happening. So, we should do it a lot.

(Rumination, perseverating)

ANXIETY DISTORTS OUR THINKING

Anxious thoughts skip over more rational responses, and tell us it is trying to keep us safe by causing us to be hypervigilant and fixated on *feeling helpless* in the situation, rather than allowing us to consider potential solutions and our ability to cope.

*This focus
is not helpful.*

Diffusing Unhelpful Anxiety

■ What are you anxious about?

- Loss of control; loss of trust in self, others, the medical care system
- Uncertainty: more questions than answers
- Fear of recurrence
- Possible poor outcomes

■ What helps

- Monitor “The Story”; reframe, reimagine the experience
 - Remember that *good things* may happen; foster hope
- Stay in the present; consider what we know for sure
- Strive to solve the problem: What if? Facts? Resources? Then? (solutions)
- Connection with others who have a similar story

■ What doesn't help

- Paralysis of analysis & statistics
- Comparing ourselves to others
- Increased substance use
- Isolation / Avoidance



Courage is the ability to be present and still act, even in the face of fear.



Strategies for Managing Anxiety & Anxiety Attacks

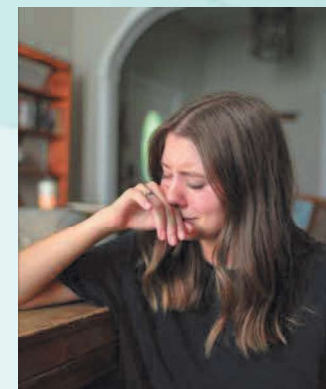
TIPS TO HELP WITH AN ANXIETY ATTACK

- Look **around** you.
- Find *five* things you can **see**, *four* things you can **touch**, *three* things you can **hear**, *two* things you can **smell**, and *one* thing you can **taste**.

This is called grounding. It can help when you feel like you have lost all control of your surroundings.

- Breathe!
- Tapping (EFT, Emotional Freedom Techniques) ([video](#))
- EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing) – structured target
 - Brainspotting – accesses younger memory networks ([video](#))
- CBT (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy)
- Guided Mindfulness Meditations
- Healthy Distraction
- Move your body, yoga, run, dance
- Cold water
- Affirming self talk, *You've got this!*

[Micro Meditations for Anxiety – Jill Disser](#)



Sadness, Grief, & Depression

- **Common emotional responses to significant loss**
 - Short-term (comes in waves) vs. chronic mood changes
- **Sadness & Grief** (often confused with depression)
 - [Grieving a past version of ourselves](#) and a potential future
 - Intermittent and mixed with positive memories
 - Self-esteem is preserved
- **Depression** – persistent low mood and feelings of hopelessness
 - 9%-63% gyn cancer survivors experience depression
 - Variance: demographics, family history, cancer stage & type, and comorbidities
 - Prevalence 2½ times higher compared to those *without* a cancer history
 - Risk increases when paired with anxiety



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■ Effects of prolonged disengagement & depression

- Some regions of the brain get smaller
- Disconnection, loss of interest, neglect (self-others)
- Fatigue, changes in sleep and appetite.
- Inability to experience joy
- Worse physical symptoms pain, nausea, fatigue, headaches, etc
- Increases risk of gyn cancer and worsens prognosis

■ What does not help

- Denying/delaying the need for care and support
- Remaining sedentary
- Isolation
- Increased substance use





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Healing, Transformation, and Resilience

Thoughts/Mindset

Observe patterns
Recognize triggers
Insight → Modify

Emotions

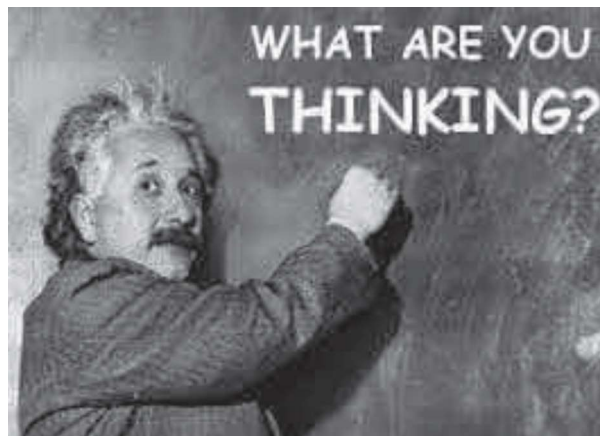
Experience / Name them
Process them
Release them

Actions

Sleep, rest, nutrition
Use your voice
Move/comfort your body

Do what you CAN do!





“You must learn a new way to *think* before you can master a new way to *be*. ”

— MARIANNE WILLIAMSON



A Gentle Therapy Practice for Self-Awareness

Challenging Negative Thoughts

Am I making assumptions?

Is there another way to look at it?

Are there any other possible outcomes?

Is there evidence for this worry?

What advice would I give to a friend?

Is this worry in or out of my control?

