Did a fight with a loved one leave you ill? How conflict weakens the immune system

Stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline play pivotal roles in the body's response...

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Lakshana N Palat (Assistant Features Editor)

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The fever wouldn't just subside. It had been several days since she had left home.

Dubai-based homemaker Malavika Sen recalls the experience of 'the fever that never really left,' an affliction that followed a growing rift between her and her husband over several months. The arguments became bitter and unsavoury words were flung at the other. Sen found herself going to bed each night feverish and drained. While the thermometer consistently read normal, her body kept the score, manifesting in colds, sudden coughs, and occasional red, itchy hives. Even after their separation, the fever persisted for days. "It finally subsided after two weeks of visits to doctors and countless medications, but no one could ever pinpoint the cause," she recalls.

And, even though the fever disappeared, she remembers a particular weakness that took over her. Sometimes, the hives would surface, if she was reminded of her marriage, be it a photograph, a place, or a fragrance.

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. This was the case for Beth Jonathan, a media professional based in Abu Dhabi. A harrowing argument with her partner fractured their relationship beyond repair, a wound she found impossible to heal from, both emotionally and physically.

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?

The emotional toll of conflict

The sleepless nights. The rapid heart rate. And, the never-ending exhaustion.

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.

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As Nusrat Khan, a clinical psychologist 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.”

“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...”

Nusrat Khan
clinical psychologist at Human Relations Institute & Clinics

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 hypothalamic-pituitary-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 over-eating, and the influx of processed foods and sugar further fuel the physical manifestations of stress.

Cortisol and adrenaline: A double-edged sword

According to Louisa Grace, a clinical psychologist in Abu Dhabi, stress hormones like cortisol and adrenaline 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. As Grace points out, "The persistent stress overwhelms the body, leading to physical symptoms like pain, slow-healing injuries, and digestive issues." Maria Youssef, an endocrinologist in Abu Dhabi and Nas Al Jafari, Co- Founder & Group Medical Director – DNA Health & Wellness elaborate 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.

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With fewer white blood cells circulating, the body's ability to ward off viruses and bacteria is severely impaired.

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 adrenaline, which increases heart rate, blood pressure, and airway dilation to boost oxygen intake. Yet, chronic adrenaline spikes ultimately result in fatigue, higher oxidative stress, and further damage to the immune system, says Youssef.

As Youssef explains, the fight-or-flight response is designed to be a temporary survival mechanism. However, prolonged conflict can leave the body in a continuous state of activation, depleting its immune resources. The result? We become increasingly vulnerable, not just to stress-related illnesses, but also to a slower recovery and weaker defense against the normal wear and tear of daily life.

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.

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.

Chronic stress doesn't only affect adults; it also impacts children. According to Khan, children exposed to ongoing conflict between parents are at increased risk of becoming immunocompromised. This stress manifests in various ways, including digestive issues, poor gut health, sleep disturbances, and weakened immunity. "Lack of sleep is one of the most insidious effects," Khan adds. Since sleep is vital for a healthy immune system, its disruption weakens the body's resilience. As a result, stress impacts multiple areas of life, leading to a fragmented sense of well-being.

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 Satish Chandran, a neuropsychiatrist based in Dubai explains: "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."

The role of the vagus nerve

As Satish Chandran, a neuropsychiatrist explains, at the heart of this fight-or-flight process is the vagus nerve, which plays a key role in calming the body after stress, 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.

Dubai-based Lilla Fleetwood, a British expat and freelancer, recalls how a minor knee injury took weeks to heal after a close 20-year friendship unraveled. "I missed my friend so much. I'm not someone who can easily let go of friendships, and the loneliness hit me hard," she reflects. "I was depressed, and my abandonment issues were triggered in a way I hadn't anticipated. Amid all this emotional turmoil, I tripped over a small stone and scraped my knee. It seemed like such a minor thing, but it wouldn't heal for weeks – sometimes even bleeding. It was baffling at the time."

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 physical pain is a manifestation of unresolved emotional wounds, explains Chandran. "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.

So, how do you recognise and address this?

It is essential to recognise that unresolved conflicts and deep emotional wounds don't just affect our mental well-being—they manifest in physical symptoms that demand our attention. From persistent fevers to digestive

issues, these physical signs are the body's way of signaling that something needs healing.

The experts explain:

• Listen to your body: Pay attention to physical symptoms like persistent fatigue, digestive issues, or unexplained pain. These could be signs that emotional stress is taking a toll on your health. Take note of when these symptoms occur and consider whether they coincide with recent conflicts or emotional struggles.

• Practise stress management techniques: Incorporate stress-reducing activities like deep breathing, meditation, or yoga into your daily routine. These can help calm your nervous system and lower the levels of stress hormones in your body.

• Prioritise self-care: Ensure you're getting adequate sleep, eating a balanced diet, and exercising regularly. These simple but essential habits can help strengthen your immune system and restore balance to both your body and mind.

• Address relationship conflicts: Unresolved conflict, especially in close relationships, can have a profound impact on your health. If possible, try to address issues directly with the person involved, or consider professional mediation if the conflict feels insurmountable.

• Establish boundaries: Setting clear emotional boundaries in your relationships can prevent chronic stress from building up. It's important to create a balance between caring for others and caring for yourself.

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