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Weaving Mind-Body Transformation

excerpted from **Tapestry of Health**

by Dr. Daniel A. Monti and Dr. Anthony J. Bazzan

Unhealthy foods, excess body fat, poor sleep and lack of exercise can all increase inflammation. But there is another big source of inflammation: stress. Each of us has our own mind-body biosystem, and how we perceive life events and the world around us and then react to them can have a significant impact on the rest of our physiology and biochemistry. In fact, stress levels left unchecked can wreak havoc throughout your body and open doors to disease.

Our hardwired stress responses and all of their offshoots have a good side for sure. They motivate us to keep us safe and alive, either to meet an improtant deadline or to flee from a lion in the jungle. That is what we call "good stress."

But even a good stress response is designed to be short lived so that we switch it off to a relatively unstressed state. There's the catch—the switch often gets stuck in the "on" position. The lions of our evolutionary past are replaced today by an unrelenting boss, a sick parent, a struggling child, and so on. For many of us, just as one stressor subsides another starts, and we are frequently juggling several stressors all at once.

This kind of constant distress is unequivocally, quantifiably bad—actually more than bad. Bad stress is a major factor in the six leading causes of death in the United States: cancer, coronary heart disease, accidental injuries, respiratory disorders, cirrhosis of the liver and suicide.

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that stress accounts for about 75% of all US doctor visits while the Occupational Health and Safety Administration reports that number to be as high as 90 percent.

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Fortunately, we have integrative solutions. Stress is not just a mental state; *it's a whole body experience.* It can pervade all aspects of your health and well-being, leaving you depleted physically and emotionally.

Your body's response to stress is controlled by a branch of your nervous system called the *autonomic* nervous system (ANS). This system also controls the functions of many different organs, regulates heartbeat, controls breathing and aids digestion. The best, and worst, part is that your ANS does all this without you having to think about it—stress is perceived as some kind of threat to your well-being which causes the ANS to go into "fight-or-flight" mode. The overall response mechanism is the same whether you are running late to catch a flight at the airport or running from a lion to keep from getting eaten. It is just the intensity of the stress response that varies depending upon how bad the threat is perceived to be. Here's how it unfolds:

First, in response to whatever the threat is, your ANS orders a series of physiological reactions that rev up your body. Your adrenal glands pump higher levels of stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, into your blood stream. Your kidneys release renin, a hormone that raises your blood pressure. Your heart pumps faster. Blood is pulled away from your midsection, thereby slowing down gut functions. Your blood sugar soars. Your pupils dilate so you can see better. Your immune cells spew out inflammatory chemicals to stop bleeding and fight infection in case either occur. In general, you gear up to fight or run for your life.

Now imagine what happens when this condition is chronic and your body is perpetually in a state of bad stress: you have an increased risk for high blood pressure, cardiac disease, poor sugar metabolism, digestive problems, difficulty sleeping, poor immunity and susceptibility to illness, to name just a few issues. Sound familiar?

It doesn't stop there. In the brain, high levels of stress hormones are associated with imbalances in neurotransmitters such as serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine that allow your brain cells to regulate your mood and behavior. An imbalance of these chemicals—too much of one or too little of another—can lead to depression and

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anxiety. Bad stress can also affect levels of the amino acid homocysteine which, when elevated, can increase the risk of Alzheimer's disease and stroke.

In your everyday life you probably most commonly experience bad stress as anxiety. From there it usually goes in two directions: you turn your stress inward—for instance, shovel down food to soothe yourself, engage in some addictive behavior, ruminate, or veg out in front of the television—or you turn it outward against others—for instance, look for fights, drive with road rage, or lash out.

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At its root, the answer lies in emotional regulation. Emotional regulation boils down to being aware of your emotions and having effective tools to navigate them. How best to go about that is a subject of great debate. Based on our own studies and the findings of extensive research from around the world, we have found that an integrative approach is as effective for emotional wellness as it is for nutrition.

It is no coincidence that new reseearch keeps revealing more about the food/emotion connection. In particular, short chain fatty acids (SCFA) found in vegetables, fruits and legumes are extremely important for healthy emotional functioning. One exciting breakthrough for understanding this cause and effect relationship is a new area of study known as nutritional psychiatry. Nutritional psychiatrists study how consuming certain foods physically reshape the brain—most notably by reducing and preventing inflammation.

In relation to emotional well-being, inflammation is linked to causing depression. The typical American diet is to inflammation what a bee is to honey. In effect, we help produce our own depression. We have a 25 to 35 percent higher risk of depression than those with a Japanese or Mediterranean diet rich in plant based foods like vegetables, fruits, nuts and whole grains, as well as fish, and little, if any, meat or dairy; and no processed or refined foods.

One recently published report suggests a mechanism that may help explain this fact. Plant fiber-rich foods travel to the colon and feed both the cells of the colon and the healthful microbiome. They in turn produce the SCFA's from the food and send them directly to the brain via the general circulatory system. However, processed, refined foods never make it to the colon; they enter the body via the small intestine and create obesity and inflammation. The proper colon bacteria, and consequently the brain, are then left begging for SCFA's to help with healthy emotional functioning.

The Tapestry Mind-Body Transformation Plan also focuses on the ways you perceive life events and then react to them. This approach addresses the fundamental necessity to regulate your emotional processing through self-acceptance and through nourishing your emotional health. This can take a lifetime to master, but big transformations can come quickly with some focused attention, patience and TLC. In the words of the great vocalist Lena Horne, "It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it."

Dr. Daniel Monti gave a presentation at the 2024 YRS Conference, and Dr. Anthony Bazzan will speak at Medical Yoga 2025.

YOGA RESEARCH SOCIETY & MARCUS INSTITUTE OF INTEGRATIVE HEALTH PRESENT

MEDICAL YOGA 2025

May 18, 2025

A program which will honor
the Centenary Celebration
of the founding of Kaivalyadhama
by Swami Kuvalayananda

at Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia