RESET YOUR STRESS

BEING ON HIGH ALERT FOR TOO LONG CAN PUT YOU INTO **ADRENAL OVERDRIVE.** LEARN HOW TO SHIFT FROM FIGHT-OR-FLIGHT MODE INTO CALMER STATES THAT HELP YOUR BODY RECOVER.

By Aviva Romm, MD

I see a lot of dark under-eye circles on the faces of patients in my practice — and I'm not a cosmetic surgeon. I'm a functional-medicine practitioner. My patients typically come in because they have a host of niggling symptoms that don't make sense: They can't lose weight, they feel chronically anxious, or they have a mysterious rash that won't go away. About 25 percent have hypothyroidism; almost 50 percent have sleep problems. But what we both know right away is they feel tired, overwhelmed, and unable to get to the bottom of their to-do lists.

These patients are in a state of chronic stress, and their bodies are showing the signs. This condition is sometimes called "allostatic load," and it occurs after the stress response has been activated for too long.

Our bodies are beautifully designed to handle short-term threats — the stress response makes us alert, energized, and able to withstand physical injury — but we're not designed to stay in this hyper-vigilant state all the time. It wears us out.

We can't eliminate all the high-pressure aspects of our lives, nor would we want to: We all need some stimulation to be healthy. Still, we can learn to recognize the signs that our body is stuck in fight-or-flight mode. And we can start to choose from the different stress responses that our bodies are also designed to deploy — ones that shift our systems away from chaos and toward rest and recovery.

Signs of Adrenal Overdrive

Getting stuck in survival mode leads to two conditions I see routinely in my practice — *adrenal overdrive* (when you can't turn off the stress response) and *adrenal overdrive with exhaustion* (when you can't turn it on). In the former you feel wired and tired; in the latter you're so exhausted you can't get moving.

These two types of adrenal malfunction show how the positive aspects of the survival system can become liabilities. For example, the energy from a big rush of blood sugar saves you when you need to battle or flee, but when blood sugar stays elevated for too long, it leads to insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes.

Likewise, adrenaline does a terrific job of raising your heart rate and constricting your blood vessels. But when this process goes on too long, hypertension can develop.

The first step to moving out of survival mode is knowing how to identify that you're in it: You feel anxious, hyper-alert, and tense. You may notice that you're "tired and wired" at night.

If you're in adrenal overdrive with exhaustion, you might feel wiped out when you wake up in the morning, tired all day long, then wide awake with worry when you finally turn out the light at night. Because you can't shut the vigilance off, you never really rest.

We often have no idea that these are symptoms of anything. We may think we're "just tired," or that anxious thoughts reflect a genuinely threatening reality. We might completely dismiss the idea of stress because we believe the circumstances shouldn't be as challenging as they are — even though the demands of raising a wily teenager or meeting the demands of your job are intense.

In an achievement-oriented culture, we often feel ashamed if we can't handle exorbitant amounts of pressure, because it seems like everyone else can. We think there must be some problem with us, and we keep quiet about it.

To a degree, these kinds of stress are a part of being alive. But most of us never get — or take — a break.

Checking our smartphones is the first and last act of the day for many of us. We're triggered by emails, headlines, and text messages right up until we go to bed — some of us even sleep with the TV on. Our schedules override the normal circadian rhythms that would have us going to sleep when it gets dark and waking up when it's light.

Day in and day out, a range of stimuli we might never suspect are triggering our nervous systems, causing unrelenting stress that can do serious damage to our health over time.

HIDDEN TRIGGERS
OF THE SYMPATHETIC STRESS RESPONSE

Almost anything the body perceives as a threat can kick the sympathetic nervous system into gear and keep it there, which is why many of us can be perpetually triggered and not know it. Here are a few surprising factors that contribute to adrenal overdrive.

In-Utero and Early Childhood Experiences

Some of us may have a lower stress "set point" because of experiences in utero or early childhood, resulting in greater sensitivity to the stresses of daily life now.

If your mother was really worried about having enough food or money during her pregnancy with you, for example, you were exposed to the stress hormones that were coursing through her system. This can create a lower stress set point, potentially making you more reactive than someone whose mother had a more secure pregnancy.

If you add adverse childhood experiences to this — like an abusive caregiver, or a death in the immediate family — it can lower your resilience even further.

