



Understanding the Effects of Stress and How Reiki Can Help

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[Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part article on the effects of stress on the human body and how Reiki can be used to heal its effects. The second part of the article will appear in the Summer 2015 issue of this magazine.]

UNDERSTANDING THE EFFECTS of stress on the human body can help us, as Reiki practitioners, better serve our clients, as well as provide good self-care. Learning to re-balance the “fight or flight” and “rest and digest” systems of the body can make a major, positive contribution to the healing work that we do for ourselves and others. Stress is something each of us faces daily. It can be something positive when it motivates us to accomplish good things in our lives—like causing us to decide to attend a trade school or university in order to get a better job, or to take a Reiki class and then prioritize regular self-Reiki sessions. In fact, Hans Selye, who coined the word “stress” in 1936, defined it as “the non-specific response of the body to any demand for change.”¹ It sounds innocuous enough doesn't it?—change can be good. Yet, the other side of our relationship to stress is not as positive. Stress can bring about emotional and physical effects that completely alter the way we live and work in negative ways. As with so many other areas of our life, Reiki can help balance and heal the way our body reacts to all stress factors, which in turn will promote a healthier life for ourselves and our clients.

The type of stress we experience and our response to it has changed drastically since pre-historic times. Back then we occasionally encountered a saber-toothed cat and had a huge release of “fight or flight” hormones designed to protect us by prompting us to run or fight for our lives. Then after that short term incident, we would relax and re-balance our nervous system and body, often through the process of telling our friends about what happened. In the modern world we are faced with increasingly stressful conditions that we may not be able take action on to resolve, such as being blamed for something we didn't do at work, but not speaking up because we might get fired, or getting cut off while driving to work or any number of other similar events that are common in our daily lives. By not being able to meet the challenge of these multiple daily stresses directly and take action, the flow of energy in our bodies becomes disrupted and stagnates and our life energy gets blocked. This is unhealthy stress and can produce fatigue and over time, dis-ease becomes disease.

What exactly is happening in our bodies?

Understanding how our bodies process stressful experiences can give us insight into how to deal with stress in a healthy way. We all have an Autonomic Nervous System that fortunately functions without us having to think about it.² It controls important things like heart rate, respiration, digestion, sweating, and body temperature to name a few. This autonomic system is further divided into two parts, 1) the “sympathetic” or “fight or flight” and 2) the “parasympathetic” or “rest and digest” system.

The sympathetic system is a general, overlapping system that can be activated as a whole very quickly. Once this fight or flight system is alarmed, our bodies go into overdrive (see Table 1). Our heart rate increases, blood selectively goes to our muscles (and away from “non-essential” areas such as our gut and frontal lobes or our thinking brain), glucose is released and our

Table 1 - Fight or Flight Response
(sympathetic activation)

Increased:

- focus & alertness
- mental activity & awareness
- heart rate & blood pressure
- muscle contraction
- blood sugar (needed for strength & endurance)
- blood cholesterol & free fatty acids (required as food)
- blood clotting (to minimize the effect of any injury)
- pupil dilation of the eyes (for increased visual acuity)

Decreased:

- immune system activity (to conserve energy)
- blood flow to internal organs (to increase blood to muscles)
- perception of pain (so we can keep going until the danger passes)
- blood flow to the frontal cortex, the logical & rational parts of the brain (so we react on survival instinct)

¹ American Institute of Stress, www.stress.org.

² John Hall, “Limbic System” and “Autonomic Nervous System,” in Guyton and Hall: *Textbook of Medical Physiology*, 12th ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Saunders/Elsevier, 2008).

metabolic rate can increase up to 100%. This is all from the stress hormones (primarily adrenalin and cortisol) released from our adrenal glands. This enabled us to “escape the cat” and survive in hostile situations. Now this response is triggered multiple times a day: when we are running late, when someone yells at us, when we “drop” one of the many balls we are juggling... Often, we are not able to fight or flee and conditioning or circumstances force us to just sit there holding it in. This repetitive triggering of the “fight or flight” response and our inability to resolve many of these events can cause this system to get jammed in overdrive.

