He tauhohe ahotea
The Stress Response

In the last module we outlined the processes involved in creating pain. In this module we will explore what happens next: the body's reaction to being in pain. *This builds on the information provided in the previous module.*

As discussed, pain occurs in the context of threat. The body has a whole system dedicated to helping us deal with threat – both in our body and in our environment – to ensure that we stay safe. In this module we will explore this threat response system also known as Fight, Flight &Freeze or **the stress response**. If we understand this system and how we can influence it, we can implement strategies to manage pain.

The fundamental role of this system is to get us into the right level of alertness for the situation we are in. We need a low level of alertness when we're safe and ready for sleep, and a high level of alertness when a potential threat looms. This is a hugely adaptive system that changes us from the 'rest and digest' state to a fighting warrior within split seconds, if need be. This module will outline what physical changes occur when the body prepares to fight, flight or freeze and whether the stress response is required in the context of what is happening in your body and your environment.

With common changes identified in the resource list, you are encouraged to observe your own body and physical changes associated with situations when the threat response is triggered. They may include muscles tensing, digestion slowing down, breathing quickening and difficulty in shifting attention beyond the stress at hand.

What triggers a threat response may vary from person to person: it may be spiders for one person, or having to speak to a stranger for another. To make it easier to understand the phenomenon, we can use the example of the tiger. The tiger is a large predator that triggers the threat response in nearly all humans. Activation of the stress response and ensuring a state of high alert when we sense a tiger has ensured human survival during hunts or when being hunted. However, it is equally important to have times of recuperation, relaxation, and sleep. When the stress response system remains on high alert, it is like we are living with a flesh-eating, dangerous tiger constantly - for which our bodies are not equipped! (Imagine being stalked daily by a real tiger.)

The tiger also teaches us about the role our thinking has on the threat response. Talking or thinking about a potential threat can trigger the threat response, even when the nature of the threat does not warrant, or even benefit, from such a response. Some tigers might end up not being so dangerous after all! We will examine this further with the Tiger in the Room exercise that follows.

Context and what is happening in our environment is also crucial in understanding pain. NOI's model of the Protectometer will help you examine the danger messages that are received by your brain prior to its production of pain.

All of this is highly relevant to pain, because stress can trigger pain and pain is another universal trigger for the threat response. Pain heightens our alertness rather than making us relaxed! So if pain is constant, daily and unremitting, our bodies do not have the times of rest, recuperation and safety that they need for health and wellness. You will be introduced to some breathing techniques. This is the starting point to actively reduce the body's threat response and we would encourage you to give this a try.

We need to be aware that sometimes the threat system is needed to help us get through situations but at other times it might respond to a perceived, rather than actual threat. The anticipation of pain will have a similar impact on the body as the actual experience of pain. Knowing that pain, or the fear of pain, generates threat and therefore triggers a stress response, will not stop such a response from happening. However, the level of stress and how long the stress response lasts for will be something you can influence with the information provided in this module. The influence of our thoughts on this stress response will be discussed in detail in the next module.