AN INTERNATIONAL YOUTH EXCHANGE

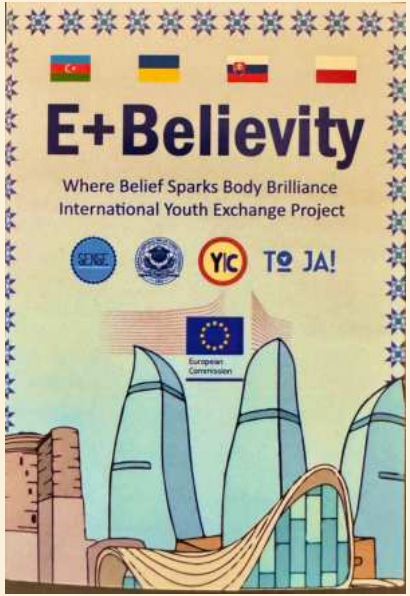
WHERE BELIEF SPARKS BODY BRILLIANCE

14. – 24.3. 2025
BAKU / AZERBAIJAN

FINAL REPORT FROM THE YOUTH EXCHANGE

Funded by the European Union
Erasmus+
NIVAM
NÁRODNÝ INŠTITÚT VZDELÁVANIA A MLÁDEŽE

Erasmus+



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Project is administrated by NIVAM - the Slovak National Agency of the Erasmus+ programme

Funded by the European Union

NIVAM

NÁRODNÝ INŠTITÚT VZDELÁVANIA A MLÁDEŽE

Introduction

This international Youth Exchange was organized as Learning Mobility Project in the frame of Erasmus+ Program by Youth Initiative Cana - Slovakia a civic association from Slovakia in cooperation with partners from Poland, Ukraine and Azerbaijan.

This youth exchange is made in a frame of a project

WHERE BELIEF SPARKS BODY BRILLIANCE

Project nr. 2024-2-SK02-KA152-YOU-000258550

Project is administrated by the Slovak National Agency fo

Project aim *was to improve the competencies of young people and youth leaders from 4x organizations in Mindfulness, Embodiment, and Stress management methods as non-formal education methods to increase mental health and well-being, but also intercultural and social dialogue and a sense of belonging to the EU values core.*

The objectives of this project are to acquire and implement new mental health tools in our daily lives, aiming to mitigate the longterm impact of contemporary challenges on both our mental and physical well-being.

These Youth Exchange had these goals:
- To develop/increase/strengthen the competencies of 28 youth workers, and youth leaders, from 4 countries in supporting young people`s emotional well-being, personal competencies development, and communication skills in 9 days during a youth exchange project in Baku,

- To create new long-term partnerships between EU and Non-EU organizations from Slovakia, Poland, Ukraine, and Azerbaijan,

- To increase attitudes and values toward recognizing

Partners

Slovakia – Youth Initiative Cana Slovakia
www.yic.sk

Azerbaijan – Odlar Yurdu University Baku
https://oyu.edu.az/en/oyu

Ukraine – Sense - Cultural and Eduactional Platform Mariupol
SENSE - educational platform

Poland – Fundacja TO JA! – Ostrorog
https://fundacjatoja.pl

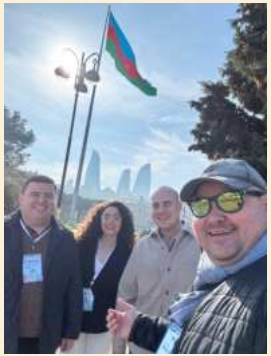
Project Team

Martin Gbúr – facilitator Slovakia

Shovkat Mammadaliyeva – facilitator Azerbaijan

David Poladov – coordinator Azerbaijan

Tomáš Peľak – coordinator Slovakia



Facilitator

I'm Shovkat Mammadaliyeva (Azerbaijan), a Psychology graduate from Baku State University with a Master's in Social Work through the prestigious Erasmus Mundus program. My journey has taken me across Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, and Portugal, where I've had the privilege of working in diverse settings. As an ABA therapist at Together and Healthy Public Union, I developed personalized learning programs for children with special needs, making a real impact on their lives. I also contributed to a career development project funded by British Petroleum, helping to shape the futures of young people through education. My passion for teaching led me to work with refugee children from Ukraine, Syria, and Turkey at Caritas International, while also leading mental health awareness initiatives with EFPSA. As a hippotherapist with Rotary International, I organized transformative equine-assisted therapy sessions, offering healing and growth to children with special needs. Throughout my career, I've been driven by one mission: to empower individuals and communities through education, compassion, and innovation.

Facilitator

Martin Gbúr (Slovakia) is a trainer, facilitator, coach, and active member of the Accreditation Commission of the Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport in Slovak republic.

Certified lector in the non-formal education field, a former teacher in the Dual education system in Slovakia. Cooperates with NIVAM - National Institute of Education and Youth in Slovak republic as a member of a pool of trainers for programs Erasmus+ and European solidarity corps.

As a trainer, he is active at the national and international levels. Supports youth initiatives and as a coach in the European Solidarity Corps program.

He has also experience with European voluntary service, he spent 12 months in Poland in the Edith Stein organization.

Coordinator

Tomáš Peľak (Slovakia) is a youth leader active in community in Košice and Čana. Young entrepreneur, experienced movie maker, a graphic designer with experience in webpage design.

He also created and cooperated on three local projects funded by European Solidarity Corps - solidarity projects in 2019-2020 and 2021-2022, 2024 - 2025.

Has a good experience with project management and leading youth groups.

Has experience in the international field, participated on several youth exchanges and seminars in Slovakia, Slovenia, Italy, Portugal, Armenia, Georgia, Marocco, and other countries.

Webpage: https://vychodukazsa.sk/

Coordinator

David Poladov (Azerbaijan) is a founder & former CEO of KIM Group, leading three core divisions (psychological services, management consulting, and professional training), serving 12,000+ clients and introducing Azerbaijan’s first structured eclectic psychotherapy supervision system.

Pioneered the first university-affiliated Psychological Diagnostics Institute, establishing an academia-industry collaboration model within a university framework.

University Lecturer atOdlar Yurdu University in Baku, teaching Cognitive Psychology, Business & Management Psychology, Psychotherapy.
Supervising psychological support programs at SOS Children's Villages, enhancing staff mental health and development.

