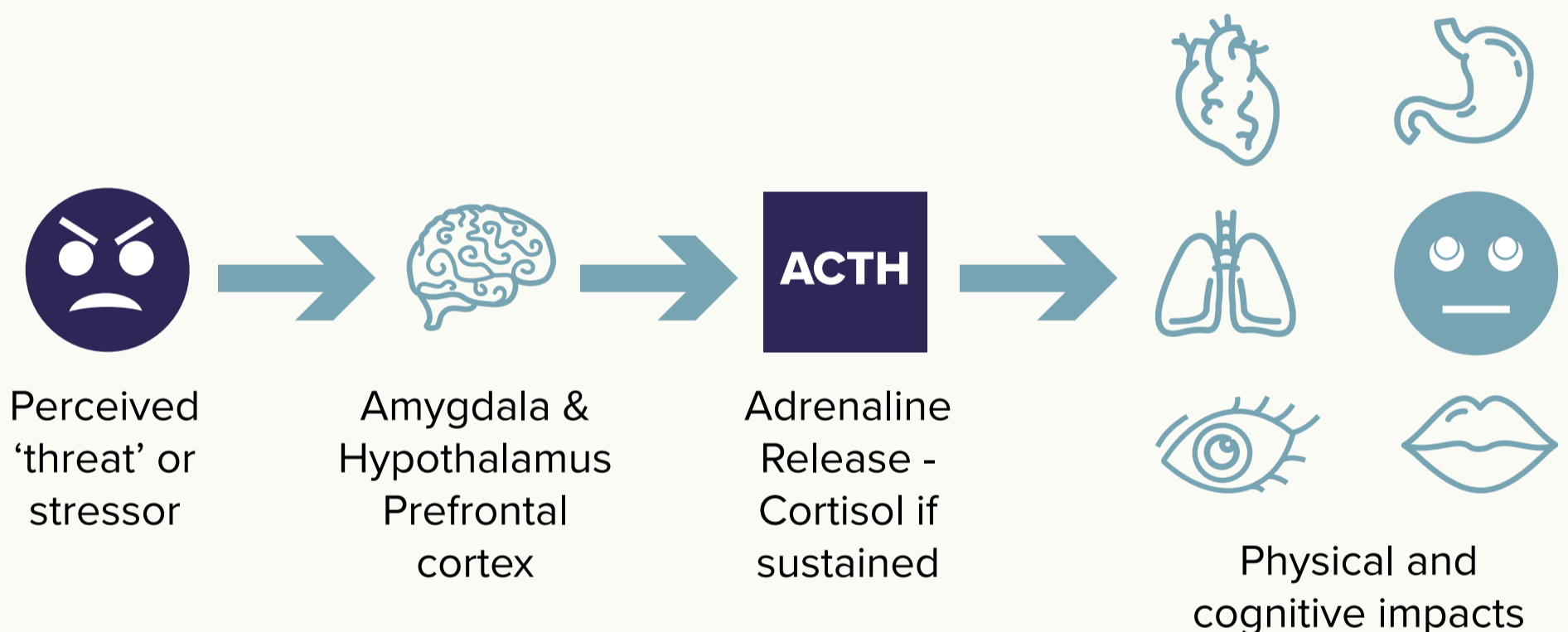


Calm and in control: Managing stress in the ICU - 1

Working in critical care can be busy and stimulating at times, and staff sometimes describe themselves as being in “go-go-go” mode. This is potentially activating for your body and mind’s stress response. This tip sheet will help you to start to understand and manage your stress responses while at work or at home.

The Stress Response

When the brain detects stress in the environment, the body’s stress–response system is activated. This involves the Sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, which leads to a “fight or flight” response. Stress hormones are released, leading to increased heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate to enable the body to act. This system can be activated even when we are asleep. There are some individual differences in how people notice the changes in thinking and physical sensations. Many will notice with a manageable level of stress the mind can feel focussed, in higher stress it is hard to think clearly and make decisions. Many will notice the sensation of over-breathing, palpitations, dry mouth, and stomach distress to name a few.



Interrupt the Stress Response

You can interrupt and regulate the stress response. Breathing acts as a biofeedback into the body’s stress response and helps to interrupt the response. Use the following technique to stop your mind from racing:- tell yourself “stop”, focus on your breath for 30 seconds plus, and then try thinking again.



Calm and in control: Managing stress in the ICU - 2

Breathing technique

Try this simple breathing technique to slow down your physiological symptoms of stress/anxiety. It's not relaxation - it will keep you feeling focussed and alert, but calm and in control.

Take a breath in for 3-5 seconds

Release the breath taking 3-5 seconds

Repeat - for a minute

Attention switching Technique

If your mind is still racing, you can also try a distraction technique.

Say to yourself **STOP**, and then take yourself through a mundane task- such as spotting all the green things in the room, going through the alphabet to people's names (Andy, Becky, Carl...etc)

This overloads your working memory with benign thoughts and gives you chance to slow down the body's stress response

Rest and Recover

Working in Critical Care can feel like a roller coaster... you need to step off at regular intervals. The Parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system helps you to recover from acute stress. Taking time to engage in restful and enjoyable activity and connecting with others can be helpful.

Take time out in work: take your breaks! If you can, go for a walk or step outside. Look out of the window and pause, take notice of something outside the hospital.



Chronic Stress

If the body's stress system is stimulated often, such as on a daily basis, it can lead to problems. High levels of cortisol can suppress the immune response, there have been links to chronic health problems, and mental health problems. It can be hard to recognise when you are chronically stressed, but symptoms include:

PHYSICAL

- headaches or dizziness
- muscle tension or pain
- stomach problems
- chest pain or a faster heartbeat
- sexual problems

THINKING

- difficulty concentrating
- struggling to make decisions
- feeling overwhelmed
- constantly worrying
- being forgetful

BEHAVIOURAL

- being irritable and snappy
- sleeping too much or too little
- eating too much or too little
- avoiding certain places or people
- drinking or smoking more

If you recognise these symptoms in yourself or others, it may be time to take stock of ongoing stressors in your life, and talk to someone in confidence to consider what you need.