

# STRESS: IT'S NOT JUST IN YOUR MIND

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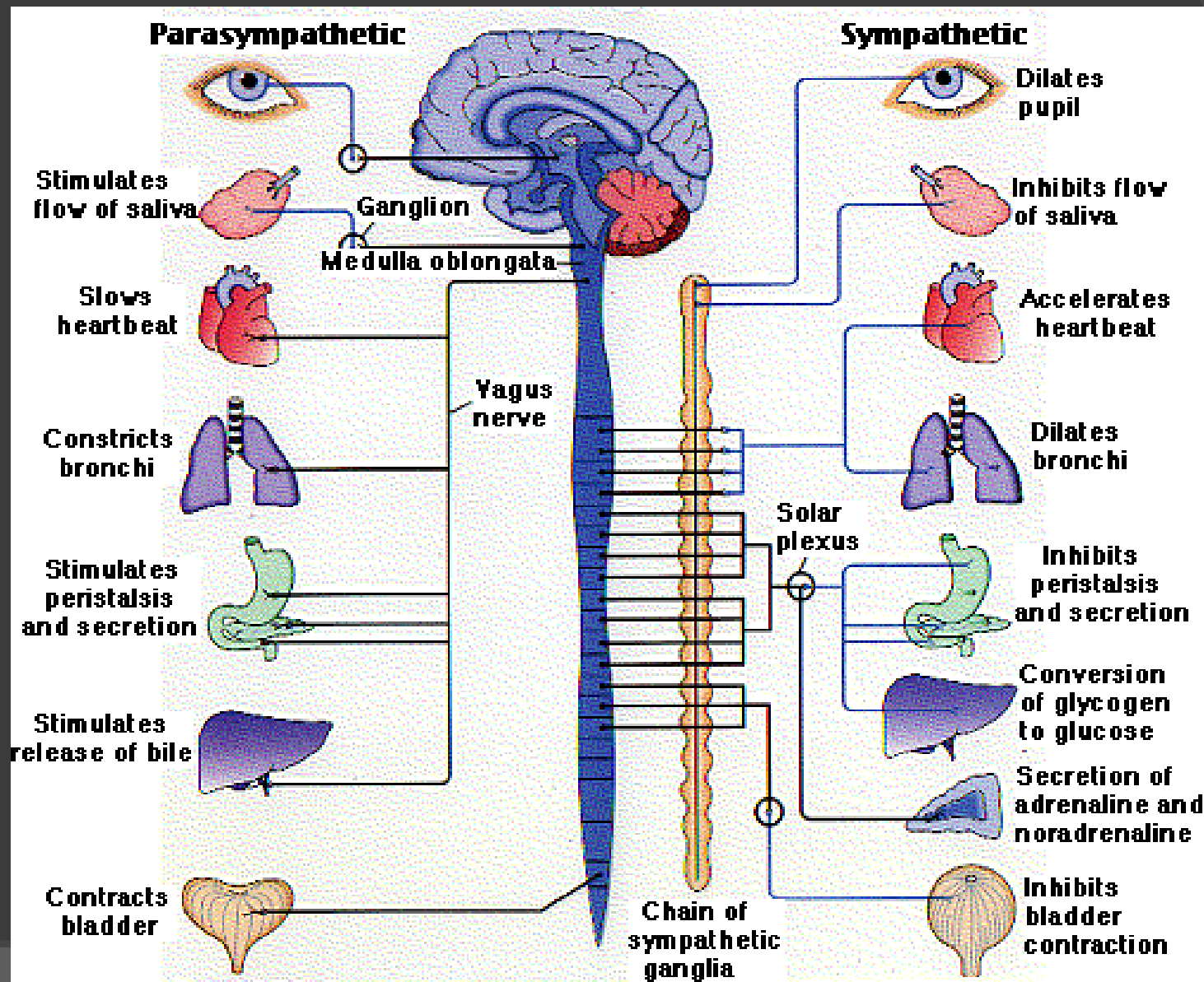
# Combat Stress: The Myths

- Myth: The symptoms of combat stress are purely psychological
- Myth: combat stress symptoms are not “real” like physical symptoms
- Myth: If you are “emotionally healthy,” you will not have combat stress symptoms
- Myth: combat stress symptoms are a sign of weakness