2x Winner of Global Management Challenge - (2022, 2024 Azerbaijan)

Mindful Conversations: Navigating Conflict with Awareness & Embodiment

Prepared for the Project:
Where Belief Sparks Body Brilliance

Introduction

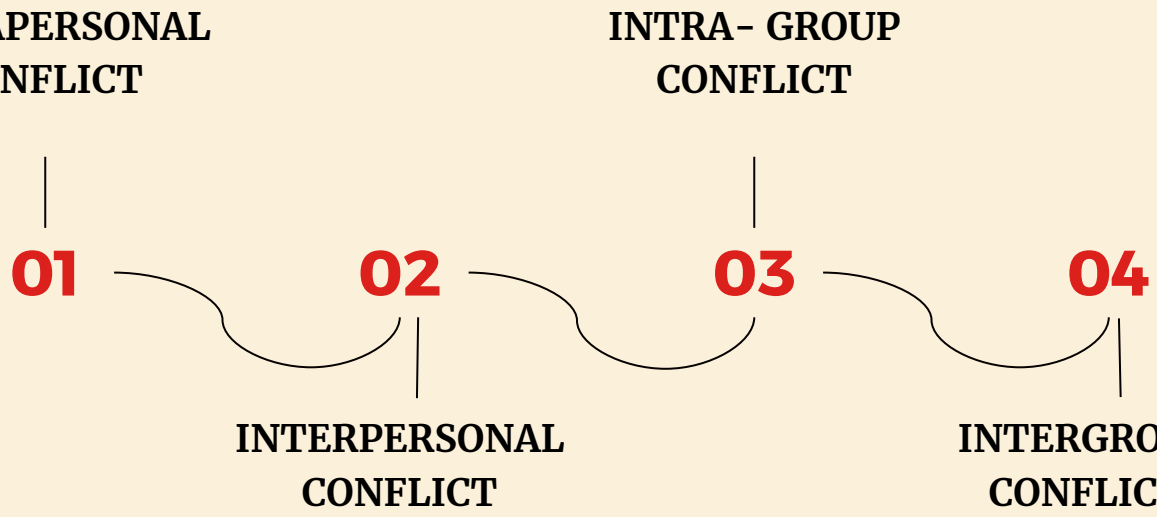
Have you ever felt your body betray you in the heat of an argument? Heart racing, muscles tensing, breath shallow—what if your body knew something you didn’t?

01
Understanding Conflict: Types & Causes

What does “conflict” mean?

Conflict isn’t just arguing—it’s any misalignment in needs, goals, or perspectives. Conflict is an existing state of disagreement or hostility between two or more people (Nicholson, 1992). Conflict also connotes different perceptions, which may not necessarily result in hostility. This way, conflict simply means ‘a different perception’ or view to an issue or situation (Barash and Webel, 2002).

Types of Conflict



(Toncheva-Zlatkova ,2023).

1. Conflict of Interests

- Arises from competition over limited resources
- Leads to rivalry, hostility, and attempts to gain at others' expense

2. Cognitive Conflict (Conflict of Ideas)

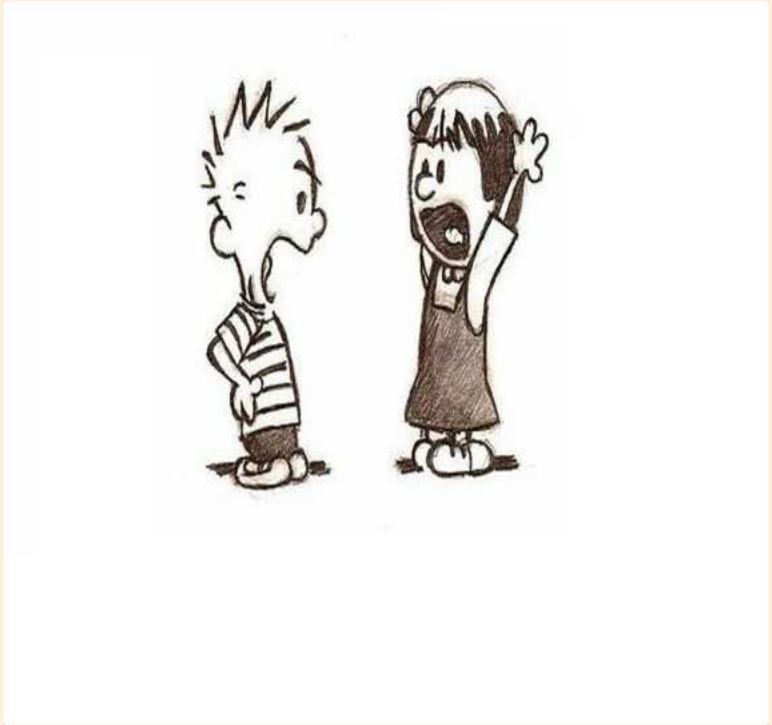
- Stems from differing perspectives on problem-solving
- Causes inconsistencies in assessments and behaviors

🔷 **Derivatives of Cognitive Conflict:**

- **Attitudinal Conflict:** Based on biases between disputants
- **Values Conflict:** Rooted in cultural, moral, and social differences
- **Psychological Conflict:** Arises from personality traits, mental processes

3. Organizational Conflict

- Results from poor coordination and structure in teamwork
- Can occur at different levels within an organization (Toncheva-Zlatkova ,2023).



The Brain's Role in Conflict Reactivity

Conflict activates the **amygdala**, the brain's threat detection system, triggering an immediate **stress response** (Porges, 2011).

The **prefrontal cortex (PFC)**, responsible for rational thinking and emotional regulation, becomes **less active** under stress, reducing cognitive flexibility (Arnsten, 2009).

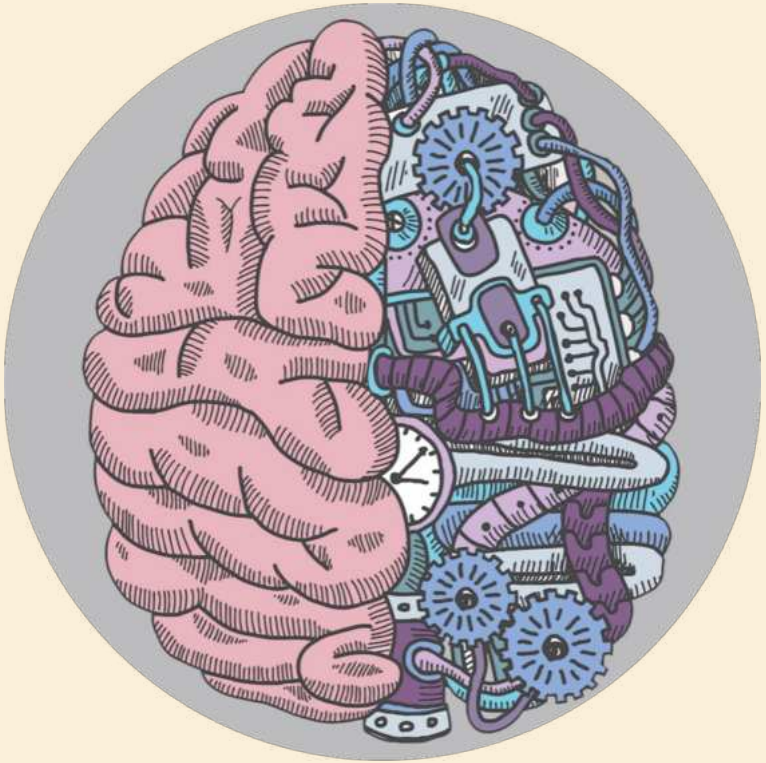
This shift from **top-down (PFC-driven) to bottom-up (amygdala-driven) processing** results in **impulsive, emotionally charged reactions** (Davidson & Begley, 2012).

