Stress Relief Exercises

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Abstract: In March 2022, Jamais Cascio—author and global thinker—introduced the "BANI" model, an acronym that stands for Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, and Incomprehensible. These terms capture the nature of today's world, where changes are not only unexpected but often deeply disorienting. Such a reality has a profound impact on our mental and physical health. We are constantly told to "live an organized life, eat well, get enough sleep... and ... don't stress..." However, the real question remains: what can we do to reduce stress immediately? There are many possible strategies. In this brief overview, we will focus on three simple and effective exercises.

Keywords: stress, diaphragmatic breathing, self-administered acupressure, aromatherapy

1 Stress

Prof. Dr. Hans (János) Selye (1907–1982) is widely recognized as the founding father of the concept of **general adaptation syndrome**, commonly known as **stress**. He famously stated, *"Stress is the spice of life"* (Selye, 1936; Siang Yong Tan, 2018).

Stress refers to the body's non-specific response to any demand or challenge—whether physical, mental, or emotional. It triggers a cascade of physiological changes, such as increased heart rate and the release of stress hormones, in order to prepare the body to cope with the situation. In essence, stress is the body's natural mechanism for adapting to internal or external demands. Importantly, stress can be beneficial and even essential, as it activates the **"fight or flight"** response—a survival mechanism that enhances our ability to respond to threats or challenges. This response is regulated by the **autonomic nervous system**, which consists of two branches: the **sympathetic** and **parasympathetic systems.** Together, these systems control involuntary physiological functions essential for maintaining homeostasis. *(See Figure 1.)*

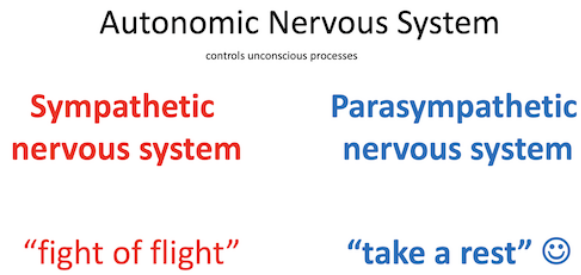

Figure 1.
The two parts of the Autonomic Nervous System

1.1 Response to Stress and the BANI Model

During stressful situations, an increase in sympathetic nervous system activity is characterized by elevated heart rate and arterial blood pressure, as well as heightened blood levels of the hormones adrenaline and cortisol. This state of heightened physiological arousal enhances our ability to respond effectively to immediate challenges, such as avoiding danger or meeting pressing deadlines (Bern & Levy, 2010). While short-term stress can be beneficial in such contexts, excessive or chronic stress can have detrimental effects. Maintaining an appropriate balance is essential — insufficient stress may result in a lack of motivation, whereas excessive stress can become overwhelming (Hutmacher et al., 2021).

In contemporary life, individuals frequently encounter numerous stress-inducing situations. In March 2022, author and futurist Jamais Cascio introduced the "BANI" model, an acronym that stands for Brittle, Anxious, Non-linear, and Incomprehensible (Cascio, 2020). These four descriptors offer a compelling framework for understanding the complex, unpredictable nature of the modern world.

2 Three Stress Relief Exercises

There are numerous approaches to alleviating stress, and it is likely that each individual has developed personal strategies that they find effective. In this brief overview, we will focus on three straightforward techniques commonly employed for stress reduction:

1. **Slow, deep abdominal breathing**
2. **Self-administered stimulation of specific acupuncture points on the body**
3. **Inhalation of a personally pleasant natural essential oil (commonly referred to as aromatherapy)**

Each of these methods exerts modulatory effects on the autonomic nervous system, typically by attenuating sympathetic nervous activity while enhancing parasympathetic responses. The net physiological outcome is a measurable reduction in stress levels.

2.1 Slow, Deep "Abdominal" (Diaphragmatic) Breathing

Regular breathwork practices have increasingly been recognized as effective interventions for stress reduction and the promotion of psychological well-being. This is largely due to the influence of respiratory activity on several brain regions involved in the regulation of cognition, behavior, and emotion (Balban, 2023; Ficham, 2023). Empirical studies on healthy individuals have demonstrated that slow, controlled breathing—specifically at a rate of approximately six breaths per minute—is associated with favorable physiological outcomes, such as reduced blood pressure, when compared to typical respiratory rates of 12 to 16 breaths per minute (Bernardi et al., 2001; Chang et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2016).

