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The Nervous System

Why Your Body May Be Stuck in Survival Mode...and How Healing Begins

Your Body Is Trying to Protect You

One of the most important ideas I'd like you to take away from this class is that your body is not working against you. Many of the symptoms associated with chronic illness—including fatigue, brain fog, digestive problems, chronic pain, dizziness, anxiety, food sensitivities, medication sensitivities, and chemical sensitivities—may actually represent your body's attempt to protect you.

Your nervous system's primary job is not to make you feel good; its primary job is to keep you alive. Every second of every day, your brain is asking one important question:

"Am I safe?"

When the answer is "yes," your body focuses on growth, repair, digestion, hormone production, immune balance, learning, and healing. When the answer is "no," your body shifts into survival mode. This response is incredibly intelligent and has helped humans survive for thousands of years.

The challenge is that sometimes this protective response never completely turns off.

The encouraging news is that this doesn't mean your body is failing—it means your nervous system is doing exactly what it was designed to do. Our goal is simply to help it recognize that the danger has passed.

Your Nervous System: The Master Control System

Most people think of the nervous system as simply controlling movement or sensation, but it actually serves as your body's master communication network. Every organ system is constantly receiving information from the brain.

Your digestive system, immune system, hormones, metabolism, cardiovascular system, and even the tiny energy-producing mitochondria inside every cell all respond to signals coming from your nervous system. When the brain perceives safety, these systems work together remarkably

well. Digestion improves, inflammation decreases, hormones become better balanced, sleep becomes more restorative, and healing can occur.

When the brain perceives danger, however, those same systems begin shifting their priorities. The body temporarily places growth and repair on hold while focusing on survival. This is exactly what should happen during a true emergency. The problem occurs when the brain continues sending danger signals long after the original threat has passed.

Your Body Has Three Primary Survival States

One helpful way to understand the nervous system is to think of it as having three primary operating modes.

The first is the **Safe and Connected** state. This is where we spend our healthiest moments. In this state, we feel calm, emotionally connected, mentally clear, and physically relaxed. Digestion works efficiently, the immune system functions appropriately, sleep is restorative, and our bodies devote energy toward healing and repair.

The second is the **Fight or Flight** state. This is your body's emergency response system. Your heart beats faster, breathing becomes quicker, muscles tighten, blood sugar rises, and stress hormones increase. These changes are extremely helpful if you're escaping danger, but they become exhausting if they continue for weeks, months, or years.

The third state is often called **Freeze**, and many experts now include **Fawn** as part of this protective response. Freeze occurs when the nervous system decides that fighting or running away isn't possible. Energy drops dramatically. People may feel exhausted, disconnected, overwhelmed, numb, or "stuck." Fawning is a related survival strategy in which a person automatically prioritizes keeping others happy, avoiding conflict, or taking care of everyone else while ignoring their own needs. These responses are not personality flaws—they are intelligent survival adaptations that helped us cope with difficult situations.

Throughout the day, your nervous system naturally moves between these different states. The goal isn't to stay calm every moment of every day. The goal is flexibility—being able to return to a state of safety once the stressful event has passed.

The Cell Danger Response

This protective response doesn't stop with the brain.

When your nervous system believes you're in danger, every cell in your body receives that message.

Dr. Robert Naviaux, a physician and researcher at the University of California, San Diego, introduced the concept of the **Cell Danger Response** to explain what happens at the cellular level during times of stress or illness.

When cells detect danger—whether from infection, injury, toxins, chronic stress, or other threats—they temporarily shift their priorities. Instead of focusing on normal growth, repair, and communication, they concentrate on protection and survival. One of the most important changes occurs in the mitochondria, the tiny structures inside nearly every cell that produce the energy your body needs to function.

When danger is present, mitochondria redirect some of their energy away from normal daily activities and toward helping the cell survive. This is a remarkably intelligent response in the short term. However, if the danger signal never completely resolves, cells may remain in this protective state much longer than intended. Over time, this can contribute to fatigue, brain fog, chronic inflammation, slower healing, and many of the symptoms associated with chronic illness.

The important message is that your body is not "malfunctioning." It is responding to the information it is receiving.

Many Different Problems Can Trigger the Same Protective Response

One of the reasons chronic illness can be so confusing is that many very different events can activate the same survival response.

