THE Stress—Health CONNECTION
by Dawn Groves

We’ve become a culture of worriers. Because worry is based in fear, the body registers it as a threat and the hypothalamus triggers the stress response. In the case of ongoing worry, the adrenals just keep on secreting varying levels of epinephrine and cortisol in preparation for a battle that never happens. Muscles live in contraction. Blood pressure goes up and stays up.

As with everything else on earth, the stress response has good and bad aspects. We evolved this intricate protective response system to help us survive in a harsh, wild environment. But modern society doesn’t require the same kinds of responses. The stress response is still useful, but “stand and fight” or “run like hell” are no longer our only two choices.

The Buddha talked about moderation in all things, and this certainly applies to the stress response. On occasion it is useful, but when it becomes chronic it is terribly damaging to the body. There is ample evidence of the role of stress in gastrointestinal, dermatological, respiratory, neurological, and emotional ailments, as well as proof of its impact on a wide range of disorders linked to immune-system disturbances, from the common cold to herpes and arthritis.

The following list of physical troubles caused by stress doesn’t take into account the perils of what pioneer stress researcher Hans Selye termed “diseases of adaptation.” That is, the manner in which we cope with stress can be more damaging than the stress response itself. Stressed, many people turn to drugs, smoking, overeating, acting out, or a combination of disruptive, harmful behaviors. Any of these can spawn their own pantheon of problems.

A short list of physical troubles related to chronic stress:

- **Sleep Disturbances**
  With chronic stress, sleep disturbances increase in number and severity.

- **Immune System Problems**
  Immune system antibodies are suppressed, increasing the risk of bacterial infections, susceptibility to viruses, and perhaps even the likelihood of developing cancer.

- **Respiratory Problems**
  Respiratory problems increase with stress, especially asthma.

- **Gastrointestinal Problems**
  Gastrointestinal problems develop or worsen with stress, often contributing to debilitating conditions such as Crohn’s disease.

- **Weight Gain**
  Increased insulin levels cause fat to be deposited around the middle of the body, leading to increased risk of heart attack, insulin resistance, and diabetes.

- **Higher Risk for Heart Disease**
  Stress can cause high blood pressure and higher cholesterol levels, which increases the risk of heart disease, as well as the possibility of stroke.

- **Headaches**
  Excessive tension in the jaw area can cause bite problems and headaches.

- **Neck and Back Pain**
  This is often caused or exacerbated by unrelieved muscle strain.

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