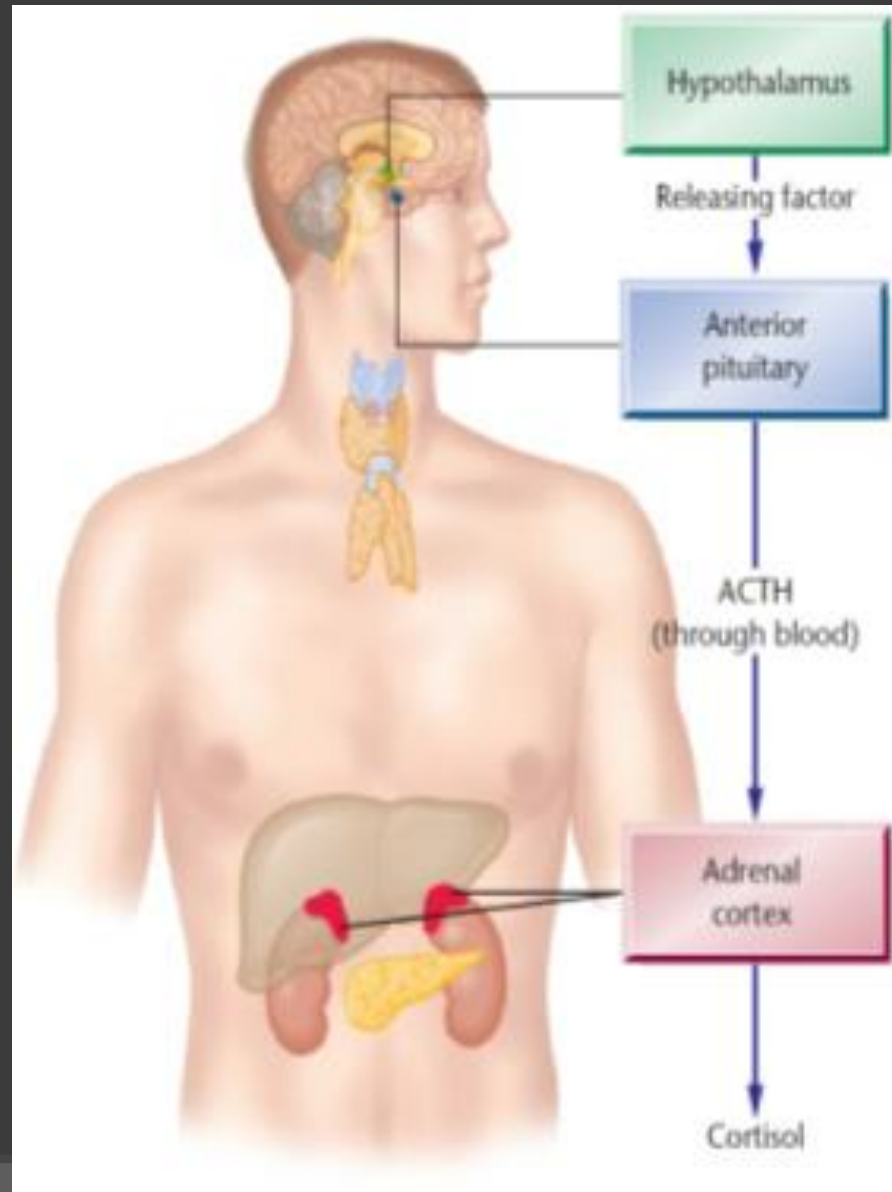
# What is Stress?

- Stressor: any threat to one's physical or emotional well-being
- Stressors trigger an alarm response in the body
  - Physiological changes gear the body for action
- This is a highly adaptive coping system
- Trauma: a severe or life-threatening stressor
  - Examples: being bombed or shot at, witnessing the injury or death of another, killing someone in combat
  - Triggers an extreme alarm response in the body and brain

# Physiological Changes in Response to a Stressor: Autonomic Nervous System



# Physiological Changes in Response to a Stressor: HPA Cortisol System



# Effect of Stress Hormones

## ⦿ Physiological changes in the body:

- Increase breathing to elevate oxygen levels
- Release sugar into the blood stream for energy
- Increase the circulation of blood to the muscles
- Dilate the pupils to see better in the dark
- Inhibit physiological processes that require energy/resources (immune and digestive systems are shut down)

## ⦿ Physiological changes in the brain:

- The mind/attention is focused on the threat
- Memory centers are activated (to ensure the threat is remembered)
- Emotion centers are activated (fear, anxiety, anger, to motivate fight/flight)

