

CHAPTER 6



Reframe the Autoimmune Process

“Our key to transforming anything lies in our ability to reframe it.”

— MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

The immune response is designed to run smoothly, and under normal circumstances, it does. However, there are times when the system trips up, makes errors, and harmful invaders are “tagged” as safe. When this happens, the result may be an illness such as cancer.

Other times, harmless invaders such as pollen, dust or pet dander are tagged and the immune system launches into overdrive, causing reactions such as allergies. In the case of an autoimmune condition, the immune system becomes overwhelmed due to a combination of triggers such as chronic stress, poor nutrition, nutrient deficiencies, allergies, infections, and toxins. These triggers can cause the immune system to overreact and produce too many T-cells or B-cells (or both), which can then attack healthy tissue.

Is the Autoimmune Process a Condition or a Disease?

We commonly associate the word “dis-ease” with sickness or illness; on the other hand, the word “condition” implies a “state of being.” Conditions can get better or worse depending on circumstances, yet diseases are typically thought of as curable or incurable.

The term “autoimmune thyroid disease” is misleading, because it’s not a disease of the thyroid gland and it’s not a disease of the immune system. It’s the “condition” or “state” of the immune system overreacting to the stimulation of constant inflammation, and the outcome is an attack on the thyroid gland or other tissue.

I’d like you to start thinking of the autoimmune process as a reversible condition instead of a disease. When I began to view the autoimmune process this way, I was able to “reframe” things in my mind and instead of thinking I was the victim of a mysterious illness that had no cure, I was

able to observe that my choices could influence my “state of being,” for better or for worse, and I began to realize that I could get better!

Stress and the Autoimmune Process

Current medical research shows that all autoimmune conditions are essentially the same process occurring in the body: the inflamed immune system, under the strain of continual cellular stress (triggers), mistakes healthy tissue as foreign and begins to destroy it.¹ The only difference between various autoimmune conditions is which organ is being attacked. With lupus, it can be the skin, the liver, the joints, etc. With type I diabetes, it's the pancreas; with multiple sclerosis, it is the brain and spinal cord; and with ulcerative colitis, it is the large intestine and rectum.

In the case of Hashimoto's and Graves', the thyroid is the obvious target, but it's important to note that it's rarely just the thyroid being affected, and there are typically many conditions happening at the same time.

In the autoimmune process, the cells of the immune system, that ordinarily work to kill harmful invaders and regulate immune response, get overworked, and thus become overproduced, under-produced or confused. They begin, instead, to tag and destroy our healthy cells and tissues.

Throughout history people have known that stress makes you sick. While they may have lacked the “science,” ancient healing systems were built upon relieving stress and detoxing the body, thus restoring balance and health. Today, scientists have proven how both acute and chronic stressors directly affect the cells of your immune system resulting in autoimmunity.

Here are just a few examples:

- Acute stress in any form (psychological and physical) can cause a rise in the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol, which suppress T-cell activity. This is why you may catch a cold after a stressful event.
- Chronic stress in any form can cause adrenal fatigue, which causes the hormones cortisol, adrenaline and norepinephrine to become depleted. This can allow immune system T-cells to get out of control, resulting in inflammation and an imbalance between T-cells and B-cells.²



- Chronic stress can impair methylation, which can suppress T-cell production. Impaired methylation of T-cells may be involved in the production of autoantibodies.³
- Chronic infectious stress can cause both B-cells and T-cells to be overproduced resulting in autoimmunity.^{4,5}
- Gastrointestinal stress, perhaps caused by parasites, yeast or an overgrowth of bad bacteria, affects all the cells of your immune system, and disrupts the balance between T-regulator cells and Th1 and Th2 cells.⁶
- Food allergies and sensitivities, for instance to gluten, can cause B-cells to be overproduced, which may result in an accidental attack on healthy tissues.⁷
- Nutrient deficiency is a form of stress that can be at the root of an autoimmune response; for instance, selenium and iodine deficiencies have been found to cause thyroid inflammation, thus driving up the production of T-cells and B-cells.⁸
- Exposure to heavy metals can cause both T-cells and B-cells to be overproduced.⁹
- Certain medications and vaccinations can be “antigenic,” which means that the body produces antibodies to the substance, thus initiating an immune response. In some cases this can trigger an autoimmune response.^{10,11}
- Literally thousands of environmental toxins from cleaning products and pesticides to dry cleaning fluids and plastics can become antigenic and trigger an autoimmune condition.¹²

What I really want you to grasp is that the autoimmune process is a “symptom” of several underlying issues that have gone ignored or untreated for so long that the immune system becomes totally overloaded.

Scientists are scrambling to understand the mechanics of the immune system so that they can find a way to chemically manipulate it to function properly while being pushed past its limits. But what if we were to take a different approach? What would happen if the stressors were removed and the immune system was taken off its 24/7 high-alert schedule?



