

Journey to Wellness

STRESS & CORTISOL

Recovery Guide



Discover guided daily plan to recover from
chronic stress, burnout & cortisol dysfunction

UNDERSTANDING CORTISOL & YOUR STRESS RESPONSE

Cortisol gets talked about a lot — usually in scary, oversimplified ways — but in reality, cortisol is one of the most essential, protective hormones in your body.

You need it. You rely on it. And when it's functioning well, it keeps your life running smoothly.

Think of cortisol as your body's daily energy guide and stress-response dial.

Cortisol's core jobs:

- Wake you up in the morning
- Help you stay alert and focused
- Regulate energy, blood sugar, and metabolism
- Support your immune system
- Help your brain respond to challenge
- Keep you going through normal daily stress

Cortisol isn't "bad."

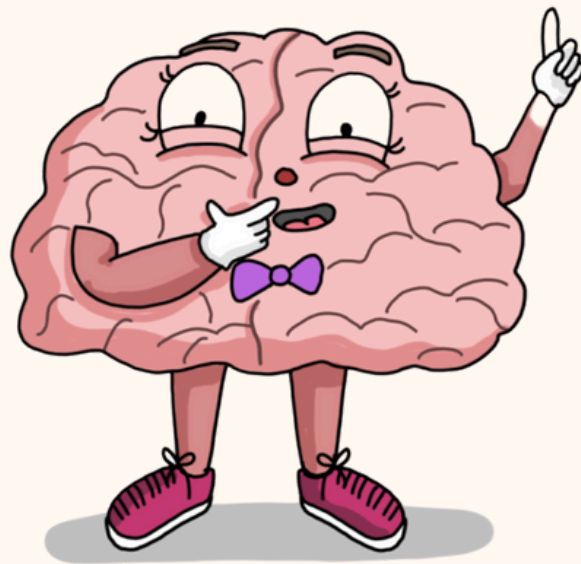
Dysregulated cortisol is what creates problems.

CORTISOL IN SHORT-TERM STRESS

Short-term stress is what cortisol was built for.

A challenge appears → your brain signals the HPA axis* → cortisol rises → you get the energy, clarity, and focus you need → and then your body returns to baseline.

This is healthy, normal, adaptive.



*The HPA axis is the connection between the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland, and the adrenal glands. Together they form your stress-response system — detecting threats, releasing cortisol, giving you energy when you need it, and returning your body to balance afterward.

CORTISOL IN LONG-TERM STRESS

The problem begins when the stress system is activated too often, too intensely, or without enough recovery.

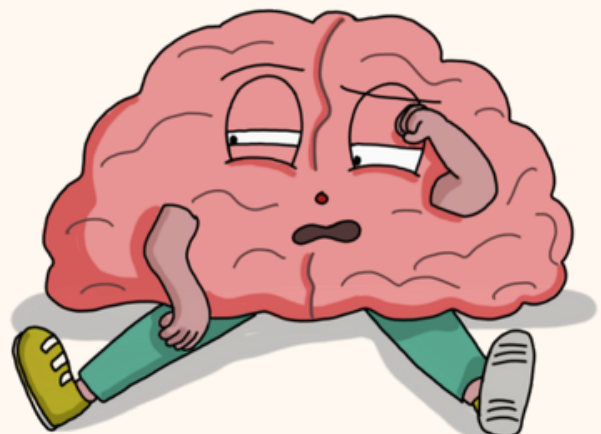
Long-term stress changes the entire stress-response system:

- cortisol rhythm becomes irregular
- the HPA axis misfires
- the brain becomes more threat-sensitive
- inflammation increases
- energy becomes unstable

And depending on the person, the history, and the load, cortisol can become:

- chronically high,
- inverted,
- or flatlined/low.

This guide helps you understand your pattern — and how to recover.



