

Module 5 Lesson 5

Transcript

Today, it's all about adrenal fatigue and chronic fatigue syndrome. While not directly related to thyroid function, it makes sense to address these conditions here because symptoms can be very similar to those of thyroid disorders. I definitely notice that more and more people have become aware of adrenal fatigue and chronic fatigue syndrome over the last couple of years, and you'll likely get lots of questions about these conditions when working with clients. I'll also point out that these conditions can be a little controversial in the medical community, I'll explain why in just a few.

What we're going to learn in this lesson is what adrenal fatigue and chronic fatigue syndromes are, what makes them different, and what the treatments and interventions are for people who suffer from them, and what your role can be in helping clients manage these conditions. I feel like I could spend hours talking about why these diseases are so hard to diagnose, difficult to understand and challenging to treat, I'm going to try to be as concise as possible though. I really want to give you a clear snapshot of this topic, and I promise I won't finish this lesson without talking about where we are in understanding these disorders, and where the research is at.

When I'm explaining stress hormones to my clients, I almost always use the running from a bear example, as I like to call it. Our bodies are cleverly designed so that in nature, if we see danger, our lickety-split instant response is to flee. See a bear, hormones flood the body, heart rate quickly accelerates, you know the feeling, legs take off before we even get a chance to tell them to, right? We all know that feeling. Well, in this day and age, rarely are we running from a bear. Our stressors are getting stuck in traffic, dealing with disgruntled people at a checkout counter, or just managing impossible schedules.

The trouble is that our bodies think and respond to running late to a meeting in the same way as running from a bear. The same hormones are released, the same adrenal response kicks in, but unlike running from a bear where you get to safety and the fight or flight response ends, we can hardly ever escape the daily stress in our lives. Our bodies are constantly in a state of humming with these hormones that don't calm down because we're constantly perceiving stressors in our day. Sure, you made it to the meeting on time, but you'll probably spend the next hour stressing about all the emails you need to do when you get back to your desk.

If you need a more detailed refresher, I want you to pull up the stress and fatigue handout from your first round of TNS, where I talk about your body being a car and fight or flight hormones

are like stepping on the gas or screeching on the brakes for a big surge of hormonal response, so go back and refresh yourself with TNS level one if you want a little bit more on that.

Okay, think about driving in your car. We've probably all had the experience of seeing something in the road at the last minute, turning the wheel to avoid an accident, and feeling our skin tingle, heart race, and breath quicken. That's the adrenaline shooting through your veins. That response resolves when you see you aren't in an accident, but chronic stress is like the car in idle, just enough gas to keep those hormones activated, but not enough to actually flee.

That cortisol response keeps you in a stress loop, because this response should be turned off most of your waking hours. This takes a toll on your system. All of those less dramatic than avoiding a crash stressors in your life, your relationships, navigating adulthood, and aspiring to great things, can take a toll on your body. You're in idle mode, like the car. Those hormones constantly flood the body, and are working in a way against our biology. Some people are definitely more sensitive than others, of course, we're all different.

Let's start with adrenal fatigue. Patients will go to their doctors complaining of fatigue, being tired, exhaustion, their low energy, and want to get to the root of it, no one wants to be exhausted. Maybe they suspect there's something going on with their adrenal system, especially because maybe they heard adrenal talk at the water cooler. On top of the kidneys are two glands called the adrenal glands. They're responsible for making several hormones, the most famous is cortisol, which you've heard me talk about, oh, about a billion times before. Under stress, our adrenal glands make and release bursts of cortisol into the blood. It helps us do what we need to do to run from a bear.

While science is not clear on this yet at all, the thought is that long exposure to stress just from doing all the things we do every day could drain the adrenals, leading to a low cortisol state. Basically, your adrenal glands can't keep up with the chronic state of stress you feel, leading to low energy, fatigue, brain fog, depression, salt and sweet cravings, lightheadedness, and a whole bunch of other symptoms.

Some people believe that adrenal fatigue is real, but it's not considered a true medical diagnosis. The biggest argument is that we don't yet have sensitive enough technology and testing abilities to clinically diagnose it. Endocrinologists don't recognize adrenal fatigue as a diagnosis, some may use the term adrenal fatigue based on patient report in interview, but there are no lab values to look at, and no diagnostic tests.

Those of us who like the facts and concrete data might brush off the idea of adrenal fatigue and think, "Get back to me when you've got some facts," but others, I'm thinking more naturopaths and more holistic doctors, claim great results with massage, dietary changes, mostly cutting out sugar and caffeine, and some supplementation, things like licorice root, magnesium, vitamin D, and turmeric, for example. I'm somewhere in the middle, because I do love me some good science, which, by the way, I think is coming, but I also think it's worth it to give it a shot and make some of these behavior changes to see if a client can get some relief.

Moving on to chronic fatigue syndrome, also known as CFS or ME. It's characterized by extreme exhaustion and joint pain that limits one's ability to function over a six-month or longer period of time. People who suffer from chronic fatigue are exhausted all of the time. I mean all of the time, they wake up exhausted, and are unable to live their normal lives and function on a most basic level. The National Academy of Medicine reports an estimated 2.5 million Americans are affected, and roughly 80% are undiagnosed. CFS can hit anyone, but the most affected population are women aged 40 to 60.

Here, we're talking about a serious, long-term illness that makes it extremely hard to hold down a job, stay functional in school, and perform simple tasks like cleaning, taking a shower, or cooking a meal. Unfortunately, like adrenal fatigue, there's not a clinical diagnosis, and it's unclear if CFS comes from infection, an autoimmune response, stress, or genetics. Treatment of CFS is tailored to each individual, and some try massage therapy, a technique called pacing where a balance of activity and rest is measured, sleep or pain medications, counseling, and even CBT, cognitive behavior therapy. Without tests, cures or drugs to treat chronic fatigue, most of the treatment is really symptom management, unfortunately. Researchers are hard at work to understand both adrenal fatigue and chronic fatigue syndrome, but for now, the best we can really do is manage symptoms.

So, as a healthcare practitioner, you have the important role in helping clients who may have one of these conditions. First, no matter which side of the data you stand on, it's so important to show empathy for clients who may have these conditions, and always validate that their symptoms are real, even if you're not yet convinced adrenal fatigue or CFS actually exist. Clearly there's something going on if a client is constantly tired and in pain, even if you're not quite sure what to call it, and you are in the position to help these people through your recommendations. You play an important role.

People who suffer should absolutely prioritize their sleep hygiene, and avoid simple and refined sugars that can make their blood sugar crash and exacerbate exhaustion. I also recommend keeping a journal that includes how bad symptoms are, and light exercise, light walking, as much as the person can tolerate. Refer back to that TNS level one handout on stress and fatigue for a full list of recommendations for managing stress.

Okay, so to wrap this lesson up, today we learned about adrenal fatigue and chronic fatigue syndrome, we learned about what makes them different, and we also learned what treatments and interventions exist now, and how you can be helpful in managing your clients' care. I'll see you in the next lesson.