02

Your Brain is Lying to You: Cognitive Biases in Conversations

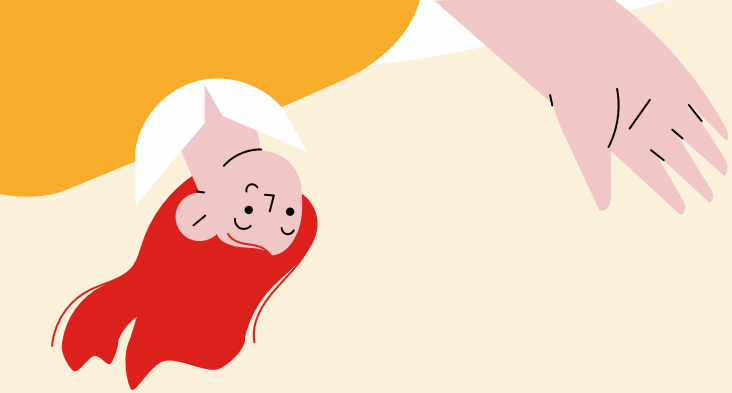
How Biases Distort Conversations

- **Negativity Bias** – We focus more on negative words than positive ones.
- **Confirmation Bias** – We hear what we *expect* rather than what's actually said.
- **Fundamental Attribution Error** – We assume others' mistakes reflect their character, not their circumstances.



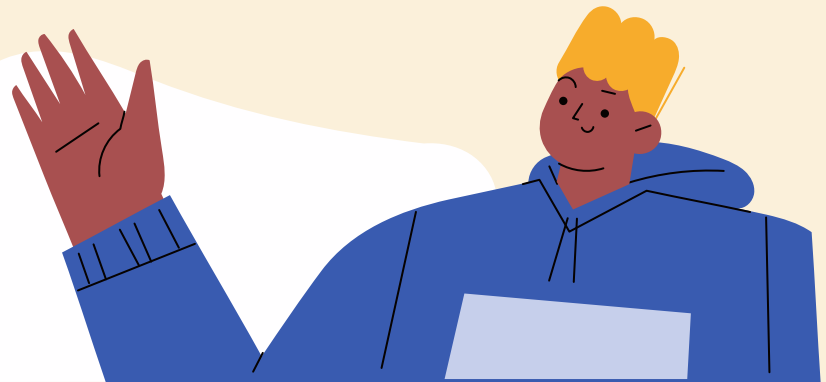
Why does this happen?

- The brain processes 11 million bits of information per second but can only consciously handle 40 bits (Kahneman, 2011).
- To save energy, the brain takes shortcuts—which often leads to misinterpretations in communication (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

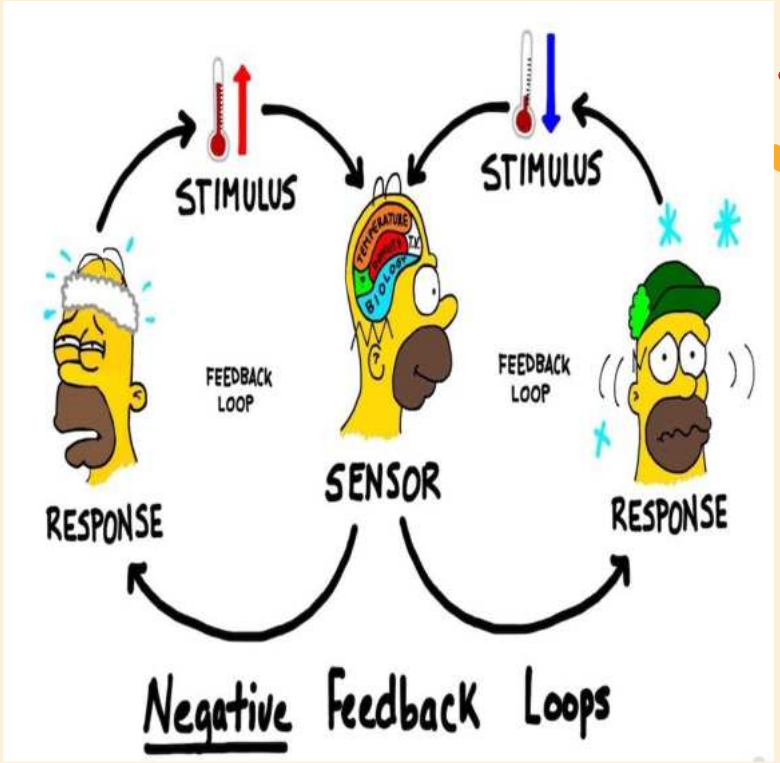


03

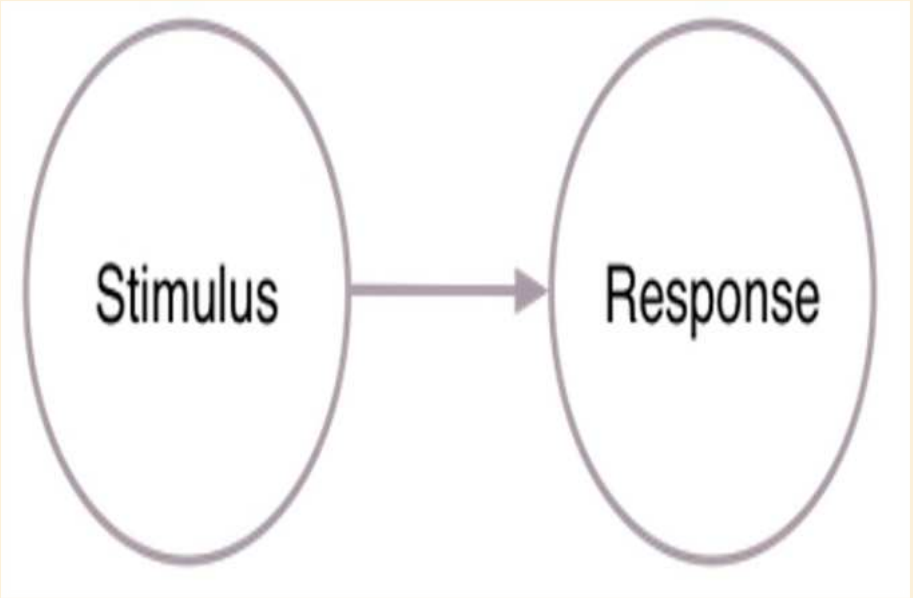
Awareness – The Superpower in Conversations



The Stimulus-Response Model, rooted in behavioral psychology, posits that external stimuli elicit responses, which can be either automatic or consciously regulated (Skinner, 1953). In communication, a stimulus is any verbal or non-verbal cue, while a response is the reaction it triggers.



Cognitive and emotional awareness serve as mediators between stimulus and response. Research in neuroscience suggests that reactive responses—those governed by the amygdala—tend to be impulsive and emotionally driven (LeDoux, 1996). Conversely, conscious responses engage the prefrontal cortex (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004).



