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Noticing Emotional Stress

It's not always easy to know what emotional stress may look and feel like for you. That's because it's natural to go through the day without pausing to express curiosity toward your internal reactions to situations. You might feel a twinge of discomfort and brush it off. Choosing to take in these moments is important, because doing so can help you better understand any emotional impact a situation is having on you. That twinge may have been a sign of feeling hopelessness, sadness, or anger. Paying attention to these feelings can help you choose how you want to respond to the situation. Making empowered, wise decisions based on an accurate assessment of the emotional impact of an experience is discussed in detail later in Part Two.

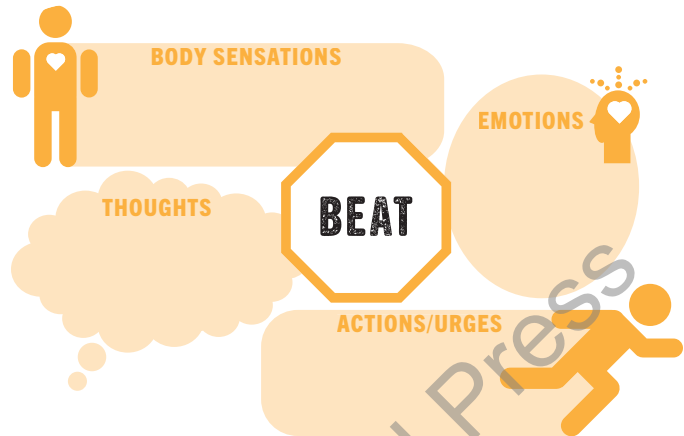
It all starts with noticing the emotional stress you're experiencing. How do you do that? By practicing **mindfulness**, which involves choosing to observe and describe your body sensations, emotions, action urges, and thoughts at any given moment. In this book, these aspects of your experience are summed up as your **BEAT** (your body sensations, emotions, actions/urges, and thoughts).

TAKE YOUR BEAT

On the next page is the **BEAT diagram** you'll use throughout this workbook to help you strengthen your mindfulness skills and fully understand the emotional impact of culturally stressful events (a version for you to fill out appears later in the chapter). Taking your BEAT is a bit like taking your temperature when you feel a cold or flu coming on. It helps you figure out how your body feels, what emotions are arising, what you're thinking, and what action you feel an urge to

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take. That information then tells you what to do about it. When you practice taking your BEAT after culturally stressful events, it can keep the impact of cultural stress from building up without your noticing. Taking your BEAT before, during, or after a culturally stressful event can also help you fully notice its impact on you and figure out how to navigate that situation (or other similar situations) effectively.



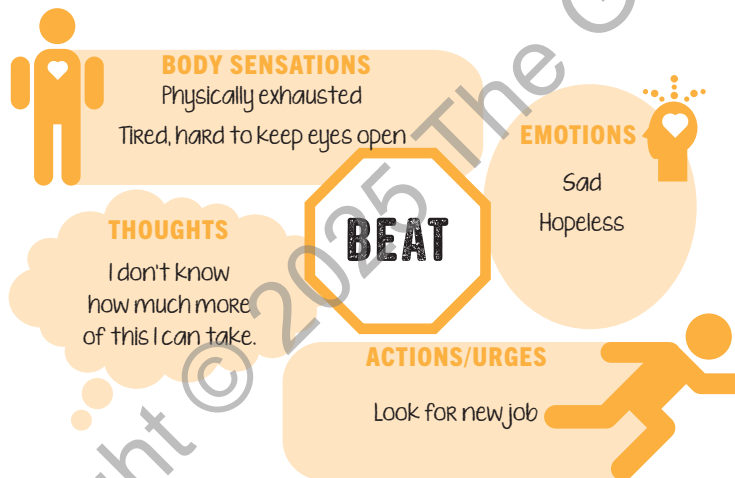
Here are the questions to ask when filling out a BEAT diagram:

