

UNIT 2. Welcome and introductions

In this unit, you will explore how the body and nervous system respond to stress and trauma. These physical and emotional reactions are not signs of weakness; they are natural survival responses.

This knowledge can help you better understand your own experiences or the experiences of others. You are encouraged to take breaks if any part of this content feels overwhelming.



UNIT 2. What is stress?

According to World Health Organisation (WHO), stress can be defined as a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation.

Stress is a natural human response that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives. Everyone experiences stress to some degree. The way we respond to stress, however, makes a big difference to our overall well-being.

Stress becomes a problem when it is constant, intense or related to traumatic experiences. Traumatic stress can be caused by war, violence, loss, displacement and even difficult migration journeys.



UNIT 2. Adrenaline and Cortisol

When we face a threat, the body releases stress hormones that prepare us to react quickly. Two of the main ones* are **adrenaline** and **cortisol**. They work together but have different roles:

ADRENALINE- INSTANT ALARM

- Released within seconds of sensing danger.
- Increases heart rate, blood pressure and energy supply.
- Makes you feel alert and ready to act immediately.
- Effects wear off quickly once the threat passes.

CORTISOL – LONG TERM “FUEL”

- Released minutes after the initial stress signal.
- Keeps the body in a state of readiness for longer periods.
- Regulates blood sugar for sustained energy.
- Helps the body recover after stress - but if levels stay high for too long, it can cause problems.

The other, third stress hormone is Norepinephrine (noradrenaline) – it works alongside adrenaline but focuses on increasing alertness and concentration. It also narrows blood vessels, raising blood pressure to keep blood flowing to vital organs.

UNIT 2. Cortisol

Cortisol, is present in your body all the time, but levels increase in response to danger and stress. In the short-term, it has positive effects, helping to deal with an immediate crisis. However, in case of long-term stress, cortisol builds up and creates a number of stress related health problems.

SHORT-TERM POSITIVE EFFECTS:

- a quick burst of energy
- decreased sensitivity to pain
- increase in immunity
- heightened memory

LONG-TERM NEGATIVE EFFECTS

- imbalances of blood sugar
- increase in abdominal fat storage
- suppressed thyroid activity
- decreased bone density
- decreased muscle mass
- high blood pressure
- lowered immunity
- less able to think clearly.

Migrants and refugees who experience long-term uncertainty or danger may have chronically high cortisol levels. This can affect mood, memory and physical health. Mindfulness and self-care can help the body gradually return to balance by lowering these hormone levels over time.

UNIT 2. Key stress responses – 4F

These key responses are sometimes called the **4 Fs**:

- **FIGHT** - reacting with anger or aggression (e.g., shouting, defending oneself).
- **FLIGHT** - running away or avoiding the threat (e.g., fleeing danger or avoiding situations).
- **FREEZE** - becoming stuck or unable to act (e.g., feeling numb or paralyzed).
- **FAWN** - trying to please others to stay safe (e.g., avoiding conflict by agreeing with others).

These are normal survival strategies, especially in extreme situations like conflict, trauma or forced displacement. However, if these responses stay active for too long, they can affect health and well-being.

UNIT 2. Why it matters?

Migrants and refugees may face prolonged stress, trauma and uncertainty. This can keep the nervous system in a constant state of alert or shutdown, making daily life and emotional regulation very difficult.

Understanding how the body responds to stress can:

- Help reduce shame or confusion about physical or emotional reactions.
- Encourage compassionate self-care and patience with healing.
- Build awareness of when support is needed and when the body may benefit from rest or grounding.

TIP: You can support your nervous system by practicing slow breathing, gentle movement or even humming or singing. These activities activate the ventral vagal system and help restore calm.

UNIT 2. EXERCISE: Notice your stress signals

Let's do a small exercise (*it is optional*). This short activity will help you recognise your body's responses to stress. Understanding these signals is the first step to taking care of yourself.

1. Find a comfortable position and take one slow, deep breath.
2. Think of a recent moment when you felt stressed or uneasy. Choose something mild, not too overwhelming.
3. As you remember it, pay attention to: *Where do you feel tension in your body? (For example: shoulders, jaw, stomach) Do you notice changes in your breathing or heartbeat? What thoughts or emotions come up?*
4. Write down three signs that your body gives you when you are stressed.
5. Keep this list somewhere safe - it can remind you when it's time to use a mindfulness or self-care technique.

These signals are connected to the stress hormones we discussed earlier (adrenaline, norepinephrine, cortisol). By noticing them early, you can take action before stress grows and becomes a problem.