

PsychoNeuroEnergetics

The Role of the Vagus Nerve in Healing Trauma

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In our natural way of being, our nervous system self-regulates easily after a stressful event. We soon come back into balance and relaxation. A traumatic event that does not get resolved leaves behind a charge in the autonomic nervous system (ANS). Consequently, a host of sensations, emotions and beliefs is left behind as traumatic imprints. Those imprints make it difficult for us to live in our natural way and are the basis of most diseases.

PsychoNeuroEnergetics (PNE) addresses all levels of the body, emotions, mind and spirit to heal the devastating effects of trauma. Our work with the vagus nerve plays a primary role in the discharge of trauma held in the ANS and a return to healthy self-regulation.

A Case Study

We will describe a session with a client to give an indication of the power of vagal techniques. Tina, about 45 years of age, came to the clinic because of tightness on the right side of her neck and a chronic headache. She often felt a burning sensation in the right side of her throat. She had had that problem since the age of 13. Medical doctors could not find any cause.

Because of depression, she had also been in psychotherapy for a few years, so she felt that she had already "talked through" everything in her past. On the question of whether there had been any physical shocks, she said that she remembered just little accidents, but nothing that stood out especially. Even in the time around the age of 13, she couldn't recall anything.

In examining her, we found the sternocleidomastoid (SCM) on the right side constricted, which was causing a tilt to the head. Breathing was shallow. We used vagal techniques to relax the muscles of the neck. These techniques shift the breathing pattern and help to achieve a deep relaxation. Afterwards, we accessed the ANS and the deep memory of the body through sustained pressure on reflex points that access the cranial nerves, and in particular, the vagus nerve. That brought up a memory of being forcefully pounded by her older brother at the age of 12 or 13. She could not understand the strength of his reaction, as it outweighed the significance of the situation. At that time, she went into shock and dissociated from this event.

In the session, the body began to shake and to release the shock that had been held for almost 30 years. We waited until the body completed the release of the shock. The breathing deepened. Then she reflected that even today, her older brother behaved like the black sheep of the family. She loved him, but also felt angry and confused around him. Her thinking was still, "Why is he behaving like that? I don't understand. Did I do something wrong?" In this situation it made sense to look back through the generational lineage. We found that on the father's side, there was always one man in each generation who took on the belief "I'm not good enough." The man who played that role in the family constantly created situations that kept people from loving him.

In understanding this pattern, Tina could start to integrate her own healing and to release the old pain. She felt sad that her brother took on this role. Tears rolled down her face, but she finally knew: It's about him and not about me. A few weeks after the session, Tina reported us that she had more energy, felt more dynamic in her life and that her neck felt free.

Our Inner Sense of Self

The quality of one's life is highly connected to an inner sense of self and the feeling of connection to loved ones. A prerequisite for this is a healthy autonomic nervous system that is able to self-regulate.

Through life, especially through early experiences, our ANS learns to adapt in a way that seemed to be the best choice at the time. Tina's story shows the potential for a link between chronic pain and old trauma. Accessing the ANS enabled her to reveal deep memory that was still trapped as constriction and pain in her body. Once the freeze response was released, she was able to make conscious connections to the emotions and belief system underneath, finally leading to an understanding of generational family dynamics. As our subcortical limbic system and the ANS are the carriers of deep patterning, vagal techniques are a very powerful way to access inner knowledge and language for the transformation of unconscious patterns in life.

The Pathways of Trauma in the Central and Autonomic Nervous System

Brain Scans done at Harvard University and described in Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score*, confirmed that the aftereffects of traumatic situations cause some parts of the brain to react with decreased activity and others with increased activity. The polyvagal theory by Stephen Porges describes a third response: a freeze response at the level of the ANS.

Fight / Flight Response

The limbic brain and therein particularly the amygdala—our "smoke detector" to danger and fear—gets activated by strong emotions, like intense fear, anger, and sadness. When activated, it sets off a cascade of stress hormones, such as adrenalin and cortisone, activating our sympathetic nervous system (SNS). The prefrontal lobes in our cerebral cortex, which enable us to make conscious choices and moderate impulses, show decreased activity. The critical balance between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex is radically shifted.

When trauma is not resolved, the amygdala becomes chronically hyper-sensitized and is triggered by ambiguous stimuli that in a well-functioning person would be interpreted by the prefrontal lobes as nonthreatening.

These dysfunctions can leave a traumatized person living a miserable life, with uncontrolled cascades of "toxic" stress responses that continue to be secreted even many years after the initiating event. The dysfunction of the ANS is expressed as agitation, panic and behavioral changes outside a person's conscious influence.

Freeze Response

When a traumatic situation is overwhelming and leaves a person in a helpless and hopeless state, the Polyvagal Theory describes that dorsal vagal fibers (parts of the vagus nerve belonging to the parasympathetic nervous system) initiate a freeze response in the body and a "shutdown" or decrease of many body functions. It can show itself as depression, chronic fatigue or pain, burn-out, memory loss and disturbances of cognitive functions.

The Clinical Approach of PNE

PsychoNeuroEnergetics is a somatic-based therapy integrating the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual levels of being. The "felt sense" is used as an inroad to traumatic events.

Facilitators learn to watch and listen carefully to the voice of the ANS of the client. Often it is useful to loosen up constrictions of the ANS in advance, so vagal techniques are used to begin the process of informing and restructuring the body. The techniques we use are primarily those developed by Thor Philipson, based on a deep knowledge of Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory and the Stanley Rosenberg Method. In order to access deep unconscious patterns, the PNE practitioner then uses particular neurosomatic pressure points that access various vagal connections to organs and glands and activate the information stored in the limbic system.

Extended pressure on these points along with sensitive facilitation enables clients to reprocess traumatic issues in a safe environment. To transform limiting patterns, it is important to discharge the ANS, to pace oneself in experiencing the emotions that were too overwhelming in the moment and to access the associated misbeliefs often unconsciously running our lives.

Limiting patterns, or habits of being, can come from traumatic incidents in our own lives, or can be taken on from our parents, our ancestors or even cultural or religious systems. Once we experience the full nature of sensations, emotions, thoughts and words, the possibility of a consciousness shift becomes available. The limiting belief that caused the body to go out of alignment is dissolved and often spontaneously replaced by a deeper wisdom.

References

Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (2015)

Stanley Rosenberg, *Accessing the Healing Power of the Vagus Nerve* (2017)