- 1. What body sensations are you feeling?** Muscle tension? Headache? A pit in your stomach? A heavy heart? Write down anything that you notice (including pleasant feelings, like a sense of lightness in your chest).
- 2. What emotions are coming up?** Fear? Anger? Disappointment? Sorrow? All kinds of emotions may come up in response to a culturally stressful event, sometimes several at once. Give yourself a little time to try to name each emotion you are feeling—one at a time. If you find it difficult to label your emotions, you may find it helpful to search online for “Emotion Wheels” and use those diagrams to give you a menu of emotion words to choose from as you practice paying attention to your emotions.
- 3. What action urges do you feel?** Do you want to exit the building, turn away, strike out, yell, mumble something, freeze, laugh? It is important that you learn to catch an action urge (“I want to quit my job”) before engaging in the action (“I quit my job”). Noticing your urges will help you choose whether acting on an urge will or will not be helpful for you.
- 4. What are you thinking?** That you’re being treated unfairly? That you’re never going to be able to reach your goals facing these obstacles? Thoughts can easily be confused with emotions. A thought is “I feel like today is going to be a good day.” While emotions can be described using one-word labels (“I feel happy” or “I feel scared”), thoughts tend to be more of an inner dialogue or self-talk about ourselves or the world around us. Also, our thoughts can be about the past (“Yesterday was a good day”), the present (“Today is a good day”), or the future (“Tomorrow will be a good day”).



Jamal's BEAT after an Exhausting Start to the Workweek

In Chapter 3, you got a snapshot of a Monday in Jamal's work life. Now he's back home, exhausted following a series of culturally stressful experiences: uncertainty of why the women crossed the street instead of walking alongside him, having attended a meeting where his White coworkers debated whether police brutality was a real threat to the Black community, learning he may be at a disadvantage for the promotion he's been working hard to get, and being expected to assume responsibility for leading his company's antiracism initiative. Jamal used the BEAT diagram to practice mindfulness after he got home. As he sat on his couch, he noticed how physically exhausted he felt. He became aware of how his body felt tired and noticed his eyes struggling to stay open. He described feeling a bit sad and hopeless, noting thoughts like "I don't know how much more of this I can take." Jamal described the urge to start looking for a new job.



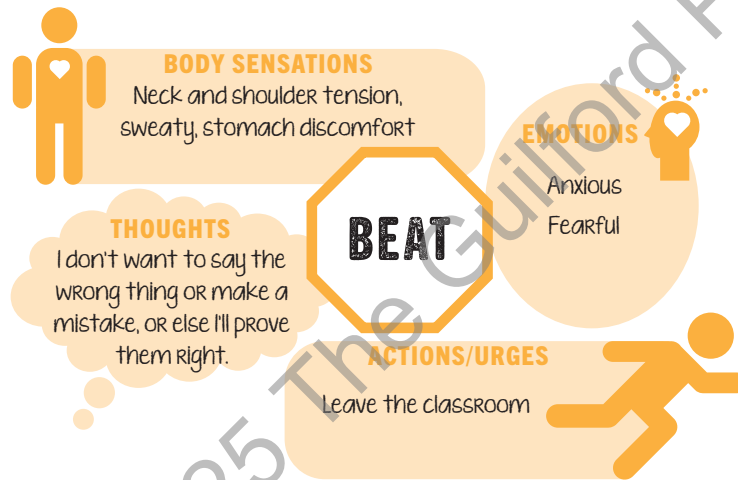
Amia's BEAT before Interacting with a Classmate Who Made Her Uncomfortable

Amia just learned that she has been paired with Thomas, a White male student, for a class project. Amia has overheard others talking about how Thomas and his friends don't believe the students of color in their class are smart and Thomas doesn't like working with them. While walking up to Thomas's desk, she sees Thomas look her way, make a comment to his friend, and then Thomas and his friend start laughing. But just when Amia

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reaches Thomas, he and his friend stop laughing and Thomas asks Amia, “Are you ready to get to work?”

Amia used the BEAT diagram to practice mindfulness before interacting with Thomas. She noticed that her neck and shoulders became tense, she became sweaty, and her stomach felt like it was in knots. As she walked toward him, she felt anxious and fearful, as she noticed thoughts of “I don’t want to say the wrong thing or make a mistake, or else I’ll prove them right.” Her body sensations, emotions, and thoughts led Amia to have the urge to tell the teacher she felt unwell so that she could go to the nurse’s office and possibly even be sent home.



Greg's BEAT while Being Teased in Class



Greg is in math class—one of his favorite subjects—studying algebra. His teacher asks if anyone knows how to solve the equation on the board. Greg enthusiastically raises his hand and answers the question correctly. After receiving praise from the teacher, his Black and Latino peers next to him begin to tease him: “You are such a teacher’s pet.” He also overhears them mocking his voice and then stating, “He wants so bad to be like the White kids across town.” Greg used the BEAT diagram to practice mindfulness in the moment right after hearing his classmates teasing him about his class participation. He noticed tension in his hands and his body getting warmer. While sitting at his desk, he felt angry and noticed thoughts of “I am tired of getting picked on for doing my thing in the classroom.” All of this caused Greg to feel the urge to yell at his classmates and say, “Y’all are just mad cuz y’all are too dumb to even know what’s going on.”