My Name Is Therapy



Emotional First Aid



- Calm your nervous system
- Spend time with pets
- Reflect & notice what anxiety and depression are telling you
- “I feel...” vs. “I have...”
- Set boundaries and time limits on when you worry and plan
- Journal and/or talk it out
- Notice what you’re telling yourself and how you speak to yourself





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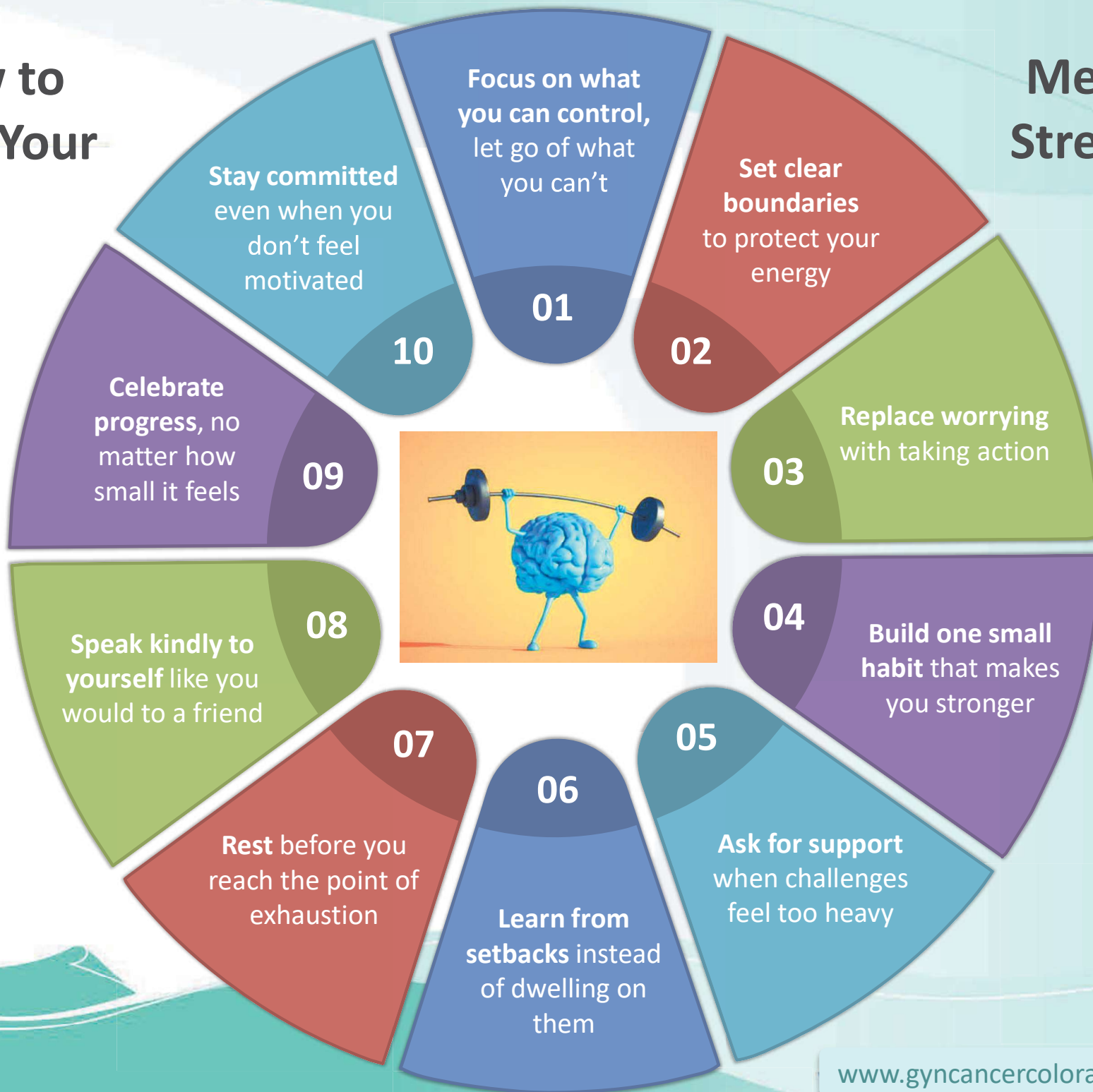
Our feelings and emotions are meant to be released and understood, not held inside.

- **Our brains are built for survival not happiness, which takes deliberate practice.**
- **Our hard feelings are most overwhelming when we are alone with them.**
 - **Talk to someone about them.**
 - **Someone who listens compassionately, doesn't judge, and understands**
- **Our feelings and emotions are looking for support, not solutions.**
- **They provide information about what is important or feels threatening.**
 - **They don't always tell you the truth. (Can feel anxious, and still be safe.)**
- **Medications alone are not the answer and may not always be helpful; sometimes, they can be harmful (obtain expert guidance in this area)**



How to Build Your

Mental Strength



What you can do to Manage Stress and the Emotional Impact of Cancer

Sometimes you can get so busy trying to be everyone else's anchor that you don't realize you are actually drowning.



- **Calm your nervous system** – begin with the body – “physiological sigh”
Take a pause to regain perspective (Mindfulness) – access understanding.
Bring awareness to the present moment
- **Focus on own needs:** sleep, rest & reset, nutrition, exercise, stress relief
- **Recognize and express feelings;** evaluate your thoughts
You cannot control everything that is happening to you
BUT you can decide how you want to respond. (Choice)
You don't have to wait to be *motivated* to take steps toward well-being
- Be **kind and patient** with your self
- Practice **gratitude** – identify 5 things to be grateful for every day
- Practice **accepting** in the moment (vs. resigned acceptance)
- Practice **forgiveness**, yourself and others – it releases you and *does not* condone the behavior that hurt or disappointed you

Talk to someone and seek support

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BEING STRONG

means refusing to tolerate people and things that wound your soul. It means practicing self-care when you're hurting. It means honoring your feelings by actually allowing yourself to feel and express them. It means treating yourself with compassion and kindness, even when you feel like you don't deserve any. It means doing what makes you happy and being with people who make you feel good, regardless of outside judgements. It means asking for help when the weight of the world has become too much. It means giving yourself permission to get your needs met by setting boundaries and using your voice. It means forgiving yourself on the days that you're struggling and can't be brave.

Daniell Koepke

tinybuddha.com

Self-Care

Self Compassion

Get Needs
Met

Honor Feelings

What/Who
Makes You Happy

Use your
voice

*Strength isn't
suffering in silence.*



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Discussion

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