

The Power and Price of Survival

Understanding Resilience, Stress, and Trauma



Quick Guide

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A Few Questions for Tense Times

1. Where am I right now, at this moment? Who or what do I see or hear around me?
2. How much are my body chemicals affecting my reaction to this situation? For example, do I have:
 - “Adrenaline overload”—heart pounding, mind racing, tense muscles, can’t sit still, intense energy, anger, guilt, shame, fear, or anxiety?
 - Too much cortisol—feeling tense, tired, and “shut down,” “numbed out,” or depressed?
3. What can I do to get my body in balance? Do I need exercise (to burn off the adrenaline)? Sleep? Food? Less caffeine? Less alcohol? Less drugs? A few slow, deep breaths?
4. What do I really know about this situation?
5. What’s another way of looking at this?
6. What’s the next right thing I can do?
7. What’s going right in my life? Even though some things are wrong, what’s going okay?
8. Who do I know who can help me work through this—or just listen and understand?

The Power and Price of Survival

This “quick guide” is part of a series of materials called *The Power and Price of Survival*. It’s for people who want to understand how the body reacts to extreme stress, threat, and trauma. It has four short chapters:

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(List of a few web-based resources on the inside back cover)

There’s also a *Power and Price of Survival* workbook, available for free download at: <https://sites.google.com/site/humanprioritiesorg/home/tools-for-growth-and-therapy/the-power-and-price-of-survival>

These materials can help you: 1) understand the natural physical processes that make sense of post-trauma effects and 2) build skills to get your stress system in balance. You can use these materials alone, with a friend or mentor, with a family member, and/or with a trainer or therapist.

Balance, Strength, and Resilience

Everybody has important strengths, and everybody has resilience—the ability to meet challenges and get back in balance afterwards, even if things are hard for a while. Not everyone is aware of their own strength and resilience, but people who aren't aware may have even more of it than those who are. What are some ways in which you're strong and resilient? You might even make a list of these—and keep adding to it as you think of things.

We have strengths in many areas of life—physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual—and all these areas fit together. You might also think of having a resilient “stress system,” something that affects every area of life. This booklet focuses on understanding and strengthening the stress system.

The Body

If you've been affected by heavy stress, threat, illness, and/or loss, all the things that are going on in your

body and mind right now—even the most troubling effects—actually make sense if you understand the way the body works. Human beings are “wired” to survive and keep going. The body, brain, and mind do amazing things to make this possible. Our bodies react automatically to intense life experiences, including stress, threat, serious illness, and loss, by:

- Pumping out chemicals that keep us going
- Speeding up and slowing down body functions
- Tightening muscles to protect vital organs
- Storing powerful memories of these events
- Getting ready to react the same way next time

Our minds react automatically, too, to help us cope and protect ourselves and others. They might:

- Organize our thoughts to keep us functioning
- Keep us from feeling more than we can handle
- Affect the way we relate to other people
- Affect our belief systems, to help us make sense of what’s happening to us and around us

We all face experiences intense enough to trigger some of these automatic stress and survival reactions.

We don't choose how our bodies react. Our stress systems and other organs respond for us, and our bodies store all our responses—and strong memories of the experiences that triggered them.

The body's automatic survival systems respond to many different kinds of experiences. For example:

- There are events, like car crashes, natural disasters, or one-time violent crimes.
- There are also longer-term experiences, like patterns of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; the constant presence of violence in the community; the stress of a long and painful illness; the shock at losing a loved one and the long grieving process afterwards; or the constant stress of financial hardship and insecurity. The stress system can stay on high alert for years.

The many ways your body keeps you going are signs of your incredible strength as a human being. The body's powerful stress and survival systems kick in, so you can keep going, keep thinking, keep functioning, and do whatever you have to do to survive and cope.

Your body was built to respond to short-term stress and threat, then “rest and reset” when the stress or threat dies down. But if it **doesn’t** die down:

- The powerful chemicals that kept you going can keep pumping long after the threat is gone.
- The systems that were supposed to keep these chemicals in balance can stop doing their job.
- Your body can hold onto the intense energy of automatic “fight, flight, and freeze” responses.
- Your brain can “hide” memories, then pull them up later, as if they were happening **right now**.

On the outside, some of these natural reactions can look—and even feel—like they’re “just emotional problems.” **They’re not.** They’re natural, physically based responses to intense experiences. They’re happening in a human being, so of course you’ll also have emotions, but their intensity is physical. They can cause physical problems, too.

With the right information and help, you can learn to handle these reactions and bring your body and your mind—and your life—back into balance.

Sheila's Story

Sheila grew up in a troubled family, where her mother's drinking and fits of rage left her doubting her own worth in this world. She was 11 when her stepfather first molested her, 12 when she started drinking and using drugs, and 17 when she met and married a man who could get her out of there. The 15 years that followed were marked by abuse from her husband, rising patterns of drinking and drug use, "crazy" emotions and health problems she didn't understand, some jail time, and a few stays in treatment for substance use and bipolar depression.