Now that you've seen how our navigators used mindfulness to notice the emotional impact of a culturally stressful event—before, during, and after—try mindfulness right now for yourself. Observe and describe your body sensations, emotions, action urges, and thoughts *in this moment*. Your BEAT diagram (see page 58) may include reactions to the navigators' stories or reactions to something else going on around you in this moment.

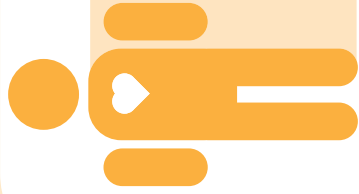
Power Up! Tips for Boosting Your Empowered Coping

If you notice that it's hard to fill in your BEAT diagram right now, that's okay. You will get more practice doing so in the rest of the chapter. Also, here are some additional exercises to help boost your ability to take a BEAT:

- **Be a mindful participant.** Find an enjoyable and low-stress activity, like eating a favorite food, listening to your favorite song, or hanging with your closest friends. Then, during this activity, try to pause every few moments and check in with your BEAT by asking questions like “What emotions do I feel in this moment?” or “What kinds of action urges are coming up for me in this moment?”
- **Journal.** Take a few moments to freely write down your reactions to a recent event. Then, after about 5–10 minutes, pause and use the BEAT diagram to help you look for examples of body sensations, emotions, action urges, or thoughts in your journaling.
- **Express yourself artistically.** For some, artistic expressions, like writing poetry, songwriting, or drawing, are ways they express their BEATs. If creative and artistic expressions are some of the strengths you listed in your Who Am I? diagram (see page 14), consider using the BEAT diagram to help notice if your art captures any of the body sensations, emotions, action urges, or thoughts you are having in a given a moment.



My BEAT



BODY SENSATIONS

THOUGHTS



EMOTIONS



ACTIONS/URGES



CATEGORIZE YOUR EMOTIONAL STRESS

As shown by our navigators, emotional stress can occur before, during, or after a stressful situation and can include a variety of uncomfortable body sensations, emotions, and action urges. To help you use your mindfulness skills to notice when emotional stress is impacting your daily life, I created **emotional stress zones**, summarized in the following chart. The chart shows how our thoughts about a particular relationship or part of our community can cause us to experience different types of emotional stress. Take a few moments to read about each zone in the chart before reading on.

		BODY SENSATION	EMOTION	ACTION URGE
EMOTIONAL STRESS ZONES	FREEZE ZONE (Ongoing Threat/Aftermath)	Body numbness Dissociation* Decreased <input type="checkbox"/> Heart rate <input type="checkbox"/> Breathing *Dissociation is feeling disconnected from your body, thoughts, or sense of self	<input type="checkbox"/> Depression <input type="checkbox"/> Numb <input type="checkbox"/> Hopeless <input type="checkbox"/> Helpless <input type="checkbox"/> Shame <input type="checkbox"/> Guilt	<input type="checkbox"/> Avoiding people/places <input type="checkbox"/> Aggressive/confrontative <input type="checkbox"/> Vigilant/watchful <input type="checkbox"/> Social withdrawal <input type="checkbox"/> Isolation <input type="checkbox"/> Giving up on goals <input type="checkbox"/> Distraction seeking <input type="checkbox"/> Hiding identity <input type="checkbox"/> Doom scrolling* <input type="checkbox"/> Sleeping more/less <input type="checkbox"/> Eating more/less <input type="checkbox"/> Substance use <input type="checkbox"/> Work harder <input type="checkbox"/> Activism <input type="checkbox"/> Hiding emotions *Doom scrolling is the urge to research gruesome details about violent or shocking events
	FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT ZONE (Detected Threat)	Increased <input type="checkbox"/> Heart rate <input type="checkbox"/> Breathing <input type="checkbox"/> Muscle tension <input type="checkbox"/> Stomach discomfort <input type="checkbox"/> Shakiness	<input type="checkbox"/> Frustration <input type="checkbox"/> Worry/Nervous <input type="checkbox"/> Anger <input type="checkbox"/> Panic/Fear	<input type="checkbox"/> Socially engaged <input type="checkbox"/> Exploring <input type="checkbox"/> Mindful Participation
	SAFE AND SECURE ZONE	Typical <input type="checkbox"/> Heart rate <input type="checkbox"/> Breathing Rested Better concentration	<input type="checkbox"/> Curious <input type="checkbox"/> Calm <input type="checkbox"/> Joy <input type="checkbox"/> Content <input type="checkbox"/> Love (self/others)	

