

# The Power and Price of Survival

Understanding Resilience,  
Stress, and Trauma

## Quick Guide



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Great Lakes (HHS Region 5)

**ATTC**

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## The Power and Price of Survival

This “quick guide” booklet is part of a series of materials by Pam Woll called *The Power and Price of Survival*, for people who want to understand how the body reacts to intense or long-term stress, threat, and/or trauma. It has four chapters:

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## 1. Balance, Strength, and Resilience

Everybody has important strengths, and everybody has resilience—the ability to meet challenges and get back in balance afterwards, even if things are hard for a while. Not everyone is aware of their own strength and resilience. Sometimes people who don't think they're strong are even stronger than those who do.

What are some ways in which you're strong and resilient? You might even make a list of these—and keep adding to it as you think of things.

We have strengths in many areas of life—physical, emotional, intellectual, social, spiritual—and all these areas fit together. You might also think of having a resilient “stress system,” something that affects every area of life. This booklet focuses on understanding and strengthening the stress system.

## 2. The Body

If you've been affected by heavy stress, threat, illness, and/or loss, all the things that are going on in your body and mind right now—even the most troubling effects—actually make sense if you understand the way the body works.

Human beings are “wired” to survive and keep going. The body, brain, and mind do amazing things to make this possible. Our bodies react automatically to intense life experiences, including stress, threat, serious illness, injury, and loss, by:

- Pumping out chemicals that keep us going
- Speeding up and slowing down body functions
- Tightening muscles to protect vital organs
- Storing powerful memories of these events
- Getting ready to react the same way next time

Our minds react automatically, too, to help us cope and protect ourselves and others. They might:

- Organize our thoughts to keep us functioning
- Keep us from feeling more than we can handle
- Affect the way we relate to other people
- Affect our belief systems, to help us make sense of what’s happening to us and around us

We all face experiences intense enough to trigger some of these automatic stress and survival reactions. We don’t choose how our bodies react. Our stress systems and other organs respond for us, and our bodies store our responses—and strong memories of the experiences that triggered them.

The body's automatic survival systems respond to many different kinds of experiences. For example:

- There are events, like car crashes, natural disasters, or one-time violent crimes.
- There are also longer-term experiences, like:
  - Patterns of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse
  - The constant stress of financial troubles
  - Being surrounded by violence, poverty, or hopelessness in the family or the community
  - The stress of a long and painful illness
  - The shock of losing a loved one and the long grieving process afterwards

The stress system can stay on high alert for years. Being on guard can become a part of everyday life.

The many ways your body keeps you going are signs of your incredible strength as a human being. The body's powerful stress and survival systems kick in, so you can keep going, keep thinking, keep functioning, and do whatever you have to do to survive and cope.

Your body was built to respond to short-term stress and threat, then “rest and reset” when the stress or threat dies down. But if the stress **doesn’t** die down:

- The powerful chemicals that kept you going can keep pumping long after the threat is gone.
- The systems that were supposed to keep these chemicals in balance can stop doing their job.
- Your body can hold onto the intense energy of automatic “fight, flight, and freeze” responses.
- Your brain can “hide” memories, then pull them up later, as if they were happening **right now**.

On the outside, some of these natural reactions can look—and even feel—like they’re “just emotional problems.” **They’re not.** They’re natural, physically based responses to intense experiences. They’re happening in a human being, so of course you’ll also have emotions, but their intensity is physical. These physical reactions can cause physical problems, too. These kinds of experiences are linked with higher risk of many chronic physical illnesses—even cancer—and with many immune system problems.

With the right information and help, you can learn to handle these reactions and bring your body and your mind—and your life—back into balance.

## Steve's Story

Steve is a Police Officer. He knows the street well, and he's handled many dangerous situations with courage, skill, and honor. Last year Steve and his partner were outnumbered by gunmen in a shopping district. Steve's partner was killed and Steve accidentally shot and killed a young boy who had panicked and run in between Steve and one of the shooters. Steve couldn't remember a lot of details, but bystanders said he couldn't have saved his partner or known the boy would run into the path of his bullet.

