

FIREFIGHTER'S GUIDE TO BECOMING A STRESS NINJA

TRANSFORM STRESS INTO STRENGTH



**Tough
Calls**

**Sleep
Deprivation**

Money

Family



First In Wellness

INTRODUCTION

Being a First Responder Is stressful. You experience:

- Irregular sleep
- Hard physical labor
- Stressful calls
- Difficult medical calls
- Seeing injury and death
- Exposure to toxins
- Dangerous situations
- Transition from the station to home life

Unfortunately, excess stress has consequences. A few include:

- Cancer
- Heart attacks and cardiac arrest
- Suicide
- Post traumatic stress injuries (PTSI)
- Burnout
- Metabolic diseases (hypertension, diabetes, CVD, etc.)

What if you could transform your stress into strength, build your resiliency and mental agility, and ultimately become a stress ninja. The good news is you can! **Just as you train in the gym to get stronger, you can also train your brain to be more psychologically fit and agile.**

4 STEPS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL AGILITY

#1: Practice Kindness To Yourself And Others

Sometimes this is the hardest one, but we put it first because it's such a powerful step. **Try the following 2-week gratitude experiment.** Think about something someone did for someone else or something you did for someone else who reciprocated with deep, sincere gratitude. This can even be from a movie or a book you read. Write that story down - this can be in the highlight bullet points. Read that to yourself daily then sit and think about it for 5 minutes.

Other powerful habits:

- Practice self-compassion
- Say thank you (and really mean it)
- Practice regular self-care
- Practice acceptance, empathy, and forgiveness
- Perform regular acts of kindness

4 STEPS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL AGILITY

#2: Minimize Unnecessary Stress

Stress is everywhere in today's world, but that doesn't mean you don't have any control over your exposure.

Here are a few decisions you can consider making to reduce your stress:

- Choose your company (when possible)
- Limit your time with people who thrive on drama, conflict, and negativity (at least outside of work)
- Limit your exposure to the news, or aim to balance it with positive news such as [The Good News Network](#)
- Learn to lose pointless arguments - sometimes you have to decide if being right is the most important thing
- Prioritize your time and practice time management
- Practice regular social media and electronic breaks (nightly and longer multiple-day digital vacations)

4 STEPS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL AGILITY

#3: Shift Your Perception Of Stress

How you perceive the stress you encounter can make a massive difference in how you react. Knowing stress will evoke strong emotions, and having the power to choose how you want to react to that emotion, puts you back in the driver's seat.

- Practice re-framing your situation - try viewing a stressful situation as a challenge or growth opportunity.
- **Remember acute stress is a natural, healthy response that can save your life** - it's part of your job - consider how stress helps you be a better firefighter.
- Use the **SEE Method**:
 - **S**eparate yourself from the emotion - you may be feeling a certain way but it does not define you.
 - **E**mbrace the emotion - it's trying to tell you something and help you get a need met.
 - **E**valuate what to do next.

4 STEPS TO PSYCHOLOGICAL AGILITY

#4: Start A Daily Stress Ninja Practice

Taking action will stock your stress ninja arsenal. This is a practice. You don't have to be perfect at it or even good at it. Just the practice will yield results.

Tips for a successful practice:

- Aim to do 1 stress modulation technique for at least five minutes daily. Choose your favorites from the next section, Stress Ninja Techniques and Tools!
- Start small. Just five minutes daily can have a dramatic impact on your mental and physical health. **The consistency is more important than the amount of time you spend each day.**
- Make stress modulation a top priority. Sleep, nutritious food, regular movement AND stress modulation are the pillars to achieving and maintaining great health.

STRESS NINJA TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Build your stress modulation toolkit. Some days sitting still and meditating may feel great and other days a movement-based practice such as yoga or a walking meditation may feel better.

Take your pick from the next 8 pages, or brainstorm your own ways and add them to the list!

Meditation And Guided Imagery

- [Headspace App](#)
- [10% Happier App](#)
- [Buddhify App](#)
- [Buddhanet Audio](#)
- [Mindful](#)
- [UCLA MARC](#)
- [UCSD Center For Mindfulness](#)
- [Calm App](#)

STRESS NINJA TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Tension and Trauma Release Exercises (TRE®)

- The **TRE® method** uses 7 simple exercises to assist the body in releasing deep muscular patterns of stress, tension, and trauma.
- The US Military is currently studying the effects of TRE on PTSIs and common conditions associated with PTSIs.

