

Additional Training Material for Module 5, Topic 4: Self-Improvement Techniques

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Module 5, Topic 4: Self-Improvement Techniques

1. An introduction to self-improvement techniques

There are many things one can do to feel better, e.g. read a book, learn a new language, start a new hobby. Here is a list of 39 more things like that:

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/lifestyle/42-practical-ways-to-improve-yourself.html>

However self-improvement is more than just doing small things to feel better. It is a personal change. It means that you start thinking, feeling, and behaving differently than you did before. This change is to obtain harder than by just peppering up your everyday life. Self-improvement starts with identifying your (patterns of) thinking, feeling, and behaving. It starts with self-observation. To be able to evaluate own characteristics one has to compare it to others'. Therefore observing others' behavior and their reactions, and being attentive to their words is a sensible introduction into self-improvement. Here is more on this practice:

<http://www.successconsciousness.com/self-improvement.htm>

The goal of analysing own characteristics is to identify situations in which we react in the way that we are not satisfied with. Soon we will realise that our reactions are least favourable when we are under stress. So identifying what stresses us respectively what our stressors are is a highly desirable action and skill.

Learn more



Science based guidelines on how to attempt changing unhealthy habits and behaviour: <http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/why-its-hard-to-change-unhealthy-behavior>



On the link below you will find synopses of a PDF book on self-improvement at working place. Go through these 8 steps/modules to access yourself and see what it comes down to at your working habits: http://www.accel-team.com/training/perEval_04.html

2. Stress management

“Stress is the feeling of being under too much mental or emotional pressure. Pressure turns into stress when you feel unable to cope. People have different ways of reacting to stress, so a situation that feels stressful to one person may be motivating to someone else.” (NHS1)

“Stress is a normal psychological and physical reaction to the ever-increasing demands of life. Surveys show that many Americans experience challenges with stress at some point during the year.

In looking at the causes of stress, remember that your brain comes hard-wired with an alarm system for your protection. When your brain perceives a threat, it signals your body to release a burst of hormones to fuel your capacity for a response. This has been labeled the "fight-or-flight" response.

Once the threat is gone, your body is meant to return to a normal relaxed state. Unfortunately, the nonstop stress of modern life means that your alarm system rarely shuts off.

That's why stress management is so important. Stress management gives you a range of tools to reset your alarm system.

Without stress management, all too often your body is always on high alert. Over time, high levels of stress lead to serious health problems. Don't wait until stress has a negative impact on your health, relationships or quality of life. Start practicing a range of stress management techniques today.” (MAYOCLINIC1)

Identifying stressors

Each person is unique and little different from all other people so everyone will have his/her own specific situations that put (only) him/her under (a big portion of) stress. Yet we are all human and we have many things in common which goes also for our personalities that are in close relationship with stress and stressors respectively with situations and issues that put us under pressure. There are 11 common stressors: (WHOLELIVING1)

1. Money issues
2. A job that never ends (i.e. available and working all the time)
3. A job you don't like
4. Your relationship
5. Constant caregiving (i.e. fighting health concerns of yourself and of your relatives)
6. Holiday pressure (i.e. traveling arrangements, shopping, preparing meals etc.)
7. Taking on too much (i.e. not able to say “no” to others)
8. Not enough quality time (i.e. no time for yourself and your friends)
9. Striving to be perfect
10. A lack of passion (i.e. activities that bring us delight or inspiration)
11. Disorganized Clutter (i.e. disorganized home, desk, inbox, and other storage places)

An extended description on these as well further reading on how to remove these stressors can be found on the WHOLELIVING1 page (see Cited Web-Sites at the end of the topic).



