
SECTION 1
**What is
Sympathetic
Dominance?**

Introducing Sympathetic Dominance

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

For twenty-seven years, I've been in the business of health and wellness, of restoring and nurturing nervous systems, and caring for patients in the grip of innumerable ailments. My job was never just about dealing with pain and illness though. My passion lay in empowering people to be in control of their health, to be truly well.

Over the years, I found myself caring for hundreds of people who seemed to be in survival mode. Some of them were incredibly busy, running from one thing to the next, caring for others, or nursing the ill. Others were wound-up, doing their best to bear up under the weight of life's circumstances, or simply putting an incredible amount of pressure on themselves for whatever reason. Some have been dealt cruel hands health-wise. The reasons why these people could be living in survival mode were as innumerable as the conditions they faced.

That's where the links started appearing in my mind. These patients seemed to be chasing symptoms, seemingly random ones at that. But the more I observed this trend, the less random they seemed to be. I began to see one thing at the root of it all – something we could so easily change, if we only knew about it.

As the dots started connecting for me, I started to see person after person who was in this same boat. They often suffered from the so-called '*random*'

symptoms. Managing them was important, even life-preserving at times. But I couldn't stay focused purely on symptoms: I needed to go after the cause. Years on, having found a pathway out of this particular health maze, it has been a joy to empower others to do the same.

Jenna was one such patient. When she walked into my office, warning bells started ringing in my head straight away. Jenna was suffering from numbness on one side of the face as well as in her arms and legs. She had blurred vision in one eye and a raft of other symptoms. They were all pointing in a very concerning direction: that of Multiple Sclerosis (MS).

Jenna's tests were inconclusive, eventually ruling out MS but not offering any solutions. This lack of answers was distressing but I said to her, *"Regardless of whether or not this is Multiple Sclerosis, I have an idea of what the underlying cause might be."*

It wasn't over-confidence or false optimism that made me say that. I could see in her symptoms and characteristics an all too familiar story.

Jenna and her husband Andrew sat across from me as I reeled off a long list of symptoms. It's one I have used hundreds of times in recent years, for patients with all sorts of health issues and concerns. I was seeing a remarkably common link at the root of them all. Her case was no different.

I said, *"You are a light sleeper and you have vivid dreams. You are sensitive to both light and noise."* Jenna and Andrew nodded.

"Your shoulders feel like concrete and you find that you sweat more than you used to." More nods.

"You have hormonal issues, and you are experiencing food intolerances and gut issues. You suffer from unmanageable fatigue." I went on to describe other symptoms, all to more nods from Andrew and Jenna. Finally I started to explain Jenna's personality, including how she often felt wound-up, had to have everything organized and *"just so,"* and was a bit of a 'Type A' personality.

It was at this point Andrew picked his jaw up off the floor and exclaimed “*How do you know my wife?*” I’d pinpointed many of her symptoms and personality traits without them telling me about them.

Over the weeks that followed, Jenna was told she didn’t have MS. Good news, no doubt! But being told she didn’t have an autoimmune disorder would not relieve her symptoms. Nor would it decrease her anxiety over what was causing them.

Does this sound familiar? It doesn’t matter whether it’s an autoimmune disorder or something like migraines or hormone and food issues. Not having anything conclusive show up on a test often has people thinking, ‘*I’m a hypochondriac*’ or ‘*I’m going crazy.*’

Neither was true for Jenna, and hundreds of other patients like her. The symptoms had told me everything I needed to know though. Jenna was Sympathetically Dominant. We enacted the treatment protocol straight away. As I always do, I encouraged Jenna not to abandon her specialist appointments.

Within weeks, the numbness and blurred vision had resolved. Jenna started sleeping well. Her gut function improved. A number of symptoms she didn’t even know were connected started dissipating.

By the time she got around to her next specialist appointment, she had no symptoms to report.

Honestly, I can’t count the number of times I have had conversations just like that one. The original presentation may have differed – migraines, high blood pressure, gut issues, tense shoulders, pain in a number of joints and autoimmune disorders to name a few, but at the root of it all, there was something all too common. It’s a list of symptoms leading down the same pathway called *Sympathetic Dominance* (when something called the Sympathetic Nervous System becomes dominant).

Due to a series of built in triggers, the brain knows when it needs to activate the ‘*fight or flight*’ survival mechanism. It’s called the Sympathetic Nervous

System and we've known for a long time that it exists. When it activates, it suppresses your digestive system, reproductive system, immune system and the repair functions of the body.

Under normal circumstances, the Sympathetic Nervous System activates in response to extreme physical, cognitive or emotional stress. This is useful as it allows our body to adapt to situations and ensures we have enough fuel for the crisis. Medical science has led to a relatively clear understanding of the reactions in the body in these situations.

What we haven't explored in depth is what happens when this survival mechanism stays switched on or fired up for extended periods of time. This is when our body's hardwired stress responses cross out of '*normal circumstance*' where they are helpful, to a scenario in which pro-longed physiological change can actually cause harm.

