

The Fight or Flight Response and Unhealthy Aging

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The book "*The Body Bears the Burden: Trauma, Dissociation, and Disease*" by Robert Scaer is a fascinating look at how important treatment using the therapies of Chinese Medicine is when a person suffers a trauma. I am not suggesting that promoting Chinese Medicine was Scaer's intent at all, but his dedication to George Engel speaks volumes about pulse diagnosis (again, unintentional but pertinent to us). He says that "the diagnostic truth lies more in the uninterrupted story told in its entirety by the patient than in a dozen diagnostic tests." Where can we see this uninterrupted story? In the pulses.

That statement impacted my reading of the book and Scaer's explanations of the inconsistencies between the actual minor physical injuries that people suffer in accidents and the unexplained disabling symptoms that they experience. For example, how could a football player who was knocked unconscious for an hour have minimal to no cognitive damage while another person who was rear-ended at 10 mph suffer cognitive impairment lasting up to three years? Scaer makes the assertion that it is the meaning attached to the event that often defines what the health results will be. For example, being rear-ended happens in a state of helplessness, while being injured playing a sport is accepted as more or less one of the things that can happen during a game.

Then there's flight or fight. But when neither of those options is available, one might fall into a state of immobility (or freeze response). In Peter Levine's book, "*Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma*," he explains that during this freeze response all of our neurochemical events associated with the fight or flight response keep going. So there is a high state of arousal of both the limbic system and the autonomic nervous system (ANS). It is interesting that when the threat is gone, animals go through a sort of release or discharge so that the limbic system and ANS can return to a normal state. It seems that humans frequently go through the freezing when faced with a threat, but seldom go through the discharge part of the cycle. Then the brain stores the abnormal intense state of arousal coupled with our conscious ability to relive an event over and over.

It is these subtleties of somatic manifestations of emotional states that are fascinating to study and treat in our field. Our medicine does not necessarily separate intangible events (or what science would label psychological conditions) from tangible events (physiological conditions). Worry damages the flow of *qi* in our digestion. Is that psychological or physiological? It is both of course. In our examination of the pulses, we can feel the imbalance in the energetic flow that worry causes. We feel it and we can predict the physiological results. The results of this pattern will be poor digestion and eventually there will be issues with the immune system, breathing, and potentially with the skin. Our medicine has that advantage: we can feel imbalances and counsel our patients about the impending results of those imbalances. Take for example the fact that we have the ability to relive an event over and over. Imagine how that pattern of thinking affects the pulses and therefore general health. It is just like it sounds - thinking over and over - creates a curving movement that repeats and repeats. So rather than energy flowing, it gets stuck in one position neither organ supporting the other. Showing patients how their thought processes affect their *qi* is

a gift; shared information can give them more power to control their emotions.

What has all of this got to do with aging? Having the fight or flight response on all of the time has detrimental effects on the body. The fear response is supposed to be a self-regulating system, but when we perceive that we are under constant stress, it can't stop; our body can't get a rest. When the fight or flight response was first discovered, a threat was more or less defined as a real danger to one's physical survival. But now a threat is the possibility that you will miss a deadline, have an argument, or bounce a check. The health effects of increased heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol start to have a negative impact. If a person can't control his or her stress response, eventually there are going to be results like sleeping disorders, depression, skin conditions (as I said above, poor digestion can lead to skin issues), heart disease, and memory deficits.

I frequently tell my patients that acupuncture (and other therapies in Chinese Medicine) can help "minimize the negative effects of stress on the body." Here's what I'm talking about - helping the person who perceives constant stress maintain a body that works better despite his or her perceptions. The body can be micro-managed to behave better in the face of constant stress or in the face of the patient's inability to stop the stress response. Many people don't even recognize the effects of stress because the effects of the stress go directly into the body and then don't get recognized until there are physical symptoms. Eye twitching is a good example of this phenomenon. If our patients can't change either their reality or their perceptions of reality, Traditional Chinese Medicine can still help them by rebalancing their flow of *qi*, keeping the spirit open, rectifying and improving digestion and immune function so that the body can remain healthy. We can help their body become the safe haven it once was.

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