SAFE AND SECURE ZONE

At the bottom of the chart is the **safe and secure zone**. While it’s impossible to feel relaxed 24 hours/7 days a week, the hope is that we can find safety and security within at least some relationships and some parts of our community. Often we find ourselves in this zone when we feel free from cultural stress, protected from

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emotional or physical harm, or surrounded by people and places that help us confidently express who we are. One way to know that you feel safe and secure is by pausing, observing, and noticing that your body feels calm and you're able to experience comfortable (or at times even positive) emotions within a relationship or while spending time in a part of your community. In such moments, you may find yourself able to focus better and meaningfully engage in activities, like having a conversation, completing a project, or simply hanging out with friends.

FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT ZONE

One step up in the chart is the **fight-or-flight zone**. Have you ever heard of the body's *fight-or-flight reaction*? When you sense an oncoming threat, like feeling as if you may be mistreated or judged unfairly due to your identity, your body readies you to face such a challenge. Interestingly, you may have this reaction whether the threat is physical (someone trying to harm your body) or social (someone judging you negatively because of your identity). Often, a detected threat is a detected threat. Also, over time and after repeated experiences of cultural stress, *the fight-or-flight reaction can activate even with the slightest reminder of past cultural stress*—like Amia becoming immediately anxious if she were paired with Thomas again in the future. One way to know that you're in the fight-or-flight zone is by noticing your body sensations becoming more activated—possibly your heart beats faster, your body temperature changes, or your breathing becomes shallower. Along with these body sensations, this zone includes feeling worried or nervous that you may experience cultural stress, like what Amia felt before working with Thomas. Or it could include feeling angry that you are presently experiencing cultural stress, like Greg while he was being judged for his class participation. In either case, this zone is nicknamed after the action urges we get in response to the detected threat—our urges often reflect a desire to *escape* or *attack* as a way of protecting ourselves from impacts of cultural stress. *Escape* urges can include avoiding or leaving uncomfortable situations or using food, video gaming, books, or substances to escape the emotional discomfort we feel from cultural stress. *Attack* urges can include becoming confrontational or yelling at the person causing cultural stress or possibly choosing to fight back with your work ethic or efforts to correct the injustices surrounding you.

FREEZE ZONE

At the top of the chart is the **freeze zone**. This zone describes instances where the intensity of your body sensations and emotions feels immobilizing, making it hard to think, feel, or choose any course of action. This most often occurs when you:

- *Feel stress that doesn't go away*, meaning you repeatedly experience cultural stress despite making many efforts to cope with the stress
- *Feel sudden or unexpected stress*, meaning you're caught off guard with seemingly no time to prepare for the intense emotional discomfort a stressful situation causes
- *Deal with the aftermath from a culturally stressful experience*, meaning you can feel, like Jamal, run down, unsure of what to do, or unsure what you have left to give

One way to know you're in the freeze zone is by pausing and observing your body sensations in moments when you feel caught up in repeated experiences of cultural stress, unexpectedly impacted by cultural stress, or immediately after experiencing cultural stress. You may notice then that it's hard to detect what's going on in your body. You may feel shocked or even unsure what to feel in these moments. Or your body may feel numb or as if you can't feel sensations as fully as usual.

Importantly, feeling numb or disconnected from the body is a common response to experiencing repeated physical or social threats over the course of time—it's another way your body tries to protect you from overwhelming moments of stress. And, when in the freeze zone, you may notice emotional states that seem to linger for extended periods of time, such as deep sadness (or depression), hopelessness, guilt, or shame. As this zone's nickname suggests, you can experience action urges that reflect feeling stuck or a lack of agency, such as wanting to give up on tasks, hide your identity, separate yourself from people, or avoid activities that you typically enjoy.

