The Survival Paradox

Reversing the Hidden Cause of Aging and Chronic Disease

Isaac Eliaz, MD

“[The Survival Paradox] is an excellent guide for anyone struggling with chronic illness. Read it carefully and start your journey to wholeness and well-being.”

Deepak Chopra, MD
CONTENTS

Foreword ................................................................. xiii
Introduction ............................................................... 1

PART ONE: HOW THE SURVIVAL RESPONSE AFFECTS OUR HEALTH

Chapter One
WHAT IS THE SURVIVAL PARADOX? ......................... 11

Chapter Two
THE ARCHITECT OF THE SURVIVAL RESPONSE:
GALECTIN-3 ............................................................. 17

Chapter Three
EFFECTS OF THE SURVIVAL RESPONSE .................. 29

Chapter Four
HOW THE SURVIVAL RESPONSE OPERATES ............ 39

Chapter Five
A GIFT FROM NATURE: MODIFIED CITRUS PECTIN ...... 47
Chapter Six
THE HEART OF TRUE SURVIVAL ........................................... 57

PART TWO:
A CLOSER LOOK AT THE SURVIVAL RESPONSE’S
ROLE IN MAJOR CONDITIONS

Chapter Seven
CANCER .............................................................................. 67

Chapter Eight
HEART AND KIDNEY DISEASES ........................................ 91

Chapter Nine
LIVER AND LUNG DISEASES ........................................... 113

Chapter Ten
METABOLIC ISSUES ....................................................... 125

Chapter Eleven
NEURODEGENERATIVE DISEASES ................................. 135

Chapter Twelve
IMBALANCES OF THE IMMUNE SYSTEM ......................... 145

Chapter Thirteen
IMBALANCE OF THE MICROBIOME ............................... 157

PART THREE:
BREAKING FREE FROM THE
SURVIVAL PARADOX

Chapter Fourteen
DETOXIFICATION AND LETTING GO ............................. 169
INTRODUCTION

We live in a time when groundbreaking medical advancements are radically improving health and longevity. Yet, despite these astounding achievements, more of us are affected by chronic diseases than ever before. Statistics paint a dire picture: we may be living longer than generations past, but our collective health continues to decline under the weight of complex, degenerative conditions. Even in the absence of diagnosed illness, many of us wake in the morning to chronic pain, anxiety, or depression.

We tend to accept this decline in health as part of the normal aging process—but it doesn’t have to be.

When we take a step back and consider why these conditions appear and where they come from, we see that they are a result of our bodies’ physical responses and emotional reactions to the world around us. In turn, those responses and reactions are all driven by a singular, fundamental need: survival. Humans are designed to survive. Our bodies have literally been built for it.

As we evolved, we developed complex protective mechanisms as part of a natural response to the need for self-preservation—the need to survive. If we had evolved in a perpetually relaxed and safe environment, these survival mechanisms would not have developed! But of course, that was not the case.
Instead, we have been shaped by external and internal stressors, whether physical, emotional, mental, or psychospiritual.

Although we can thank our survival response for making sure our species is still on the planet, such durability comes at a cost. For example, we are all aware of our most famous survival mechanism: the fight-or-flight response to danger. But many of us have not yet considered the cascading effects of such a response. How does our body get the energy to launch it? After the danger has passed, where do the chemicals and proteins we created go? All survival mechanisms take a toll.

Let’s think metaphorically for a moment. Imagine what happens in daily life when a crisis arises. Perhaps a client threatens to walk away from a deal, or your child breaks an arm, or the pipes burst in your bathroom. Suddenly, everything else in life is pushed to the side while you focus all time and energy on the crisis. You’re unable to pick up new clients while dedicating yourself to the unhappy one; or because you spend all evening in the emergency room with your child, you eat fast food and don’t sleep all night; or you spend twice as much money fixing the faulty pipes since you now need a rush job. The response to any crisis results in these kinds of casualties.

