

Module 5, Lesson 5 Handout:

Adrenal Fatigue

The concept of adrenal fatigue is controversial and not well understood, yet it's a topic we're hearing more and more about in the wellness world. Let's go through the basics so you feel prepared when your clients present with symptoms of fatigue or have questions about this condition.

What is Adrenal Fatigue?

Adrenal fatigue is based on the idea that prolonged stress could deplete the adrenals, resulting in low cortisol. When we're under stress, our adrenal glands produce hormones like cortisol to help us deal with it. Cortisol helps control blood sugar and blood pressure, regulates metabolism and helps reduce inflammation. Though we often talk about the negative effects of too much cortisol, we rely on balanced cortisol to maintain overall health.

According to the theory of adrenal fatigue, when people are faced with long-term stress, their adrenal glands cannot keep up with the body's need for hormones like cortisol and they run low. When this happens, symptoms of "adrenal fatigue" may appear, which may include low energy, trouble sleeping or waking up, brain fog, mood swings, cravings, and lightheadedness.

So Does this Really Exist?

According to The Endocrine Society, no. They do not recognize adrenal fatigue as a real condition. A 2016 review paper titled "Adrenal fatigue does not exist: a systematic review" looked at 58 different studies to determine the validity of the condition. Published in *BMC Endocrine Disorders* by two Brazilian doctors, the review concluded that there is no substantiation that "adrenal fatigue" is an actual medical condition because there are no confirmed methods of clinical screening for adrenal fatigue. Also, when trying to differentiate between exhaustion, fatigue and burnout, there is conflicting data using most of the functional tests. Even cortisol tests have shown inconsistent results in studies. The results of this big study basically say that it's still possible that adrenal fatigue is a "real" thing, but right now there is no confirmed evidence.

The reality is, there's very little research in this area and most of the evidence is anecdotal. This condition may actually exist, we just might not have the best way to diagnose it yet. For example, conventional blood tests might indicate that your adrenals are normal. However, a better diagnostic approach may be to test your levels at different times of the day, which is much more likely to reveal

an out-of-whack pattern of cortisol or DHEA secretion and adrenal fatigue has been characterized by cortisol levels that are too high at night and not high enough in the morning. For now the science just isn't there.

Bottom Line

While there isn't research to prove adrenal fatigue exists, we can still take action to reduce the symptoms of stress and fatigue even if the exact biological mechanism is up for debate. There are plenty of people who experience the proposed symptoms of adrenal fatigue who can't get to the bottom of their issues, and these symptoms shouldn't be ignored just because we're not yet exactly sure why they're happening. Consider why a client's adrenals would be drained. Take a better look at what types of stress might be affecting this person.

Overall, help a client implement stress reduction strategies and eliminate sources of stress in their lives when possible. Continue to promote nutrient dense foods and focus on nutrients known to play a role in energy metabolism, such as magnesium and B vitamins. And of course, empathize with this client how challenging it is to experience symptoms and be unsure of the cause and let the person know you're on his or her side.