

Strength is asking for help.



A first responder's toxic stress self assessment

This self-assessment can help you identify potential signs of toxic stress and trauma in your life.

1. Have you ever experienced any of these cognitive signs of toxic stress and trauma? Please check all boxes that apply.

- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Heightened or lowered alertness
- Poor concentration
- Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people
- Memory problems
- Nightmares

2. Have you ever experienced any of these emotional and behavioral signs of toxic stress and trauma? Please check all boxes that apply.

- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Denial
- Grief
- Fear
- Irritability, intense anger, or emotional outbursts
- Depression
- Withdrawal
- Panic
- Feeling hopeless or being overwhelmed
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feelings of isolation or detachment
- Changes in sexual behavior
- Increased alcohol consumption
- Temporary loss or increase of appetite

3. Have you ever experienced any of the following physical signs of toxic stress and trauma? Please check all boxes that apply.

- Fatigue
- Nausea or vomiting
- Dizziness
- Profuse sweating
- Excessive thirst
- Digestive problems
- Headaches
- Visual difficulties
- Clenching your jaw
- Unexplained aches and pains

4. If you have experienced any of these, did you reach out to someone you trust and/or a professional for support or find a different outlet to help you cope (i.e. improving diet, sleep cycle, exercise, etc.)? Please check one box.

- Never
- Rarely
- Sometimes
- Often

If your answer to the previous question was “never,” do you feel comfortable reaching out to someone you trust for support if you need it? Trusted allies could be a loved one, a friend, a peer, a professional, or a local organization.

The effects of toxic stress can be cumulative. If you experience more than one of the symptoms listed in questions 1–3 it is recommended that you seek out appropriate resources that can help you learn helpful tips and tools that will help you in your career as a first responder. Please see the Resilient Wisconsin Resources Guide and remember, strength is asking for help.

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A first responder's self-care guide

Resilient Wisconsin has prepared this guide for you to offer simple recommendations that can help you manage toxic stress and trauma on a general day-to-day basis, and in the moment when you feel signs of stress and trauma beginning to set in. The more of these practices you utilize, the more you increase your odds of reducing stress and trauma. Not all may work for you, and some may work better than others, but the only way you'll really know is to try. You can even ask your colleagues what works for them.

Day-to-day self-care

Tips that collectively improve your ability to manage stress and trauma when practiced over time.

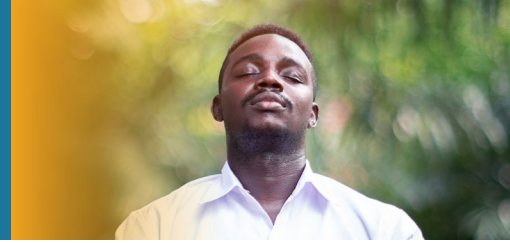
- **Exercise gratitude** – just recognizing or writing down three things you're grateful for daily has been shown to increase happiness.
- **Keep a journal** – keeping track of things like what you're grateful for, how you feel on a given day and choosing affirmations that you state to help focus goals for the day has shown to help track emotional well-being over time, and to help people be more aware of their feelings, which can help recognize feelings of stress earlier.
- **Get enough physical exercise** – study after study has shown the benefits of a strong mind/body connection via regular exercise.
- **Practice mindfulness, meditation, or prayer** – taking time to simply be still, or reflecting on your spirituality can reduce blood pressure and give instant relief to stressful times
- **Eat healthy foods regularly** – the better the “fuel” is that you put in your “machine” the better that machine will run.
- **Recharge through rest, sleep, and relaxation** – getting eight hours of sleep and enough down time is one of the best things you can do over time to manage stress and trauma.

In the moment self-care

Tips for coping with immediate, specific instances of stressful and toxic moments.

