

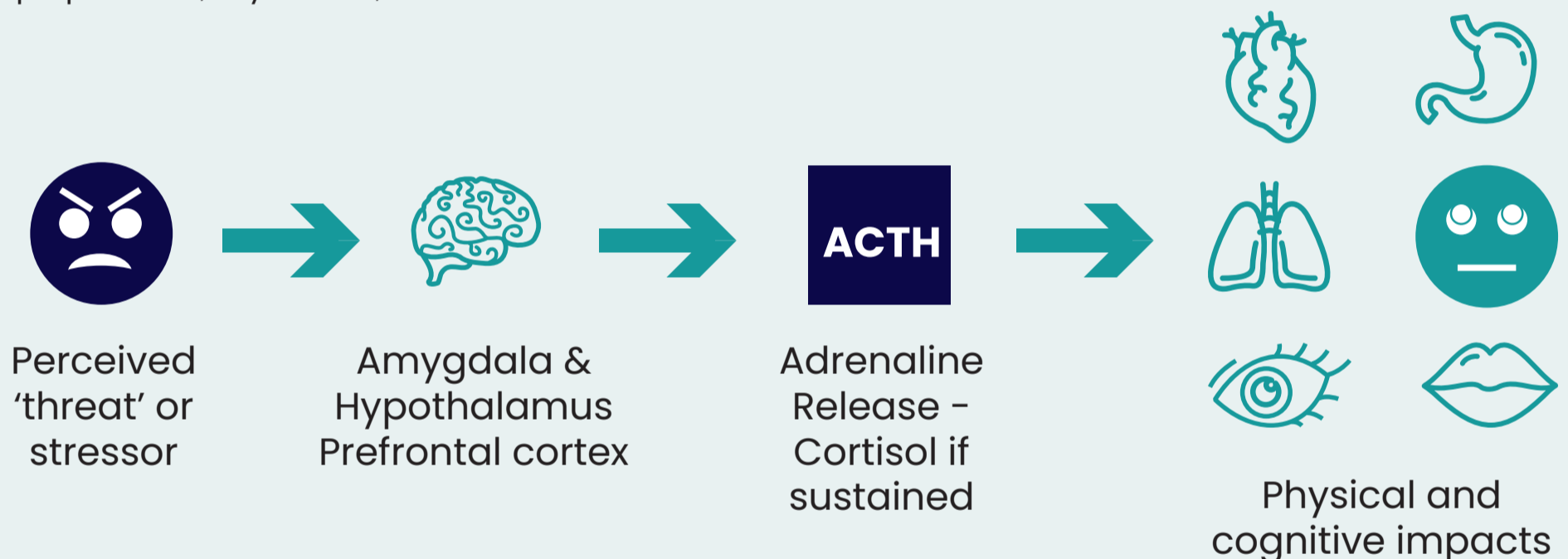
Calm and in control: Managing stress in intensive care



Working in intensive care can be busy and stimulating at times, and staff sometimes describe themselves as being in “go-go-go” mode. This is potentially activating for your body and mind’s stress response. This resource will help you to start to understand and manage your stress responses while at work or at home.

What happens in the stress response?

When the brain detects stress in the environment, the body’s stress-response system is activated. This involves the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, which leads to a “fight or flight” response. Stress hormones are released, leading to increased heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate to enable the body to act. This system can be activated even when we are asleep. There are some individual differences in how people notice the changes in thinking and physical sensations. Many will notice with a manageable level of stress the mind can feel focussed, in higher stress it is hard to think clearly and make decisions. Many will notice the sensation of over-breathing, palpitations, dry mouth, and stomach distress to name a few.



What can trigger our stress response?

Anything which our mind considers to be threatening can trigger a stress response. For example:



How you can interrupt the acute stress response in the moment:

You can interrupt and regulate the stress response.



Stop technique

Breathing acts as a biofeedback into the body's stress response and helps to interrupt the response. Use the following technique to stop your mind from racing: – tell yourself **STOP**, focus on your breath for 30 seconds plus, and then try thinking again.

Stop...breathe...then think.

Breathing technique

Try this simple breathing technique to slow down your physiological symptoms of stress/anxiety. It's not relaxation – it will keep you feeling focussed and alert, but calm and in control.

Take a breath in for 3–5 seconds

Release the breath taking 3–5 seconds

Repeat – for a minute

Attention switching Technique

If your mind is still racing, you can also try a distraction technique.

Say to yourself **STOP**, and then take yourself through a mundane task– such as spotting all the green things in the room, going through the alphabet to people's names (Andy, Becky, Carl...etc)

This overloads your working memory with benign thoughts and gives you chance to slow down the body's stress response.

Self-talk

Often our stress can be made worse when we make judgements of what is happening in our bodies or in the situation. E.g., "I am so stupid!" "I think I'll faint!". Using neutral self talk is another way of interrupting the stress response in the moment. If we can tell ourselves "you can do this" or "it will pass" this can neutralise our stress response.

Longer term stress management

Rest and Recover

Working in intensive care can feel like a roller coaster.... you need to step off at regular intervals.

The parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system helps you to recover from acute stress. Taking time to engage in restful and enjoyable activity and connecting with others can be helpful.

Take time out in work: take your breaks! If you can, go for a walk or step outside.

Look out of the window and pause, take notice of something outside the hospital.



Recognise chronic triggers

Most stress triggers are intermittent, but there may be some triggers which are sustained for you, such as your workload, the environment, or certain relationships at work. It is important to recognise chronic stressors and modify those where possible. If possible, speak with your line manager to discuss further modifications.

Recognise signs of chronic stress

If the body's stress system is stimulated often, it can lead to problems. High levels of cortisol can suppress the immune response, there have been links to chronic health problems, and mental health problems.

It can be hard to recognise when you are chronically stressed, but symptoms include:

PHYSICAL

- headaches or dizziness
- muscle tension or pain
- stomach problems
- chest pain or a faster heartbeat
- sexual problems

THINKING

- difficulty concentrating
- struggling to make decisions
- feeling overwhelmed
- constantly worrying
- being forgetful

BEHAVIOURAL

- being irritable and snappy
- sleeping too much or too little
- eating too much or too little
- avoiding certain places or people
- drinking or smoking more

Access help

If you recognise these symptoms in yourself or others, it may be time to take stock of ongoing stressors in your life and talk to someone in confidence to consider what you need.

Consider:

Your hospital occupational health and wellbeing offer or your GP.

Further resources from the Intensive Care Society www.ics.ac.uk/thrive