- *Jump up and down 15 times, put your hand to your chest and listen to your breathing. What you feel is exactly what the stress response triggers when it is activated. (HUMANSTRESS1)*
- *If you're not sure what's causing your stress, keep a diary and make a note of stressful episodes for two-to-four weeks. Then review it to spot the triggers. Things you might want to write down include: the date, time and place of a stressful episode; what you were doing; who you were with; how you felt emotionally; what you were thinking; what you started doing; how you felt physically; a stress rating 0-10 where 10 is the most stressed you could ever feel. (NHS1)*
- *Go through the following "roadmap" to find your stressors and how to relief them:*

www.wholeliving.com/images/assets/module/package/less_stress/wl_lessstress_roadmap.pdf

Principles of stress management

Principles of stress management help you to achieve success at stress management. They help you counter the self-defeating beliefs that create distress and they help you overcome a number of common blocks to using the practical strategies that are a standard part of stress management training. (MANAGINGSTRESS1) Various authors and institutions count down various number of stress management principles. Here are two examples.

Canadian Centre for Studies on Human Stress (HUMANSTRESS) has two principles of stress management:

- There are no easy solutions.
- There are no universal solutions.

The British Centre for Stress Management (MANAGINGSTRESS) lists the following "Twelve Rational Principles":

- Self-Knowledge
- Self-Acceptance and Confidence
- Enlightened Self-Interest
- Tolerance for Frustration and Discomfort

- Long-Range Enjoyment
- Risk-Taking
- Moderation
- Emotional and Behavioural Responsibility
- Self-Direction and Commitment
- Flexibility
- Objective Thinking
- Acceptance of Reality

You will find a one page description and further reading tips for each of these at MANGINGSTRESS1 page <http://www.managingstress.com/#!twelve-rational-principles/csbs>.



The following short paper presents four principles of stress management that are suitable for self-practice: www.lianalowenstein.com/articleStressProf.pdf

Coping strategies

Under coping strategies we understand actions we (can) take to prevent or respond to stress. More generally “coping refers to the thoughts and actions we use to deal with a threatening situation” (HUMANSTRESS2). Coping strategies are mostly broken down into positive and negative, where “negative coping responses often make your stress worse, because they wear you down over time or are temporary distractions. On the other hand, positive coping responses keep you in the present moment and give you chances to actively work toward solving your problems.” (WEBMD1)

Here are positive and negative “coping responses” listed from the cited WEBMD site:

Positive coping responses

- Listening to music
- Playing with a pet
- Laughing or crying
- Going out with a friend (shopping, movie, dining)
- Taking a bath or shower
- Writing, painting, or doing other creative activities
- Praying or going to church
- Exercising or getting outdoors to enjoy nature
- Discussing situations with a spouse or close friend
- Gardening or making home repairs
- Practicing deep breathing, meditation, or muscle relaxation
- Making and following through with an action plan to solve your problems.
- Seeking counseling if you continue to struggle with stress.

Negative coping responses

- Criticizing yourself (negative self-talk)
- Driving fast in a car
- Chewing your fingernails
- Becoming aggressive or violent (hitting someone, throwing or kicking something)
- Eating too much or too little or drinking a lot of coffee
- Smoking or chewing tobacco
- Drinking alcohol
- Yelling at your spouse, children, or friends
- Taking a recreational drug, or misusing prescription medicine
- Avoiding friends and family

Not all positive coping responses will work for every person: “A stressful situation may be considered a threat for you but not necessarily for your neighbor. You and your neighbor may become stressed by the same situation, but for different reasons (e.g. the situation is new for you, but unpredictable for your neighbor). After all, since we all become stressed for various reasons we will need to choose different coping strategies.” (HUMANSTRESS2)

Coping strategies can be divided into problem-focused and emotion-focused:
(HUMANSTRESS2)

- **Problem-focused strategies** rely on using active ways to directly tackle the situation that caused the stress: you must concentrate on the problem. Here are some examples:
 - Analyze the situation; e.g. Pay attention, avoid taking on more responsibility than you can manage.
 - Work harder; e.g. Stay up all night to study for an exam
 - Apply what you have already learned to your daily life; e.g. You lose your job for the second time - you now know the steps to apply for a new job
 - Talk to a person that has a direct impact on the situation; e.g. Talk directly to your boss to ask for an extension to the project that is due in one week.
- **Emotion-focused strategies** are used to handle feelings of distress, rather than the actual problem situation. You focus on your emotions:
 - Brood; e.g. you accept new tasks instead of saying “no”, but you keep complaining and saying it is unfair.