Weeks later, Steve started getting flashbacks (powerful memories, as if it's happening now), nightmares, and diarrhea. On top of his loss and guilt, he felt weak, "crazy," and ashamed of how he felt. He refused to admit anything was wrong.

Finally an older Officer took Steve aside and told him how the body can react to stress, threat, and guilt. Steve felt a little less ashamed, and asked the Departmental Counselor to help him understand and control his stress reactions. They worked hard, and it paid off. He's back to normal, and enjoying his work again.

### 3. Stress Chemicals

Under stress and threat, our bodies help us keep functioning by pumping out stress chemicals. But under long-term stress, the natural processes that keep these chemicals in line can stop working.

- Chemicals like *adrenaline* and *dopamine* speed us up and make us more confident, so we can take action. But the systems that control adrenaline can stop working. We can have adrenaline overload—too much uncontrollable energy, anger, anxiety, etc.—or not enough adrenaline. In reaction to this, we can crave stimulants to get that energy back, we can have trouble feeling pleasure, or we can feel like we have to drink too much just to calm down or get to sleep.
- The stress hormone *cortisol* slows our bodies down when we get too much adrenaline, but two things can go wrong: 1) the adrenaline can overpower the cortisol, so we **can't** slow down, and 2) cortisol can build up and make us both tense and tired—shut down, numbed out, or depressed. It can also raise blood sugar, increase appetite and weight gain, and/or weaken the immune system. It's not good for memory or clear thinking, either.



- Natural chemicals like *serotonin* calm us down and help us make better decisions. But stress can wear down our ability to use serotonin, making it hard to feel hope or happiness; hard to cooperate; and hard to control our urges to drink, fight, eat too much, etc.
- Chemicals called *endorphins* blur the pain and the memories, so we can keep going. Later, past memories and feelings can invade the present. We can also get powerful cravings to drink or do anything else we think will numb us out.

Different people's bodies react to extreme stress with more or less power, and they take more or less work and help to get back in balance. But when these stress effects cause other life problems, it's each person's responsibility to get help.

Because you're human, you have feelings—happiness, sadness, guilt, shame, fear, anger, hope—you name it. **Feelings are not problems or symptoms, and they don't mean you're weak or "crazy."** Feelings are not the reason your body is doing painful or frightening things. They're just part of being human. If you pay attention to them, feelings can serve as tools to help you find balance on all levels—body, mind, and spirit.

## 4. Balance

The power that has helped you keep going all these years is still there, still inside you. You can use that power to help you bring your body, brain, and life back into balance, and back into the present.

Most of us don't grow up knowing how to handle intense or long-lasting stress, threat, illness, loss, anger, guilt, shame, or grief in effective ways. It takes learning, training, and practice.

Getting back in balance gives you the power to:

- Recognize your body's stress/survival reactions
- Choose whether or not to act on them
- Notice when the past is "invading" the present
- Choose to focus on what's right here, right now
- Do things to help control your stress reactions
- Choose responses that make things better
- Make choices that support your true values

The *Power and Price of Survival* workbook is one resource that can help you get started (downloadable from [www.humanpriorities.com](http://www.humanpriorities.com), click on the "Power and Price of Survival" link).

## Sheila's Story

Sheila grew up in a troubled family, where her mother's drinking and fits of rage left her doubting her own worth in this world. She was 11 when her stepfather first molested her, 12 when she started drinking and using drugs, and 17 when she married a man because he could "get her out of there." The 15 years that followed were marked by abuse from her husband, her own steadily rising drinking and drug use, "crazy" emotions and health problems she didn't understand, some jail time, and a few stays in treatment for substance use, anxiety, depression, and attempted suicide.

