

AUTOIMMUNE DISEASE

How Emotions Fuel Autoimmune Disease, and What You Can Do

In addition to colds, flu, or other illnesses, our immune systems can also be triggered into high alert by stress, trauma, and unprocessed emotions.



Maskot/Getty Images



Victoria Steinmetz Muir

When most people think of the immune system, they picture being bedridden with the latest seasonal virus. However, the immune system isn't just triggered by foreign invaders.

Our emotions play a key role in how our immune systems function and, in some cases, determine whether this coordinated defense system attacks our own cells, leading to autoimmune symptoms.

Research suggests that chronic stress, trauma, and unprocessed emotions can trigger autoimmune diseases by overstimulating the immune system. Reassuringly, there are evidence-based steps people can take to support their emotional well-being and help improve autoimmune symptoms.

Why Stress Matters

Stress comes in many forms, and while it can be adaptive in short bursts, its effects on health depend largely on how we process it and how long it persists.

Dr. Will Cole, a functional medicine physician who integrates the mind-body connection with autoimmune patients, has witnessed firsthand how stress can trigger autoimmunity.

“In my clinical experience, a history of emotional trauma or chronic stress is extremely common in people dealing with autoimmune issues. People often describe prolonged periods of emotional suppression, chronic overwhelm, or people-pleasing leading up to flare-ups. Major life transitions, unresolved grief, and relational conflict also tend to correlate with immune dysregulation in a noticeable way,” Cole told The Epoch Times.

When we’ve run on empty for too long or tragedy strikes, our bodies trigger a biological alarm. Our heart rates speed up, breathing quickens, and digestion shuts down.

The adrenal glands release adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol into the circulatory system through a feedback loop involving the brain, nervous system, and endocrine organs. Cortisol, the most widely recognized stress hormone, is beneficial in the short term.

However, when emotional stressors are chronic and repressed, our alarm system struggles to deactivate. The slow-burning fire of constant stress hormones can fuel toxicity in our bodies and immune systems, leading to increased gut barrier permeability, immune system dysfunction, inflammation, and autoimmunity.

What the Research Shows

Perpetual activation of the stress response takes a toll on overall health. Multiple lines of research have identified connections between emotional stress and immune dysfunction, though scientists are still working to understand the precise mechanisms.

Studies have found that emotional, chronic, and traumatic [stress](#) are linked to [inflammation](#), slowed [wound healing](#), [gut issues](#), [immune dysfunction](#), and [autoimmune diseases](#).

A life-course [study](#) linked trauma, such as childhood maltreatment, to increased risk of adult inflammation up to 20 years later.

One preliminary [study](#) found that people with chronic inflammatory rheumatisms (CIRs) had higher rates of severe emotional repression, traumatic early life events, and psychological and somatic complaints before receiving an autoimmune diagnosis than those who did not have CIRs.

Similarly, a large-scale [study](#) published in JAMA compared more than 106,000 people with stress-related disorders (excluding those who had a previous history of autoimmune disease) with more than 1 million matched controls and more than 126,000 siblings across 30 years. The researchers found that the men and women who experienced traumatic or other stressful events (especially at young ages) and later developed stress-related disorders had a higher risk of developing an autoimmune disease.

Recently, two large cohort [studies](#) exploring adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), mental distress, and autoimmune disease in adult women found that ACEs were associated with a higher prevalence of specific autoimmune diseases, including thyroid disease, Sjögrens disease, rheumatoid arthritis, systemic lupus, polymyalgia

rheumatica, and psoriasis.

Additionally, histories of sexual abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect were particularly associated with a higher prevalence of autoimmune diseases, and a quarter of the associations were mediated by mental distress.

Other research exploring the connections between specific negative emotions and the immune system adds further pieces to the puzzle. Studies have found that anger can [trigger](#) immune system activation, depression can [alter](#) immune responses, and marital conflict can [heighten](#) inflammation.

Cole stated that the research continually affirms that the mind and body are inseparable.

“Emotional stress directly influences immune signaling, inflammation, and healing capacity. I see the mind-body connection as a central component of autoimmune care—not an accessory—because addressing emotional health often becomes the turning point in a patient’s recovery.”

Cole noted that his patients experience measurable changes in

their autoimmune symptoms after addressing psychological and emotional stressors, including lower inflammation markers, less fatigue, and better digestive health. Their flare-ups lessen in frequency and intensity, and they respond better to the rest of their protocol.

