

Somatic Coping in the Pandemic

Survival physiology 101 and tips to calm your nervous system under prolonged stress.

When we, as mammals, feel threatened, our survival physiology kicks in. This means that our nervous system shifts into *sympathetic* activation (fight or flight) or *dorsal parasympathetic* activation (freeze). Fight and flight states help us to defend ourselves, or get away from perceived threat. If the body determines that we need an additional survival response because fight or flight have not defused the threat, we will go into freeze. This is essentially our system playing dead. In these states we no longer have access to our pre-frontal cortex (our logical, analytic, problem solving mind). Instead our amygdala and brain stem (mid to lower brain or “reptilian brain”) run the show. These nervous system survival states are super helpful for short periods of acute danger, and we have evolved to be able to turn them on and off quickly in order to stay alive.

However, in this modern day and age and especially during a pandemic, these states can get activated and it can be hard to turn them off. Prolonged activation of survival states might feel like anxiety, depression, or other mental health issues. It also compromises our physical health because it takes a lot of energy for our bodies to be operating in survival mode. In the past few days and weeks as we have witnessed the spread of the new coronavirus, it is likely that you may have experienced fight, flight, or freeze.

Here’s a quick rundown of what each survival state can feel like:

Sympathetic activation such as fight or flight may feel like anxiety, agitation, worry, physical tension, difficulty breathing, rapid heart rate, disrupted concentration, lack of appetite, or poor sleep. You may feel like you have to make changes or take action quickly, figure out a plan for every possible scenario, or seek safety through control and perfectionism.

Dorsal parasympathetic activation, or freeze, can look like feeling numb, dissociated, like your experience is happening to someone else, inability to process information, brain fog, poor memory, lack of appetite, fatigue, feeling cold, sad, hopeless or helpless. You may feel stuck, incapable of doing anything, or be unable to imagine that anything will get better.

When we feel safe we are in our *parasympathetic ventral vagal* part of our autonomic nervous system. In this state we might feel calm, connected to ourselves and others, able to think logically, experience feelings of joy, pleasure, curiosity, and creativity. You may have improved functioning of biorhythms such as sleep, digestion, and immunity.

The good news is that we can shift our nervous system states. Even during a scary and uncertain time, such as the one we find ourselves in now. We don’t have to stay in fight, flight, or freeze mode until the pandemic is completely resolved. In fact, it’s more sustainable and healthier if we can allow ourselves to experience when and how we are safe in the midst of uncertainty. It’s important to acknowledge what we can and can’t control. We can’t control the virus, we can’t control other people’s responses, but we can do activities that move the stress physiology through and help us get back into our logical thinking minds as we continue to hand wash and social distance.

When you notice that a survival response has been triggered, try the following techniques to come back to a sense of wellbeing. These practices engage our physiology in ways that support an internal sense of ease and safety:

- 1) **Notice where you are.** Use your senses to take in your environment. Name objects, colors, or textures that you can see. What sounds do you hear? What can you smell or taste? What tactile sensations can you feel? Notice things in your environment that you like, or find pleasing.
- 2) **Hum or sing songs, prayers, or chants.** Or listen to music that you love, and let your body follow the rhythm.
- 3) **Move.** Dance, yoga, tai chi, qi gong--move in any way that feels good.
- 4) **Take social media breaks.** When we take in news or social media information, our nervous system doesn't know that whatever we are seeing isn't happening *to us*, and this can heighten our sense of threat. Be diligent with yourself in terms of protecting your nervous system from over-exposure to news or collective suffering.
- 5) **Reach out.** Call a friend and share about your experience right now. Ask them how they are doing.
- 6) **Get outside.** Go for a walk or run. Focus on the living world as you walk, take in trees, plants, and animals that are around.
- 7) **Create.** Cook, bake, craft, sew, build, draw, paint. Get to work with your hands in some way that you enjoy.
- 8) **Say something kind to yourself.** Speak to yourself the way that you would to a good friend who is having a hard time.
- 9) **Rub your hands along your legs or arms.** Focus on sensory information. Press your palms together, initiating the movement from your back and shoulders. Repeat. Do push ups or leg lifts.
- 10) **Burn herbs or use essential oils.** Cedarwood, vetiver, lavender and sage are good for calming agitation. Peppermint, grapefruit, or sweet orange are invigorating and clarifying.
- 11) **Journal.** This helps move thoughts and emotions, and invites your pre-frontal cortex back online. Write down what you are grateful for.
- 12) **Breathe deeply.** Breathe into the belly slowly and regularly. If anxiety is present, your body might resist this breath, and anxiety may increase. Pay attention to your external environment instead of your internal environment if this happens.
- 13) **Curl up.** Under a weighted blanket, in the sun, with a pet, or on a loved one's shoulder, if you are living with family members, friends, or partners.
- 14) **Rest.** Acknowledge that you and the rest of the world are facing many transitions right now, and that this can be exhausting. Allow yourself to take a nap, watch or read something comforting, or sit idly by for a little while. It's ok to slow down during this time. Allow yourself a pause to catch your breath. Take it one day at a time.