A wide variety of breathing exercises exist, each with its own approach and emphasis. The following technique, personally practiced by the author, exemplifies a simple yet effective method for diaphragmatic breathing:

Mental Preparation: Commit to focusing exclusively on your breathing for the next five minutes.

Posture: The exercise can be performed while standing, seated, or lying on your back. Place one hand on the center of your chest and the other on your abdomen.

Controlled Breathing Sequence:

Inhalation: Breathe in slowly through the nose (mouth closed), allowing the abdomen to expand like a balloon. Feel it gently press into your hand. Count to four silently during the inhalation.

Breath Retention: Hold the breath for a mental count of four.

Exhalation: Exhale slowly through the nose (mouth still closed) while gently contracting the abdominal muscles. Count to six silently during exhalation.

Post-Exhalation Pause: Hold the breath again for a mental count of four.

Repeat this cycle continuously for a duration of five minutes (Ling, 2023).

A substantial body of research supports the efficacy of slow, deep abdominal breathing in reducing stress and promoting relaxation (Hamasaki, 2020; Magnon et al., 2021; Hunt et al., 2021; Birdee et al., 2023; Tavoian et al., 2023).

2.2 Self-Administered Massage of Specific Acupuncture Points on the Body Surface

2.2.1 Historical and Theoretical Background

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) has a history spanning over 5,000 years. It is founded on a holistic worldview that emphasizes harmony between humans and nature. As defined by Ma et al. (2021), "Traditional Chinese Medicine is a medical knowledge system developed by the Chinese people. It is characterized by a holistic approach that encompasses image-based information processing, cognitive activity based on attributes and relationships, the utilization of natural resources both within and outside the human body, and the regulation and balancing of health status."

TCM serves not only as a framework for disease prevention, diagnosis, and treatment but also for rehabilitation and health maintenance. It is primarily derived from natural medicinal sources, including herbal, animal, and mineral substances, as well as certain chemical and biological products (Ma et al., 2021).

The terminology used in TCM originates from classical Chinese, and many of its concepts differ significantly in meaning from those used in contemporary Western medicine (Wang & Chen, 2023). Fundamental philosophical constructs such as *Qi* (vital energy), *Yin and Yang*, and the *Five Elements* (Wood, Fire, Earth, Metal, Water) form the theoretical basis of TCM (Huang Di Nei Jing, English translation1990).

The concept of *Qi* (氣 pronounced "chee") is central to TCM but remains difficult to translate precisely. For the purposes of this discussion, it can be understood as a form of "vital energy" that flows throughout the body. According to *Huang Di Nei Jing* [黄帝内经](The Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon), widely considered the oldest extant medical text in the world, the human body is traversed by a network of meridians—pathways that interconnect internal organs with the limbs, head, and skin surface. These meridians facilitate the flow of *Qi*, which is believed to be more concentrated along these channels. Along the meridians lie 365 classical acupuncture points, along with numerous "extra-meridian" points not associated with a specific meridian. TCM

posits that imbalances or blockages in the flow of *Qi* lead to disease and dysfunction, and that stimulation of acupuncture points can help restore internal equilibrium.

Each acupuncture point is identified by a Chinese name and a standardized alphanumeric code. For example, "Shen Men" (Spirit Gate) is designated as HT7, indicating that it is the seventh point on the Heart meridian. The Latin abbreviation preceding the number refers to the associated meridian or, in some cases, indicates that the point lies outside (EXT) the established meridian system.

Definitions:

Acupuncture: A therapeutic technique in TCM involving the insertion of fine needles into specific points on the body to influence the flow of *Qi* and restore balance.

Acupressure: A non-invasive TCM therapy that involves applying manual pressure—typically with the fingers—to specific acupuncture points to achieve similar therapeutic effects as acupuncture.