Why Awareness is a Superpower

Prevents Misunderstandings

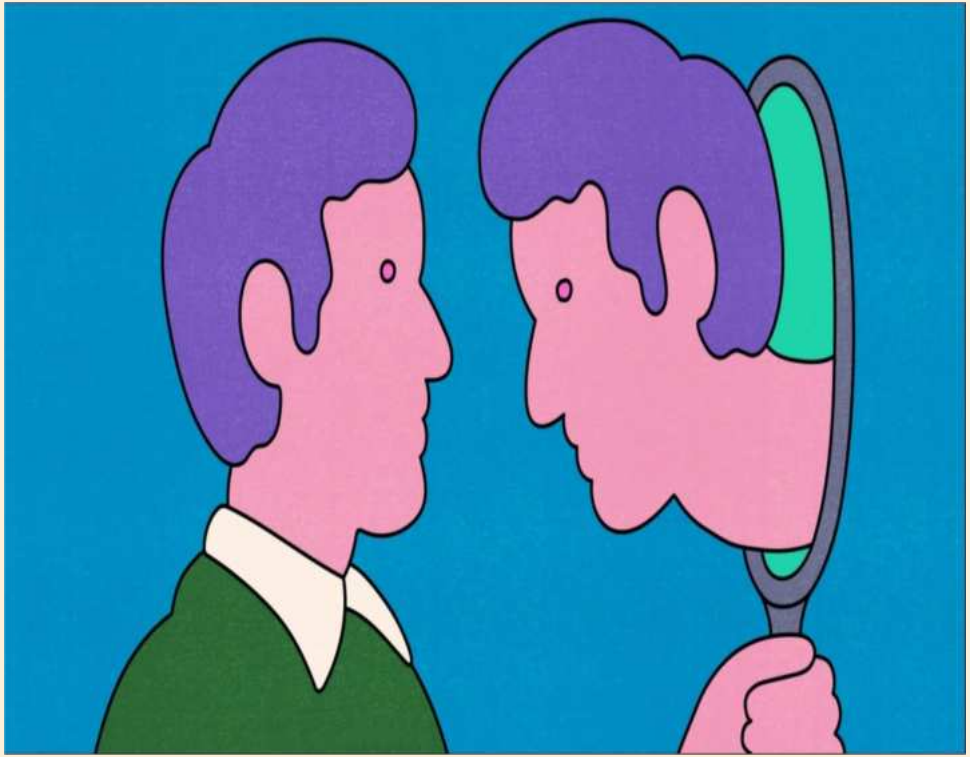
Develops Emotional Intelligence

Enhances Active Listening

Strengthens Relationships

Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose.” – Viktor Frankl

1. **Recognize Emotional Triggers:**
   “Notice when emotions take control—your body gives clues (tight chest, clenched jaw, fast heart rate).”
2. **Observe Without Judgment:**
   “You are NOT your reaction. Step back and watch it like a curious scientist.”
3. **Create a Power Pause Before Responding:**
   “That ‘space’ is your superpower. Breathe. Center. Then choose how to respond.”



The Power of Open-Ended ?

Open-ended questions encourage deeper, more meaningful conversations by prompting reflection and elaboration. Unlike yes/no questions, they engage the speaker to share more insights and emotions, fostering understanding and empathy.

- Stimulates critical thinking and creativity.
- Enhances active listening and rapport.
- Helps uncover new perspectives and solutions.

Examples:

- *“What inspired your decision?”*
- *“How did that make you feel?”*
- *“What do you think could be improved?”*

04

Embodiment – Bringing Awareness into the Body

"Are You Really in Your Body Right Now?"

The Science of Disembodiment: Why We Disconnect from the Body

The Default Mode Network (DMN) and Overthinking

- The DMN (medial prefrontal cortex & posterior cingulate cortex) is overactive when we ruminate and disconnect from the present moment.
- Studies show chronic stress and trauma lead to excessive DMN activity, reducing bodily awareness (Farb et al., 2007).

The Brain's Neglect of Internal Signals (Interoceptive Deficit)

- Interoception: The brain's ability to sense internal body signals (heartbeat, breath, gut feelings).
- The insula and anterior cingulate cortex (ACC) regulate interoception.
- Low interoceptive awareness is linked to anxiety, depression, and dissociation (Craig, 2009).

The Neuroscience of Embodiment: How Awareness Changes the Brain

- MRI studies show meditation, breathwork, and somatic practices activate the insula, enhancing interoception (Critchley & Harrison, 2013).
- Stronger interoceptive networks = better emotional resilience, less anxiety.
- The vagus nerve regulates heart rate, digestion, and emotional state via the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS).
- Vagal tone improves with breath control, slow movement (yoga, tai chi), and body awareness (Porges, 2011 – Polyvagal Theory).
- Higher vagal tone = *reduced inflammation, better emotional regulation, increased resilience to stress.*

MINDFUL CONFLICT QUEST: INSTRUCTIONS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Welcome, brave explorers! 🌟
Today, you will embark on an epic journey to master the art of mindful conflict resolution through games.

STAGE 1: The Bridge of Deep Listening

Objective: Learn to listen mindfully without reacting.

Step 1: Pair Up & Share

- One person **shares a real conflict** they have experienced.
- The other person **listens silently**, without interrupting or giving advice.

Step 2: Reflect Back

- The listener repeats what they heard using:

"What I hear you saying is..."

- The speaker gives feedback: *Did they get it right? Did it feel good to be heard?*

🧘 **Mindfulness Practice:** Before responding, take a full breath in and out. Notice how that pause changes your reaction.

STAGE 2: The Trust Walk

Objective: Learn to communicate through body language and build trust.

Step 1: Blindfolded Navigation

- One person wears a **blindfold** while their partner guides them using **only nonverbal cues** (gestures, touch, or sound).
- The goal: Navigate the space safely.

Step 2: Debrief

- How did it feel to **trust someone without words**?
- How much of our communication happens **nonverbally** in conflict?

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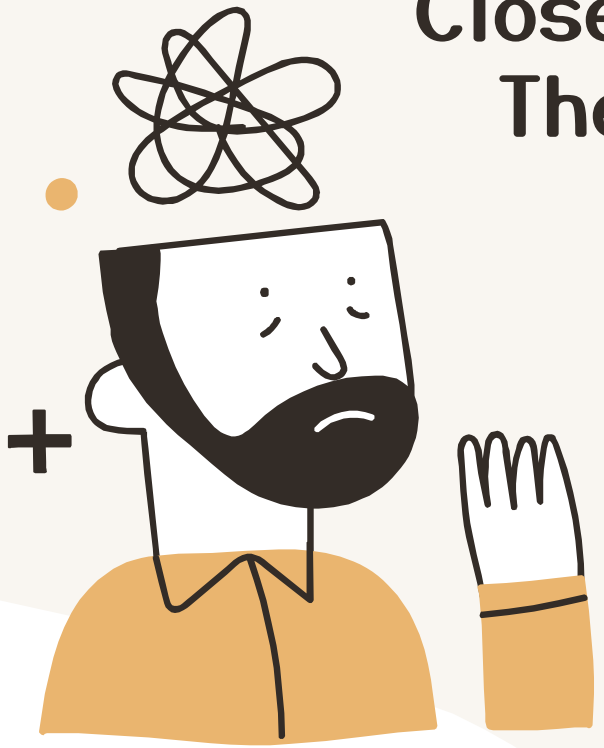
The Science of Stress: How Mindfulness Can Rewire Your Brain to Calm

Prepared by for the Project:
Where Belief Sparks Body Brilliance

Close Your Eyes and Imagine: The Future of Your Brain, Stress-Free



"Please close your eyes for a moment."

