

HPA-D 3-5 – Part 6

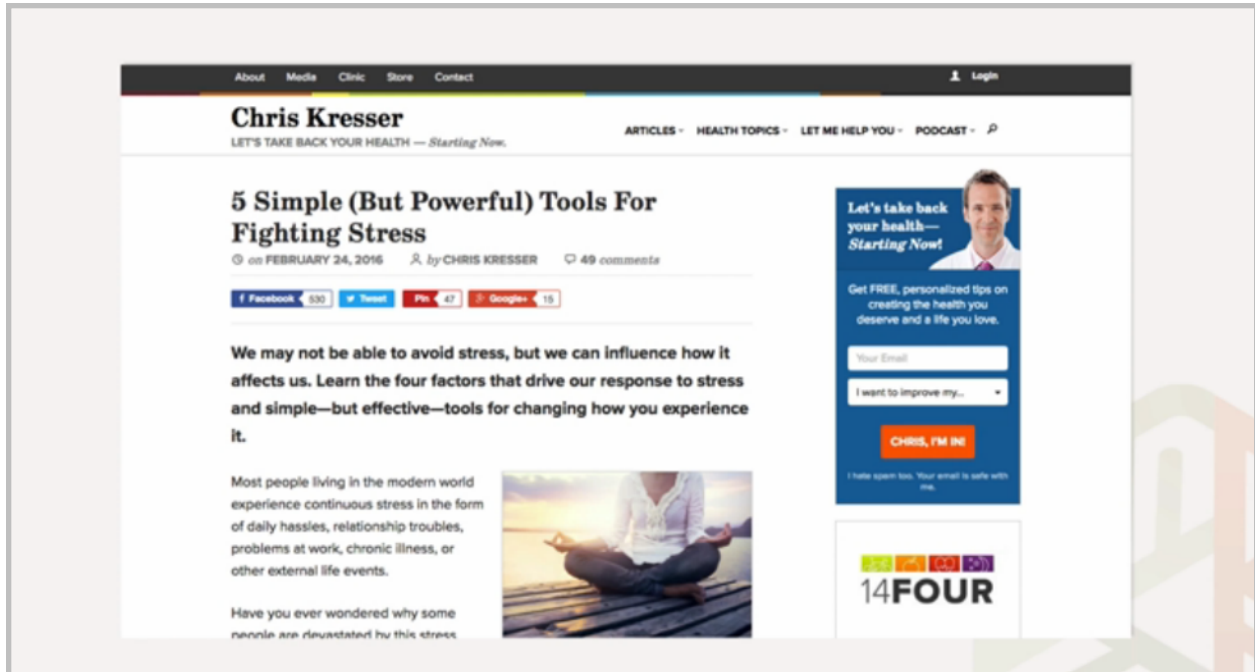
Hey, everybody. In this presentation, we're going to continue discussing treatment of HPA axis dysfunction, starting with adjunctive therapies.

“N.U.T.S.”

- N** **Novelty** of event
- U** **Unpredictable** nature of event
- T** Perceived **threat** to body or ego
- S** **Sense** of loss of control

