

Dr. Braman's  
**“Nourish & Flourish”™ Activation Program**  
(Daily Therapeutic Relaxation Practice, Rest, Meditation)

***How to activate your built in “Nourish & Flourish™” systems on a regular basis as a primary tool for physical and mental health. This is the single most powerful “lifestyle as medicine” tool there is for most people because it turns on the built-in healing and recharging systems in our bodies.***

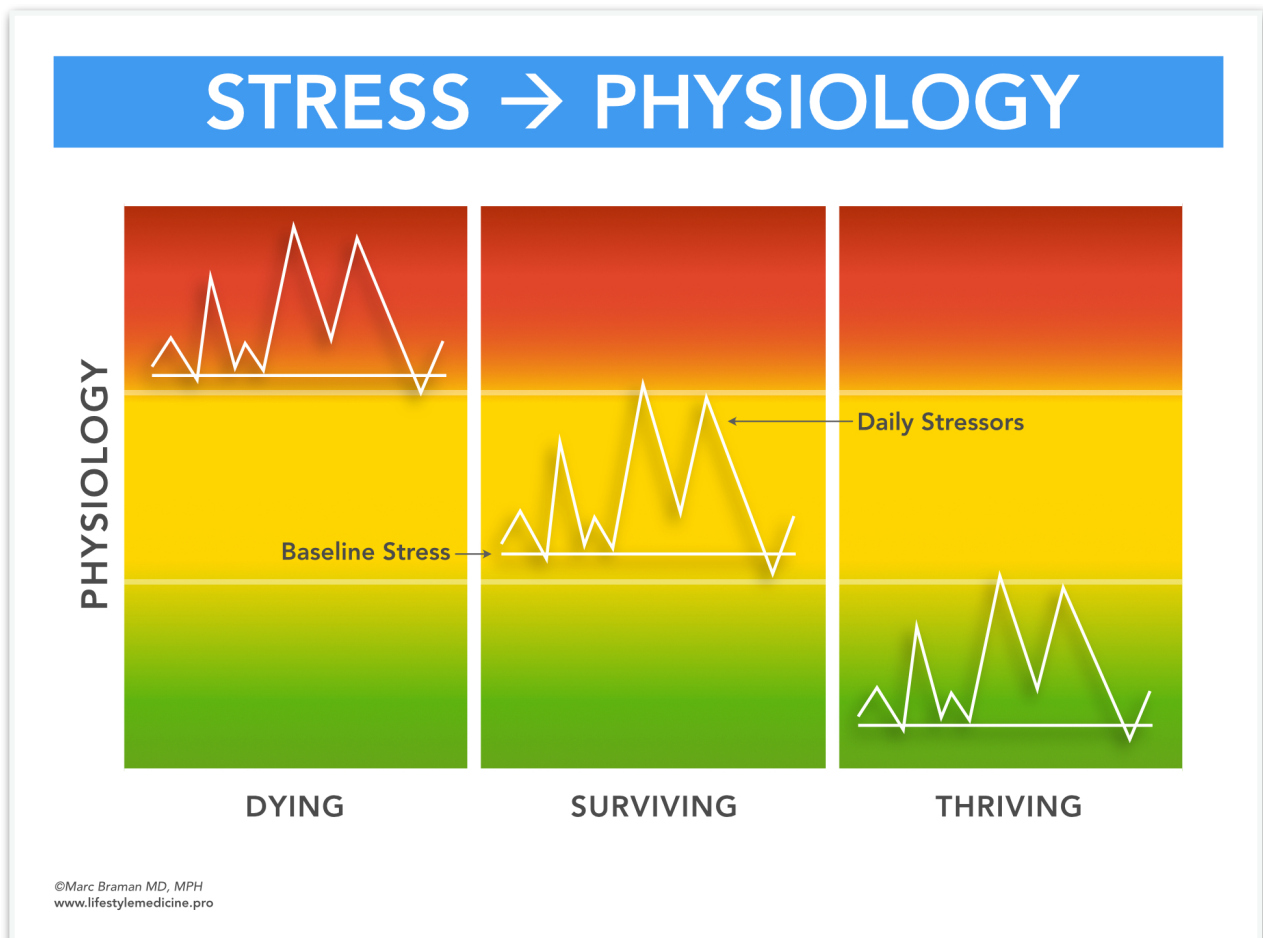
**Preface:**

You can relax. We are not talking about or promoting anything religious or philosophical. We are dealing with physiology, and only physiology. We are not going to ask you to do anything “weird”. We will ask you to breathe and use your attention to engage your physiology. That’s it. We may suggest some ideas for using your imagination to help you engage some of your physiology that may be less obvious, like you might with learning any new thing.

You will be actually relaxing in this process. For a small number of really uptight people this is uncomfortable at first because it is so foreign. Give yourself a chance to learn what it feels like to unwind.

