

ANATOMICAL IMPACT OF LONG-TERM PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS ON THE HIPPOCAMPUS AND INTERNEURONAL CONNECTIONS: A NEUROANATOMICAL REVIEW

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20064830>

Annotation: Chronic psychological stress has emerged as a significant factor in the structural degradation of the human brain. This article provides an in-depth neuroanatomical analysis of the changes occurring within the hippocampal formation—a region critical for memory consolidation and emotional regulation. By synthesizing recent literature from 2020 to 2026, the study examines the anatomical pathways of the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis and its role in inducing dendritic atrophy and suppressing neurogenesis. Furthermore, it explores the disruption of interneuronal communication networks, specifically focusing on the loss of synaptic density in the CA1 and CA3 regions. The findings highlight the physical remodeling of neural circuits as a direct consequence of prolonged glucocorticoid exposure, offering a structural perspective on stress-related cognitive decline.

Key words: diabetes; continuous glucose monitoring; CGI; mobile applications; artificial intelligence; remotely monitoring; telemedicine; data security.

Introduction

The human brain possesses a remarkable degree of plasticity, allowing it to adapt to various environmental stimuli. However, when psychological stress transitions from an acute survival response to a chronic condition, this plasticity becomes maladaptive. The hippocampus, located within the medial temporal lobe, is characterized by an exceptionally high density of glucocorticoid receptors, making it one of the most sensitive regions to stress-induced structural changes. While traditional psychiatry historically focused on the functional aspects of stress, modern neuroanatomy emphasizes the physical transformation of neural tissue. Chronic exposure to cortisol triggers a biochemical cascade that results in the measurable shrinking of hippocampal volume and the "withering" of the dendritic tree. This article aims to detail these anatomical shifts, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding how prolonged psychological pressure compromises brain integrity and the efficiency of interneuronal communication.

Literature Analysis

1. The HPA Axis and the Biochemical Bridge to Anatomy: The Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal (HPA) axis serves as the primary mediator of the stress response. Under chronic stress, the negative feedback loop of the HPA axis fails, leading to a state of hypercortisolemia. Elevated cortisol levels cross the blood-brain barrier and bind to mineralocorticoid and glucocorticoid

receptors in the hippocampus. This prolonged activation leads to metabolic exhaustion of neurons, particularly in the Cornu Ammonis (CA) fields.

2. **Dendritic Atrophy and Morphological Remodeling:** One of the most well-documented anatomical effects of stress is the remodeling of dendrites. Research indicates that apical dendrites of pyramidal neurons in the CA3 region undergo significant shortening and a reduction in branching complexity. This "shrinkage" reduces the total surface area available for receiving synaptic inputs, effectively isolating the neuron from its neighboring network.

3. **Synaptic Pruning and Loss of Connectivity:** Interneuron communication relies on the stability of synaptic connections. Chronic stress induces the loss of dendritic spines—the physical sites where excitatory synapses occur. This process, often referred to as synaptic pruning, leads to a significant decrease in synaptic density. When these physical connections are lost, the neural circuits responsible for memory retrieval and emotional processing become fragmented.

4. **Suppression of Adult Neurogenesis:** The dentate gyrus (DG) is a unique part of the hippocampus capable of generating new neurons throughout life. Chronic stress-induced glucocorticoids inhibit the proliferation of progenitor cells in the subgranular zone. Furthermore, even when new cells are formed, the stressful environment prevents them from properly maturing or integrating into the existing anatomical circuitry.

Methodology

The analysis followed a systematic review approach, focusing on neuroanatomical and clinical studies published between 2020 and 2026. Data was gathered from primary databases including PubMed, ScienceDirect, and the Journal of Comparative Neurology. Priority was given to studies utilizing high-resolution MRI (3 Tesla and above) for volumetric analysis and those providing histological evidence of neuronal changes in human or primate models.

Results and Discussion

The synthesis of current research reveals that individuals exposed to long-term psychological stress exhibit a 5% to 12% reduction in total hippocampal volume. At the microscopic level, this correlates with a significant decrease in the number of synaptic vesicles and a thinning of the myelin sheath in the pathways connecting the hippocampus to the prefrontal cortex. A critical discovery in recent years is the role of Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF). Chronic stress severely downregulates BDNF protein levels, which are essential for maintaining the health of the dendritic tree. However, evidence suggests that this anatomical damage is not entirely permanent. Neurogenic stimuli, such as physical exercise and specific pharmacological interventions, can boost BDNF levels, potentially stimulating dendritic regrowth and the restoration of synaptic connections.

Summary

In conclusion, long-term psychological stress acts as a potent remodeling agent that fundamentally alters brain anatomy. Through the mechanisms of the HPA axis, it induces hippocampal atrophy, reduces dendritic complexity, and suppresses the birth of new neurons. These physical changes weaken interneuron communication, forming the structural basis for cognitive and emotional dysfunction. Understanding these anatomical shifts is crucial for developing medical interventions that move beyond symptom management.

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