



STRESSFUL TIMES IMPACT HEALTH

HELP YOURSELF

By Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP



The

BURNOUT

EPIDEMIC

It feels like no one's life is easy these days. In my 36-year career, I have never seen more people under more stress for longer periods than I see now.

Tired, unmotivated Mara

When Mara, 68, came to me for help, she had spent the last two years care-taking her ailing mother. More recently, she'd been refereeing family dysfunction related to the pandemic and different levels of precautions people were willing to take. She was worried sick about her grown kids and their issues but also irritated for the demands they placed on her.

Mara owned a business with her partner, and the responsibilities were unrelenting. This stress affected both their relationship and their livelihood. "I'm not coping very well," she said. "I'm making more mistakes. I can't think straight. And I'm snapping at him all the time." She also felt troubled by political events in her community.

"I feel like I can never catch a break. When we finally got away for a few days of vacation last month, I spent half the time on my phone or laptop, putting out fires and managing other people's problems," she said. "My energy is zapped." She felt tired and achy, unmotivated and aimless.

"My digestion is not working right anymore either," she added. She often felt constipated and/or bloated.

Though exhausted, Mara did not sleep well at night. She felt jittery and anxious. She relied on caffeine for energy, which she

BOUNCE BACK



knew was not helpful in the long run and contributed to both her anxiety and sleep troubles.

A pandemic of "the blahs"

Mara's physical exam was unremarkable, and her screening blood tests were within normal ranges, including her thyroid tests. She did not take any prescription medications and had

no other chronic ailments. There really was no specific diagnosis for Mara's condition, but she certainly was not thriving. Her story reminded me of a recent *New York Times* article¹ describing the effects of pandemic stress on many people in 2021. As the pandemic has dragged on, the acute state of anguish people felt in 2020 "has given way to a chronic condition of languishing," according to the article.

Languishing—feeling joyless, unmotivated, stagnant, empty—is not as extreme as depression, but it is far from flourishing. We can think of languishing as the *absence* of well-being. This concept fit Mara perfectly. When I shared the article with her, it actually made her feel a little better. At least she was in good company!

A backdrop of vulnerabilities

Even before COVID-19 arrived, our constant access to work, social media, and the defeating news cycle—on top of political strife, climate change, and environmental toxins—created a backdrop of vulnerabilities. The ongoing pandemic stress

has revealed or exacerbated people's physical, emotional, and cognitive imbalances and illnesses.

We are also more aware that adverse childhood events, low income, and being a person of color in this country create additional stress, and that stress is not meted out evenly across zip codes or populations. Indeed, racism², long a public health crisis, has been further highlighted by the pandemic.

And far-reaching pandemic stressors continue. To name a few: Worry about getting infected; coping with viral infection and its aftermath; loss of loved ones; uncertainty about the future; inability to be with family and friends; loss of social support networks; loss of work and income; worry about rent or mortgage payments; change in school routines; disruption in everyday activities, such as participating in health clubs, choirs, and worship services.

Chronic stress can undermine health

With the unrelenting stress of 2020 and 2021, we're not bouncing back like we used to because we have not had

BURNED OUT, STRESSED OUT?

Here are the top tools and recommendations I use with patients suffering the ill effects of ongoing stress.

1. Get Homeopathic Constitutional Care.

First and foremost, I prescribe a homeopathic remedy individualized to the whole person—their physical, cognitive, and emotional states. A well-chosen constitutional remedy will not only address the person's symptoms, it will raise their threshold for feeling stressed, so they are less susceptible to stresses that previously triggered their symptoms. A constitutional remedy often increases a person's self-agency, empowering them to make healthier lifestyle choices, and improves their mood, energy, mental clarity, and sleep. Whole-person, constitutional care is best delivered by a well-trained professional.

