# Own Your Stress, Then Let It Go

*By: Roger Landry, MD, MPH*

What if I told you that the single most destructive component to our health is our stress response? Would you believe me? Stress rots us from within. Unfortunately, the chronic stress that we accept as part of living in our modern world is destructive to our cognitive function; it raises our risk for dementia, impacts learning and memory, and suppresses our immune systems, leaving us vulnerable to disease, causes causing weight gain – which leads to other conditions, drains our energy, ages us more rapidly, stunts creativity, and negatively impacts our relationships. Stress is worse than the long list of side effects in small print on the side of a medicine bottle. Dr. Robert Sapolsky, Professor of Biology, Neuroscience and Neurosurgery at Stanford University and internationally renowned expert on stress tells us, “Most of us will live long enough and well enough to get seriously ill with a stress-related disease.”

*Why does this happen?*

**How Our Bodies Respond to Stress**

As humans, we are hard-wired with a “fight or flight” response. When our ancestors experienced a life-threatening situation, the amygdala in their brains kicked into high gear releasing epinephrine, cortisol and norepinephrine, enabling them to exhibit strength and speed to outmaneuver and outrun the lion that was chasing them down. Unfortunately, humans are the only mammals capable of self-inducing this response with our thoughts. There’s no lion about to eat us, but our bodies can’t tell the difference and will respond as if in danger. Furthermore, we are capable of sustaining that state of hyper-response long after whatever threatened us is gone.

**And Along Came Covid-19…**

So, now our world, including our personal world, has been turned upside down. We’re virtual prisoners, unable to do much of what we did, including the very important social connection, eating in a dining room, traveling, hugging the grandkids, and on and on. And we’re seeing statistics on deaths and sickness, shortages of needed equipment, and an entire world changed … and who knows for how long? Talk about **STRESS!**

**The Truth of the Matter**

So, answer this question … As you read this, what in your immediate environment is threatening to you right now? Most likely you’ll answer “nothing.” And it’s true. You may have your routine changed, but you are most likely comfortable with your important needs met and no threat to your life or health (not everybody can say that … health care workers, for example, and they are truly heroes). So, if your immediate situation is not threatening, then why should you be stressed? You got it. I mentioned earlier [how our thoughts and thought patterns can trigger our stress response](https://www.facebook.com/brightsideoflongevity/videos/3721515767923171/), can keep it going when there’s no way for us to do something about it (i.e. fight or flee). And so, we cause our own chronic stress which basically rots us from within … suppressing our immune system and our quality of life just when we need help with both. So, what is the truth of the matter? We cause our own stress with how we respond to situations like the one we’re all facing right now.

**What can we do about it?**

Eckhart Tolle, in his magnificent book *The Power of Now* tells us that when faced with a stressful situation like with Covid-19, there are only three options. 1) We can fix the problem or make a plan to fix the situation. 2) We can walk away … it’s not our problem. Or 3) We can accept it. With this pandemic, all we can do to “fix it” is to reduce our likelihood of contracting it with the recommendations given to us by public health experts … Wash our hands, don’t touch our face, keep physical distance from others (including wearing masks when outside and near others), and do all we can to limit our exposure to others. We cannot “walk away” because we’re all susceptible … and we’re all in this together. If we’re human, we’re facing this thing with eight billion others. And so, we must accept it. We must accept that this is a reality we cannot worry away. It’s a reality we must accept as here and all we can do is lower our risk, and the risk of others, as much as possible, and do that, while we live our lives, even as changed and altered as they are. We should basically, let it go, and count our blessings, for so many others are suffering dearly; keep connected creatively and safely, and just maybe do some small thing for the greater good, even if that is merely feeling compassion and empathy for our fellow humans dealing with more than we are. Everything else, dear reader, is irrational and self-destructive.

Please stay safe everybody…