

Fight Or Flight vs. Rest And Digest

One benefit of the Suppers program is the incorporation of more time spent in the “rest and digest” mode and less time spent in the “fight or flight” mode. The meeting format sets the example: Eating whole foods; having water to drink; using lower lights at meals; cultivating thoughtfulness and gratitude; eating among friends and cultivating therapeutic friendships; trying on meditative exercises; and learning to observe, accept, and redirect thought patterns.

Does The Phrase “Fight Or Flight” Sound Familiar

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “fight or flight”? Saber toothed tigers? Flashing lights in the rear view mirror? It is the alarm state that our bodies go into whenever a threat is perceived. And it is regulated by a part of our nervous system that is outside our conscious control, the sympathetic nervous system. In other words, it’s an automatic response that works faster than the thinking part of the brain and makes the body ready for action.

The fight or flight rush sensation is a sign that the sympathetic nervous system has kicked in producing stress hormones. Its job is to activate glands and organs to help us spring into action or defend the body against attack. Most of us can recognize the jolt of adrenaline, the body’s biochemical preparation for fighting or fleeing. Threat is, however, just one reason for running adrenaline. Having sugar, caffeine, cigarettes, or too much alcohol or other drugs produces the same fight or flight chemistry. That means there is an important relationship between stress and addiction. When adrenaline runs *for any reason*, blood moves to the muscles and the action centers of the brain; heart rate and blood pressure increase. Blood flow for digestion decreases. These changes come with a surge of energy, stimulating brain chemicals, and sometimes nervousness or panicky feelings, especially when there is no burst of physical activity to mop up the excess stress hormones. Think of it this way: when you get a burst of fight or flight chemicals and you fight or flee, the chemicals have done a good job and your body uses them to respond to the urgent situation. But when you get the fight or flight chemicals because of a food or drug stress and you *don’t* run them off, it’s a ticket to agitation, panic, foul moods, and eventually ill health and/or weight gain.

The sympathetic system’s activity breaks down the body when stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol run. When this system dominates, energy is diverted from healing, building tissues, and eliminating waste. The energy for this system comes from demands placed on your glands (as opposed to the kind of energy that comes from eating food). And while it feels good or great at first, it is often followed by fatigue or even a crash. Over time, too much sympathetic nervous system activity breaks the body.

How About “Rest And Digest”

Its biological opposite is the parasympathetic system of nerves. This is the “rest and digest” system. When parasympathetic activity dominates, healing and regeneration occur. The body performs activities like digesting, detoxifying, eliminating, and building immunity.

What Activates This Activity

Rest, relaxation, contentment, and the kind of thinking and feeling that bring balance and a sense of well being into your life. Biochemically, the adrenaline and cortisol have to be down for parasympathetic activity to be up.

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What Does It Feel Like

Quiet. Composed. You might feel lethargic, but that just means your body is in repair mode. It feels like the opposite of fight or flight, which can come on fast. The biochemicals of fight or flight are yours in a split second. All you have to do is think an alarming thought, have an argument, feel threatened, or ingest something like too much alcohol, caffeine, or cigarettes. Eating too much sugar can bring it on too if your body is poor at regulating blood sugar levels (as in hypoglycemia and pre-diabetes.)

How Do You Bring On Parasympathetic Activity

Bringing about parasympathetic activity takes more time than bringing on the biochemistry of fight or flight. To get into healing mode, there is no choice but to relax. For some people, meditation or prayer work. For those who can't sit still, it's possible to be more quietly in motion, like walking in nature or swimming laps meditatively.

Because sympathetic and parasympathetic modes oppose one another, resting, digesting and healing can't take place when survival hormones are running. The biochemicals of rest and digest are critical for survival too, but long term survival. Nature cannot give you a spurt of relaxation like it can give you a spurt of urgency. If stress mode has been your preferred way of being, you may have to make a conscious effort to slow down and heal, as by practicing yoga or regularly walking in nature. Adrenaline always trumps the chemistry of serenity because we are programmed to produce it faster than we can think, for survival.

For a person with addictive tendencies, it's hard to spend enough time in a quiet, parasympathetic state because as soon as you feel yourself withdrawing and looking for a hit of your drug or food of choice, you're producing stress chemicals. Anything that makes adrenaline run flips the stress chemistry. Substances and even addictive behaviors (for example, gambling) bring on stress hormones, either by directly causing a change or by creating an alarm state when the body goes into withdrawal. This is one of the main reasons Suppers has created a program that provides long term support for lifestyle change. Finding the right diet and developing an interest in alternate sources of pleasure – like good human connections or hobbies – takes time.