SIGNS YOUR CORTISOL IS OUT OF BALANCE

Physical Signs

- Trouble waking up / feeling unrefreshed
- Low energy or “tired but wired”
- Afternoon crashes
- Nighttime restlessness
- Trouble falling asleep or staying asleep
- Increased belly fat or changes in appetite
- Sensitivity to caffeine or sugar
- Heart palpitations or racing heart
- Headaches or tension in jaw/neck
- Frequent colds or slow immune recovery
- Digestive issues (IBS, bloating, nausea)
- Changes in menstrual cycle or PMS symptoms



Emotional & Mental Signs

- Feeling overwhelmed by small things
- Irritability or short fuse
- Anxiety spikes (especially at night)
- Feeling emotionally flat or numb
- Difficulty concentrating or brain fog
- Memory issues
- Worry loops or catastrophising
- Feeling “on edge” or hypervigilant
- Feeling disconnected or dissociated
- Low motivation or apathy



Behavioral Signs

- Relying heavily on caffeine to function
- Crashing later and craving sugar/carbs
- Seeking constant stimulation or distraction
- Avoiding tasks or withdrawing
- Pushing through exhaustion
- Trouble setting boundaries
- Overworking to cope
- Difficulty relaxing or slowing down
- Procrastination followed by adrenaline-fuelled bursts

THE NORMAL CORTISOL CURVE

Cortisol follows a beautiful natural rhythm called the diurnal cortisol cycle.

Imagine it like the sun rising and setting inside your body.

Morning peak (highest point)

30–45 minutes after waking

→ You feel alert, awake, energised

Gradual decline through the day

Energy slowly stabilises

→ You stay focused, engaged, steady

Lowest point at night

Cortisol dips to allow:

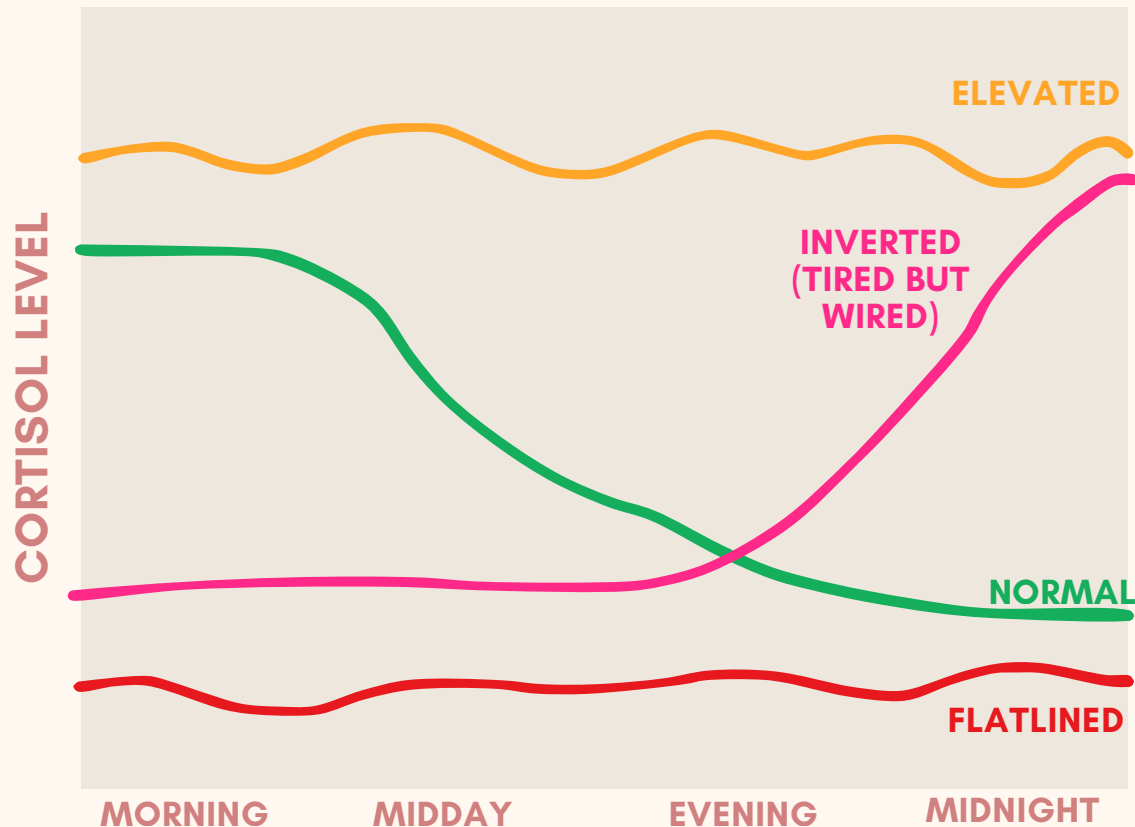
- deep rest
- digestion
- repair
- nervous system safety
- sleep

