

Emergency Stress Reduction Journaling

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"If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself, but to your estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment."

Marcus Aurelius Antoninus (121 AD - 180 AD)

What Causes Stress?

We experience stress primarily through the activation of our fight or flight response. Our fight or flight response is an ***automatic, unconscious and predictable*** bodily response designed to protect us from the proverbial saber tooth tigers that once lurked in the woods and fields around us. Once activated, our fight or flight response triggers powerful nerve impulses and chemical messengers, which pump adrenaline, noradrenaline, cortisol and other stress hormones into our body. Our respiratory rate increases. Our muscles swell with blood and carbohydrate fuel for immediate energy. Blood is shunted away from our digestive tracts and into our limbs for power. Our pupils dilate. Our awareness intensifies. Our sight sharpens. Our impulses quicken. Our perception of pain diminishes. We become ready for the enemy, physically and psychologically. We scan and search our environment "looking for the enemy." We are prepared for flight. We are

prepared to fight. You get the picture. The fight or flight response is hard wired into our brains and represents a genetic wisdom designed to secure our future.

The fight or flight response is designed so that whenever something in our external environment poses a threat to our physical survival, we are ready for action. In order to truly protect us more efficiently, this early warning system is also designed so that ***the mere perception*** of physical threat or harm activates our bodies and prepares our minds for fight or flight. This understanding gives us ***two powerful tools for stress reduction***. They are:

1) Changing our EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT (our "reality").

This includes any action we take that helps to make the environment we live in more safe. This includes creating many types of safe external environments. ***Physical safety*** means getting out of toxic,

noisy or hostile environments. **Emotional safety** means surrounding ourselves with friends and people who genuinely care for us, learning better communication skills, time management skills, getting out of toxic jobs and toxic relationships. **Spiritual safety** means creating a life surrounded with a sense of purpose, a relationship with a higher power and a resolve to release deeply held feelings of shame, worthlessness and excessive guilt.

2) **Changing our PERCEPTIONS of reality:**

This includes any technique whereby we seek to change our mental perspectives, our attitudes, our beliefs and our emotional reactions to the events that happen to us. Many of these techniques are discussed in other Special Reports as well as *The Handbook of Journaling* and include cognitive restructuring, voice dialogue therapy, inner child work, learning NOT to take things personally, affirmations, self-parenting, etc. Changing our perceptions of reality is best illustrated by the proverbial saying, “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade.” So without actually changing our reality, we have **altered our perception**, now viewing the difficulties of life as events that make us stronger and more loving. In the Buddhist tradition, this is referred to as developing a “supple mind.”

Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better.

King Whitney Jr.

The Stress Hardy Personality

The ability to change our perceptions includes the ability to change our attitudes and develop healthy, life-enhancing stress-reducing attitudes. Researcher Suzanne Kobasa studied 161 business executives under large amounts of stress. She found that those who stayed healthy judged their stresses differently than those who became ill. The healthy individuals had a capacity for what she called “optimistic cognitive appraisal.” This capacity has come to be known as the **STRESS HARDY PERSONALITY** and is characterized by 3 C’s. They are:

1) **COMMITMENT:** Those executives who stayed well were committed to work and committed to family, but predominately they were committed to their own values, sense of purpose and inner life.

2) **CONTROL**: Healthy executives always displayed an attitude of control in their lives, so that even if they could not control the external events in their lives they were able to control their reactions to them and beliefs about them. And finally,

3) **CHALLENGE**: The healthy executives were able to view life's difficulties and setbacks as a challenge, an opportunity for growth rather than something catastrophic.

"The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929 - 1968),

Journaling Technique #1:

In order to begin the process of developing a stress hardy personality, take out a piece of paper and write down some difficulty or stressful situation you are encountering. Then write your way to a stress hardy personality by asking yourself these questions and writing down your answers.

1) **Questions to strengthen your sense of commitment**: What am I most committed to in this situation? What do I most value personally and professionally? What can I do to strengthen my

commitment to these values that I hold? What values do I hold most dear in this situation?

2) **Questions to strengthen your sense of control**: What can I control in this situation? What external factors can I truly change? What external factors do I have no control over? Even if I can't change some external factors, what attitudes and beliefs can I change about the situation? How can I respond instead of react to the situation? What possible responses can I make that are good for me and my inner peace, even if they are not going to solve the problem at hand?

3) **Questions to strengthen your sense of challenge**: How can I use this situation to grow? What is it about this situation that can strengthen me and help me to grow even more capable, more loving and internally stronger than I was before? How can I turn this setback into a positive step forward? How can I turn this breakdown into a breakthrough? What attitudes must I adjust to be able to utilize this situation to change for the better? What can I learn from this situation? (Greater patience? Greater equanimity? Serenity? Letting go? Fighting harder?)

