

## Collateral Stress Related Injury

By Jeff Jernigan, PhD, BCPPC, FAIS

This COVID-19 pandemic is a mass disaster that provides no escape for anyone. There is no escaping the consequences: social isolation, work from home, quarantine; businesses shut down, schools closed, gatherings limited in size; disinfecting everything, possible exposure, actual infection, someone you know passing away from the disease: there is no escape even on a personal level. Everywhere we turn there are constant reminders of our lives being at risk (Trauma 1), the persistent threat of disease and the unending estrangement from colleagues, friends, and family in a world with apparently shrinking resources including toilet paper (Trauma 2), and the impact of watching others struggle with the same shortages, same risks, and same fears (Vicarious Trauma). All of this produces frustration, worry, anxiety, and stress related fatigue and disorders. How do we deal with this stress when we know it is unrelenting and for the time being unending? Let's start at the top.

Our brain is the control center for everything that goes on in our body, especially where stress is concerned. Here are some fast facts about what the brain needs to remain operationally healthy:

**Nutrition:** 28% of the energy our body needs each day is consumed by our brain. Our brains use glucose from fruits, vegetables, and whole grains as its main source of energy. Protein from eggs, fish, meat, milk, cheese, and yogurt is used to grow new brain cells and produce myelin which keeps our neural pathways from short-circuiting. Vitamins, minerals, as well as antioxidants keep this fantastic organ strong. A healthy diet is key to our body's ability to produce the neurotransmitters the structures of our brain need to communicate with one another.

**Exercise:** 153 minutes of intense exercise spread over a few sessions each week produces a protein in our muscles that travels through the bloodstream to our brain where it triggers the production of a Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF). BDNF is involved in the replacement and repair of brain cells. Without this function learning ability decreases, reason and logic are not as sharp, short term memory fails more often, and self-control can go out the window.

**Sleep:** Think of your brain as a high-rise office building. A lot goes on during business hours. So much so, when the day is over and the office is empty, a maintenance crew sweeps in after dark making repairs, cleaning up the trash, and putting everything back in order for the next day. In our brain this effect is produced by proper nutrition and sufficient exercise. The problem is that this cleanup only goes on while you sleep without disturbance.

Good nutrition, regular exercise, and sufficient sleep are required to maintain brain health and sustain your resilience. This is where stress enters the picture. Stress is cumulative, both stress from good experiences as well as stress from difficult ones. Resilience, the ability to bounce back, is crucial to maintaining your health. Low resilience means less bounce-back power and energy and an increase in stress load.

You can shed stress in a number of ways: Balance stressful experiences with nourishing ones. Maintain your optimism (anger and frustration dump a chemical cocktail into your system that will erode your immune system, produce headaches, stomach aches, and other stress disorders). Keep your resilience up! There are two more very important antidotes to burnout from too much stress: meaningful relationships and purposeful work. Meaningful relationships are those characterized by mutual trust, authenticity, and healthy personal interaction full of acceptance and free from judging. Purposeful work describes experiencing what you do inside or outside of the home as significant in your own eyes. Meaning and purpose in work keeps us optimistic and energized. Here are some things you can do to maintain this perspective:

- Guard your optimism. Set limits on how much time you spend reading or watching news about the outbreak. You will want to stay up to date, particularly if you have loved ones in places where many people have been seriously impacted. Make sure to take time away from media to focus on things in your life that are going well and that you can control.
- Be realistically informed. Find people and resources you can depend on for accurate health information. Learn from them about the outbreak and how you can protect yourself against illness, if you are at risk. You may turn to your family doctor, a state or local health department, US government agencies. Local newscasts are not always the best source of accurate news as they tend to report in sound bites the latest impressions, theories, or news that has been vetted partially or not at all. Get behind the headlines to move beyond conjecture as much as possible.
- Keep yourself healthy: Practice good nutrition and hydration. Avoid excessive amounts of caffeine and alcohol. Do not use tobacco or illegal drugs. Get enough sleep and rest. Get the exercise you need to improve physical stamina, sleep, and brain health.
- Provide and find good emotional support: Talking things through with others is a way of processing stress and regaining perspective. It takes an appropriate balance of transparency and vulnerability, so don't just pick anyone to unload on. When someone looks to you for emo-

tional support, listen actively with empathy. This is about providing emotional support that helps restore mental equilibrium. Helpful conversations that teach are for a different time.

There is a saying in the Bible that I reflect on often when under pressure. It comes from Isaiah 30.15 in the Old Testament. It goes like this, “Your strength will come from settling down in complete dependence on me.” Recently, making my way home from Eastern Europe through four airports I was confronted by angry, very frightened mob-like crowds in two of the airports. Like a whisper I heard the refrain, settle down, depend on me. All I could add was Amen!

#### About the Author

Jeff Jernigan, PhD, BCPPC, FAIS is a board certified mental health professional known for influencing change in people and organizations by capitalizing on growth and change. Jeff currently serves Stanton Chase Pacific as the regional Life-Science and Healthcare Practice Leader for retained executive search, and is the national subject matter expert for psychometric and psychological client support services.

A lifetime focus on humanitarian service is reflected in Jeff’s other role as the Chief Executive Officer and co-founder, with his wife Nancy (also a PhD) for the Hidden Value Group, an organization bringing healing, health, and hope to the world in the wake of mass disaster and violence through healthcare, education, and leadership development. They have completed more than 300 projects in 25 countries over the last 27 years.

Jeff currently serves as a Subject Matter Expert, Master Teacher, Research Mentor, or Fellow in the following professional organizations: National Association for Addiction Professionals, American Association of Suicidology, American Institute of Stress, International Association for Continuing Education and Training, American College of Healthcare Executives, Wellness Council of America.