There are numerous physical and emotional downsides of being constantly stuck in fight or flight overdrive (see Table 2). Add to this the “Chemical Stress” of what we put into our bodies in terms of the quality and quantity of food, alcohol, nicotine, caffeine and drugs as well as environmental pollutants that impact us, and it becomes clearer how these many unhealthy stressors can eventually lead to illnesses that affect body, mind and spirit! Burnout is inevitable when we live from crisis to crisis without being able to effectively deal with them on a daily basis.

Table 2 - Physical and Emotional Side Effects of Stress

Physical	Emotional
Heart disease	Anxiety & depression
Diabetes	Aggression & uncontrolled Anger
Stroke	A closed off heart
Cancer	Disengaged rational mind
Pituitary Disorder	Decreased creativity & concentration
Adrenal Exhaustion	Focus on fear, rather than love
Sleep Disturbances	Disconnection from our intuition
Chronic Constipation	Overwhelm to the point of a loss of joy
“Stress” Ulcer	Choices based on short-term survival, rather than long-term prosperity
Weight gain (belly fat)	long-term prosperity

Now let’s look at the other side of the autonomic nervous system that is hard wired into us to counteract stress, the “parasympathetic system.” This system is involved in specific reflexes and is more localized, running through our cranial and sacral nerves. This “rest and digest” system is important for us to engage because it promotes the relaxation response.

It is important for us to understand that health and dis-ease are a balancing act of positive and negative stressors in our lives. If we accumulate too many negative pressures, the balance tips in the favor of dis-ease progressing to disease. Sadly, out of con-

Table 3 - Rest and Digest or Relaxation Response

Decreased:

- blood pressure
- respiratory rate
- heart rate & force of contraction

Increased:

- stomach, small intestine & colon activity (digest & move things through)
- efficiency of oxygen use
- alpha brain waves (indicates deep relaxation with closed eyes)
- sense of mental & spiritual well-being

trol stress does not allow us to live our lives to our fullest potential and robs us of our inner peace and joy. So we have an important choice to make—to sink or swim in the sea of stress. Hmm...the choice seems easy, swimming is definitely preferable! Let’s shift from dis-ease to ease and harmony in the body. But how do we balance these multiple systems at work in our brains? We use Reiki of course! Other techniques can also decrease the sympathetic system overdrive and reinforce this new found equilibrium of health and peace within, including yoga, meditation, tapping (Emotional Freedom Technique, EFT), moderate exercise, breath work, guided meditations and more. Now let’s focus on Reiki.

Reiki and stress relief

When a client asks about what Reiki is and its effects, many practitioners explain that Reiki reduces stress and brings deep relaxation to mind, body and spirit and that this helps restore balance and promotes the body’s natural ability to heal. This explanation makes it easy to see why Reiki is a wonderful first choice for stress reduction! Stressed clients may come to you with quite a variety of physical or emotional issues (review Table 2). Listening attentively and reflecting back your understanding of their discomfort in a gentle manner can help put your clients at ease and open them to receiving Reiki with more grace. A quiet, calming environment with soft, relaxing music is also helpful to set the tone for the session.

Many of my clients come with complaints of anxiety, insomnia and/or multiple major life events hitting them one after another and overwhelming them. Some first time clients are so anxious, I start surrounding them with the mental/emotional symbol as they are describing their challenges to me. I find staying calm and grounded in the midst of their “storm” essential to gaining their trust, as I let them know they have been heard

(SHK and the Karuna symbols Shanti, Rama and Kriya on myself help here). If they have quite a number of issues, I may ask them if they have a sense of which are the most important to work on resolving today.

After making my stressed client comfortable on my Reiki table, I say a prayer or set intentions asking that this session be for the client's highest good; that the session be powerful and gently integrated into the mind, body and spirit to allow more love, light, peace, joy and grace into the person's life; that any sacred being of the highest light from the third heaven is welcome to work with us during the session for the client's highest good; and that my ego and personality step aside so that I can be a clear channel for this amazing God-consciousness energy we call Reiki. I have already prepared myself and the room prior to the client's arrival, as well as sent Distance Reiki to the client before he or she arrives. So now, it is time to let the energy guide the actual session.