By diligently answering these questions in your journal, you can begin writing your way to a stress hardy personality, one that will help you achieve

greatness on the outside as well as on the inside.

Now, let's learn about another common condition that depletes our ability to fight stress in our lives.

Another well-known researcher in healthy attitudes is Martin Seligman Ph.D., psychologist and author of Learned Optimism. Dr. Seligman studied a condition called “learned helplessness.” Dr. Seligman’s initial observations were fascinating. He found that when dogs were given unavoidable, inescapable shocks, they seemed to give up. ***then, when they were given a chance to escape*** the shocks by jumping over a low barrier, ***they acted helpless and continued to accept the shocks***. It was as if the dogs actually ***learned to be helpless***. IF the animals had the chance to escape from the start, they ***did not learn to give up. they did not become helpless***. They had the perception of control. They figured out that when given a shock they could find a way out.

Using his observations on learned helplessness, Dr. Seligman created a scale to measure this characteristic in humans. He then devised an experiment where he rated 172 undergrads for learned helplessness. Then he accurately predicted which students would be sick the most. In another study of 13 patients with

malignant melanoma, he showed that the absence of learned helplessness was a better predictor of survival than even the level of an immune predictor called Natural Killer Cell Activity (NKCA).

So, we must guard against learned helplessness and find ways to release ourselves from the ***unavoidable shocks of life***. To become helpless is a learned phenomenon. Anything that is learned can be **un-**learned. We can learn how to overcome our learned helplessness by taking steps to reduce our stress, take control of our environment and develop positive optimistic attitudes in life.

"Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents, which in prosperous circumstances would have lain dormant."

Horace (65 BC - 8 BC)

The best way to overcome learned helplessness is through cognitive therapy described in more detail in the special report ***Cognitive Therapy (Reframing) Journaling***. Our ability to overcome learned helplessness does not rely on simple positive thinking. It relies more upon our ability to change the negative thinking and pessimistic beliefs we carry about ourselves when “bad” things happen to us. What Seligman found is that there are three conditions that characterize learned helplessness, called ***the 3 P's***:

1) We tend to take things **personally** and blame ourselves when bad things happen to us.

2) We tend to think that because one bad thing happened in one area of our life, that this negativity will become **pervasive** and affect all areas of our life.

3) That this one bad thing that happened to us means that we are forever flawed in this area, and doomed to **permanent** failure.

The way that we change our negative thinking to positive thinking is through the ABCDE method. First, when **adversity** hits us, we examine the **beliefs** we hold about that adversity. Then we look at the **consequences** of those **beliefs**. When we see the negative consequences of pessimistic and helpless beliefs, we **dispute** them by rationally attacking the negative beliefs we hold. (We do this by challenging the three P's: i.e. we learn *not to take things so personally* and attempt to find other explanations for the bad things that happen. We see the limited nature of the adversity and *realize that it is not pervasive*, but applies only to one small area of our lives. Lastly we attack the negative assumption that the problem is permanent by *allowing ourselves to see the temporary nature of the adversity*.) Finally when we overcome our learned helplessness by disputing the pessimistic and negative thinking, we allow ourselves

to feel **energized** by the new positive beliefs, i.e. we celebrate every small accomplishment that moves us closer to peace and happiness.

Here's an example of the whole process. Johnny loses it at work and yells at one of his customers in public. Johnny has been a good worker in the past and always done well, but when this happens he goes into panic and is sure he will lose his job. He apologizes to the customer and they reach a new understanding, but nevertheless, Johnny cannot let go of his anxiety about the situation. It continues to haunt him and deplete his energy and self-esteem. By writing out the ABCDE's of the situation, Johnny can better address his learned helplessness and pessimism.

ADVERSITY: *"I really lost it at work by yelling at a customer."*

BELIEFS: *"I am out of my mind." "I don't know how to get along with people." "I must be going crazy."*

CONSEQUENCES (of his negative beliefs) *"I'll never be able to hold a job. I'm a loser." "I'm going to lose this job and I cannot afford to be without work right now."*

DISPUTE: *"I only lost it this one time. It's never happened before. I didn't sleep well last night and this was a really difficult customer. I can learn more about dealing with difficult customers so this doesn't happen*

again. I am generally a respectful and 'in-control' person."

ENERGIZE: *"Hey, I really do feel better now. I can see my irrationally negative beliefs about the situation and feel like I've taken some positive steps to stop taking the problem so personally. I can now see that it is a temporary setback, not a permanent one and that makes me feel more hopeful inside. I also now realize that this incident has not really happened before, is not pervasive and seems to be applicable only to this one situation."*

Whenever you are facing a difficult situation where you are beating yourself up for something and starting to feel down, take out a sheet of paper and write down the ABCDE's of learned optimism. Through regular practice and diligent effort, you can retrain yourself to move from negativity and pessimism to positivity and healthy optimism. You will be happier, healthier and more successful for it. Helplessness virtually never leads to success, unless it is the first step in your admitting your powerlessness over a certain situation that has had the best of you, and seeking help in overcoming it.

