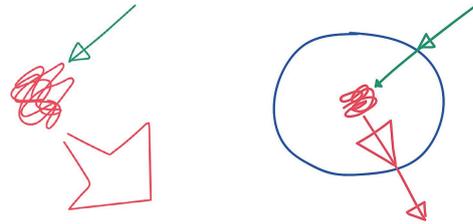


Re-Regulating our Nervous System using our Senses

by Benjamin Fry

In freeing ourselves from a dysregulated nervous system, an important step is learning how to reframe our experiences and manage our triggers, reactions, and baggage. We need to do this so that we are no longer subject to learned ways of behaviour that negatively impact our lives and the relationships we have with others.

The goal is to go from the diagram on the left below to the one on the right.



In the diagram on the left, in which our baggage is represented by the red squiggle, triggers are the green arrow, and our reaction is the red arrow, you can see a dysregulated nervous system - one that overreacts to the trigger. The diagram on the right represents a nervous system that is well regulated as a result of using boundaries and containment.

To reframe our experiences, we must bring attention to our triggers, our baggage, and our reactions. It's easy to consider ourselves the victim in situations that trigger us and make us feel unsafe, but there is very little we can do to control what life throws at us. What we can do, however, is use boundaries and containment to lessen the impact that our triggers have on our baggage. When we do this, we create something like a shield around that vulnerable, wounded part of ourselves.

If we want to re-regulate our nervous system and leave that state of dysregulation, we need to connect with our bodies, and allow our reptilian and mammalian brains to finish dealing with our unfinished business, the root cause of our dysregulation.

If we are going to disengage the thinking brain and activate the mammal brain, it's not very easy to do that while reading words. We need to go instead into the part of the brain that's aware of sensations, which show up in our five senses; touch, sight, smell, sound and taste. They are experienced, not thought about or read about.

So, this step in freeing ourselves from dysregulation sees us using the sensations from our own body as a bridge through time. That's right; we're going time-travelling, back towards the original trigger that created your baggage. You are going to visit the reaction was so strong that you had to pause it. You never completely un-paused it, so the reaction is unfinished and remains dormant in your nervous system. Using sensation to time-travel back to that experience is the first step to resolving it.

Essentially, you are including in your awareness today an awareness of this same experience before today. It's just a bigger window of awareness we're opening up going from the now to the now-and-then. This time-travel is done by your body. No thinking required.

The nervous system is linked to the event in the past, as if it is happening right now. So you just have to train your body to listen to your nervous system, and your mind to listen to your body. With the right preparatory work, you can tap into this magical somatic dialogue at any time.

Let's use a practical example to get a better understanding of how we can connect with ourselves and discharge our baggage.

John has agreed to pick up Mary from a work drinks event and take her to a dinner with his friends. He's supposed to collect her at 7pm. At 6.55pm, she tells everyone she has to go, gets ready and is expecting him. He doesn't show up. There's no call, no message, nothing. As she's waiting by the lobby of the bar, some of her colleagues leave together and comment that they thought she'd left. They ask her if she's ok. Mary smiles bravely and tells them that everything's fine. But inside she's dying. She has no idea what's going on and having played it all cool, like she had to leave because she had another event to go to, now she's the one standing on her own looking foolish. It doesn't help that one of the people passing her in the lobby is her work nemesis! John finally turns up at 7.50pm. Mary is still waiting, but not exactly pleased to see him. As he walks into the bar, all flustered, and greets her, she must make a choice in what to say.

When talking about her triggers, Mary would respond well to this situation by saying:

'When we agree to meet at 7pm and you show up at 7.50pm, that's a trigger for me.'

In doing so, Mary makes her response about her and her own triggers, not about John. Mary could add to the communication about the trigger by also including a good description of the reaction.

How Listening Can Help Us Not React To Our Triggers

by Benjamin Fry

And now I notice that I feel very angry, upset, hurt, confused and scared. My stomach is tight, and everything feels hot in my abdomen. I don't feel safe.

Once you have carefully identified your trigger, and diligently noticed and safely articulated your reaction, it's time to open up the bit in the middle, the bit that links the trigger to that reaction. For Mary, that looks something like this:

"When we agree to meet at 7pm and you show up at 7.50pm that's a trigger for me. And now I notice that I feel very angry, upset, hurt, confused and scared. My stomach is tight, and everything feels hot in my abdomen. I don't feel safe. This reminds me of when I was always waiting for my Mum. She was always late for me when I was younger."

What does this help Mary to learn about herself now as an adult? She has an over-reaction to people she cares about being late for her. She obviously has some work to do on this, but in the meantime, how can she keep the triggers to a minimum, so that this work is easier to do? She can ask John to help:

"So, in the future it would really help me if you could be on time, or let me know if there's a problem as early as possible. And what I will do to help myself is if you are late and I'm getting uncomfortable, I will just go home."

In this story, Mary has successfully identified her trigger, manages her reaction, and opens up about her baggage. She then let's John know about her boundaries, which he can then, if he chooses, collaborate with Mary on keeping them. By simply letting people know what your boundaries are, they may find it easier to help.

Imagine in this example that she's not saying this to John now, but she's actually working through this on her own, or with a friend or even a therapist. She now wants to use this statement describing the sensations she felt to do some work on her nervous system, to get better at handling these kinds of triggering events in the future.

So, while remembering what it felt like when she was waiting for John, Mary goes into her body and looks for sensations. She has already noticed that her stomach is tight and everything feels hot in her abdomen. Now is her chance to go towards those feelings, not away from them. The goal here is to stop analysing and to allow the experience to start to take over.

Once we find these sensations and focus clearly on them, we have a very important question to ask. This question is not asked of the mind; it is asked to the body. You might feel like this makes no sense at all, but just go with me here. It works. I've seen it work hundreds of times. What it really comes down to is just a trick of language, but it means something to us all in a way that's hard to describe with words. You will know it when you feel it.

Once you have a clear awareness of your sensations as you recall the trigger, reaction and your baggage. Now is when you ask your body this question:

"Can you float that back in time and see where it goes?"

And then you let that hang there for a while. You might want to repeat it. Your body might resist answering. Your thinking brain might be desperately trying to get in on the act. Come back to your sensations, back to your body. Its initial response might be to draw a blank.

That's OK; hang out with blank for a while. If you stay with it, eventually something will happen. Something will pop up on the radar.

Sometimes we think it doesn't make sense and so we resist it. Go with whatever comes up, however crazy it may seem. The memory might be an unwelcome one and your mind might tell you not to go there, but the reality is that your body is already there. It's not a memory anymore; it's something happening right here right now. So, there's no point listening to your mind telling you not to go there. You are there. And now you have a way out.

The most important thing here is to respect the pace at which your body wants to work. There is nothing to be gained by rushing anything. The body can't do more than it can do when healing anything, whether it's a broken toe or a dysregulated nervous system. It takes the time it takes. So if you need to, give yourself permission to do this slowly, carefully, in stages.

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