- Imagine/Magic thinking; e.g. You dream about a better financial situation.
- Avoid/Deny; e.g. You avoid everything that is related to this situation or you take drugs and/or alcohol to escape from this situation.
- Blame; e.g. You blame yourself or others for the situation.
- Social support; e.g. You talk to your best friend about your concerns.

Effective prevention and coping techniques

When facing stress the most unhelpful thing you can do is turn to something unhealthy to help you cope, such as smoking or drinking. Likewise not taking control of the situation and doing nothing will only make your problems worse. The keys to good stress management are building emotional strength, being in control of your situation, having a good social network and adopting a positive outlook. (NHS2) Here are some strategies you can adopt (in not cited differently the text and examples are taken from the NHS2 page):

Adopting a healthy lifestyle

Unhealthy habits like drinking alcohol, caffeine and smoking won't solve your problems over the long term. They'll just create new ones. The same goes for sweets. Instead try to eat and live healthy. Choose what you put into yourself and what you engage your body and mind with. This will put you in control and give you the feeling of doing something good (for your body). Exercise every second day (see below).

Time out

Take time for yourself and for the things you enjoy. Don't take your work home and don't do just things that you "have to". If you think that you are not able to do this than set a day or two per week with hours booked only for yourself respectively for "my fun".

Exercise

"We think that the mind and body are separate. But what you do with your body can have a powerful effect on your mental wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing means feeling good – both about yourself and about the world around you. It means being able to get on with life in the way you want.

Evidence shows that there is a link between being physically active and good mental wellbeing.

Being active doesn't mean you need to spend hours in the gym, if that doesn't appeal to you. Find physical activities that you enjoy and think about how to fit more of them into your daily life." (NHS3)

Learn more



On the NHS3 page (<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mental-benefits-of-exercise.aspx>) you will find more materials on exercises and being active as a strategy for coping with stress and improving own well-being. There is scientific evidence as well as practical tips.

Attitude control

There's a solution to any problem. If you cannot induce it at once or by planning wait for it to come. This means to be positive. Look for the positives in your life and things for which you're grateful. Try to be glass half full instead of glass half empty.



Try writing down three things that went well, or for which you're grateful, at the end of every day.

It is wrong to think that you cannot do anything about your problem. This passivity gives you the feeling that you don't have control over your problem (and over your life). The loss of control is one of the main causes for stress and lack of wellbeing. The act of taking control is in itself empowering, and it's a crucial part of finding a solution that satisfies you and not someone else.

Work smarter, not harder. Concentrate on tasks that will make a real difference and leave the least important tasks to last. Accept that at the end of the day there will still be lots of work waiting for you. But make sure that you have completed the most important tasks of this day.

Challenge yourself by setting goals, at work and outside. Learning new things or taking up new or long-not-practiced sports or hobbies will challenge you and make you active. This builds up confidence which helps you to deal with stress. Learning arms you with knowledge and makes you want to do things rather than be passive.

In the end you have to accept things that you cannot change. Try to concentrate on the things you do have control over.



If your company is going under and is making redundancies what can you do as an employee?

Social engagement

It is important to keep a network of friends and to nurture bonds to your family and colleagues. So when you need them you can turn to them and get a needed support be it in words or in actions. Talking things through with a friend will help you find solutions to your problems and activities we do with friends help us relax. We often have a good laugh with them, which is an excellent stress reliever.

Furthermore helping other people, through activities such as volunteering or community work, makes you more resilient and feel happy. Helping people who are often in situations worse than yours will help you put your problems into perspective, i.e. you will stop thinking exclusively of your problems and seeing your life only in the negative perspective.



If you don't have time to volunteer, try to do someone a favour every day. It can be something as small as helping someone to cross the road or going on a coffee run for colleagues.

Learn more



Here is more information on why helping others makes us feel good and there are more tips on what to do today or this week that will improve your mental wellbeing: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/give-for-mental-wellbeing.aspx>

Biofeedback

“Biofeedback is a technique you can use to learn to control your body's functions, such as your heart rate. With biofeedback, you're connected to electrical sensors that help you receive information (feedback) about your body (bio).

