

## **Chronic Stress Syndrome**

Some of you may know of Hans Selye, and his model of stress, from Psychology 101. In 1936, Selye identified three universal stages of coping with stress.

First, we have Alarm: the body prepares for fight or flight, and energy is taken away from digestion, immune response, and any other functions secondary to immediate survival.

Second, we have Resistance: if the stress continues, we can't stay in the Alarm state, so we try to adapt, but we are actually beginning to break down as our body continues to cope with high levels of stress.

Lastly we have Exhaustion, when the system begins to give out.

Selye defined stress broadly, as "the response of the body to any demand", either positive or negative, including illness and disease, long-term physical deprivation, as well as other psychological and emotional factors. In fact, your body can not distinguish between different forms of stress; it responds the same no matter what the stimulus. Selye recognized that stress can lead to infection, illness, disease, and death. For decades, Selye's model was the universal explanation for how we react and adapt to stress, or fail to.

The physical picture Selye described is characterized by overproduction of cortisol. Cortisol is a hormone made by the adrenal glands. It is good in short bursts, but chronic over-secretion leads to a structural and functional breakdown of the body. (Many of you will also recognize

it as a hormone that tells our body to store fat.) When stress continues long-term, our physiology starts to change as if a high cortisol state were normal, when in fact it is destructive. So therapeutically, approaches to chronic stress have focused on lowering cortisol, and diminishing its deleterious effects.

But a strange phenomenon is occurring among us baby. More and more of us do not fit this traditional biological stress profile. Rather, we are physiologically more akin – almost unbelievably - to concentration camp survivors. We mimic the profiles of those who undergo long-term, chronic, almost unimaginably severe stress. How can this be?

Symptoms of high cortisol include depression, ability to fall asleep but inability to sleep through the night, high insulin resistance, and cravings. Chronic high cortisol also makes us susceptible to multiple allergies. But when stress persists and the adrenal glands give out, there is compensation by the sympathetic nervous system, which produces catecholamines. The primary catecholamines are norepinephrine, epinephrine and dopamine. What we have now is more people presenting with anxiety, rather than depression; who have low energy in the morning, but are wide awake at night; who experience periodic palpitations and rapid heart beat; who feel easily out of sorts when stressed - all the symptoms of low cortisol with high catecholamines. This is similar to the profile of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

For cortisol-dominant stress, we can support the healing of the adrenals and use herbal adaptogens which do not mechanically force

cortisol up or down but allow it to normalize by working on receptor sites. There are some excellent supplements available that do this very well. For more anxiety-based stress, we want to still use nutritional support to heal and calm, but also work on reducing reactivity. Nutrients such as Phosphatidyl Serine, Taurine, and Theanine can be very helpful in doing just that.

Of course, along with supplements, we need to look at our lifestyles, our priorities, our choices, our values. Why are we the first generation to live with this kind of ongoing stress? And how much of it is of our own choosing?

Although it is wonderful to be able to address these issues significantly on the physical level, the most fundamental level is elsewhere. We can make changes that reduce the stress in our lives. True, there are many things we can't control, but so many that we can, too. Simply take a few moments periodically throughout the day to stop, breathe, and center yourself. Say a prayer or meditate, call a loved one, look out and take in a lovely view, but give yourself permission to stop, even if it's just for a moment. Get enough rest and sleep, which allows your stress hormones to drop. Reduce your toxic load, whether from alcohol, tobacco, sugar, food sensitivities or even people who are not good for you. Have fun. You'd be amazed at the positive physical effects of pleasure, laughter, closeness and affection. Let it go: holding on to past anger and resentment will keep you going, but over time it is poisonous fuel. Nurture yourself: make a commitment to do something positive for yourself today: take a walk, eat a healthy meal, get to bed earlier. It doesn't have to be big to make a difference.

*NOTE: Children can also exhibit compensatory sympathetic dominance with high catecholamines, and children with ADD/ADHD, Oppositional Defiance, autistic spectrum issues, and behavior issues often do. In other words, they have bad stress physiology that became chronic. Supporting them with Phosphatidyl Serine and other supplements that have an inhibitory effect on nerve transmitters has proven very helpful in many cases, and may reduce their reactivity to stressful occurrences in their lives*

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