"He that can heroically endure adversity will bear prosperity with equal greatest of the soul; for the mind that cannot be dejected by the former is not likely to be transported

without the latter."

Henry Fielding (1707 - 1754)

What are the saber-tooth tigers of today?

The saber tooth tigers of today exist in abundance, but are no longer a threat to **our physical survival**. Today's saber tooth tigers consist of rush hour traffic, missing a deadline, bouncing a check, having an argument with our boss or spouse, etc., etc., etc. On a daily basis our fight or flight response is activated, pouring toxic stress hormones into our bodies for events which pose no real threat to our physical survival.

Whether we choose to fight or choose to flee, the fight or flight response is designed to move us into intense physical activity. The extreme muscular activity brought on by fighting or fleeing effectively metabolizes and "burns off" the surging stress hormones. This vigorous physical activity restores balance and calm to our physiology and our emotions by bringing our fight or flight response to its natural conclusion: intense physical/muscular activity.

Has the fight or flight response become counterproductive?

In most cases today, once our fight or flight response is activated, we cannot flee. We cannot fight. We cannot physically run from our perceived threats. When we are faced with modern day, saber tooth tigers, we have to sit in our office and “control ourselves.” We have to sit in traffic and “deal with it.” We have to wait until the bank opens to “handle” the bounced check. In short, many of the major stresses today trigger the full activation of our fight or flight response, causing us to become aggressive, hypervigilant and over-reactive. This aggressiveness, over-reactivity and hypervigilance causes us to act or respond in ways that are actually ***counter-productive*** to our survival. Consider road rage in Los Angeles.

It is counterproductive to punch out the boss (the fight response) when s/he activates our fight or flight response. (Even though it might bring temporary relief to our tension!) It is counterproductive to run away from the boss (the flight response) when s/he activates our fight or flight response. This all leads to a difficult situation in which our automatic, predictable and unconscious fight or flight response leads us to behaviors which can actually be self-

defeating and work against our emotional, psychological and spiritual survival.

When you encounter difficulties and contradictions, do not try to break them, but bend them with gentleness and time.

[Saint Francis de Sales](#)

Is there a cumulative danger from over-activation of our fight or flight response?

Yes. The evidence is overwhelming that there is a cumulative buildup of stress hormones, which over time, if not properly metabolized, can lead to disorders of our autonomic nervous system (such as headache, irritable bowel syndrome, high blood pressure and the like) and to disorders of our hormonal and immune system (such as allergy, susceptibility to infection, chronic fatigue, depression and autoimmune diseases like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, allergy and the like.)

To protect ourselves today, we must consciously pay attention to the signals of fight or flight.

In today’s world, most of our survival threats are related to our emotional, psychological or spiritual survival and NOT to our physical survival. The fight or flight response is beautifully geared

towards physical survival. At those times when our actual physical survival is threatened, there is no greater response to have on our side. The surge of adrenaline is the force responsible for mothers lifting cars off their trapped children, for firemen heroically running into blazing houses to save endangered victims. The surge of adrenaline imbues us with heroism and courage at times when we are called upon to protect and defend the lives and values we cherish.

When we are *not* in physical danger, the fight or flight response has less immediate value and as we have already seen, may be counterproductive. To protect ourselves in a world of psychological danger rather than physical

danger, we must *consciously pay attention* to the unique signals that we are IN fight or flight. For some of us these may be experienced as *physical symptoms* such as tension in our muscles, headache, stomach upset, racing heart beat, deep sighing, shallow breathing, etc. For others, being IN fight or flight may be experienced as *emotional or psychological symptoms* such as anxiety, poor concentration, depression, hopelessness, frustration, anger, sadness or fear.

The chart below outlines the detrimental effects of overactivation of the flight-or flight response from both acute stress and chronic nagging stress.

