

BEXART HUB

# Rewire Your Stress Response

---

**An Art-Based Toolkit for Finding Calm**

Rebecca Hill  
Holistic Art Therapist  
Artist  
MBEArtTherp, IICT  
7/29/2025



## Rewire Your Stress Response: An Art-Based Toolkit for Finding Calm

Why does stress make us feel so scattered and overwhelmed?

The answer lies in the complex interplay between our brain, our emotions, and the chaotic demands of modern life.

In today's fast-paced world, stress has become an all-too-common experience. This eBook aims to guide you through understanding stress, exploring its causes, recognising its symptoms, and learning about its long-term effects. Inside, you'll also find practical, art-based exercises designed to help manage and reduce the impacts of stress on your overall health and well-being. Think of this eBook as your personal toolkit for navigating the complexities of stress and building resilience.

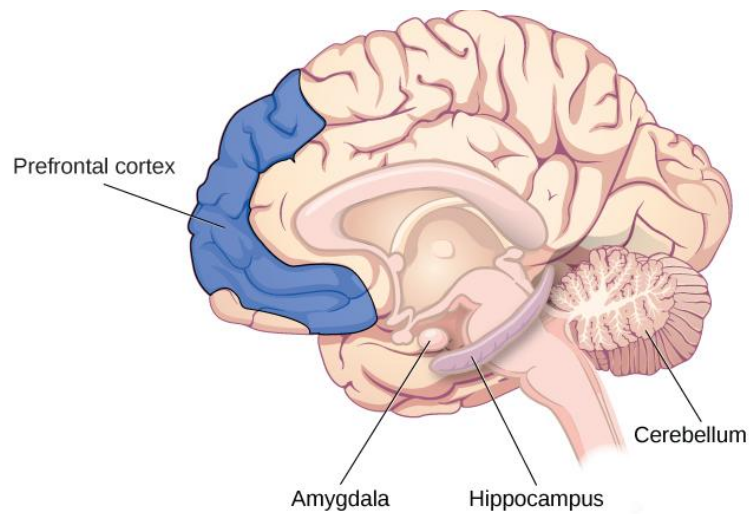
Stress is something we all deal with, but getting to know its different flavours is key to handling it well. Think of acute stress as the short bursts we feel from specific events – like that time you had to explain to your parents why 300 rubber chickens were showing up at your door! It's intense but usually fades once the situation is over. Then there's chronic stress, the long-term stuff that sticks around due to ongoing issues like money problems, relationship drama, or school/work pressures. Since chronic stress can really mess with your physical and mental health, it's super important to find ways to manage it for the long haul.

Stress can come at you from all angles, both inside your head and from the world around you. Figuring out what sets you off is the first step in taking control. For me, it's usually a mix of work deadlines, worrying about money, those occasional friend dramas, and the constant fear of saying something embarrassing. Spotting these triggers is half the battle!" Here are some other common stresses:

- \* School-related pressures: Tight deadlines, demanding workloads, and schoolyard conflicts.
- \* Financial problems: Debt, job loss, and economic uncertainty.
- \* Relationship difficulties: Conflicts with friend, partners or family members.
- \* Health concerns: Personal illness or the illness of a loved one.
- \* Major life changes: Moving, changing schools, starting a new job or experiencing the loss of a loved one.

To understand the functions of different brain regions, it's helpful to first have a general overview of the brain's structure. Figure 1 provides a diagram of the major brain areas that will be discussed.

