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WHEN TERRIBLE THINGS HAPPEN: BRAIN/BODY TOOLS TO HELP YOURSELF AND OTHERS

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INTRODUCTION

WELCOME!

Brain/body tools can improve the quality of your thinking, your emotions and your physical health, especially when you're living under stress or have experienced trauma. There are dozens of such tools. Many cultures intuitively use them to release stress and trauma, sometimes without realizing that's what they are doing.

But others individuals or cultures don't. They may even resist. I've wondered why. Listening over the years, here's what I've heard:

Three reasons we dismiss brain/body tools and miss out

1. BECAUSE THEY SEEM SO SIMPLE.

Brain/body tools are not a pill or a complicated therapy. You can do them yourself. At home. At your office. When you've seen horrifying violence on the TV news. At the scene of an accident or bombing. Whenever you feel jittery, frightened or numb.

However, if the situations you're dealing with are BIG --- unsafe neighborhoods, terrorism, political unrest, mass rape, natural disasters, abuse---you likely sincerely doubt that anything so simple could help.

But ignoring brain/body tools when dealing with trauma is like trying to build a high rise without first building a foundation and frame. During, or immediately after traumatic events, these tools help calm us and can keep us from going into cycles of violence against ourselves or others. Over the long term, they can help individuals and communities support and participate in processes of justice, conflict transformation and security.

2. BECAUSE WE'RE NOT TRAUMA-INFORMED

When we know the benefits of an activity, we're more willing to try it. Trauma-informed people understand that trauma goes in through our bodies--our brain, nervous system, and our energy system--and it needs to come out from our bodies. Calming the body allows the brain to function as it's meant to. We think more clearly about the best way to have good relationships with our families and friends, create long-term security, seek justice, and transform conflict.

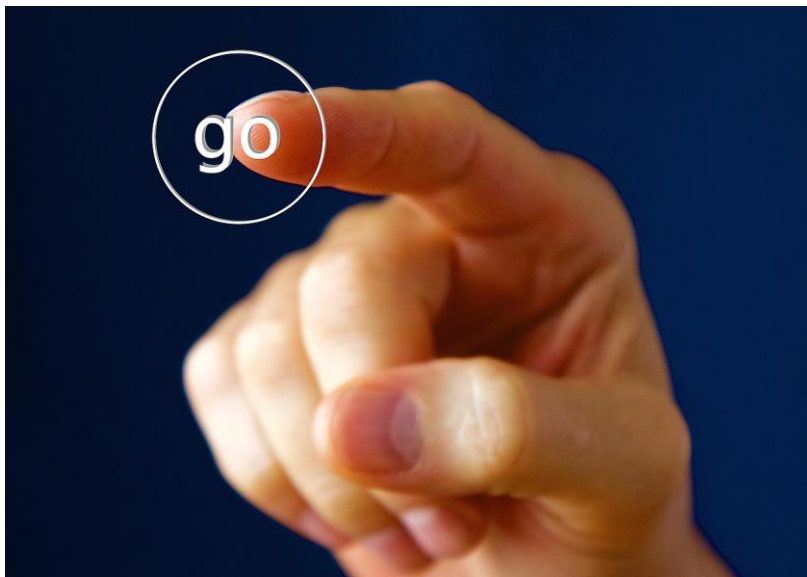
Trauma-informed people understand that when we have tools and know what to do, we feel resourceful, more powerful, and more hopeful. This counteracts the disempowerment and helplessness of trauma.

And they understand that people walking around hyper-activated from trauma fuel [cycles of violence](#) against themselves and others. Brain/body tools help to interrupt these destructive cycles.

3. BECAUSE WE DON'T START WITH THE FAMILIAR

Most cultures have brain/body tools that most people know: singing, dancing, drumming, yoga, tai chi, participating in sports, running, massage, etc. Find ones that are familiar and explain the benefits. Then introduce new ones. A variety of options helps you find the ones you naturally enjoy doing and that help you most.

SO LET'S GET STARTED!



BRAIN BODY TOOL #1: SHAKE & AWAKE

How it helps: You release the excess flight/flight energy from your body and counteract the freeze response which helps ground you in the present and calms your nervous system.