At 32, Sheila met a counselor who understood trauma. The counselor started working with Sheila to get her stress system, emotional reactions, relationships, and memories under control so she could deal with all her challenges more effectively. They worked together and teamed up with her doctors, her recovery group sponsor, and a domestic violence shelter. That was 10 years ago. Sheila is still sober, still in successful recovery from anxiety and depression, building a safe and peaceful home that's all her own, and working well at a job she enjoys. She's glad she's alive.

The key is to strengthen the resilience skills that will help you re-balance your body, mind, and spirit. There are many approaches, but we'll look at three: relationships; getting your stress system in balance; and meaning, purpose, and spiritual strength.

## *Relationships*

From the earliest days of our lives, we're built to learn how to handle stress. We do this through safe relationships with people who handle stress well. Whether or not you grew up in safe relationships, you can build them at any point in your life, and it can help you get your stress system back in balance. The challenge is finding people who can earn and keep your trust, and letting them into your life—little by little, in safe ways. These can be family members, friends, clergy, counselors, mentors, sponsors, doctors, etc. People who are overcoming life experiences like yours are especially important sources of support. And it can't just be one person: A balanced life needs many healthy, positive people.

Your bonds with other people affect your ability to bring your stress system back in balance. Nobody's perfect, but if people care, and they're respectful and trustworthy, their presence in your life will help.

A few more examples of things that can help balance your stress system:

- Breathing slowly and deeply
- Walking, running, sports, or riding horseback
- Exercises, especially stretching
- Letting your body release its stored energy
- Getting a good night's sleep (7 hrs. or more)
- Prayer, meditation, yoga, affirmations, etc.
- Any kind of positive ritual or ceremony
- Dancing, music, singing, laughter, creativity
- Looking into the eyes of someone you can trust
- Telling your story to someone you can trust
- Noticing your thoughts / feelings without judging
- Separating the past from the present

A few things that put you more off balance:

- Too much caffeine (coffee, cola, energy drinks)
- Drinking too much, doing street drugs
- Not taking your medication, or taking too much
- "Stuffing" your thoughts and feelings inside
- Focusing on past mistakes or fears for the future
- Doing things that speed or "pump" you up
- Resenting, "ranting," yelling at people, etc.
- Getting into heated arguments or fights

## *Getting Your Stress System in Balance*

It's important to get a better understanding of how and why your body's stress system does what it does. With this understanding, you might find out:

- Why you feel bored, numb, or depressed
- Why you feel edgy and get upset—even over little things—in ways that cause problems
- Why you feel like you can't tolerate negative feelings—or even strong positive feelings
- Why you don't remember things that happened—or why some memories come crashing in on you, as if out of nowhere

Once you understand the physical reasons, you might feel less afraid or ashamed of your reactions. This can make it easier to become an observer of your own thoughts and feelings. You can learn to notice things about your own experience—without judging it—even while you're living through it. It can help you get back in balance.

You can also learn techniques—thoughts, actions, prayers, affirmations—that can help you manage your stress system and make more helpful choices.

A counselor, mentor, sponsor, trainer, etc. who understands the effects of stress and trauma can train you to recognize and manage your body's reactions, question the thoughts that are causing trouble for you, and manage—and sometimes just get through—intense or difficult feelings.

Another thing you'll learn when you learn about your stress system is how the effects of some of your experiences have been stored in your brain and its connections with your body. In a situation that combines extreme threat with helplessness, your brain sends out combinations of chemicals that can:

- Make your “higher brain” stop recording the “story” of what happened—who, what, when, where, etc.—so you might not remember it later, or might be missing some important details
- Make your “survival brain” record intense memories of how you felt and what you saw, heard, smelled, or tasted—and those memories can come jumping out at you later

Sometimes these chemicals can also tell your body to “freeze”—shut down important functions.

Depending on the situation, the freeze might just last a second, but that response can get stored in your body, causing health challenges later.

Skill training to get you back in balance might include exercises to relax the muscles that were affected by the freeze—especially the front core (stomach/abdomen) and pelvic/thigh muscles—and safe ways of helping your body get rid of the energy that the freeze left there.