Figure 1:  
General Brain Structure



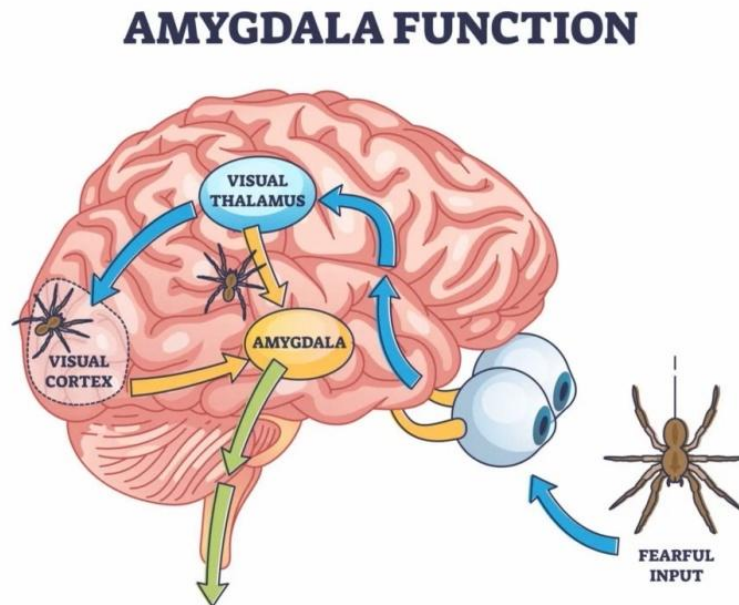
Stress really messes with your body, kicking off all sorts of reactions. Physically, this can show up as tummy troubles like irritable bowel syndrome (IBS). Stress hormones mess with your gut, leading to bloating, pain, and changes in bowel habits, which can be super disruptive. Plus, muscle tension is a big one – your body tenses up, causing discomfort and pain, often in your neck and shoulders. And get this: stress can also weaken your immune system, making you more likely to catch colds or other illnesses. It's a tough cycle to break, but recognising these signs is the first step in managing stress and feeling better!

Emotionally and cognitively, stress throws your brain for a loop, especially when it comes to key neurotransmitters. Serotonin and dopamine, which are crucial for keeping your mood balanced, often get depleted when you're constantly stressed. Low serotonin can bring on feelings of sadness and make you lose interest in things you usually enjoy – classic signs of depression. And when dopamine levels drop, it hits your motivation and ability to feel pleasure, making those depressive symptoms even worse. Plus, stress really messes with your prefrontal cortex, which is in charge of decision-making and staying flexible. When it's impaired, you might find it hard to concentrate, make good choices, or solve problems effectively. Meanwhile, your amygdala, as shown in figure 2, which handles emotions, goes into overdrive, making you super reactive. It's like your brain's emotional control centre is stuck on high alert!

The flight-or-freeze response, a fundamental survival mechanism, kicks in during stressful situations, prepping us to either face danger or flee. While this response is super helpful in acute danger, like dodging a rogue Frisbee, chronic stress can lead to its prolonged activation. Think of it like your alarm system stuck on high alert. This extended activation has some nasty side effects, such as increased anxiety and a heightened state of alert, making you feel constantly on edge. Understanding these complex interactions between stress, the brain, and the body is crucial for

developing effective coping strategies. By learning how to manage our stress responses, we can mitigate the negative impacts of stress on our overall health and well-being.

Figure 2:  
The amygdale activity



The flight, fight, freeze, or fawn response is like our ancient survival toolkit, an evolutionary adaptation that helps us survive in the face of danger. As shown in figure 3, when confronted with a perceived threat, our bodies gear up to either fight, flee, freeze, or fawn – each a unique strategy for survival. In the 'flight' response, the body mobilizes energy to escape the threat, like sprinting away from a scary spider. In the 'fight' response, we prepare to confront the threat head-on, ready to defend ourselves. The 'freeze' response involves becoming immobile, conserving energy and avoiding detection, like a deer caught in headlights. And then there's the 'fawn' response, where individuals attempt to please or appease the source of stress, often sacrificing their own needs to avoid conflict – a common trauma response. While these responses are beneficial in acute situations, like reacting to a sudden loud noise, chronic activation can lead to a state of hyper-arousal, where individuals feel constantly on edge and struggle to relax. Understanding these responses and their underlying mechanisms is crucial for recognising and managing stress effectively, helping us regain control over our reactions