What Does That Mean Long Term

Over time, too much sympathetic dominance (think alarm, adrenaline) can lead to the inability to absorb nutrients from food, overweight, poor blood sugar regulation, anxiety, depression, learning issues, chronic exhaustion, insomnia, aches and pains, and ultimately serious illnesses like diabetes. These are the logical result of calling on the glands for one emergency after another, whether the emergency is real, imagined, or because of what you ate or drank. Compromised digestion, whether from too much stress, antibiotics, alcohol, or bad food, is a big contributor to all these health problems.

How Can You Repair After Years Of Too Much "Sympathetic" Activity

It takes exercising your decision muscle. It takes breaking old, unhealthy patterns and creating new healthy patterns. It will take support from your family and friends. These changes are not things you are likely to accomplish alone. You can learn what you need to learn at the family tables of Suppers.

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In general, here is what happens at these tables: You will start observing how your mind and body react to things. You will take notes and work first on the areas you know you can succeed at. As you start feeling better or get more support, other areas may become easier to include. Just begin it.

1. Eat well. Your body needs adequate protein *for your highly individual needs*, high quality fats, high fiber carbohydrates (whole fruits, vegetables, and grains) and adequate water to repair. Junk food (chips, soda, candy, etc.) is stressful, fattening, and increases risk of failure or relapse.
2. Drink enough water. Every cell in your brain, in fact your whole body, needs adequate water to function. Where illness or addiction have compromised cells, added water helps the long term detoxification process and efficient operation of your whole body. Less toxic bodies will probably require less water.
3. Work on the other addictions. Addictions stress and break down the body.
4. Learn about the value of "pro-biotics". Many of our members need to repair digestion with these supplements in order to help with depression, anxiety, learning issues, obesity, diabetes, and problems with alcohol. Abdominal bloating, gas, constipation, diarrhea, belching, abdominal pressure, or a history of fungal infections are tip offs that this should be investigated.
5. Learn about breath work. Breathing deeply and slowly has immediate benefits, quieting down a fired up system and detoxing.
6. Choose relaxing activity you're willing to do regularly. It could be yoga, meditation, warm baths, or prayer. For people who require some movement to relax, you might start swimming meditatively or spending quiet time in nature.
7. Get help with unproductive, destructive thought patterns. You can give yourself a panic attack sitting still in a chair if your thinking is alarming. Your therapeutic friends at the Suppers table will help.
8. Get your blood sugar checked. America is now said to suffer an epidemic of obesity and diabetes. The same actions that normalize blood sugar (a diet of whole foods, reasonable physical exercise and mind-quieting exercise) also promote a better balance in the nervous system.
9. Learn the list of dietary stressors and get help turning your eating habits around. Go slowly. Speed invites failure.
 - Sugar
 - Alcohol (Any amount is toxic for alcoholics, some others may benefit from small quantities)
 - Coffee and caffeine drinks; some can tolerate it better than others
 - Insufficient water intake
 - Cigarettes
 - Any food that has a drug-like effect *on you* like chocolate has for many people
 - Chronic dieting, a ticket to depression
 - Overeating
 - Many medications

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10. If you are thinking thoughts and having emotions that feel stressful, the stress is taking place not just in your mind but in your cells at the same time. Get help if you can't do it alone. This is why we form therapeutic friendships at Suppers.
11. Practice gratitude. It helps you stay in the rest and digest frame of mind.
12. Identify things other than food and substances that make you feel satisfied and content. Do more of these things. These are "alternate sources of pleasure", like a sport, a hobby, or working as a group on a common goal.
13. Get enough rest. If sleep eludes you, it may be an indication that you need professional help.
14. Eliminate whatever unproductive stressors you can eliminate and reduce whatever stressors you have the power to reduce. Stress activates adrenal stress hormones. For you the list might include reducing exposure to noise or things with chemical smells, unnecessary arguments, overdoing anything including exercise, getting too little exercise relative to how you eat, unhealthy relationships, dishonesty, cell phones – anything you know takes an avoidable toll on you.
15. Spend enough time in darkness or less harsh light. Our bodies are designed to produce the biochemistry of repair in total darkness. Sleeping with no exposure to a light source is one cheap, easy way to get your biology to support long term health or sobriety. For sensitive people, fluorescent lighting equals poison. If you feel better in natural light or under different kinds of light bulbs, *it's data*.

Conclusion

Anyone with an addiction or mental health diagnosis is by definition stressed. One of the most powerful things you can do for your health, well being, and/or sobriety is learn how to spend more time in parasympathetic mode, the rest and digest way of being.