You already understand how the survival response works because you live it in your daily life! What you might not know is that similar crises and resulting casualties play out at the molecular level and have been since we were born and, indeed, since the origin of our species. Our bodies are not just trained to survive but to survive at any cost. Now imagine what happens when our environment and the pace of our lives create a situation in which our survival responses never turn off. Some of these inherent protective mechanisms are actually causing irreversible long-term damage to our health.

Further, when faced with a life-threatening illness, our innate survival response can even be fundamentally at odds with our ability to heal—it can literally create the kind of microenvironments where disease and cancer
thrive. In an attempt to survive a stressor, our survival response may cause more damage than the stressor itself.

This is the survival paradox.

The question is, how do we determine which self-preservation responses are healthy and necessary for growth and development, and which ones are causing irreversible long-term damage? How can we transform our innate survival drive to work for us and promote healing, wholeness, and longevity rather than against us, causing suffering, isolation, disease, and premature death?

I have spent much of my life working to unravel this mystery, searching for the true source of our innate healing abilities.

**MY LIFE’S WORK**

For the last three decades, through my medical clinic, my two nonprofit organizations, and through collaboration with leading academic institutions across the globe, I’ve researched and treated cancer and complex diseases using integrative medicine—the synergistic combination of Western medical treatments and complementary therapies drawn from different systems. The fundamental intention of this holistic approach is to open more doors for recovery, transformation, and healing so that patients emerge with greater strength, vitality, and a more profound and satisfying experience of life itself. While considering the whole picture in both disease and healing, my research kept bringing me back to the survival paradox, what drives it, and how we do or don’t recover from it.

I’ve been trained in diverse systems including Western allopathic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, acupuncture, and others. I’ve extensively studied and practiced Buddhist meditation and mind-body healing methods, Western and Eastern herbal pharmacopeia, and served as the personal physician to renowned Buddhist masters all over the world. Collaborating with
academic institutions and coauthoring peer-reviewed studies is as important in my training as the time I've spent with monks in remote mountains.

The integration of these studies and experiences has allowed me to develop a truly holistic, multidimensional perspective on health, disease, and healing. Above all, I have learned to let go of the expectations and dogmatic paradigms of our current medical systems, conventional and alternative. People often say I think “outside the box,” to which I respond that there was never a box to begin with. There was just the perception of one.

WHAT YOU’LL LEARN IN THIS BOOK

Foundational to holistic mind-body healing is education. I am committed to empowering patients, practitioners, and anyone seeking guidance about lasting wellness. This book is the account of how we survive on a biochemical, physiological, and psychospiritual level—and what it means for health, disease, longevity, and quality of life. Through this lens, magnified with cutting-edge scientific data from the most exciting medical fields today, this book offers profound insights for overcoming illness and optimizing health.

- In Part 1 of our journey, you’ll receive an in-depth introduction to the survival paradox and, along with it, a paradigm shift in your understanding of the root causes of health and disease. We can master our biochemistry. And it may be simpler than we think! As you’ll learn, scientists have not only identified the one “master protein” responsible for most of the survival response’s damage, but have also discovered a way to stop it.
- In Part 2, you’ll come to understand the effects of the survival paradox in specific conditions, such as heart disease, lung disease, and cancer. Every organ responds differently to the survival paradox.
You’ll also learn how to address these conditions based on insights from a variety of medical systems. (While you won’t need to fully grasp all of the biological concepts in order to start transforming your health, I have provided as much context as possible. Again, the more you understand, the better equipped you will be for healing.) Think of Part 2 as your micro roadmap.

• In Part 3 you’ll develop your macro roadmap. Here, you’ll learn holistic methods for transforming the survival response, releasing unhealthy fixation, and shifting from struggle to harmony.

• Woven between the science and advice are a collection of anecdotes, real-life patient stories from my thirty-plus years as a physician in the field of integrative medicine. They are stories of healing, radical recovery, and loss, and of community and courage. It’s my hope that these stories give you inspiration, insight, and a new perspective for overcoming challenges, no matter how great or small.