HOW TO KNOW WHEN YOU'RE EXPERIENCING EMOTIONAL STRESS

Many events and situations, including mistreatment due to your identity, can have a strong emotional impact. But when does “impact” become “stress”? This is where your BEAT diagram is key. Here are the steps for using your BEAT reaction to know when you're under significant emotional stress:

- 1. Describe the culturally stressful situation.** Where were you? Who was there? What relationship or community stressor arose?
- 2. Use the BEAT diagram to label your physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, and actions/urges.**
- 3. Describe the impact of the culturally stressful event.** Do you notice any of the

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three indicators of emotional stress (described below) when looking at your BEAT reaction?

- **“I am in the freeze zone.”** It’s natural to experience some uncomfortable body sensations or emotional responses to culturally stressful events. But several BEAT reactions that feature feelings of shame, guilt, hopelessness, or sadness over several days or maybe even weeks can be a sign that you may benefit from exploring options to cope with emotional stress. This is especially important if you also notice yourself struggling to maintain efforts toward meaningful life goals, like attending school, completing schoolwork, continuing to spend time with friends, or even maintaining daily hygiene routines.
- **“I am in the fight-or-flight zone.”** Are you feeling more vigilant and watchful for possible culturally stressful events? Becoming extremely anxious or even angry when anticipating or first confronted with such experiences? In either case, you may notice, looking back, that you’re using coping methods that really aren’t helping you emotionally. Maybe you even notice your coping responses are actually disruptive and causing problems in other areas of your life, like you’re getting in trouble for your confrontation, your grades are suffering because of your avoidance, or you’re becoming concerningly dependent on substances. These are all signs that focusing on building your emotional stress coping skills may be beneficial.
- **“I don’t know what zone I’m in.”** Culturally stressful events can have a confusing impact. If you’re not used to paying attention to your emotions, it can be hard to know exactly what you’re feeling. Or, even with decent mindfulness skills and familiarity with what culturally stressful events typically look and feel like, you’re sometimes left speechless, confused, and uncertain about the emotional impact of a specific event. Think of these moments as opportunities to use the BEAT diagram and emotional stress zones chart to help you check in with yourself. Doing so may help you notice emotional stress early and help you thoughtfully select coping responses that support your healing.

IDENTIFY EMOTIONAL STRESS

Moving forward, you can use the **Identifying My Emotional Stress worksheet** on page 64 to help you pause, notice, and label the signs of emotional stress any time you are curious about whether you are experiencing (or have experienced) emotional stress in response to a culturally stressful event(s). Greg followed the steps above to fill out his worksheet, shown on the facing page.



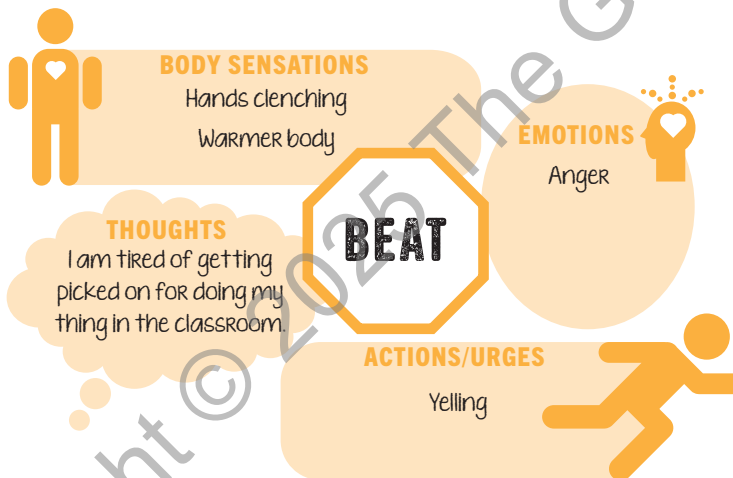
Greg’s Emotional Stress

Earlier in this chapter, you read about Greg’s reactions to culturally stressful interactions with his classmates. Here is how Greg used this worksheet.

1. Describe the culturally stressful situation.

<input type="checkbox"/> Where are you?	Math class
<input type="checkbox"/> Who was present?	My class and teacher. Sitting near my friends
<input type="checkbox"/> Describe the relationship or community stressor	Being judged for caring about school and participating

2. Use the BEAT diagram to label your physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, and actions/urges.



3. Describe the impact of the culturally stressful event. When looking at your BEAT diagram, do you notice yourself having any of the following impacts?