At 32, Sheila met a counselor who understood trauma. The counselor started working with Sheila to get her stress system, emotional reactions, and memories under control so she could deal with all her challenges more effectively. They worked together and teamed up with her doctors, her recovery group sponsor, and a domestic violence shelter. That was 10 years ago. Sheila is still sober, still in recovery from depression, living in a safe and peaceful home, and working well at a job she enjoys. She's glad she's alive.

Stress Chemicals

Under stress and threat, our bodies help us keep functioning by pumping out stress chemicals. But under long-term stress, the natural processes that keep these chemicals in line can stop working.

- Chemicals like *adrenaline* and *dopamine* speed us up so we can take action. But the systems that control adrenaline can stop working. We can have adrenaline overload—too much anger, anxiety, etc.—or not enough adrenaline. We can crave stimulants to get that energy back, or drink too much just to calm down or get to sleep.
- The chemical *cortisol* slows our bodies down when we get too much adrenaline, but two things can go wrong: 1) the adrenaline can overpower the cortisol, so we **can't** slow down, and 2) cortisol can build up and make us both tense and shut down, numbed out, or depressed. It can also weaken the immune system.
- Chemicals like *serotonin* calm us down and help us make better decisions. But stress can wear down our ability to use serotonin, making it hard

to feel hope or happiness; hard to cooperate; and hard to control our urges to drink, fight, etc.

- Chemicals called *endorphins* blur the pain and the memories, so we can keep going. Later, past memories and feelings can invade the present. We can also get powerful cravings to drink or do anything that will numb us out.

Different people's bodies react to extreme stress with more or less power, and they take more or less work and help to get back in balance. But when these stress effects cause other life problems, it's each person's responsibility to get help.

Because you're human, you have feelings—happiness, sadness, guilt, shame, fear, anger, hope—you name it. **Feelings are not problems or symptoms, and they don't mean you're weak or "crazy."** Feelings are not the reason your body is doing painful or frightening things. They're just part of being human. If you pay attention to them, feelings can serve as tools to help you find balance on all levels—body, mind, and spirit.

Balance

The power that has helped you keep going all these years is still there, still inside you. You can use that power to help you bring your body, brain, and life back into balance, and back into the present.

Most of us don't grow up knowing how to handle extreme stress, threat, illness, and loss in effective ways. It takes learning, training, and practice.

Getting back in balance gives you the power to:

- Recognize your body's stress/survival reactions
- Choose whether or not to act on them
- Notice when the past is "invading" the present
- Choose to focus on what's right here, right now
- Do things to help control your stress reactions
- Choose responses that make things better
- Make choices that support your true values

The *Power and Price of Survival* workbook is one resource that can help you get started. (See Page 1 for the web site for free download of this workbook).

Steve's Story

Steve is a Police Officer. He knows the street well, and he's handled many dangerous situations with courage, skill, and honor. Last year Steve and his partner were outnumbered by gunmen in a shopping district. Steve's partner was killed and Steve accidentally shot and killed a young boy who had panicked and run in between Steve and one of the shooters. Steve couldn't remember a lot of details, but bystanders said he couldn't have saved his partner or known the boy would run into the path of his bullet. A few weeks later, Steve started getting flashbacks (powerful memories that feel as if it's happening now), nightmares, and diarrhea. On top of his loss and guilt, he felt weak and "crazy," and ashamed of his reactions. He refused to admit anything was wrong.

Finally an older Officer took Steve aside and told him how the body can react to stress, threat, and guilt. Steve felt a little less ashamed, and asked the Departmental Counselor to help him understand and control his stress reactions. They worked hard, and it paid off. He's back to normal, and enjoying his work.

The key is to strengthen the resilience skills that will help you re-balance your body, mind, and spirit. There are many approaches, but we'll look at three here: relationships, getting your stress system in balance, and finding meaning and purpose.

Relationships

We're built to learn how to handle stress—from the earliest days of our lives—through safe relationships with people who handle stress well. Whether or not you grew up in those safe relationships, you can build them later, as an important part of getting your body and your life back in balance.

It's important to look for and find people you can trust, and to work on letting them into your life—in safe ways. These can be family members, friends, clergy, counselors, mentors, sponsors, doctors, etc. Your bonds with other people affect your ability to bring your stress system back in balance. Nobody's perfect, but if people care and they're respectful and trustworthy, their presence in your life will help.