Perfectionism

Being a perfectionist triggers the primal fear that if we don't do everything, and do it just right, we'll get kicked out of the social community.

This fear stems from the time in our species' history when we needed the group for protection, because a predator could easily eat us if we were alone. So perfectionism isn't just anxiety about mistakes themselves, it's also anxiety about mistakes that put our lives at risk — which triggers the survival response.

Learning to embrace your mistakes and vulnerabilities is a far better survival strategy.

Low Blood Sugar

When your blood sugar stays low for a long time, your body switches to an energy-conservation mode. It doesn't know that you just skipped breakfast; instead it behaves as though you're entering an indefinite period of going hungry.

Starvation is one of the original mortal threats, so when you're hungry for too long, the body raises cortisol and sets the stress response in motion. Eating adequate amounts of good-quality protein and fat, and avoiding excess sugar (which yanks insulin around) helps keep the nervous system in balance.

Food Intolerances

Food sensitivities involve immune reactions. So when someone who is gluten intolerant eats gluten, his immune system releases an inflammatory cascade to vanquish the invader. The body treats inflammation as a crisis and fires up the stress response. This means if you regularly eat a food that your body doesn't tolerate, it will continually provoke the stress response.

Environmental Toxins

Body-care products, air pollution, chemicals in the home — all contain toxins that can trigger the immune response, and, by extension, the stress response.

Genetics

There are two particular genes — MTHFR and COMT — that influence the body's ability to eliminate toxins. If you're exposed to toxins and you carry alterations on either of these genes, your body won't eliminate them as well as someone with no alterations.

Additionally, people with an alteration on COMT don't break down stress hormones as effectively. So when they get a hit of adrenaline, it stays in their systems. They generally can't tolerate coffee and avoid roller coasters and scary movies, because they know that when they're exposed to these kinds of stimulation it will take a long time for them to calm down.

Viral Infections

Simmering viral infections stimulate the stress response in the same way that food allergies do, and results in chronic inflammation that triggers a state of alarm in the body.

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THE STRESS ALARM

Stress can be stimulated by stressors that are concrete (not having enough money to pay bills) and abstract (persistent perfectionism). Our bodies react the same way to any trigger that sends us into survival mode. Here's the process:

1. You perceive a danger, which might be an immediate threat (a car speeding toward you) or a perceived one (you hear a car backfire and are reminded of the sound of gunfire).

2. This perception triggers your amygdala, the area of your brain associated with self-preservation memories. These memories helped our ancestors avoid plants that made them sick before. Today, it helps us prepare for daily situations that we know to be stressful.

3. Your amygdala sends an alarm message to your hypothalamus, which passes it along to your pituitary gland, which sends a message to your adrenal glands that they need to pump out the hormone cortisol.

4. Cortisol acts to protect your body: It elevates your blood pressure, so if you bleed copiously you won't go into shock. It mobilizes your immune system to fight infection. It dumps glucose into your bloodstream for an immediate surge of energy — plus insulin from your pancreas to mop up that glucose once the crisis is over.

5. The threat message signals your medulla (which controls involuntary functions) to send an adrenaline burst. This jump-starts your heart rate, dilates your pupils, and makes you hyper-alert. You are now primed to escape, subdue, and survive a mortal threat.

SIGNS THAT YOU'RE **STUCK IN OVERDRIVE**

Experiencing food cravings: We often crave sweet or salty foods when we're in adrenal overdrive because they provide energy and replenish our systems. When we're not stressed, our cravings lessen.

Feeling judgmental and picky: When we're in survival mode, we naturally scan our surroundings for danger, and a "negativity bias" prevents us from missing any potential threats. When we're stuck in overdrive and only see what's wrong with everyone and everything, it can make us unpleasant and miserable.

Waking up tired: If you go to bed at a decent hour but wake up feeling like you haven't slept at all, this is a sign that your cortisol is not rising in the morning as it should, which happens when your adrenals have stopped producing enough of the hormone. (For more on optimizing your cortisol levels, see ELmag.com/cortisol.)

Gaining belly fat: Not all fat cells are created equal, and the weight we gain around our midsections is often a signal that we're experiencing a cortisol overload.