When your cortisol follows this curve, you feel:

- awake in the morning
- stable during the day
- relaxed at night
- able to sleep
- able to handle stress

When the curve is disrupted... the whole system follows.

CORTISOL CURVES



🔥 Elevated Cortisol (Chronically High)

System is stuck in long-term fight-or-flight, often due to ongoing stress, pressure, conflict, or emotional overload. Brain is sending constant “we’re not safe” signals, so the adrenals keep producing cortisol long past the point of usefulness.

🌙 Inverted Cortisol Curve

Cortisol is low in the morning and high at night because the body’s internal clock has become dysregulated. This often happens when stress is suppressed during the day or the system stays hypervigilant into the evening, causing the cortisol rhythm to “flip.”

🔋 Flatlined Cortisol (Chronically Low)

Cortisol stays low all day because the HPA axis has downshifted after too much stress for too long. Body is conserving energy by turning the stress system onto “low power mode” to protect you.

PATTERNS THAT SUGGEST SPECIFIC CORTISOL CURVES

Elevated Cortisol (consistently high):

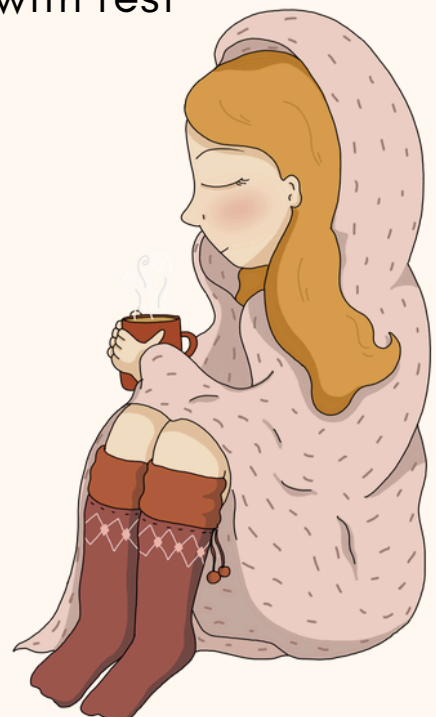
- Constant tension
- Irritability or anxiety
- Wired energy
- Poor digestion
- Trouble winding down at night

Inverted Curve (low morning / high night):

- Hard to wake up
- Exhausted all day → alert at night
- Bedtime racing thoughts
- “Second wind” after 9pm

Flatlined Cortisol (chronically low):

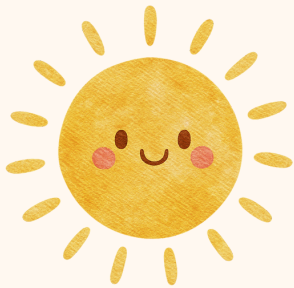
- Burnout
- Emotional numbness
- Low motivation
- Frequent illness
- Deep fatigue that doesn't improve with rest



RECOVERY FOR ELEVATED CORTISOL

Follow this guide you when you're 'always' stressed, wired, hypervigilant or reactive.

★ Core principle: Lower overall activation + rebuild safety.



