

Relaxation

Its role in Western Yoga



Managing Stress & Wellbeing

- Definition: 'feeling of being overwhelmed or unable to cope with mental or emotional pressure' (Mental Health Foundation)
- 2018, 74% of people have felt so stressed that they have been overwhelmed or unable to cope ([Mental Health Foundation](#))
- In 2022/23 17.1 million work days lost due to work-related stress, depression or anxiety. (54% of all working days lost to ill health)
- 44% of this related to workload (HSE)
- 2022/23 stress, depression & anxiety accounted for 49% of all work-related ill health cases (HSE)
- Stress, depression & anxiety most prevalent in Health & Social Care, 'protective services', teaching & education (HSE)
- The pandemic increased global rate of anxiety & depression by 25% (WHO)
- Full HSE report: ([link](#))

Physical signs of stress



- Muscle tension / aches & pains
- Headaches / migraines
- Insomnia
- Prone to colds & infections
- Fatigue / lethargy
- Constipation / IBS / diarrhoea
- Indigestion / heartburn / ulcers
- Panic attacks
- Tremors / tics
- Menstrual changes
- Rashes
- High blood pressure
- Chronic pain

Emotional & psychological signs of stress

- Poor concentration
- Feeling overwhelmed / Burnout
- Easily distracted
- Lack of motivation or creativity
- Irritable / angry / mood swings
- Over-reacting to situations
- Self neglect
- Forgetful / accident prone
- Absent from work
- Excessive worrying / anxious
- Unable to make simple decisions
- Lack of confidence
- Negative thinking



Our nervous system & the stress response

AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

Fight or Flight

The accelerator: prioritises an active response to an immediate situation

- Heart rate increases
- Eyes: pupils dilate
- Lungs: open airways
- Liver: releases glucose for energy
- Stomach: inhibits digestion
- Adrenal glands: stimulate stress hormones
- Lacrimal & salivary glands inhibit tears & saliva
- Bladder: relaxes to inhibit urination
- Increases our alertness, towards mobilisation
- Expend energy (Gabor Mate)

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

Rest & Digest

The brake pedal: returns the body to balance (homeostasis)

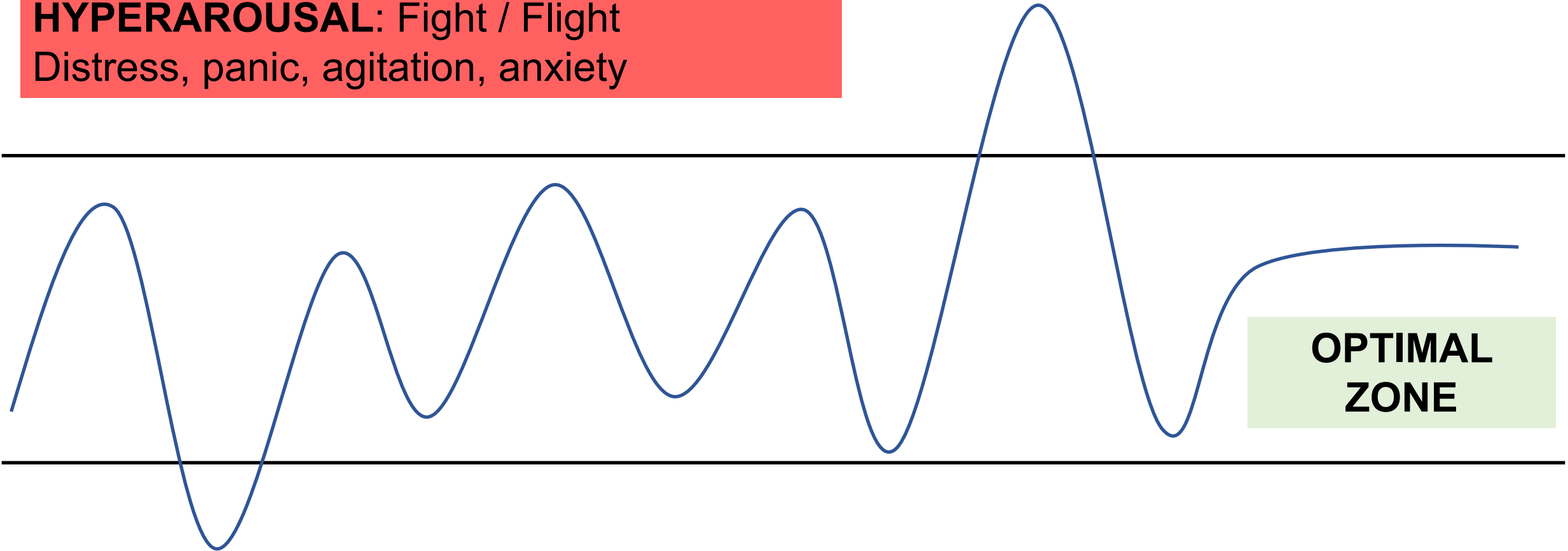
- Heart rate slows down
- Eyes: pupils contract
- Lungs: Returns to normal breathing rate
- Digestive system: digestive enzymes released and digestive function returns to normal
- Lacrimal & salivary glands stimulate tears & saliva
- Bladder: stimulates to enable contraction for urination
- Draws our attention inwards, towards stillness
- Conserves energy (Gabor Mate)

Chronic Stress

- Fight or flight – normal and essential to survival
- But... the response to stress is meant to be 'turned off' when the threat has gone
- When the response doesn't get 'turned off' due to persistent and ongoing stress, the constant activation of our fight/flight response causes unhealthy changes in the body/mind.
- *“A marker of physiological health is having a flexible nervous system that transitions with relative ease between sympathetic and parasympathetic states of arousal” Dr Arielle Schwartz*