A counselor can also help you teach your body and mind to handle feelings and memories in ways that don't throw you off balance. Different counselors take different approaches, but you can ask questions and find one whose approach works for you.

There are even many kinds of counseling that use physical techniques to help you re-balance your stress system and—when you're ready—deal with memories. One of many good examples is EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), which combines guidance and questions from the therapist with side-to-side motion or sensations. If it's done safely by a therapist who's trained and certified in EMDR, this can be helpful.

### *Meaning, Purpose, and Spiritual Strength*

No matter how powerful your brain and body are, they're still connected to the rest of you—your mind,



your heart, your spirit. The journey back to balance may cover some rocky ground, but those who make this journey often grow stronger, wiser, and happier. Many people end up with a strong sense of purpose and an ability to back up that purpose with action.

If your experiences have left you feeling like you have nothing to offer—or like you don't deserve to live on this earth—it may be hard to imagine finding dignity, honor, meaning, purpose, and spiritual strength. But through the balancing and healing process, we **do** find these things—and much more. Whatever else your story is, it's definitely a story of strength, in spite of—and often because of—what you've lived through. Just remember how resilient you are, and stay open to what your purpose might be, and where the strength comes from in your life.

Someone you trust—a true friend, mentor, sponsor, faith leader, or counselor—might help you explore all this over time. But it's not theirs to tell you. It's the meaning, purpose, and spiritual strength **you** find in **your** life and experience.

The past has hurt you but left you stronger. As you return to balance, you'll come to live more and more in the present moment. May you find there a calm understanding, a sense of purpose, peace, and joy.

## **A Few Web Sites With Resources on Stress and Trauma**

Trauma resources from SAMHSA's web site:

<http://store.samhsa.gov/facet/Issues-Conditions-Disorders/term/Trauma>

Resources from SAMHSA's Center for Trauma-Informed

Care: <http://www.samhsa.gov/nctic/hottopics.asp>

National Center for PTSD resources:

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/index.asp>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network:

<http://www.attcnetwork.org/index.asp>

Information and resources from the landmark Adverse

Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study: <http://acestudy.org>

ACEs Connection, a web-based community to prevent

childhood trauma/effects: <http://acesconnection.com>

Support resources from the Trauma Resource Pages:

<http://www.trauma-pages.com/support.php>

Trauma Resource Institute App for dealing with post-trauma

effects: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/ichill/id403527676?ls=1&mt=8>

Web-based links to resources for trauma survivors:

<http://thirdofalifetime.com/2010-best-ptsd-resources-for-trauma-survivors-pt-1/>

## A Few Questions for Tense Times

1. Where am I right now, right here, at this moment? Who or what do I see or hear around me?
2. How much are my body chemicals affecting my reaction to this situation? For example, do I have:
  - “Adrenaline overload”—heart pounding, mind racing, tense muscles, can’t sit still, intense energy and/or intense feelings of anger, guilt, shame, fear, or anxiety?
  - Too much cortisol—feeling tense, tired, and “shut down,” “numbed out,” or depressed?
3. What can I do to get my body in balance? Do I need exercise to burn off the adrenaline? Sleep? Food? Less caffeine? Less alcohol? Less drugs? A few slow, deep breaths?
4. What do I really know about this situation?
5. What might be another way of looking at it?
6. What’s the next right thing I can do?
7. What’s going right in my life? Even though some things are wrong, what’s going okay?
8. What’s one strength in me that has helped me through hard situations in the past?
9. Who do I know who can help me work through this—or just listen and understand?

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996-0966 or contact the author, [pamelawoll@sbcglobal.net](mailto:pamelawoll@sbcglobal.net)

### **Related resources from the author:**

- *The Power and Price of Survival* workbook
- The *Finding Balance* series (booklets and workbooks) for service members, veterans, and their families
- *Addressing Stress and Trauma in Recovery-oriented Systems and Communities* (written for the Great Lakes ATTC)

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