

# Digestion under attack? Escape state of chronic crisis by slowing down

By Nancy Ludwig, MS, RD, LD, Siletz Tribal Head Start Nutrition

As part of my role as a consultant nutritionist to Siletz Tribal Head Start, I offer information for families. Last month I reminded readers that ideal nutrition is a powerful ally to stress. This month, however, I state that stress can significantly interfere with digestion, even when nutritious vital food is consumed.

I eat a very healthy diet and have for many years. I have struggled with my stress response and I've come to realize that I spend most of my time in the hyper-alert state of fight, flight or freeze.

After many years of this, while believing that I was handling stress fine, I learned that this chronic state of fight, flight or freeze may be harming my health by interfering with proper digestion despite my attention on high quality food.

Fight or flight really works well in a state of short-term crisis (freeze is less adaptive). When this heightened state becomes chronic, however, it does not work so well.

Adults and children who have experienced trauma tend to spend more time in this hyper-vigilant (or hyper-alert) state. Trauma isn't always a direct experience with a memory. Trauma can be a collective experience passed down through families, and groups. Collective trauma is at work in the Native population and adds a burden to health.

When individuals live in a chronic state of fight, flight or freeze as though they were in crisis, they miss out on the state of rest and digest and this actually

interferes with digestion. Digestion is at the root of health because it extracts the materials we need from our food to function, to grow and to repair.

Did you know that our bodies actually have the ability to turn our digestion on or off? Our central nervous system controls our body's ability to digest and use food. How we respond to our environment, our thoughts or our meal will determine whether our central nervous system turns our digestion on or off.

Our nervous system has two primary aspects:

1. The sympathetic nervous system, also known as fight or flight response
2. The parasympathetic nervous system, also known as rest and digest response

They each have a powerful and essential function.

Our sympathetic nervous system kicks in whenever we experience any kind of real or perceived threat. If fear, real or imagined shows up in your thoughts or environment – being chased by a bear, running late for a plane or the never ending to-do list full of urgent deadlines – or even judging ourselves for eating all that cake – we activate our fight/flight response and shift into a stress response.

As this occurs, our sympathetic nervous system moves our energy and blood flow out to our extremities so that we can fight or flee, escape the situation or freeze in the presence of our stressor.

When our body shuttles our energy and blood to our arms and legs, it also moves them away from our internal organs – including our digestive tract. Digestion

is hardly essential when we are fighting for our lives, so if we find ourselves in a full-tilt stress response – like a bear chasing us – our digestion completely shuts down.

Yet even in a moderate or chronic stress response – like our to-do list for the day at work or our constant self-criticism – our digestive system still experiences a negative impact. When we live in a state of worry or anxiety, our ability to digest, assimilate and metabolize our food is hugely reduced.

Our stress response holds great influence over our digestion and metabolism. This is one of the key principles in the field of eating psychology.

There is simply no way that our body can fully assimilate the nutrition that we're ingesting when our sympathetic nervous system is activated. If we can shift out of the physiologic stress response and back into parasympathetic, we can improve our digestive wellness.

The activation of our parasympathetic nervous system is also called the rest and digest system. It's our relaxation response.

The parasympathetic system conserves energy while it slows the heart rate down, increases intestinal activity, opens blood vessels and allows us to take those deep, calming breaths. When it comes to improving our digestion wellness, the parasympathetic nervous system is critical.

The Institute of Eating Psychology suggests three strategies that will promote digestive wellness by shifting into the physiologic relaxation response. Check out this link for more information – [psychologyofeating.com/secret-digestive-wellness/](http://psychologyofeating.com/secret-digestive-wellness/).

The strategies include 1. Breathe, 2. Slow down and 3. Enjoy your food.

**Breathe:** Unless you're choking or sick, few of us really pay attention to our breath and its connection to our mood and emotions. So before you begin eating, take one minute to breathe fully, gently and slowly. Bring yourself to your body, sitting there at the table. Be committed to being nowhere else and begin breathing with the intention of relaxing and becoming fully present.

This is the fastest way to shift our bodies into a more relaxed state. Isn't it about time we paid more heed to the power of our breath?

**Slow Down:** Imagine shifting your body from 100 miles an hour to 25 miles an hour. In other words, bring it down to an easy coast. So many of us are racing through life. If we can slow down more by sitting down to eat, by being realistic about how many things we can actually get done in a day, by focusing on one task instead of five at once, we can shift our body out of fight or flight mode and into rest and digest mode.

Life happens so fast. It deserves our full attention and it deserves its full due. Relax. Enjoy the process. There's no good reason to move so fast that we can't metabolize our meal. Health is not about speed; it's all about slow.

**Enjoy your food:** When we focus on enjoying our food, we activate our pleasure receptors, we tune into our senses – our sense of taste, touch, smell is initiated. Enjoyment has the positive impact of activating our parasympathetic nervous system.

You may have noticed that none of the above suggestions is purely focused on food. What we eat certainly has an impact on our digestive wellness, but it's not the whole story. Digestive wellness and nutritional healing are much more than just the food and supplements we choose to ingest. I invite you to see what happens when you add pleasure into the equation.

In order for our food to impact our body in the most positive and nourishing way, we have to focus on the deep systemic level of our nervous system. Everything is connected – nothing in our body stands apart.

Nutrition is at the core of health, yet it is influenced by more than nutritious food. For starters, breathe, slow down and enjoy your food. For trauma, additional help may be needed (at any age, regardless of cause).

Siletz Tribal Head Start offers my time at no cost to you to support family nutrition over the telephone. Please contact your Head Start teacher for a referral if you have nutrition concerns about your Head Start child.

## ATTENTION! Siletz Tribal Member Artists!

Have you ever wondered how artwork jumps off a page onto a T-Shirt?!



477-SSP Clients Encouraged to Attend!  
Direct to Garment Demo\*Training Workshop

JOIN US!! JOIN US!! JOIN US!!

Please R.S.V.P. By February 6th, 2017

WHEN: Wednesday, February 8th, 2017

WHERE: Siletz Tribal Prints & Gifts, 1520 NE Hwy 101, Lincoln City, Or 97367

TIME: 12:30 pm to 4:00 pm

PHONE: 541-996-5550



Space is limited!  
10 Spots available! R.S.V.P. TODAY!  
Pizza & Refreshments Will be provided!!

## CEDARR

Community Efforts Demonstrating the Ability to Rebuild and Restore

### Mission Statement

We will utilize resources to prevent the use of alcohol and other drugs, delinquency and violence; we will seek to reduce the barriers to treatment and support those who choose abstinence.

Feb. 8 • Noon

Siletz Community Health Clinic  
200 Gwee-Shut Road, Siletz



## Siletz Tribal Behavioral Health Programs

Prevention, Outpatient Treatment, and Women's and Men's Transitional

Siletz: 800-600-5599 or 541-444-8286

Eugene: 541-484-4234

Salem: 503-390-9494

Portland: 503-238-1512

Narcotics Anonymous Toll-Free Help Line – 877-233-4287

For information on Alcoholics Anonymous: [aa-oregon.org](http://aa-oregon.org)