"Take a deep breath in... and out."

"Imagine a world where your mind is completely calm—no racing thoughts, no stress, just peace."

"Picture your brain as a calm ocean—smooth, still, and clear."

Now, Picture This…

“Now, imagine the opposite: your mind is filled with racing thoughts, your heart is racing, and you feel overwhelmed by stress.”

“Take a moment to really feel that chaos—like a storm in your mind.”

“Feel the difference between the calm and the chaos.”

“Take one more deep breath and, when you're ready, open your eyes.”

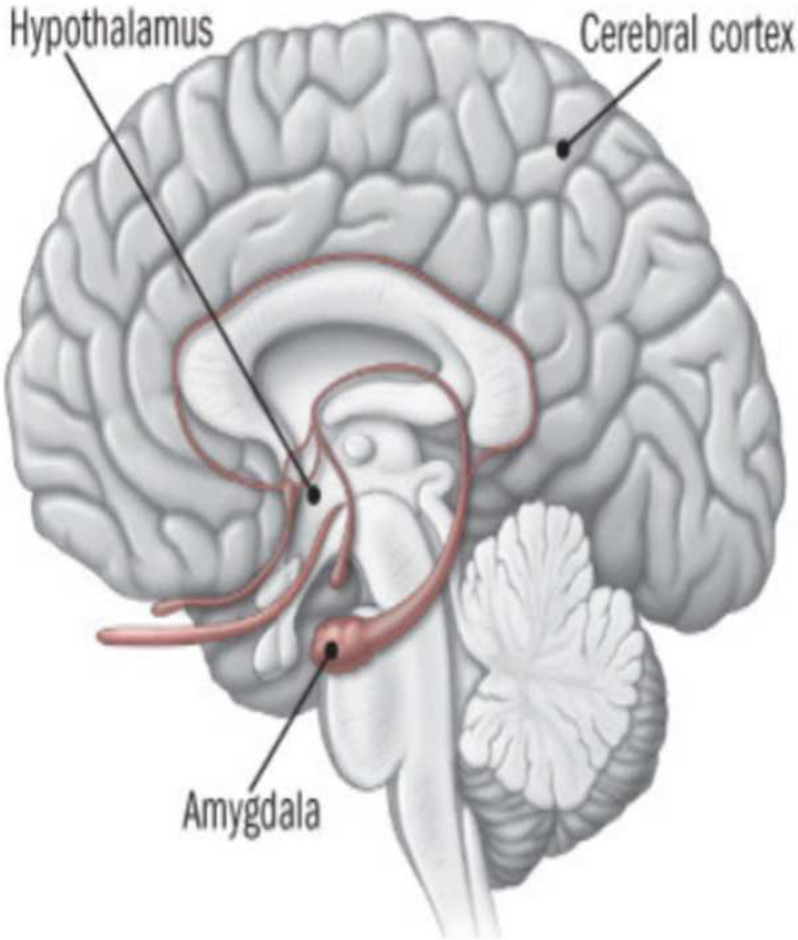
01

The Science Behind Stress

Stress is an adaptive biological response designed for survival, but its prolonged activation can lead to detrimental consequences for both brain and body. To understand this, let’s examine the biological mechanisms and neuroendocrine pathways that underlie the stress response (Fink, 2010).

The Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) Axis: “When an individual perceives a threat, the brain’s amygdala (the center for emotional processing) sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus, which activates the HPA axis—a complex system involving the hypothalamus, pituitary gland, and adrenal glands. This system releases cortisol, a glucocorticoid hormone that mobilizes the body’s resources to respond to the stressor.”

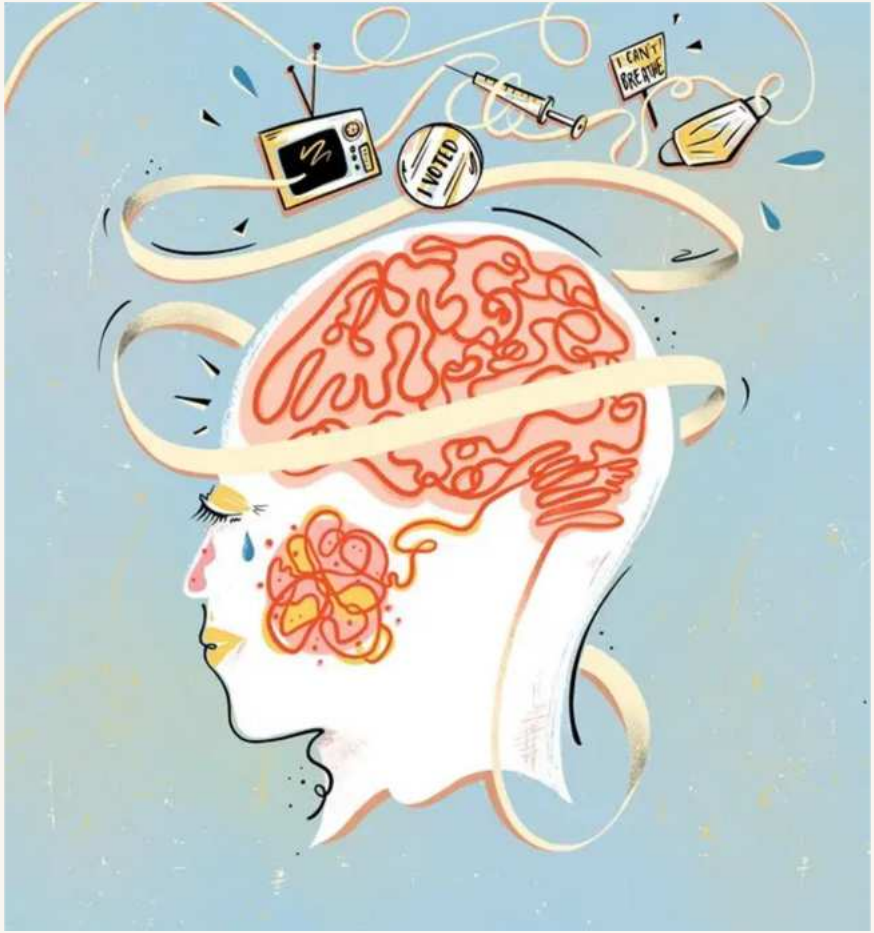
Fight-or-Flight Response: “The release of cortisol, along with adrenaline and norepinephrine, primes the body to either confront the threat (fight) or flee from it (flight). This is an evolutionary mechanism that enhances focus and energy for short-term survival. However, prolonged activation of this system due to chronic stress can have deleterious effects.” (LeWine, 2024).