2.2.2 Effects of Acupressure and Acupuncture on the Human Body

The precise mechanisms underlying the physiological effects of acupuncture and acupressure remain incompletely understood. Several hypotheses have been proposed, including modulation of the autonomic nervous system, regulation of neurochemical mediators, and enhancement of local blood circulation. Despite the lack of complete mechanistic clarity, interventions at specific acupuncture points have been shown to induce measurable physiological responses. In numerous cases, these responses have been scientifically demonstrated to exert beneficial effects on human health (Cabioglu, 2016). A comprehensive meta-analysis by Li et al. (2024), which reviewed 700 publications on acupressure, concluded that "acupressure has proven efficacy in symptom management, making it valuable in clinical practice and patient care."

Ongoing research continues to explore the mechanisms and therapeutic potential of acupuncture and acupressure (Sato, 1997; Shan et al., 2014; Ma, 2020; Liu et al., 2021; Hutsalenko et al., 2022; Sun & Chen, 2022; Wang & Chen, 2023; Larki et al., 2025; Liu Y. et al., 2025). These studies contribute to a growing body of evidence supporting the clinical application of these traditional techniques within integrative medicine.

2.2.3 World Health Organization (WHO) Position on Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM)

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as a complementary and alternative therapeutic approach for the treatment and management of certain symptoms and health conditions. Over the years, WHO has systematically addressed the role of TCM through a series of guidelines and strategic

documents aimed at integrating traditional medicine into national health systems in a safe, effective, and evidence-based manner (WHO, 1999; WHO, 2021; WHO, 2022; WHO, 2025).

2.2.4 Mechanisms of Acupressure in Acute Stress Reduction

Self-administered acupressure applied to specific acupuncture points on the body has been found to be effective in reducing acute stress levels. A plausible physiological explanation is that stimulation of certain somatic sites may enhance parasympathetic nervous system activity within the autonomic nervous system. While the exact neurobiological mechanisms remain incompletely understood, it is hypothesized that acupressure may promote a relaxation response through modulation of vagal tone or central autonomic networks.

2.2.5 Acupuncture Points Commonly Used to Alleviate Stress

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) identifies numerous acupuncture points that, when stimulated through massage, may contribute to the reduction of stress. Among these, three specific points have been selected for discussion due to their accessibility, safety, and frequent citation in the literature as effective sites for stress relief. These points are relatively easy for individuals to locate and apply pressure to, making them practical for both clinical and self-care applications.

2.2.5.1 Yintang (“Hall of Impression”) [EXT-2]

This acupoint is located precisely at the midpoint between the medial ends of the two eyebrows. It can be identified by locating the exact center between the brows (Jaung-Geng Lin, *Atlas of Acupunturology*, 2023) (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Yintang = "Hall of Impression" (EXT-2)

2.2.5.2 Shenmen (“Spirit Gate”) [HT7]

Located on the ulnar side of the wrist, posterior to the palm, Shenmen lies in the depression distal to the prominence of the pisiform bone and at the level of the wrist crease, adjacent to the head of the ulna (Jaung-Geng Lin, *Atlas of Acupunturology*, 2023) (Figure 3).

Figure 3.
Shenmen ="Spirit gate" (HT7.)

2.2.5.3 Taiyuan (“Great Abyss”) [LU9]

Taiyuan is found on the radial aspect of the wrist, at the level of the transverse wrist crease. It is located in the depression between the radial artery and the tendon of the abductor pollicis longus muscle—where the radial pulse is typically palpated (Jaung-Geng Lin, *Atlas of Acupunturology*, 2023) (Figure 4).

Figure 4.
Taiyuan = "Great Abyss" (LU9.)

2.2.5.4 Remarks

The aforementioned acupoints are often reported to be slightly more sensitive to pressure than surrounding tissue in many individuals, although the underlying mechanisms are not fully understood.

Recommended acupressure technique:

*** Stimulation method**: Apply circular pressure using the fingertip in a gentle, clockwise motion. The pressure should be firm enough to be distinctly perceptible but not painful.

*** Order of application**: Always begin wrist point stimulation on the **left wrist**.

*** Duration**: Each point should be massaged for approximately **3 to 5 minutes**.

2.3 Inhalation of Natural Essential Oils Considered Pleasant ("Aromatherapy")

The potential therapeutic effects of natural essential oils on human health have garnered increasing scientific interest over the past two decades. This area of research and clinical application is commonly referred to as *aromatherapy* in the scientific literature.