• Throughout it all, I will return to the overarching concept and argument that what happens at the cellular level also happens at the individual, community, global, and even universal levels. Buddhism teaches that everything in the universe is connected. We see that this is true when we map cellular behavior beside community behavior and find the same mechanisms at work. When we learn to heal our bodies, our relationships with each other, or our connection to the earth, we simultaneously learn to heal at all other levels.

I would like to clarify that this is not a how-to book. I won’t tell you, “How to Reverse Aging and Disease in Ten Easy Steps.” Such lists can be a helpful way to start, but they are rarely transformative because they are antithetical to true, holistic mind-body healing. Rather, within these pages, you will explore a much deeper cause of illness and aging and what to do about
it on all levels. You will be able to answer the key question of what it means to truly heal, and how we may cultivate this innate capacity to the fullest.

Altogether, the book comprises an even bigger story, a narrative of the primordial root of our existence. We are built to survive. But how you survive—whether at all costs or minimal costs—is up to you. Once you know the narrative, you can become the author of your own story.

That’s what I did.

The insights in this book are the result of my personal exploration. Throughout my life, while I have rejoiced in my successes, I have also learned much from my failures. Specific challenging moments in my life allowed me to experience the survival response and survival paradox at its fullest, and I had to make a choice. Would I get caught in a loop of struggle and reactivity that is ultimately damaging? Or would I take the opportunity to use the crisis for transformation and growth? Amidst the difficulties, life provided me with an opportunity to find a greater depth in my heart. I decided to free myself from the survival paradox’s binding consequences. It is from this transformative place that I am sharing this book with you.

**FORGING A NEW PATH**

Today, we’re at a crossroads. The direction we choose will have far-reaching implications on our individual health, our communities, our societies, and our planet. Our body makes trillions of such choices each second, thanks to our vast, intricate network of biochemical pathways. Everything is changing all of the time. We have choices in that process. That means anything is possible!

Over the years, my patients have given me the gift of supporting them during their most vulnerable times, opening up their lives and putting their trust in me. Through my experiences with them, I have come to believe that
there is always a pathway for healing because we have choices. And if we do not see a path, we forge one.

That is what this book can help you do. Yes, we live in a time rife with chronic disease. But it is also a time when advances in medical research have helped scientists produce a roadmap that we can use to harness both our genetic capacity and our cellular pathways to promote health and alleviate disease at the molecular level.

However, there is one thing to remember about navigating a course to recovery, or to any other destination for that matter: a map is only a representation or a rendering—it’s not the actual terrain. We all have a unique personal history that creates distinct pathways through which we express our biology, psychology, and the essence of our hearts, which means no two maps will be the same. But when you combine what we’ve learned from the growing body of scientific research with your own inner exploration and the unfolding of your personal story, a more specific picture will start to emerge.

And with it, much greater healing potential.

Rather than merely providing generic templates of well-known interventions, my intent is to offer you a multidimensional view of how it’s possible to uncover your greatest healing potential and start to map your own unique healing path. No one else can improve your health for you. Only you can decide what to do based on your unique story: your current state of health, environment, lifestyle, abilities, and goals. What drives you not just to survive but to thrive in a state of health and harmony? If you don’t yet know the answer to that question, you’ll find motivation in the pages of this book.

Understanding the full picture is especially important because medical research and findings are always changing. In truth, of course, everything is always changing. It’s the only absolute certainty you can count on. The key is to use this constant change to your advantage. And when you harness the incredible power of change, true miracles begin to happen. Forging your own path to healing is a series of choices. You always have choices. Your first is to turn the page.
PART ONE

HOW THE SURVIVAL RESPONSE AFFECTS OUR HEALTH
Rebecca first came to see me at Amitabha Medical Clinic in 2011. She was seventy, with stage 4 lung cancer that had metastasized to her bones. She had no family and lived alone; her companion that day was a stone-faced chauffeur waiting in a car outside the clinic. With tears in her eyes, she told me she had just been diagnosed. Hands shaking, she showed me the PET scan report highlighting the multiple tumors throughout her body. Based on what the oncologist said, she understood that her life could come to an end very soon.

“I don’t want to die,” she said. “I’m not ready to go.” Every cell in her body was reeling with anxiety and fear. Her restlessness was palpable in the air.