This feedback helps you focus on making subtle changes in your body, such as relaxing certain muscles, to achieve the results you want, such as reducing pain. In essence, biofeedback gives you the power to use your thoughts to control your body, often to improve a health condition or physical performance.” (MAYOCLINIC2)



In research and health care sophisticated devices and procedures are used for biofeedback. But there are numerous biofeedback devices and apps for personal/home use. They measure your temperature, heart rate, sweating etc. and advise you by what actions to improve your physical (and overall) condition. You can find many of them in this on-line shop:

units.html. But be aware that not everything that is offered on the market works well and is easy to use. The Association for Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback features the following page on what to be attentive of when buying such a device: <http://www.aapb.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageID=3375>

Relaxation techniques

“Relaxation techniques are an essential part of stress management. If you're an overachiever, you may put relaxation low on your priority list. Don't short-change yourself. Everyone needs to relax and recharge.

Relaxation is invaluable for maintaining your health and well-being, and repairing the toll that stress takes on your mind and body.

Almost everyone can benefit from learning relaxation techniques. Relaxation techniques can help to slow your breathing and to focus your attention on the here and now.

Common relaxation techniques include meditation, tai chi and yoga. But there are more-active ways of achieving relaxation. For example, walking outdoors or participating in a sports activity can be relaxing and help reduce stress.

It doesn't matter which relaxation technique you choose. What matters is that you select a technique that works for you and that you practice achieving relaxation regularly.” (MAYOCLINIC3)



A simple breathing exercise for stress that takes just few minutes and can be done anywhere:

If you're sitting, place your arms on the chair arms. If you're sitting or standing, place both feet flat on the ground. Whatever position you're in, place your feet roughly hip-width apart.

- *Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it.*
- *Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.*
- *Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from one to five. You may not be able to reach five at first.*
- *Then, without pausing or holding your breath, let it flow out gently, counting from one to five again, if you find this helpful.*
- *Keep doing this for three to five minutes.*

You will get the most benefit if you do it regularly, as part of your daily routine. (NHS4)

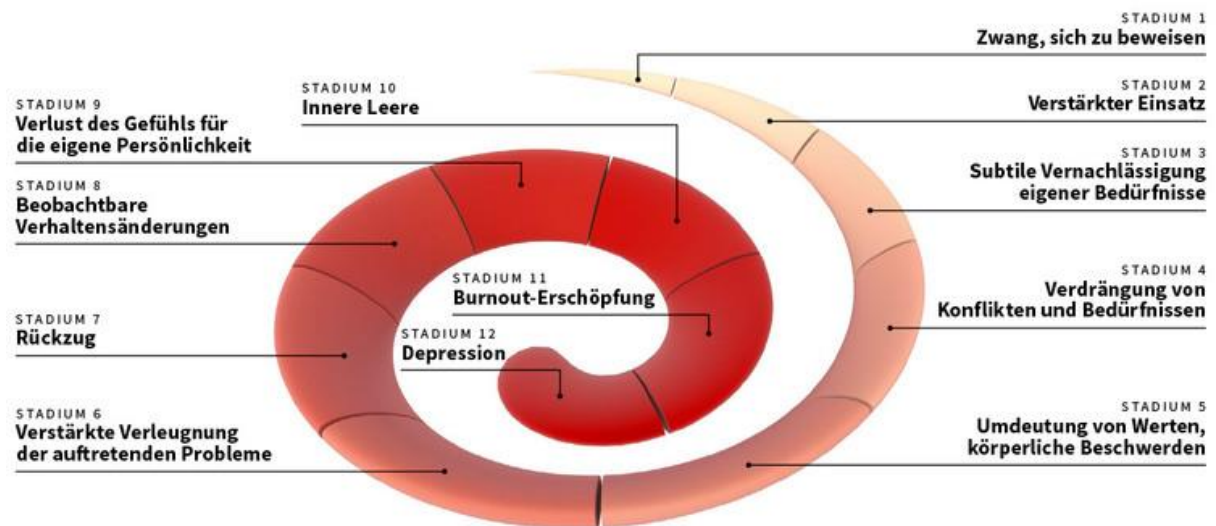
Controlling the stress spiral: stress – burnout – depression

Burnout cannot be clearly defined, it is “best described as an *exhaustion process*, a downward spiral of exhaustion between the condition of ideal health and a clearly defined illness such as depression.