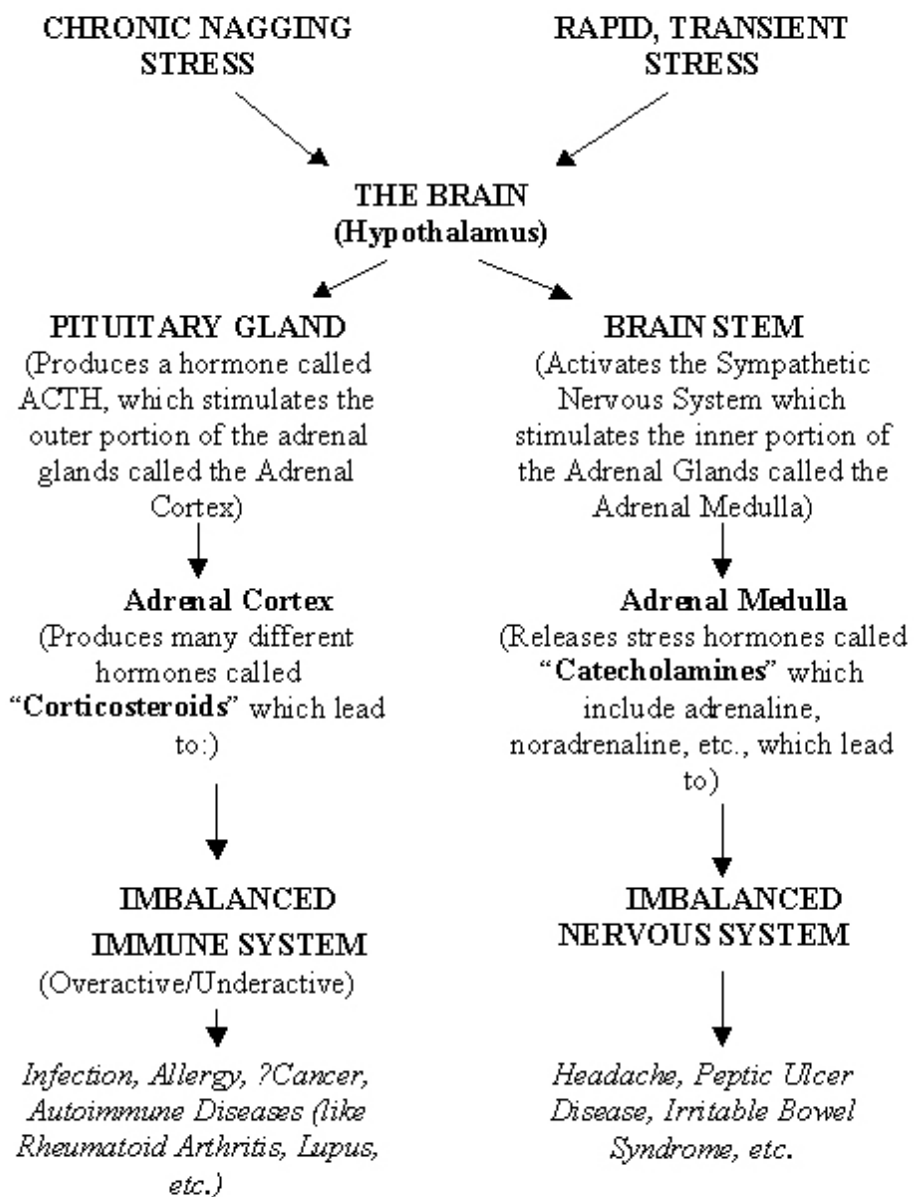


Figure 1: The cumulative effects of stress on the body

How do I recognize when I'm stressed?

Excess stress does not always show up as the “feeling” of being stressed. Many stresses go directly into our physical body and may only be recognized by the physical symptoms we manifest. Two excellent examples of stress-induced conditions are “eye twitching” and “teeth-grinding.” Conversely, we may “feel” lots of emotional stress in our emotional body and have very few physical symptoms or signs in our body.

By recognizing when our systems are IN fight or flight (i.e. “overheating”) we can begin to take steps to handle the stress overload. There are benefits to the fight or flight response even when the threat is only psychological rather than physical. For example, in times of emotional threat, the fight or flight response can sharpen our mental acuity and awareness, thereby helping us to deal with issues and take action. But it can also make us ***hypervigilant and over-reactive at times when a state of calm awareness is more productive.*** So by learning to recognize the signals of fight or flight activation and consciously pay attention, we can keep from going into excessive reactions to events and fears that are not life threatening. In so doing, we can play ***“emotional judo”*** with our fight or flight response and “use its energy” to help us rather than harm us. We can learn to

borrow the beneficial effects (heightened awareness, mental acuity and the ability to tolerate excess pain) in order to change our emotional environment and deal productively with our fears, thoughts and potential dangers.

Don't forget to journal your stress away.

You learned two very powerful journaling techniques in this report: Stress Hardy Personality Journaling and the ABCDE Method for Overcoming Learned Helplessness. Whenever you feel overstressed, take out a piece of paper and try one—or both—of these methods to help you calm down your overactive hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, i.e. your flight or flight response. Not only will you learn how to become a stronger person, more capable of handling life's certain slings and arrows, but you will also cool down your physiology and improve your physical health. Wishing you all the very best in becoming an optimistic and stress hardy personality.

"The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; it is dearness only that gives everything its value. I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death."

Thomas Paine (1737-1809)