For one person, it may begin after a severe infection such as COVID-19 or Lyme disease. For another, it may follow mold exposure, a concussion, surgery, significant emotional trauma, chronic stress, poor sleep, environmental toxins, an autoimmune illness, or years of overwork.

Although these experiences are very different, the brain often interprets them in the same way:

"Something isn't safe."

This helps explain why people with very different diagnoses frequently experience remarkably similar symptoms. Fatigue, brain fog, digestive problems, dizziness, chronic pain, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and increasing sensitivity are common across many chronic illnesses because they are often driven by the same underlying protective physiology.

Understanding this can be incredibly reassuring. It reminds us that we don't always need a completely different explanation for every symptom. Often, many seemingly unrelated symptoms are connected through one highly intelligent system that has become stuck in survival mode.

The Good News

The most hopeful part of this story is that the brain is remarkably adaptable.

Scientists call this **neuroplasticity**, which simply means that the brain can change throughout life. Just as your nervous system learned to become highly protective, it can also learn that it is safe again.

That doesn't happen overnight, and it doesn't happen because of one supplement or one medication. It happens through repeated experiences of safety that gradually teach the brain a new way of responding to the world.

This is why nervous system regulation has become such an important part of my approach to caring for patients with chronic illness. When we help the brain recognize that the danger has passed, many of the body's other systems become much more capable of doing what they were designed to do—heal.

In the next section, we'll discuss why people often become sensitive to foods, medications, supplements, and environmental triggers, why treatments sometimes don't work as expected, and, most importantly, the practical steps you can begin taking today to help your nervous system move from protection back toward healing.

Part 2 – Helping Your Nervous System Heal

Why Do I Suddenly React to Everything?

One of the most frustrating experiences for many people with chronic illness is becoming increasingly sensitive to things they once tolerated without any difficulty. Foods that never caused problems now trigger symptoms. Supplements that are supposed to help make them feel worse. Medications cause unexpected side effects. Bright lights, loud noises, perfumes, chemicals, stress, heat, exercise, or even busy environments suddenly become overwhelming.

This can leave people feeling confused, discouraged, and wondering if something is seriously wrong with them.

One way to think about this is to imagine that your brain has a "volume knob" that determines how strongly it responds to the world around you. Under healthy circumstances, the volume is set appropriately. Your brain responds strongly to real danger while filtering out things that are safe and unimportant.

When the nervous system becomes stuck in survival mode, however, that volume knob gets turned up. Suddenly, normal everyday experiences feel much louder than they really are. The perfume someone is wearing seems overwhelming. A small amount of caffeine causes anxiety. A new supplement produces symptoms that seem out of proportion to the dose. Even positive stress, such as travel or exercise, may temporarily overwhelm the system.

The goal is not simply to avoid everything that causes symptoms. Instead, our goal is to gradually help the nervous system turn the volume back down so it can once again distinguish between true danger and normal life.

Why Treatments Sometimes Don't Work

Many people who come to my office have already tried numerous diets, supplements, medications, detoxification programs, hormone therapies, or alternative treatments. Some have improved a little, some have seen no benefit, and others have actually felt worse.

This often leads people to believe that they simply haven't found the "right" treatment.

Sometimes that's true—but often there is another explanation.

Imagine your house catches fire. While firefighters are still trying to put out the flames, someone begins repainting the walls, replacing the carpet, and planting flowers in the front yard. Those are all worthwhile improvements—but they're happening in the wrong order.

The nervous system works much the same way.

If the brain still believes your body is under constant threat, every other system continues prioritizing protection rather than healing. Digestion changes. Hormones change. Immune function changes. Mitochondria shift their energy toward survival. Inflammation increases.

This doesn't mean that gut health, hormones, nutrition, detoxification, chronic infections, or environmental toxins aren't important. They absolutely are.

It simply means that helping the nervous system feel safe often allows those other treatments to work much more effectively.

Rather than asking, "What's the next supplement?" we often begin by asking, "What does your nervous system need in order to feel safe enough to heal?"

Teaching Your Brain Safety

The encouraging news is that your brain is capable of changing throughout your lifetime. This ability, called **neuroplasticity**, allows the brain to build new pathways through repeated experiences.

Just as your nervous system learned to stay on high alert, it can also learn safety.

