



Living in Survival Mode? Try These Techniques to Relax and Feel More Grounded

By Alona Pulde, MD, and Matthew Lederman, MD
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Editor's Note: Matthew Lederman, MD, and Alona Pulde, MD—longtime Forks Over Knives contributors and the authors of The Forks Over Knives Plan—released a new book this week. *Wellness to Wonderful: 9 Pillars for Living Healthier, Longer, and with Greater Joy* offers practical, science-backed strategies for reducing stress, increasing connection, and improving the whole picture of one's health. We're excited to share a portion of the brand-new book with you, excerpted from Chapter 2: Getting Out of Survival Mode. [Learn more about the book here.](#)

One of the biggest hurdles to making life wonderful is living in survival mode, lowering our heads and soldiering on day after day, dealing with whatever comes our way as it comes. We know what survival mode looks like at a meta-level. And we know how bad it feels day-in and day-out: the exhaustion, the fear, the dissatisfaction, the desire for something different and more fulfilling.

We are not designed to live in chronic survival mode. In fact, our ancestors experienced danger and threat in short bursts. They would see a threat, they would escape from the danger, and then they would rest and recover.

Unfortunately, today the threats we perceive are pervasive and often constant, primarily because they come from our thoughts, not actual physical danger. We are not just running from the tiger; we are raging on the road, worrying about our finances, struggling to balance work and home life, concerned about our children, anxious about the relationships we have or the ones we

want and don't yet have, and so on. This threat exists in a mind that, in survival mode, doesn't shut off danger signals. In fact, your body is designed to raise the ante, or in other words, to "see your threat and raise you another threat" that you haven't considered yet, all in an effort to protect you from anything and everything possible while increasing your chances of survival. As a result, we never get to rest or recover, and thus our bodies remain in a perpetual state of threat or high alert.

Therefore, a strategy that was once beneficial to our survival has transformed into one that has become detrimental to it. Chronic stress is linked to all sorts of proinflammatory states and conditions, challenges with fertility, and increased risk of asthma, heart disease, obesity, pain (headaches, back and neck pain), gastrointestinal issues (reflux, heartburn, colitis), depression, insomnia, and immune suppression, among other health issues.

Unfortunately, the ups and downs of daily living make it impossible to rid ourselves of stress. Instead, we need to learn to manage our daily challenges differently. We can do this by giving our bodies messages of safety instead of messages of danger. Here are a few exercises you can try to signal safety and reduce stress.

Use facial expressions to dampen the threat response.

Use facial expressions to dampen the threat response and increase your sense of safety. Try singing or humming your favorite tune. Share a smile with someone, even if it is just yourself in the mirror. [Studies show](#) that smiling, regardless of whether you are happy or not, can help lower your heart rate and more quickly recover from a stress response.

Take some deep slow breaths.

Take a few deep, slow breaths, breathing in for a count of three and out for a count of seven. Slow breathing techniques increase relaxation, alertness, and comfort while [decreasing anxiety](#), depression, confusion, and anger.

(continued)

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Use your five senses.

Use your five senses to bring your attention to the present moment, most likely a time when you are indeed safe. This grounding technique helps reduce stress and anxiety by shifting our perception away from danger and towards safety. You can engage with the five senses in several ways.

1) Step outside with a cup of tea (taste), smell a flower (smell), listen to birds chirping (hear), look at the trees around you (see), and feel the weather on your skin (feel).

2) Another variation is the 5-4-3-2-1 technique. Find and name five things you can see (sky, clouds, flowers, butterflies, trees), four things you can feel (wind, warmth, hair on neck, ground), three things you can hear (traffic, talking, birds), two things you can smell (grass, flowers), and one thing you can taste (tea).