02

Chronic Stress: Pathophysiology and Effects on Brain Function

Chronic activation of the HPA axis leads to sustained elevations of cortisol, which, in turn, has a direct impact on the brain. Over time, chronic stress causes functional and structural changes to key brain areas responsible for memory, decision-making, and emotional regulation (Schraml, Perski, Grossi, & Makower, 2024).

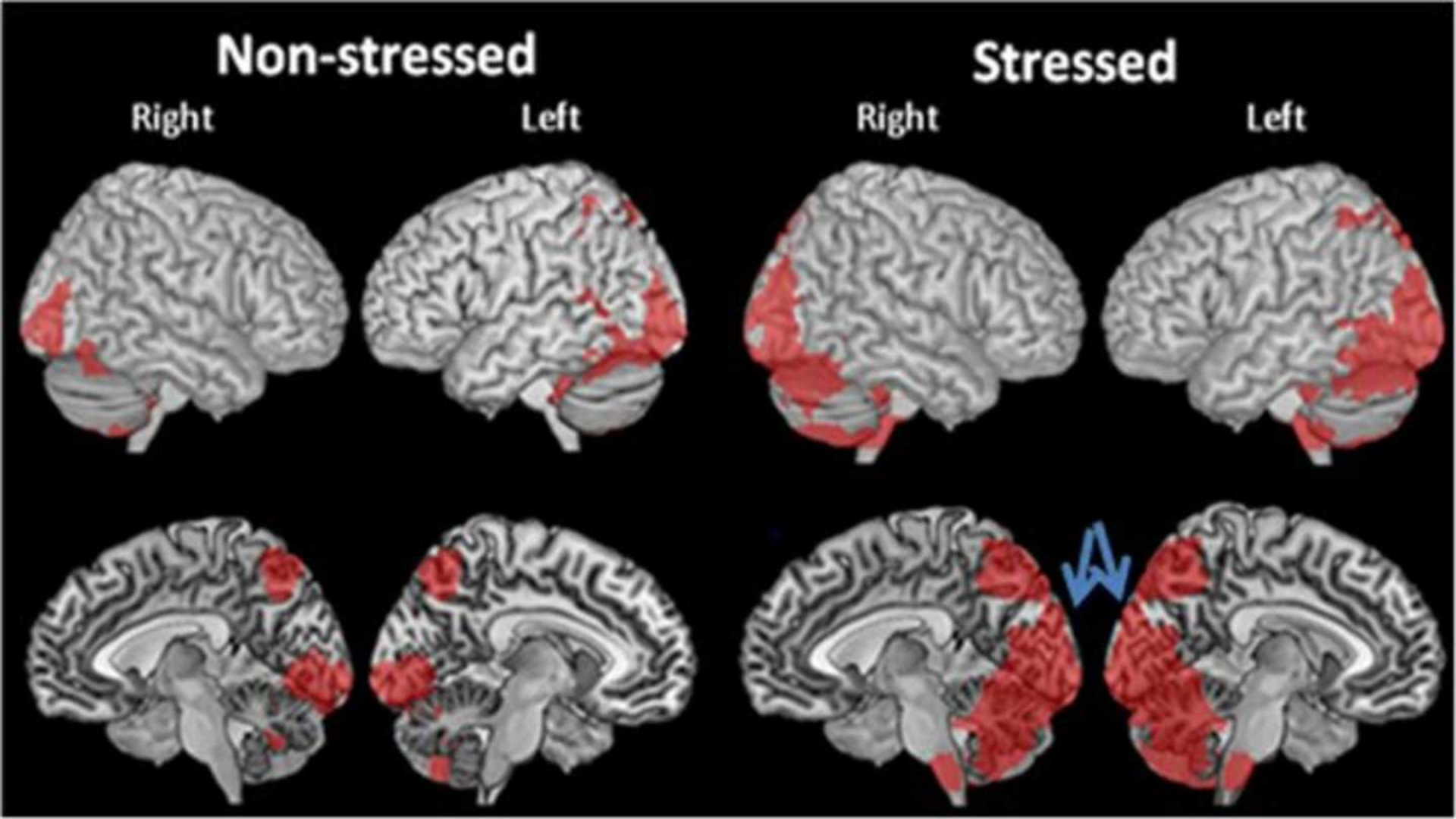


Neurobiological Changes in Stress

- **Impact on the Hippocampus:** “One of the first regions affected by chronic stress is the hippocampus, a critical structure involved in learning and memory. Long-term exposure to elevated cortisol levels induces hippocampal atrophy, meaning it can reduce the volume and function of this area, impairing the ability to encode and retrieve memories.”

- **Prefrontal Cortex Dysfunction:** “The prefrontal cortex (PFC), responsible for executive functions like decision-making, attention, and emotional regulation, is also vulnerable to stress. Studies show that chronic stress leads to decreased PFC activity, resulting in poorer impulse control, reduced emotional regulation, and difficulty concentrating.”

- **Amygdala Hyperactivity:** “In contrast, the amygdala, responsible for processing emotions like fear, becomes hyperactive during chronic stress. This hyperactivity results in heightened anxiety, emotional reactivity, and an impaired ability to regulate negative emotions.”


Non-stressed
Right
Left
Stressed
Right
Left

02

How Stress Affect Our Lives

Table of contents

We will talk about:

Physical Effects

Mental and Emotional Effects

Behavioral Effects

1. Chronic stress significantly contributes to cardiovascular issues. Extended periods of stress result in the persistent release of stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol, which can harm blood vessels and arteries. This damage increases the likelihood of developing high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke(Mayo Clinic Staff, 2023; Harvard Health Publishing, 2023).

1. Immune system suppression is another significant consequence of chronic stress. Prolonged stress decreases the production of vital immune cells, which makes the body more vulnerable to infections and diseases (Dhabhar, 2018; National Institutes of Health, 2023).

1. Digestive issues are also prevalent in individuals dealing with chronic stress. Disruptions in the gut-brain connection can result in conditions such as irritable bowel syndrome (IBS), ulcers, and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD).