Modern life doesn't improve this scenario. We leave demanding jobs and arrive home with financial stress sitting like heavy weights on our shoulders. We wake up with a to-do list as long as our arm. We go to bed knowing the same will wait for us the next day. Some of us have businesses, noisy or demanding family lives. Others have illnesses or sick loved ones that we worry over.

We lie awake at night worrying about mortgages, exams, interviews, relationships, and the list goes on. Typically, we don't think of these things when we think of '*fight or flight*.' But they represent only a handful of issues that can activate the survival mechanism and keep it activated.

The rest of the list may surprise you. It includes the constant barrage of light and noise we deal with, the poor posture we often engage in when we spend hours looking down at our laptops and handheld devices, and the simple fact that many of us are living life in a '*wound up*' state.

Can we live life in complete silence with the lights turned off? No. Can we avoid the use of technology? Absolutely not! Can we avoid stress and the demands of modern life completely, never facing a financial, relational or health stressor ever again? The answer to that is a resounding '*No!*'

We can think about whether or not to flex a muscle or go for a walk, but we don't think about whether or not to go into 'fight or flight' mode. It's automatic. So what's the point of writing a book like this?

The point is that staying in 'fight or flight' mode for too long negatively impacts health in many ways, and there *are* some things we can do about it. Best of all, they're remarkably simple.

Empowering people with knowledge and helping put them back in control of their health is something that isn't just a job for me but a joy and a passion. Over the last ten years, I have undertaken advanced training in functional neurology. It has coincided with a developing fascination with an issue that impacts so many lives. However, it has been poorly understood until now.

It's called Sympathetic Dominance. It comes from a part of your brain that is so deep that it's primal and automatic. However, I'm here to tell you that you can fool your brain into switching gears – from the survival mode that is ironically wearing us down, to something so much better.

THE WORD WE ALL HATE

It's an incredibly busy life we lead these days and many of us are living in a state of feeling sick, tired and cranky. It needn't be so. But it also runs far deeper than the need for a nap or a pain killer.

Science is starting to catch up with what we have known for a while: Stress just isn't good for us. But what we haven't explored to its fullest capacity is just how bad it can be.

I've written an offensive word there. If you read the word '*stress*' and think that doesn't apply to you then I challenge you to read on, even reframe your thinking on the term. The Australian Oxford Dictionary defines stress as "*demand on physical or mental energy [1].*"

Therefore, if you have had to exert any physical or mental energy at all, then you've experienced it. It's impossible *not* to experience it. How well you deal with the physiological repercussions will greatly influence your health and sense of wellbeing.

As you read this book, I want you to keep something in mind. I'm not talking about stress the way it usually gets talked about. You see, stress can be physical: an illness that has taken you time to recover from, a sick child or loved one you worried over, the death of a loved one or a job where you push your body to the limits time and time again. You would even experience stress if you were driving along in your car, completely chilled out, and a child suddenly ran out in front of you. It may be short term, but that jolt of fear would have made your body respond.

Stress can be mental: The pressure of running a business or a household and worrying if ends are going to meet, a tedious relationship, trauma or any negative situation. Even last minute cramming for an exam amounts to mental stress.

It could even be chemical, with various aspects of our lifestyle and environment having impacts on the chemistry of our bodies. Food intolerances, environmental toxins such as pesticides and herbicides, petrochemical exposure in our homes and work environments, pollution, cosmetics – they all contribute. Anyone who has ever gotten sick on an overseas trip will attest to the fact that differences in travel environments can be a factor. If you have ever experienced side effects from a course of medication, you will have experienced the power of chemical stress.

The Mayo Clinic, a world leader in diagnostic medicine, is now saying that prolonged stress puts you at elevated risk of anxiety, depression, digestive problems, heart disease, sleep problems and weight gain, along with memory and concentration impairment [2].

Sadly, it could be just the tip of a sickly iceberg.

AN EPIDEMIC IN SOCIETY

In 2003, the World Health Organisation released a paper noting the ten social determinants of health [3]. Number two was stress. The paper claimed that *‘Stressful circumstances, making people feel worried, anxious and unable to cope, are damaging to health and may lead to premature death.’*

The key lesson the World Health Organisation was putting across was that *“lack of control over work and home can have powerful effects on health [3].”*

It’s not enough to vaguely grasp that excessive stress is bad for us. We need to know how and why. More importantly, we need to know what we can do about it. It is unavoidable that at some stage in our lives, we will deal with pressure and stress. Illness, loss or situations beyond our control will certainly happen.

Genetics or life experiences may influence the way we respond to stress. However, if we don’t make significant improvements to our management of it, it’s not just our mental state but our physical health that suffers.

Looking back through generations, stress has always been part of the human experience. Today we have mortgages, complex family needs, relationships, health dramas and high pressure lifestyles. But in generations gone by there were wars, economic crashes and other stressors. Even the primitive cave man would have had something to stress over if the pickings were a bit slim or a neighboring caveman was eyeing off his woman.