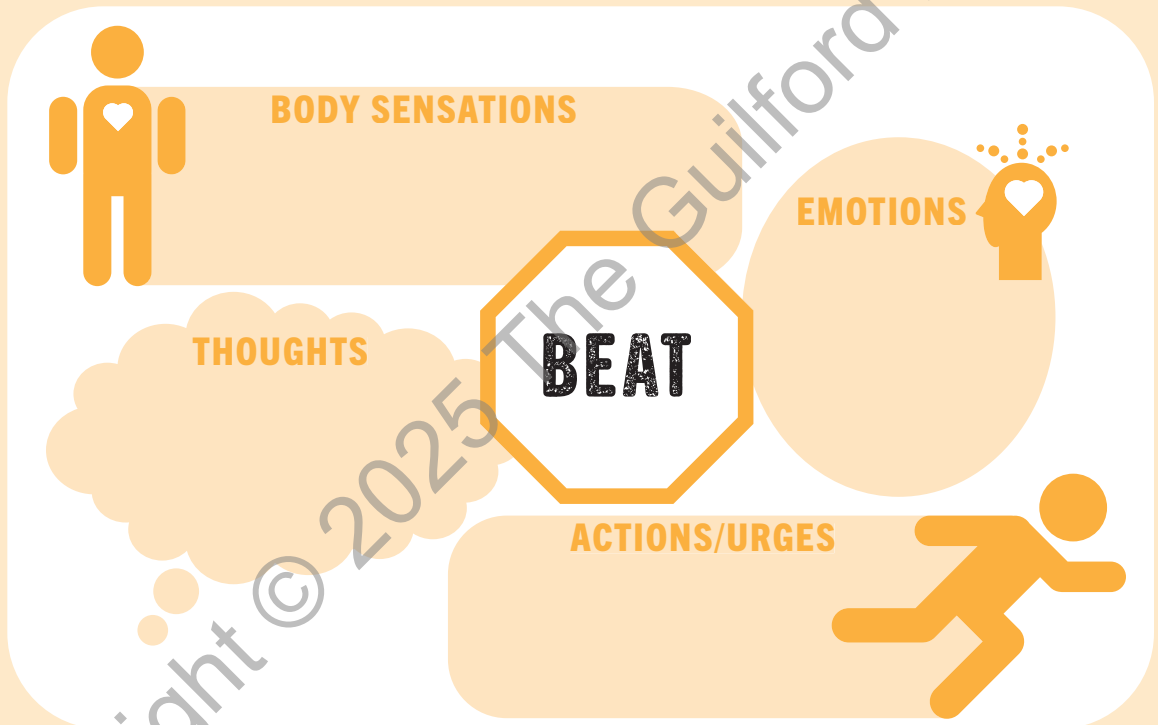
“I am in the freeze zone.”	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No
“I am in the fight-or-flight zone.”	<input checked="" type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
“I don’t know what zone I’m in.”	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> No

Identifying My Emotional Stress

1. Describe the culturally stressful situation.

Where are you?	
Who was present?	
Describe the relationship or community stressor	

2. Use the BEAT diagram to label your physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, and actions/urges.



3. Describe the impact of the culturally stressful event. When looking at your BEAT diagram, do you notice your reactions falling in any of the zones below?

“I am in the freeze zone.”	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
“I am in the fight-or-flight zone.”	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No
“I don’t know what zone I’m in.”	<input type="radio"/> Yes <input type="radio"/> No

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Now fill in each step of the Identifying My Emotional Stress worksheet (on the facing page), as Greg did.

Power Up! Tips for Boosting Your Empowered Coping

- If you indicated “yes” for any of these indicators, consider using the emotional stress coping diagram in Chapter 6 (see page 80).
- If you’re having trouble sticking with uncomfortable feelings long enough to identify them, try to combine taking a BEAT with some of the coping skills introduced in Chapter 8. Possibly, spend a few seconds or minutes observing and describing your BEAT reactions followed by engaging in a soothing activity, such as a breathing exercise.



Chapter 4: Recap and Reflect

RECAP

- **Mindfulness** involves choosing to pause, observe, and describe body sensations, emotions, action urges, and thoughts at any given moment.
- You can use the **BEAT diagram** to help you observe and describe these parts of your experience.
- To help you identify emotional stress when you’re experiencing it, you can use the BEAT diagram to observe if you’re in either of the **emotional stress zones** (*fight-or-flight zone* or *freeze zone*).

REFLECT

Now that you’re more familiar with what emotional stress looks and feels like, record in the **My Experiences in Emotional Stress Zones worksheet** (on the next page) a time when you were in the freeze, fight-or-flight, or safe and secure zone and then describe your BEAT reactions to this situation.

