Our Protective Patterns

Stress Impacts Us

Life brings adversity. Personal stressors can include family and relationship problems, serious health issues, workplace pressures, financial stressors, and our own moods and attitudes. How we deal with stress impacts our own emotional, mental, and physical health as well as those around us. We Are Resilient™ helps us identify our default patterns of dealing with stress and discover tools to build resilience for ourselves and for others experiencing stress of all kinds.

Some stress is actually healthy for us—it helps us perform at peak levels. It can help us complete a project on time, achieve an important goal, or be vigilant and safe in a difficult situation. If our stressor is brief, we may have the skills to deal with it well. Even when the stress is intense, we are biologically hardwired as human beings to deal with it in a “freeze, fight or flight” reaction. The extra surges of adrenaline and cortisol have evolved as a survival mechanism which can help us react quickly and effectively.

However, if the period of stress continues or becomes more intense, we may need the help of others who care about us to help tap into our own resilient skills. If we have a prolonged period of stress or a traumatic incident, it not only impairs our emotional and mental self, but it can have a toxic effect on the body. We may need healing and regeneration to become our best self.
Spectrum of Stress Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Tolerable</th>
<th>Toxic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mild/Moderate and Brief</td>
<td>More Severe but Time Limited</td>
<td>Extreme, Frequent, or Extended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex: Fender bender,</td>
<td>Ex: Demeaning boss, parent with Alzheimer's...</td>
<td>Ex: Abuse, unsafe neighborhood....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>presentation at work...</td>
<td>I need a buffering relationship</td>
<td>I need healing and regeneration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can take care of myself</td>
<td>I need a buffering relationship</td>
<td>I need healing and regeneration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Our Protective Patterns

We have fundamental needs for safety: mental and emotional safety, physical safety, and safety in community—safety to belong. When we don’t feel safe or experience circumstances beyond our control, we often instinctively react, before we’ve had time to fully process a situation. Over time, to address the things in our life that were outside of our control, these **instinctive reactions can settle into emotional protective patterns**. These normal human responses include distrusting ourselves and others, isolating, avoiding, hyper-caretaking, and attacking. These reactions can be vital for surviving a traumatic incident or toxic stress.

However, survival and context go hand in hand. While these emotional patterns can help protect us in situations that feel dangerous or overwhelming, they can create a false sense of safety or work against our best interest when applied in the wrong context. Over time, protecting ourselves can become a pattern that is self-defeating, preventing us from connecting with others. If we acknowledge the vital role of our protective patterns in the right context, we are better able assess each situation and recognize when those same reactive patterns are helping or hindering us.

Though we may use all of the protective patterns at different times, many people have developed a primary emotional pattern that they resort to during difficulties. In stressful situations, are we “Distrustful Doris” who has to do everything herself? Or maybe “Isolating Ian” whose first move in conflict is to walk away? Are we “Avoiding Ana” who drinks her wine and avoids her problems? Maybe we are “Hyper-caretaking Hank” who spends so much time on everyone else’s problems that his own seem to disappear. Or “Attacking Azul” who lashes out when things get tough. The names may be silly, but they illustrate a deeper point: it is hard to move beyond our first reactions when they have become ingrained in who we are. So how do we change? First, we must identify and accept our own patterns.Outlined below are some critical (and common) areas to think about.
Recognizing when and how we use our protective patterns is the first step. Let’s take a look at five common protective patterns and think about when and how we use them. Then we can look at new ways of approaching stress and think about skills that will strengthen our resilience.

### Protective Patterns

1. **Distrusting Myself & Others**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What it looks like</th>
<th>How it protects</th>
<th>How it harms</th>
<th>What will help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Doubting ourselves or suspicious of others; negative self talk; keeping distance</td>
<td>Ensures we don’t make mistakes; protection from being harmed</td>
<td>Results in inaction, getting stuck; Inability to be in relationship with others</td>
<td>Learning to trust self and others appropriately</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When I make a mistake, I tend to beat myself up. It is a loop that goes around in my head repeatedly. It is hard to move on.

~ Shariz, Executive Director
I hate to delegate because I feel like my team never seems to get it right. I feel like I have to do it all myself.

~ John, Project Manager

Everytime I ask my husband to clean the bathroom, he does such a sloppy job. I get so angry. It is easier not to ask.

~ Yolanda, Marketing Consultant

Think about:

When and how do I distrust myself? How do I distrust others?

____________________________________________________________________________________

When does distrust help (protect) me?

____________________________________________________________________________________

When does distrust hurt me?

____________________________________________________________________________________

Is there a current situation in your life that distrust is part of what isn’t working? If so, what could be done to move forward?

____________________________________________________________________________________

2. Isolating

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What it looks like</th>
<th>How it protects</th>
<th>How it harms</th>
<th>What will help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawal from interactions, retreating to self</td>
<td>Safe space can protect us from harm (physical, emotional)</td>
<td>Avoids a problem; lose connection; isolation</td>
<td>Engaging and connecting; inviting others in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My family argues all the time. I just put my buds in and tune them out.

~ Carter, Student

When she gets in that mood, I just turn the game on. I can’t deal with her.

~ Ian, Construction Manager

My boss has a hissy fit sometimes. I try to stay out of her way and keep my head down.

~ Tina, Receptionist

Think about:
When and how do I isolate myself? What situations are best if I can stay out of it?

When does isolating help (protect) me?

When does it hurt me?