Figure 3:  
Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn stress response



Chronic stress doesn't just mess with your day; it can seriously change your brain's structure and how it works long-term. Imagine your brain's hippocampus – that's the part responsible for learning and memory – shrinking because of constant stress. When this happens, it's like trying to navigate with a faulty GPS; you might struggle to remember simple things like appointments or find it hard to pick up new skills. But it's not just about memory; chronic stress can also throw your brain's chemical messengers, like serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine, out of whack. Think of these as your brain's mood regulators. When they're off-balance, it can lead to mood swings, depression, and anxiety. Low serotonin can drag you down into a depressive slump, while dopamine imbalances can zap your motivation. So, yeah, chronic stress is a real brain bummer.

Beyond the structural and neurochemical changes, chronic stress can also mess with your brain's ability to handle emotions and future challenges. Think of your prefrontal cortex as the CEO of your brain, responsible for making decisions and keeping impulses in check. But when you're constantly stressed, this CEO starts to lose its grip, leading to poor judgment calls and impulsive actions. This can make it hard to manage emotions, make rational decisions, or control impulsive behaviour, leaving you feeling overwhelmed and out of control. You might find yourself struggling to plan tasks or making rash decisions without thinking them through, which can create even more stress in the long run.

So, what can you do to protect your brain from the long-term effects of stress?

It's all about implementing stress management strategies and promoting brain health. Regular exercise, like a brisk walk or a fun dance class, can lower cortisol

levels and sharpen focus, helping you feel more energised and clear-headed. Mindful practices like meditation and deep breathing exercises can help you stay grounded and calm, allowing you to respond to stressors with greater awareness and composure. Strong social connections are also key – having people to lean on for emotional support can make a world of difference, providing a sense of belonging and reducing feelings of isolation. And don't forget to engage in activities that stimulate your brain, like learning a new language or diving into a hobby you love; these activities can boost cognitive function and build resilience against stress. By understanding the impact of stress on your brain and taking proactive steps to manage it, you can safeguard your cognitive and emotional well-being, ensuring a healthier and happier life.

Now that we've explored some effective stress management strategies, let's dive into a creative avenue that can provide both relaxation and emotional release: art-based exercises. Engaging in artistic activities can offer a unique way to disconnect from daily stressors and tap into your inner creativity. Whether you consider yourself an artist or not, these exercises are designed to be accessible and enjoyable for everyone, providing a therapeutic outlet to express emotions and reduce stress.

#### Art-Based Exercises for Stress Reduction:

1. Doodling:

Simple, unstructured drawing can help calm your mind and release tension. Grab a pen and paper, and let your hand wander freely. Start by drawing simple shapes or patterns without thinking too much about the end result. Focus on the feeling of the pen on the paper and the movement of your hand. Continue doodling, letting your mind wander without judgment. Start doodling for just 5-10 minutes each day to experience the calming effects.

2. Expressive Painting/Drawing

Provides an outlet for emotional release, helps process difficult feelings, and promotes self-awareness. It allows you to communicate emotions that might be hard to express verbally.

Grab some paint, crayons, or any drawing material you like. Without planning, let your emotions guide your hand. Use colors and shapes to express how you feel. There's no need to create a masterpiece; the goal is to release emotions.

Try expressive painting or drawing for 15-20 minutes as a way to unwind after a stressful day.

3. Journaling:

Enhances self-awareness, reduces anxiety, and helps process emotions. Journaling provides a safe space to explore your thoughts and feelings, leading to better emotional regulation.

Write down your thoughts and feelings in a notebook. Don't worry about grammar or structure; just let your thoughts flow freely. Reflect on your day, any challenges, and your emotional state.

Write in your journal for 10-15 minutes before bed to clear your mind and promote relaxation.\*

#### 4. Gratitude Journaling

Increases happiness, fosters a positive mindset, and improves overall well-being. Regularly acknowledging gratitude can shift your focus from what's lacking to what you have, boosting your mood and resilience.

