

IT'S YOUR STRESS REFLEX

THE 6 WAYS SMART, LOVELY HUMANS LOSE
THEIR MINDS UNDER PRESSURE & HOW
TO NOT

CHASE THORNOCK

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INTRODUCTION

I wanted to show up for her. My wife had just given birth to our first son. It was a miracle in every way—I was elated! Yet, in my elation, I was in the hospital bed next door, getting my own infusion. We threw up together as she was delivering. It was a unique kind of bonding, I suppose, if you look at it with squinty eyes, but I was over it.

No matter how hard I tried, no matter how much I wanted my body to show up and carry the load in this moment, I couldn't.

For many years, I thought this was a character flaw. I imagined that if I had a better work ethic, things would improve. I thought that I just needed to find the right path or the right drug, and I'd unlock energy and healing. I believed that if I could just push through, my weakness would be conquered.

You may have felt similarly, even if your health hasn't taken a nosedive.

All of us have experienced the frustration of getting in our own way, hitting invisible brick walls that seem to dam our progress. When the pressure is on, we crumble.

You can't go to bed on time.

You can't stop yelling at the kids.

You can't get in shape.

You can't stop drinking.

You can't stop buying batteries on Amazon. Or clothes. Or gyroscopically controlled power drills. The power drills get me every time.

You can't get out of bed and care for your newborn.

Eventually, I realized that the “can'ts” (that word needs a seizure warning) I was experiencing with my health, while real, were my body's way of protecting me. When the pressure set in, I was automatically enacting a pattern of survival. A Stress Reflex engaged and kept engaging.

This is what we all do.

What if the reason you keep getting in your own way isn't actually a character flaw? What if it's a biological pattern—a reflex? And what if the pattern is actually changeable?

Here's the good news: this reflex is, in fact, changeable. The tricky part is that it's often invisible.

It shows up when things get hot or hard. It is your knee-jerk reaction to stress. It is the way you have grown to cope with the challenges of life, both the big, rocky mountains and the small bumps.

Your unique Stress Reflex runs in the background so constantly, so quietly, that you stop noticing it altogether. It is the lens through which you view the world. It is the water, and you are the fish.

These Reflexes are always there, always on, making them almost impossible to see. They become normal and automatic. You stop recognizing them as something separate from you.

Throughout this book, you will hear stories from real

people who have seen the benefits of changing their default Stress Reflex system in our coaching group, the Stress Less Dojo. Although their names have been changed for privacy, their stories are real.

I found my way to healing through rewriting my Stress Reflex.

The changes you're looking for, the breakthrough you've been chasing, or the clarity you pine for don't come from forcing different results. They come from rewiring the system underneath the way you think, react, relate, and decide.

This book will help you "see the water."

It will help you uncover your operating system and see the hidden nervous system programming quietly shaping your life. And once you can see it, you gain choice. And with choice, those patterns become malleable.

It's your stress reflex, but that doesn't mean it has to stay this way.

With you,
Chase

REFLECTION

Reflection

Before you go further, pause and take inventory.

Don't overthink this. Just answer honestly and quickly. These answers will give you a place to come back to after you've applied the tools in this book. It's always fun to see how much you've changed.

1. Relationship Pattern

Where in your life do you feel the most friction with another person right now, and what do you typically do in that moment of tension?

2. Body Pattern

Where does stress show up in your body first?

(In other words, what hurts? Be specific: jaw, chest, gut, shoulders, fatigue, numbness, etc.)

3. Recurring Frustration

What is one situation or type of situation that keeps frustrating you year after year, even though you've tried various techniques to handle it "better" before? It could be weight loss, a job plateau, dating troubles, mother-in-law boundaries . . . anything.

4. Resource Dilemma

What is one problem in your life that you believe more money would solve?

5. Cost of the Pattern

What are the one or two things you wish you could do or have but feel are just beyond your grasp? (Health, marriage, parenting, work, money, creativity, career . . . Again, it could be anything.)

Good. Now take a deep breath. (Yes, actually. I'll wait. Don't make it weird.)

THE STRESS REFLEX QUIZ

It is time to take the Stress Reflex Quiz!

Scan the QR code below to take the latest version of the quiz.



