

Managing Stress

Pre- and Post-Transplant



GUIDANCE & RESOURCES
FOR RESILIENCE

TRANSPLANT WELLNESS PROGRAM

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Contributors to this manual include the Transplant Wellness and Health and Wellness study teams: S. Nicole Culos-Reed (PhD), Maneka Perinpanayagam (PhD), Katie Bakgaard (BKin, ACSM-CEP), Jenna Sim (MSc), Mandy McIntosh and the Transplant Wellness Patient Advisory Board.

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INTRODUCTION

Undergoing a transplant is a life-changing journey that can bring hope, healing, and new beginnings. At the same time, it can also bring challenges, uncertainties, and stress—both before and after the procedure. Feeling stress is a natural response to these experiences. Learning how to recognize and manage stressors can make a meaningful difference in your overall well-being and recovery.

Managing stress before and after a transplant is an important skill to develop. Before transplant, stress often stems from the uncertainty of finding a suitable donor, the risks involved, the waiting period, and concerns about the surgery's outcome. After transplant, stress can be just as challenging, as you adjust to a new reality that may include a strict medication schedule and lifestyle changes to prevent organ rejection.

This resource has been created to support you through every stage of the transplant process. Inside, you'll find practical tools, mindful strategies, and guidance from the Transplant Wellness Program to help you care for your mind and body. Whether you are preparing for your transplant, or adjusting to life afterward, these resources are designed to strengthen resilience, reduce stress, and promote healing.

Remember: Stress is a normal part of the transplant journey. These strategies are not about removing stress entirely, but about giving you tools to cope and regain balance as you move forward in your new normal.

WHAT IS STRESS?

Stress is your body's natural reaction to a challenge, demand, or pressure. When something feels threatening or overwhelming, your brain signals your body to get ready to respond. Your heart might beat faster, your breathing may quicken, and your muscles tense up. This “fight-or-flight” response is designed to help you deal with the situation.

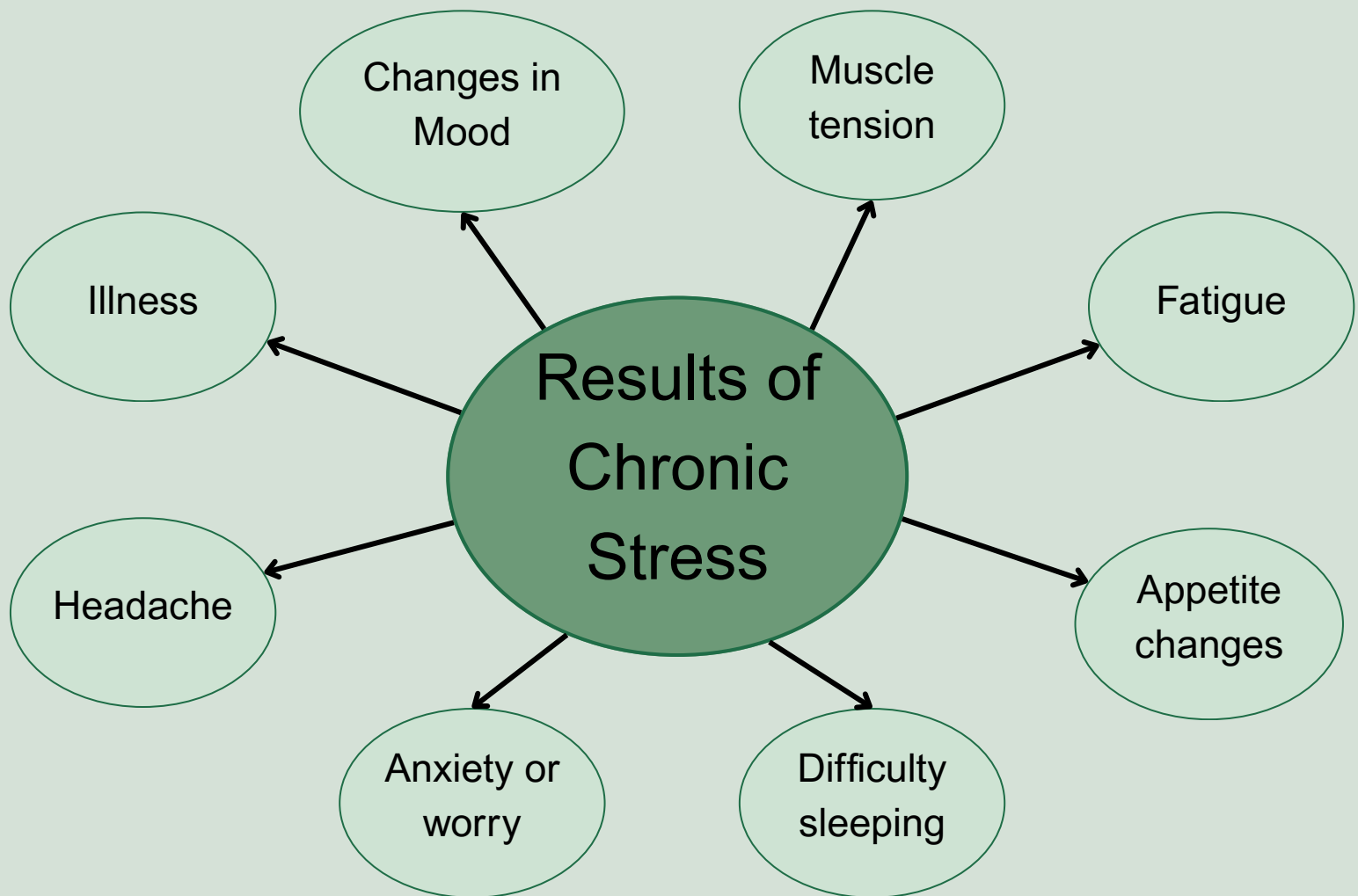
A little stress can actually be useful—it can push you to meet deadlines, stay alert, or perform well. But if stress goes on for too long or feels constant, it can wear you down and affect your health, mood, and energy.

