

# Stressful times

By Dr. Doug Fryday

We all know what stress is and most of us are under a lot of it in this high-paced, frenzied, pressure-cooker world we live in.

What most of us don't know is how stress affects our bodies and those of our kids. No one is immune. Modern day stress has catapulted us into the early stages of the worst epidemic of all time, the 'Neurologic Epidemic.' Medical experts are saying chronic stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system from chemical, physical, emotional and, increasingly, electromagnetic stress is the cause of Dysautonomia – the dysfunction of our autonomic nervous system. They go on to say, unequivocally, this is the cause of all physical and emotional disease and disorders. In reality, all sickness, disease and behavioural problems begin with brain imbalance as a result of chronic stress. More than two billion people worldwide are now suffering from brain-based health challenges such as Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, autism, insomnia, Lupus, Multiple Sclerosis, acid reflux, irritable bowel syndrome, chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, migraines, depression and anxiety.

A new study says there are five things killing Ontario residents more than seven years earlier than previous generations – smoking, drinking alcohol, poor diet, lack of physical activity and stress. Researchers found 60 per cent of all deaths in Ontario can be blamed on those five unhealthy habits. Isn't it time we took a hard look at our lifestyles, not only for our own health but for the health of our children and future generations?

All forms of stress in reality are 'brain stress.' Chronic repetitive brain stress causes an imbalance in our autonomic nervous system, creating a neurological cascade of events putting our body into hyper-overdrive. I describe the autonomic nervous system as the part of the brain that runs the show in the background and has a gas pedal, which is called the sympathetic nervous system, and a brake, which is called the parasympathetic nervous system. The gas pedal is our survival nervous system and is referred to as our 'fight or flight' nervous system. The brake is the 'rest and digest' relaxation response part of the nervous system, where all healing takes place.

When your body (the car) is running smoothly and optimally, the gas pedal comes on when it needs to speed up and the brake is applied when it needs to slow down. When the gas and brake



are working in harmony we have optimal function, which is health. Anything less has the potential for disease. The problem occurs when the gas pedal (sympathetic nervous system) gets 'stuck' because of chronic recurrent stress, requiring the brain to respond as if every external stimulus in life was a threat. This becomes a habit and I call this 'Pedal to the Metal Syndrome.'

Your body innately or automatically responds by increasing your heart rate, blood pressure, blood sugar, respiration rate, sweat glands and your pupils dilate. Secretion of stress hormones cortisol, adrenaline and epinephrine are turned on and up. This response can be lifesaving for short periods of time, but if prolonged without the appropriate relaxation, it will cause a weakening of the heart, shrinkage of the brain and chronic inflammation, which prevents the formation of new neurons in your brain.

As you can appreciate, driving at full speed for an indefinite period of time will have destructive effects on the internal structure of a car's engine, and in the body we call this anxiety, a natural internal response to the external stimuli of stress that serves a purpose. This is good for short periods of time because it puts us in a heightened sense of awareness so we're prepared for potential threats, but it's bad if prolonged. Our goal is not to dismiss it entirely, just make it a healthy, manageable part of our lives.

Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that early life experiences are very important for the developing brain.

Chronic stress and traumatic events, such as death, divorce, violence, sexual abuse, illness, etc., can significantly alter brain development and lead to changes in the fear circuitry, putting kids at risk for developing anxiety and depression.

Never before have we lived in a time of so much chronic stress. Increase in stress – mental, emotional, chemical, physical and electromagnetic – causes an imbalance in the body's stress response due to the stress load and inability of a developing brain to handle it. You have most likely observed the child that is on the computer with multiple tasks going at once. It's not rare to see them doing homework, listening to music, messaging on Facebook and texting on the cell phone all at the same time! It is estimated a typical teenager will be exposed to as much information, in just one day, as their great-grandparents were exposed to in their entire life! One issue of the Sunday New York Times contains more information than all the written

## Balance child's brain at home

- Diaphragmatic breathing makes your brain more flexible.
- Supplement period – a good quality fish oil, coconut oil and Vitamin D3 (consult your physician first).
- Use the Internet for brain games.
- Learn something new every day by reading.
- Do crossword and Sudoku puzzles and traditional puzzles.
- Listen to classical music from the Baroque period.
- Learn how to play an instrument.
- Play board games, especially chess.
- Play ping pong, tennis and badminton.
- Limit time in front the computer and especially the TV.
- Exercise at least 40 minutes per day at moderate intensity.
- Get outdoors enjoy nature and reflect.
- Smile, laugh and rent a funny movie.
- Keep hydrated – your body is roughly 70 per cent water and your brain is 85 per cent water.
- Get plenty of restful sleep – this is mostly when your body heals and repairs itself.
- Investigate yoga and Tai Chi.

material available to readers in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century. We are living in information overload.

With these extreme amounts of stress is it any wonder, as a defence or survival mechanism, the brain and nervous system go into Pedal to the Metal Syndrome? When our kids' survival brain is in charge, they impulsively react with defensive behaviours such as aggressiveness and fighting, refusing to cooperate, throwing a temper tantrum, withdrawing or even spacing out. Anxiety can be a real barrier to learning, as it impacts a student's working memory, making it difficult to comprehend and retain information. Anxiety fluctuates between days and within days, which results in inconsistent performance.

The common misconception that children are under lower levels of stress contributes to the fact adults can fail to recognize the magnitude of stress-producing anxiety in the lives of children. Often parents and teachers will label the anxiety produced by chronic stress in a child as shyness, frigidity, busy boy/busy girl, etc. The other problem is that the behaviours brought on by the anxious child of low impulse control, including difficulty in concentrating and irritating behaviour, often matches the definition of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) leading to misdiagnosis. Understanding a child's behaviour in the context of the brain's reaction to stress can provide a parent, teacher or health care professional with insight, empathy and expand their behaviour management repertoire including calming strategies.

The good news is that more has been learned about the brain and how to identify and strengthen weaknesses in its response to stress and overall function in the last 20 years than in all of history. We absolutely know that when the brain is out of balance, the body always follows. We call this sickness and disease.

When we rebalance the brain, the body always follows. We call this healing and health. **GBK**

*DR. DOUG FRYDAY is the owner of the Optimize Healing Centre in Port Elgin and the creator of The Brain Achievement Program and the InsideOut Lifestyle. He is a licensed chiropractor with a special interest in neurology and has had a family wellness practice for 28 years. Visit [www.optimizehealing.com](http://www.optimizehealing.com) for more information.*



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