



# Can Positive Thinking Lead to Reduced Stress in Skin Care Clients?



# How to use Insight Cards in your practice

by Howard Murad, MD, FAAD, and Paula Coyne, LVN

NEW RESEARCH SUGGESTS A SIMPLE, noninvasive, and novel intervention—the use of positive Insight Cards—may help reduce stress, which has been linked to myriad health problems and been identified as a risk factor for the development of aging-related diseases, as well as a possible contributor to skin aging and acne.<sup>1</sup> Dermatology patients showed a significant reduction in reported stress levels after using the Insight Cards, suggesting the cards could complement other stress-busting spa services.

We look for ways to meet our patients' needs on multiple levels, including addressing the stress that may underlie their skin conditions. That's why Dr. Howard Murad developed 11 positive Insight Cards based on principles from mindfulness and positive psychology—fields in which stress-reduction techniques have long been popular. On each card is a phrase (or “insight”) intended to facilitate stress reduction, such as “be thrilled with who you are,” and “happiness resides within.” The insights target key areas in the psychology of emotion, including optimism, emotional regulation, gratitude, and more. While the insights relate to specific concepts, they do not offer specific directions, allowing the sentiments to be broadly applicable and relevant to a variety of people and contexts.

## WHY ARE INSIGHT CARDS NEEDED?

The idea behind the cards is that feeling good contributes to positive health outcomes. While many psychological models focus on pathology rather than positivity, research has demonstrated the benefit of fostering the positive,<sup>2</sup> suggesting a need for balanced and holistic models of care that address the body and mind, the good and the bad. Also, the relationship between stress reduction and positive health outcomes doesn't flow only one way. In the case of acne, for example, while stress may worsen breakouts,<sup>3</sup> the

experience of having acne may also cause stress.<sup>4</sup> Thus, reducing stress could interrupt this self-perpetuating cycle.


Accessible stress-reduction techniques are needed not only to address episodic, acute stress but also to ameliorate the chronic stress that is virtually unavoidable as a result of living in today's world. Life in modern society includes overexposure to technology at the expense of in-person relationships; 24-hour connectivity, blurring the boundaries between work and personal life; on-demand delivery of goods and services, which severs neighborhood and community relationships and contributes to long sedentary hours in front of screens; the pace of technological change, which contributes to professional, economic, and social insecurity, as one can never stop “keeping up” with the rest; environmental contaminants that expose humans to chemicals the body didn't evolve to handle, as well as to noise, crowding, and various new sources of radiation; changes to diet, which has become heavily reliant on processed commodities like corn, wheat, sugar, and soy; and changes to urban development and transportation patterns, which result in less physical activity and more hours spent sitting—whether passively or in anger and frustration.

## HOW INSIGHT CARDS WORK

The cumulative load of such day-to-day stressors is called Cultural Stress. As its name implies, Cultural Stress is embedded in society and, thus, impossible to avoid. When we noticed the Insight Cards appeared to have a positive effect on dermatology patients and on patients with diabetes, we became interested in expanding the cards' use to a nonclinical setting: If the cards help manage Cultural Stress, they ought to be applicable in numerous contexts.

The effects of Cultural Stress may be particularly evident to personal service





Research has demonstrated the benefit of fostering the positive, suggesting a need for balanced and holistic models of care.

industry practitioners, whose work requires close attention to their clients' psychological and physiological states. Jacqueline Davis, owner of Perfect Balance Day Spa in Lodi, California, and a longtime colleague of mine, sees her clients' stress levels reflected in their breathing, their skin, their muscle tension, and their demeanor. Davis shares our vision of providing multilayered care

and was eager to participate when we invited her to investigate the effects of Insight Cards on her clients' stress levels. The cards had already shown promise for reducing subjective and physiological measures of stress in a study conducted at the Murad Research Center in 2018. In that study, volunteers who self-identified as experiencing Cultural Stress were

instructed to focus on the insights at least twice a day for four weeks, incorporate the cards into their daily routine (for example, by posting them in a prominent place), and keep a journal about their experience. At the beginning and end of the study, researchers collected measurements of perceived stress and physiological stress. Perceived stress was measured using a questionnaire that asked participants to rate how often in the last month they felt overloaded with stress, and physiological effects of stress were assessed using measures of intracellular water, heart rate, and blood pressure.