The problem is that the demands of modern life can be constant and unrelenting. In an age gone by, we may have thought this was just wearing us down mentally. Science is now showing us that you can’t separate mental and emotional health from physical health. One will impact the other [4].

Have you ever stopped to think about how we are presented with a plethora of medical interventions today, yet we still have the problem of illness? One in five will experience cancer. One in six couples face fertility

challenges. According to the Australian Health Survey of 2011-13[5], although most of us reported being in reasonably good health, 75% of the population reported that they had one or more long term health conditions.

The American Centre for Disease Control did a study from 2001 – 2009 which revealed a 23% increase in the prevalence of autoimmune diseases. Dr. Virginia T. Ladd, who served as President and Executive Director of the American Autoimmune Related Disease Association, pointed out that *“genes do not change in such a short amount of time [6].”*

One in five now suffer from asthma and allergies [7]. There are now more than eighty autoimmune diseases, and the instance of these is on the rise. What is then causing the increase of these and other health burdens? Environmental factors? Diet?

We need to look back further – not just at environmental factors, not just at symptoms or diseases but at the system that controls every aspect of our bodies: the brain. How is it working? What is it doing? What is it suppressing? What is it firing up? Something must be out of order in the body if imbalance or illness is to exist.

So often, we go straight to treating the symptom but we don't look at the cause. That's not how I think about health. Most people think, *“I have an itchy rash on my hand. I'll put some cream on it until it gets better.”*

Sure! Put the cream on it, but think about why the rash was there in the first place. Was it diet? Are you allergic to something? Perhaps you shouldn't be eating that.

But don't stop there. Go back further. Which system of your body is letting you down and allowing that reaction to occur? I'm introducing you to a new way of looking at health. It doesn't look at *symptoms* as much as *systems*. It doesn't look at *crisis* as much as *cause*.

This book will take some big neurological concepts and put them into words anyone can understand. It will explain the links between seemingly

random symptoms and health conditions and give you simple tools to climb back into the driver's seat with your health.

It is possible to change your health reality and re-plot your wellness future. The key to regaining control is two-fold: be armed with information and be ready to make the changes.

Look through the list below. If any or many of these sound familiar to you, then I may just have some good news for you. Do you:

- ▶ Experience headaches or irritability
- ▶ Experience sensitivity to light or noise
- ▶ Have tightness in your neck and shoulders that feel like cement
- ▶ Have tight calf muscles, buttocks or Achilles tendons
- ▶ Feel wound up or wired and find it difficult to calm down
- ▶ Feel cold even when you shouldn't
- ▶ Have cravings for sugar or salt
- ▶ Have high blood pressure
- ▶ Have increased blood clotting factors (including increased risk of Deep Vein Thrombosis and stroke)
- ▶ Have digestive issues including bowel issues (bloating, constipation or diarrhea)
- ▶ Struggle with food sensitivities or allergies
- ▶ Find it difficult to lose weight
- ▶ Find yourself tired or low on energy
- ▶ Suffer from adrenal exhaustion or fatigue
- ▶ Have light sleep with vivid dreams
- ▶ Experience hormonal issues, including issues with your menstrual cycle
- ▶ Have Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome or Uterine Fibroids

- Suffer with gallbladder disease or thyroid imbalances
- Suffer from hair loss
- Suffer from water retention
- Struggle with feelings of low mood, depression or anxiety
- Have a friend, partner, parent or child who suffers from any of the above.

This is not a magic panacea that will cure all ills, and I'm absolutely not telling you to disregard the advice of your primary health practitioner (by all means heed it!), but there is hope ahead. These conditions are not random. They are not disconnected. You are about to discover things that are very likely to improve your health reality by connecting the dots between all these seemingly unrelated symptoms.

You might be reading this because you're facing some health challenges and are desperate for change. You might be reading this because you are interested in protecting and fostering your own health or that of a loved one. No matter your motivation for picking up this book, you will find keys in it that help you take control.

Don't just read though. The key is to make the changes. If your podiatrist prescribed innersoles or orthotics for your shoes, you wouldn't see any improvement by buying them and leaving them in your sock drawer. You have to put them in your shoes. You will only see improvement if you use them. It is exactly the same here.

You don't have to be at the mercy of a body that is spiraling out of control. You may have had tests show '*nothing wrong*' but still have that pervasive feeling of being unwell that tells you something isn't *right* either.

During the course of this book you will learn simple tools that can change different pieces of your health puzzle. Once all these pieces have changed, the whole picture can change. I love seeing the joy and excitement on people's faces when I give them the power of knowledge – *why* their body is doing what it is doing.

To be able to give people the tools to make changes in their lives has been a powerful motivator for writing this book. It is about seeing lives turned around, and about giving people more control over their health.

Welcome to *The SD Protocol*.

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