

## GLOBAL HIGH INTENSITY ACTIVATION (GHIA) Information Sheet

*“You are the guardian of your own nervous system”  
~ Catherine Lemon (Somatic Experiencing practitioner)*

The purpose of this information sheet is to give you general information about Global High Intensity Activation. It is designed to help you **understand what is happening in your body** and to **map the processes** involved that will help your nervous system come out of GHIA states and find more flow, ease, and stability. These understandings and treatments come out of Somatic Experiencing® trauma healing.

### Overview

**GHIA is a nervous system state and pattern.** It often arises from complex trauma. But don't worry! **Healing and rewiring is possible.**

There are **three basic steps** to changing this pattern and regaining (or having for the first time) a more stable, resilient system:

- **understanding** what is happening (hence this information sheet);
- **learning strategies** to help the nervous system rebalance and defuse itself;
- working with a therapist to **renegotiate old traumas** that have created this pattern.<sup>1</sup>

### Features of the GHIA experience

The **body is flooded with sensations, emotions, and thoughts** that are overwhelming and often feel like they come on quickly or 'out of nowhere'. People are hijacked by their internal experience, their own system.

People often describe GHIA as being like a **volcanic eruption** or an **explosion**, like **fireworks** or a **tidal wave**. Some people feel chaotic others shut down (eg. falling asleep).

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<sup>1</sup> 'Healing old traumas' can sound daunting. We may fear we are not up to it, or that the process will take us back to the places that were overwhelming and terrifying. This is not the case. The purpose of Somatic Experiencing® is to renegotiate old traumas in a gentle, manageable way that allows your natural ability to heal to arise. The processes are empowering, nurturing, and gentle. Discuss any concerns with your therapist.

These states often feel **uncontrollable, endless, inconsolable, frightening, 'crazy'**. People often have **feelings of bewilderment, shame, helplessness and fear** about what is happening and the ways they are able to respond. There can be a sense of despair or of failing in some way.

There are often **frantic attempts to regain control or 'make it stop'**. Some of these strategies are more successful than others. *It is helpful to understand what you do to try and regain control and what the positive and negative effects of these actions are.*



Image: Hokusai (18<sup>th</sup> Century) *Great Wave Off Kanagawa*

### What is happening in the nervous system in a GHIA state?

GHIA is a **nervous system activation cycle** that affects the whole body. It takes a person high into their sympathetic nervous system (fight or flight), or into a deep dorsal vagal shut down (freeze).

You might recognise these as:

- trying to **escape or avoid** situations that trigger these experiences (flight) – eg. jobs, relationships, conflicts. Often highly anxious.
- trying to **push away, blame, criticise** situations or people that trigger these experiences (fight) – eg. people's feelings, views, habits. Often highly angry.

- **shutting down** and pulling away from people or situations that trigger these experiences (freeze) – eg. sleeping more than normal, being emotionally unresponsive, feeling numb. Often emotionally shut down or depressed.

Often there is a mixture of all these states. Some of the chaos that is experienced is caused by **conflicting impulses, such as:** a desire to run away, as well as hang in there and change the situation, feeling a crumbling within the situation while also trying to fix it, etc....

Because of the high levels of activation in the nervous system **the person is rarely able to think clearly.** The pre-frontal cortex is simply offline. This creates some of the ‘irrational’ thought responses.

It is important to understand that **these are survival responses:** ways developed to deal with a situation that is overwhelming, confusing, frightening, and unmanageable. It is the best the person can do in the moment.



Image: Hokusai (18<sup>th</sup> Century) *Great Wave Off Kanagawa* (detail)

### Why is GHIA happening?

These nervous system states arise for two reasons. Firstly because the person is being **triggered from past experiences** that play out in the present. The person is **still trying to deal with what happened *then* in the here and now.** Secondly, **this way of coping with stress has become a become part of the nervous system pattern,** the habit or ‘go-to’ for the system.

## What causes GHIA?

While there can be a few reasons why someone has GHIA, one of the most common is **developmental trauma**. Having attuned caregivers and a safe enough environment are preconditions for developing a resilient nervous system. Caregivers who can attune and adequately support a developing child resolve stresses as they arise helps a system become resilient. Without this help those traumas sit unresolved in the nervous system and are triggered by current events.

GHIA can also follow from **sustained stress** which also creates patterns that underlie the structure of our nervous system.

The **good news** is that like neural plasticity, the nervous system can be 're-set' or 're-wired'; it's not a life-long sentence, even in a nervous system affected from the beginning of our life.

## Gaining/regaining stability and resilience

*'Curiosity is the cure for trauma'*  
~ Peter Levine (founder of  
Somatic Experiencing trauma healing)

There are two parts to shifting from GHIA to a system that responds to the here-and-now and is not reacting to old trauma:

- **Stabilisation:** recognising and interrupting the patterns, and using new tools and techniques to help the nervous system regain equilibrium;
- **Renegotiating unresolved traumas** that created the patterns.

NOTE: Both of these usually require the help of a therapist whom you trust and who is skilled in working with GHIA.

## Living with more ease and peace

When we live with unresolved trauma and a system that has a large element of GHIA, we often feel we cannot quite trust ourselves. Things in us don't feel 'quite right' or we can see that our responses to what happens today are adversely coloured by past experiences.

There can be a longing to be 'free' of all the hard work of trying to manage ourselves, to feel 'like everyone else', to know that we can rely on our own judgements, on our own system to not hijack us, to know that we can handle what happens in our own being as well as our lives.

By learning with the support of another to work with our own nervous systems and by healing old wounds, we can feel more ease and peace and have a greater sense of flow and aliveness in our lives. It takes time, patience, and persistence. It requires the right help. We need to offer ourselves many dollops of kindness along the way. We are all worth this effort and the work is worth doing.

*"I have come to the conclusion that human beings are born with an innate capacity to triumph over trauma."*

*~ Peter Levine*



Image: Lin Onus, *Michael and I Are Just Slipping Down to the Pub for a Moment*

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*The reflections here are drawn from Somatic Experiencing trauma healing teachings, with particular thanks to Ariel Giarretto.*

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