## ⦿ What happens in the case of trauma?

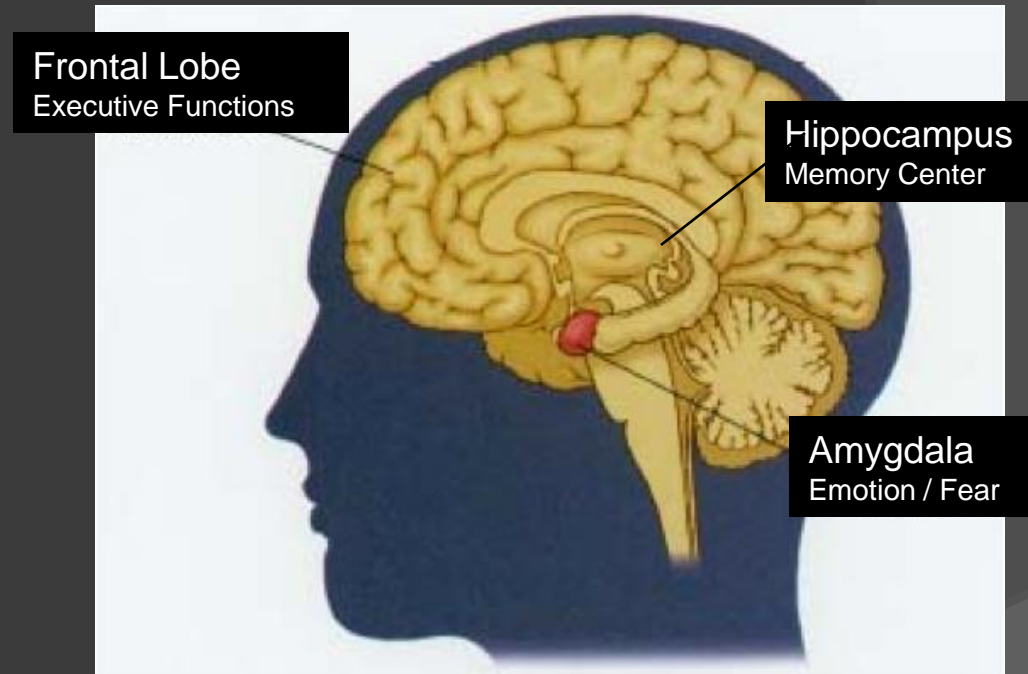
# Trauma: Stress Hormone Overload

## ⦿ Hippocampus (memory):

- Memory for stressful events is not properly stored
- Memory becomes fragmented and emotionally charged

## ⦿ Amygdala (emotion/fear):

- Stress alarm system gets “stuck” in high alert
- Conditioning: situations, cues, etc. associated with stressful combat become triggers for more anxiety



# The Nature of Combat

- Multiple traumatic events
- Stressors that last for many hours, days, weeks
- Made worse by lack of sleep, food, etc.
- Add this: grief related to troop deaths
- The brain & body is not well designed for chronic and repeated stress, which is typical of combat

# Symptoms of Combat Stress

## ● Changes in mood / emotions

- Anxiety, feeling on-edge, hypervigilant, easily startled
- Irritability & anger, fighting with family or buddies
- Sadness, hopelessness, grief
- Numb, loss of motivation / pleasure

## ● Intrusive memories & nightmares of combat

## ● Sleep problems, changes in appetite

## ● Avoidance of trauma reminders

## ● Increased drinking / drug use

## ● Alienation / withdrawal from family and friends

# When to Get Help?

- Common to have many of these symptoms days or weeks after extreme stressor / trauma
- If symptoms persist or are severe, time to get help
- Research evidence suggests that intervening EARLY is critical
- Brain and behavior changes tend to become ingrained over time without treatment

# Effective Treatments

## ◎ Last decade: new, effective treatments

- We know a lot more about the cause & treatment of severe stress
- Research has identified specific psychological interventions that work
- These interventions are often brief, targeted approaches
- Emphasis is on information, strategic coping skills, empowerment

## ◎ These interventions can directly address

- Fragmented, emotional memories
- Conditioned fear & avoidance of situations associated with stressors
- Chronic anxiety, anger, depression, grief, sleep problems
- Relationship issues, work issues

## ◎ Again: The key is to be proactive and get help!