**Goals:**

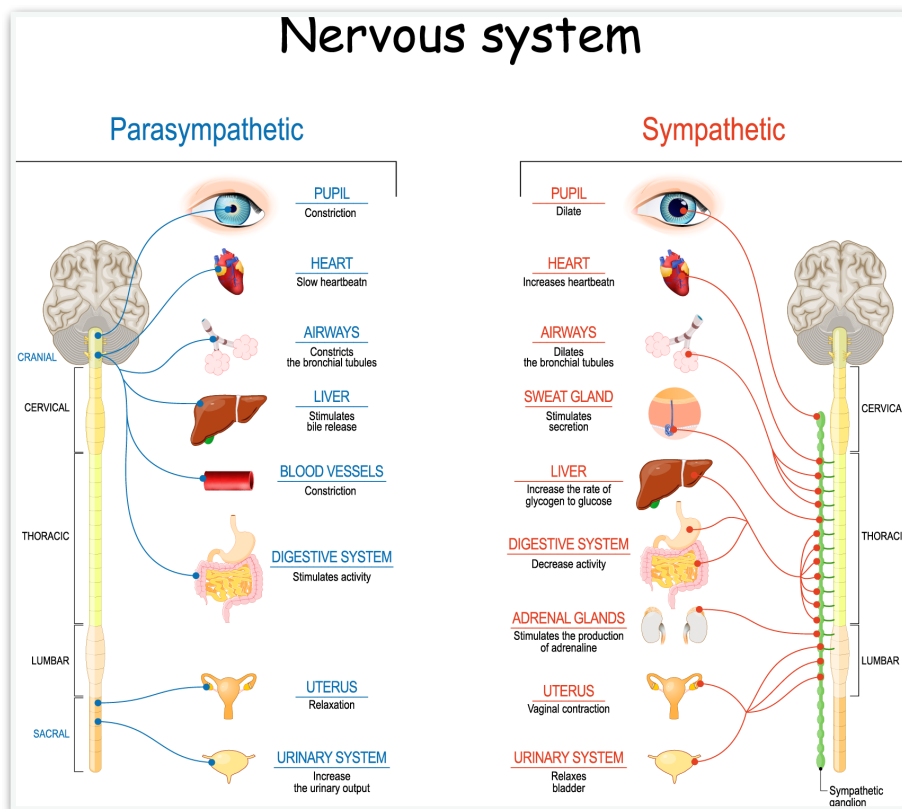
1. Shift our nervous system tone from one of stress to one of resilience. This will dramatically change our physiology and all the health conditions affected by stress. Day-to-day stressors will then not be a physiologic problem.
2. Develop the skill of physiologic relaxation so we can use it as a primary lifestyle medicine tool for health. This includes both maintenance and specific use when most needed.



## Basics:

Some very deep and profoundly important parts of our anatomy and physiology are our systems for surviving life-threatening situations on the one hand, and being able to heal and repair, recharge and reset on the other hand. The system that accomplishes these two fundamental functions is known as the “autonomic” nervous system. Just think of it as the “automatic” nervous system – it manages all the physiology automatically for the different and changing needs we have relative to our environment. It tells the heart to beat faster when you run, or send resources to digest food after eating. One branch activates the “fight-or-flight” physiologies in the body and brain, the other branch activates the “rest-and-digest” or “Nourish & Flourish™” physiologies in the body and brain. This branch facilitates nourishment and recovery, and most of the health restorative physiology that enables us to flourish. It is actually far more complicated than this, but this basic understanding works well.

(Should be labeled “autonomic nervous system”)



Our challenge is that modern life is very artificial and very overstimulating. Our nervous system and bodies have a hard time dealing with a constant stream of far more things than human beings have every had to deal with before on planet earth. This has most of us in a fairly constant state of fight-or-flight or stress to some degree. This has profound negative effects on our physical health and quality of life. We need to learn how to turn off this fight-or-flight stress physiology and activate our built-in Nourish & Flourish™ capacity on a regular basis.

Mind-body science out of Harvard’s Mind-Body Institute by Herbert Benson, MD, shows that we can achieve tremendous benefit with just 20 minutes a day of an effective activation of

Nourish & Flourish™. The body goes through significant cycles of varying physiology every 24 hours. They are called our “circadian rhythms.” The real benefit comes when this activation of nervous system “recharge”, and defusing of stress, occurs consistently in our daily cycles. In other words, it should be a routine part of daily life if we are to get maximum benefit. Our body needs clear and strong “reset” and “recharge” messages every 24-hour cycle of physiology.

The really good news is that Nourish & Flourish™ is available to everyone, everywhere. We don't need to be on top of a mountain, or sit in uncomfortable positions. We don't need to spend hours every day. It doesn't require special equipment or special buildings. We don't have to travel to somewhere like a gym or yoga studio. It does need some basic commitment and consistency.