This happens through small, consistent experiences repeated over time. There is rarely one single treatment that "fixes" the nervous system. Instead, healing usually occurs because many small experiences gradually teach the brain that it no longer needs to remain in survival mode.

Some of the strategies I frequently recommend include slow diaphragmatic breathing, expressive journaling, spending time outdoors in nature, getting morning sunlight, prioritizing restorative sleep, eating a nutrient-dense diet, practicing gratitude, maintaining meaningful relationships, and engaging in gentle movement as tolerated.

For many patients, structured nervous system retraining programs such as **Primal Trust** provide an excellent framework for helping the brain develop healthier patterns. Others, particularly those who feel easily overwhelmed, may benefit from more passive approaches such as **BrainHarmony** and the **Safe and Sound Protocol**, which gently encourage the nervous system to move toward regulation.

Other tools may include **BrainTap**, **Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT)**, and **Parasym Plus**, which supports healthy vagus nerve function.

For selected patients, **ketamine-assisted therapy** can also be an incredibly valuable tool. Ketamine is not simply used to improve mood. One of its greatest strengths is that it temporarily increases the brain's flexibility, allowing people to step outside long-established patterns of thinking and view their circumstances from a different perspective. When combined with counseling, nervous system retraining, or expressive journaling, it can create an important opportunity for meaningful and lasting change.

No single tool works for everyone, and no single tool is required. The important point is that each experience of safety helps strengthen healthier neural pathways.

The Balanced Body System Reset™

One of the biggest lessons I've learned throughout my career is that healing happens best when we work with the body rather than against it.

At Balanced Body Functional Medicine, everything begins with a comprehensive Functional Health Assessment. We carefully review your health history and evaluate over one hundred laboratory markers, including hormones, thyroid function, metabolic health, inflammation, cardiovascular risk factors, nutritional status, liver and kidney function, and many other aspects of your health. We also perform a body composition analysis and evaluate the health of your smallest blood vessels using GlycoCheck technology.

Once we understand where your body is today, we begin rebuilding health in a thoughtful sequence.

We start by helping the nervous system regain a sense of safety while simultaneously supporting gut health and improving nutrition. We also make sure the body's natural drainage pathways are functioning well by supporting healthy bowel movements, bile flow, liver and kidney function, hydration, lymphatic circulation, and a diet rich in colorful fruits and vegetables.

As that foundation becomes stronger, we address chronic inflammation and identify the factors driving it, whether those are infections, food sensitivities, environmental toxins, chronic stress, poor sleep, or other contributors.

Next, we focus on restoring healthy mitochondrial function so your cells have the energy needed to repair themselves. From there we optimize hormones and metabolism, support detoxification when appropriate, and use advanced functional testing to personalize care for each individual.

Healing is not about doing everything at once.

It is about doing the right things in the right order.

Progress, Not Perfection

Healing from chronic illness is rarely a straight line.

There will be good days and difficult days. Sometimes you will feel like you're making tremendous progress, and other times it may seem like you've taken a step backward.

That does not mean you're failing.

The nervous system learns gradually through repetition.

Instead of asking yourself, "How do I feel today?" it is often more helpful to ask, "Am I doing better than I was three months ago? Six months ago?"

Those are the changes that truly matter.

One of my favorite definitions of health is this:

Health isn't the absence of stress. It's the ability to adapt to stress.

Our goal isn't to eliminate every challenge from your life. Our goal is to help your body become resilient enough that it no longer has to respond to every challenge as though your life depends on it.

Final Thoughts

If you've been struggling with chronic illness for months—or even years—I hope you'll leave with one important message:

There is reason for hope.

The nervous system is remarkably adaptable. The same brain that learned to protect you can also learn that it is safe again.

Healing doesn't happen overnight, and it rarely happens because of one supplement, one medication, or one treatment. It happens because we gradually create the conditions that allow your body to do what it was designed to do.

One of the biggest shifts I've made in my own thinking over the years is that I've stopped trying to "fix" people. Instead, my goal is to create the conditions in which their bodies can heal themselves.

Think about a broken bone. We don't actually heal it—the body does. Our job is to align it, protect it, and provide the nutrients and environment it needs to recover.

Chronic illness is often much the same.

My role is to help remove the obstacles to healing and guide your body back toward balance.

Your body has been doing its best to protect you.

Together, our goal is to help it feel safe enough to heal.