2. Rule Out Underlying Illness.

Depression, overwhelm, and burnout can result from stress, but they can also be by-products of chronic disease. I screen fatigued patients with appropriate exams and blood tests, to see if there are other reasons for their symptoms, and then work to mitigate or reverse those ailments, as relevant.

3. Optimize Nutrition.

An anti-inflammatory, appropriate-for-the person diet is often key to reducing the effects of stress. I typically recommend plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits, beans and nuts, lean meats, eggs, whole grains (but not white

flour), cold-water fish, fresh herbs and spices, and fermented foods. Balancing blood sugar levels is also important, so I ask patients to reduce frequent snacking, cut back or eliminate refined sugars and carbohydrates, and keep alcohol consumption to a minimum.

4. Drink Enough Water.

Hydration improves sleep quality, cognition, and mood, and keeps all the body's systems functioning well. But drinking enough water is easier for some people than others. I ask my under-hydrated patients to set out four small juice glasses of water each day, as a starting goal. We work up from there, aiming for half a person's weight in ounces, so a 150-pound person drinks 75 ounces of water daily. It's amazing how being adequately hydrated can help a person feel better. For those who are not big fans of plain water, I recommend herbal teas, diluted fruit juice, or water with a squeeze of lemon or lime.

5. Sleep Well.

Sufficient, regular, and restful sleep—which is essential to good health and the ability to bounce back from stressful events—is an enormous challenge for some people. See my article, "Sweet Dreams: Homeopathic Help for Insomnia," in *Homeopathy Today* Fall 2019 for help.

6. Move More.

Exercise is one of the best ways to blow off steam, clear the mind, sweat out natural toxins related to metabolism, improve sex drive, and help with sleep. Research⁷ shows that exercise

Stress alters insulin metabolism and sensitivity, one risk factor for developing diabetes.

the chance to heal. Chronic stress leads the brain's hypothalamus to stimulate the adrenal glands, which in turn release adrenaline and cortisol. These hormones raise heart rate, blood pressure, respiratory rate, and glucose levels, while lowering immune function. Is there such a thing as "adrenal exhaustion"? The conventional medical literature says no³, but we certainly see patients who seem to experience their problems as fallout from chronic stress.

Studies⁴ show that chronic stress may lead to histamine release, which can cause allergy symptoms, asthma, and rashes. Stress alters insulin metabolism and sensitivity, one

risk factor for developing diabetes. Stress also affects stomach acids, which can lead to all manner of digestive complaints. Ongoing stress contributes to arterial plaque buildup. It also suppresses natural killer cells, which perform many important functions, including preventing cancer development or spread.

Beyond contributing to physical ailments, unmitigated stress can wreak havoc on the emotional level, contributing to depression, anxiety, irritability, and insomnia. All elements of our health are intertwined. That's why whole-person, whole-medicine approaches, such as homeopathy and naturopathic medicine, are key to healing, especially now. They offer a fresh perspective on the treatment of stress and how it affects the human condition. (See my article, "Whole Person Help for the Anxious Child," in *Homeopathy Today* Summer 2020.)

It's important to remember that stress impacts each person differently, according to individual susceptibility. Genetics, coping skills, personality, and access to support systems are a few factors that influence how a person reacts to and manages stress.

TOP 10 TOOLS TO BOUNCE BACK AND FEEL BETTER

improves quality of life and delays the onset of more than 40 chronic ailments! Most people would benefit from more exercise. I work with patients to get them moving more, reminding them that exercise comes in three parts: aerobic, weight-lifting, and stretching. One caveat: Over-exercising or exercise-bingeing is not advised, as it can make a person feel as overwhelmed and unwell as being sedentary.