This *downward spiral of exhaustion or burnout* (see diagram) generally lasts several months or even years and can be reversed at any point, before it ultimately leads to stress-associated illnesses such as depression.

It is not possible to isolate direct causes of the burnout process, but today we are aware of the main risk factors. These can be both of a personal and occupational nature. It is personality traits and work-related environmental factors, often in conjunction with other stressors that lead via complicated interactions to the state of burnout.

As said it starts with stress – suddenly problems can't be solved and important targets are unexpectedly not reached. Both of these lead to frustration that can't be simply shrugged off. Then something decisive happens. The person redoubles their efforts in an attempt to resolve the problems, to still achieve the objectives. The feeling of frustration becomes stronger and they spiral further down the slippery slope of burnout, driven on by the risk factors.” (BURNOUTPROTECTOR1)



*Burnout spiral according to Freudenberger and adapted by von Känel, 1990,
©Burnout Protector Ltd.*

Recognizing and differentiating between signs of stress – burnout – depression

The difference between stress and burnout is a matter of degree whereas the difference between burnout and depression is a matter of scope. Stress has several forms and intensities and burnout is its final, most intense and dangerous state for

your body and mind. Burnout and depression are very similar and hard to tell apart. Briefly it can be said that burnout is work-related and depression has a broader spectrum of causes and consequences and, as seen on the image above, can be the consequence of burnout. Yet some authors (e.g. PSYCHOLOGYTODAY1) see depression, i.e. “having more bad days than good ones” and “thinking the world would be better off without you”, as accompanying state of burnout.

Both have following symptoms: (15minutes4me_1)

- Concentration issues, i.e. the patient has problems with attention and focusing
- Memory issues, i.e. the patient has problems remembering things and to do tasks
- Sleeping issues, i.e. the patient suffers under lack of sleep
- Exhausted feeling, i.e. the patient suffers under the feeling he/she has no energy

The main difference is that burnout is considered a consequence of stress at work with far-reaching medical and economic consequences. (BURNOUTPROTECTOR1) whereas depression takes effect on all life areas, especially on relationships with others in family, among friends, and in hobbies. (15minutes4me_1)



Burnout is a problem which is more common in our society than you would originally think. From research, it is shown that 1 out of 20 employees sits at home with a burnout. (15minutes4me_2)

Learn more



On the following page of Dutch commercial self-help provider (15minutes4me) you will find very informative excerpts on burnout from the scientific paper “The relationship between job stress, burnout and clinical depression” from 2003: <http://www.15minutes4me.com/burnout/>

When to seek professional help – available resources

Following are “the warning lights that signal burnout” to look for when you suspect burnout might be happening to you: (PSYCHOLOGYTODAY2)

- Physical signs, such as chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, stomach pain, sleep problems, frequent headaches, chronic fatigue, gynecological problems, and/or increased illness

- Psychological signs, such as loss of enjoyment for activities once enjoyed; sadness; excessive anxiety or worry; panic attacks; feeling trapped without options for relief or escape; loss of motivation; loss of concentration; emotional hypersensitivity at seemingly inconsequential things; feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, or pessimism; and/or increasing feelings of irritability, frustration, or anger
- Behavioral signs, such as skipping meals; little or no appetite or overeating; increase in alcohol or drug use; increased absenteeism; drop in productivity; many uncompleted projects despite long work hours; and/or isolative behaviors, such as wanting to be alone, closing doors to prevent others from access, being generally inaccessible, eating lunch alone, or being a poor team player

If you experience some of the symptoms in all categories pay attention to your lifestyle, most of all to your work. Take step back and apply some of the stress relieving techniques described above. Get better informed - on these pages you will find many web-sites with further information on stress and burnout. If you figured out it would be better to turn to professional help do not hesitate to do so. Talk to your physician or turn directly to a psychiatrist or psychotherapist. Consult your local web-sites to get their contacts. Only one talk might clear up your case and give you certainty about your health condition.

If many of the symptoms above apply seek for professional help as soon as possible.