Yoga Nidra

- **Yoga Nidra** is conscious sleep. During the practice, you don't lose consciousness, yet your entire body, mind and nervous system obtain complete rest through deep relaxation.
- **This is also a great way to rest and restore, especially if you aren't able to get enough sleep.**

STRESS NINJA TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Devices

- **Muse** is an electroencephalogram (EEG) device, evaluates the electrical activity in the brain, and provides immediate feedback to guide you in your meditation.
- **David Delight** is an Audio-visual Entertainment (AVE) device, which utilizes pulses of light and sound at specific frequencies to gently and safely guide the brain into various brain wave patterns such as relaxation.
- **Vielight 810 Infrared (Brain)** is gentle brain stimulation using 810 nm near infrared wavelength, which helps release the calming neurotransmitter serotonin.
- **HeartMath/Inner Balance** uses real-time coherence feedback measured through heart rate variability (HRV) to help you achieve a state of relaxation, focus, and calmness.

STRESS NINJA TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Tai Chi

- [Chi Center](#) and [QiGong Institute](#) use a combination of movement, meditation, and breathing to increase relaxation, health, and healing.

Hypnosis

- A psychotherapy that uses guided relaxation, concentration, and focused attention to achieve a heightened state of awareness.
- It has been shown to improve anxiety, sleep disorders, depression, PTSDs, and lower stress levels.

Tapping

- [The Tapping Solution](#) offers techniques using Tapping, also known as Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), on meridian points to rebalance the nervous system and rewire the brain to respond to stress in healthier ways.

STRESS NINJA TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

EMDR

- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) Therapy is an extensively researched, effective psychotherapy method proven to help people recover from trauma and other distressing life experiences, including PTSIs, anxiety, depression, and panic disorders.

Somatic Therapy

- The Somatic Experiencing® Method is a body-oriented approach to the healing of trauma and other stress disorders by focusing on your perceived body sensations.

STRESS NINJA TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Breathwork

- Breathing correctly will improve your performance physically and cognitively so you have more capacity when your crew needs it.
- Trains your body to respond in a healthy way to stress.
- Some of our favorite resources and trainings include:
 - [Yoga For First Responders](#)
 - [Patrick McKeon](#)
 - [Dr. Belisa Vranich](#)
 - [Breatheology](#)

Play

- Set your inner child loose to play. **Research has shown that play can trigger the release of endorphins**, the body's natural feel good chemicals. Create opportunities to play in your life. Examples include playing with your dog or kid(s), riding your bike, or dancing without inhibitions.

STRESS NINJA TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Social Connection

- Feeling socially connected lowers stress hormones. This may include volunteering, performing acts of kindness such as helping a neighbor, friend, or stranger, joining a club, or talking to a close friend.

Exercise

- Exercise (the right amount) is a positive stressor on your body and promotes healthy adaptations that make your body stronger and more resilient to stress.
- **Over-training causes excess stress to your body.** Signs of over-training may include poor recovery from workouts, a plateau or decrease in performance (your regular workout feels harder than usual), weight gain in your mid-section, poor sleep, restlessness, anxiety, fatigue, GI discomfort, muscle or joint pain, frequent illness and depression.

STRESS NINJA TECHNIQUES AND TOOLS

Nature

- Take your “Vitamin N”. A study published in *Frontiers in Psychology* in 2019 showed that a 20-30 minute walk or sitting in nature without distraction (music, exercise, social media, phones, etc) significantly reduced cortisol levels.

Sleep and Relaxation

- Acute stress can be useful, and this is a healthy response that our bodies are built for. **However, after bouts of acute stress our bodies need to rest.**
 - An example is a caveman who is chased by a tiger. He runs away to save himself and then would sleep in his cave for 8-10 hours. You need to do this as well.
 - Take care of yourself after acute stress. Consider a 10-minute yoga nidra session or 5-10 minutes of breathwork after a tough call such as box breathing