

POLYVAGAL THEORY & ENDORPHIN EFFECT

Notes

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POLYVAGAL THEORY

Stephen Porges – psychophysicologist – first proposed polyvagal theory in 1994 following his research on what is going on in critically ill new-borns who become passive. Interestingly his wife, Sue Carter, identified the significance of oxytocin in bonding relationships (working mainly on voles.)

Three core states

Safe & Cooperative	Parasympathetic — Ventral Vagus — Heart/head, face muscles, ear drum
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Aroused, Fight, Flight	Sympathetic — animals fight/flight/survive
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Petrified	Parasympathetic — Dorsal Vagus — Reptile/worm, gut
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Neuroception

Our subconscious awareness (not conscious) responds to triggers and moves us through the three states.

Trauma Therapy

Polyvagal theory has been mainly taken up by therapists working with trauma, because it provides a coherent map and method for the stages of healing.

PSYCHONEUROIMMUNOLOGY (PNI)

What goes on in the mind → Triggers nervous system → Triggers endocrine system
 Conversely what goes on in the body (neuro-endocrine system) → Triggers the mind

Emotions are feelings.

Feelings are physiological sensations.

Physiological sensations are based in body chemistry and mediated by neuropeptides (hormones.)

The three vagal states are also *Hormonal*

Safe & Cooperative	Endorphins/oxytocin/etc — cocktail of feel-good hormones
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Aroused, Fight, Flight	Adrenalin/cortisol as fuel
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Petrified	Adrenalin/cortisol as stress; endorphins as anaesthetic
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HUMAN INSTINCTS, SUFFERING AND THERAPY

CARE — connect, nurture
 FEAR — humiliation, defeat
 HUNGER — Food – survival
 LUST — Procreation – sex
 PANIC — frozen, petrified
 PLAY— cooperative, fun, humour, joy
 RAGE — violence
 SAFETY — fear, anxiety
 SEEKING — Enquiry – curiosity – make sense of
 SPACE — territory
 STATUS — pecking order, identity

We hurt each other: big **Traumas** – little traumas

We hurt ourselves with self-judgement and thwarted desires.
 Buddha: Desire is the source of suffering.

Traumas and traumas sit in the body as memories
 Medical science is unclear about where memory resides.
 Holistic therapists know/feel that it resides in body tissue as tension, suffering and pain. They intuitively enquire, feel into and follow clues.
 Triggers and depth of trauma depend on • Inherited traits • DNA • Conditioning • Karma

Therapy

Releases tension, suffering and pain
 Brings tissue, feelings and emotions into open flow
 Takes people from Petrified → Safe/cooperative
 Takes people from Frozen adrenalin/cortisol → Endorphins, cocktail of wellbeing hormones

ENDORPHINS

First identified in 1974 by teams in Aberdeen and John Hopkins universities. Researchers looking to find a substitute for morphine. Became well known via the work of one of the main researchers at John Hopkins, Candace Pert author of *Molecules of Emotion*.

Endo — produced internally
Morphine — the opiate
Endorphin — the opiate produce internally (inside the body)

Endomorphine

Endorphins

- Opiate hormones/neuropeptides produced in every cell of the body. The body's natural morphine.
- Production can be small and local, or cascading/flooding whole body.
- Function – kill pain, relax tissue, create feelings of pleasure, allow healing agents into affected region.
- Continuously present and 'humming' in the background for children and good-humoured people.
- Can be guided by the mind into particular body regions or triggered into increased production.

Five Triggers

1. Ongoing physical movement. (Tissue needs to open to allow more oxygenated blood.)
2. Any pleasurable event, activity or **thought**.
3. A kind focus given to your own body or any area of tension or distress. 'Inner Smile'
4. A good rest or purposefully guiding the body into the sensation of a pleasant rest. 'Curled deer'
5. Biophilia – connection with natural world, beauty of the universe, spiritual dimension

Endorphins cont/

Production and Effect Increased by

- Mental pause.
- 'Soaking.' Allowing any good feeling to sink into you (like a warm bath).
- Letting chest and stomach sink.
- Long, quiet, calm, soft, deep breaths.
- Extended focus on pleasurable thoughts.
- Amplified kind attitude towards your own body.
- Increased awareness of earth, nature, sun, universe.
- Doing things you enjoy.
- Exercise.

When 'Endorphinated' it is natural to

- Feel good and connected to the things that matter.
- Feel positive and optimistic.
- Be fully present to challenges and suffering.
- Feel strong and flexible.
- Extend one's own charisma to 'hold' people so as to encourage and support them.
- Have a kind and 'holding' attitude towards one's own distress and foibles.

William Bloom, *The Endorphin Effect and Feeling Safe*

Deb Dana, *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy*

Candace Pert, *Molecules of Emotion*

Stephen Porges, *The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory*

Porges & Dana (eds) *Clinical Applications of Polyvagal Theory*

I found the following image in Corrigan, Payne & Wilkinson (eds), *About a Body: Working with the embodied mind in psychotherapy*.

