

## MINIMISING STRESS, MAXIMISING RELAXATION

### IMPACT OF STRESS

Stress can have an impact both on the body and on the psyche. This is known as the *fight or flight* (or the *acute stress*) response because the body literally prepares itself to either fight or escape.

What follows is a description of this 'fight or flight' chemical reaction that occurs in the body when it is under stress. The response, which is designed to protect our body from harm, is said to have been first devised by an American physiologist in the late 1920s called Walter Cannon.

The hypothalamus is a specific part of the brain located just behind the middle point between the eyebrows. The hypothalamus releases a hormone into the pituitary gland - which is located at the base of the brain and attached to the hypothalamus - and then into the bloodstream, when you become either threatened or excited.

This hormone (corticotrophin-releasing hormone) stimulates the adrenal glands. This sets the heart racing and speeds up the breathing. Blood is re-directed from the digestive tract to the muscles and limbs which require extra energy in readiness for fight or flight. In addition, your impulses, sight and awareness become sharper, your pain threshold rises and your entire immune system becomes highly charged.

Fight or flight is a physical response, during which certain hormones are produced including cortisol, which is said to increase blood pressure and blood sugar, and suppress the immune system. Once the immune system is suppressed our ability to fight off illness effectively is reduced.

Flight or flight also suppresses the rationality of the mind. In this state we are in survival mode. Everything is seen as a possible threat, making our response to even the most mundane action or comment exaggerated.

This state goes back to pre-historic times when man's very survival would be threatened and he would literally need to either fight or flee. In those days, the threat, from say the attack of an animal, would be short lived, the chemical reaction in the body would therefore also be short lived. Soon this fight or flight state would subside and the body would return to normal.

In today's pressurised society, however, many of us are (sometimes unbeknownst to ourselves) living lives of high stress, where this chemical reaction is being set off many times a day. The threat, however, is not necessarily from an animal attack, it may be an impending deadline, traffic lights that just turn to red when you approach them, arguments with friends, family or colleagues or just too much to do in too short a space of time.

Because situations such as these occur on a regular basis each day, the adrenal glands become overworked, pumping adrenaline and other stress hormones into the body on a constant basis. As a result we are in a constant state of 'fight or flight'. Whereas the body is designed to cope with this state in short bursts it is not designed to withstand it on an ongoing basis.

The upshot can be complete physical and mental shutdown resulting from exhaustion of the body. This shutdown can manifest itself in the form of complete withdrawal, a state in which you feel you cannot face the world.

The following extract sums up the serious implications of constant stress on the body and mind:

*“We can begin to see how it is almost impossible to cultivate positive attitudes and beliefs when we are stuck in survival mode. Our heart is not open. Our rational mind is disengaged. Our consciousness is focused on fear, not love. Making clear choices and recognizing the consequences of those choices is unfeasible. We are focused on short-term survival, not the long-term consequences of our beliefs and choices. When we are overwhelmed with excessive stress, our life becomes a series of short-term emergencies. We lose the ability to relax and enjoy the moment. We live from crisis to crisis, with no relief in sight. Burnout is inevitable.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [www.thebodysoulconnection.com](http://www.thebodysoulconnection.com)