Stress Reduction Module #4:

Cracking Your Stress Code – How to Identify, Track, and Reflect for Relief

### Stakeholder Sign Off

| **Name** | **Role\*** | **Initials** | **Date** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| [Heather Muszynski](mailto:heather@kuarahealth.com) | Author | HM | 09.23.24 |
| Mollie Ewing | Approver | Me | 11.4.24 |
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**\*\*Roles**: Approver, Reviewer, Author

### Version Update Management

| **Editor Name** | **Purpose of Revision(s)** | **Stakeholder(s) Notified?** | **Date** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Mollie (on behalf of Dr. Frame) for future V2 | Incorporate [PNC Model](https://takecare.org/resources/pause-notice-choose-turning-off-our-emotional-autopilot/) to common stress trigger example section [here](#97tc5lhh69iw) |  | 11.4.24 |
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|  |  |  |  |

By the end of this module, you should have a clear understanding of:

#### Common stress triggers and their role in the stress response

* Your unique stress triggers, and your emotional and physical responses
* How to recognize and reinforce stress-free moments

#### **Let's Get Started on Module 4!**

This week, we’ll dive into the power of understanding your stress triggers and how to track and reflect on them. By the end of this module, you’ll know how to identify your stressors, how to spot stress-free moments, and why both are key to managing stress more effectively.

### **Understanding Stress Triggers**

Stress triggers are any event, situation, or thought that sparks your body’s stress response. These triggers can be external, like a deadline at work, or internal, such as worrying about your parent's declining health.

#### **Why is it important to know your triggers?**

Recognizing what sets off ***your*** stress response allows you to anticipate and manage your reaction ***before*** stress spirals out of control. Ignoring your triggers often leads to reactive responses, meaning you might feel overwhelmed or anxious before understanding why.

#### **Common Stress Triggers**

While everyone’s stress is personal, there are many universal stress triggers:

* **Work/Career** – Deadlines, starting a new job, losing your job, retiring, etc.
* **Finances** – Paying bills, debt, unexpected expenses, etc.
* **Relationships and Family –** Conflicts with family or friends, juggling relationships, starting a family, caregiving, etc.
* **Health** – Illness, injury, chronic conditions, etc.
* **Life Transitions** – Moving, getting married, having children, etc.

Stress triggers also come in many forms. We might experience emotional stress, physical stress, environmental stress, psychological stress, and/or psychosocial stress.

#### **[EXPANDED OPTION] Research Insights**

* According to the American Psychological Association, work is consistently one of the top causes of stress for Americans. Chronic work stress has been linked to health conditions like hypertension and burnout.
* Studies have shown that financial stress is associated with mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression. People with chronic financial stress may have a heightened stress response, even in non-financial situations.
* Interpersonal stress can activate your "fight or flight" response, and, if left unaddressed, it can damage relationships. It’s critical to manage this type of stress to maintain emotional well-being and strong connections.
* External environmental stressors, such as noise pollution or overcrowding, can trigger chronic stress responses in those sensitive to them.

#### **Stress and Daily Life**

Stress doesn’t just make you feel tense—it can have a compounding effect, with impacts that reach far beyond the original source of the stress:

* You might find it hard to focus at work or make decisions.
* You might become more reactive, irritable, or impatient.
* You might lose sleep, tossing and turning at night.

Stress and daily life are interconnected. Stress can interfere with your routine, and disruptions in your routine (such as poor sleep, diet, or exercise habits) can increase stress. Recognizing this cycle is the first step in breaking it.

**Here’s an example from [ ] at Kuara:**

**Example:** Let’s say you’ve had a particularly stressful week at work, and you’re finding it hard to sleep. You may notice that when you’re sleep-deprived, even small irritations—like a messy house or noisy neighbors—seem overwhelming. This illustrates how stress can compound over time, making minor issues feel much bigger than they are. This can quickly become a vicious cycle, so learning to identify this early can be a major benefit.

#### **[EXPANDED OPTION] A Deeper Look**

**Impact on Work**

Stress can affect your ability to focus, make decisions, and perform tasks. When your brain is in “fight or flight” mode, it’s harder to think clearly or problem-solve effectively. Over time, this can lead to decreased productivity and even burnout.