### **BIG Deal**

One of the most challenging aspects to teaching this to my patients so they can benefit greatly, is simply communicating effectively how big a deal this is. It is based on a very different understanding of what stress is and how it works (Not: Oh, it's just “stress”. Just “get over it.”) Nourish & Flourish™ is much more powerful and impactful than people have any idea of. I need people to understand how important it is and why we spend as much time and energy on this as we do. Our autonomic nervous system is like our built-in 24/7/365 pharmacy that is continuously dispensing precise medication directly to our tissues and organs. There is no “Off” switch. We have no choice about whether it is “On” or “Off.” We do have choice and potential control over which medications it is dispensing and at what dose or volume. Is it dispensing constant fight-or-flight messages that are making us tired, and sick, and anxious or depressed? Or is it sending out healing medicines and messages on a regular basis to rejuvenate and recharge? What are the relative volume or dose settings on the fight-or-flight vs the Nourish & Flourish™ systems?

We think of prescription medications as “magic bullets” that are supposed to fix our physical problems. They are no where near as powerful as our own built in pharmaceutical systems that are hardwired to our organs and tissues, and have the exact medicines needed in stock and ready to go. Our autonomic nervous system is the pharmacist. We are the doctor ordering the medicine. What are we prescribing today? Is it what you want and need it to be? Would you like to change your prescription, Doc?

### **Stress Drain**

Most people don't consciously realize how draining stress is. It takes a LOT of energy to be stressed. After all, your body is in survival mode. The higher the stress level and the longer the stress, the faster and greater the drain is. We end up physically tired, emotionally spent, and not able to think quickly and clearly. The sad part of most modern-world stress is that it doesn't accomplish very much, except make us tired and depressed, and not as smart or capable. In more natural circumstances, in contrast to the modern world, we would activate survival mode for a short time and then it would turn off. The energy drain would be limited. Today the draining effect tends to be much more continuous than we are designed to experience. This has a huge effect on our physical, emotional, and mental energy levels.

### **Recharge mode**

The autonomic nervous system is the wiring to our organs and blood vessels and skin from our central nervous system. This is different than the nerves that tell our muscles to move. If our brain perceives a bear running at us out of the woods, our autonomic nervous system very quickly sends out fight-or-flight messaging to survive the situation. What doesn't get nearly as much attention, and which we desperately need, is the activity of the opposite part of the autonomic nervous system. It sends out messages to trigger digestion, healing, recovery. It is

best understood as “recharge” or Nourish & Flourish™ mode for the body and brain. It deactivates the emergency survival physiology and refills the energy reserves depleted from the increased stress. You can also think of it as deep relaxation – deep to the level of your organs and all the way out to your skin.

## **Breathe**

Slow, deep breathing is a fundamental tool for activating Nourish & Flourish™. When we are stressed the message goes out from the nervous system to the lungs to breathe faster because there is an emergency. We breathe fast and shallow. The pH in our blood changes. Many other things change. Our autonomic nervous system and our lungs are tightly linked – *in both directions*. This means that we can take intentional control of our breathing, and calm the autonomic nervous system down relatively directly. It is very cool! We can literally simply “breathe” to dramatically improve the function of our brain and body, greatly facilitating mental and physical health. Details follow.

## HOW TO

### **Core Practice**

Breathe as slowly and deeply as you comfortably can while letting all of your awareness rest on your breathing. Gently bring your awareness back to your breathing when it wanders. Not getting stressed about one’s attention wandering and trying to force it harder to stay on task is a key part of these exercises. Let it go. Breathe through your nose if at all possible. Keep your belly soft, and allow your belly and chest to move easily. A big deep breath and sigh is sometimes helpful to quickly shed a dose of tension and loosen up your breathing more, especially at the beginning of a session.

Many, especially when first learning how to activate Nourish & Flourish™, will struggle with “the mental marketplace:” all kinds of things will crowd in, waving and shouting, and vying for our attention. The really important things we really need to get done, and not forget. The things we suddenly realize we already forgot and are now past due. And on and on. Trying to remember these important things takes energy and attention. So be smart about it. Have a pen and paper, or your smart phone to-do list, handy. When a truly important things pops into your consciousness, just pause and write it down. Now you won’t forget it, and you can get on with being able to truly let it go without stress for the moment and further activate Nourish & Flourish™. It doesn’t harm or detract from the exercise to do this. It helps. Later, once we get “the mental marketplace” tamed down and we are in a much better, healthier state of nervous system, there is usually little need for stopping and writing things down. Or we may want to write down “ah-ha” moments or inspirations. Use the “pause and write it down” tool as is helpful.

### **Apps/audio**

One of the benefits of modern life is our access to tools and resources on demand. Using an app on a smart phone is the easiest way to be walked through breathing basics. I like the simplicity of *Power of Calm*. The fact that it is free helps a lot also. It has some basic explanation, like we cover here, a 14-day basic breathing training program, timing pacing for regular breathing exercises, and a “pressure valve” for when we feel like we need to let off some steam in a healthy way.

There are many apps and tools out there. Some of the most popular apps have so many bells and whistles and background sounds, etc, that I find many people are as lost and confused by them, as they are helped. These would include the apps *Calm* and *Headspace*. They are also

expensive. At some point they may be worth the cost, but to get started with basic breathing, *Power of Calm* is far more user friendly due to its simplicity.

