

## **How Chronic Stress Affects Your Health and Ways to Cope**

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Stressful situations aren't avoidable sometimes, and no one knows this better than service members. Whether you are a soldier juggling daily tasks or a retired veteran. Often, stress is associated with a feeling; you can't turn your mind off or your body becomes tense. Understanding the physical impact of short and long-term stress can help you mitigate the health impacts.

When your body perceives a threat, the sympathetic nervous system is activated. This prepares the body to "flee" or "attack" the stressor. The adrenal system is signaled to release stress hormones causing your veins to constrict and increase cardiac workload. Secondly, this increases the loss of essential minerals such as magnesium. Although this response is natural, adaptive, and beneficial at times, we weren't meant to experience chronic stress i.e. in combat. Excessive stress can have profound impacts on your physical and mental health.

It's important to understand that you don't have to be on the battlefield to produce stress hormones. Anything your mind perceives as a threat provokes the same physiological hormone response. It could be "minor" things such as navigating the chain of command, a disagreement with a co-worker, or trying to meet a deadline.

Allowing yourself to enter a restful parasympathetic state is crucial. Spending time in nature can help achieve this by releasing oxytocin, and naturally lowering cortisol. Other ways to support your body include practicing breathwork, exercise, avoiding blue light (cell phone) before bed, and engaging in healthy relationships. Supporting your body's energy demands by consuming a variety of whole foods and avoiding processed food is essential.

If medically indicated, there are alternative therapies that can support a healthy stress response. There is supportive research around massage, chiropractic care, cold water immersion, and infrared sauna therapy. Some benefits of these therapies include immune, adrenal, and neurologic system support, enhancing physical recovery, and improving mental health.

Stress will inevitably be a part of life and soldiers know this all too well. Consider taking a proactive approach and integrating some of the techniques above. This can help support your body's recovery and lessen the destructive effects it can have on your overall health.