

Trauma and the Nervous System

Stress is not in your head; it's in your nervous system.

Neurophysiology research shows that the stress response memory lives in our nervous systems, not our brains. When we experience a stressful event, one in which we feel helpless, hopeless, and lacking control, our autonomic nervous system (ANS) becomes engaged. The hormones associated with our fight or flight response (cortisol and adrenaline) are released to help our bodies mobilize and flee danger. Stress evolves into trauma when fighting or fleeing are not options we have, and we freeze instead. Our biological process is overwhelmed and we are unable to release and process (by fighting or fleeing) the stressful event. It is possible to avoid a traumatic response by discharging the energy that is generated in the moment. Shaking, crying, and screaming can allow the individual to physically process the stress.

However, if the stress response is not processed, it remains in the tissues of the body. When a subsequent stressful event occurs (a trigger), the traumatic memory is recalled. A large amount of stress hormones are released, and the nervous system responds as if this small incident is life-threatening. This biological response is beyond the ability to rationally control; you can't think your way out of it.

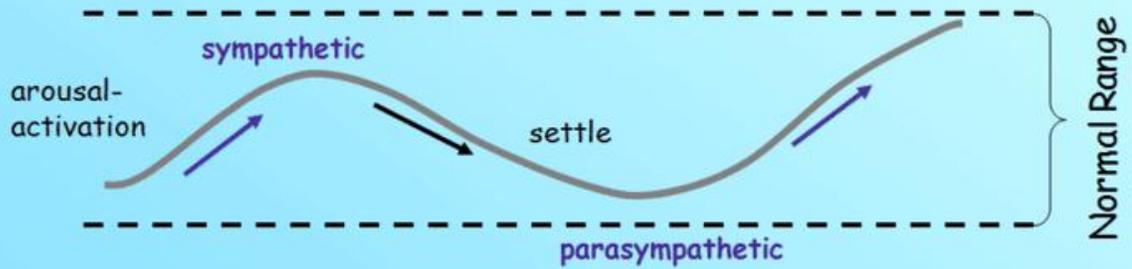
Unprocessed stress becomes traumatic memory that lies dormant in the body. A present day trigger can cause the stored memory to resurface. Understanding what is happening inside our body and learning why our body responds the way it does gives us awareness and empowerment, and allows ourselves the permission to be compassionate and gentle with ourselves.

Symptoms of Trauma:

Hypervigilance: “stuck on”; occurs when you remain primed with anticipation, triggered by a need to defend yourself or escape reminders of the trauma. Even once the danger has passed, the stress hormone, cortisol, may remain in your system, keeping your reflexes overly sharp.

Hypovigilance: “stuck off”; occurs when you are overwhelmed by stress during the trauma, and drift into a dissociative state as you freeze. When the immediate danger had passed, you find yourself “stuck”, as the nervous system is unable to recover or return to its normal state.

A Healthy Nervous System



Symptoms of Un-Discharged Traumatic Stress

