



A Better Answer to Chronic Stress

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If an epidemic is defined as a disease that affects whole populations without having a medical cure, then the epidemic of modern life is *stress*.

Stress itself is not a disease, but it instead leads to a breakdown in the body's internal balance, or homeostasis, and from that point onward, if the stress isn't relieved, damage occurs from within. Ironically, most modern people in a developed country do not experience acute stress, the kind that triggers a full-blown fight-or-flight response. There is no battlefield, civil war, rampant violent crime, or struggle over food and water to contend with.

The Three Stages of Stress Damage

Our epidemic is silent and hidden, in the form of low-level chronic stress. The natural purpose of the body's stress response is to trigger heightened alertness and energy for a short period, a matter of minutes or at most an hour, when fighting or fleeing is a matter of survival. When stress becomes chronic, a "normal" way of life that people believe they have adapted to, stress hormones become a drip-drip in the background of the physiology, and over time, three stages of damage begin to appear:

1. Psychological and neural damage

This begins with minor things like feeling mentally tired and under pressure from deadlines at work. When people say they are stressed out, they generally mean that they've run out of energy, which can mask mental states like being depressed, anxious, or even panicky.

2. Behavioral damage

Negative changes in behavior are likely to manifest in two major areas: work and relationships. Stressful jobs can make you respond with all kinds of behaviors, from office gossip to going out for a drink after work. As stress mounts, the drinking can get heavier, the need for distraction more severe. Inevitably, you may take your feelings home after work, where friction easily follows.

3. Physical damage

When the body can't completely adapt to stress, bad effects follow without being predictable. Most people will suffer from physical fatigue. Stomachaches, bad digestion, and headaches are likely—so is reduced immune response, leading to more colds and worsened allergies. After that, the problems will tend to be associated with inflammation, whose effects can travel anywhere. One person may experience skin eruptions, another irritable bowel syndrome, yet another a heart attack or stroke. By this stage, the damage caused by stress has led to serious system breakdown.

In our book *The Healing Self*, we go into great detail about how to personalize your own stress-reduction program. But for everyone, there needs to be conscious coping mechanisms in the face of everyday stress. Let's say you're at the airport and find out that your flight has been canceled.

The airline won't bring another airplane into service but tells you that you must wait five hours until a flight arrives that can accommodate you. With no alternative except to comply with the airline's mistreatment,

passengers look passive as they sit and wait, but on the inside many people will react (perhaps you) with the following self-defeating responses:

- *Worry is self-induced anxiety.* It solves nothing and blocks the possibility of dealing with things more positively.
- *Complaining increases tension and anger.* As a display of hostility, it encourages other people to act hostile in return.
- *Pessimism induces the illusion that a situation is hopeless* and fosters the belief that expecting a bad outcome is always realistic, when in fact it isn't.

If you see yourself in any of these behaviors and attitudes, you are fooling yourself into believing that you are adapting to stress. As your body experiences it, however, you have become the stressor yourself. That's because an external event (canceled flight) must go through an internal interpretation before it triggers the stress response.

Unlike a crisis like losing your job, a flight delay belongs in the category of everyday chronic stresses, which means that you have a choice to respond. Worry, complaining, and pessimism are unconscious responses. People who are stuck in them have become the victims of old reactions that became glued in place because the person didn't reevaluate them.

Some people handle a canceled flight better than others. Just as we gave you the "baby solution" for acute stress, here's the "airport solution" for low-level everyday stress.

The "Airport Solution" to Chronic Stress

- *Detach yourself from the stressor.* At the airport, you can do this by reading a book or finding a place to be alone.
- *Become centered.* At the airport, you can do this by shutting your eyes to meditate.
- *Remain active.* At the airport, this means walking around instead of slumping in a chair and waiting.
- *Seek positive outlets.* At the airport, this might mean shopping, getting a chair massage, or going to a restaurant.
- *Rely on emotional support.* At the airport, the usual way to do this is by calling a friend or family member on the phone. (A short call announcing that you'll be late won't give you emotional support. The key is a conversation with someone meaningful in your life that lasts at least half an hour.)
- *Escape if you must.* At the airport, if the airline's behavior gets too outrageous, it saves your psychology to reschedule and go home. (Of course, this not always practical or affordable.)

All of these things are positive adaptations, as opposed to the negativity of worry, complaining, and pessimism. They bring awareness into a situation where falling back on passive acceptance isn't the right answer. Beneath the attitude of "I have to put up with it" lies stress.

In most everyday situations, you have the option of turning the situation around by interpreting it not as bad luck but as a non-stress, to which you respond by doing things you actually want to do, like meditating, connecting with a friend, or shopping. When you become adept at this turnaround, chronic stress is nipped in the bud. You cut short a process that otherwise would have harmed your body and mind.

About the Authors

Deepak Chopra, M.D., F.A.C.P., is the co-founder of the Chopra Center for Wellbeing, the founder of the Chopra Foundation, and a world-renowned pioneer in integrative medicine and personal transformation. He is board certified in internal medicine, endocrinology, and metabolism. He is a Fellow of the American College of Physicians, a member of the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, and a clinical professor in the Family Medicine and Public Health Department at the University of California, San Diego. He is the author of more than 85 books translated into over 43 languages, including numerous *New York Times* bestsellers.

Rudolph Tanzi, Ph.D., is a professor of neurology at Harvard University Medical School, Director of the Genetics and Aging Unit at Massachusetts General Hospital, and author of *Decoding Darkness: The Search for the Genetic Causes of Alzheimer's Disease*. He also serves as the head of the Alzheimer's Genome Project. Dr. Tanzi has been investigating the molecular and genetic basis of neurological disease since 1980, and during the past several decades he has collaborated on many studies identifying other disease genes, including those that contribute to amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and autism.

Deepak Chopra and Rudolph Tanzi are the co-authors of three books: *Super Brain: Unleashing the Explosive Power of Your Mind to Maximize Health, Happiness, and Spiritual Well-Being*; *Super Genes: Unlock the Astonishing Power of Your DNA for Optimum Health and Well-Being*; and *The Healing Self: A Revolutionary New Plan to Supercharge Your Immunity and Stay Well for Life*.