Stressreflex.com/quiz

1. A FRIEND CANCELS PLANS AT THE LAST MINUTE. YOU...

- A. *Crack your knuckles and say, "Plot twist."
Within 2 minutes you've made new (better)
plans, and have an Uber on the way.*
- B. *Smile politely... while internally drafting a
TED Talk called Why Standards Matter.*
- C. *Feel a wave of relief so strong you briefly
consider sending them a thank-you card. But
then you feel guilty about being so relieved.*
- D. *Instantly replay your last three interactions.
"Wait. Are they mad? Was it my tone? Should
I have used a different emoji?"*
- E. *You'd forgotten about dinner. Close call!*
- F. *Log this data point into your mental Reliability
Spreadsheet™ and decide to not do dinner
with them again. But sincerely without
drama or anger.*

2. Someone says, "We need to talk." Your body...

- A. ...*automatically responds, "YOU may need to talk, but I am presently doing something else."*
- B. ...*startles back to reality. You were thinking about what it would be like to own an almond grove in Portugal. "Oh! Okay!" you say.*
- C. ...*plummets straight into, "Oh no. What did I miss? Was it Tuesday? It was Tuesday, wasn't it?"*
- D. ...*goes completely still, hoping if you don't move, they can't see you. You hate these kinds of conversations. They always result in change.*
- E. ...*straightens regally, because if someone asks for your well-earned opinion, you are going to take it seriously (as should they). "Proceed."*
- F. ...*instantly remembers all the ideas you wanted to talk through! You've got a 3-point plan, a backup 5-year vision, and a contingency spreadsheet.*

3. You get invited to something you don't want to go to. You...

- A. *Decide in four seconds flat. "Nope."*
- B. *Say yes immediately and confidently outsource the logistical overbooking problem to Future You. You'll figure it out.*
- C. *Say yes-- because you can't just say no! They'll be disappointed.*
- D. *Feel physically exhausted just picturing traffic, parking, small talk, and whatever shoes are required.*
- E. *Ask enough logistical, ethical, and philosophical clarifying questions that they gently retract the invitation on their own.*
- F. *Open the message, fully intend to respond, and then somehow resurface 36 hours later like, "Oh wow. Time is fake."*

4. During conflict, you'd rather...

- A. Fix it immediately, optimize the problem, and assign action steps with a shared Google Doc.*
- B. Win. Calmly. Logically. With eye contact.*
- C. Walk directly into the ocean in full outfit and let the tide decide your fate.*
- D. Smooth it over so fast it's unclear whether there was ever conflict to begin with. "We're good! Everyone's good!"*
- E. You can see why they feel the way they do, and all the childhood trauma that is likely bubbling under the surface. When Venus comes back into harmony with their chart, life will absolutely start to feel beautiful again.*
- F. Pause everything and say, "Before we proceed, can we define what we mean by 'always'?"*

5. When you feel inadequate, you...

- A. Reassess the entire strategic framework of your life. If we're inadequate, it must be a systems issue.*
- B. Construct the outline of a cinematic short film where you are the misunderstood genius protagonist.*
- C. Find someone who needs some service. When your problems get too big, the best solution is to go help someone else with theirs.*
- D. Go very, very quiet. Minimal expression. Minimal reaction. "It's fine." (It is not fine.)*
- E. Double down and raise your standards. Even if you're wrong, confidence usually wins anyway.*
- F. Watch a few YouTube videos about how James Clear and T-Swift handle inadequacies. Open a fresh Notes app and add three new goals. Onward and upward.*

6. In group chats, you are...

- A. Usually annoyed. Off-topic tangents make your phone ping too often and it's indecent.*
- B. The cruise director. Itinerary posted, ideas consolidated, polls launched. "Okay team, here's the plan."*
- C. The emotional support responder. "Are you okay??" "That sounds hard." "I'm proud of you."*
- D. The emoji-and-vanish. Drops a 🍷 or "LOL" on the full moon or when asked a direct question.*
- E. The "Actually..." person. The dictionary. "Actually, it was Thursday." "Actually, that's not how that works."*
- F. The mind blower. You drop videos that explain how the world is a mere hologram, and you make jokes that tie in three separate recent conversations that regularly make your friends spit their beverages.*