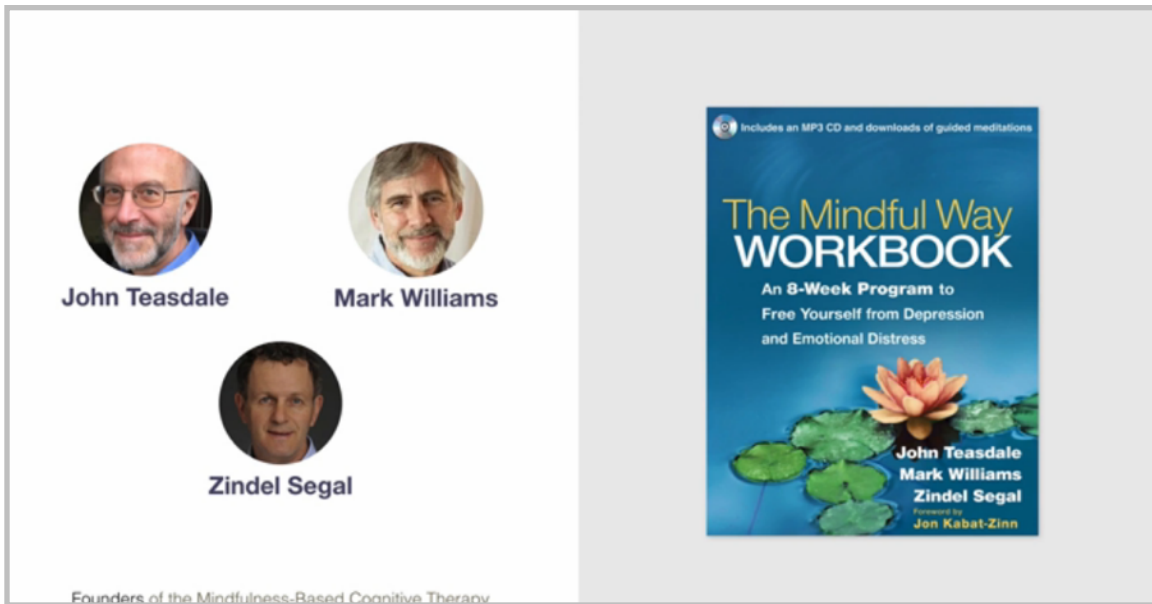
When we talked about perceived stress, I mentioned that there are four key factors that determine how stress is perceived, and these are summarized using the acronym NUTS: novelty, unpredictability, perceived threat to body or ego, and sense of loss of control.

The first two aren't particularly modifiable, but the second two can be influenced by how we frame the event in our mind, which means we can influence how we respond to stressors by changing how we perceive them. In psychology, this is known as reframing.



Let's say you lose your job. If you perceive that event as a sign of your worthlessness and an indicator that you'll never be successful, which are some of the thoughts that could go through your mind in a situation like that, I think you can imagine how your body will respond. It won't be fun. But what if you saw the loss of your job as an opportunity to pursue a long-time dream that you've ignored or a chance for a fresh start? In this case, losing your job would be unlikely to trigger a harmful stress response and may even be a source of "eustress," or positive stress. I'm not suggesting that it's possible or even desirable to put a positive spin on tragic or horrific events, but if you find yourself feeling overwhelmed by all of the minor daily hassles that characterize most of our lives, reframing can be a powerful way of mitigating the impact of that stress. I wrote an article with tips on reframing that I will provide a link to in the resources section.

Reframing can be a powerful ally in stressful situations, but it depends on your capacity to stay present in a difficult situation. This is why I'm such a big believer in mindfulness practice. It helps us to ground our attention in the present moment and focus on what is right now rather than what we fear might be. When you put reframing and mindfulness together, they are even more effective. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, or MBCT, is one methodology for doing this. It combines the ideas of cognitive behavioral therapy with meditative practices and attitudes based on the cultivation of mindfulness. The heart of this work lies in becoming acquainted with the modes of mind that often characterize mood disorders while simultaneously learning to develop a new relationship with them.



MBCT was developed by Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale, and it's based on Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction program. You can search for classes and other resources at MBCT.com.

Massage is another modality that has been shown to reduce cortisol and regulate the HPA axis. According to one study, family caregivers for patients with cancer can benefit from back massage to improve state anxiety, cortisol level, blood pressure, heart rate, and sleep quality. Another study showed that just a single session of Swedish massage improved hypothalamic, pituitary, adrenal, and immune function in healthy volunteers.

Research on acupuncture is less robust in terms of its effects on cortisol levels, but it has been shown to reduce subjective markers of stress, and most people who receive acupuncture report feeling a deep sense of relaxation. It has also been shown to regulate the HPA axis in both animal and human studies. I think, as an acupuncturist myself, of course, I'm perhaps a little bit biased, but I've seen acupuncture have a pretty profound impact in terms of stress management when it's done regularly enough, and that is one of the key factors when it comes to acupuncture. The way that it is typically delivered in the U.S., just once a month or once every two weeks or something like that, is not typically sufficient to achieve the desired therapeutic effect.

The way it was historically delivered in China and even is today in most parts of China is much more frequently, as often as every day but certainly two to five times a week, depending on the condition. There is a new model for delivering acupuncture in the U.S. that tries to replicate that. It's called community acupuncture, and treatments are offered on a sliding scale of \$15 to \$45 usually, and this makes it more affordable for people and allows them to get treatment more regularly. When acupuncture is delivered this way, the results are much better than if it is only received twice a month by the patient, so that's something to keep in mind when you refer out for acupuncture.