3 STEPS TO RELEASE TRAUMA TRAPPED IN YOUR BODY

By: Sarah Rollins, LMSW, SEP

You've had a lot happen to you in your life and some of the memories of the past have stuck with you. You've talked about it with a therapist, a friend or coach - more times than you can count. Logically you know your past doesn't define you and that you aren't the reason or cause for all the things that have happened, but yet, deep inside there is a nagging feeling that you are broken. **You had to disconnect from your body because it betrayed you in those moments of fear, stress and trauma.** Now you are left with sensations in your body that are scary, unpredictable and confusing. You feel startled when there is no one there. Without thinking, you recoil when you are touched by someone you love. You are tense all of the time. **Your body feels like the enemy, not something to honor or befriend.** You can't reason your way out of the battle between your mind and body. You don't want to live like this anymore but you don't know what else to do. It feels like you have tried everything and nothing is working. **You feel stuck.**

IT IS POSSIBLE TO RELEASE THE TRAUMA TRAPPED IN YOUR BODY.

"Trauma is a fact of life. It does not, however, have to be a life sentence" states Peter Levine.
Levine is the developer of Somatic Experiencing, a body-oriented therapeutic model for healing trauma and other stress related disorders. I utilize this technique with my clients in my practice but I want to show you how you can benefit and find relief now. By utilizing this three step guide, you can begin to free the trauma from your body and unburden yourself from your past.

Step 1: Identify your Nervous System State

First things first… What is a "nervous system?" When I use the term, "nervous system," I am referring specifically the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS is the part of the body that "regulates involuntary physiologic processes including heart rate, blood pressure, respiration, digestion, and sexual arousal" (Waxenbaum, et al. 2022). **Your autonomic nervous system is working all the time, even when you are sleeping.** Your body temperature, immune system, production of sweat and saliva, urination and defecation, pupillary response (pupil size), metabolism, pancreas and liver function, and glands of the mouth, nose and eyes are all regulated by this system. **The nervous system is one of the main elements of the Polyvagal Theory.**

If our autonomic nervous system is involuntary then what is the benefit of identifying it? There are two reasons!

1: NAME IT TO TAME IT

When you can identify what is going on in your body, the sensations, emotions, thoughts or behaviors you are experiencing may become **less scary, overwhelming or uncomfortable.** When you can name (without judgment!) what is happening in your body, what used to feel uncertain now becomes more tolerable.

2. IDENTIFICATION PRECEDES CHANGE.

Although it can be frustrating, the first step in any transformational journey is to identify what is happening. If you cannot name an experience, how do you know what to shift? The good news is **you don't have to perfectly identify your nervous system state to create change!**

WHAT IS THE POLYVAGAL THEORY?

The Polyvagal Theory was developed by Dr. Steven Porges. The theory explains how the body and nervous system are unconsciously impacted by the sense of threat or safety in your environment. Porges theorizes that humans have three states: social engagement, fight/flight, and freeze. When we experience a sense of safety, we are in the social engagement state (Ventral vagal). If there is a threat, the fight/flight system (Sympathetic Nervous System) activates. We freeze, collapse or shut down (Dorsal vagal) if we perceive life threat or cannot fight or flee. When trauma occurs, the nervous system can get "stuck" in one of these states rather than moving between them naturally.

The Three States:

As humans, the goal is to have access to all of these nervous system states and naturally shift between them. The concern is when you feel "stuck" in one of these states and have a hard time moving between them. **If you do not feel safe, you cannot heal from trauma no matter how much you talk about it or how great your therapist is.**

VENTRAL VAGAL:

This state is called **"safe and social"** or **"rest and digest."** It is a state where you feel a sense of **relative ease and safety in the world**. You feel more **calm, settled, compassionate, in the present moment, curious, and open.**

SIGNS YOU MAY BE IN THE VENTRAL VAGAL STATE:

- Your sleep is more restorative.
- You have the ability to connect, relate with others, and make eye contact more easily.
- Your breath is steady, regulated, and moves throughout your body.
- Your stomach may gurgle or you may fart or burp!

SYMPATHETIC:

The sympathetic state, also known as **"fight or flight"** or activation, occurs when you experience a real or perceived threat. Common fight symptoms include **rage, anger, and irritation**. Flight symptoms include **panic, fear, and worry.**

SIGNS YOU MAY BE IN THE SYMPATHETIC STATE:

- Your heart rate increases; it may feel like your heart is beating out of your chest.
- Your muscles are tense; you feel like you want to move.
- Your pupils increase to allow more light in to see the possible threat.
- Your breathing becomes rapid and shallow.