Learn more



The following page gives you good insight into burnout syndrome and at the end suggests tests first to check whether you are endangered by burnout and then to avoid being burned out:
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/high-octane-women/201205/where-do-you-fall-the-burnout-continuum>



Take the following online test. It not only tells you at what risk of burnout you are but it also displays which are the risk factors involved into burnout:

<http://check.burnoutprotector.com/>

3. Reflection

Definition

Reflection within self-improvement techniques can be defined as the process of “going back” to (and analysing) objects. Under objects we can understand the “outside world”, like nature and events, as well as our “inner world” in which case we speak of self-reflection. Indeed English Wikipedia offers only one term on reflection that is not bound to mathematics, computers or science namely human self-reflection (in philosophy) and defines it as “the capacity of humans to exercise introspection and the willingness to learn more about their fundamental nature, purpose and essence.” So reflection in terms of self-improvement can be understood as self-reflection and by that as the will and ability to “go back” to and analyse own actions and thoughts.

Performing self-reflection rises the amount of self-awareness that English Wikipedia defines as “the capacity for introspection and the ability to recognize oneself as an individual separate from the environment and other individuals“. Although five of six self-awareness stages presented in Wikipedia (WIKIPEDIA1) are developed in childhood and all people without mental illness have reached the sixth respectively self-consciousness stage, this last stage can and should be further differentiated. There are people who are aware only of themselves but not of the impact they take on others and there are people who are aware of this impact. And in-between there are all the different shades of people.

Confusingly the English Wikipedia explains self-consciousness as “an acute sense of self-awareness. It is a preoccupation with oneself, as opposed to the philosophical state of self-awareness, which is the awareness that one exists as an individual being“. According to this self-consciousness is not the last, most elaborated stage of self-awareness but goes beyond it into its dysfunctions (on the same page the paranoia illness is put into context).

Learn more



This short paper/blog post explains further differences between terms bound to (self-) reflection and puts them also in multicultural perspective: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-social-self/201009/reflection-critical-self-improvement>

Here we will stop with our reflection on reflection (that we could also call “meta-reflection”) in hope to have made the reflection process clear enough.



Visit <https://staroversky.com/blog/self-reflection-for-self-improvement> and see how observation is related to reflection and planning for future action.



Try this self-assessment test – read numbered instructions and click on the image/test to download it: <http://www.danielgoleman.info/daniel-goleman-why-self-improvement-begins-with-self-reflection-2/>

Cited websites:

15minutes4me_1: <http://www.15minutes4me.com/burnout/difference-depression/>

15minutes4me_2: <http://www.15minutes4me.com/burnout/>

BURNOUTPROTECTOR1: <http://www.burnoutprotector.com/en/burnout/>

HUMANSTRESS1: <http://www.humanstress.ca/stress/understand-your-stress/recognize-your-stress.html>

HUMANSTRESS2: <http://www.humanstress.ca/stress/trick-your-stress/steps-to-instant-stress-management.html>

MANAGINGSTRESS1: <http://www.managingstress.com/#!twelve-rational-principles/csbs>

MAYOCLINIC1: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/basics/stress-basics/hlv-20049495>

MAYOCLINIC2: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/tests-procedures/biofeedback/>

MAYOCLINIC3: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/basics/relaxation-techniques/>

NHS1: <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/understanding-stress.aspx>

NHS2: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/reduce-stress.aspx>

NHS3: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/Pages/mental-benefits-of-exercise.aspx>

NHS4: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/pages/ways-relieve-stress.aspx>

PSYCHOLOGYTODAY1: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/high-octane-women/201205/where-do-you-fall-the-burnout-continuum>

PSYCHOLOGYTODAY2: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/high-octane-women/201101/running-empty-how-recognize-when-youre-the-road-burnout>

WEBMD1: <http://www.webmd.com/balance/stress-management/tc/common-coping-responses-for-stress-topic-overview>

WHOLELIVING1: <http://www.wholeliving.com/136234/11-common-stress-triggers/@center/136756/stress-relief-your-guided-tour?czone=b¢er=136756&gallery=136177&slide=136234#71778>