



Building Inner Readiness: A HeartMath[®] Guide for Staying Cool Under Pressure

For Military Personnel and Veterans

+❤️ HeartMath[®] Institute



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For Military Personnel
and Veterans

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About HeartMath® Institute

HeartMath Institute (HMI) is an innovative nonprofit research and education organization that provides simple, user-friendly mental and emotion self-regulation tools and techniques. People of all ages and cultures can use these simple tools, in-the-moment, to relieve stress, restore personal balance and stability, enhance decision making and strengthen creativity, intuition, and a sense of purpose.

HMI research has provided the foundation for training programs used around the world in many settings including major corporations, government and social-service agencies, all branches of the Armed Forces, schools and universities, hospitals and health-care services.

The tools and technologies developed at HMI offer practical, science-based solutions to many of the stress-related challenges people face today, beginning with restoring balance and maximizing the potential within each of us.

HeartMath Institute's Mission

To co-create a kinder, more compassionate world by conducting interconnectivity research and providing heart-based, science-proven tools for raising humanity's baseline consciousness from separation and discord to compassionate care and cooperation.

Introduction

Stress is part of life, but for service members, veterans, and their families, it can feel constant. The tempo of deployments, long hours, high-pressure situations, reintegration, family responsibilities, health concerns, and the transition back into civilian life can all stack up, leading to feeling on edge, drained, or stretched too thin.

A certain amount of stress that challenges us to learn new things or improve can help us stay sharp and perform under pressure. But when it never lets up, it takes a toll mentally, emotionally, and physically, and it can chip away at your focus, patience, sleep, relationships, and overall well-being.

Imagine being able to maintain your mental clarity and confidence despite the pressures of today's world and not having to wait until you can finally go somewhere to relax, exercise, meditate, or flop on the couch with a drink and watch TV. This guide is designed to help you harness the power of your heart to find and sustain inner balance using simple heart-based techniques you can do in just a few minutes whenever you start to feel overloaded or mind fogged. Why the heart? We'll share more about it shortly.

This guide offers a step-by-step approach to navigating daily challenges with more ease – without letting stress run the show. The HeartMath® approach has been effectively used across all branches of the military, special forces, and by veterans and their families to build resilience in real-world conditions. It's also used by Olympic and professional athletes who want to optimize their physiology so they can be “mission ready” regardless of life's challenges.

The tools in this guide are quick, practical, nervous system regulation techniques and can be used anywhere – during a tough conversation, before making a decision, after a stressful moment, or anytime you feel overloaded. With just a few minutes of practice each day, you can reset your nervous system, calm internal pressure, and shift from feeling reactive to feeling ready and composed.

In practical terms, this means you can:

- Steady your nerves and think more clearly under pressure
- Reduce the wear and tear that constant stress causes on your body
- Feel more emotionally balanced and in control
- Improve your patience and communication with the people around you
- Bounce back faster when something throws you off
- Build long-term resilience that supports your health, performance, and daily life

How to use this guide

The concepts and science introduced help create a framework of understanding. To achieve the benefits of coherence, it's essential to practice the techniques. If it helps at first to practice them with your eyes closed, that's fine. But practice them on the go too, when you are engaging in life. That's when they often matter the most. Just as stress adds up, so does heart coherence – the more you practice, the more you'll start to experience the benefits.

“There is no greater gift that someone can give to a service member or vet than to give them part of their sanity back. If people really want to do something for us, they need to get the word out about HeartMath. It (HeartMath) works. I know what I’m talking about. It’s one of the reasons I am who I am today.”

– Sgt. Michael “Bulldog” Blair, U.S. Marine Corps

Your Personal Energy Reserves

What if you could meet daily stress the way you approach a mission – steady, prepared, and adaptable? What would be different? Let's begin by talking about energy.

Consider for a moment that you have an inner battery. You can't see it, but your body and mind run on real energy that you draw from every day. Sometimes that inner battery is fully charged. Other times it's like running on fumes.

Taking a closer look.

What happens when your battery is low? How do you show up? Many service members and veterans describe feeling irritable, foggy, unmotivated, distracted, pessimistic, quick-tempered, or stuck in a rut. Maybe you recognize some of these in yourself. What else do you notice when your energy is drained?

Now think about times when your battery was fully charged. You might feel motivated, clear-headed, steady, more patient, and able to roll with whatever comes your way. You make better decisions, bounce back faster, and even enjoy what you're doing. What other signs tell you that you are at your best?