3 HEALTHIER STRESS RESPONSES

The good news is that our bodies do have other ways of responding to stress — ones designed to move us out of the state of alarm and into one that's calm and secure, where we can replenish our energy. With a little practice, we can learn to consciously shift into these modes whenever we notice the heart-racing signs of adrenal overdrive.

1. REST AND DIGEST

We aren't meant to spend most of our time in overdrive. Part of life necessarily involves replenishing ourselves by getting into a parasympathetic response — what you experience when you nap, get a massage, or lie in savasana at the end of yoga. This restorative mode helps us recover from the wear and tear of daily life and times of stress.

The problem is most of us don't take time to hit the pause button, because we think we can't — or shouldn't. But intentionally taking time to recuperate after an unexpected stressful event will lessen its effects. Better yet, regularly build this time into your schedule.

I recommend creating a nightly routine that helps you downshift; this helps guarantee that your body has a chance to get out of fight-or-flight mode daily. Try to eat dinner at least three hours before bed, so your body can finish the period of active digestion and use those nutrients for rest and repair while you sleep. Turn off devices at least an hour before bedtime to avoid upsetting messages and the light from the screen that signals the pineal gland that it's time to wake up.

Here are a few other ways to help you shift into rest and digest that you can try anytime:

- **Breathe slowly and deeply for five minutes.**
- **Spend 30 minutes a day in nature.**
- **Take a relaxing hot bath.**
- **Attend a yoga class.**
- **Meditate, even for just 10 minutes.**

2. TEND AND BEFRIEND

There's a physiological reason it feels so good to call a friend when you're feeling anxious or down. UCLA researcher Shelley Taylor, PhD, has identified this as the "tend and befriend" stress response.

Along with adrenaline and cortisol, the body produces a small amount of oxytocin in response to a threat. Sometimes called "the cuddle hormone," oxytocin triggers us to bond with others, which helps us feel safe and settle down.

When Taylor's research group investigated why reaching out for support is typically easier for women, they discovered that it makes sense from an evolutionary perspective. It's not easy to fight off a beast or run if you're pregnant or caring for small children, so females relied more on the group for protection. Still, men benefit greatly from social support — and for them, a little bonding goes a long way because they seem to have fewer oxytocin receptors than women.

Either way, it's worth silencing the achievement-oriented voices of shame in your head that tell you to avoid sharing your worries. The idea that you should be able to handle stress without help is just not true; we never have. And why deny yourself one of nature's great chill pills? Shifting into this mode isn't hard:

- **Do something social** — anything that allows you to bond with others. You don't need to discuss problems to get the benefit of social bonding.
- **Connect with a good friend** on the phone or take a walk and talk it out. Studies show that verbalizing our concerns automatically turns off the sympathetic nervous system.

3. EXCITE AND DELIGHT

You don't have to shut down when you feel pressure. It's possible to open up and use the energy of stress to become more interested in what's going on. This is called the "excite and delight" response. Because it also involves cortisol and adrenaline, you feel the same level of alertness and awareness as you do in fight or flight.

But rather than narrowing your focus, you choose to open up, to be curious.

Marilee Adams, PhD, calls this a "learner mindset." When we're faced with a situation we don't know how to handle, we start asking questions. It's opposite is a "judger" mindset: We see something unfamiliar or threatening and make quick judgments — no questions asked. This is the default of the fight-or-flight response, in which hormones limit our perception of the bigger picture.

If you adopt a learner mindset, a challenging situation can become an opportunity to learn or experience something new. If you're ill, for example, you can view your symptoms as a chance to listen to your body instead of as signs of your demise. Or if someone is being aggressive toward you, rather than reacting defensively, you could ask yourself, "What's going on with him or her?" This might lead to compassion instead of more anger.

Curiosity expands your options for how to solve problems, and often solves them more quickly and easily.

Once you've developed a habit of being interested, you can use all the best parts of the stress response — alertness, energy, focus — to have new kinds of experiences, ones in which you use your excited energy to expand your abilities and ideas, instead of shutting down.

Asking yourself these questions can help you shift into excite-and-delight mode:

- **What's really happening here?**
- **What else might be going on that I'm not seeing?**
- **What's interesting about this situation?**

When we learn to appreciate how intelligently our bodies are meant to behave in response to stress, and to identify when we're stuck in the fight-or-flight response, easing into modes that rebuild and restore our health will become second nature. After all, our bodies are designed to support us. We just need to give them the chance.

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