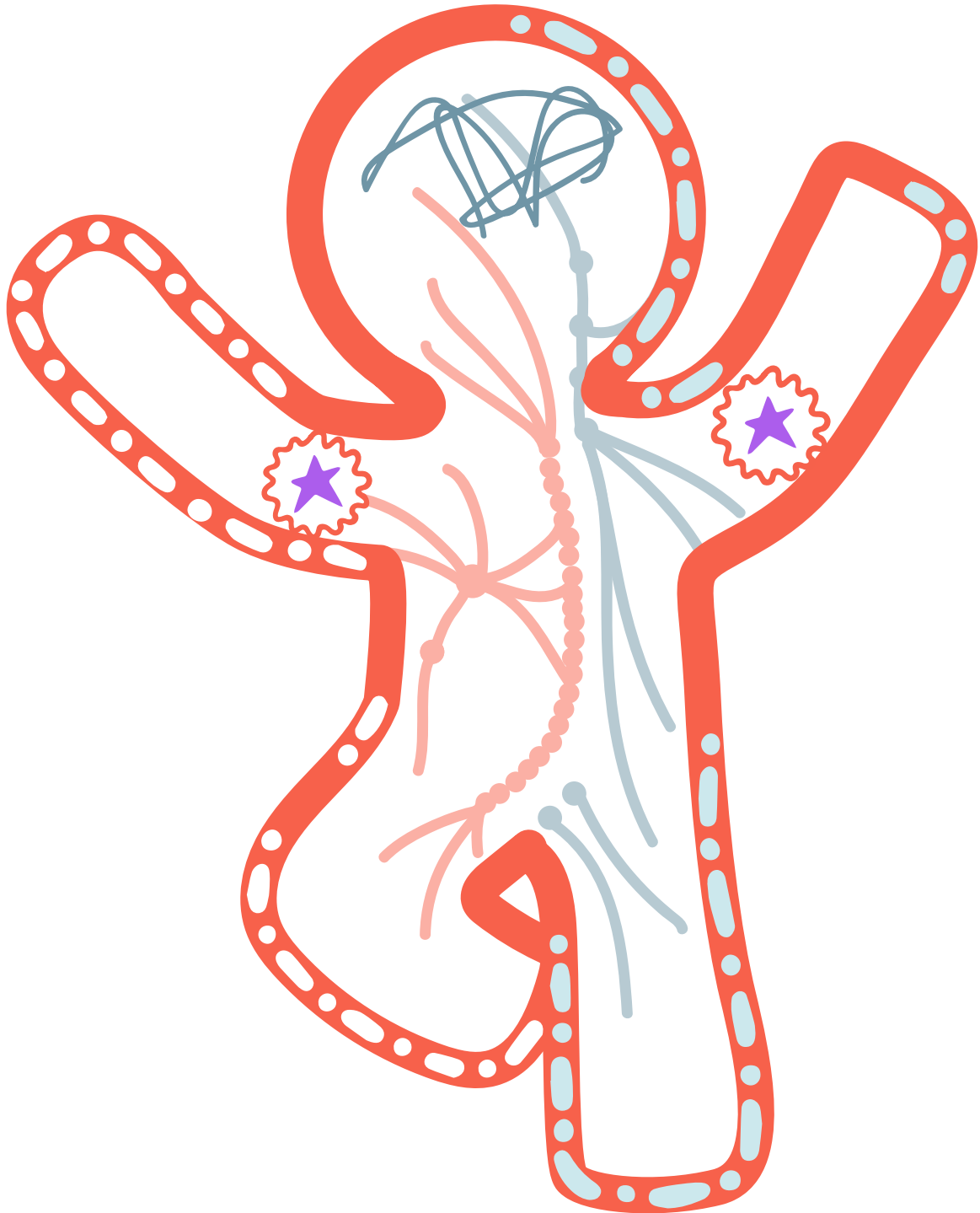


Bodily stress



How does your body store stress?

Bodily stress

Functional somatic symptoms often first appear during a time of excessive or chronic stress. For this reason they are sometimes called stress related symptoms.

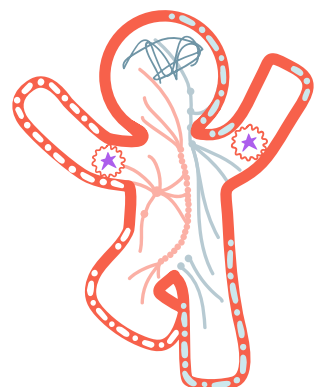
It is important to remember the mechanisms for dealing with stress in the body are very similar, regardless of whether the stress comes from the body, mind, or the environment.

Examples of stress from the body include infections, operations, or chronic inflammation. Examples of stress from the mind include worry and rumination. Examples of stress from the environment include financial difficulties, experiencing discrimination, or being in an abusive relationship.

You can be stressed without overloading the body

Stress doesn't always mean overloading the body. Our body is built to handle everyday stressors. We might notice our stress systems reacting day to day. For example, before a job interview, our heart might race or we might suddenly need to use the toilet. These are signs that the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) is active.