Why Energy Matters

That simple comparison – low battery versus full battery – shows just how different we can feel and act based on our internal energy level. It's like being two different people simply because of our energy levels. Energy is a core part of being mission ready, whether you're preparing for duty or navigating everyday life at home.

When our inner battery is depleted, everything gets harder. It's tougher to manage emotions, stay focused, think clearly, make solid decisions, feel confident, be mission ready, and respond in more effective ways. Little things get under our skin more easily. In short, it becomes more difficult to take charge of our reactions and to be the version of ourselves we aim to be – and enjoy daily life more.

On the other hand, when your personal reserves have more energy, you can stay calm under pressure, think clearly, manage your emotions, and avoid getting triggered or overreacting. With more energy in your inner battery, it can be easier to “roll with what comes” and “go with the flow” instead of getting overwhelmed – and you protect your energy reserves rather than draining them further. You also strengthen your ability to be prepared, making the HeartMath tools proactive skills – not just something you call on in emergencies.

The good news: you can learn practical skills that stop unnecessary energy drains and help quickly recharge your inner battery and give you more self-control – anytime, anywhere.

The amount of energy we have directly impacts how we perform and show up in daily life.

Managing Your Energy Reserves

We use energy every day – it's what fuels us. A core principle of lasting resilience is managing that energy. By paying attention to where your energy goes, reducing unnecessary drains, and intentionally recharging, you build your energy reserves and strengthen your resilience and inner readiness over time.

Sleep is one of the most effective ways to replenish your inner battery. But equally important is learning to stay more coherent and self-regulated in the moment. This helps you maintain focus, think clearly, stay emotionally composed, and respond instead of reacting. You'll learn more about coherence shortly.

A different way to look at stress.

Stressors are the things that trigger us: Deployments, family issues, unpaid bills, health challenges like migraines and TBIs, employment and reintegration challenges, and just ordinary traffic jams and to-do lists.

What people typically experience as stress are emotions such as anger, anxiety, worry, impatience, guilt, frustration, and overwhelm. Often, we can't change the situation or other people (stressors), but we can learn how to take charge of our stress reactions.

One reason this is so important is that ongoing frustration, anger, worry, or replaying upsetting events can drain your system FAST, leaving you wiped out. Even less intense emotions – boredom, impatience, sadness, frustration – quietly drain energy over time, often without realizing it.

With regular practice of HeartMath's coherence techniques in this guide, you can build and sustain your energy so you can meet the demands of military life, reintegration, or family responsibilities with greater steadiness and emotional stability. Let's start with the Heart-Focused™ Breathing Technique.

Heart-Focused Breathing™ Technique

Heart-Focused Breathing is a deceptively simple powerhouse tool! It's an effective technique that calms the nervous system and takes the charge out of an emotional reaction, making it a powerful technique for self-regulation. It's also the first step in shifting to a state of focused energy, alertness, and calm – all at the same time. It can help you maintain your composure even in challenging situations, and start the process of shifting into a more coherent state.

Focus your attention in the area of the heart. Imagine your breath is flowing in and out of your heart or chest area, breathing a little slower and deeper than usual. Find an easy rhythm that's comfortable.

Benefits:

- Reduces the intensity of feelings like anger, anxiety, overwhelm, dread, acute pain, etc.
- Calms the nervous system and stress reactions while reducing some of the inner drama and emotional noise in the moment.
- Increases the coherence of the heart's rhythms, which calms the brain and body.

When to use it:

- Any time you feel frustrated, annoyed, worried, anxious, or overwhelmed.
- When you first wake up in the morning.

How will you remember to practice it?

One veteran said his reminder was every time he walked through a doorway – and he walked through a lot of doorways every day! It was just his reminder until it became more automatic to practice it – *eyes open, on the go.*

Tips:

- Focusing on the center of your chest as you breathe slower and deeper is important. Refocusing helps break the cycle of looping thoughts and automatic judgments.
- People often hold their breath when a stressful moment happens. Remember to breathe slower and deeper, which can neutralize the intensity of a stress reaction.
- As simple as it is, it does take practice so that it's effective in highly charged situations.

Try it now for about 5 or 6 breaths. What do you notice?

Heart-Brain Coherence: Your Everyday Readiness Booster

Coherence is a key factor in building inner readiness and performing at your best. Coherence is an optimal state where your body's internal systems are "mission ready" – in sync, efficient, working together, and able to support you under everyday stress and pressure.

The heart and brain are directly connected. This connection is vitally important because the heart actually sends far more information via neural pathways to the brain than the brain sends to the heart and body. The quality of that information has a profound impact on how well the brain operates. That's where coherence comes in.

