

Healing Your Nervous System

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Introduction

Most people in the United States have an imbalanced nervous system. That is, their stress response is far more powerful than their relaxation response. This means that when they react, they often react strongly, take longer to get back to baseline and experience more intense effects like headaches, blood sugar and blood pressure issues and difficulty sleeping and are plagued by stress-related mental and physical health problems.

Depression, anxiety and anger are feelings that are caused when your nervous system identifies that there might be a threat. This triggers a cascade of changes to help you prepare to fight or flee. If this happens too often or you constantly feel stressed, anxious, angry or depressed, then the nervous system is altered to help protect you from what it sees as a constantly unsafe environment. Alterations in the nervous system cause your “stress response” to become much stronger than your “relaxation” response. Then when you get stressed there is more intensity in physical, emotional and cognitive distress.

One part of recovering from physical or mental illnesses is to free up energy so the body can heal the nervous system. Additionally, by learning to downregulate and “manually override” the stress response, the nervous system “learns” that you are safe and empowered. You have the ability to take action and protect yourself both from yourself as well as from the outside world. To do this, you start removing sources of unnecessary stress and developing tools to more effectively deal with unavoidable stress.

In the following booklet, you will explore a variety of different stressors; evaluate how those stressors impact each PIECE of your life (Physical, Interpersonal, Emotional, Cognitive, Environmental) and increase awareness of what triggers those stressors and how to prevent or manage them.

It took years for your nervous system to become “unbalanced.” It will take some time for you to begin to recognize things that caused you stress that actually were not threats; recognize stressors that you have control over and strengthen your “rest and digest” or relaxation response to more effectively downregulate your stress response.

Physical

In this review sheet that examines how various physical stressors can trigger the HPA axis and sympathetic nervous system activation, their impact on each dimension of the PIECES model (Physical, Interpersonal, Emotional, Cognitive, Environmental), and includes reflection questions to help individuals assess the presence, patterns, triggers, and strategies to address each stressor. The PIECES model acknowledges that a person's well-being arises from the reciprocal interactions between Physical, Interpersonal, Emotional, Cognitive, and Environmental aspects of health.

Circadian Rhythm Dysfunction

How it Triggers the HPA Axis and Sympathetic Nervous System:

Disrupted circadian rhythms, often caused by irregular sleeping patterns, shift work, or excessive artificial light exposure at night, can impair the body's internal clock (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2017). The misalignment between internal sleep-wake cycles and external environmental cues triggers stress hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline, activating the HPA axis and sympathetic nervous system. Over time, this can lead to an increase in inflammatory processes and stress-related disorders.

Impact on PIECES:

- Physical: Poor sleep, increased blood sugar and blood pressure, autoimmune flares, thyroid imbalances, gonadal hormone imbalances
- Interpersonal: Irritability and reduced patience can strain relationships and reduce self esteem
- Emotional: Mood swings, heightened anxiety, irritability, depressive symptoms or reduced motivation.
- Cognitive: Reduced concentration, impaired memory, difficulty making decisions, intrusive thoughts
- Environmental: Difficulty maintaining a consistent schedule, impaired work-life balance

Reflection Questions:

1. Is my sleep-wake cycle erratic, and do I often feel tired at inappropriate times?
2. How is disrupted circadian rhythm affecting my physical energy, my interactions with others, my emotional regulation, my mental clarity, and my ability to maintain a consistent daily schedule?
3. Are there certain times or environments (e.g., shift work, late-night screen time) that consistently disturb my rhythm?
4. Could strategies like regular sleep schedules, reducing blue light exposure, creating a sleep routine, or seeking supportive work arrangements help me restore my natural rhythms?