Each day, write down things you are grateful for. These can be big or small, from having a roof over your head to enjoying a good cup of coffee. Focus on the positive aspects of your life.

At the end of this e-book, you'll find a journal to help you get started, along with additional art-based activities for stress relief. To make the most of these resources, start by identifying your stress triggers, whether they're work-related or school-related deadlines, relationship issues, or financial worries. Then, think about how you typically respond – do you withdraw, become anxious, or get easily irritated? Understanding these patterns is crucial for tailoring the exercises to your specific challenges and preferences. For instance, if deadlines stress you out, try mindful doodling during short breaks to refocus. If expressing feelings are hard, expressive painting might offer a non-verbal outlet.

To effectively integrate these techniques into your daily routine, set aside regular time for creative activities; even 15 to 20 minutes a day can significantly impact your stress levels. Think of it as an appointment with yourself—time to disconnect and reconnect with your creative side. Take some time to deeply reflect on your experiences with stress and consider how these exercises can be adapted to suit your personal needs. Remember, the goal is not to create a masterpiece, but to find moments of calm and self-expression. So grab your supplies, get comfortable, and start exploring the power of art to transform your stress into serenity. Here's to a more creative and stress-free you!


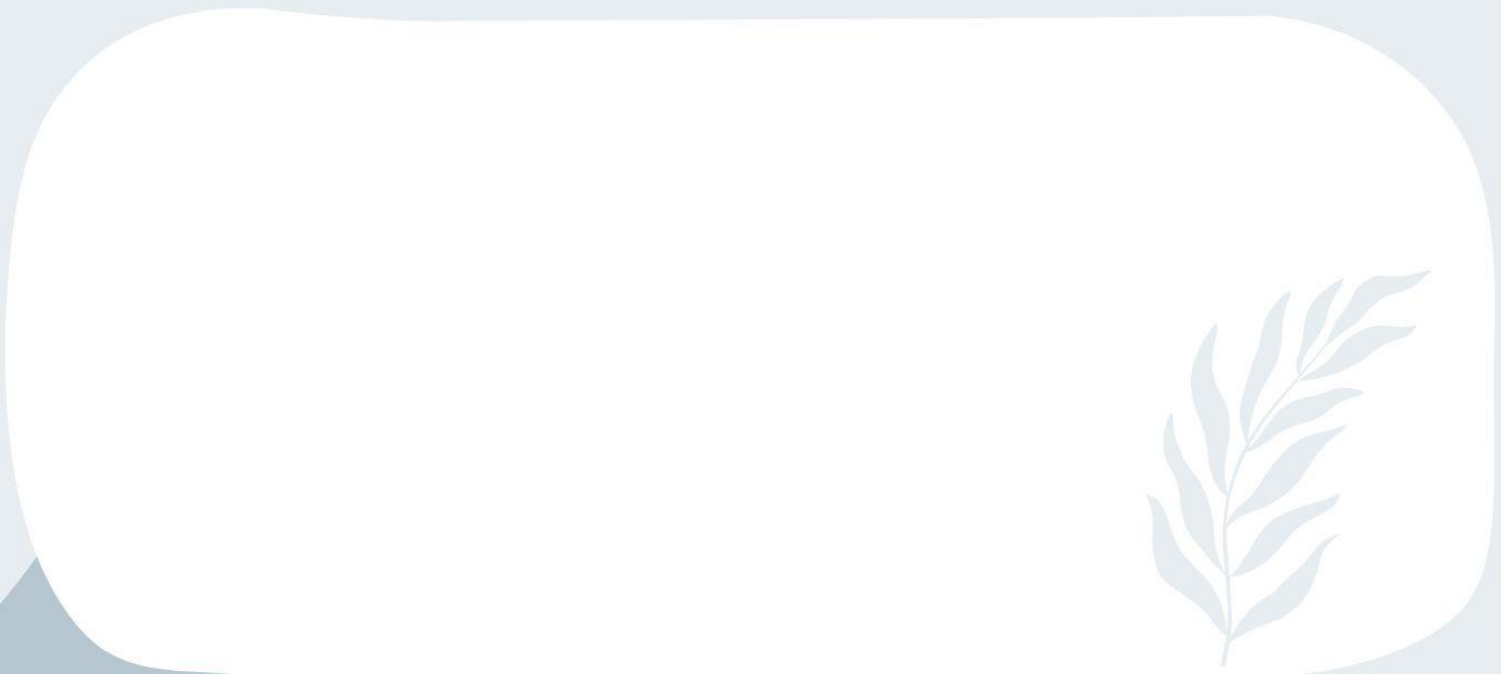
Think of activating your relaxation response as your personal reset button, especially when you're dealing with that never-ending chronic stress. Practices like body scans? They're like a tension treasure hunt, helping you pinpoint exactly where you're holding stress so you can release it. Journaling and reflective exercises become your safe space to spill your thoughts, understand your emotions, and gain some much-needed clarity. And mindfulness activities, like gratitude exercises, are your secret weapon to flip the script, focusing on the good stuff and boosting your appreciation vibes. By making these activities a regular part of your routine, you're not just managing stress—you're creating a balanced, feel-good lifestyle. So, dive in, stay consistent, and watch how these responses become second nature!