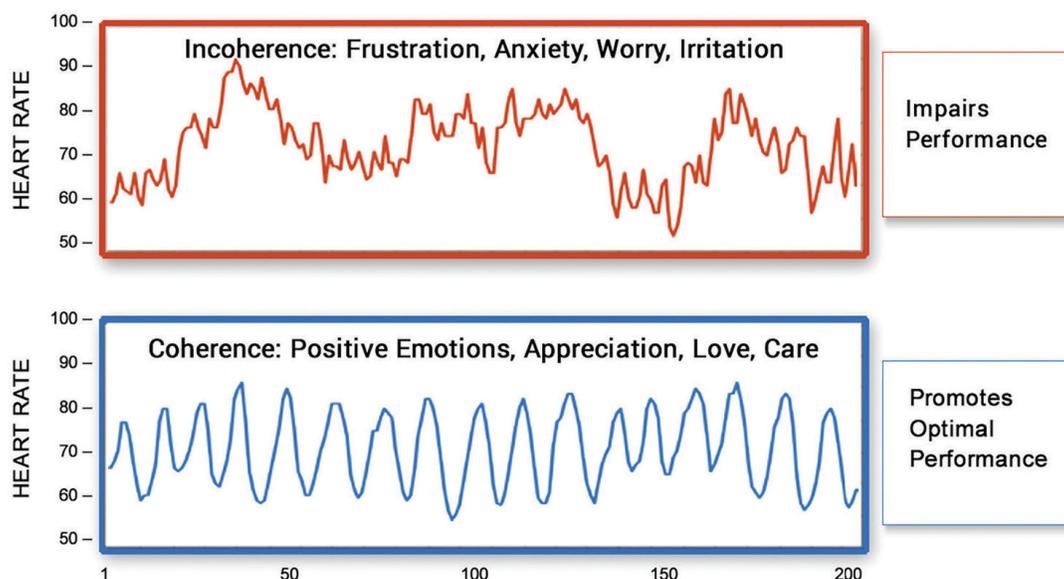
When you're in a coherent state, your mind, heart, and emotions are aligned, and your nervous, hormonal, immune, and other body systems work together more efficiently. You feel calmer and more centered on the inside, yet alert, focused, and ready and able to get the job done.

Coherence isn't a sleepy or disconnected state. It's an optimal state of steady focus – clear thinking, emotional control, and the ability to respond quickly and effectively. This gives you a real performance advantage, especially under pressure.

The more coherence you maintain throughout the day, the more you restore your energy reserves, sharpen mental clarity, stay composed under stress, sleep better, and reduce the overall wear and tear on your body and mind.

Let's take a closer look at what is meant by this optimal state called coherence.

Coherence, Heart Rhythms and Emotions



Heart Rhythms Reflect What is Happening in Your Nervous System

Heart rhythms offer a real-time window into how well regulated your nervous system is. This matters because the autonomic nervous system (ANS) controls more than 90% of the body's automatic functions, influencing nearly every aspect of how we feel and function.

Top graph: During stress, frustration, or pressure, heart rhythms tend to become irregular and chaotic. This incoherent pattern reflects a nervous system that is dysregulated, out of sync, and operating less efficiently. In this incoherent state, clear thinking, regulating emotions, and making good decisions becomes more difficult. We also drain our energy reserves unnecessarily.

Bottom graph: When you experience renewing emotions such as calm, ease, appreciation, or patience, heart rhythms become smoother and more ordered – a coherent state. This indicates that the nervous system is aligned and better regulated and that your body's systems are literally working together more efficiently, supporting optimal performance, clearer thinking, a greater sense of control, and reduced reactivity.

Emotions drive our physiology much more than thoughts do.

A Coherence Practice

Begin by practicing Heart-Focused Breathing – focusing on the heart area and breathing slower and deeper. Then breathe in a renewing feeling or attitude, such as calm, courage, patience, or appreciation. Do this for a minute or two – or longer.

What do you notice? Was it relatively simple or challenging? If you don't feel you shifted into a renewing emotion, practice Heart-Focused Breathing until you start to feel calm. Then breathe in the feeling of calm.

Practice this in moments when you already feel calm to help reinforce that feeling. And also practice this when you're in conversations and situations and out and about in daily life – no matter where you are.

And remember – worthwhile things take practice. Be sure to notice even the slightest changes. Coherence adds up!

Did You Know Heart Rhythms Affect Your Brain?