Is there a current situation in your life that isolating is part of what isn’t working? If so, what could be done to move forward?
3. Avoiding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What it looks like</th>
<th>How it protects</th>
<th>How it harms</th>
<th>What will help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Defensiveness; numbing; substance misuse; over shopping, over eating, over working</td>
<td>We can avoid looking at why we don’t feel safe; allows us to pretend things are ok as they are</td>
<td>Shuts down our ability to access our emotions or needs; prevents finding lasting solutions</td>
<td>Courage to engage honestly; confront directly without attacking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**I just like to relax with a six pack of beer every night. Put the game on and tune the world out. Why wouldn’t I do that?**

~ Sergio, Maintenance Supervisor

**Retail therapy gets me through my days. A few clicks on Amazon, a little trip to the mall, and life seems a little brighter.**

~ Ana Maria, Social Worker

**I provide for my family. I have given them the nice house, the best schools—everything they could want. That takes work. And they complain that I work too much!**

~ Bao, Lawyer

**Think about:**

When and how do I avoid other people? My own thoughts and feelings?

When does avoiding help (protect) me?

When does this hurt me?

Are there specific people or situations you find yourself avoiding? Why do you think that is?
4. Hyper-Caretaking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What it looks like</th>
<th>How it protects</th>
<th>How it harms</th>
<th>What will help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Over-prioritizing others to the detriment of self;</td>
<td>Allows us to ignore our own needs; gives us a</td>
<td>We neglect our own fundamental needs; we don’t honor</td>
<td>Ensuring a balance of meeting our own needs without</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enabling others; victimhood</td>
<td>feeling of helping</td>
<td>capacity of others</td>
<td>abandoning the needs of others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As a mother of 3 children, my children are everything to me. I don’t have time to think about exercising or eating healthy.

~ Marta Luz, Cashier

My elderly mom has one crisis after another. I am continually asking for time off work. I am afraid I will lose my job. My sister has said she could help, but I know she would just make a mess of it that I would have to clean up.

~ Ahmed, Cashier

Between working and caring for my children, I have no time for anything else.

~ Susannah, Paralegal

Both my kids are off at college, but they still need something or other all the time. I drive there every week delivering what they forgot or bringing them clean laundry. My husband says it’s too much, but my kids shouldn’t worry about anything but school work at college.

~ Lucy, Designer

Think about:

When and how do I take care of other people to the detriment of myself?

__________________________________________________________

When does this help (protect) me?

__________________________________________________________

When does it hurt me?

__________________________________________________________

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.
Dovetail Learning 2020.03.13
Is there a current situation in your life that hyper-caretaking is part of what isn’t working? If so, what could be done to move forward?

5. Attacking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What it looks like</th>
<th>How it protects</th>
<th>How it harms</th>
<th>What will help</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Making an attack with or without a provocation; Attacking self (i.e. self critical; eating disorder)</td>
<td>Self-protection from others’ aggression; standing against harm; feeling of power</td>
<td>Hostility invites counter attacks; hurts relationships; stops possible engagement</td>
<td>Taking a stand by being assertive; Holding healthy boundaries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So I lashed out at the coach. So what? He was being a jerk. Can’t he see that my daughter is the best player out there and should be playing all the time?

~ Gabriel, Factory Supervisor

Those people are always cutting line. They need to be taught a lesson.

~ Richard, Pharmaceutical Sales

Everyone talks about losing weight. It is easy to get obsessed with it. First, I cut out all carbs. Easy to say “gluten free.” Then animal products. Easy to say vegan. Anyone offers me food, I explain why I can’t eat it. Everyone around me seems worried about me, but I ignore them and just simply reply ‘ah no, I’m fine. I’m, like healthy’. I’m not though. I am still too big for the dress I bought for my sister’s wedding.

~ Ayesha, Student
Think about:
When and how do I attack others or myself?
________________________________________________________________________
When does this help (protect) me?
________________________________________________________________________
When does it hurt me?
________________________________________________________________________
Is there a current situation in your life that attacking is part of what isn’t working? If so, what could be done to move forward?
________________________________________________________________________

As we recognize how and when we use our protective patterns we need to understand two aspects:

1. **In the right contexts, our protective patterns are very helpful.** They protect us from threatening situations.
2. **In other contexts, our reactive patterns keep us from responding thoughtfully.** They can be an obstacle to caring for ourselves or connecting and collaborating well with others.

When we strengthen our resilience skills, we have the ability and practices to make the best choice for ourselves for how to respond in each situation.

Though we will always have our self-protective patterns to fall back on, if we can recognize healthier ways to deal with situations and strengthen our resilience skills, we will enrich our lives.

Learning how to use our resilience skills is a life-long process. Even after years of practicing resilience, we sometimes don’t use them when we want to. Our protective patterns can reemerge when we are faced with a big stress and get “triggered.” Human beings have a tendency to fall back into familiar patterns and it takes learning and practice to move away from
them. Continued personal development and growth requires both acknowledging the gift of our protective patterns and learning to use more effective resilient skills for most situations.

As a final activity, take a moment to consider your responses above. Having responded to the questions, circle the two ‘protective patterns’ that you use the most below and consider how you would like to work on them:

- Distrusting
- Isolating
- Avoiding
- Hyper-Caretaking
- Avoiding

The first step in being more centered is noticing ourselves by building awareness — acknowledging when and how we are falling off-center and how we are using a protective pattern in a way that is not helpful. With that sensitivity, it is easier to catch yourself and practice centering skills instead. In the next section, we will explore these centering skills more fully.

I am so amazed at how much more control I feel since I have been working on the centering skills for the last 6 months. Before I would get triggered and then yell, and end up needing to clean up my relationships after the fact. Now when I get annoyed or frustrated, I notice my protective patterns are being triggered. I am able to take a breath, assess if I should be attacking, then decide what I want to do next. It is really freeing.

~ Tanya, Mom of two