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**“Fight, Flight or Freeze”**

**What’s Going On In My Brain?**

Without getting too technical and running the risk of my readers glazing over, I want to clarify in general terms how the mind/body connection is in full force in these stressful, challenging times.

First, I need to do some explaining about our brains. There is a part of the brain called *the primitive brain*. It is located in the back of our heads by the brain stem. It remains a vestige of early man. Early Man hunted for food, confronted dangerous creatures and dealt with other physically dangerous situations. The brain developed the capacity to handle these situations effectively.

The physiological changes in the body when faced with danger protected Early Man. This is what we refer to as the Fight, Flight or Freeze response. Depending on the situation, Early Man would challenge and fight the attacker, flee or freeze. The senses heightened, pupils dilated and adrenaline was flowing. Along with adrenaline, the hormone cortisol was also flowing in large quantities. After the confrontation, levels would revert to normal and Early Man would go about his life.

Cortisol is a stress hormone that modern man also manufactures along with adrenaline. In today’s world, most of our stressful situations do not involve confronting wild animals and imminent death. (unless of course we are talking about war or indigenous societies living as Early Man did). However, the body reacts similarly as Early Man’s did. Faced with job demands, a family crisis or any number of modern day stressors, cortisol and adrenaline are released. Unfortunately, cortisol can accumulate in the body with no mechanism for release. This can have negative consequences in our daily lives that could lead to but are not limited to:

* Anxiety
* Depression
* Digestive problems
* Headaches
* Weight gain
* Sleep disturbances
* Memory and concentration impairment

The body is unable to differentiate between an attack from a wild animal and a verbal attack from a co-worker. The same physiological response occurs and, in some cases, has a negative impact on a person’s everyday functioning.

Cortisol levels remain at higher than average levels and we are not aware of it. We **are** aware of being impatient, easy to anger, more tired than usual and just having a negative mindset. Getting cortisol levels back in the average range may take some time for those of us who have been dealing with stress for long periods of time without relief.

Today, it is critically important to develop and have at our disposal effective coping tools. It is interesting to note that cortisol is stored in the muscle tissue and weight-bearing exercise allows it to break up and be released out of the body. That is one healthy coping strategy for stress reduction that most of us can take advantage of. There are many others, depending on your particular lifestyle and stressors. How about taking time away from the regular routine for recreational activities? It may be helpful to take a break from social media and technology in general and power down all devices for a period of time. Some of us enjoy writing or engaging in other creative endeavors. Talking with a trusted family member or friend can lower our stress also. When more guidance and objectivity is needed, seeking the help of a mental health professional may be the answer.

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