DORSAL VAGAL:

This state is frequently referred to as **"freeze"** or **"shut down."** In this state, the focus of the body is the conservation of energy which can result in experiencing feelings of **depression, helplessness, shame, a sense of being trapped and dissociation.**

SIGNS YOU MAY BE IN THE DORSAL VAGAL STATE:

- You find it difficult to make eye contact or connect with others.
- Your body temperature lowers resulting in feeling cold.
- You experience a decrease in muscle tone; you don't want to move.
- You experience an increase in endorphins to help numb and raise your pain tolerance.

Step 2: Get Curious!

HOW DO I GET CURIOUS? WHAT DOES CURIOSITY LOOK LIKE?

According to the Webster dictionary, curiosity is defined as **"desire to investigate and learn"** and **"inquisitive interest…"**

Let's imagine you feel anxious and your mind is racing. Your heart is pounding so hard it feels like it is going to explode out of your chest. Your breathing is really fast and you can't stop sweating. You feel like you want to run away. No matter how hard you try, you can't settle down.

WHAT NERVOUS SYSTEM STATE ARE YOU IN? SYMPATHETIC!

Now let's start with the heart rate and get curious about it!

I like to pretend I am a detective! With a sense of curiosity, desire to investigate, and a sense of inquisitive interest, ask yourself the following questions:

Does the sensation have a shape?

DOES THE SENSATION HAVE A SIZE?

DOES THE SENSATION HAVE A COLOR?

Does the sensation have a texture?

Does the sensation have a temperature?

Are there any images associated with the sensation?

NOW, WHAT DO YOU NOTICE IN YOUR BODY?

WANT TO GET EVEN MORE CURIOUS?

Does the heartbeat have an **edge** (a place where the sensation feels less intense)?

Does it go all the way to your right arm? If not, **where does it end?** If yes, how far out does it go… outside of your body? To the wall? Outside of your space?

Does it go all the way to your **left arm**? If not, where does it end? If yes, how far does it go?

Does it go all the way to the top of your **head**?

Does it go all the way to your **toes**?

Does it go all the way behind you reaching your **back**?

Does it go all the way in front of you towards your **chest**?

It is okay to not be able to answer any or all of these questions. There are no right or wrong answers.

THE GOAL IS TO SIMPLY GET CURIOUS!

Step 3: Go Inside, Don't Override

Besides curiosity, **I believe that overriding is one of the most powerful concepts in trauma recovery.** When I talk to patients about overriding, they commonly refer to it as "powering through."

What is overriding? **Overriding is the experience of stunting our natural impulses towards healing with thoughts, feelings or behaviors.** You don't always override because you want to, sometimes you override because you have to.

WHAT DOES OVERRIDING LOOK LIKE:

- Telling yourself there isn't time to feel– fighting the urge to cry or scream and becoming even more controlled in response.
- Saying yes when you really want to say no.
- In an effort to lose weight, you stop listening to your body's natural hunger cues. Eventually, your body may stop producing these cues so you won't know when you are hungry.

The most common way you override is by not being present with yourself. You are disconnected from your emotions and experiences. You spend your time zoning out on social media, working non stop, obsessively exercising, binging sugar and burying yourself in distractions.

Going inside means slowing down enough to listen to your body. Listening means paying attention and learning to tolerate what is happening inside.

HERE ARE SOME SIMPLE, YET EFFECTIVE WAYS THAT YOU CAN START TO PRACTICE LISTENING TO YOUR BODY AND NOT OVERRIDING:

- Sleeping when you feel tired.
- Eat when you feel hungry.
- Drink when you are thirsty.
- Use the bathroom when you feel the urge to go.
- Move when you have the urge to move.
- Allow tears to come when you have the urge to cry.
- Stop scrolling on social media the first time you tell yourself it's time to go to bed.

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MESSAGE FROM SARAH ROLLINS, LMSW, SEP

Tracking your nervous system state, getting curious and going inside are three essential components to trauma recovery. Sometimes, this is not enough. **Trauma is often about having to go through overwhelming events alone.** You do not have to go through the recovery process alone too. If you are interested in meeting with trained trauma therapist to learn more ways to heal from trauma, schedule a free 15 minute consultation at www.embodiedwellnesstherapy.com. **We are here to support you every step of the way.**

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