(Fun fact: I actually interviewed the developer of *Power of Calm* years ago. He is a retired stock broker who had been super stressed before retiring. He was helped so much by these simple practices that he interviewed and/or visited many top experts and scientists around the world, and then created this very user-friendly system for directly intervening in the stress physiology to help others.)

### **Time**

We are only talking about 20 minutes a day. That 20 minutes doesn't need to be at a particular time of day. It doesn't have to be all at once. Find what works best for you, for the situation, for your current attention span, and for your present place in your skill development process.

Some will use a 1-minute practice as a "pressure valve" to lower the stress level during the day. Some like to do 5-minute sessions throughout the day. Those with Attention Deficit Disorder or poor ability to focus at first often do better with shorter sessions and more of them. Done right before bed, you will be more relaxed physiologically as you go to sleep, your sleep will be deeper and more refreshing, and you will wake up more energized and ready for the day. Some people (like myself) like doing a recharge session at the very beginning of the day. It really helps start the day in a great state of body and mind. This does require that you are not in sleep deficit with falling asleep again due to sheer exhaustion.

Keep a simple record of time for the day. Top it up at the end of the day as needed.

If you do more than 20 minutes a day you are likely to develop your recharge skills faster.

### **Space**

Minimize the potential for interruptions for longer sessions, especially when first learning. As far as possible find a quiet, comfortable place to practice Nourish & Flourish™ activation. For many, especially just starting out, a room with a closable door works well. Let others know you are not to be interrupted for the next however many minutes. Manage pets. Consider using a work break or lunch break. Use your car, and maybe tip the seat back. Almost any place can work, actually.

As you get better at managing your awareness you will become more and more able to do effective activation in more noisy or busy environments. Sitting in your car (parked), sitting in an airport waiting for your flight, taking a break at work, riding the subway or bus - all become opportunities to shift into "recharge" mode for a little bit.

### **Posture**

Any posture that allows you to relax to the best of your ability is fine. If you have total control over your environment at the moment, then laying flay on your back with the knees partially up so the back can relax and flatten is ideal for most people for allowing all muscles to relax. Hands in your lap when sitting, or laying by your side when laying down is usually best. Avoid having pressure or constriction on your chest and belly. It is not necessary to cross your legs or hold your fingers in unusual configurations. Figure out what works well for you. It is OK to experiment.

### **Skill**

It is a *skill* to activate Nourish & Flourish™ and be in the recharge zone physiologically. It is like learning to ride a bike or throw a baseball. Some learn quickly while others take longer. But essentially everyone can learn to ride a bike, and everyone can learn to activate Nourish & Flourish™.

The other beauty of skills are that, when learned well, they are life long. One may get rusty, but if you haven't ridden a bike for 10 years you can still get on a bike and ride it around. You may not return to riding wheelies immediately, but the vast majority of us can get on and ride quite adequately. The same is true for the skill of deep relaxation. You can learn how to do it. It is within your ability. And it can become a lifelong skill.

### **Internal vs External**

Many have incorrect ideas of "relaxation". They may start doing the exercises and find they are having a challenging time doing multiple minutes of focusing on breathing or a single thing. They think, "Well, if I am just trying to relax, I'll put some 'relaxation' music or sounds on." Or they think they will take a soak in the tub. These external things we do that have a relaxing effect on us are all fine and good. But they are not what we are after. We are after developing the *internal* skill to shift our bodily physiology at will. We are developing our capacity to be in charge of, and manage, ourselves. Yes, it will take more effort than just turning on some nice music. That is expected. We are working to learn how to rest. Because we stink at it and don't know how to do it yet. They tried to teach us how to rest in kindergarten with nap time. Most of us didn't learn it, or we unlearned it later on. We are focused on developing our inner tools, skills, control, regardless of our external circumstances. Let's not be distracted by our misunderstandings of how real relaxation skill works.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

### **Falling asleep**

Many people will fall asleep when they start actually relaxing, no matter what time of day or night it is. That is OK. Don't worry about it. You are tired. You didn't realize how tired. You have been spending too much energy stressing, and not getting enough rest and recovery for your needs. This will change as you continue the process of getting to a much better place. You may need to catch up on your sleep deficit. If you are not in sleep deficit, deeply relaxing does not make you fall asleep.