- **Breathe** – try the 4-7-8 breathing technique to help slow your heart rate and improve breathing.
- **Self-empathy** – giving yourself permission to be upset/confused/angry or forgiving yourself can reduce negative feelings.
- **Positive self-talk** – conversely, telling yourself that you'll get through this and giving yourself positive motivation can decrease the stress of challenging moments.
- **Count to 10** – a time-tested way to help instantly lower stress.
- **Grounding by simply feeling your feet on the floor** – simple as it sounds, this is a proven way to help your mind and body collect and refocus in challenging moments.
- **Use fidgets** – keeping your mind and body distracted with small accessories like fidget spinners or a small ball can take focus away from negative emotions.
- **Doodle** – giving your mind a chance to take a break by doodling can help keep stress at bay.
- **Get up and walk around** – simply getting up and moving when stress hits can immediately provide relief.

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A first responder's guide to stress reduction through breathing

Breathing is one of the simplest ways to lower stress in the body, because when you breathe deeply, it sends a message to your brain to calm down. The brain relays that message to your body, which helps you relax. Breathing deeply helps decrease many of the physical side effects caused by stress, such as fast breathing, increased heart rate, and high blood pressure. You can utilize these breathing exercises whenever and wherever you need to, and it only takes a few minutes.

4-7-8 breathing

A classic, timeless exercise that can help with stress reduction, help guide meditation and can even help for falling asleep.

1. Get comfortable in a seated or laying down position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Inhale through your nose and count to four in your head.
4. Hold your breath for seven seconds.
5. Then exhale through your mouth for eight seconds.

Try this cycle five times any time when you need some relief.

Extended exhaling

Exhaling is part of the nervous system's process, which improves our body's ability to quickly relax.

1. Get comfortable in a seated or laying down position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Thoroughly exhale by pushing all the air out of your lungs.
4. Simply let your lungs do their work by inhaling. Try exhaling for more time than you do inhale. (For example, try inhaling for four seconds, then exhaling for six.)
5. Repeat for two to five minutes.

Equal breathing

Varying the amount of time you inhale and exhale can get your mind and body into a calming rhythm. So can inhaling and exhaling for the same amount of time.

1. Get comfortable in a seated or laying down position.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Simply pay attention to how you normally breathe for a few breaths.
4. Slowly count 1-2-3-4 while inhaling through your nose.
5. Slowly count 1-2-3-4 while exhaling through your mouth.
6. Repeat for two to five minutes.

Learn more about resilience
and stress reduction at
resilient.wisconsin.gov

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Resilience-building resources

Always remember, you are not alone. There are many organizations ready to assist you:

General resources

211 Wisconsin

Available 24/7

Call: 211 or 877-947-2211

Visit: [211Wisconsin.org](https://www.211wisconsin.org)

Disaster Distress Helpline

Available 24/7

Call: 800-985-5990

Text: TalkWithUs to 66746

Substance use resources

Wisconsin Addiction Recovery Helpline

Available 24/7

Call: 211 or 833-944-4673

Text: your zip code to 898211

Visit: addictionhelpwi.org

Mental health resources

Mental & Behavioral Health Crisis Support

Available 24/7

Text: HOPELINE to 741741

NAMI Helpline

Available 24/7

Call: 800-950-NAMI (6264)

Text: NAMI to 741741

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

Available 24/7

Call: 800-273-8255

Trans Lifeline

Available 24/7

Call: 877-565-8860

Mental health resources (continued)

Trevor Project

Available 24/7

Call: 866-488-7386

Text: START to 678678

Veterans Crisis Line

Available 24/7

Call: 800-273-8255 and press 1

Call: 800-799-4889 (deaf and hard of hearing)

Text: 838255

Violence-prevention resources

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Available 24/7

Call: 800-799-7233 or TTY 800-787-3224

Visit: thehotline.org

National Sexual Assault Hotline

Available 24/7

Call: 800-656-HOPE

Wisconsin Coalition Against Sexual Assault

Visit: wcasa.org/survivors/service-providers

End Domestic Abuse Wisconsin

Available 24/7

Visit: endabusewi.org/get-help

Wisconsin Department of Justice Victim Services

Visit: www.doj.state.wi.us/ocvs

More helpful resources across
Wisconsin can be found at
resilient.wisconsin.gov