There is no question that modern medicine has made incredible advances in understanding the complexities of immune function, yet experts still don't agree on why the immune system turns against its own body.

Our immune systems are influenced by everything in our environments from our positive and negative thoughts, the good and bad foods we eat, to the toxins and infections we are exposed to. Once we observe these effects, we can accentuate the positive and reduce the negative so the immune system can come into balance. When we reduce the burdens on our body and emotions and restore the conditions for wellness, autoimmunity can be reversed. I know this in my heart, and I have seen it hundreds of times with my clients.

"Michelle Corey has eloquently put into perspective the debate about the involvement of the immune system in autoimmune thyroid conditions. Both ancient systems of healing and modern scientific medicine have taught us that balance, or imbalance, in the body is the result of myriad processes, which are simultaneously complex and beautifully simple. Variable gene expression, protein production, immune up-and-down-regulation, enzymatic reactions, buffering systems, detoxification, and the alignment (or misalignment) of energetic fields are just a few such processes which can lead to a state of homeostasis or one of disruption where the body attacks itself as if its very tissue were an enemy.

To think that the cause of a given autoimmune disease is the dominance of one of two pathways and/or the submission of the other is to ignore the wisdom of traditional holistic systems of health as well as modern science. The ultimate expression of wellness or disease is a complex interplay of multiple factors — environment, genetics, and exposures (i.e. food, emotions, toxins, lifestyle). Our understanding of autoimmune disease will continue to evolve rapidly, but universal principles will always hold true: go upstream to find the source of the problem, search for and treat the root causes, nourish the physical and emotional body, and do not get lost in the details of the ill condition while failing to remove the "splinter" which stuck the person in the first place.

— ERIC GRASSER, M.D., Unity Medicine, Santa Fe, New Mexico

Your Genes are Not Your Destiny!

We have been taught to think of genes as being set in stone, a determining factor over which we have no control. If someone has family members, or relatives with the same autoimmune disorder, they may assume that “it’s in their genes” and there’s nothing they can do about it. But your genes are not your destiny; they are “instructions” to build the proteins, hormones and everything else your body is made of.

Many factors influence how well, or poorly, those proteins get built. The emerging science of epigenetics studies the factors that influence, and even control, how our genetic code expresses itself.

Visionary developmental biologist Bruce Lipton in his book, *Spontaneous Evolution*, uses a building construction analogy that I’ll expand to illustrate how gene expression works. Your genes are like the blueprints used to construct a house. The blueprints are a crucial source of information that informs contractors how to build the house.

Although the genetic difference between human beings is less than 1 percent, everyone’s blueprint is a little bit different although our blueprints do have much in common—doors, windows, floors, ceilings, etc. Some blueprints are designed to make mansions, and others to make a ranch house or cozy bungalow. It’s possible to make a shoddy mansion even from perfectly good blueprints if you use poor materials and incompetent workers. Epigenetics describes everything that goes into creating the final result out of the original blueprint in your DNA.

Imagine that you give identical blueprints to five contractors in different parts of the country. Will they build exactly the same house? No, there will be all kinds of variations. The houses may look similar, but one may end up with shoddy plumbing because of an incompetent subcontractor that used old, broken parts. One builder might purchase the finest finish materials, while another buys everything from the discount building center.

One contractor might be distracted, and makes mistakes everywhere, while another is conscientious and creates a beautiful, long-lasting home.

You could use the same analogy for a dinner recipe. If you don’t have all the ingredients, or use foods that have begun to spoil, the best recipe could wind up, at the least, not tasting very good and, at the worst, make you sick.



Epigenetics informs us that if we give our body the proper ingredients and a positive, non-toxic, inner environment, it can give us optimum health and the best expression of our unique genetic code.

The foods and supplements you eat are the main ingredients your body needs to fulfill your inner blueprint. If your DNA needs certain amino acids to create your best body, and you don't provide those building blocks, the body has to make do and the resultant weakness makes way for possible illness. Stress and toxins are other important factors that can confuse and distort the process.

In 2010, a paper in *Science Magazine* reported that while risks of developing chronic diseases are attributed to both genetic and environmental factors, 70 to 90 percent of disease risks are probably due to differences in environments.¹⁶ This should be commonsense to everyone with a garden or houseplants. Genetic variations might allow some plants to have bigger leaves or different colored flowers, but if you don't water them, or give them the light that they need, it's going to make a much bigger difference in whether they flourish or wilt. Different plants have different needs and the same is true for people.

**What You Need to Know:**

Your doctor might tell you that you have a genetic predisposition that led you to develop your autoimmune condition. My experience has shown that by removing the physical, emotional and environmental factors that trigger autoimmunity, your condition can be reversed. You can get better. The bottom line is that you have a lot of control over your health and your genetic expression.