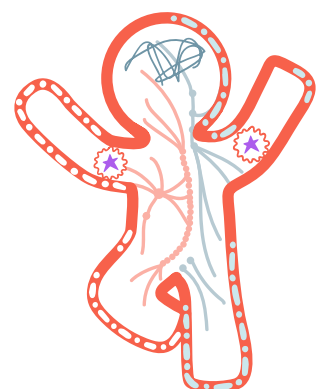
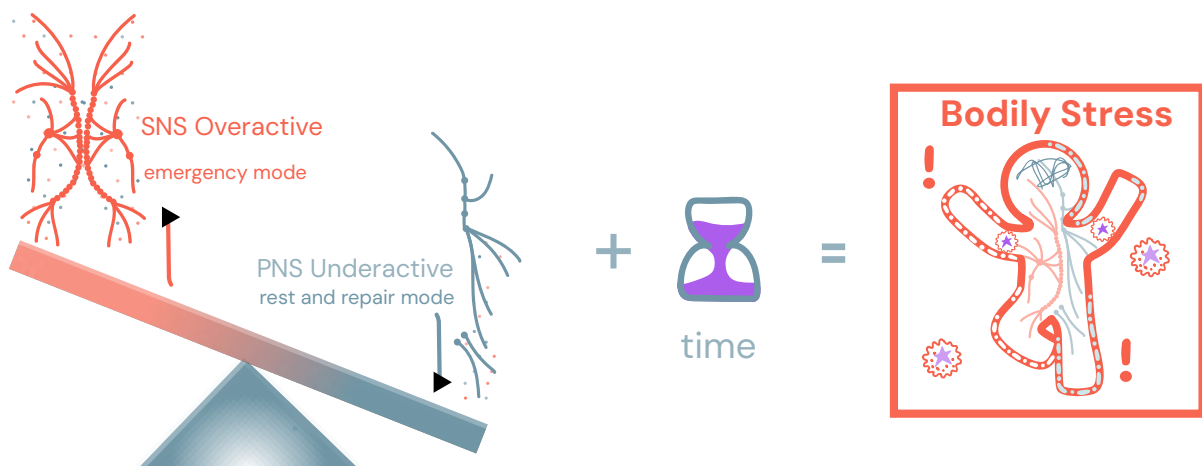
SNS activity in response to short-term stress are not symptoms of illness. It is better to think of them as normal and helpful responses, that help us adapt to our environment. Being able to move flexibly between both poles of the autonomic nervous system (SNS---PNS) helps us build resilience. We are toning up mechanisms the body will use to deal automatically with future stressors.



An overactive SNS for too long leads to exhaustion

Prolonged bodily stress occurs when the SNS and the PNS are out of balance for long periods of time. When we spend too much time in emergency mode (SNS active) without sufficient periods of rest and recovery in between (PNS active), stress can get stored in the body.

When the SNS doesn't switch down again after the challenge has passed, the body can stay in a state of stress longer than needed. It also stimulates the adrenal glands to release stress hormones like adrenaline and cortisol, setting off longer acting stress responses.

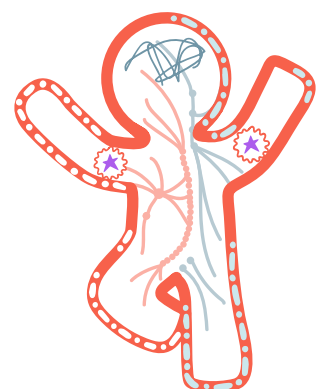


The chronic stress state

Persistent bodily stress consumes a lot of energy. Stress activates the immune and hormonal systems, depleting the body's reserves of energy and essential nutrients. If the body's resources are at risk of being used up too quickly, fatigue sets in as a way to conserve energy. We feel exhausted or 'burnt out'. Factors like poor diet, poor sleep, or bouts of severe illness can contribute to resource depletion, accelerating the burnout process.

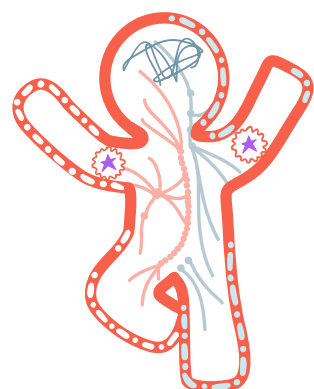
When the process of chronic stress reaches burn-out, typical symptoms include low energy, restless sleep, muscle discomfort, weakness, and ongoing low-level inflammation with frequent infections.

If you recognise the symptoms described at this stage, your main task is to recuperate resources. You will need to find ways you can activate the vagal nerve to shift the body into the parasympathetic nervous system (the state of physiological rest and repair). Eating nutritious food (+ supplements if you are deficient), getting enough rest, finding a positive mindset, morning sunlight and gentle movement are key resources. Expect recovery to take some time.



Maria R's Experience

The usual explanation is that people with functional disorders often have an underlying vulnerability due to genetics or upbringing. Then either a trigger event can occur that pushes you over the edge and drastically worsens your level of functioning, or you can experience a slow worsening of symptoms. Then there will be factors that can perpetuate one's symptoms so that one does not recover and get better as one normally would. It is an overloaded system that cannot just fix itself again. But what does it even mean that a system is overloaded? We have a lot of different ways that the body regulates itself. Usually the body will find its way back into balance, but if they have been pushed to the extreme for too long, then they can lose the ability to self-regulate towards the middle. For me, it was a combination of slow deterioration, and finally a trigger event in the form of a severe respiratory infection, which happened at a very stressful time in my life. It caused all the otherwise annoying symptoms to flare up to such an extent that my level of functioning went down completely.



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