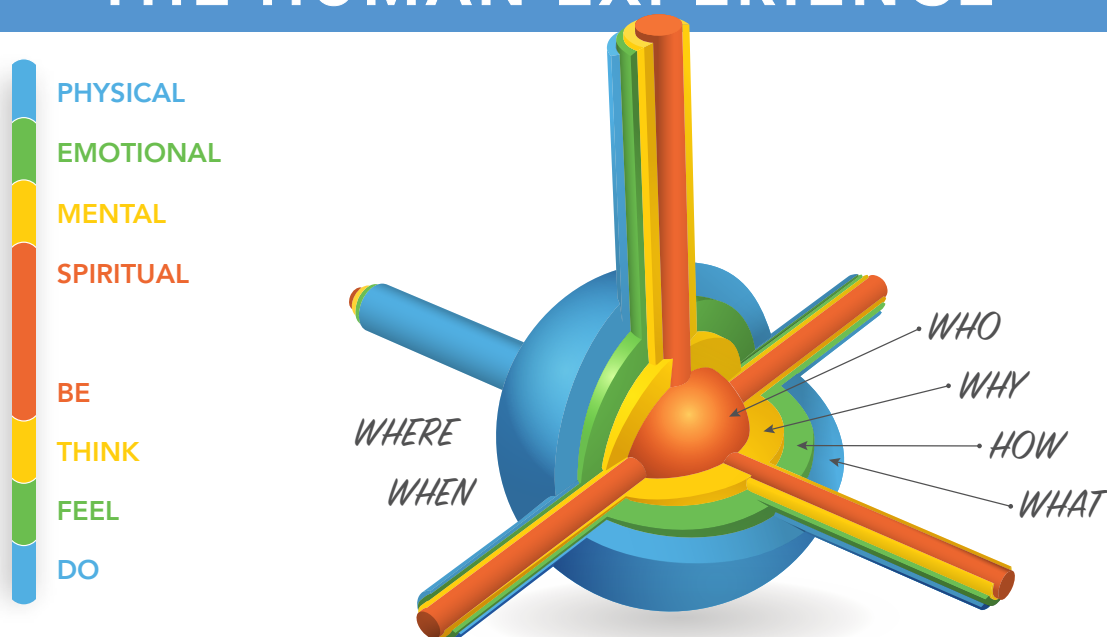
### **More energy**

Most people think that meditating or deeply relaxing would make you more tired. They may mistakenly think so even more if they fall asleep when they first start relaxing. The reality is that fight-or-flight is very energy intensive and very draining. Once you are regularly stopping the unproductive short-circuiting of being in "stress mode," you will find that you actually have more energy to work with. You are not constantly drained. Life gets much easier in total.

### **Typical Progression of Skill Development:**

The main goal in most medical contexts is to get to good benefit with #3 below (tissue level recharge). But it is helpful to have an understanding of the total picture, and what it would look like in a full, whole-person implementation, including Physical, Emotional, Mental, Spiritual aspects of ourselves. We primarily experience stress in the Physical and Emotional domains, so that is our focus here. The typical learning process occurs most naturally and most easily from the most tangible elements to the least tangible elements as follows:

# THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE



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1. **Breathing.** Learn to breathe well. Slower, deeper. Use your nose if at all possible. Soft belly. Minimal exertion. Ideally, the average optimal breath rate is about 5-6 breaths per minute as default (average through the day when not paying attention). Slower, deeper, comfortable breathing will activate recharge more. When you are comfortable with and sensing the “recharge” activation from breathing, start to add muscular awareness (#2).
2. **Muscular relaxation.** Learn to relax your muscles. Listen to your body. Do “body scans” spending 10 seconds or more on each muscle group or area. Reconnect your mind and body into one unit. Learn where you hold your tension. Learn to be aware of what state your muscles are in. Teach them to let go. Teach them a default relaxed state. When you are sensing basic competency with reconnecting with your muscles and getting basic control of them, start to add autonomic engagement (#3).
3. **Organ level recharge.** Learn to activate Nourish & Flourish™ to your organs and tissues. The sympathetic fight-or-flight system gets turned off in the process. For most, tuning in to our gut level sense is easiest. Are all the neurons in your gut reconnecting with your nervous system? Because our organs are less tangible than our muscles, most people find mental imagery helpful. You may imagine inhaling oxygen or life energy deeply, and then blowing that warm oxygen into a tight muscle, into your gut, or throughout your body as you exhale – like if you were melting a handful of snow with your warm breath. You may find it helpful to intentionally let go of negative emotions and nurture positive emotions. (If you were holding physical tension from past trauma that becomes emotionally problematic, seek help from a professional counselor.) Remember your skin is an organ. Imagining your hands and feet being warm and heavy is helpful for most people. When you have a consistent sense of your physiology shifting, and your organs are in Nourish & Flourish™ mode, you may start to add mental relaxation (#4).
4. **Mental rest.** Learn to quiet your mind. The most common sleep problem is insomnia. The most common cause of insomnia is “I can’t turn it off!” – meaning the mind. You should

already have a decent level of awareness or attention management from what you have done thus far. The idea is to let the mind rest on one simple thing of your choosing. It may be a concept, a mental picture, a positive thought. Letting it rest on something you are grateful for and just savoring it is one of the most productive methods of mental rest. This practice is not trying to have your mind blank or empty. It is learning the skill of mental rest and recharge. When you are able to rest mentally, you may start to add spiritual Nourish & Flourish™ activation (#5).