#### **Impact on Relationships**

Stress can make you short-tempered, irritable, and less patient with others. This can lead to conflicts or feelings of isolation. Additionally, stress may make it harder to communicate effectively, leading to misunderstandings and strained relationships.

#### **Impact on Sleep**

Stress is a common cause of insomnia. When your mind is racing with anxious thoughts, it becomes difficult to fall asleep, stay asleep, or get restful sleep. Poor sleep then makes you more prone to stress the following day, creating a vicious cycle.

**★ Are you experiencing mind chatter? Try this**:

### **Letting Go of Thoughts Before Bed**

Following along with this practice to help you release unhelpful thoughts for a restful night’s sleep:

1. **Set Your Intention**: Before writing, remind yourself that you’re releasing thoughts to clear your mind for better rest.
2. **Free Writing**: Set a timer for **5 minutes**. Write freely without worrying about grammar or coherence. Let your thoughts flow onto the paper.
3. **Letting-Go Ritual**: Once the timer ends, create a ritual to signify release, such as:
   * Closing your notebook intentionally.
   * Putting it away in a designated spot.
   * Trusting that you can address anything written tomorrow (like a to-do list).
4. **Reflect**: ~~add~~ **~~1 minute~~** Notice how your mind feels and if certain days require more writing than others. It’s perfectly normal for some nights to need more or less expression.

By integrating this ritual into your nightly routine, you can clear your mind and foster a peaceful state before sleep.

### **Identifying Your Personal Stress Triggers**

Your stress is unique to you. While you may share common stressors with others, how you react emotionally and physically will depend on your personality, environment, life experiences, and the tools you have in your toolbox.

#### **Techniques for Identifying and Tracking Stress Triggers**

There are several effective methods to uncover your personal stress triggers. These methods allow you to reflect on both immediate reactions and long-term patterns in your stress response:

* **Journaling**: Write down stressful moments throughout your day. Note what happened, how you felt, and how you reacted.
* **Mood tracking**: Log your stress levels over time, tracking both your emotional, as well as physical responses to stress.
* **Self-reflection**: At the end of each day, take a few minutes to think about moments when you felt stressed. What caused it? How did it feel in your body?

**Example:** After journaling for a few days, you might notice a pattern—like getting stressed every time you’re running late for work. With this information, you can take action (like setting alarms earlier) to reduce or better manage this stress.

#### **Frequency and Intensity Matter**

Tracking the *frequency* and *intensity* of your stress is key to understanding how to manage it. Here’s why:

* **Frequency**: If certain triggers are happening daily, that’s a sign you need to prioritize managing them.
* **Intensity**: Some stressors may only occur occasionally, but their impact is significant. These high-intensity stressors need special attention, as they can linger and affect other parts of your life.

#### **Value of Identifying and Tracking Triggers**

Why does all this work? Once you recognize what’s triggering your stress, you can start to *control* how you respond to it. You’ll be able to see patterns and make changes that can reduce your overall stress.

### **Recognizing Stress-Free Moments**

It’s just as important to recognize *when* you’re not stressed. These moments can offer clues about what helps you feel calm, grounded, and relaxed. Once you know what works, you can incorporate these things into your daily routine to keep stress at bay.

#### **Why It’s Valuable**

When you’re aware of what makes you feel good, you can *reinforce* positive habits. The more time you spend doing things that reduce stress, the better you become at managing stress overall.

**Example:** You might realize that you feel relaxed while having your morning coffee. By making that time a stress-free ritual—maybe by enjoying it outside or combining it with a few minutes of deep breathing—you create space for calm in your day.

#### **How to Recognize These Moments**

* **Mindfulness**: Pay attention to moments when you feel relaxed or content, no matter how small. What’s happening? Who are you with? What are you doing?
* **Reflection**: At the end of the day, think about when you *didn’t* feel stressed. Was it while listening to music, talking with a friend, or taking a break from your phone?

By recognizing these moments, you can start to actively seek them out and build them into your routine.

#### **Favorite No-Stress Strategies From the Kuara Team**

#### **Heather:** Taking a 5-minute break to listen to clips of stand-up comedians/comedy shows.

#### **Jess:** Setting aside time for an activity you enjoy or have always wanted to try that is purely for enjoyment and not for productivity. For example, I recently tried an art class

#### **Mollie:** Stand up and move to get your blood flowing when you start to feel stress coming on - quick wall sit or handstand against the wall or chest opening stretch or shoulder shrugs.

