How stress from conflict weakens immune system

The impact triggers fight-or-flight response

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The grief, rage and stress of fighting with someone you love, leave their physical marks on us in different ways. For some, it manifests as a stubborn cold that lingers like an unwelcome guest, for others, a persistent wave of nausea. Sometimes, a harrowing argument leaves wounds that you can't heal from.



The question is, how does the stress of a conflict have such an ironclad hold on our system? Or rather, let's rephrase. Why do fights with loved ones leave us immunocompromised?

No doubt, fighting with someone you love, is emotionally taxing. The impact goes beyond the immediate tension, gradually seeping into the body and triggering the fight-or-flight response. As Nusrat Khan, clinical psychologist at Human Relations Institute & Clinics explains, these intense emotional storms affect the body in profound ways. "Chronic stress from interpersonal conflicts — especially toxic relationships — can lead to numerous health problems, from disrupted menstrual cycles and diabetes to immunosuppressant reactions."

The truth is, when we're in conflict, our nervous system perceives it as a threat. "This sets off a cascade of physiological changes aimed at ensuring survival. Stress hormones flood the body, and

our sympathetic nervous system remains activated in a constant state of hypervigilance or, at times, hypo-vigilance," explains Khan.

When conflict becomes a recurring pattern, it shifts from occasional stress to chronic strain on the body. The stress builds over time, triggering inflammation and even autoimmune disorders. The mind-body connection is undeniable, and unresolved emotions from conflict manifest physically.

Devika Mankani, the Chief Positive Psychologist of Fortes Education, Dubai, elaborates, "The mind and body are deeply interconnected. Our emotional state influences physical health and vice versa. For example, unresolved interpersonal stress impacts the hypothalamicpituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, triggering the release of cortisol, which can suppress immune function and promote inflammation."

Often, when people are emotionally drained or anxious, they may neglect their physical health, not sleeping enough or even neglecting their food habits. As sleep is crucial for well-being, this results in the person feeling a permanent sense of fatigue, exhaustion also leads to overeating, and the influx of processed foods and sugar further fuel the physical manifestations of stress.

CORTISOL AND ADRENALIN: A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Stress hormones like cortisol and adrenalin play pivotal roles in the body's response to perceived threats. While this response is beneficial in short bursts, it becomes harmful when stress lingers over time.

Nas Al Jafari, Co-Founder & Group Medical Director – DNA Health & Wellness elaborates on the mechanisms: Cortisol increases blood sugar for quick energy and suppresses the immune system to prioritise immediate survival. But when cortisol remains elevated, it decreases the production of lymphocytes, the white blood cells responsible for fighting off infections. "While acute cortisol release limits excessive inflammation, prolonged high cortisol levels can dampen the body's ability to respond to infections effectively, making it harder for the body to mount an appropriate immune response," explains Al Jafari.

Cortisol also inhibits the release of pro-inflammatory cytokines, proteins that facilitate communication between immune cells. This suppression makes the body more vulnerable to infections and slows recovery from illness or injury. But it doesn't stop there.

Cortisol works in tandem with adrenalin, which increases heart rate, blood pressure, and airway dilation to boost oxygen intake. Yet, chronic adrenalin spikes ultimately result in fatigue, higher oxidative stress, and further damage to the immune system.

HOW STRESS AFFECTS YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM

And so, the immune system, already weakened by stress, struggles to defend the body against even mild viruses, causing colds to linger. Mankani explains, the prolonged stress suppresses the immune system, leaving the body more vulnerable to illness. She cites the 2020 study from Carnegie Mellon University, which found that interpersonal stress, such as frequent family arguments, was associated with a higher risk of colds and flu, as stress reduced the body's ability to fight off infections.

"Chronic stress also elevates inflammation, as demonstrated in research from The Ohio State University, which highlighted that negative social interactions can delay healing and impair immune responses," she says.

Stress can even impact digestion, and issues like nausea, bloating, or irregular bowel movements can be linked to emotional turmoil. Anxiety, especially in the wake of a relationship conflict, often leads to digestive distress, as the body's fight-or-flight response is activated, directing resources away from processes like digestion. And so, the emotional toll of unresolved stress is linked to the physical manifestation of illness.

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Nusrat Khan | Clinical psychologist at Human Relations Institute & Clinics

LOW-GRADE INFLAMMATION: THE HIDDEN TOLL ON HEALTH

As cortisol levels surge, they trigger low-grade inflammation, leading to symptoms like swelling and a weakened immune response. Over time, this continuous activation hinders the body's ability to return to a state of calm. "This persistent activation makes it difficult for the body to heal or protect itself," Khan explains.

THE ANGER HEADACHES

You're probably all too familiar with that throbbing headache after a heated argument. Your head aches, and all you want to do is crawl into bed and sleep the pain away.

As the experts explain: When you feel rage,your heart rate increases, along with the blood pressure. There's tension in the muscles, especially in the neck and head area, leading to headaches. Moreover, anger can also cause changes in blood flow, constricting blood vessels in the head and contributing to a painful headache. The emotional intensity of anger can also heighten sensitivity to pain, making any existing tension or discomfort in the head feel more pronounced.

At the heart of this fight-or-flight process is the vagus nerve, which plays a key role in calming the body after stress, and is impaired in cases of intense emotional distress. This makes it harder for the body to recover from both emotional and physical strain. High emotional distress can impair the system, leading to a state of chronic activation. As a result, the body's ability to heal and defend itself diminishes significantly. While emotional wounds continue to run deep, even the physical ones don't heal quick enough.

WHY DOES EMOTIONAL PAIN FEEL PHYSICAL?

Why does stress affect us so much, to the point that we can't sleep and wounds won't heal? As Khan explains, we are biologically wired for connection, and when emotional bonds are disrupted, it triggers feelings of abandonment, worthlessness, and helplessness — each of which the body interprets as a threat. If a person already struggles with low self-esteem and self-worth, the physical effects can be even more intense. This leads to a significant drain on the body's energy reserves, weakening its resilience and exacerbating pre-existing health conditions.

Furthermore, there's a sense of physical pain, and sometimes, we don't know why.

The sensation of physical pain after emotional trauma, such as a breakup or loss, can be felt as tension in the chest, headaches, or even muscle aches and joint pain. This is because emotions like sadness or grief can affect the body's nervous system, causing inflammation and amplifying the sensation of pain.

This is often referred to as 'psychosomatic pain' where the body physically reflects emotional stress. The physical pain is not 'imaginary' but rather a tangible expression of the emotional struggle the person is experiencing.