2.3.1 Anatomical and Physiological Background

Olfaction is considered the most evolutionarily ancient of the human senses. The human olfactory system, located at the upper part of the nasal cavity, comprises a dense array of olfactory receptors. These receptors are responsible for detecting volatile chemical compounds (odorants) and converting them into neural signals. Upon binding specific odor molecules, the olfactory receptors stimulate olfactory sensory neurons, which are in direct contact with the olfactory bulb—a structure situated at the base of the brain. From the olfactory bulb, information is rapidly transmitted to several regions of the brain, most notably the limbic system. The limbic system plays a key role in the regulation of emotions, memory, and autonomic (vegetative) functions. This direct neuroanatomical connection explains the immediate and profound influence of scents on emotional states and physiological responses (Pizzolo SFM et al., 2021).

2.3.2 Inhalation of Selected Essential Oils for Stress Reduction

Essential oils are volatile, aromatic compounds extracted from various parts of plants, including flowers, bark, roots, and leaves. These compounds are typically stored in specialized cells and serve biological functions within the plant (Steflitsch & Steflitsch, 2008). In recent years, numerous essential oils have been investigated for their potential to alleviate stress and promote relaxation through inhalation.

Lavender (Lavandula angustifolia) is among the most extensively studied essential oils for its anxiolytic and stress-reducing properties. Empirical evidence indicates that inhalation of lavender essential oil can significantly reduce heart rate and blood pressure, contributing to lower levels of psychological and physiological stress (Chen et al., 2015; Yoo & Park, 2023).

Chamomile (Chamaemelum nobile), particularly Roman chamomile, has also demonstrated promising effects in reducing stress and anxiety. Its mild sedative

properties may contribute to an overall calming effect, supporting its traditional use in managing stress-related symptoms (Pourshaikhian et al., 2024).

Bergamot (Citrus bergamia) essential oil has been associated with mood enhancement and decreased levels of anxiety. Several studies suggest that bergamot may reduce cortisol—the primary stress hormone—thereby alleviating emotional stress. Wakui et al. (2023) reported that "using bergamot essential oil before bedtime helps relax the mind and body and provides sound sleep. It also improves mood and wakefulness when used upon awakening. Using aromatic essential oils is expected to relieve psychological stress and improve sleep quality and morning wakefulness."

Vora et al. (2024) conducted a comprehensive review of the literature and concluded: "Aromatherapy combines traditional and contemporary medicine, offering holistic healing with essential oils. Through complex interactions, essential oils modulate health, influencing mood, comfort, and overall well-being."

In addition to these well-known oils, several other essential oils have shown potential in stress reduction, although individual responses may vary based on physiological and psychological sensitivity. Some studies have reported greater efficacy among female participants compared to males. Research in this field continues to evolve, with ongoing studies aimed at better understanding the mechanisms and efficacy of essential oils in stress management.(Huang et al., 2016; Sharma et al., 2019; Xiao et al., 2023; Saiyudthong et al., 2025).

2.3.3 Practical Considerations

For individuals interested in experimenting with this approach, the following guidelines should be carefully considered:

* Only natural essential oils, preferably those obtained from reputable sources such as pharmacies, should be used. Synthetic alternatives may contain additives or impurities that could pose health risks.

* Inhalation should be limited to one or two brief sniffs per session to minimize the risk of overstimulation or adverse effects.

* This method is not recommended for individuals with a known history of allergic reactions, such as seasonal allergic rhinitis (hay fever), due to the potential for triggering hypersensitivity responses.

Conclusion

A variety of strategies exist for mitigating stress, among which simple, non-invasive techniques can offer accessible and effective relief. This overview focused on three such methods: (1) slow, deep abdominal breathing; (2) self-administered acupressure at three specific acupuncture points; and (3) inhalation of a personally pleasant natural

essential oil, commonly referred to as aromatherapy. Each of these interventions has been shown to modulate autonomic nervous system activity by attenuating sympathetic arousal and enhancing parasympathetic tone. The resultant shift in autonomic balance contributes to a measurable reduction in stress levels.

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