CHAPTER SIX

FLEX
FOR

ERIKA & THE

ELKINGTON FAMILY

WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO

BILL, SABRINA AND THE ERIKA LEGACY FOUNDATION

FOR THE MANY WAYS YOU LIVE TO INSPIRE
Little things make a big difference. So we’ve created a hands-on, start-anywhere guide to inform and empower your day-to-day actions and interactions.

This is our top 10—the best of the best recommendations for self-care, maintenance and optimal performance. The actions may seem simple but don’t let that deceive you. Each one is based on evidence—we’ve taken the leading science and made it applicable to our daily lives. Start with Chapter One and work your way to Chapter 10. Experiment. Play. And discover what works for you!

Our Starting Equation? 
You = Awesome
How to take on challenges with grit and grace. Manage stress, resolve problems and cultivate mindfulness.
Flex

Like physical fitness, mental well-being is a combination of strength, flexibility and endurance.

This book champions all three. As the title of this section suggests, we’re ready to flex!

There are ways to train for the unexpected. We have tips on navigating change and tactics for tackling challenges!

We always laugh when Dr. Stanley Kutcher talks about “bad hair weeks,” but we know that some days – and months – are harder than others.

In the next few pages, we will look closer at stress – a normal response to life. The better you get at managing your response to it, the more resilient you will become.

We will also expand on emotions, exploring ways to consider the feelings of others.

Geez, that’s a lot!

If the thought of any of this seems too much right now, take this section slow. Or come back to it another time.
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FOR WAYS TO GET THE WISE BRAIN BACK ONLINE, FLIP AHEAD IN THIS CHAPTER

THIS IS YOUR BRAIN

FACT NO. 1

FACT NO. 2
THIS PART OF THE BRAIN CONTROLS BREATHING, HEART RATE AND BODY TEMPERATURE.

FACT NO. 3
“STRESS HORMONES” (ADRENALINE, NOREPINEPHRINE AND CORTISOL) ARE RELEASED.

ON STRESS

FACT NO. 4
THE BRAIN USES SIGNALS TO SEND SIGNALS TO OTHER PARTS OF THE BODY. STRESS CAN CAUSE THE HEART TO BEAT FASTER, BREATH TO SPEED UP, AND MUSCLES TO GET TIGHT AND TENSE.

FACT NO. 5
WHEN YOUR STRESS RESPONSE IS ACTIVATED, YOUR “WISE BRAIN” (PREFRONTAL CORTEX), WHICH HELPS US TO SEE CLEARLY, THINK RATIONALY AND ACT WISELY, GOES TEMPORARILY “OFFLINE.”

FOR WAYS TO GET THE WISE BRAIN BACK ONLINE, FLIP AHEAD IN THIS CHAPTER

DISCOVER MORE ON THE STRESS RESPONSE
Here is a simple practice that activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which cues the body to relax and chill a little.

Keep this practice in mind as we begin to talk about stress and stressors. Take a couple minutes to learn this breath exercise and it will serve you a lifetime!

1
GET COMFORTABLE

"Be here now. Be someplace else later. Is that so complicated?"
DAVID M. BADER

2
BREATHE IN AS YOU COUNT TO FOUR

Stressors are conditions and events that activate a stress response system that affects blood flow as well as adrenaline, norepinephrine and cortisol.

We’ve mentioned deadlines and public speaking, but the list might include academic pressure, unpaid bills, unexpected delays, unreasonable demands, shark-filled waters, too many things all at once.

Stress is our body’s response to the demands we face.

3
BREATHE OUT AS YOU COUNT TO SIX OR EIGHT. REPEAT FOR 90 SECONDS

IDENTIFY SOME OF THE STRESSORS IN YOUR LIFE

WHAT, AND WHO, IN YOUR LIFE HELPS YOU TO MANAGE STRESS?*

ARE THERE STRESSORS YOU CAN REMOVE OR AT LEAST MINIMIZE?

*BY NOTICING WHEN WE ARE STRESSED AND THEN TAKING ACTION TO REDUCE IT, WE INCREASE SELF-AWARENESS AND BOOST SELF-MANAGEMENT SKILLS – BOTH OF WHICH IMPROVE WELL-BEING!

TURN BACK A PAGE FOR A MAGIC TRICK!
Don’t Distress About Short-Term Stress

Those sweaty palms are a sign your body is revving for a challenge!

No pressure, but ... maybe it’s time to change the way you think about stress.