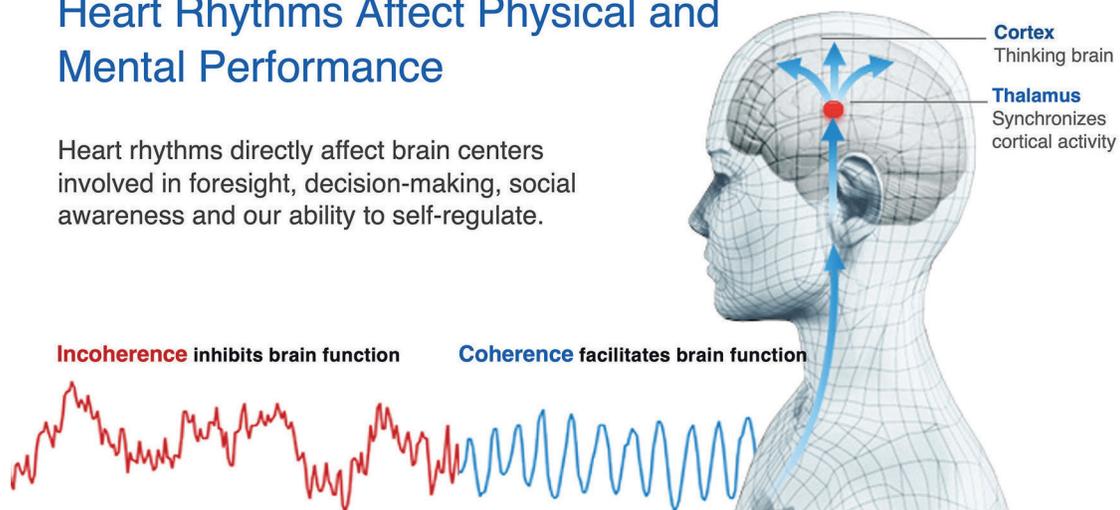
Your heart rhythms directly impact the brain's main relay center – the thalamus – that helps coordinate and synchronize neural activity across the entire brain. This synchronized coordination affects key brain functions, such as decision-making, problem-solving, foresight, emotional regulation, social awareness, coordination, reaction time, and memory.

When heart rhythms become incoherent – as they often do during frustration, anger, anxiety, or overwhelm – the thalamus has a harder time synchronizing brain activity. This leads to cortical inhibition, making it more difficult to think clearly, regulate emotions, or make sound decisions. It's why we sometimes react impulsively and later think, "What was I thinking?"

We literally can't think as clearly! When has that happened to you?

Heart Rhythms Affect Physical and Mental Performance

Heart rhythms directly affect brain centers involved in foresight, decision-making, social awareness and our ability to self-regulate.