7. When someone misunderstands you, you...

- A. *Explain your perspective in two other ways with a solid analogy and throw in some Spanish words.*
- B. *Your eyebrows go up; you take a big breath and proceed to correct them. Kindly. If they understand your point, they will agree. Patience is the hardest part.*
- C. *Smile. Nod. Say nothing. File it away in the Internal Archive™ where it will live forever.*
- D. *Re-explain gently. Then even more gently. Then somehow softer still.*
- E. *Let them be wrong. Physically present. Mentally packing a suitcase. You'll be over here in your own universe.*
- F. *Calmly dismantle the misunderstanding step-by-step like you're narrating a TED Talk titled "Let's Revisit the Premise."*

8. When you're stressed, your tell is...

- A. You start correcting grammar, timelines, and minor factual errors (because accuracy matters).*
- B. You begin drafting blueprints for a quiet cabin in Montana. Or a trip to Italy. Yeah, Italy sounds amazing.*
- C. You start staring at people. Who's off? Who's upset?*
- D. You switch to Emotional Dark Mode. Outward facing systems retreat until turmoil has passed.*
- E. Your voice gets sharper. Your jaw sets. You remind everyone of the right way to get things done.*
- F. You accidentally on purpose agree to head the PTA for next year. And the Girl Scout Cookie Campaign for the district.*

9. If someone disappoints you, you...

- A. Confront them. *"So... what happened?" And then you help them realize that they should have done it your way. I mean the right way.*
- B. Replace them with a better plan before they finish apologizing. Deploy the professional pivot.
- C. Wonder why they don't care about you.
- D. Seal off the inner sanctum of your trust for an undetermined length of time.
- E. Note it. Incidents become patterns over time. And patterns have logical implications.
- F. The weight of all the disappointments every felt by mankind and the arboreal kingdoms descend upon you. You wonder if you'll ever return to the land of carefree. And you write a song about it.

10. Your partner is upset. You instinctively...

- A. Activate Fix-It Mode™. You think of something they can do immediately to solve their problem.*
- B. Straighten up like you're about to defend a thesis. "I just want to clarify something."*
- C. Wait it out in silence.*
- D. Absorb their mood so completely you're now apologizing for things you didn't do.*
- E. Retreat to think alone.*
- F. Ask clarifying questions that feel suspiciously like cross-examination.*

11. When plans fall apart, you think...

- A. *"Let's review what went wrong. We can use the 6 Steps of Root Cause Analysis." You then go through the steps and decode where things actually did fall apart.*
- B. *"Interesting..." And you remember that book by Chinua Achebe called Things Falling Apart. What a strange book. Plans are such a universal and yet etherial pursuit for mere mortals to attempt.*
- C. *"Is everyone okay?" You message everyone individually to make sure.*
- D. *"This is why I keep my world small." Too many people means too many moving parts.*
- E. *"Who messed this up?" You aren't mad, but you do want to know strengths and weaknesses.*
- F. *"New plan!" Hallelujah, you had a better plan in the wings, just waiting for the chance to be born and THIS IS THE CHANCE.*

12. If someone criticizes you publicly, you...

- A. Lock eyes. Then yawn.*
- B. Smile calmly. And plot a glow-up so aggressively it qualifies as revenge.*
- C. Apologize immediately, even if you're 63% sure they're wrong.*
- D. Feel your internal operating system crash.
Ughhhh now you'll have to expend resources
and time and thought and energy on damage
control.*
- E. Say nothing but begin drafting an airtight
rebuttal with footnotes and references. Your
argument makes any attackers look like fools.
Then you get it published in Forbes.*
- F. You don't notice.*

13. Your stress fantasy escape looks like...

- A. *Quitting everything and launching something wildly ambitious in a new city. Fresh start, unstoppable energy, perfection.*
- B. *No one questions the plan but can follow instructions and report back quickly, and troubleshoot issues competently. You can take a nap and know the bases are all covered.*
- C. *Silence. Blessed silence.*
- D. *Everyone getting along. No tension. Laughter, amazing food that fits all the allergy needs, and smooth, harmonious vibes.*
- E. *A solo train ride staring out the window while Jurassic Park soundtrack is blaring in your earbuds.*
- F. *A peaceful time at a beautiful library with a great coffee shop next door and uninterrupted time to think clearly.*

