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Can Chiropractic Improve How the Body Handles Stress?

The human body and its functions are incredibly complex. We have the ability to adapt to physical, mental, and chemical stress at a fundamental level. Our lifestyles create or diminish stress depending on diet, physical activity, attitude, posture, past history of trauma, and the environment we live in. The automatic operating system (aOS) is the primary portion of the nervous system that helps the body recognize the interactions we have with our environment in the form of short-term stress and long-term or chronic stress.

We have a particular response pattern to sudden or severe stress called the “fight-or-flight” mechanism. This is the primary portion of the aOS that helps us deal with or adapt to changes in our environment. The responsibility of the aOS in times of stress is to allow our bodies to continue to self-regulate. The best way to evaluate stress is by intensity, frequency, and duration.

In a healthy individual, the nervous system will adapt to stress based on its intensity or severity, the frequency of exposure, and the duration of the stress. In severe cases, the aOS will create the fight-or-flight response. During fight-or-flight, the body will go into a defensive mode and out of a growth mode. This is a very beneficial state during short-term stress, but a very bad state to be in throughout life.

During a stressful event, our bodies will release stress hormones, primarily adrenaline and cortisol, for increased energy and short bursts of physical activity. The blood vessels will constrict around our organs and blood will be delivered to the muscles to help us get away from stress quickly and efficiently.



Photo Courtesy of Abelle Photography

Our heart rate will increase and our breathing will become shallow.

We will become more acutely aware of our environment, but have less ability to consciously make decisions. The body and mind at this time are not in a normal state because the order of the moment is to survive the event—not to thrive, grow, or repair tissue.

The problem we run into is when we have chronic long-term, low-intensity stress and the nervous system adopts a prolonged fight-or-flight state.

When the body has accumulated stress and the nervous system learns a pattern of prolonged stress responses, the only outcome can and will be a state of imbalance and eventual disease. Most of the diseases that affect people are caused by the stress response, not a lack of medicine or pills.

-Adam Ries, DC *Pathways #54*

A Three Part Breathing Exercise to Help Reduce Stress

Step One:

Through the nose, breathe into your abdomen and allow the air to enter into the depths of the abdomen. The belly should expand outward.

Step Two:

Then breathe into the chest, allowing the air to widen the *sides of your chest*. You may feel an expansion in your back which is excellent as well.

Step Three:

Finally let the air fill the upper chest to the collar bone.

With relaxation as the fundamental principle, exhale the breath to a natural pause and begin again.

The beauty of this exercise is the downward movement of air into the sole of the abdomen and the later push of air against the sides of the lower chest. Such a technique honors the *deep* in deep breathing.

There are hundreds of benefits to deep breathing, not just to reduce stress:

Massage of the Organs • Oxygenation • Circulation • Relaxation • Expansion of Lung Capacity • Clears Mucus and Bronchial Obstructions • Assists Posture • Clearer Thinking • Sleep Aid • Enhances Digestion • Releases Tension in the Spine • Grounding • Increased Blood Flow • Reduces Toxic Buildup • Helps Clear Infection • Increased Energy


