



## Stress Management and Resiliency Training (SMART) Program

### Overview of Intervention

Since 1988, the Benson-Henry Institute (BHI) for Mind Body Medicine at Massachusetts General Hospital has focused on developing and evaluating interventions to mitigate the effects of stress on physical and psychological health, with a particular emphasis on the role of the *Relaxation Response* (RR) and its integration with other evidence-based strategies to improve health outcomes. The relaxation response is thought to exert its effects via a series of important physiologic changes including decreased oxygen consumption, decreased respiratory rate, increased brain cortical thickness, increased low-frequency heart rate oscillations, and specific changes in gene expression. The resulting comprehensive stress management and resiliency-training program has been adapted for use with different populations (e.g., children, older adults, military personnel) and widely evaluated and disseminated.

The Stress Management and Resiliency Training (SMART) program is a manualized, copyrighted curriculum that helps participants develop skills to manage stress and cultivate a more positive outlook. It introduces patients to a variety of self-care practices ranging from deep breathing and meditation to daily appreciations, mindful movement, promoting positivity and creative expression. Throughout the program, participants practice these skills between sessions and track which techniques are most helpful in reducing stress and enhancing quality of life.

Patients begin with an individual 1-hour goal setting and skill-building session with their provider and then attend eight consecutive, 2-hour, weekly sessions. Patients also attend 30-minute sessions with their provider at the midway point of the group and about one month after the conclusion of the group.

The following is a session-by-session description of the intervention:

**Intake Session:** In the initial evaluation meeting, participants are introduced to the idea of resiliency and the relaxation response, are oriented to the content of the SMART program, and are asked to set personal goals for participating in the program. This is done in a one-on-one office visit with the group leader.

**Session 1:** The first group session provides psychoeducation about stress and its impact on the brain and body. It introduces the relaxation response via body awareness and single-pointed focus meditation exercises and discusses the importance of appreciation and awareness of positive moments. Participants begin to identify stress-inducing and resiliency-building factors. As homework, participants are asked to practice the relaxation response and record at least one appreciation on a daily basis, and to record these in their practice log.

**Session 2:** In this session, additional strategies for eliciting the relaxation response are introduced, with a focus on diaphragmatic breathing and “mini” relaxation exercises that can be implemented easily throughout the day. To further deepen practice of the relaxation response, participants are taught how to implement body scanning and progressive muscle relaxation. The session also highlights sleep hygiene and strategies to mitigate the impact of stress on sleep quality. As homework, participants continue daily practice of the relaxation response and appreciations, and also add daily practice of mini relaxation exercises.

**Session 3:** Participants explore mindful awareness, focusing on the breath, external stimuli and sensations, including mindful eating. This session also provides psychoeducation about stress warning signals, including physiologic, cognitive, affective, and behavioral signals. Finally, this session introduces the importance of social support in managing stress and asks participants to identify sources of support. As homework, participants continue to practice previously learned relaxation response strategies, and add practice of mindful body awareness.

**Session 4:** This session serves as an introduction to mindful movement, especially yoga practice. This session also introduces cognitive techniques with a focus on identifying negative thought patterns and cognitive errors. As homework practice, participants continue daily RR practice, and begin to log their negative thoughts and their association to affective and physiologic reactions.

**Session 5:** In week 5, the group focuses on guided imagery to deepen relaxation response practice. Cognitive restructuring to challenge negative thought patterns and foster adaptive responses is also introduced. The appropriate and differential use of problem-solving and acceptance techniques are highlighted, as is the importance of physical activity in promoting coping. As homework, participants continue previous daily practice of previous exercises and add between-session practice of imagery, cognitive restructuring, and acceptance techniques.

**Session 6:** A review of previously learned skills including imagery, identification of relaxation signals, and cognitive skills. This session highlights elements drawn from positive psychology, including cultivating positivity to combat stress. As homework, patients add cultivating positivity exercises to their ongoing skills practice.

**Session 7:** This session serves as a continuing discussion of problem solving and acceptance as adaptive responses to stressful situations and introduces self-empathy and self-compassion as healing skills. As homework, participants continue daily practice of previously learned skills and engage in creative expression on at least one occasion between sessions.

**Session 8:** In this final session, participants learn to use humor and imagination to foster coping. Participants review skills learned in previous sessions, review progress towards goals set at the beginning of the program and create a resiliency plan to maintain gains developed through the program.