As an integrative physician who treats cancer, I’d had this conversation many times. I handed her a tissue and she wiped her tears. “I will do anything I can to overcome this cancer,” she said firmly. I acknowledged her fierce determination, her resolve. After all, determination is what’s needed first and foremost to overcome a deadly disease, right?
With her anxiety so palpable, I wondered how this fear must be affecting her. Not just on the level of her emotions or quality of life; I wondered how it was affecting the cancer cells. Will this fear-based determination not to die help her overcome her disease? Or will it cause her to become sicker and shorten her life? Her anxiety was so prominent that it infused her surroundings, affecting her ability to take a deep breath. It was constant suffering, and it was clear she was in “survival mode.”

Being in survival mode meant that her sympathetic nervous system hormones, the drivers of her innate biochemical response patterns, were dialed all the way up. Her adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol were elevated, and her insulin was spiking. Her immune response was being suppressed, and her metabolic function was altered. Ultimately, it meant that many of the compounds she excreted in an effort to survive would very likely nourish her cancer and allow it to grow and survive as well.

Survival mode is often a state of stress and panic. The body feels rushed and doesn’t slow down, and all cells, whether normal or cancerous, fight harder to survive. Thus, Rebecca’s anxiety and fear of dying could “feed” the cancerous cells. Her best chance at beating the cancer and living a longer life was to shift away from survival mode and move into a state of greater relaxation, with less reactivity on the cellular, emotional, and psychological levels.

Based on research and my years of work with patients, one thing has become clear: when facing a life-threatening or debilitating illness, the natural biochemical stress response, our innate fight-or-flight mechanisms that are driven by our instinct to survive are fundamentally at odds with our ability to heal and thrive. This survival drive, rooted in our sympathetic nervous system and expressed by our biochemical alert system, is not going to save us. In fact, it can harm us.

How does this physiological response system turn against us so dramatically, fueling disease processes and premature aging? And more importantly, what can we do about it?

The good news is, we can do a lot. And we can do it in a way that is
actually simpler than anyone facing a complex health condition—patient or provider—might have imagined.

We’ll continue to discuss the details of Rebecca’s treatment and outcomes in the next chapter. I witnessed something incredible in her case, as well as in many others. Something that Bruce Lipton, Deepak Chopra, and many others have written about, and what the yogis and mystics have been saying for millennia: the mind can influence the body to heal spontaneously and completely. The mind can deliver the body from the brink of death and disease to vitality and longevity.

**THE CATCH-22 OF “POSITIVE THINKING”**

Published evidence on the mind-body connection is significant and growing rapidly, and based on my personal and clinical experience, the results can be exponential.¹ Its power is within us all the time, and it’s absolutely available for us to use.

So, why doesn’t it always work?

If mind-body medicine is the clinically studied gold standard “alternative” deemed the safest and most beneficial treatment and increasingly adopted and applied in clinical settings around the world, it stands to reason that many more people would be able to meditate or “positively think” their disease into remission.

It’s the ultimate catch-22: when someone is facing a life-threatening disease, asking them to relax, change their thought patterns, and focus on happy, healing energy is much easier said than done. It’s like asking someone whose house is on fire to stay calm, think positively, and deeply inhale the smoke from their burning home.

We’re built for survival. We don’t just want but intrinsically need to overcome disease and to heal. I’ve come to find, based on extensive published
research and years of clinical observation, that this survival drive is the one major blockage standing in the way of would-be successes.

In an era when we tend to look for quick fixes and symptom suppressors, we’re really just suppressing our healing capacity. We don’t take the time to stop, slow down, and look within. The idea that we don’t have time—that we must rush, and must compete with everyone, including ourselves—is detrimental to our health and well-being.

What Rebecca needed above all else was to slow this sympathetic nervous system response, but she couldn’t. Her house was burning down, and she couldn’t take a deep breath in the midst of what appeared to be a life-threatening situation.

