

How Stress Shapes Your Body

from "Stress in the Background: How to Thrive in a High-Stress World"

by Elizabeth Eckert, PhD

The myth of stress management

Everybody's stressed out these days. No wonder. Stress can find a foothold nearly anywhere – just like weeds that grow up in a rock garden. It doesn't look like there's a speck of dirt for them to root in, but somehow they're just there.

If you've read my health guide, *Transform Stress Into Power*, (free at WordCures.com) you know that I identify 6 common sources of everyday stress:

- Lifestyle chaos
- Over-taxing of personal resources such as your time, money, and energy.
- Personal conflicts and power struggles (especially within yourself)
- Being unwilling to change outgrown or unproductive behavior and habits
- Being unwilling to give or keep your word (includes keeping your word to yourself)
- Unexpressed creativity

Of course those 6 sources are just the tip of the iceberg. Just in *Word Cures (the book)*, we identify another seventeen. And I'm sure there are even more.

The point is this. Why try to "manage" it all? Doesn't that sound like an awful lot of energy down the drain? Not to mention that conventional stress management works only so well.

Sure, it's relaxing to take a nice long bath, listen to some quiet music, get a massage, or play with the cat. Of course it feels good. And I recommend it!

But it's not going to solve anything – long term – is it? Think about the absurdity. You can't think straight because your home is so chaotic – so you go for a nice long walk. You'll feel better for a few minutes, sure. But your home is still chaotic. Got the picture?

Why not just organize the house? That would resolve the stress. You wouldn't have to spend all that continuous energy "managing" it. And you'd feel better – for real.

Of course, it's not that simple. If it was, you would have done it already. We all know that. But the least we can do is have you put your energy where it will count – resolving the challenge! (It *is* possible.)

Stress and muscular & skeletal system pain

By now I hope you realize I'm not simply referring to some generic "stress" like everybody gets. We're talking about **yours**. And how your stress affects your body is personal. Really personal.

In fact, stress has the power to literally re-shape your skeleton. You may think of bones as "those hard things that don't change," but unfortunately, they do. There are several interlacing factors that go into the process, which we'll explore briefly.

Stress and congestion

First, stress causes a state of congestion around your major organs. It's a basic principle of Traditional Chinese Medicine that an energy imbalance (stress, to us) around any of the major organ systems causes restriction and congestion of the natural flow of energy around the organs involved.

This congestion results in less free movement of the organ itself and the tissue around it, including muscles and connective tissue. Over time, this congestion and lack of movement produces changes in your muscular tissue. Tissue that is stagnant over time becomes hard and fibrotic to the point where it can't move freely. Lack of motion creates a tissue state that restricts motion even further.

Next time you're at the grocery store, take a close look at the steaks you see on display. Look at the difference between nice, soft red tissue (the kind of steak you'd like to purchase if you eat steak) and the tough stuff with all the long, stringy fibers (the kind you'd marinate, tenderize, and hold back from grandma because you know she'd never be able to chew it.) Get the connection?

Stress and connective tissue

Second, there is some scientific thought that the part of your body's communication network that is comprised of stress hormones, neuropeptides, and electromagnetic energy travels through the medium of your connective tissue.

Connective tissue is one single matrix that envelops your body. A layer of connective tissue connects your skin to your body. (Again, to the meat market – did you ever try and skin a raw chicken? If so, you know just how tough

connective tissue can be – 2000 pounds per square inch!) It also surrounds each individual muscle and the individual fibers that comprise the muscle. It surrounds your organs, separates the cavities in your head, cushions your joints – basically it's everywhere!

If connective tissue loses elasticity as a result of mental or emotional stress, and there's some evidence that it does, then it's not difficult to see how this would affect your muscles, bones, and joints.

Soft tissue and your body's bony structure

Third, your skeleton responds to the force applied to it by your muscles and gravity. A principle known as "Wolff's Law of Bone Transformation" says that the internal architecture of a bone responds to the force being applied to it. In other words, your bones change shape as a result of mechanical stress.

This is not unlike how nature transforms the landscape in other ways – such as the way a tree growing up the side of a mountain will bend toward the sun.

As your movement patterns consistently pull on bony attachments, the shape of the bones will change. As your muscles consistently balance and correct in the same patterns, the shape of the bones will change.

Over time, the combined effects of these soft tissue influences and bony changes will begin to have several effects. One effect is that your tight muscles will complain in an attempt to get you to correct the situation. If you are unable to do that, for whatever reason, the joints of your body receiving the greatest amount of inappropriate pressure will begin to wear out.

In a way, you could compare the alignment of your body to the alignment of your car. When your car frame is misaligned, your tires wear out too fast. When your skeleton is misaligned, your joints wear out too fast. Your car is easier to deal with, isn't it?

Stress, posture, and pain

This is clearly an area for further research in the scientific community. As a bodyworker for 17 years, my experience suggests that certain areas of the body may be more vulnerable to the effects of particular mental and emotional stresses than others.

Published research on body types does exist. But the specific effects of particular types of stress (like yours – the **personal** kind) on particular body regions seems beyond the scope of both the energy medicine researchers and the orthopedic community. Presumably, one group or the other will eventually get curious.

I'll share one example that nearly everyone can appreciate. There's an area of your body, just below the "v" between your ribs (below your sternum or breastbone), known as the solar plexus.

A blow to the solar plexus will knock the wind out of you. Literally. You'll think you're a goner.

A mental or emotional blow to your self-esteem has the same effect. Watch people's body language closely when they're in an emotionally tense situation. They'll cover up their solar plexus nearly every time, protecting it from attack.

A person whose perception of their life is that they're constantly being attacked, then, will have a tendency to alter their posture to protect their solar plexus. It's instinctive. And it's also the beginning of a chain reaction of events that ultimately leads to a caved-in chest and forward head posture, and mechanical stress on the neck and lower back.

A patient with this posture is likely to complain of back pain, neck pain, headaches, abdominal distress, and often, generalized pain throughout the body. Their perception of having been attacked, a form of stress, is not incidental to this pattern.

Suggested reading on stress and muscular & skeletal system pain

Benfield, Harriet & Efreim Korngold (1991). *Between Heaven and Earth: A Guide to Chinese Medicine*. Ballantine.

Greene, Elliot & Barbara Goodrich-Dunn (2004). *The Psychology of the Body*. Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.

Oschmann, James L. (2000). *Energy Medicine: The Scientific Basis*. Churchill Livingstone.

Skrobisch, Al (2003). *Pain Relief for Life*. The Career Press, Inc.

About the author

Frustrated with watching well-intentioned people unknowingly sabotage their potential and their health, Elizabeth Eckert began a campaign to inspire better results.

Elizabeth can show you how your inside world of thoughts and habits manifests in the everyday elements of your life. Her education includes developmental psychology, neuromuscular therapy, and energy medicine.

Elizabeth lives in a nearly ideal location in spacious North Dakota. She is the author of *Word Cures: How to Keep Stupid Excuses from Sabotaging Your Health* and *Stress In The Background: How to Thrive in a High-Stress World*.