How Stres Rots You From WIthin—And what four things you can do about it

By Roger Landry, MD, MPH

# The Lion Within Us: It’s Fight or Flight

What’s the difference between a charging lion and being late for an appointment? From your body’s point of view – not much. This is the key to understanding how stress can rot us from within. Nearly 100% of the stress you’re dealing with is caused by … *you.* Not that crazy driver who cut you off, or that job interview that’s coming up, or that funny looking mole on your arm. It’s all your creation, and, unfortunately, you’re not alone. **Stanford University’s Dr. Robert Sapolsky**, an internationally renowned expert on stress, tells us, “Most of us will long enough and well enough to get seriously ill with a stress-related disease.”

Here’s how it works. We humans inherited a magnificent ability to respond to a life-threatening situation … our stress response. It’s called our **Fight or Flight Response**, and that describes perfectly what it’s meant to do. Great, great, great-grandpa Bruno is walking along and a lion jumps out in his path. His body immediately releases catecholamines, including **epinephrine, cortisol and norepinephrine**, substances that make him able to perform like he had been at boot camp all his life. He has strength and speed he didn’t have a few seconds ago, and he can either take on the lion, or try to outrun him. This is a “do or die” thing, and it’s very powerful. Grandpa survives, and you’re here today because he did.

We share this response with other mammals. A zebra will run from the lion and if he makes it, he’ll be grazing in a few minutes, and no longer stressing about the lion from the past. In fact, Sapolsky talks about this in his excellent book *Why Don’t Zebras Get Ulcers*. But, what do us humans do? Turns out, **we are the only species capable of setting off and sustaining this “do or die” reaction *with our thoughts!*** This chronic state of hyper-response I call The Big Uneasy … self-induced, chronic stress – an unsettling anxiety which wreaks havoc with our health and quality of life.

# How Our Bodies React to Stress

This chronic stress we create is ourmade-up threat state (yes, made up because there is nothing threatening your life *right now) and* is a factor in heart disease, stroke, some cancers, immune system weakening, autoimmune diseases, and now we know, even dementia. Johns Hopkins researchers have linked high levels of the stress hormone cortisol with poor cognitive performance in older individuals. Additionally, the hippocampus, a part of the brain important in learning and memory, is now known to be particularly vulnerable to chronic stress.

Essentially, when we allow our minds to stress us out, what we’re doing is turning out neurotransmitters and hormones that whip our bodies into a frenzy so we can deal with a “life-threatening situation which doesn’t really exist. We’re literally beating ourselves up … as if we’re hitting the gas pedal and the brake at the same time.

In [*Live Long, Die Short*](http://www.livelongdieshort.com)*,* there’s a personal lifestyle inventory. Readers answer the question, **“How many times today did you feel in a rush?”** How would you answer this question?

# Four Ways to Combat Stress and Tame the Inner Beast

So what can we do? Are we doomed to whip ourselves until we get sick? Here are four secrets to a calmer, healthier you.

1. **Fix It, Walk Away or Accept It.** When confronted with a stress-producing situation, you have one of three choices: *Fix It* – do it immediately or make a plan to do it. If you cannot fix the situation – *Walk Away*. Don’t own the situation any more. Just put it in your rearview mirror. Or - *Accept It …* no more beating yourself up. It is what it is, and let’s move on. All else is madnessand leads to stress and disease.
2. **Seek Out Things That Quiet Your Chattering Mind.** Whatever does it for you … crafts, nature, animals, music, yoga, meditation, walking, spending time with your children, exercise, gardening … whatever causes you to lose track of time (there is no stress without a sense of time). This will break the momentum of stress buildup and reboot you.
3. **Get Your Sleep.** Without sleep, everything looks and feels worse. Our bodies and minds cannot keep up with the pace of life today and only in sleep (or other quiet periods) can it repair, reset, and assimilate all that happens in a day. Do nothing that gets your mind galloping anytime near bedtime. Clear you bedroom of all electronics. Do not eat a heavy meal late in the evening. Do one of your quieting things before sleep. You’ll become a virtual warrior against stress.
4. **Give Up the Need to Be Right.** This single trait is responsible for prodigious amounts of pain and suffering, lower quality of relationships, reduced creativity, and dysfunctional work environments. Learn to truly listen to other people rather than be thinking about what you’re going to say next. Allow for the possibility that you might be wrong or not totally informed about any issue. You’ll love how it feels!

We make our stress by our reactions to life’s situations. You have the power to minimize or eliminate it. Yes, you can do this! Peace.