Overtime, stress can negatively influence your wellbeing and your ability to manage ongoing health concerns.



HOW OUR BODY RESPONDS

Your body responds to stress (both positive and negative stressors) in a way that helps keep you balanced and safe. Stress results in a release of hormones that are designed to help you cope with the stressor. However, when we are experiencing chronic stress, these hormones are no longer as beneficial. Chronic stress leads to a variety of negative effects on the body.



Managing stress begins with recognizing where it comes from and how your body responds. Which of the results above do you experience? The worksheet on the following page will give you a chance to reflect on this.

Strategies for Managing Stress

Stress is a natural response to any *perceived* or *actual* threat. It can result in both physical and mental/emotional symptoms. Recognizing stressors and stress symptoms for when is the first step in building strategies to manage your stress levels.

Common stressors

- Managing chronic disease
- Uncertainty about future
- Unpredictability of transplant
- Medical procedures
- Family responsibilities
- Work responsibilities
- Life changes

Stress responses

- Muscle tension
- Exhaustion/fatigue
- Irritability
- Anxiety or worry
- Difficulty sleeping
- Appetite changes
- Weakened immune system

Stressors I am experiencing:

Stress responses I notice:

STRESS MANAGEMENT RESOURCES

The following pages provide evidence-based resources and practical examples of skills to help you manage your response to stress. The rest of this manual will walk you through specific strategies for managing stress during your transplant journey.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY:

Physical activity is one of the best evidence-based ways to reduce stress, increase energy, and improve quality of life. This manual provides a summary of benefits to engaging in regular exercise. More detailed information about how to incorporate physical activity into your life is outlined in the Physical Activity Wellness Manual.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION:

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a simple technique that reduces stress by tensing and relaxing different muscle groups to release built-up tension. In this manual, you will find a clear step-by-step guide to practice PMR and experience a calmer, more relaxed body and mind.

MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION:

Mindfulness and meditation are practices that help you to calm the mind and manage stress. This manual includes examples of affirmations and a guided meditation practice to support you in cultivating these skills in your daily life.