7. Consider Supplements and Botanical Medicines. Nutritional supplements and botanical medicines, tailored to the individual by a professional, can help to address specific or synergistic biochemical issues related to burnout. Of many possibilities, here are my top five:

- Vitamin C for its roles⁸ related to improving energy and reducing overall inflammation
- Vitamin B Complex⁹ for its roles related to stress and cognition
- Adaptogenic herbs, including ashwagandha¹⁰ and rhodiola¹¹, which address both mental and physical fatigue and support adrenal function
- Licorice root¹², because it supports adrenal function (deglycyrrhized licorice, known as DGL, is recommended because it does not raise blood pressure.)
- Curcumin, the primary bio-active substance in the culinary and medicinal herb turmeric, for its anti-inflammatory and antioxidant qualities; studies¹³ show it also improves overall quality of life.

8. Practice Body-Mind Approaches. Body-mind approaches help us relax and normalize an activated stress response. I recommend practicing regularly, so that when such a tool is especially needed, it is there for you to use! Examples include: breathing techniques, mindfulness meditation, yoga, qigong, and hobbies that help you to relax—from art to music to building model airplanes.

9. Simplify Your Space. Simplifying home and work spaces can do wonders to lower stress levels. I recommend Marie Kondo's popular book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up*. Her method "encourages keeping only those things that speak to the heart. Discard items that have outlived their purpose; thank them for their service—then let them go." She emphasizes being mindful, introspective, and forward-looking.

10. Do Less. Think about what you are trying to accomplish in any given day. Sometimes we put too much pressure on ourselves to get through the to-do lists and to be productive, as if we were human *doings* instead of human *beings*! A tremendous amount of stress can be alleviated by literally doing less. I have conversations with my patients to help them identify what the most stressful things are in their lives and invite them to think about ways they might actually reduce their stress, whether letting go of a difficult relative, shifting their work schedule, or adjusting expectations from family members.

A path through the stress cycle

Of course, stress and our emotional reactions to it are normal parts of life and need to be given time and attention. In the book, *Burnout—The Secret to Unlocking the Stress Cycle*⁵, Emily and Amelia Nagoski beautifully describe the neurobiology of the stress cycle. They write about how every emotion has a beginning, a middle, and an end. You have to feel your emotion all the way through, especially the more challenging ones, in order to keep moving forward.

They suggest ways to process emotions including talking about them, having a good cry, doing regular deep breathing exercises, sharing a caring hug, having a deep belly laugh, getting physical exercise, doing something creative like writing, drawing, or singing, and feeling the connection of family and friends.

I concur with their list entirely and would add spending time outdoors in greenspaces, at parks, or in the woods. The more we study⁶ the need for time outdoors, the more we see its positive impact on overall health. Watching TV or streaming video, surfing the internet on computer or phone, and playing video games have become fallback activities for many children *and* adults. We're missing out on the essential role of sunshine, greenspace, and time away from screens.



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Helping Mara manage stress

So, how do we help a person like Mara, who is burned out, languishing, and exhausted, suffering the effects of chronic stress? In general, I follow the approach summarized in the sidebar on pages 20-21, "Burned Out, Stressed Out? Top 10 steps to bounce back and feel better."

The first step was to find Mara a constitutional homeopathic remedy by considering her major symptoms. She'd told me she "woke up like a bear," and it took several hours and two cups of coffee to "feel human again." She was irritable and impatient with her partner and could not seem to stop snapping at him and pointing out all his faults, yet, her irritability never rose to the level of yelling or aggression.

Mara had a few good hours from late morning to late afternoon, and then she totally crashed. She could not accomplish much after 5:00 p.m., so her diet suffered, as she had no creative energy to food shop or cook dinner. Instead, she bought fast or processed foods. All she wanted was a quick fix, a candy bar, toast and jam, any sweets really. Mara had gained more than ten pounds during the pandemic. She was chilly and could not seem to get warm, even as the weather warmed up.

Mara's symptoms were fairly run-of-the mill, which didn't give me much to go on, in choosing a remedy: general malaise, irritability, chilliness, feeling worse in the morning and later afternoon, brain fog, making mistakes in reading and writing, and constipation.

Choosing between two

I narrowed down the choice to *Sepia* or *Lycopodium*, as people who benefit from these remedies share many qualities.