In nerve-wracking situations – before an exam or the start of a presentation – your heart rate may go up; you might sweat and begin to breathe faster. These are physical changes that you might perceive negatively, but wait ...

In a blockbuster TEDtalk a few years back, health psychologist Kelly McGonigal advocated for a new way of thinking about the stress response.

“What if you viewed them as signs that your body was energized and it’s preparing you to meet this challenge?” McGonigal asked, citing research that shows study participants who did so were less stressed out, less anxious, more confident.

“When you view stress in this way, your body believes you, and your stress becomes healthier.”

The stress response serves as an alert that something is up. Stress hormones can produce butterflies or clammy palms, just for example, signals that you have come face to face with a challenge or opportunity.

The next time you note signs of “on the spot” nervous tension – a normal reaction to any challenge or new situation – it might help to remind yourself that it’s your body revving up to the challenge.

Shorter version: Don’t sweat it.

The next time your internal alarm system goes off, try to be mindful of your stress response. Notice where you feel it in your body.
THE ART OF REFRAMING

DO YOU HAVE A PROBLEM IN YOUR LIFE?

YES  NO

THEN DON’T WORRY

NO  YES

CAN YOU DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT?

“The opposite of stress is resilience. Resilience is the ability to have a Plan B, a Plan C, a Plan D etc., in order to face the situation that stresses you out.”

DR. SONIA LUPIN

Perspective is everything. We're grateful to have picked up the art of reframing – the ability to see the opportunity or to seek out the positive in a situation. The technique has the power to transform most annoyances. See for yourself →

Stuck on a slow-moving subway? A chance to catch up on your favorite podcast! A trip to the dentist to fill a cavity? The sooner it’s done, the sooner it’s off your to-do list. A slow-moving lineup? An opportunity to practice patience.

CAN YOU THINK OF ANYTHING IN YOUR OWN LIFE THAT WOULD BENEFIT FROM A REFRAME?

SSRESSSORD  REFRFRAGMNE

 CAN YOU THINK OF ANYTHING ELSE IN YOUR LIFE THAT WOULD BENEFIT FROM A REFRAME?
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WHAT OTHER HEALTHY COPING STRATEGIES COME TO MIND?

THINK OF THREE STRESSORS IN YOUR LIFE

WHAT TIPS MIGHT YOU APPLY AGAINST EACH STRESSOR?

Tame Your Stress Response

10 tips for tackling “crisis” situations

So far, so fine. But here’s the thing. (Of course there’s a thing!)

The world is full of could-be stressors. Sometimes one big thing can weigh you down. In other moments, it’s lots of little events and circumstances.

The “fight-or-flight” stress response is forever on alert, but it was never meant to be always on. Nor is it equipped to judge levels of alarm.

“It may not know the difference between a mammoth and a traffic jam,” the Centre for Studies on Human Stress explains. “It secretes the same stress hormones, while you are stuck in traffic or being chased by an aggressive bear, which have the same effect on your mind and body.”

The body gets mixed up and runs down when always dealing with “crisis” situations.

Everyone is different. Some people thrive on deadlines, love public speaking, like to get lost. There is no one-size-fits-all way to cope.

It helps to identify situations and events in your life that may activate your stress response. This book is full of tricks that can help you to pay attention in a way that will create options when you are tackling challenges.

The Centre for Studies on Human Stress is a champion when it comes to helping people of all ages and stages. They offer the following 10 tips that might inspire you to think about the way you cope. Experiment here, try one tip, then another. Find what works for you!

1. **BE POSITIVE**
   Think of obstacles as a chance to learn

2. **MAKE THE CHOICE NOT TO OVER-REACT**
   to stressors and deal with them one at a time

3. **TAKE AN OBJECTIVE VIEW**
   of your stressor

4. **COMMUNICATE**
   “Don’t ruminate or bottle up your emotions.”

5. **ACCEPT YOURSELF (AND OTHERS)**
   No one is perfect!

6. **MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH PEOPLE**

7. **DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH MISTAKES**
   FOR MORE, SEE PAGE 132

8. **DEAL EFFECTIVELY WITH SUCCESSES!**
   “This will build on your competence.”

9. **DEVELOP SELF-MANAGEMENT**
   “Train yourself to study hard in preparation for your final exam.”

10. **MAINTENANCE**
    “Practice, practice, practice for a long life of resilient living.”
The ABCs of Optimism

Glass half-full or glass half-empty?
The question has launched 1,000 memes, including one that points out: “The glass is refillable!”
The good news about optimism is that it can be developed as a skill and way of thinking that contributes to well-being.
The ABC model of optimism was created by psychologist Albert Ellis to help explain how we respond to stress →

A IS FOR ADVERSITY OR “ACTIVATING EVENTS,” A TOUGH MOMENT OR SITUATION

“A” C IS FOR CONSEQUENCES HOW YOU RESPOND TO A SITUATION BASED ON YOUR BELIEF

“Blorft” is an adjective I just made up that means ‘Completely overwhelmed but proceeding as if everything is fine and reacting to the stress with the torpor of a possum.’ I have been blorft every day for the past seven years.”
TINA FEY

B IS FOR BELIEF WHAT YOU TELL YOURSELF ABOUT THOSE DIFFICULTIES

We all get carried away by worst-case scenarios. For example, most of us know the anticipation and worry around a first date. We imagine all the things that could go wrong: Prince (or Princess) Charming could turn out to be a frog. They might show up late or leave abruptly before things even get started! Don’t waste time imagining the worst.

With practice, we can learn to identify and challenge the accuracy of our thinking and assumptions.
CHAPTER 6

7 THINGS TO ASK YOURSELF

Some good questions that will help to challenge self-talk and slow runaway thinking →

1 Am I falling into a thinking trap, that is, catastrophizing or overestimating danger?

2 What is the evidence that this thought is true?

3 What is the evidence that this thought is not true?

4 Have I confused a thought with fact?

5 What would I tell a friend if they had the same thought? What would a friend say about my thought?

6 Am I 100 percent sure that ______ will happen?

7 Is my judgment based on the way I feel instead of facts?

SOURCE: ANXIETY CANADA

Seeing is Believing

For bonus points, try mental training

Many athletes and performers rely on mental rehearsal to enhance skills and decrease game-day nerves. The practice has been shown to improve performance in all kinds of sports from archery to high jump to rugby. “The more an athlete can image the entire package, the better it’s going to be,” Nicole Detling, a psychologist with the U.S. Olympic team, told the New York Times. The same applies to the plodders and recreational athletes among us. Affirmations and mantras can also help.

CHECK OUT CHAPTER 7 FOR TIPS

“We do not need magic to transform our world; we carry all the power we need within already.”

J.K. ROWLING

“Finish each day and be done with it.... You have done what you could; some blunders and absurdities no doubt crept in. Forget them as soon as you can.

Tomorrow is a new day; you shall begin it well and serenely, and with too high a spirit to be encumbered with your old nonsense.

This day is for all that is good and fair. It is too dear, with its hopes and invitations, to waste a moment on the rotten yesterdays.”

RALPH WALDO EMERSON
Three’s a Charm

“The core of a fulfilled life is knowing that every moment is a choice.”

ROD STRYKER

Keep on the lookout for good

Dr. Martin Seligman, a psychologist and champion of positive psychology, uses this “three good things” exercise to teach well-being, hope, optimism and resilience.

Like gratitude practices, it may motivate you to be on the lookout for good – even in that half-glass of water. Along with that, the exercise may inspire you to pay closer attention as you move through your routines.

For one week, write down three positive things that happen to you each day.

Beside each thing, consider one of these questions →

1

WHY DID IT HAPPEN?

2

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO YOU?

3

HOW CAN YOU HAVE MORE OF THIS GOOD THING IN THE FUTURE?

WANT TO KNOW MORE? CHECK OUT THE PENN RESILIENCY PROGRAM. FOR MORE EXERCISES IN GRATITUDE, TURN TO CHAPTER 4

You + Everyone

How to create space for the feelings of others

The better you get at clueing into your own emotions, the more likely you are to notice the feelings of others. Think of something – or someone! – who recently got under your skin. Now replay it with the benefit of the tips below:

PERSPECTIVE IS EVERYTHING
If you see someone having a difficult time, try to imagine what they might be going through.

ASSUME POSITIVE INTENT
Most of the time, you can’t know what someone else is thinking, or why they acted in a certain way. So why not assume they are acting with the best of intentions – at least until they give you reason to think otherwise.

ASK YOURSELF, HOW WOULD I FEEL IF ...?
It’s the perfect question for every occasion.

Imagining yourself in someone else’s shoes is often the first of many steps. Empathy and compassion will often inspire the desire to get involved.

FOR MORE ON HELPING OTHERS, TURN TO CHAPTER 4
“This being human is a guest house,” the poet Rumi wrote. “Every morning a new arrival.”

It’s a 100-percent guarantee there will be mornings that demand an apology and others that call on forgiveness. This can be hard, so we’ll keep it simple.