JOURNALING:

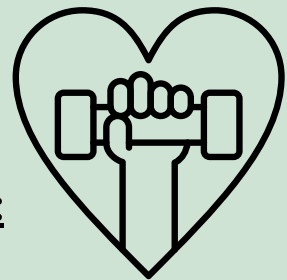
Journaling is a self-care method that can help improve wellness and alleviate mental distress. Tips for getting started on journaling and prompts are provided to support you in this process.

BREATH WORK:

Breath work is a quick wellness technique that can be done anywhere and helps you remain grounded and present. This manual provides instructions on how to perform different breath work techniques and links to guided breath work practice.

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

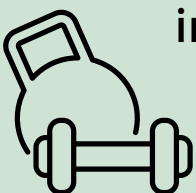
Physical activity is one of the most effective ways to relieve stress. Whether it's a walk, some gentle stretching, or a full workout, moving your body helps your mind and body reset so you can feel calmer, think more clearly, and cope better with challenges.



Moving your body helps lower stress by:

- Reducing stress hormones like cortisol
- Boosting feel-good chemicals like endorphins
- Calming the nervous system, helping you relax faster
- Improved brain function and mood
- Improving sleep, which makes stress easier to handle
- Clearing your mind, giving you a mental break
- Connecting with others, which adds emotional support

More detailed information about how to incorporate physical activity into your life is outlined in the Physical Activity Wellness Manual.



All levels of activity can make a big difference in how you feel and cope with stress.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION



Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) is a technique that helps reduce stress by teaching you to notice and release muscle tension. It involves tensing specific muscle groups for a few seconds, then slowly letting them relax. By moving through the body—from head to toe or vice versa—you become more aware of tension patterns and learn how to consciously let go. Regular practice calms the nervous system, lowers stress, and promotes a sense of physical and mental relaxation.



Follow the step-by-step guide on the next pages to start using PMR today!

Tips: Practice daily (8–12 minutes).

Skip any injured/painful areas.

Use a lighter, “mini-PMR” (steps 9–12) anytime during the day.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION: STEP-BY-STEP

Timing cue for each muscle group: Inhale and gently tense for 5–7 seconds → exhale and fully release for 10–20 seconds.

Keep tension moderate (no pain) and don't hold your breath.

1. Set up: Sit or lie down comfortably. Uncross legs/arms. Close eyes if helpful.

2. Breath anchor: Take one slow breath in... and out... letting the body settle.

3. Feet & toes: Curl toes downward; release.

4. Calves: Flex feet (toes toward nose) to tighten calves; release.

5. Thighs: Squeeze thighs or press heels into floor; release.

6. Glutes (buttocks): Gently squeeze; release.

7. Abdomen: Gently brace belly (light contraction you can still breathe through); release.

8. Chest & upper back: Draw shoulder blades slightly together; release.

PROGRESSIVE MUSCLE RELAXATION: STEP-BY-STEP

9. Hands: Make fists; release.

10. Forearms: Bend wrists up (as if stopping traffic) to tighten forearms; release.

11. Upper arms: Bend elbows and tighten biceps; release.

12. Shoulders: Shrug toward ears; release.

13. Neck: Press head gently back into support (small effort); release. (Skip if neck issues.)

14. Jaw: Clench lightly; release—let the jaw hang loose.

15. Mouth & Nose: Press lips together, scrunch nose; release.

16. Eyes & forehead: Squeeze eyes shut; release. Then raise eyebrows wide; release.

17. Whole-body sweep: Notice any leftover tension. Breathe in, soften the whole body as you exhale.

Finish (optional): Count up 1-3, open eyes, and re-orient slowly.

MINDFULNESS & MEDITATION

Meditation for stress reduction is a practice that helps calm the mind and body by focusing attention and promoting relaxation. Through techniques like mindful breathing, or focusing on an affirmation, meditation lowers stress hormones, reduces racing thoughts, and creates a sense of inner calm. Regular practice can improve focus, emotional balance, and resilience to daily stress.



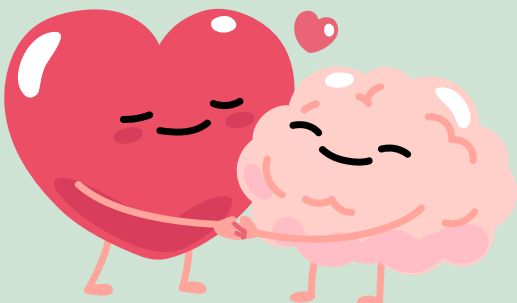
Mindfulness and meditation are closely connected and work together. Meditation gives you a chance to practice focus and calm, while mindfulness is the gentle awareness you can carry with you into everyday moments.