14. When you say "I'm fine," it usually means...

- A. There are missing facts here and I will find them.*
- B. I have something else I'd like to think about, so unless you're interested, I shall now move somewhere more private.*
- C. Please don't be mad at me.*
- D. I'm not talking about this. Not now. Possibly not ever.*
- E. I just need to handle this myself.*
- F. I am sorting through options and don't have the capacity to bring you along right now. Hold please.*

15. If your nervous system had a tagline, it would be...

A. *"Try me."*

B. *"We'll sleep when we're dead."*

C. *"Are we all okay? Just checking. Again."*

D. *"Slow and steady."*

E. *"Let's be precise."*

F. *"Processing... do not tap the glass."*

PART I

**YOUR COPING
MECHANISM FORMERLY
KNOWN AS PERSONALITY**

THE BEGINNING

One warm, sunny February afternoon, I was sitting at the lunch table with my wife, Carly, and our boys. This is notable because we were in Florida, where a warm, sunny February afternoon was an absolute delight.

We were eating pão de queijo (we've been hooked since our travels to the Algarve in Portugal) and a big Caesar salad (once the only thing we could understand on a menu in Montenegro, it's since become a staple) when we got a text.

A friend was coming to Orlando and would be staying only twenty minutes away.

She asked, "Can I come see you guys? Can we meet up?"

We love when this happens.

"Of course!" we texted back.

Then I turned to Carly and said, "So, you know we're not going to see her, right?"

Carly looked confused. "We just offered to meet her. What do you mean?"

I said it how I saw it. "It'll never happen. Even though we love her and she means well, you and I know how this ends."

Things will come up. She'll be sad she can't seem to make it. She'll cancel."

Carly paused.

Then she started laughing.

And because we are extremely kind, loving, and nonjudgmental friends, we immediately started listing other people we know and love who do the exact same thing.

Five names came up in under twenty seconds.

Including Carly's.

(To be fair, she used to do this much more often before she learned the fine art of actually honoring her yeses. Which, somewhat inconveniently, requires saying no much more often.)

Here's the thing: this behavior isn't random. It's not a character flaw, and it's not poor time management. It's the outcome of one type of subconscious neurological programming.

Some people say yes with enormous enthusiasm because, in that "YES!" moment, their nervous system is energized by connection and possibility. They genuinely mean it. But later, when reality arrives with its boring little details—time, energy, other commitments—the nervous system recalculates.

Suddenly, the same person who said "Absolutely!" two hours ago is staring at their phone, composing a message that begins with:

"I'm so sorry . . ."

These are not flaky people. In fact, they are often some of the kindest, most generous humans you'll meet. Their nervous system just happens to be wired toward optimism and connection in a way that occasionally leads to enthusiastic overbooking.

Once you start noticing patterns like this, you see them everywhere.

Different people respond to the same situations in wildly different ways, and those differences become surprisingly predictable once you understand what the nervous system is doing.

Which is exactly what Carly realized.

She looked at me across the table and asked a question that would eventually lead to this book.

“How many different nervous system patterns are there, do you think?”

Now, I have a somewhat unusual skill set. I can usually read a person's nervous system state within a few minutes of meeting them. Not their personality in the “which ice cream flavor is totally you this summer” sense, but their underlying wiring.

Carly says it's creepy. But she's also endlessly entertained by it. For years, she would ask me questions after social interactions.

“What was going on with her?”

“That was weird. What do you think happened there?”

And I could reply, “She's got a bummed hip, and it's progressing into a dissociative depression.”

And I was accurate.

I remember having a friend in college who could identify a car simply by the shape of its headlights in the darkness. It was astonishing. Little did I know then that I had developed a similar ability to identify subconscious patterns in people.

It sounds arrogant. In reality, much like the subconscious patterns I learned to read, this ability was a mechanism I developed to survive. Turns out, that's *my* wiring:

becoming really good at reading other people so I could stay safe.

I can't wait to tell you all about it later.

So when Carly asked how many subconscious nervous system patterns I could identify, she wasn't surprised when I started counting them off on my fingers.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Five.

Six.

Six primary ways the nervous system tends to organize itself in response to life. Six recurring strategies for creating safety, navigating relationships, and dealing with stress, uncertainty, and opportunity.

Six Stress Reflexes.