Talking points for difficult conversations

Here are a few things to think about when talk is tough.

(If your needs are urgent, don’t worry about these details — just seek help.)

**PLAN AHEAD**
Think about what you want to say.

**CONSIDER TIMING**
Find a quiet spot, if you can.

**TAKE BREAKS**
If the conversation stops being productive, know that it’s okay to take a break.

**SET EXPECTATIONS**
Let your friend know what you expect out of the conversation.

**PACE YOURSELF**
Take your time.

**LISTEN**
Take time to hear your friend’s side.

**STAY CALM**
If you find yourself getting upset, take a time out.

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**How to apologize**

Our notes on this subject come from the “last lecture” of Randy Pausch. In a presentation that went viral before becoming a book that sold millions, the terminally ill computer science professor shared his life’s wisdoms with students at Carnegie Mellon University.

Proper apologies have three parts, he advised:

→ What I did was wrong.
→ I feel badly that I hurt you.
→ How do I make this better?

**THINK OF SOMEONE TO WHOM YOU OWE AN APOLOGY. HOW CAN YOU MAKE IT HAPPEN?**

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Source: Kids Help Phone
How to fix an error

We all screw up, though knowing that is of little use when you’re in the middle of a five-alarm fire of your own making. Every situation is different, but here are three things that may help to extinguish the flames:

→ Own the mistake. Apologize (see the previous page).
→ Propose a solution.
→ Identify ways to prevent the error from happening again.

How to forgive

The act of forgiveness is not always easy, though the steps appear simple enough:

→ Make a decision to forgive.
→ Release emotions.
  (Try writing them down.)
→ Let it go. (This requires practice. It will take time!)

Dr. Fred Luskin is an expert on the subject. He is the author of a best-selling book on forgiveness and has put his methods to the test in war-torn countries and shell-shocked relationships.

The act of forgiveness is for YOU, he advises. (The emphasis is ours.) “[It] does not necessarily mean reconciling with the person who upset you or condoning the action.”

The point, as he explains it, is to release the hold that those actions have on your head and your heart.

Make a commitment to yourself to feel better. “Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge,” he adds.

“Sometimes a person has to go a very long distance out of his way to come back a short distance correctly.”

EDWARD ALBEE,
THE ZOO STORY

IS THERE SOMEONE IN YOUR LIFE WHO WOULD BENEFIT FROM AN APOLOGY OR SOME FORGIVENESS? USE THE SPACE BELOW TO CRAFT NOTES

IS THERE SOMETHING YOU ARE HOLDING OVER YOUR OWN HEAD THAT YOU MAY BE ABLE TO LET GO OF? TRY SOME SELF-FORGIVENESS

FLIP BACK TO CHAPTER 2 FOR SOME TIPS ON SELF-CARE

DID YOU KNOW

In an interview with author Megan Feldman Bettencourt, Dr. Luskin detailed the body chemistry involved in holding a grudge:

“Each time you react, adrenaline, cortisol, and norepinephrine enter the body. When it’s a chronic grudge, you could think about it twenty times a day, and those chemicals limit creativity, they limit problem-solving. Cortisol and norepinephrine cause your brain to enter what we call ‘the no-thinking zone,’ and over time, they lead you to feel helpless and like a victim. When you forgive, you wipe all of that clean.”
ENDNOTES

The Well-being Playbook was inspired by ongoing work and conversations with leading thinkers in the world of education and mental well-being. This is a list of books, articles and resources that helped inform our contemplation.

CHAPTER 6

Did you know

Don’t distress about short-term stress


Spoiler alert: Not all stress is good

10 tips for tackling ‘crisis’ situations

The ABCs of optimism

7 things to ask yourself

Seeing is believing

Three good things

Talking points for difficult conversations

How to apologize

How to forgive

Don’t miss a single chapter!

01 Read the Owner’s Manual
Like any good guide, we begin with key recommendations for care

02 Be Your Own BFF
Self-compassion is a source of inner strength

03 Connect
Identify your supporting players and champion communication

04 Tap Into Your Superpowers
A celebration of gratitude, resilience, altruism and empathy

05 Feel All the Feels
A user’s guide to emotions

06 Flex
Tips for managing stress, resolving problems and cultivating mindfulness

07 Know, Grow, Flow
Explore, revel and marvel

08 Expand
The world needs you, at home and at large

09 Be Your Own GPS
Chart your course, overcome obstacles ... stretch!

10 Find Your True North
You are ready to become a life-long explorer