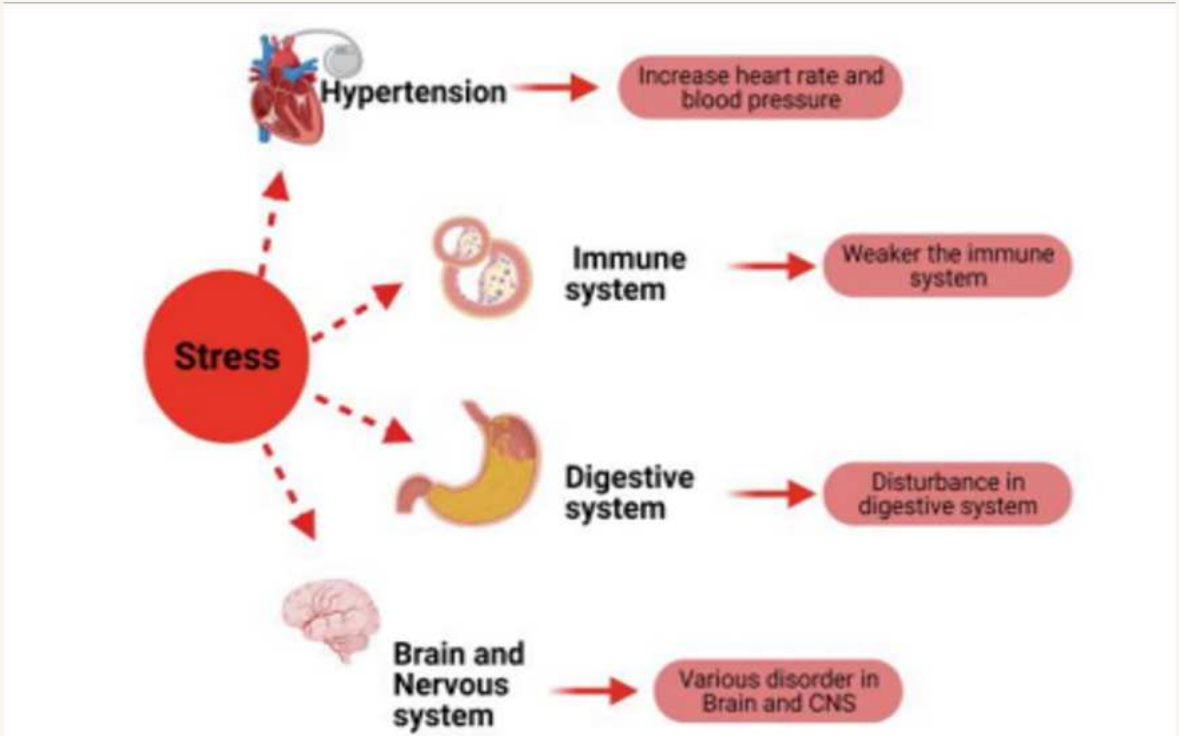


Fig. 1. Stress impacts on human immune system, digestive system, central nervous system, and cardiovascular system.

1. Chronic stress contributes to anxiety and depression by disrupting brain chemistry and structure. Prolonged high cortisol levels can damage the hippocampus, impairing learning and memory (National Institutes of Health, 2023).
2. Chronic stress often leads to sleep issues like insomnia, worsening stress and creating a cycle that's hard to break. It can also contribute to other mental health conditions, such as PTSD and substance abuse disorders, alongside anxiety and depression (Sleep Foundation, 2023).
3. Individuals with chronic stress may resort to unhealthy coping mechanisms like overeating, smoking, alcohol abuse, and drug use, which worsen physical and mental health. Social withdrawal is also common, weakening the support networks needed to manage stress effectively (National Institute of Mental Health, 2023).
4. In both work and academic settings, chronic stress can undermine productivity and performance, resulting in lower job satisfaction and academic achievement. When individuals come to accept a consistently stressful environment as normal, social withdrawal can occur, further weakening the support systems essential for effectively managing stress.

03

The Role Of Mindfulnes s In Stress Reduction

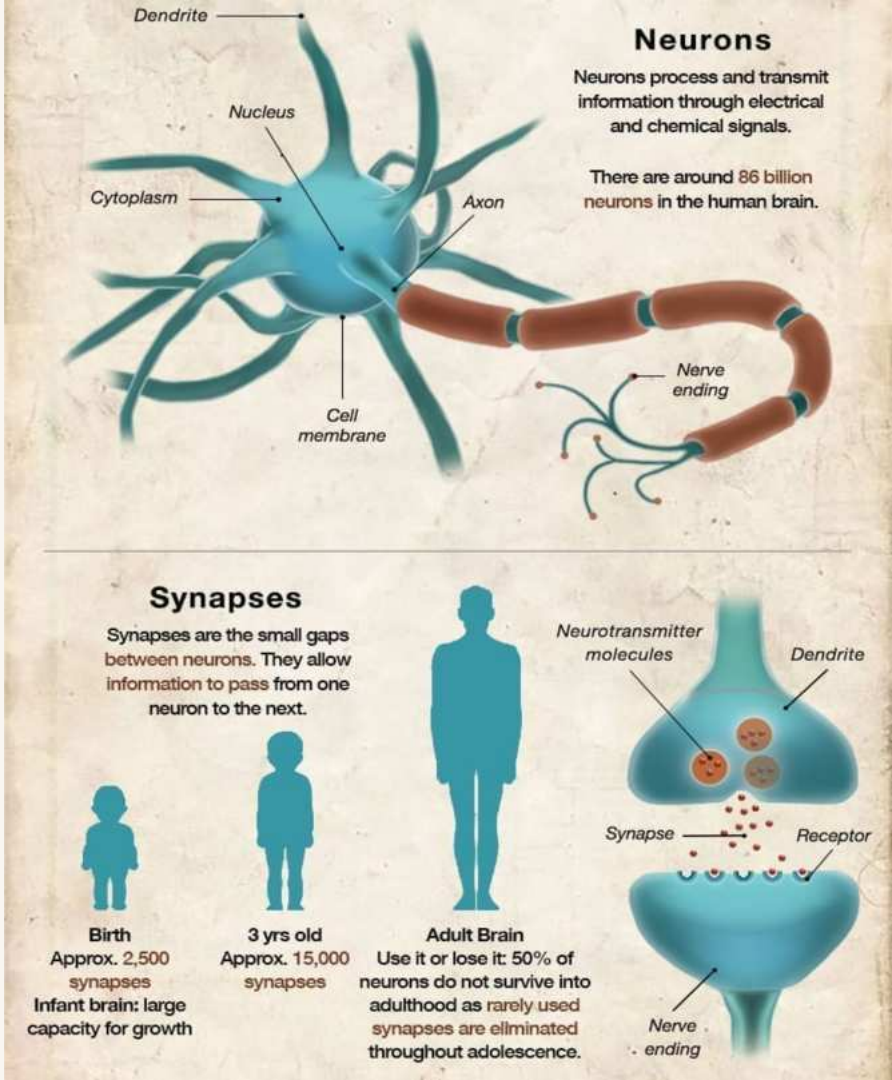
-Mindful awareness is the intentional and purposeful direction of attention to the present moment, characterized by a non-judgmental recognition of thoughts, emotions, and sensations as they arise, without labeling them as positive or negative.

(Naik, Harris, & Forthun, 2013)

The Concept of NeuroPlasticity

"Neuroplasticity is the term used to describe the capacity for creating new neural connections and growing neurons in response to experience"(Siegel, 2010).

Mindfulness meditation promotes neuroplasticity by strengthening neural circuits for attention control. Regular practice enhances synaptic connections through the release of neurochemicals like BDNF, dopamine, and serotonin, particularly in the medial prefrontal cortex. Meditation produces both state effects (short-term changes) and trait-like effects (long-term benefits) (Baer, 2010).



***Neurological Changes from Meditation**:*

- Studies support that meditation induces structural changes in the brain.
- Massachusetts General Hospital Study (2013): 40 minutes of daily meditation thickens the cerebral cortex, enhancing attention and sensory processing.
- Tibetan Monks Study (Davidson, 2010): Long-term meditators altered both the structure and function of their brains, proving meditation can lead to lasting brain changes.