5. **Spiritual rest.** Learn to rest at the core of your being. This is not about religion. This is deeper than mental relaxation or rest. This is about who you are. And about being connected with that which is outside of and greater than yourself and infinitely good. This is about knowing real love, real peace. For some, this is equivalent to: “Be still, and know that I am God.” This is about learning to rest at the Who level. Some would consider this the “soul”. Many describe this as a “oneness”, a sense of ultimate “connection”. Gratitude for joy and good to an Ultimate Good is often a primary element for many. This is more about “being”, than thinking or talking or even feeling. Some may choose to experience “compassion” or other terms for deep and genuine love toward others and a sense of unity with them that is not dependent on one’s own or other’s perceived worthiness.

This outlines the potential aspects of Nourish & Flourish™ from most to least tangible. This is often easiest for most people. We are whole people all the time. Feel free to incorporate any aspect as is most helpful to you at any time. Some may wish to start with the Spiritual concepts and then do the breathing in that context. Or start with a very basic whole person approach from the beginning and then progressively focus on the aspects in the order above. Start from where you are at. Find what works best for you. Keep in mind that we get the most direct physical benefit from the organ level physiology activation.

### **Time**

Learning how to effectively activate Nourish & Flourish™ will take time. Be patient with yourself and persistent with the process. This is like physical therapy for your nervous system. If you have a limb that is shriveled and weak from being in a cast for 6 weeks and not used, you know it will take time and process of exercise to get it strong and functional again. This is no different, except that, unlike recovery from a broken bone, many of us have never previously learned how to use our “recharge” muscles.

With good process and daily practice most will get the hang of the basics of breathing and muscular relaxation in days to weeks. You will *start* to get benefit physically and mentally from day 1. And like most things in life, to a large degree, you will get out of it what you put into it.

### **Benefit**

Your physiologic benefit to body and mind can most easily be understood as:

$$\text{Benefit Experienced} = [\text{Skill} \times \text{Time}] / \text{Stress}$$

If you are a skill level 3/10 it will take longer (more Time) to get the same amount of benefit vs a skill level 8/10.

The 20 minute sweet spot for benefit relative to time is an average for someone with at least a moderate skill level who is able to shift relatively quickly and effectively into a good recharge mode. Don’t expect large benefits quickly in 20 minutes/day if you are starting at a skill level of 1/10. Just focus on developing your skill level. Add more practice time to build your skill level more quickly if you want to.



Benefit is relative to the stress load your body is experiencing. If you are in a state of being very drained from chronically high stress, it may take more skill and time to get out of that state in a session. If your stress load is relatively small at a point in time, then you may jump right up to a really nice net effect benefit in just a few minutes.

### **Zone**

Being “in the zone” means you are effectively activating Nourish & Flourish™ physiology in your body and nervous system: you are in “recharge” mode. It is balancing out the stress and its effects. One’s skill level is the single largest factor determining to what degree one can achieve the zone. Other factors may include distractions like boarding announcements if you are sitting in an airport waiting to board your plane.

“Time in zone” means time that the desired physiology is happening. One may spend 20 minutes in total but be “in the zone” none or all, or any where in between, of that 20 minutes. The total time doesn’t get you benefit by checking a to-do box. It is the “time in zone” and the degree of being in the zone that gets you the benefit.

### **Know the zone**

Many don’t even know what it feels like to deeply relax and activate “recharge” physiology. One of the most important things to learn in this process is what it feels like so you know when you are there or not. For most people, you just “know”. It feels so different and so pleasant that it is distinct. If you don’t know whether or not you are there, you are not.

The other way I describe it to people is as the opposite of fight-or-flight sensations. When one is really stressed there is often a gut level sensation of “knots” or “butterflies” or nausea at a gut level. The opposite is also true. When Nourish & Flourish™ is activated there is a gut level sense of well-being, relaxation, peace. For me the visual is a perfectly warm sunny beach with palm trees, white sand, and crystal blue water. I am totally relaxed in a hammock under the palm trees and there is a gentle, cool breeze passing through. To me there is a very pleasant distinct gut level sense of “warm and melty and wonderfully relaxed” – the opposite of tight and twisted and churning. You want to lean back, smile broadly, and let out a long, satisfied, “Ahhhhh...!”.

### **Awareness**

The central pillar of developing your skill is “awareness.” Many have heard a lot about “mindfulness” in reference to forms of meditation that provide a lot of benefit. What is “mindfulness”? It is awareness. At least mentally, and perhaps beyond. Mindfulness practice is an active practice of awareness.

Awareness or attention is what our physiology needs to be able to naturally and healthfully regulate ourselves and our physiology. If you put your hand on a hot stove you have a sudden and significant awareness that occurs. You are aware of your hand hurting. You don’t have to think too hard or deliberate too long to regulate the location of your hand. It is pretty automatic. So too with most systems in our body. If the nervous system becomes aware of the state and condition of that system, it automatically tends to do something with that information in terms of system management.