In short:

Meditation = the practice

Mindfulness = the quality of awareness

The following pages offer opportunities to practice meditation and mindfulness, including examples of affirmations you can use to manage stress throughout your day.



MINDFULNESS & MEDITATION

Repeating an affirmation during meditation helps focus the mind, reducing distracting thoughts and mental chatter. This repetition promotes calmness, reinforces positive thinking, and strengthens a sense of control over stress. Over time, regularly using an affirmation can make it easier to access relaxation and mindfulness in daily life.

Here are some meaningful affirmations you can use at any stage of your transplant journey:

“I honor what my body needs today.”

“I am more than my illness.”

“Rest is not weakness; it’s healing.”

“I choose patience with myself.”

“Small steps are still progress.”

“I listen to my body with kindness.”

“I am learning to live well with what I have.”

“I can do hard things, in my own way.”

“I give myself permission to slow down.”

“Healing is not linear, and that is okay.”

“I am adapting, and that shows strength.”

“Today, I will focus on what I can do.”

“This is my new normal.”

“Progress, not perfection.”

“I am capable.”



MINDFUL MEDITATION: STEP-BY-STEP

This guided meditation will take between 5-10 minutes. Chose an affirmation on the previous page to utilize throughout your practice.

1) Set up (30 sec) Sit comfortably (chair or cushion), spine tall, feet grounded or legs crossed. Soften shoulders, rest hands, gently close eyes or lower your gaze.

Optional: set a 5-10 minute timer.

2) Take three settling breaths (20 sec) Inhale through the nose... slow, easy exhale through the mouth. Let the out-breath be slightly longer than the in-breath.

3) Focus on the breath (3-9 min) Feel each inhale and exhale at your chosen spot. If helpful, silently repeat an affirmation during this time.

4) When the mind wanders (every time it happens)

Notice it → name it (“thinking,” “planning,” “worry”). Gently return to the breath. No judgment.

6) Soften the body (30 sec) Scan forehead, jaw, shoulders, hands, belly—release any clenching on each exhale.

7) Close the practice (30 sec) Deep breath in... long exhale.

Open eyes, notice one thing you can see/hear/feel.

Ask: “How do I feel now compared to when I started?”

MEDITATION: RESOURCES

The following are additional resources that you can easily access from your mobile device. Click the links below to explore two meditation apps and one meditation podcast.



Headspace

Mental health support is made accessible to everyone through the flagship Headspace app, users can access mindfulness tools for everyday life, including meditations, sleepcasts, mindful movement, and focus exercises.



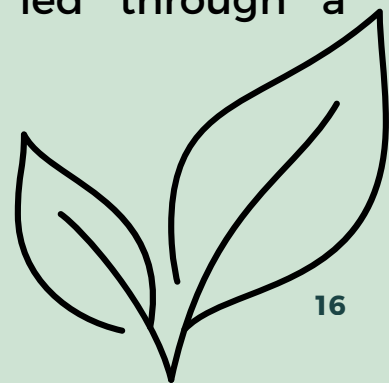
Calm

A mental health app designed to support stress management, better sleep, and overall well-being. The app offers research-based tools such as guided meditations, 500+ Sleep Stories®, soundscapes, breathing exercises, and stress management practices.



First This

First This is a short mindfulness and meditation podcast by Kathryn Nicolai. Take ten minutes to settle your mind, observe your breath, and be gently led through a meditation practice.



JOURNALING

Journaling is a self-care practice that can support overall wellness. It can take many forms, such as identifying emotions, writing about stressful situations, or practicing gratitude. There's no right or wrong way to journal—exploring different approaches can help you discover what feels most helpful for you.

Tips for starting out:

1. **Keep it brief.** Even 5-10 minutes a day can make a difference. Keep it easy, don't feel pressured to write pages and pages.
2. **Any Format Works.** A simple notebook, a notes app on your phone, or a dedicated journaling app are all great options. Choose what feels easiest to access.
3. **No Rules: This is your space.** Say what is on your mind, don't worry about grammar or spelling. Just let your thoughts flow freely.



