

De-escalation from the Inside-Out

Stress Tolerant Practices for the First Responder

Our bodies are well equipped to handle stress in small doses, but when that stress becomes long-term or chronic, it can have serious effects on our bodies.

The autonomic nervous system has a direct role in our physical response to stress and is divided into the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS). When the body is stressed, the SNS contributes to what is known as the “fight-or-flight” response. The body shifts its energy resources toward fighting off a life threat or fleeing an enemy.

The SNS signals the adrenal glands to release hormones called adrenalin (epinephrine) and cortisol. These hormones, together with direct actions of autonomic nerves, cause the heart to beat faster, respiration to increase, blood vessels in the arms and legs to dilate, digestive process to change and glucose levels (sugar energy) in the bloodstream to increase to deal with the emergency.

Chronic stress, experiencing stressors over a prolonged period of time, can result in a long-term drain on the body. As the autonomic nervous system continues to trigger physical reactions, it causes wear-and-tear on the body. It’s not so much what chronic stress does to the nervous system, but what continuous activation of the nervous system does to other body systems that become problematic. Unaddressed chronic stress affects all systems of the body causing premature aging of the vital organs and disease to the musculoskeletal, respiratory, cardiovascular, endocrine, gastrointestinal, nervous, and reproductive systems.

Science and medical research have proven that we are built to reduce stress by directly influencing the sympathetic nervous system. Understanding our body dynamics and shifting our attention and daily practices, will consciously transfer our body’s energy resources from a constant operating state of fight-or-flight back into balance, into rest and digest. This influence over the SNS also reduces crippling fear and anxiety at critical action moments requiring clear decisions and responses. This influence over the SNS also increases endurance and the body’s ability to efficiently perform at times when a balanced physical response can mean the difference between life and death.

Daily practices include:

- Focused nasal breathing utilizing the diaphragm, ¹abdomen, and pelvic floor
- Proven sleep and relaxation strategies
- Basic principles of hydration and nutrition
- Awareness of the basic body structure and designing physical efficiency
- Mindfulness and peak performance strategies

¹ American Psychological Association