Some of the earliest scientific discoveries in what came to be known as “biofeedback” were quite accidental. One involved lab experiments where a sensor measuring blood flow through the large carotid arteries in the neck was left attached and connected to an oscilloscope monitor in between experiments. The human subjects didn’t have anything to do but stare at the oscilloscope screen showing the blood flow activity. After a while they discovered that they could change what was on the screen. Their nervous system started developing control over

the blood flow in their neck and to their brain as the nervous system was made more aware of that system's activity in real time.

Be intentional with your learning with awareness. We need to learn what it feels like when we are fully and deeply relaxed – when we are in “recharge” mode. We also need to learn what our stress feels like. We need to learn to be aware of what state we are in, so we can manage the systems well.

### **Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again**

Yoga has become quite popular in many parts of the world. There are many forms of yoga. And like everything else, it often gets tweaked and changed from the original version or the core principles. Do you know what the word “yoga” means? It means “to yoke together”, “to unite.” Specifically, it is in reference to yoking or joining the mind and body back together again. In a full implementation it would unite all aspects together again – body, emotions, mind, spirit. We get too busy, we get too stressed. Our fundamental mind and body systems become separated. They are no longer working as an integrated whole that we really are. We are sending stress signals to the body, but we are not listening to the distress and dysregulation that the body is experiencing. We need to intentionally put them back together again.

Building our skill is largely a matter of getting better and better at managing our awareness. We learn to listen, to be in charge of ourselves. We get better and better at reconnecting our mind and body – listening to the body and then directing it to function in healthy ways.

### **Getting Unstuck**

Sometimes we are just too wound up with too much tension to be able to do normal Nourish & Flourish™ activation practices. Some of the leading experts in Mind-Body Medicine that work with traumatized groups of people like those who have been victims of genocide (they lived, others didn't), have found that a very different approach is sometimes needed at first. They call it a form of “active meditation”. To me it is just “shake it loose” and “let it all out.” I call it “the rubber chicken.” They put on some kind of familiar “active” music and have the group of people shake-dance for 4-5 minutes. The only guidance is: move everything, whatever feels good, don't hurt yourself, don't stop until the music ends. If done well, it ends up looking like what I would describe as “fling-dancing” – people are moving every part of their body vigorously. They are “letting it all out.” It gets people “unstuck.” They can smile, and talk, and laugh, and relax again afterwards.

There is limited research on this approach so far, but in real life applications it is sometimes very useful. We don't know if some of this would be good to be a regular practice or not. We don't have any reason to think it would be problematic – assuming you don't get overly zealous and hurt yourself. The other challenge is getting people to do something that is not “normal.” Largely this boils down to not wanting others to think we are really weird. So, you may want to use a room you can lock others out of where you can have privacy the first times you do this, if this is a concern.

### **Rest**

We think of “rest” as a state of doing nothing, or pretty close to nothing. And that is largely how we experience it. But it is actually a very active state. It is like the recharge phase of battery activity. We think of the battery “working” when it is putting out electricity to make things happen. It is an opposite type of activity when it is recharging. But it is activity, without which it is a “one-and-done” battery and not a rechargeable battery. It is taking energy in, filling up its empty tank, getting strong and capable again.

Our stress experience involves our brain in particular. This is what is driving the bus. Reset and recharge is so important to the brain that we spend about 1/3 of our entire lives – 30 years if we live to 90 years old – in brain recharge sleeping. We think nothing is going on, except maybe some dreaming. But the brain is doing reset and recharge. It is taking out the trash physiologically from the prior day's activity. It is storing memories away for the long term. Etc, etc. Between late night eating, bright blue screen light, and being stressed, for many of us our sleep recharge is not able to work for our brains and bodies very well. We end up tired, needing stimulants to wake up, depressed, and functioning poorly overall. It is important to support our Nourish & Flourish™ skills development with the physical brain and body management that will allow our systems to work as designed: sufficient sleep, avoiding late night eating, avoiding bright or blue light before bed, etc. We don't want to be trying to learn to ride a bike that is chained to the bike rack.

Rest is a physiologic necessity that is an inherent critical part of all living systems. Is your heart working all the time? Actually, it is not working most of the time. No, this doesn't mean you are dead, or that there is a problem. If you see an ECG heart monitor tracing, the sharp bursts of lines up and down are when the heart beats or works. The relatively flat line in between is the heart resting and recovering. If you remove the rest phases and have back-to-back, sharp, up-down complexes, it is a medical emergency. You better dial 911. That is an example from the organ level. The same is true on the cellular level. If you recall high school biology we learned about the cell division and replication cycle, how the DNA gets divided and forms two new cells from the one original cell. There are phases in the division cycle the cell goes through. One of those phases is the "rest" phase. If you remove this phase, do you know what the cell now is? It is cancer: a normal cell minus the ability to rest. Whenever you do not have effective, regular "rest" phases, things go very badly. They fall apart. They die.