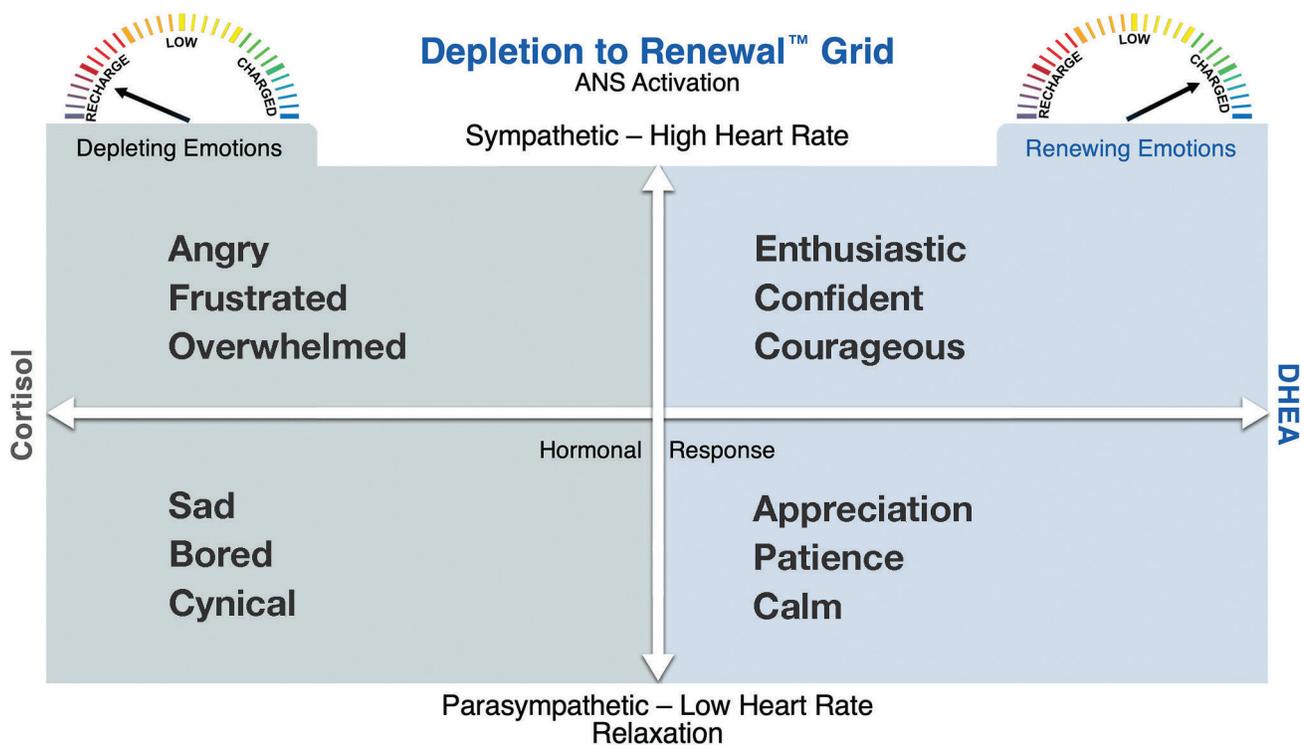


In contrast, coherent heart rhythms support the thalamus in aligning neural activity throughout the entire brain. This creates cortical facilitation, which means we have improved clarity, focus, planning, problem-solving, and reaction times – core elements of being mission ready.

Simply put, when we're more coherent, we think more clearly, make better choices, and perform at a higher level.

The Depletion to Renewal™ Grid

One of people's favorite HeartMath tools is the Depletion to Renewal™ Grid, which shows how the wide range of emotions we experience each day impacts our physiology. Used regularly, it can give you a sense of your emotional landscape and how your body, mind, and performance are being affected by emotions.



Understanding the Grid

The vertical line represents the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which has two main branches. The **sympathetic system** speeds the body up – raising heart rate and preparing you for action – while the **parasympathetic system** slows things down and supports recovery. Because the ANS regulates about 90% of the body's automatic internal functions, it plays a major role in how we feel, function, and perform.

The horizontal line reflects the body's hormonal response to different emotions. Hormones can remain active for hours, which means their effects can linger well beyond the moment. Two key hormones influenced by emotions are **cortisol, the body's primary stress hormone**, and **DHEA, often referred to as the vitality hormone**.

Emotions in the left quadrants are considered depleting. States such as frustration, impatience, or worry tend to increase cortisol, which can impact multiple systems in the body, including metabolism, immune function, and sleep.

Emotions in the right quadrants are renewing and are associated with higher levels of DHEA, supporting resilience, energy, and overall vitality.

The upper quadrants represent higher-intensity emotions, while the lower quadrants reflect lower-intensity or quieter emotional states. Throughout a typical day, we naturally move through many emotional states – something that becomes clear as you begin mapping the different emotions you experience throughout the day on the Grid.

How to Use the Grid

See the examples on the Grid and use the following guidelines as you fill out your own Grid. You can draw the Grid on a piece of paper.

- Upper left quadrant: higher intensity, depleting emotions
- Lower left quadrant: lower intensity, depleting emotions
- Upper right quadrant: higher intensity, renewing emotions
- Lower right quadrant: lower intensity, renewing emotions

Action: As you consider the last few days, write down as many emotions you can recall that you experienced in each of the quadrants.

Where am I on the Grid?

To help become more aware of your emotional landscape, ask yourself:

- In which quadrant do I spend the most time?
- Where would you like to spend more time?

Throughout the day, ask: **Where am I on the Grid right now?**

Some emotions are easy to spot, while others run quietly in the background and often go unnoticed. As you continue using the Grid, patterns begin to emerge – you'll see which emotional states you experience most often.

This awareness offers valuable insight into what's happening in your nervous system and hormonal balance, which affects your energy expenditure, stress levels, ability to think clearly, and how you interact with others.

The goal isn't to avoid difficult emotions – it's learning to self-regulate depleting emotions using the coherence tools in this guide so you can spend more time on the right side of the Grid than the left. Frustration, anger, sadness, and impatience are part of being human. The difference is recognizing that you don't have to stay in an energy-depleting state.

You can shift the quality of what you're feeling – for example, moving from impatience to patience. The coherence practice in this guide can help you make that shift more easily and more often.

