

PHYSIOLOGY OF TRAUMA AND HOW YOU MIGHT SUPPORT YOUR BODY AND MIND INFOSHEET WITH EXERCISES

There is a lot more information now on the physiology of traumatic response. While there is much work in therapy to help unwind and renegotiate the trauma within the therapeutic relationship, there are also many things you can do outside of sessions to support your body to strengthen its resilience and rebuild or counteract the effects of ongoing traumatic stress.

The resources and exercises described below relate to the autonomic nervous system including orienting, fight, flight, freeze and fawn. They also touch on how we process emotions and sense ourselves in time and space, and thus how we process and memory. And they help the mind and body remember or learn how to talk better to each other.

One of the things that happens in trauma is that some things get overcoupled (like hypervigilance when there is nothing around us to suggest we need to be on high alert) and undercoupled (like not noticing actual danger or situations where we need to stand up for ourselves). These over- and under-couplings are represented in the body, too. Some parts speak well together, some are talking way too much and in not helpful ways, and others have forgotten the other exists.

These unhappy physiological systems are shown to us in what we call “symptoms”. And these symptoms often feel mysterious or confusing. They sometimes get diagnosed as illnesses or syndromes. Or we are just told that is who we are, just part of our personality. While things do “go wrong” with our bodies, it is often worth finding out more, seeing if there are things that we can do to build capacity for easier function and start a better conversation within and between systems.

The suggestions in this information sheet are both broad and specific. And they are general advice, so take them on board lightly, pull out what appeals most to you, do more research, and continue with therapy, because that is the big unwinder.



Broad suggestions

Pleasurable regular exercise and healthy food and rest are always winners. No big news there. But it is worth getting more specific and understanding more.

Exercise

Exercise and movement are being shown more and more to help with just about everything. But in my experience, exercise needs to be pleasurable, within a range for your body that feels manageable, and of a type that helps you. So, it could be dancing or yoga or running; maybe lifting weights; and yes, good and happy sex counts (and has the added bonus of touch, such an important aspect to our sense of safety and belonging).

Ideally, though, when talking “trauma-supportive exercise” it needs to include a mixture of weights, cardio, stretching, balance and some kind of intricacy of movement (not just a treadmill), something soft and gentle (like qigong). We also need to bring awareness/mindfulness so that we are attuning to our actual needs and not just smashing it out.



Such a combination can provides:

- Pleasure (very helpful for ANS regulation , vagal stimulation, and longevity of what we do; life need to be fun!)
- Cardio (to get the endorphins going and for overall health of cardio vascular, and for releasing stress, cardio brings us into the SNS in ways that are not about fight or flight, but can simulate and feed back to our system our capacity for both)
- Strength training (when we have felt small and powerless, it is helpful for the body to recognise strength and capacity at a very physiological level; strength challenges muscles, bones and ligaments that may be hypotonic – shut down, too loose, in freeze or fawn states)
- Complexity and taking new routes to work or learning dance moves or songs (supports our sense of coordination, capacity for learning new movements helps brain/body connection, singing is great for our vagal tone)
- Gentle movement (brings pleasure and helps us slow down and have that real sense of presence with ourselves), it can be highly integrative of experience, and support mindful/safe presence in the here and now while connected to our body sensations).
- Exercise with others supports the vagal safety connection.

Other considerations when exercising:

- Tracking towards safety. If exercise is often a trigger for you or you crash afterwards, notice while exercising what feels safe about it or find ways to make it feel safe for yourself.
- Being present with our movement links awareness with the embodied self. It can support a sense of safety and agency and support better links between brain and body (below the neck).

Food

Healthy food speaks for itself, I hope. But again let's build on that. Food that is good for our body supports not just nutrients but also needs to be attached to a sense of nourishment and care. And within that is: pleasure, attunement, and digestion.

- Pleasure: taking pleasure in our food is important and eating with people we enjoy (again for ANS regulation, but also food is highly linked to belonging and sharing); having things that delight our tastebuds but that also make us feel good afterwards (unlike the third slice of chocolate cake) can help us restore a sense of safety to taking in the world around us and being nourished by it.
- Attunement: It can be helpful to start to pay attention to what your body wants to eat. There are often subtle signals that we have lost connection with. Learning to listen to a desire for a certain item or kind of food can be helpful. This is not to be confused with our comfort/emotional eating go-tos, though they can play an important role.
- Digestion: where trauma has been digestion is probably a little knocked about. There is a huge toll on the digestion when we are stuck in high sympathetic states and more shut down ones. Ideally see a naturopath or integrative doctor as well as doing your therapeutic work to discover what your gut health might need to be supported back to good function.



Meditation

Meditation and mindfulness practices can help us reconnect to our body and mind in ways that stabilise the connections that may be lost. Whether these are guided meditations or a specific practice, it pays to find one that works for you.

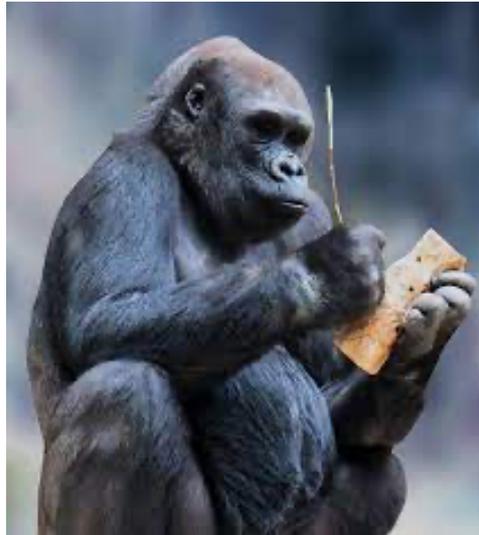
For many people seated meditation is not great fun and can be too activating of traumatic memories. In these cases, I suggest a movement meditation like just bringing gentle awareness to your feet and hands as you walk and slowly including more of the body in this awareness. This supports the insula and our interoceptive (feeling what is happening inside) capacities as well as being more regulating.



Other general suggestions

To help support and balance your body, you may also want to look at things like:

- Chinese and Energy medicine which uses meridians and movement and self-touch. I like Prune Harris as she has some lovely sequences for free on YouTube.
- Naturopathy and homoeopathy: these more traditional western approaches to body care.
- Trauma-informed yoga, tai chi, qigong, or other movement practices that focus on bringing balance throughout your body while being mindful and careful of your being.



And remember, this is about love and care and reminding your body and yourself that things are okay enough now to come out of fight and flight and freeze states. That we have survived what happened and that this is a time to restore balance and joy and okayness.

If you are still in the difficult situation, you are invited to let your body feel into the gaps between the hard parts: to still find places of ease and joy and strength.



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