The Window of Tolerance (Dan Siegal)

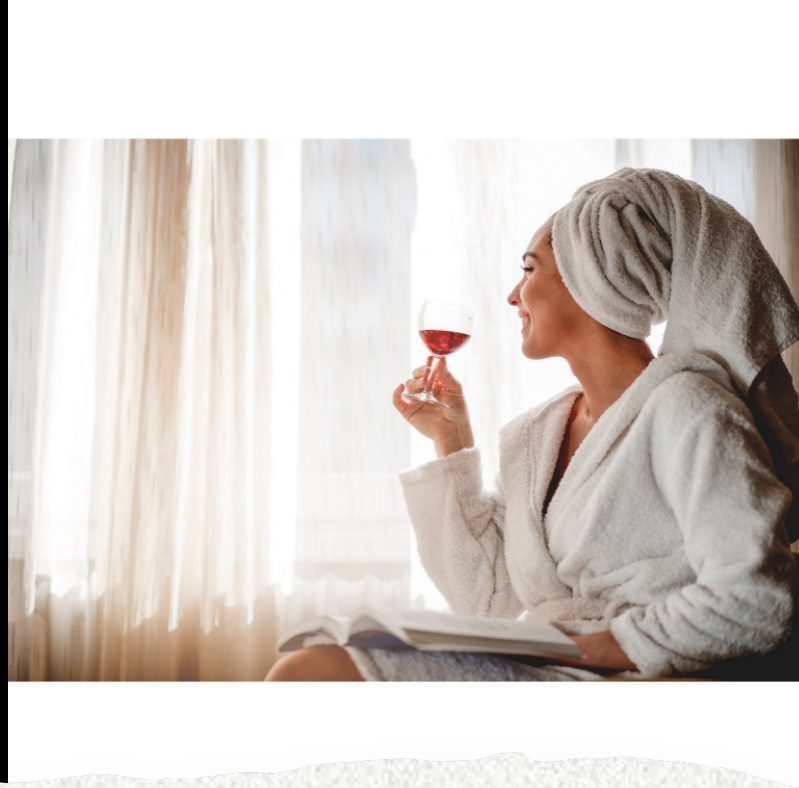
HYPERAROUSAL: Fight / Flight
Distress, panic, agitation, anxiety



HYPOAROUSAL: Freeze
Numb, depressed, shutdown, poor self care

The Vagus Nerve

- 10th pair of Cranial Nerves (from the brainstem) – 2 nerves (L/R)
- 75% of the parasympathetic response
- “The power cord to the computer” (Dr Arielle Schwartz)
- Emerges from brainstem behind ear, neck/throat, chest, larynx, heart and abdomen
- Sends and receives messages between the brain and body
- Reduces sympathetic nervous system activation
- Activating the vagus nerve via yoga:
 - Slow, relaxed breathing (diaphragmatic, ujjayi, brahmari)
 - Sound: Chanting, brahmari
 - Meditation / relaxation



**How do we relax in
the modern world?**

Benefits of a regular relaxation practice

- An opportunity to pause from the busyness of life
- Soothes, calms, nourishes
- Improves resilience and our ability to respond to stressors (increasing our window of tolerance)
- Regulates and soothes the nervous system
- Returns us to balance
- Promotes better sleep
- Improves energy levels
- Greater emotional stability
- Empowering: we have the keys to our personal transformation
- It works! Radiance Yoga workplace relaxation study: 15 minutes guided relaxation - 57% reduction in perceived stress levels

Benefits of a regular relaxation practice

8 Limbs...

- Pratyahara (sense withdrawal)
- Svadhyaya: helps us recognise when we are feeling out of balance
- Svadhyaya: is the response that I'm having to this situation accurate?
- Asana: Integrates the effects of your active asana practice
- Dharana: Relaxation prepares us for concentration & meditation (dharana / dhyana)
- Yamas / Niyamas: how we relate to ourselves and others

Yoga citta vritti nirodhah (YS 1.2)

Savasana

*“If I had to pick just one yoga asana to teach the world,
it would be Deep Relaxation Pose”*

Judith Hanson Lasater

A posture in which we are supported and held, while also openly receptive

4 “keys to relaxation” in savasana (JHL):

- Still
 - Quiet
 - Dark
 - Warm
- I would also add Comfort to this list. Create your “rest nest” or cosy cocoon and use props to support you in effortless rest.

Savasana: principles of alignment

- Check the head isn't tilting back excessively, if so draw the chin softly towards the chest. Use a cushion if needed
- Externally rotate the arms by placing the palms up (this helps to free space in the chest for the breath)
- Allow space between the arms and the sides of your body
- Take your feet slightly wider than your hips
- Externally rotate the legs by letting the feet flop out to the sides

If you have tension in your lower back:

- Semi-supine instead (bend knees, soles of feet to your mat)
- Use a bolster or pillow under your knees
- Side lying savasana instead, or lay on your tummy

“What if you embraced rest as your birthright?”

Tracee Stanley

*“I will only go as fast,
as the slowest part of me feels safe to go”*

Karen Drucker, lyrics “[Gentle with Myself](#)”

Sources of inspiration and information:

- HSE <https://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/stress.pdf>
- [Mental Health Foundation](#)
- [International Stress Management Association](#)
- Kristine Weber, Subtle Yoga Resilience Society
- Dr Arielle Schwartz
- Tracee Stanley
- Doug Keller
- Judith Hanson Lasater
- All my wonderful yoga teachers past and present, particularly [Louise Lloyd](#), Theresa Bisgrove, [Helena Delpino](#), and [Kari Knight](#)

Images (where not otherwise specified):

Canva