Spot Check – A Quick Self-Assessment

Spot Check is a simple practice you can use a few times throughout the day to pause, look inward, get honest about what's really going on in your thoughts, feelings, and attitudes, and see where you are on the Grid.

Then practice Heart-Focused Breathing for a quick reset if you're on the left side of the Grid. This is like taking a step back to see whether your energies or attitudes are helping you or draining your energy. With this clearer, more neutral view, it becomes much easier to shift out of unhelpful reactions.



Many service members and veterans are used to pushing through the day with stress running in the background – frustration, irritation, impatience, or heaviness that never fully goes away. Over time, that steady pressure can cloud your thinking and wear down your resilience. Spot Checking, along with Heart-Focused Breathing breaks that cycle.

By pausing for just a minute or two, you give yourself a chance to reset your internal state

and reduce the build-up of stress that affects clarity, performance, and peace of mind.

You can Spot Check anytime, anywhere – between tasks, before a conversation, when you feel yourself getting irritated, or whenever something starts to throw you off. The biggest challenge is simply remembering to do it, so reminders can help until it becomes a habit.

Every time you Spot Check and practice Heart-Focused Breathing, you're clearing out stress before it accumulates, improving your clarity, steadiness, nervous system and emotional balance. It's one of the most direct forms of self-care you can practice – and one that strengthens your resilience day after day.

Start Your Day with Coherence

A powerful way to start your day is doing the Coherence Practice on page 7 when you first wake up in the morning. Notice what's different when you do.

How Can I Learn to Increase My Coherence?



Why Coherence Matters

HRV heart-rhythm coherence training helps build resilience, reduce stress, and improve overall well-being.

Training coherence is like lifting weights at the gym, which actively strengthens the muscles. Coherence training is a live, interactive training process using an app and sensor that strengthens your capacity to be able to shift into coherence at will. It conditions the nervous system so you can increase your capacity to maintain your cool under pressure. Over time, this translates to a new, more optimal normal for better stress resilience and increased well-being.

What the HeartMath® HRV Coherence Biofeedback Technology Measures

The HRV coherence biofeedback app and sensor offer interactive training. The technology measures your heart rhythms, or heart rate variability (HRV), which refers to the natural speeding up and slowing down of heart rate, which is happening all the time – even if we’re just sitting still. The more coherent the heart rhythm pattern, the more synchronized the body’s systems, which means they are working together more efficiently.

By practicing the Heart-Focused Breathing Technique or Coherence Practice, you’ll actually see your heart rhythms become more coherent – as you see in the graphs on pages 6 and 7. There are many HRV apps only track how much heart rate variability (HRV), rather than the synchronization of the body’s systems. Below are Apps we created to track Coherence.

Coherence technology options include the Inner Balance™ App, HeartMath® App, and the Global Coherence™ App. The Inner Balance™ Coherence Plus sensor works with all the apps.



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Purchase of the Coherence Plus Bluetooth sensor unlocks a lifetime subscription to the HeartMath app. The **free** Global Coherence App allows for both group coherence and personal practice, and you can use your phone’s camera as the HRV sensor.

Benefits of HRV Heart-Rhythm Coherence Training

HeartMath’s training approach is supported by decades of research and over 500 independent studies that show:

- **Physical health** – immune system boost, improved nervous system regulation, lowers blood pressure, strengthens the body’s stress response system,
 - slows the aging of the brain
 - reductions in plasma amyloid beta level – the primary biomarker of cognitive decline and Alzheimer’s

- **Improved emotional balance** – calmer responses, mood stability, reduced stress and anxiety
- **Greater mental clarity** – clearer thinking, wiser decision making, better focus under stress
- **Faster recovery** – quicker stress reset
- **Performance:** increased endurance, faster reaction times, and better coordination

What You Can Expect

Starting with 5 minutes/day can begin to rewire stress habits and build resilience. Measurable improvements can appear in as little as 6 weeks.

- **Short-term (minutes)**
Immediate calming, ability to reset, clarity
- **Medium-term: days–weeks**
Better sleep, faster recovery, improved focus
- **6+ Weeks**
Higher resting HRV, resilience, long-term well-being, improved performance, and physical health markers

Practice Plan Example (starter)

- 5 minutes/day (morning or night) OR 3 × 3–5 min (morning, midday, bedtime)
- Aim: spend ~80% of practice time in the green coherence zone over time.

**We hope the practices in this guide are helpful
in supporting you on your journey.**

Thank you for your service, protection and support.

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