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Stress, Fatigue, Anxiety.... Do these sound familiar?



As we reach an end of the year, there is one theme that seems to be recurring with every patient I see.... Stress, fatigue, anxiety, lethargy, low mood.

We are all over worked and burn out.

'Stress' is a word that we hear used often. We have all felt what it is like to have a 'stressful' day or week (*or year!*).

However the correct meaning of stress does not just refer to how we feel emotionally. It refers to a process of changes that occur in our body when our body is put under intense pressure or workload. To understand stress, we need to understand about the fight or flight response. This is our body's primitive and innate response that enables us to 'fight' or 'flee' from perceived attack in order to ensure our survival. It gives us the physical capabilities to literally run or fight for our lives.

The response is hardwired into our brains and can be difficult for many to control. For example, imagine you are walking down the street and come face to face with a big, black dog growling at you. You are going to want to get out of there as quickly as possible and this is where the stress response kicks in.

Every day is a series of stressful events. We lose our keys, argue with the kids, rush to get to work on time, feel the pressure of trying to get through hundreds of emails in a day or hand a report in on time, then rush back out the door again only to get stuck in rush hour traffic. All these small events initiate the same 'fight or flight' response within our bodies.

Changes that occur in the body with anxiety and stress

- The 'fight or flight' response is initiated when your brain senses danger - or our 20th century 'dangers' such as getting lost, rushing around, losing things, fear or worry.
- Adrenaline and cortisol, our stress hormones, are released from the adrenal glands. These hormones initiate the physical changes that occur with stress.
- The respiratory rate changes. We start breathing faster and using our upper chest and accessory breathing muscles (to get us ready to run fast). We can experience a tightness in the chest and trouble catching our breath.
- Our blood pressure increases and our pulse quickens as our bodies attempt to get more blood pumped into our limbs to allow us to better run/fight. Suddenly sitting still at your desk becomes difficult.
- Our senses sharpen. Our peripheral vision increases to allow us to look for danger. Our pupils dilate. These are not things that most people notice, but have a check in the mirror next time you're feeling anxious/stressed.
- Our thought processes quicken and jump from one thing to the next. This allows us to process any potential danger ahead, but in actual fact makes it harder to concentrate and focus on one task at a time. Ever had a million things running through your head?
- Our blood sugar regulation changes- our glucose level increases to allow more available energy. Here comes the 3pm coffee and sugar cravings!
- Our muscles tense up to prepare us for action. This helps us to run faster and get better strength. If no action occurs, the muscle tension remains, leading to poor posture and aches and pains. We become more prone to injuries as we are more inflamed and our muscles fatigue easily. Chronic muscle tension puts pressure on our joints and tendons leading to further aches and pains.
- Energy is diverted away from the digestive system. Blood is diverted from the gut to the arms and legs. This leaves us less able to digest our food and absorb nutrients. Bloating, reflux, constipation and/or diarrhea can all occur due to this part of the stress response.
- Energy is diverted away from our immune system. We don't need to worry about infections when running for our lives, however ongoing stress leaves us open to infections and explains recurrent colds.

- Nutritional stores get depleted. The stress response uses up our B vitamins, zinc, magnesium and omega 3 fatty acids as well as needing cofactors such as vitamin C, chromium, calcium and proteins. On top of this, the changes that occur in our digestive system reduces the absorption of nutrients from the food that we eat, meaning that we cannot replenish our nutrient stores.

On a daily basis, adrenaline and cortisol are pumping around our body, changing our biochemistry and having huge effects on our health. Our body cannot keep this high level of activity for very long without causing harm. There will be a cumulative effect of stress hormones leading to all sorts of health issues.

...Headaches, irritable bowel syndrome, high blood pressure, sugar cravings, fatigue, weight gain, thyroid issues, poor immunity, low libido, hot flushes, anxiety, depression, insomnia, inflammation...

These are all symptoms of chronic stress!

What you can do about it

It is difficult to avoid the triggers that make us stressed and make us feel exhausted. However here are a few simple steps you can take to improve your bodies' resilience to stress:

1- Get enough sleep - This sounds obvious enough, but often the first thing that we miss out on when under stress. Our brains need a minimum of 7.5 hours sleep to thrive and we do best with 8 hours. Time for sleep needs to be prioritized just like anything else in your day. Try to get to bed by 10pm to ensure you have enough time for sleep.

2- Start each day with some early morning exercise - Exercising first thing in the morning has many benefits (such as weight loss, improved mood and increased energy) however it also allows some time to yourself to start your day and prepare for what's ahead. It can be as simple as a 20 minute walk outside in the early morning sunshine. Exercising at the end of the day is still useful; however it doesn't allow much time to wind down before bed. Studies have found that morning exercise aids cortisol regulation for the rest of the day.

3- Avoid sugar and caffeine - Caffeine and sugar both stimulate our adrenals and cortisol and adrenaline production, which is completely counterproductive when trying to stabilize these levels! I

know that it is so easy to fall into the trap of reaching for sugar and coffee to give you that energy boost, but you will simply come crashing down soon afterwards only to reach for your next 'hit'. Limit to 1 coffee daily and ensure this is before 10am. Replace with herbal teas such as green tea or rooibos for an energy boost or try ginger, fennel, cinnamon or peppermint based teas to reduce sugar cravings.

4- Eat regular meals to keep your blood sugar levels stable - Stable blood sugar levels are essential for good energy, concentration and focus. Start the day with a good breakfast and don't allow more than 4 hours between meals. Snack on protein rich snacks that won't spike your blood sugars such as natural, unsweetened yoghurt, cheddar cheese, raw and unsalted nuts, cottage cheese on crackers or hummus and vegetable sticks. Portions only need to be small however eating regularly makes a huge difference to your energy and cognitive function.

*There are also a variety of well researched natural supplements that you can take that makes a huge difference to how your nervous system responds to stress. These include herbal medicines such as licorice, siberian ginseng, withania or astragalus. A B complex is also useful when feeling exhausted and overworked.

However these should be prescribed from a professional so please seek advice from us before yourself on supplementation.

Call, email or book an appointment online, we can help you!

We look forward to seeing you soon,

Paula

Call us on **0415 517 445** or book online on www.nnhealth.com.au