#### **Gonzo:** Waking up early on the weekends and enjoy a cup of coffee by myself before everyone wakes up.

#### 

**Next Steps**

Last week, you began tracking your mood with a daily stress journal. Now that we’ve dug a little deeper into how to identify, track, and reflect on your stress, take time this week to continue with identifying and logging your stress triggers. Additionally, begin noting your stress-free moments, too. You can track these in your journal or directly in your Kuara chat. You’ll be amazed at how much you learn about yourself—and how much more manageable stress becomes when you understand its patterns.

**Remember:** Identifying and tracking stress isn’t about avoiding stress altogether—it’s about understanding it better so you can manage it. Keep reflecting, stay curious, and trust that this process will help you take more control over your stress and your life.

## Module #4: Activities and Exercises

### **Activity: Stress-Free Moments Scavenger Hunt**

**Objective:** Recognize and appreciate stress-free moments in your day.

**Instructions:**

* Over the next few days, go on a “scavenger hunt” for stress-free moments. These are times when you feel relaxed, content, or peaceful.
* Each day, try to find and note at least *one* moment when you felt stress-free. Write down:
  + What you were doing.
  + Where you were.
  + Who you were with.
  + How you felt physically and emotionally.

**Reflection**: At the end of the week, review your stress-free moments. Do any patterns emerge? Are there certain activities or environments that consistently help you feel calm? Use this insight to plan more of these moments into your day.

**Activity: Frequency and Intensity Rating**

**Objective:** Track and evaluate the frequency and intensity of your stress triggers over time.

**Instructions:**

* Each day for the next week, rate your stress using a simple scale.
  + **Frequency**: How many times did you experience stress today?
    - 0 (No stress)
    - 1 (Mild stress)
    - 2 (Moderate stress)
    - 3 (High stress)
  + **Intensity**: How intense was your stress on a scale from 1 (low) to 10 (high)?

**Activity: Studying and Solutioning your Stressors**

**Objective**: Explore what’s stressing you out and how it affects your day-to-day life.

**Instructions**:

1. Create a list of your current stressors you experience in areas of your life, like work, relationships, finances, health, and personal expectations.
2. Categorize into types of stress and identify whether it is acute or chronic stress.

★ Refresh on types of stress and their impact on you.

| **Type of stress** |  | **Duration of stress type** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| * **Positive Stress (Eustress):** Motivating and beneficial.   + May help you focus and tackle challenges, like before a presentation or workout. |  | * **Acute Stress:**   + Short-term stress from immediate situations that triggers a quick "fight-or-flight" response. |
| * **Negative Stress (Distress):** Overwhelming and harmful.   + Can cause anxiety and discomfort, often from too many challenges at once or prolonged stress. |  | * **Chronic Stress:**   + Ongoing stress from persistent issues, such as an unfulfilling job or financial problems. |

1. Choose one or two stressors from each category and evaluate their impact on your daily life.

* How does this stressor affect my mood?
* What physical symptoms do I notice?
* How does it influence my productivity or relationships?
* How would you like to see yourself react to this stress instead?

1. Consider practicing your response to “How would you like to see yourself react to this stress instead?” to one of the two stressors you evaluated and journal the experience including how you felt before, during, and after.

**EXAMPLE**

**Stressor #1:** My child is having a hard time at school.

* **Type:** Negative stress
* **Duration:** Chronic stress

**Evaluation:**

1. **How does this stressor affect my mood?**
   * I feel overwhelmed with emotion, trying to appear cheerful despite feeling sad and unable to control the situation.
2. **What physical symptoms do I notice?**
   * I tend to talk quickly and push my child to communicate, even when they’re not ready.
3. **How does it influence my productivity or relationships?**
   * It negatively affects my relationship with my child, leading to poor communication and feelings of disconnect.
4. **How would you like to see yourself react to this stress instead?**
   * I want to practice speaking less and giving my child space to express themselves. Embracing silence and being present for them will show that I’m here when they’re ready to talk.

**Expand**: Once you have written your thoughts, consider sharing this exercise aloud with someone you trust.