

# Mindful Monday, October 5, 2020

When you're feeling exhausted and unable to go on remember your body can keep going.  
It's only the little voice in your head that wants to stop.

- Unknown

I am starting to think the voice in my head is right. I don't know about you, but lately I often feel like giving into the voice in my head. I have recently become aware of a strange underlying fatigue as I find myself jealous of my cat who sleeps in a sunbeam on the couch all day. With the second wave of COVID-19 upon us, we are being reminded and encouraged to remain vigilant in our battle against this virus, an illness that is proving to be a sneaky and unrelenting foe. Regardless of what we think and how strong the pull is to throw in the towel or sleep on the couch, we do have the capacity to continue to move forward. Our ability to battle on; however, may be thwarted by crisis fatigue. Crisis fatigue can occur when a stressful incident becomes enduring or chronic. Your body has adapted to handle acute or short-term stresses but given the chaos of 2020 thus far you may be feeling overwhelmed by the seemingly unrelenting nature of the last six months.

An article in [Psychology Today](#) notes that initially our bodies chemically react to fear in the same way as excitement. This is why horror movies are so entertaining for some, the anticipation of being scared is thrilling, but at the end of the movie we return to the safety of our environment, the perceived threat proving to be make believe. However, when fear sticks around or becomes a permanent feature, our bodies interpret it as a constant threat. As a result, our bodies are continually flooded with cortisol, a complex hormone involved with memory, mood and motivation. During a stress response cortisol is involved with diverting resources away from non-essential functions like growth and digestion and directing resources to fight the threat by increasing nutrients to power muscles and reducing pain perception. Cortisol release is highly effective in short-term responses and it is designed to turn off when the threat has passed. However, when the threat is ongoing and long term, our bodies need help to tell the difference between the immediate threat and an ongoing one. By understanding a bit about cortisol, we can outsmart our biology and overcome crisis fatigue.

What Cortisol Tells You To Do	What You Should Actually Do
Stay Awake	<b>SLEEP</b> Cortisol makes you "tired but wired." It prevents you from wanting to sleep. <b>You need to sleep!</b> Perhaps more than you ever have. Our brains are having to process complex new information each day and every day of this pandemic. They need an opportunity to shut down, rewire, and work through new challenges.
Keep Plugged In	<b>Plug Into Nature</b> Cortisol makes you feel restless and when you're unproductive you might spend time plugged into devices that only increase the feeling of restlessness and lower productivity (generating a vicious feedback cycle where you never feel like you're getting anything done). Take a break and swap the screen for some green in your life! Getting into nature is a simple way to lower cortisol levels naturally. If you can't escape to a park, grab a houseplant or two to lower anxiety, cortisol and blood pressure. <b>Pro-tip:</b> If you're like me and struggle to keep house plants alive, go ahead and get a fake one. Your brain won't know the difference and you'll still get the effects of lowered cortisol.
Eat Sugar	<b>Balance Your Dietary Intake</b> Cortisol makes you crave sugars. Your body needs a healthy, balanced diet to prevent the massive surges and crashes that high/low blood sugar will bring. Watch out for overly caffeinated foods and beverages and load up on foods high in fiber. <b>Pro-tip:</b> If you really need to satisfy that sweet tooth, look for dark chocolate which in a 2014 study showed to buffer stress reactivity.
Lay on the Couch	<b>Get Moving</b> Long term exposure to cortisol often makes us feel sluggish as our hormones are telling us to conserve our energy. But in fact, moving your body and getting good exercise will help keep your blood sugar in check and lower your overall stressed state. You don't need to go overboard – in fact, extremely intense workouts may increase your cortisol! Instead, opt for moderate cardiovascular exercise (think brisk walk, or a friendly pickleball match)

Adapted from the original by Dr. Rebeca Heiss

By being aware of the impact of cortisol and the impact of prolonged stress, we can outsmart our instincts and support our recovery. For additional information on crisis fatigue and tips for overcoming it, check out the articles below.

[Covid Exhaustion](#), from Psychology Today | [7 Self-Care Tips for Coping with Covid-19 Crisis Fatigue](#), from Today

[Crisis Fatigue](#), from Wired | [Crisis Fatigue: Are We Emotionally Overwhelmed](#), from WebMD