JOURNALING: PROMPTS TO GET STARTED

1. Today's Intention / Focus:

What is one thing I want to focus on or achieve today?

2. Morning Reflections / Starting the Day:

How am I feeling right now (mentally, emotionally, physically)? What's on my mind as I begin the day?

3. Key Events / Experiences of the Day:

What were the most significant things that happened today? (Big or small)



4. Moments of Gratitude:

What am I grateful for today? (List at least 3 things)

5. Challenges / Lessons Learned:

What challenges did I face today? What did I learn from them?

6. Evening Reflections / Looking Ahead:

How am I feeling now at the end of the day?

What do I need to let go of from today?

What is one thing I'm looking forward to tomorrow?



BREATH WORK

Deep breathing is a mindfulness technique that can help with relaxation and stress reduction. There are a variety of different types of breath work, with two common practices known as diaphragmatic breathing, or "belly breathing" and box breathing. These breathing techniques can help shift your body and mind from a tense fight-or-flight response into a calmer state.

With the stresses and uncertainty surrounding transplant, you may notice feeling more stressed or anxious than usual, signaling your body might be in a fight-or-flight response. Integrating breathwork into your routine may help to reduce some of the stress you may be experiencing along the transplant journey.



Videos for Breathing Techniques found on YouTube:

Box Breathing Technique: Practice Breathwork for Focus and Anxiety with Dora Kamau

Breathing Technique to Relax: Belly Breathing Exercise with Dora Kamau

BREATH WORK: STEP-BY-STEP

Exercise: Box Breathing

Begin standing, seated, or lying down. Pick whichever position is most comfortable. Release any tension you are holding in your body

To begin, follow this breathing pattern:

- 1) Inhale slowly through your nose for four counts, focusing on your belly expanding.
- 2) Hold your breath at the top for four counts.
- 3) Exhale slowly and controllably through your mouth for four counts.
- 4) Hold your breath out for four counts. Repeat this cycle until you achieve a state of relaxation.



THINKING AHEAD: STRESS MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Having a stress management plan ensures you're prepared when challenges arise. A clear plan provides strategies you can turn to right away, helping you respond to stress in a healthier and more effective way.



Use the worksheet on the next page to reflect on your current stress management strategies and create a new plan that incorporates one of the techniques from this manual.

Strategies for Managing Stress

Stress is a natural response to any *perceived* or *actual* threat.

Having a stress management strategy helps maintain balance, health, and resilience. Take a moment to reflect on the ways stress is currently managed and consider which strategies have been helpful or challenging. Think about new approaches you're willing to try, and set small, achievable goals to incorporate these into your routine for better stress control.

Stress management strategies I currently use:

Stress management strategies I am willing to try:

Goal setting for new stress management strategies:

CLOSING REFLECTION

It is important to remember that stress management techniques do not remove the stressors in our lives. Having a toolkit of strategies can help us shift how we respond to stressors. While external challenges may remain, these practices allow us to approach them with greater calm, perspective, and resilience. Instead of being overwhelmed, we can acknowledge the stress and manage it more effectively.

When we calm the body's stress response, we not only feel more at ease emotionally but also support our physical health and reduce the burden of other symptoms. By integrating these techniques into daily life, you are giving yourself practical tools to protect your well-being, strengthen your resilience, and create space for healing.

We hope this manual has offered you useful insights and practical strategies to support your well-being. Our goal is that you not only feel equipped with new stress management skills but also encouraged to try them in your own daily life. Small steps can make a meaningful difference in how you experience and manage stress each day.

CONTACT DETAILS

TWP Team:

Nicole Culos-Reed, PhD. Behaviour Change Researcher

Katie Bakgaard, BKin, ACSM-CEP, Clinical Exercise Physiologist

Jenna Sim, MSc. PhD Student

Research Program Manager:

Maneka Perinpanayagam, PhD

Clinical Team:

Stefan Mustata, MD

Kelly Burak, MD

Email: twp@ucalgary.ca



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