After four weeks of using the Insight Cards, participants' subjective ratings of stress were significantly lower than they had been at baseline.<sup>5</sup> Although intracellular water and blood pressure were not measured at the end of the study, the significant reduction in perceived stress and self-reported feelings of greater ease suggested the Insight Cards have utility for stress reduction. More research was needed, and Davis's spa, with its



“Be imperfect, live longer.”

—Howard Murad, MD



Interested in using Insight Cards with your clients? You can access them for free at <https://bit.ly/3UpVVEE> or scan the code above.

focus on treating the whole person, was an intuitive context for the investigation.

Davis began asking her clients if they would like to try an additional way of managing stress, free of charge—and most of those asked said yes. In all, 97 spa clients were given the Insight Cards and instructed to reflect on the insights twice daily for the duration of the study. Perceived stress was measured via questionnaire at the beginning and end of the study, and, as before, participants' self-reported stress scores were significantly lower at the end of the study than they were at baseline, with the majority of participants (97 percent) showing a decrease in stress from the beginning to the end of the study.<sup>6</sup>

#### LOOKING FORWARD

Although the present research is limited in scope and methodology, and more investigation is needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn, these studies provide preliminary evidence that following a positive psychology protocol involving the use of positive Insight Cards may help reduce stress, which has been associated with skin concerns.<sup>7</sup> For estheticians, massage therapists, and others seeking to provide holistic care, positive Insight Cards could be a worthy addition to their tool kit.

Like Davis, estheticians and spa owners might ask clients if they'd like to try the Insight Cards as a way of managing stress between appointments. You might also try printing and posting the cards in waiting areas and treatment rooms or sharing them periodically on social media. At the very least, you might try incorporating Insight Cards as part of your self-care practice for managing Cultural Stress.

After the Insight Cards study, Perfect Balance Day Spa introduced a wellness membership program that encourages clients to manage stress by coming in

monthly for services. Davis says she came up with her own positive insight as well: “Live a life less perfect . . . more balanced.”<sup>8</sup>

#### Notes

1. D. S. Goldstein and B. McEwen, “Allostasis, Homeostats, and the Nature of Stress,” *International Journal on the Biology of Stress* 5, no. 1 (2002): 55–8, <https://doi.org/10.1080/102538902900012345>; N. C. Glassen et al., “Life Stress, Glucocorticoid Signaling, and the Aging Epigenome: Implications for Aging-Related Diseases,” *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews* 74, Part B (March 2017): 356–65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2016.06.003>; C. M. Lee, R. E. B. Watson, and C. E. Kleyn, “The Impact of Perceived Stress on Skin Ageing,” *Journal of the European Academy of Dermatology & Venereology* 34, no. 1 (January 2020): 54–8, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jdv.15865>; S. Bondade, A. Hothota, and V. Basavaraju, “Stressful Life Events and Psychiatric Comorbidity in Acne—A Case Control Study,” *Asia-Pacific Psychiatry* 11, no. 1 (March 2019): e12340, <https://doi.org/10.1111/appy.12340>.
2. M. E. P. Seligman and M. Csikszentmihalyi, “Positive Psychology: An Introduction,” *Flow and the Foundations of Positive Psychology* (January 2014): 279–98, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8\\_18](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-9088-8_18).
3. Bondade, Hothota, and Basavaraju, “Stressful Life Events and Psychiatric Comorbidity in Acne—A Case Control Study.”
4. V. Niemeier, J. Kupfer, and U. Gieler, “Acne Vulgaris—Psychosomatic Aspects,” *Journal of the German Society of Dermatology* 4, no. 12 (November 2006): <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1610-0387.2006.06110.x>.
5. H. Murad and T. Giesbrecht, “Effectiveness of Positive Insights for Emotional Wellbeing and Stress Reduction: A Four-Week Intervention in Participants Experiencing Cultural Stress,” 2018, [www.drhowardmurad.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Effectiveness-of-positive-insights-for-emotional-wellbeing-and-stress-reduction-Dr-Howard-Murad.pdf](http://www.drhowardmurad.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Effectiveness-of-positive-insights-for-emotional-wellbeing-and-stress-reduction-Dr-Howard-Murad.pdf).
6. Murad and Giesbrecht, “Effectiveness of Positive Insights for Emotional Wellbeing and Stress Reduction: A Four-Week Intervention in Participants Experiencing Cultural Stress.”
7. Lee, Watson, and Kleyn, “The Impact of Perceived Stress on Skin Ageing;” S. Bondade, A. Hothota, and V. Basavaraju, “Stressful Life Events and Psychiatric Comorbidity in Acne—A Case Control Study.”