

How Stress Affects Immunity

from "Stress in the Background: How to Thrive in a High-Stress World"

by Elizabeth Eckert, PhD

The myth of stress management

Everybody's stressed out these days. No wonder. Stress can find a foothold nearly anywhere – just like weeds that grow up in a rock garden. It doesn't look like there's a speck of dirt for them to root in, but somehow they're just there.

If you've read my health guide, *Transform Stress Into Power*, (free at WordCures.com) you know that I identify 6 common sources of everyday stress:

- Lifestyle chaos
- Over-taxing of personal resources such as your time, money, and energy.
- Personal conflicts and power struggles (especially within yourself)
- Being unwilling to change outgrown or unproductive behavior and habits
- Being unwilling to give or keep your word (includes keeping your word to yourself)
- Unexpressed creativity

Of course those 6 sources are just the tip of the iceberg. Just in *Word Cures (the book)*, we identify another seventeen. And I'm sure there are even more.

The point is this. Why try to "manage" it all? Doesn't that sound like an awful lot of energy down the drain? Not to mention that conventional stress management works only so well.

Sure, it's relaxing to take a nice long bath, listen to some quiet music, get a massage, or play with the cat. Of course it feels good. And I recommend it!

But it's not going to solve anything – long term – is it? Think about the absurdity. You can't think straight because your home is so chaotic – so you go for a nice long walk. You'll feel better for a few minutes, sure. But your home is still chaotic. Got the picture?

Why not just organize the house? That would resolve the stress. You wouldn't have to spend all that continuous energy "managing" it. And you'd feel better – for real.

Of course, it's not that simple. If it was, you would have done it already. We all know that. But the least we can do is have you put your energy where it will count – resolving the challenge! (It *is* possible.)

Stress and immune function

The science of how emotions and the immune system interact with one another is called psychoneuroimmunology. That's a mouthful, huh?

One of its pioneers, Dr. Candace Pert, completed ground breaking research over a decade ago, exploring the body's receptors for a group of messenger molecules called neuropeptides. Current belief is that neuropeptides transmit emotional messages in the body.

In fact, scientists believe that these emotional messages actually cause our DNA to create itself in the most effective way to meet the demands we perceive. Our perception of the environment is communicated through neuropeptides directly to the DNA, which causes our physical bodies to optimize for the environment we see.

These neuropeptides are mood-specific. Feel great and your neuropeptides will make you healthy. Feel blue and they'll sabotage your efforts. It's as simple as that.

The question is this: If mood affects your immune system, how do you manage your mood?

Glad you asked. You manage your mood by doing what we've been talking about all along.

1. Stand up for what you believe in.
2. Match your actions with your values.
3. If something bugs you, take it on and do something about it.
4. Create yourself as the powerful individual you are.
5. Invest in your relationships – with others; with yourself.
6. Know when to say "no," and say it in a firm but kind way that leaves no room for discussion.

This will model for your immune system exactly the characteristics you want it to live by. Aren't the points above pretty much how you'd like to have your immune system treat you? I think so. Then those are the behavioral characteristics you'd better be modeling for it.

When you choose this behavior, and it is a choice, then you will have reason to feel good. When you treat yourself as though you make a difference, your self-esteem naturally increases.

What about a plain old bad mood?

Dr. Pert was pretty clear on her findings. No emotion is inherently bad. The only bad emotion is an unexpressed one. In other words, Dr. Pert found that the suppression of emotion was worse than simply expressing the feeling and getting it over with.

Notice that no one is suggesting endless processing of emotions over weeks, months, or years. Dr. Pert's view seems to have been that acknowledging the emotion allows one to move past it to a better state. Whereas suppressing it somehow "traps" it in the body.

Life isn't all pink balloons and purple unicorns. Sometimes things get ugly. Fine. Acknowledge the truth and move on.

You can, however, choose your state any time you like.

Here's what I suggest that you do. When the blues hit, give yourself time to accept your feeling. Usually, if you look deeply enough, you'll find that there's a reason you don't feel as you'd like to. Identify what it is.

- You've been working too hard, perhaps.
- Someone in your family is sick.
- The weather doesn't suit your constitution.
- A hurricane just washed over your house and you lost everything.
- You made a poor choice that you regret.
- You've just passed the anniversary date of a past event that still upsets you.

Fine. Acknowledge it. If the situation warrants, repair the damage as best you can. Get some rest.

Then, once the smoke has cleared, make a choice to re-invent yourself in your desired state. A simple affirmation process, such as the one outlined on page 47 of *Stress In The Background*, can accomplish this for you easily.

A note on perception

We've been speaking quite a bit about perception lately, and I want to make sure you understand exactly what it means. Perception refers to your views and opinions about the situation in which you find yourself.

Here's a classic example. A couple hours ago, I spoke with my mom on the phone. It's Sunday evening as I write, and Sunday is "call Mom" night. I mentioned the heat we've been having here, and the fact that today was unusually humid for this part of the country.

Humidity and temperature are relative. Compared with Florida, where Mom lived for 9 years, the heat and humidity we've been having seems like no big deal. However

compared with our usual temperatures, it's been hot!

My perception is that it's hot and sticky, and I'm uncomfortable. However, bring in a resident of the state of Florida, and they'd perceive the same objective circumstances as a relief.

Your perceptions of how busy you are, how much stress is too much, what the neighbors think of you, whether you feel loved by or alienated from your family ... they're perceptions. Someone else might drop into the same circumstances as you and experience them differently.

Perception drives your mood, and therefore your immune system. You can influence your perception by choosing a "half-full" or "half-empty" view of your life and circumstances. A "half-full" view is generally the healthier choice. When in doubt, begin a practice of identifying people, things, and experiences you can appreciate and be grateful for.

Suggested reading on stress and your immune system

Chopra, Deepak (1990). *Quantum Healing: Exploring the Frontiers of Mind/Body Medicine*. Bantam.

Dreher, Henry (1995). *The Immune Power Personality: 7 Traits You Can Develop to Stay Healthy*. New York: Plume/Penguin.

Lipton, Bruce (2005). *The Biology of Belief: Unleashing the Power of Consciousness, Matter & Miracles*. Mountain of Love / Elite Books.

Pert, Candace (1999). *Molecules of Emotion: The Science Behind Mind/Body Medicine*. Scribner.

Sternberg, Esther (2000). *The Balance Within: The Science Connecting Health and Emotions*. W.H. Freeman and Company.

About the author

Frustrated with watching well-intentioned people unknowingly sabotage their potential and their health, Elizabeth Eckert began a campaign to inspire better results.

Elizabeth can show you how your inside world of thoughts and habits manifests in the everyday elements of your life. Her education includes developmental psychology, neuromuscular therapy, and energy medicine.

Elizabeth lives in a nearly ideal location in spacious North Dakota. She is the author of *Word Cures: How to Keep Stupid Excuses from Sabotaging Your Health* and *Stress In The Background: How to Thrive in a High-Stress World*.