When we experience a sense of restlessness, not feeling safe, or not trusting our environment and community, it can translate all the way down to the cellular level. When we feel unsafe and believe we need to survive on our own, it changes the metabolism and function of our cells—they receive signals from their environment that there is a lack of oxygen. The formal term for lack of oxygen is hypoxia, and the hypoxic cell can’t breathe or naturally relax. (In cancer however, the cells behave this way even in the presence of oxygen, which we’ll discuss in detail later in the book.)

To begin the healing process, we need to move a hypoxic cell to a place where it feels it can breathe, create a normal metabolism, and return to normal mitochondrial function. To do this, the cell and the person must shift away from a state of survival toward a state of relaxation. To achieve such a change, the person as a whole must experience safety and balance all the way to the cellular level. The survival alarm has to be turned off!

So, how did Rebecca and I begin addressing her cancer? How was she able to take a deep breath? We worked directly on her biochemistry. We didn’t just circumvent her fear and anxiety—we transformed it. We used certain natural compounds to quiet the alarm system, normalize the cell, and fight the cancer. We combined those compounds with meditation, breathing exercises, regular acupuncture, and healing sessions with different
modalities, including hands-on osteopathic, craniosacral, sound, and visualization therapies. Most importantly, we surrounded her with unconditional love and affection, a sense of community, and an environment that held her without judgment—we created a world where she felt safe and loved.

A DEEPER HEART-BODY CONNECTION

The mind-body connection is amazing, and it’s not a one-way street. Emotions, thoughts, and subconscious responses clearly affect our biochemistry, our physiology, and our subjective and objective experiences of health and disease. At the same time, our biochemistry sharply affects our emotions and our thoughts. It affects who we are at the core.²

Meditation and other mind-body practices can undoubtedly give us the quantum edge in healing. They work not only because they can calm our anxiety, reduce inflammation, and reverse our biochemical disease processes—they also work because they melt our rigidity and relax our fixations. They dissolve the literal boundaries between the person and the disease, allowing the person to reach and engage the tumor, the atherosclerotic plaque, the burrowing Lyme spirochete, or any other opportunistic infection.

However, mind-body methods like meditation can only unleash our innate healing potential when we figure out how to truly engage our hearts. In this regard, a more accurate term for this type of healing is “heart-body medicine” rather than “mind-body medicine.” It is heartfulness rather than mindfulness. I call this “open heart medicine.”

The basic physiology of our heart and the fundamental mechanics of this vital organ function in a way that actually allows and supports “miracle” healing—an unexpected positive outcome that defies probability.

Ultimately, we have to get through the thin veneer of “positive thinking” and penetrate the deeper layers of our defenses. Our instinctual fears
and anxieties, while part of our innate survival drive, obstruct our healing capacity by triggering biochemical changes in our body that create literal physical barriers. These barriers are made of different components that need to be treated. For example, there can be hyperviscosity, which is thickness of the blood that hampers circulation and the ability to deliver oxygen to the tissue; fibrosis, which is the scarring or hardening of tissues and organs; biofilm structures, which form protective shields around tumors and pathogens; and more. And all of this will translate into changes in communications between the cell and its environment. This causes changes inside the cells and affects their function.

So, what is the key to shifting us from survival to harmony? From disease to longevity? What is this metabolic survival alarm that must be turned off?

Researchers have identified one master protein produced by the body, which is at the headwaters of our biochemical alarm system. This protein dictates our biochemical and physiological response to stress, illness, and injury.

The more stress we’re under, the more our bodies will view life as a battle, leading to ongoing conflict and friction within. Production of this survival protein will ramp up in an effort to resolve the conflicting dialogue between the body and the outside world and between different systems and cells within the body. Here is where we can see the paradox of this survival protein in action.

The molecular end result of this reactive defense strategy is contraction, isolation, and often disease. These are survival responses, which are driven by self-preservation but unfortunately lead to inflammation and fibrosis. These responses also lead to degeneration at the cellular level, organ system level, and at the level of our well-being and longevity. They halt the cooperation between our trillions of cells that would otherwise seamlessly communicate with each other in the miracle of life. The body has an innate capacity to heal itself—when the survival response doesn’t stand in its way.