

Stress: silently stealing your ability to heal?

By MATTHEW FISCHER, MSPT, P.R.R.T. INSTRUCTOR

Fischer Physical Therapy

Our bodies are gifted with an amazing capacity to heal! This ability gets choked off when stress becomes a normal part of one's life. In recent times, much has been stated about the connection between stress and health. I'd like to focus on the basic influence stress has on our nervous system and how this inhibits that amazing ability to heal.

We live in a complex, over-stimulating society. In order to adjust to the speed of these pressures, our nervous system must be responsive. The involuntary aspect of our nervous system that handles stress is broken into two divisions called the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems.

They are under subconscious control and together form the autonomic nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system is associated with rest, relaxation, digestion, and healing. In this mode, your body will conserve energy. You may experience this aspect when you relax on the couch after eating a large meal.

The sympathetic nervous system has often been referred to as fight or flight. Its job is to activate and mobilize the body's energy to best respond to a stressful or threatening situation. You may feel this aspect when stuck in traffic while late for an appointment. Balance between the parasympathetic and sympathetic divisions is highly important to maintain a healthy state.

Unfortunately, instead of balance we commonly see a bias toward the sympathetic (fight or flight) nervous system. Frequent stresses have become a normal part of life in 21st century American culture. We become subtly startled on an ongoing basis. The startle reflex, when activated in a large or small way directly activates the fight or flight aspect of our nervous system.

In today's world, it is not socially appropriate, however, to fight or flee when exposed to everyday stresses. So, instead of acting on or expressing this feeling (as originally designed) we instead internalize or repress it. The result of the latter is often chronic tension and frustration.

The sympathetic response I am describing is a great blessing when we need a quick surge of energy to accomplish a task. Chronic activation of this system, however, starves the body's ability to be restored. Fluidity of movement is hampered. Systems become strained and the precious energy the body needs for healing is drained.

In closing, you might take a little test to see where your healing potential is with regards to the nervous system to see how well your autonomic nervous system is balanced. Do you tend to grind your teeth at night? Do you experience consistent muscle tension in the neck and shoulders? Have you noticed a trend toward elevated blood pressure or heart rate? Answering yes to questions such as these may indicate that stress may be threatening your healing capacity. I recommend an excellent book called *Margin* by Dr. Richard Swenson to learn more about the lifestyle aspect of this modern disease. There are multiple physical, psycho-emotional and spiritual elements that go far beyond this very basic introduction. Now is the best time to respond to this silent stealer by furthering your awareness and knowledge on the subject. ■