***Amygdala and Stress Reduction**:*

- National Institutes of Health Study (Wilson, 2013): Mindfulness meditation reduces amygdala activity and can shrink its size, leading to reduced stress.
- Business Application: After 8 weeks of mindfulness, stressed business people had smaller amygdalas, suggesting reduced stress and increased productivity.

***Prefrontal Cortex and Emotional Regulation**:*

- Mindfulness increases activity in the prefrontal cortex, which controls decision-making, emotion regulation, and planning.
- Reduces overactive amygdala (common in PTSD) and enhances emotional stability.
- Anterior cingulate cortex activation improves emotional stability and reduces reactivity (Wilson, 2013).

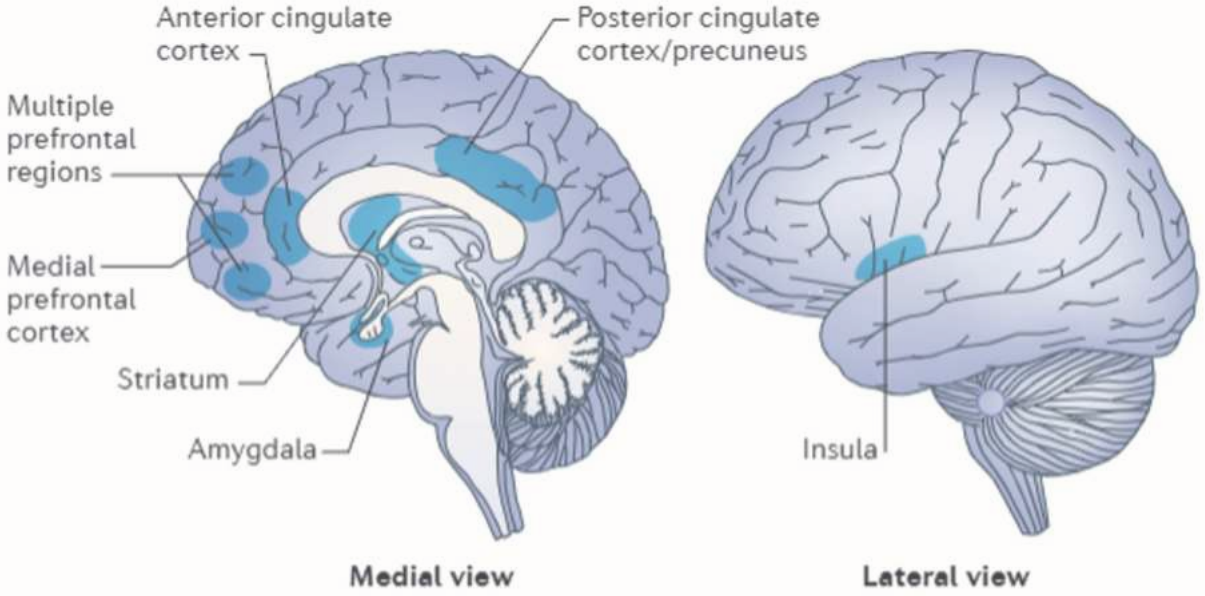


Figure 1 | **Brain regions involved in the components of mindfulness meditation.** Schematic view of some of the brain regions involved in attention control (the anterior cingulate cortex and the striatum), emotion regulation (multiple prefrontal regions, limbic regions and the striatum) and self-awareness (the insula, medial prefrontal cortex and posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus).

04

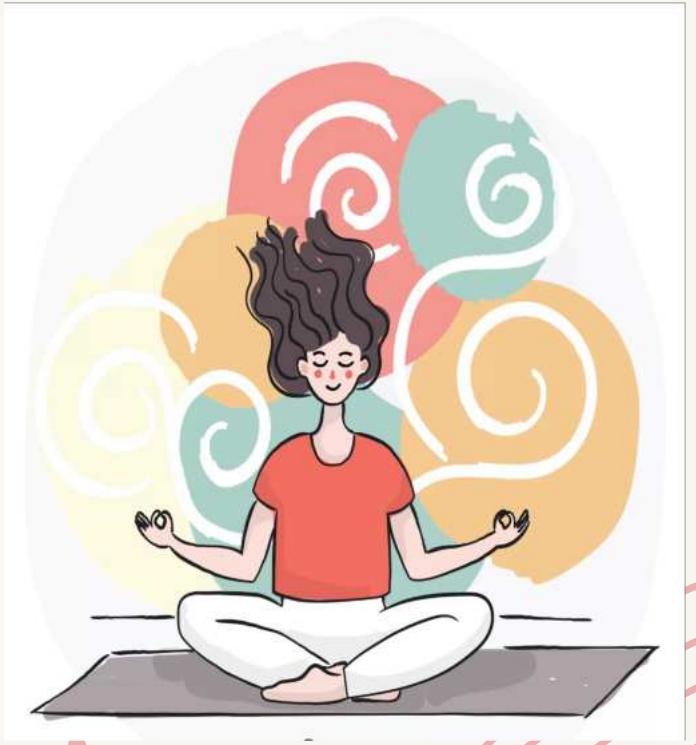
Mindfulnes s Practices: Real Life Tools

Mindful Breathing

How to Practice:

- Inhale deeply through your nose for a count of 4.
- Hold for 4 counts.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth for 4 counts.
- Repeat 4-5 times or longer as needed.

Benefit: Lowers stress hormones, improves focus, and calms the mind.



Body Scan Meditation: Release Tension and Relax

How to Practice:

- Lie down or sit comfortably.
- Slowly bring your awareness to different parts of your body, starting from your toes and moving upward.
- Notice any tension and breathe deeply into those areas to release it.

Benefit: Increases body awareness, reduces physical tension, and enhances relaxation.

5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Exercise: Reconnect to the Present Moment

How to Practice:

- Name 5 things you can see.
- Name 4 things you can touch.
- Name 3 things you can hear.
- Name 2 things you can smell.
- Name 1 thing you can taste.

Benefit: Quickly shifts your focus from overwhelming thoughts to sensory experiences, grounding you in the present.

Loving-Kindness Meditation: Cultivating Compassion

How to Practice:

- Sit comfortably and close your eyes.
- Repeat phrases like, “May I be happy, may I be healthy, may I be safe, may I live with ease.”
- Extend these wishes to others, including loved ones, acquaintances, and even those you may have difficulty with.

Benefit: Promotes positive emotions, empathy, and emotional regulation.

Mindful Walking: Bring Awareness to Every Step

How to Practice:

- Walk slowly, paying attention to each step.
- Notice how your feet feel as they make contact with the ground.
- Focus on the rhythm of your breath and the sensations in your body as you move.

Benefit: Calms the mind, improves physical coordination, and grounds you in the present.

Mindfulness is not just a passing trend, but a powerful tool that can reshape the way our brains respond to stress. By incorporating simple practices into our daily lives, we can cultivate a sense of balance, improve emotional well-being, and create healthier, more mindful responses to the challenges we face. It's a long-term approach that helps us lead more peaceful, fulfilling lives!

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