

THE MOTHER LODE

Nervous System 101

[Disclaimer: I am not a neuroscientist, psychologist, licensed trauma therapist, or physician. What I offer here is a simplification of what I have learned from years of research and working with people. If doing any of the practices below is uncomfortable or distressful in any way, stop. What I share here can be an effective companion to therapy but it is not a replacement for it. If you are in therapy, you may want to share these practices with your therapist.]

A couple of definitions of trauma:

#1 Anything that was too much, too soon, or too fast for your nervous system to process and integrate.

#2 Any experience that made you feel unsafe in your fullest authentic expression and led to developing trauma adaptations to keep you safe.

What sometimes stops us from showing up the way we want to in our relationships with our mothers is not a lack of skill or desire, but an incomplete understanding of trauma responses (ours and theirs). Here are some basics:

The Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) is responsible for:

Action/movement
Foot on the gas
Motivation
Using your body the way you want
Muscles flex/tense
Arousal
"Predator" energy
Upside of the wave
The climb
Inhale

When under perceived threat, it is also responsible for the Fight/Flight response.

Fight = "defeating the threat will make me feel safe," anger, wanting to glare or sneer or stomp and scream and hit and kick

Flight = "perfection will make me lovable and safe," over-busy-ness, doing ALL the things, thinking about doing, mind racing, hard to sit still, "I have to get this right."

The Parasympathetic Nervous System (PSNS) is responsible for:

Rest & digest
Let down
Sphincters release
Orgasm
“Prey” energy
Tears
Foot on the brake
Exhale
Collapse
Fainting

When under perceived threat, it is also responsible for the Freeze/Fawn response.

Freeze = “being alone will make me safe,” disorientation or dissociation, hiding, self-isolating, spacing out, self-numbing with sleep, scrolling, bingeing, you blank out and can’t think what to say.

Fawn = “giving up my own desires and needs and complying will make me safe,” people-pleasing, agreeing with someone you disagree with, apologizing even when there’s nothing to apologize for.

~~~

When we perceive threat, and our nervous systems have capacity, we're able to respond appropriately.

When we have unresolved/unaddressed trauma our nervous systems might default to the SNS or the PSNS responses. Women learn early that fight/flight tends not to work so we might default to freeze/fawn.

There are emotional cues/clues for each.

When the SNS is activated, you might notice irritation or annoyance at first. Then frustration, anger, and full on rage.

When the PSNS is activated, you might notice confusion at first, then disorientation, moving into helpless/hopeless, overwhelm, and then shutdown/collapse.

Women can start with a SNS response and then default into a PSNS response precisely because we know fight/flight won't work.

~~~

Three concepts & four practices (from the field of Somatic Experiencing®). I am not a licensed or certified SE™ professional, and the practices I am sharing here can be found in various places on the Internet.

3 Concepts:

1. Resourcing: being attuned to sensations of safety or goodness, no matter how small, and then creating moments of safety and goodness on purpose to increase the amount of resource you have.

2. Pendulation: being aware of the natural back-and-forth between feelings of expansion and contraction, ebb and flow, alertness/action and calm/rest. This helps develop confidence in the ability to move between states.

3. Titrating: less is more; slower is better; start with what's easy, move your attention to what's hard, then back to what's easy.

4 Practices that help increase nervous system capacity:

1. Affirm yourself and your presence.

“I am here. My name is _____. It is [date, time] and I am here [location].”

Notice how it feels in your body to do this. Try it standing up and see how it changes. Notice what your body wants to do as you affirm yourself and your presence.

2. Orient yourself. This can be done when you're calm and it can be done in stressful situations or environments.

Let your attention wander around your space. Make sure to turn your head and twist your torso to look behind you, both ways. Notice what attracts your attention and draws your interest. Pick three things and say, out loud, or inside your head, each thing as your eyes focus on it.

For example, as I write this, I am sitting in my home office. I sat back and let my eyes wander. I noticed, and said to myself, “There's the Scorpio print that was made for me in Italy. And the photo of my husband that I love so much. And the blanket, which is about to fall off the chair.”

Then move your attention inward and notice what attracts your attention there. Notice sensations: urges to move, tightness, softness, pressure, etc. Name them and see how they evolve.

“My shoulders are scrunched up, I am breathing shallowly, and I can feel a tenseness in my lower back.”

Don't judge your observations. Simply make a note of them. In this way you will establish yourself in the here and now.

3. Hold yourself. This is a way to define your literal boundaries and it has a calming effect on the nervous system.

Stand comfortably and place your hands on either side of your head. You can apply a bit of pressure, or not. Imagine that you are molding a container for your thoughts. Feel the sensations on both your head and your hands.

Now move one hand to your forehead and the other to the back of your skull. Continue to notice the sensations and boundaries your hands are creating.

Move the hand on the back of your head to your heart and keep the other hand on your forehead. What changes? Are there sensations between your two hands?

Now move the hand that was on your forehead to your belly and keep the other hand on your heart. Continue to feel and notice the sensations.

And finally, move one hand to your solar plexus and one to the base of your head, where you head and neck meet.

4. Express yourself. This is a combination breathing exercise and chant, much like the "Om" in yoga. The vibrations created when you sound or chant a deep "voo" (on the exhale) "tone" the vagus nerve. The longest nerve in your body, the vagus nerve has two main functions: first, it monitors all the major organs in your body and communicates with the brain stem, and second, it regulates social engagement, digestion, alertness/consciousness, and emotions.

To practice, inhale through your nose and as you exhale, make the "voo" sound (imagine a fog horn) in as low a tone as you can, making the effort to feel the vibrations in your lower abdomen.

After each round, close your eyes and sit calmly, noticing what you feel in your body.

These simple practices can expand the capacity of your nervous system and cue your body to know that it is safe. Why is this important in difficult mother-daughter relationships? There's likely trauma in your maternal lineage that gets in the way of having a healthier relationship.