

## **Understanding Stress The Body's Perspective**

Stress takes a toll on the body, and the field of stress management has become quite a money making enterprise. I find that many different kinds of stress management techniques are helpful for my patients. Which techniques are most effective depends on the individual. However, most people I talk to lack a basic understanding of the stress response from a physiological point of view. The mental side of the stress response is much better understood.

Here are some things that I think you should know.

### The Stress Response: Prolonged Fight-or-Flight

The stress response is a high energy state that most of us call “fight or flight”. It’s a normal thing, and actually good in small doses. What we generally call “stress” is a prolonged state of low grade fight-or-flight. We can’t thrive to the best of our potential if we’re stuck in low grade fight-or-flight. Instead we’re tired, cranky, and forgetful. We also have heightened senses, meaning that annoying sounds are really annoying and bright lights can seem blinding. Bad smells can seem nauseating, quick movements can make us gasp, and crowded places can be overwhelming.

### Stress & Triggers

Triggers are also called stressors. The body perceives stressful situations in the form of triggers. Even without us knowing, the body can go into the fight-or-flight state as a result of a trigger. We’re not always aware that we’ve encountered a trigger. We may simply start feeling unwell and not understand why. If this occurs, take a moment to look at your surroundings. Was there a sound, a movement out of the corner of your eye, or an odour that may have triggered you? Are you in a place where something bad happened to you in the past? We all have triggers, they’re hard to avoid. When your system triggers, give yourself a moment to become aware. This awareness will decrease the intensity of what you’re feeling.

After being triggered, the nervous system must re-set back to a state of neutral (wound down mode). This is a process, and it’s common for the nervous system to remain in wound-up mode, especially if we’re unaware of what’s happened.

### Trauma

Bad experiences are often called traumas, especially when they’re really bad experiences. The body’s response to a trauma is similar to its response to a trigger. The nervous system goes into a state of fight-or-flight, and hopefully gets the chance to re-set back to neutral after the trauma is over. If you suspect that

your system never got a chance to re-set properly after a trauma, come in and talk to me about that. I can help. If you suspect that a past trauma is causing your system to trigger on a regular basis, I may be able to help you with that as well. Even when triggers happen on a small scale, they can affect our ability to function.

### What to Expect After You've Experienced a Trigger:

The nervous system will be in a state of fight-or-flight. You may notice a rush of adrenalin. You may feel an upward or downward movement in your stomach. Your senses will be heightened until your nervous system is able to re-set back to Neutral. If you're at the grocery store the lights/colours will seem brighter, the smells stronger, the people moving faster than usual, and you'll feel over-stimulated. Your muscles will be flexed, meaning your body will feel heavier and you won't have the flexibility or balance that you're used to having. If you already have pain somewhere in your body, it's likely to flare up at this time. You'll startle easily; you may gasp if a bird flies too close to you. Some people may get the sensation that there's bugs crawling on them, or water trickling on their skin.

Places where something bad happened will be places that produce the largest triggers. If you find yourself triggered, remember that awareness is key. Until we can get the nervous system re-set back to neutral, awareness & understanding will make us better able to stay functional during the trigger response.

### Use the Felt Sense To Keep Yourself Out of Panic Mode

The Felt Sense is different from our thoughts and emotions. It's the body's wave-like responses to our experiences. Examples of the Felt Sense are nausea or tingling.

To better understand the Felt Sense, here are some descriptive words you can choose from.

"I Feel":

Dense	Thick	Flowing	Breathless	Fluttery	Nervous
Queasy	Expanded	Floating	Heavy	Tingly	Electric
Fluid	Numb	Wooden	Dizzy	Full	Congested
Spacey	Trembly	Twitchy	Tight	Hot	Bubbly
Achy	Wobbly	Calm	Suffocating	Buzzy	Energized
Tremulous	Constricted	Warm	Knotted	Icy	Light
Blocked	Hollow	Cold	Sweaty	Streaming	
Disconnected					

"Where?"

Upper abdomen	Lower Abdomen	Thigh(s)	Feet	Hands	
Head	Upper Back	Mid Back	Lower back	Eyes	Buttocks
Knee(s)	Penis	Vagina	Testicles	Urinary Tract	
Anus					

Note: sensations are different from emotions and different from thoughts. Locate the sensation in your body.

### Once You've Identified Your Felt Senses, Bring Your Awareness to Your 5 Senses.

Listen carefully, hear what's going on around you.

Smell what's around you.

See what's around you. What colours stand out? What's moving and what's standing still? Focus on the things that are standing still.

Notice if you have any taste in your mouth, or if the mouth is moist or dry.

Feel the temperature of your environment and the air currents. Is there wind? Are you sweaty? Feel the fabric of the clothes you're wearing.

For those of you who have severe stress and have experienced severe trauma, you're well aware of how complex your stress responses are. I encourage you to look much farther than this document for insights and help. I'm really just scratching the surface here.

-Dr. Angela, ND