A few more examples of things that can help balance your stress system:

- Breathing slowly and deeply
- Walking, running, sports, or riding horseback
- Exercises, especially stretching
- Letting your body release its stored energy
- Getting a good night's sleep (7 hrs. or more)
- Prayer, meditation, yoga, affirmations, etc.
- Any kind of positive ritual or ceremony
- Dancing, music, singing, artistic expression
- Looking into the eyes of someone you can trust
- Telling your story to someone you can trust
- Noticing your thoughts/feelings without judging
- Separating the past from the present

A few things that put you more off balance:

- Too much caffeine (coffee, cola, energy drinks)
- Drinking too much, doing street drugs
- Not taking your medication, or taking too much
- "Stuffing" your thoughts and feelings inside
- Doing things that speed or "pump" you up
- Resenting, "ranting," yelling at people, etc.
- Getting into heated arguments or fights

Getting Your Stress System in Balance

The first step is to get a better understanding of how and why your body's stress system does what it does. With this understanding, you might find out:

- Why you feel bored, numb, or depressed
- Why you feel edgy and get upset—even over little things—in ways that cause problems
- Why you don't remember things that happened—or why some memories come crashing in on you

Once you understand the physical reasons, you might feel less afraid and less ashamed of your reactions. This can make it easier to become an observer of your own thoughts and feelings. You can learn to notice things about your own experience—without judging it—even while you're living through it. It can help you get back in balance and think more clearly.

You can also learn techniques—thoughts, actions, prayers, affirmations—that can help you manage your stress system and make more helpful choices. A counselor, mentor, sponsor, trainer, etc. who

understands the effects of stress and trauma can train you to recognize and manage your body's reactions, question the thoughts that are causing trouble for you, and manage—or just get through—difficult feelings.

Another thing you'll learn when you learn about your stress system is how the effects of some of your experiences have been stored in your brain and its connections with your body. In a situation that combines extreme threat with helplessness, your brain sends out combinations of chemicals that can:

- Make your "higher brain" stop recording the "story" of what happened—who, what, when, where, etc.—so you might not remember it later
- Make your "survival brain" record intense memories of how you felt and what you saw, heard, smelled, or tasted—and those memories can come jumping out at you later, especially when something reminds you of those feelings, sights, sounds, smells, etc.

These chemicals can also tell your body to "freeze"—shut down important functions. Depending on the

situation, the freeze might just last a second, but that response may get stored in your body. Training might include exercises to relax the muscles that were affected by the freeze—especially the front core and pelvic/thigh muscles—and safe ways of helping your body get rid of the energy that the freeze left there.

A counselor can also help you teach your body to handle feelings and memories in ways that don't throw you off balance. There are even many kinds of counseling that use physical techniques to help you re-balance your stress system and—when you're ready—deal with memories. One example is EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), if it's done safely by a counselor who's trained and certified in it. Counseling can be an important part of training and re-balancing. (There's a short list of web sites with resources on the inside back cover.)

Finding Meaning, Purpose, and Spiritual Strength

No matter how powerful your brain and body are, they're still connected to the rest of you—your mind,

your heart, your spirit. The journey back to balance may cover some rocky ground, but those who make this journey grow stronger, wiser, and happier.

If your experiences have left you feeling like you have nothing to offer—or like you don't deserve to live on this earth—it may be hard to imagine finding honor, meaning, purpose, and spiritual strength. But through the balancing and healing process, we **do** find these things—and much more. Just remember how strong you are, and stay open to what your purpose might be—and where the strength comes from in your life.

Someone you trust—a true friend, mentor, sponsor, faith leader, or counselor—might help you explore this. But it's not theirs to tell you. It's the meaning, purpose, and spiritual strength **you** find in your life and experience.

The past has hurt you but left you stronger. As you return to balance, you'll come to live more and more in the present moment. May you find there a calm understanding, a sense of purpose, peace, and joy.

A Few Web Sites With Trauma Resources

Trauma resources from SAMHSA's web site:

<http://store.samhsa.gov/facet/Issues-Conditions-Disorders/term/Trauma>

Referral resources from SAMHSA's Center for Trauma-Informed

Care: <http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/hottopics.asp>

National Center for PTSD resources:

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/index.asp>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network:

<http://www.attcnetwork.org/index.asp>

Sidran Institute: <http://www.sidran.org/>

Support resources from the Trauma Resource Pages:

<http://www.trauma-pages.com/support.php>

Trauma Resource Institute app for dealing with post-trauma

effects: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/ichill/id403527676?ls=1&mt=8>

Trauma Survivors Network:

<http://www.traumasurvivorsnetwork.org/pages/resources>

Web-based links to resources for trauma survivors:

<http://thirdofalifetime.com/2010-best-ptsd-resources-for-trauma-survivors-pt-1/>

National Organization on Disability: <http://www.nod.org/>

(See back cover for links to more Human Priorities resources)

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Download the workbook for free from:

<https://sites.google.com/site/humanprioritiesorg/home/tools-for-growth-and-therapy/the-power-and-price-of-survival>

**For free resources for service members, veterans,
and military families:**

See the *Finding Balance* series of materials, including a workbook and quick guide for service members and veterans, a workbook for military families, and materials for clinicians and facilitators. You can download these for free from:
<https://sites.google.com/site/humanprioritiesorg/home/resilience-101>