What to Do: The Power of Simple Action

There are a few small steps you can begin taking today to improve your emotional well-being and help prevent the effects of suppressed or prolonged stress on your immune system.

Go for a Walk

Walking, a form of bilateral stimulation that encourages communication between the left and right brain hemispheres, can help you [process](#) traumatic memories and difficult emotions by stimulating your brain and nervous system. Walking for as little as 15 minutes can also [reduce](#) stress and feelings of negative emotions, lower cortisol levels, and [boost](#) our

immune systems.

Write About It

Research has [found](#) that writing about emotions and traumatic experiences helps improve long-term health outcomes. This approach is widely recommended to patients by therapists and medical professionals.

Regular journaling [boosts](#) mood and emotional awareness, reduces stress levels, and [improves](#) immune function. You can list out a “brain dump,” draw with emotion prompts if you enjoy art therapy, or simply write down your thoughts, experiences, and feelings of the day or past events for a few minutes each day.

Practice Mindfulness to Notice Your Body

Many psychotherapists, somatic practitioners, and medical providers note the importance of practicing mindfulness to increase awareness of our emotions and bodies and calm our nervous systems. The practice of mindfulness can quickly shift us from a stressed nervous system state to a rested state.

Mindfulness practices include simple breathing exercises, asking yourself to identify any bodily sensations you may be feeling or thoughts you may be thinking (body scan), meditative practices, or even taking a seat wherever you are and pointing out things you see in your environment to re-center yourself, like the game I Spy.

Focus on Building Resources and Safety

Start by taking small steps that bring you joy, comfort, or a sense of safety. If you enjoy a good book and a warm cup of coffee, try finding a small pocket of time in your day to read and relax, even if only for five minutes.

Joy and playfulness are important components of nervous system regulation, especially when dealing with trauma and chronic stress. When you create space for enjoyment and rest, you're no longer spending all your energy—you're actively releasing stress and inducing beneficial, feel-good endorphins—silencing your alarm system and giving attackers space to retreat.

Understanding that our emotional

lives play a significant role in our physical health is meant to empower us, not scare us. By acknowledging the mind-body connection, we can begin to heal ailments that may seem like mysteries, and finally attend to our bodies' cries for help. We can implement new healing practices and prioritize our emotional well-being as an essential part of our overall health.



Victoria Steinmetz Muir

Author

Victoria Steinmetz Muir has a Master of Arts in psychology and a certification in nutritional therapy. Muir worked on neuronutrition autism research at American University and published a paper on emotion, empathy, and technology in Sage Journals. She is pursuing a Master of Science in clinical mental health counseling and writes to provide well-researched insights on mind-body wellness.

Newsletters

Rise & Shine

Wellness

Integrative
Medicine

Essential Guides

Parkinson's
Disease

ADHD

Original Series

Virtue
Medicine

The R

Explore Our Health Newsletters

Get the best in health and wellness. See all of our inspiring newsletter.

CHOOSE
YOURS NOW

Nutrition &
Supplements

21-Day Super
Immunity
Challenge

Sciatica

Celiac
Disease

Vertigo

Macular
Degeneration

of Ha
Loss

Harm
Vagu
Nerve
Power

Herb
First
Kit

EMF:
Invisi
Haza

THE CONTENT IN EPOCH HEALTH IS NOT INTENDED TO BE A SUBSTITUTE FOR PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL ADVICE, DIAGNOSIS OR TREATMENT. NEVER DISREGARD PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL ADVICE, OR DELAY IN SEEKING IT, BECAUSE OF SOMETHING YOU HAVE READ IN THIS PUBLICATION. NEVER RELY ON INFORMATION IN THIS PUBLICATION IN PLACE OF SEEKING PROFESSIONAL MEDICAL ADVICE. EPOCH HEALTH DOES NOT RECOMMEND OR ENDORSE ANY SPECIFIC TESTS, PRODUCTS, PROCEDURES, OPINIONS OR OTHER INFORMATION THAT MAY BE PROVIDED IN THIS PUBLICATION. [SEE ADDITIONAL INFORMATION.](#)

[About Us](#) [Media Statements](#) [Contact Us](#) [RSS Feeds](#)

[Terms of Services](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Copyright Policy](#)

[Data Disclaimer](#) [Digital Newspaper](#) [Our Story](#) [Subscribe](#)

[Careers](#)

Copyright © 2000 - 2026 The Epoch Times Association Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Information