

# Why the Body can't "Just Get Over It"

by Benjamin Fry

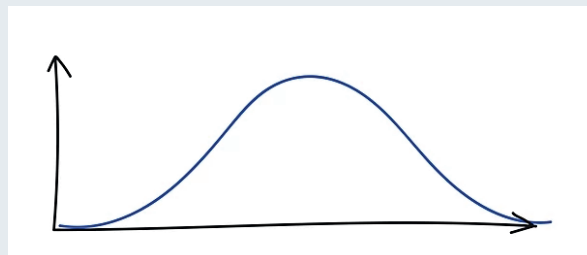
One of the great amusements about psychotherapy in popular culture is that it is all about your mother, or childhood, or past and so on. Often people are told to "just get over it" and "forget about the past". They are encouraged to move on and not dwell on things which happened a long time ago.

And, who wouldn't want to do that? It's certainly no fun reliving the past when it was worse than the present. At least that is what our human, thinking brains tell us. Of course, it turns out that it is not that simple, and if you understand how the mammal and the reptile in us responds to threat, it is easy to see why.

## The Threat Cycle

What goes up must come down. That's as true of the systems in your body as it is of a child's party balloon. For example, when you are on a treadmill, your heart rate goes up, and then when you come off it, your heart rate goes down. You hope that it returns to where it came from. There's a medical term for this (from Greek), homeostasis, which just means back to the same place. Every system in your body works like this, your temperature, your blood pressure, your hormones, all of it.

So when you experience some stress, or a mammal is confronted by a threat, something starts in the body which should then return to normal. This is called your activation and it is basically your accelerator to respond to threat. If you get away from the threat, it should look something like this.

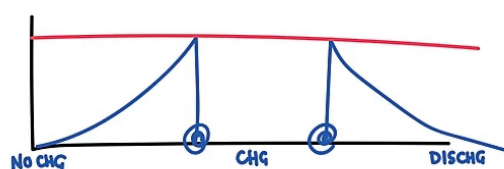


A threat cycle

If this is in your past, then you are done with it. You have returned to where you came from. And so this experience is a memory, but not one that you feel much about when you think of it. This is exactly what critics of psychotherapy would like, for you to leave it in the past. You have had many, many experiences like this. You probably don't even remember them. They are done. It's over.

So, what goes wrong when you don't feel like this about the past? Mammals and reptiles have a fight or flight response to threat, but they also have a freeze response. This kicks in when the threat gets so great that they can't accelerate any more. At that point they take all of this accelerated energy and cram it into a frozen well, like slamming on the brakes but keeping the engine running at top revs.

If the threat is survived, then the brakes come off, and the activation immediately kicks in, sending the mammal back into fight or flight, discharging all of that frozen energy. It looks like this.



A threat cycle going through freezet

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So long as everything returns back to where it came from, this event is also over. It is in the past. You won't be bringing it up in therapy. So we still don't know why some things stay with us so troublingly, while other events just seem to fade from view. The answer is that not every frozen event makes it back to this pattern of discharge. Sometimes the energy gets stuck in us for good, because we are unable to complete the discharge process.

The problem with this is that the body doesn't end up back where it started. It ends up back in the middle of the threat cycle, with the charge of fight and flight energy stuck in a frozen state in the body. It has not returned to homeostasis. This has lots of consequences.

## Unfinished business

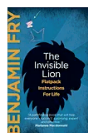
This energy, which has not been discharged yet, is now waiting to be activated again. So the event, which set the whole threat cycle in motion, is not yet finished. This means that, in your body, you are still experiencing the episode. When people say can't you leave the past behind, they don't realise how right they are. The threat is still being experienced right now. You have unfinished business in your nervous system, today, but from an event many years ago.

So in fact, no one in psychotherapy is trying to drag up the past. What they are doing is trying to do is to take what is happening right now, in the room, in your body, and help you to leave it behind in the past where it belongs. A lot of therapists don't even know that this is what they are trying to do, but we all have the same bodies!

If you have unfinished business in your nervous system, check out the blogs in the blog section of The Invisible Lion website (<https://www.theinvisiblelion.com/blog>) or my book The Invisible Lion and you will find lots of case-studies and techniques for healing to try to make sense of what you have been going through

And how, finally, to start to leave it where it all belongs; in the past.

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