There are a number of symbols that tend to come in frequently for an anxious or stressed client. The mental/emotional or harmony symbol used around the head helps calm, heal and balance the mind and emotions of the client by releasing blocked emotions, old beliefs, or tension. This improves mental clarity and instills a sense of safety and peace. SHK may also work on softening and releasing any heart-related issues tied to the client's stress. The harmony symbol may also help release a habit that is contributing to the stress in the client's life and help establish a new, healthier way of being. For deep-seated issues, the Distance Healing symbol (HSZSN) may enter the session to connect to a past traumatic event and send Reiki to the root cause of the situation or to connect to a person's spirit to impart healing and peace by integrating this aspect back into the person's life. The power symbol (CKR) and Usui Master symbol are wonderful to help release blocks, ground the person and empower this new state of being. In someone who is fatigued or exhausted by stress, CKR and the Master symbol energies used over the adrenal glands can balance and energize these over-worked organs.

I find the Holy Fire symbol elevates the vibrational frequency of the session and helps with all of the above and more. Used by itself or with the other Usui or Karuna Reiki® symbols, Holy Fire creates more rapid shifts and adds a sense of tremendous grace and ease to releases and the personal empowerment that can occur in a session. Practitioners will find that the frequency of the Karuna symbols dissolves stubborn stress blocks with ease through their ability to prepare an area for deep healing (Zonar), to gracefully and powerfully release stuck energy (Halu, Holy Fire), to fill released areas with deep love, light,

peace and compassion (Harth, Shanti, Holy Fire), to retrain the body concerning what is normal (Gnosa), to connect the client with nature and its healing (Iava) and finally, to integrate, balance and ground or anchor all the healing that has taken place (Rama, Kriya). Our imaginations and the guidance of the Reiki energy are the only limit to how to use this incredible gift!

A client story

Here is a client story that illustrates how I use Reiki in a session involving stress. "Joyce" comes into my office visibly upset and anxious. She has had issues with anxiety and staying at a healthy weight since early high school. She sees a counselor and also takes medications for her panic attacks and anxiety. She has also had several major life events occurring involving challenges in her marriage, her parents and with being the mom of teenagers. SHK and talking about the situations help calm her, as does my patient listening and reflecting back to her. Once Joyce is comfortable on my Reiki table, more SHK begins to flow, with my hands in various positions around her head. This continues until she starts taking deeper breaths and her face relaxes some. I gently push the dense energies around her head away with SHK and CKR. Her energy system wants attention next and CKR opens and establishes good flow and spinning of her seven chakras. I am guided to work on her emotional and mental auras—first with HSZSN to connect to "everything that is ready to go now," then Zonar to prepare this combination of old memories, beliefs and experiences for deep healing and release, and finally Holy Fire comes in and gently burns them all away. Her heart chakra wants more attention and HSZSN, Zonar, Halu, Harth and Rama first connect to a core issue, then prepare it for deep healing, dissolve the block, fill the area with love, light and compassion, and then balance and integrate this new state of being within her heart. Other areas of the body are treated, including a focus on her adrenal glands, filling them with energy of CKR and SHK. Rama is called on to integrate, balance and ground the session. Shanti fills her mental and emotional auras. The Divine Feminine, who has been present through the session, seals the session with love and light. Joyce is surprised at how calm and centered she feels. I talk to her about how breath can be used to interrupt the fight or flight response and also to calm it—just three–five breaths as soon as she feels her anxiety or panic start to kick in can help keep her thinking brain engaged and give her additional resources to handle the situation. She thinks she could start walking in nature while her teens are in school to help foster more calm in her life as well. We schedule an appointment for the following week.

Joyce comes back anxious the next week but not in such a panic as compared to the first session.

Conclusion

Reiki is such a gift for me and works beautifully with most stressed patients in a session with occasional follow-up or perhaps through empowering clients by having them learn Reiki. I have been guided to use several other techniques involving Reiki with clients who have persistent stress, anxiety or Post Traumatic

Stress Disorder. These techniques involve connecting with and receiving a score from the fight or flight system to turn it down and with the rest and digest system to fill it up. I will share those with you in the next issue of the *Reiki News Magazine*, as well as some information about what we think is going on in the brain of someone with PTSD. As I have said before, I really don't know what people do without Reiki in their lives! 

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