Do *you* have

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Both can be chilly and irritable. Both can feel worse in the morning on waking, as well as worse in the late afternoon. And both can slant toward constipation.

People needing *Sepia* feel better with movement and exercise, as a way to combat an underlying sluggishness throughout their body, but Mara was entirely disinterested in exercise. Even a gentle walk around the neighborhood, if she could get herself to do it, would exhaust her.

The constipation of *Sepia* is related to low muscle tone, with no sense of a need to evacuate, whereas *Lycopodium* constipation is accompanied by a sense of fullness and the need to pass gas. Mara's constipation with bloating fit the *Lycopodium* profile better, as did her preference for sweets.

In the psycho-emotional realm, those who need *Sepia* can be irritable but often lean toward flat emotions or depression. In contrast, *Lycopodium* patients can easily become anxious about anything at all, especially if they feel the subject reflects poorly on them. Mara was not depressed but anxious, jittery, and sleepless over work and family matters, which fit the *Lycopodium* profile. People who need *Lycopodium* can also be somewhat dictatorial, and Mara was slanting that way, especially with her partner. Mara's mistakes with her business's paperwork also fit *Lycopodium*'s particular type of brain fog.

I prescribed *Lycopodium* 200c for Mara. I also advised her on ways to improve her diet and nutrition, get more sleep, and figure out ways to reduce the stressors in her life, as outlined in the sidebar on pages 20-21.

The fog clears

Six weeks later at our follow-up visit, Mara's first comment was: "I'm clear-headed again—it's good to be back to myself!" Thinking more clearly made operating her business less stressful. She thanked me for our conversation, which had prompted her to set better boundaries with her adult children. She'd also initiated some difficult talks with her partner, which resulted in improved communication between them. Mara reported better sleep and less fatigue but said she "still had a ways to go" in her energy. Her digestion was "still off," but it wasn't bothering her so much. She had removed some of the junk food from her diet and was cooking healthy meals a few times a week.

This was a good report, as Mara was now moving in a positive direction with her health and her actions. I am always inspired when patients take up lifestyle habits that help with healing. When someone has this kind of positive report after taking a constitutional remedy, the best thing to do is to wait rather than give another dose of the remedy. So I congratulated Mara, encouraged her to continue the healthy approaches she'd adopted, and suggested we follow up in another six weeks.

Over the next six months, Mara continued to do well, with gradual improvement in her energy level. She was sleeping better, felt less irritable, and cut way back on her caffeine and sugar intake. On two occasions, I gave her additional doses of *Lycopodium* 200c—once when she had a right-sided sore throat

that was better from warm drinks, fitting of *Lycopodium*, and once after the holidays, when she was overly stressed by family dynamics and repeat offenses from a particular relative—and both times she bounced back. I look forward to periodic check-ins with Mara to be sure she continues to move in the right direction.

A whole-person path forward

For many patients who are languishing or burned out with "adrenal fatigue," it will be a long unwinding back to health. But homeopathy and other whole-person natural medicines that address root causes, stimulate the body's inherent healing capacity, and work to reverse the role of chronic stress, can help. Taking stock, cultivating self-awareness, and welcoming change can also help people feel better and reduce the harmful effects of chronic stress. 🌊

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Amy Rothenberg, ND, DHANP, practices in Connecticut and Massachusetts (www.nhcmcd.com) and by telemedicine. Dr. Rothenberg is the AANP's 2017 Physician of the Year. With her husband, Paul Herscu, ND, MPH, DHANP, she teaches through the New England School of Homeopathy (www.NESH.com), where virtual learning is now available. For information on NESH's new entirely virtual class, as well as other resources, see www.nesh.com. Her writing can be found at *Medium*, *Thrive Global*, *The Huff Po*, and more. When not working, Dr. Rothenberg enjoys spending time with her family, in nature, and puttering in her art studio.