MORNING PRACTICES

- Sip something warm slowly
- Go outside or look out a window (light helps regulate cortisol timing)
- Slow, gentle stretching
- Breakfast that includes protein + fat
- Avoid checking your phone for the first 10-20 minutes
- Nervous system soother for 1 minute - i.e. humming, voo breath, havening



EVENING PRACTICES

- Long exhale breathing (4-6 or sighing)
- Weighted blanket, warm candlelit shower, or face-stroking
- One "off-switch ritual": lamp light, candle, soft music
- Write down tomorrow's tasks → close the notebook
- No caffeine after 12pm, no doom-scrolling after 8pm

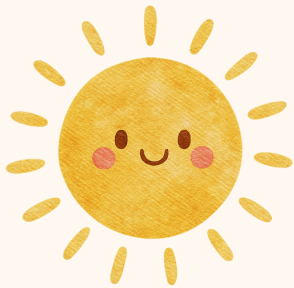
IN GENERAL

- reduce caffeine
- avoid skipping meals
- avoid high sugar spikes
- limit doom-scrolling & digital overload
- consistent wake times
- predictable meals
- gentle structure
- reducing chaos

RECOVERY FOR INVERTED CORTISOL

Follow this guide you when you feel flat in the morning but wired at night.

★ Core principle: Reset timing. Re-teach the body what day and night mean.



MORNING PRACTICES

- Get outside light within 10-30 minutes of waking
- Move your body for 2-5 minutes (shake, brisk walk, dancing, marching)
- Eat protein within 60-90 minutes
- Optional: upbeat music while getting ready



EVENING PRACTICES

- Dim lights 1-2 hours before bed
- Warm shower or warm drink
- Slow breathing + humming (1-2 minutes)
- Screens off or on very low brightness
- No stimulating conversations or emotional processing after 8pm

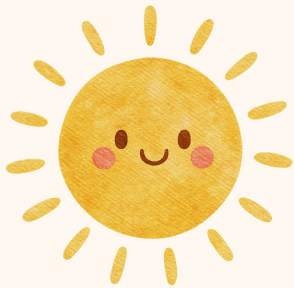
IN GENERAL

- Do your "relaxation tools" later in the day:
- practice vagal toning
- address suppressed stress during the day
- Same wake/bed time daily
- → anchors the cortisol curve in place.
- reducing overload

RECOVERY FOR FLATLINED CORTISOL

Follow this guide you when you feel stuck in burnout, shutdown, exhaustion, emotional blunting or brain fog

★ Core principle: Gentle rebuilding. Slow energy return. No overwhelming the system.



MORNING PRACTICES

- Gentle wake-up: sunlight + warm drink
- Slow movement: stretching, rocking, or 10-20 seconds of shaking
- Eat something warm and grounding
- Keep the morning slow — no rushing, no intense workouts



EVENING PRACTICES

- Sleep meditation or yoga nidra for 5-10 minutes
- Warm bath/shower or warm compress on chest/abdomen
- Calm, cosy lighting
- Very light journaling: "What can I put down today?"
- Early bedtime window (your system needs more sleep opportunities)

IN GENERAL

- Remove overload: simplify tasks, cut multitasking, say no to 10% more, reduce emotional labour, take breaks between activities
- Practice vagal drills, trauma recovery & nervous system healing
- Burnout recovery is not linear.
- 3-12 month recovery → energy returns & capacity restores
- Consistency beats intensity

CORTISOL FRIENDLY FOODS

PROTEIN

- Eggs
- Greek yogurt
- Lean poultry
- Tofu / tempeh
- Lentils & beans

Consistent glucose levels help stabilise cortisol, especially in the morning and late afternoon, which reduces unnecessary cortisol spikes.

COMPLEX CARBS

- Oats
- Quinoa
- Sweet potato
- Brown rice
- Wholegrain bread

Great for people who get “tired but wired” at night. Slow-release carbs help the brain feel “fed and safe,” lowering nighttime cortisol.

MAGNESIUM-RICH FOODS

- Pumpkin seeds
- Almonds
- Dark leafy greens
- Black beans
- Dark chocolate (70%+)

Helps regulate the parasympathetic nervous system, reduces stress reactivity + improves sleep

OMEGA-3 FATTY ACIDS

- Salmon
- Walnuts
- Flaxseed
- Chia seeds

Reduces cortisol after stress exposure, improves mood + resilience.

VITAMIN C-RICH FOODS

- Kiwi
- Oranges
- Berries
- Capsicum
- Broccoli

Decreases cortisol release in stressful experiences. Vitamin C is used by the adrenals during cortisol production and recovery.