By getting to know your triggers and mixing art-based exercises into your daily grind, you're basically taking the reins of your well-being and steering towards a more balanced and awesome life. Think of it as creating your personal wellness toolkit! Remember, consistency is your superpower—the more you practice, the more these techniques become your go-to moves, like having a secret weapon against stress. Embrace the journey of self-discovery and give yourself the green light to explore your creative side; it's a total powerhouse for managing stress and seriously boosting your quality of life. So grab those paints, sketchpads, or whatever sparks joy! With a little dedication and mindfulness, you can transform your relationship with stress and

cultivate a more resilient and joyful existence. So, go ahead, make that shift, and watch the magic happen—you deserve it!

Now that you understand the 'why' behind your stress and the science backing art's calming effect, you're holding the keys to a different path. Life's going to throw all kinds of chaos your way—that's a given—but here's the thing: you have the power to chill, unleash your inner artist, and let your creativity be your happy place. Seriously, consider it your personal sanctuary. You can choose to embrace the chaos, not as a source of anxiety, but as a catalyst for creative exploration—think of it as turning stress into your muse! You can choose to nurture your brain, cultivate your resilience, and create a life that is both meaningful and serene. So, take a deep breath, grab your tools, and remember: the choice, as always, is yours to make.

Write 3 Things You're  
Grateful for today



**DRAW 3 THINGS  
YOU'RE GRATEFUL  
FOR TODAY**



## Additional Art-Based Activities for Stress Relief:

To further enhance your stress management toolkit, here are more detailed art-based activities that you can explore:

1. **Pottery:** Working with clay can be incredibly therapeutic, allowing you to channel your stress into a tangible creation. The tactile nature of molding and shaping clay can be grounding and meditative. For example, try creating a small bowl or sculpture. The process of focusing on the clay can help quiet your mind. Try sign up for a pottery class or purchase a home clay kit to start exploring this relaxing activity.
2. **Creative Writing:** Expressing your thoughts and feelings through writing can be a powerful way to process emotions and reduce stress. Whether it's poetry, short stories, or personal essays, the act of writing can provide a sense of release and clarity. For example, write a poem about a recent challenge you faced or a short story about a place that brings you peace. Set aside 20-30 minutes each day to write freely without worrying about grammar or structure.
3. **Collage Making:** Creating a collage involves gathering various materials like magazines, newspapers, fabric, and photos, and arranging them on a surface to create a new image. This activity allows for creative expression and can be a great way to visualise your goals or emotions. For example, create a vision board with images that represent your aspirations or a collage that reflects your current emotional state. Gather some materials and spend an afternoon creating a collage that reflects your inner world.