### **Its Not Primarily About the Stressors**

Here is one of the biggest – and never talked about – “aha” truths of “stress”. The stress we experience is not primarily about the stressors in our lives. It is about the lack of effective “rest” in our lives. It is about the lack of regular recharge and recovery and reset. This is readily apparent if you look around and pay attention. People may be living in a tin shack in the jungle, displaced by war, but be basically happy and content. Other people will be driving their big black luxury vehicle down beautifully smooth paved streets in lands of plenty, and become very stressed very quickly and lose control of their temper because someone else wasn't driving to their liking. We need to dispel the illusion: “stress experienced = my stressors”. We need to get in sync with the reality that most of our stress experience is a lack of resilience – a lack of regular, effective recharge, a lack of rest. Developing and practicing the skill of rest is our best direct method of changing our stress experience. The reality is:

Stressors

$$\text{Stress Experienced} = \frac{\text{Stressors}}{\text{Resilience}}$$

It is not really our stressors that stress us, but really more our perception of our stressors. It is not how big they actually are objectively. Notice that our Stress Experienced changes dramatically based on the magnitude of our Resilience. If our Resilience is large, even big stressors don't produce that much Stress Experienced. But if our Resilience is low or small, even small Stressors will produce maxed out Stress Experienced. The main issue in our stress experience is our resilience – or lack thereof. It is not our stressors.

### Direct and Indirect

This guide is focused on the basics of the direct method of changing our stress experience. This is often the best place to start. To provide a full perspective, it is important to know that there is also the "indirect" or whole-person-programming understanding of the stress experience. The direct method engages the physical physiology of stress directly. The indirect or whole person approach is dealing with the processes, and choices or lack thereof, that tend to generate the emotional-physical stress experience. How do we interpret our environment and it's dynamics and people? Who are we? How do we process life and make meaning? What choices do we think we have? Or do we feel like we have no choice? Our Who (being) processes, drive our Why (thought) processes, which drive our How (emotions) processes, which drive our What (physical actions) processes or behaviors. If we would like to change what is being produced at the emotional and physical levels, we change what is occurring upstream. This whole person programming and reprogramming is a longer and deeper process, but is important to understand as we seek to become more and more resilient, and less and less "stressed".



### STRESSORS

When most people think of stressors they think of challenging circumstances. Often those circumstances involve other people. To get a good handle on stressors we need to break them down and understand them better. The good news is that we have a whole lot more potential control over the things that actually stress us than we realize. (Every arrow in The Stress Experience illustration is an opportunity for choice – things we inherently control.) Which means we can change or manage our stressors or stress responses and experience much less distress.

### **Internal**

Let's be clear. Stress happens inside of us. No event is inherently stress. So, in this sense, all stress is internal. But often the biggest stressors are simply our attempts at living contrary to how we are wired to work. Being an alcoholic as a means of trying to cope with relational or emotional pain, is very stressful. Interpreting others as being against you and not liking you, because your interpretation processes are dysfunctional and not because they actually dislike you, is very stressful. Not knowing how to express your concerns in constructive ways in your workplace, is stressful.

The biggest, most pervasive stressors are within ourselves: not functioning in harmony with our design. This has two major aspects or categories: 1) using actively destructive methods to do life, and, 2) simply lacking the positive skills to operate well. Dealing with internal stressors is a matter of learning to manage ourselves well and healthfully – to operate the systems as they were designed to be operated.

### **External**

External stressors are variations on place or circumstances, and time. It is the things we do not inherently control directly. Dealing with external stressors is a matter of managing one's environment and circumstances well to the extent that is possible.

### **Relational**

For many people the single biggest stressor is other people. How we relate to other people, and how they relate to us in practice. This makes a lot of sense when we understand that the primary purpose of our existence is to connect in relationships. This includes in the vertical dimension with God or a Higher Power, though obviously that has some differences from our horizontal relationships with other people. Relationships are both external and internal potential stressors. They involve every aspect of our existence. We manage our relationships with others by managing both the environments and time we share with them, and the internal relationship processes of ourselves in back and forth exchange with other people's internal processes.

### **Little White Picket Fence**

Being clear on what we can and can't actually control, and living accordingly is a HUGE factor in our stress experience. Some people call this "boundaries". In professional psychological circles we may call it "locus of control". Imagine a picture perfect little neighborhood with rows of cute little houses lining the street on both sides. Each house has a yard and a white picket fence around it. Inside each home's fence is what belongs to and is controlled by that home-owner. They manage their lawn, flowers, garden, or whatever. Outside of that fence is either publicly owned/shared land – like the sidewalks and street – or other neighbors properties. Each home-owner can only control their own yard – what is within their little white picket fence. When one home-owner tries to control what is happening in other neighbors yards or in the public space as if they expected to control it like their own yard, things go bad very quickly. It is VERY stressful. Similarly, when someone else tries to control your yard, or has their pet pee and poop in your yard and kills your lawn and flowers, that doesn't work well.

Practicing identifying and implementing what we can and can't control or be responsible for is a major life skill, and one of the biggest issues with becoming competent in functioning well and minimizing stress generated. This is especially true with other people and relationships. Becoming proficient in managing one's own little white picket fence, including letting other own their own "stuff", is one of the top ways to both decrease the stressors and increase the resilience in one's life.