

ONE SIMPLE WAY TO PROTECT YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM FROM STRESS

Even during good times, stress is unavoidable. No matter how positive we are, we are going to encounter stress or have moments of anxiety. The issue is what you do about it.

You want to have strategies for recovery and restoring your equilibrium. Unchecked or prolonged stress can impair your immunity. Let's learn a little about how the immune system works so we can understand how to protect it.

When your body receives a "threat" in the form of bacteria, let's say, the immune system reacts. The number of white blood cells increases to fight the infection, but this results in inflammation in the body. An inflammatory response is necessary and protective, but prolonged or unnecessary inflammation is bad. Researchers now suspect that inflammation is behind many major diseases, including heart disease, cancer, and even Alzheimer's. Therefore, we do not want unnecessary or unhelpful inflammation.

Surprisingly, it is looking like the immune system also responds to emotions. Neuroscientist Candace Pert called them "molecules of emotion" (her book by that title is highly recommended). Negative emotions such as anxiety, or fear, interpreted by the brain as "threat", can also trigger an increase in white blood cell count. However, there is no "enemy" that these cells can attack. Nevertheless, they still leave inflammation behind.

How can we turn off this response? Positive emotions release different hormones from those of negative emotions. However, when we are in fear, anxiety, grief, stress, or trauma it is hard to just create positive emotions. When we are in that state, we are paying attention to many negative factors around us, which is natural for survival but not healthy for us. However, we can change from negative to positive emotions by changing what we pay *attention* to.

One quick, easy, and research-based approach to change what we pay attention to and to release positive hormones in our body is by being in a state of gratitude. This state can be achieved by focusing your attention on the many things that you have to be grateful for. Were you able to walk by yourself this morning? Not everyone can. Do you have a roof over your head? Are you able to choose what you eat? No matter how bad things are, it is possible to find something to be grateful for.

While it is helpful to think about things that we are grateful for, we need to do this in a way that can momentarily turn off that fight/flight/freeze reaction and put us into the calm, parasympathetic nervous system. Research indicates that it takes about 20 seconds of focused attention on something positive for it to register in our brains and create the reaction that we want. When we briefly hear a compliment or notice a rose, it may not register in our brains. When we *think* of our gratitudes, they may not sufficiently register. That is why *writing them down* is so important. As you slowly write by hand, you are making a stronger impression in the brain. This focused attention will give you the reaction that you need physiologically.

If you plan to write down 3 things that you are grateful for every day, this changes your focus of attention during the day. While it may be hard to avoid noticing the negative things, you are countering that by consciously at first and later unconsciously looking for the positive – looking for something to be grateful for. This changes your focus of attention.

While writing down 3 things a day that you are grateful for may sound kind of “out there”, scientists have found that doing that actually *rewires* the brain. It is attention that drives plasticity – the ability of the brain to change as a result of experience – and knowing that you have to write down 3 things you are grateful for every day changes the *focus of attention* during the day as you start to look for and notice that there is much to be grateful for. Writing them down reinforces that and, over time, you begin to become more grateful. Being in a grateful state is a great anxiety and stress reducer.

Let’s get those positive “molecules of emotion” working for us! Every evening (or the following morning) write down three things you are grateful for. Over dinner ask your family to share “one good thing” or one thing that they are grateful for. Over time, you will rewire your brain to be more positive.