Now, before you start imagining that this book will neatly sort every human being into a single tidy box, let me reassure you: humans are far too complicated for that. Each person carries nuance, contradiction, and originality that refuse to fit perfectly into any system. As my engineer father-in-law wisely taught me, "All models are wrong; some are useful."

My hope is that what you learn in this book lands firmly in the latter category—useful and maybe even enlightening.

Naturally, once we identified the Six Stress Reflexes, we began testing the theory on everyone we knew. Friends, clients, family members, and the occasional unsuspecting stranger all became informal research participants.

The responses started pouring in.

"That's exactly me!"

"I get why I do that now!"

"I understand my spouse so much better!"

"I can finally understand how to parent my kid!"

"Oh my goodness, I'm exactly like my mom."

"This makes so much sense."

Because when people begin to see the hidden logic behind their reactions, behaviors that once felt confusing suddenly become understandable.

Often, compassion takes the place of confusion or frustration.

We live for it, Carly and I.

We live for understanding and adventure, even when that adventure means exploring our own personalities.

That's the real purpose of this book: not to label you, diagnose you, or assign you to a permanent category, but to give you a lens that makes human behavior easier to understand—especially your own.

After you meet the Six Stress Reflexes, we'll introduce you to something called The SHIFT 5: a framework designed to help you change your subconscious programming so you can choose how you respond rather than simply repeating patterns inherited from your upbringing and trauma.

When something is subconscious, it is invisible. This book will help make what was once unseen visible. Once you can see it, you can work with it.

And when something becomes workable, it becomes far less intimidating.

When you understand yourself, you become your own best ally.

As you move through this book, you'll begin recognizing the nervous system strategies that have been quietly guiding your reactions, relationships, and decisions for most of your life.

By the end, you'll begin to see a few things in a new light, including:

- why you react the way you do, especially under pressure
- why certain situations drain or energize you
- why some relationships feel effortless while others feel impossible
- how your nervous system is working for you—and how you can work with it

Your Stress Reflex archetype underpins every area and every relationship in your life.

Our sincerest hope is that you'll learn how to feel amazing, do what you love with your time and resources, and help your family use their strengths while regulating through their own triggers.

Here's how the book works.

Take The Stress Reflex Quiz, which will help you identify your primary pattern. You can take it online or write directly in the companion workbook (you can find the workbook here: www.stressreflex.com/workbook).

Part I explains the foundations. You'll learn how personality forms, how experience and trauma shape nervous system responses, and why what we call personality is often a survival strategy that has become the default setting.

Part II introduces the Six Stress Reflexes—the most common nervous system strategies people develop as they learn to navigate life.

Part III explores the 30 Blended Stress Reflexes, which is where things get especially interesting. Most people operate from two patterns, and understanding how those patterns

interact can explain a great deal about your behavior under stress.

Part IV introduces The SHIFT 5 method, a practical process for working with your nervous system so your patterns can become flexible and intentional.

Understanding your nervous system does something remarkable: it gives you options for deep and lasting change.

When you understand your patterns, you can love better, rest better, work better, and relate to others with far more ease. Life becomes less confusing, relationships become less frustrating, and your good old self begins to make a lot more sense.

Hallelujah!

Your nervous system has been trying to help you this entire time, but it also sets the ceiling on what you are able to receive and create. There's no amount of willpower—and no sunrise simulation alarm clock—that can motivate you enough to overpower your Stress Reflex programming.

You have to learn to work *with* it.

Please understand: I do not claim to know more about your experience or your expertise than you do. My value isn't in knowing more. I'm here to help you see differently.

May this book offer you a perspective that reveals leverage you may not have been shown before. My deepest hope is that you take this knowledge and run with it—chase your wildest dreams!

I hope you discover regular old pão de queijo at a Portuguese Continente (that's like a Kroger in the States—just a typical grocery store), a Caesar salad in the Balkans, and a Turkish scuba instructor who changes your life. I hope you sit with your loved ones in the February sunshine somewhere warm and beautiful and just laugh.

All of this and more is possible when your nervous system becomes your BFF.

So let's begin.

What if the things you've always called your personality are actually strategies your nervous system learned along the way?

And what if the things you want most are just on the other side of understanding them?

With love and power,

Chase