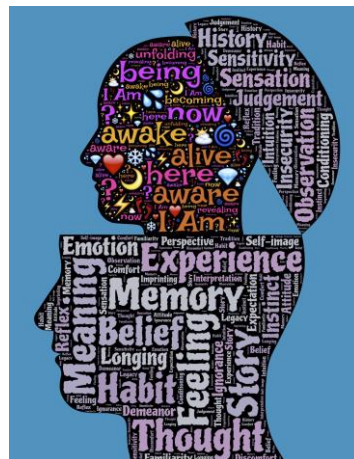
It can be used on your own, with children or in groups.



SHAKE

If your body is trembling and shaking, accept it rather than trying to suppress it. This is a normal, healthy reaction, not a sign that you're losing it. The body is simply trying to release the tornado-like energy of the fight/flight survival response that kicked in to get you ready for action. You want to let it out, not shut it into your body. Reassure yourself by thinking, "Look how my body is releasing and healing."

Children tremble and cry spontaneously when they're afraid. If children are with you, make a game of releasing --- shaking like an animal does when it's wet, putting on music and moving to it. Run, jump, or play a game like football/soccer.



BRAIN BODY TOOL #2: BREATHE

How it helps: Your body will relax, panic and anxiety will calm*. You will sleep better, think more clearly and make better decisions. It can be used on your own, with children or in groups.



If you're thinking, "Really? In the face of shootings or war or crippling poverty, you're telling me "just breathe?"

I understand that reaction because I used to think that too.

Then I began using a little biofeedback device on myself and my clients called a Heart Rate Variability Monitor (www.heartmath.org). It has a light that turns red, blue or green according to the degree that your heart, breath and head are in coherence, internally synchronized. Green indicates highest coherence, where you want to be.

I was amazed at what I saw. The person I was working with would be telling me about something stressful or traumatic and the monitor would be stuck on RED. I would point it out and then suggest we pause and take a few deep breaths together.

In ten, 20 or 45 seconds, the monitor would turn blue, then green. I saw this happen over and over again.

People stayed in the green zone a long time if they continued to breathe deeply and put a hand near their heart while thinking of people they loved or something they were grateful for. They reported feeling calm, peaceful.

Deep breathing allows your body to communicate with your lower brain, which automatically regulates functions such as breathing, digestion and sleep and the fight/flight response). The lower brain doesn't respond to commands, like "relax" or "stop it!" But through your Vagus nerve, which connects your diaphragm with your brain stem, deep breathing is able to "message" your lower brain, telling it

that it's safe to relax the hyper alertness. Like the brakes on a car, it can slow or stop fear and panic.* Right now, in the moment, you can be calm and peaceful.

*** PLEASE NOTE:** *Deep breathing, or even the thought of deep breathing, can bring on feelings of panic and anxiety in some people. This often is a fear of being overwhelmed by what happened and of having too much intensity come up. It illustrates the power of deep breathing. If this happens, start with Shake and Awake (#1) or Emotional Freedom Technique (#3) or consult a health care professional.*

Here are two ways to do deep breathing exercises:

1. RELAXED, DEEP BREATHING.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight.
- Gently fill your belly, chest, and shoulders as you breathe in.
- Exhale letting your shoulders, chest, and belly relax.
- Take slow, deep breaths rather than pushing or using effort.
- Lifting your arms up and down with the motion of the breath while standing or sitting is a more active way to do deep breathing that can be helpful when people are feeling too jittery to be still.



2. THE 4-7-8 (OR RELAXING BREATH) EXERCISE, A NATURAL TRANQUILIZER FOR YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM.

- Sit comfortably with your back straight.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.

- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose. Silently count 1-2-3-4.
- Hold your breath while silently counting from 1 to 7.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound while silently counting 1-8.
- Repeat three more times for a total of four breaths.

Do this at least twice a day. Don't do more than four breaths at a time for at least a month. Feelings of lightheadedness usually pass. If it persists, do less than four breaths and speed up the exercise, but keep the 4-7-8 counts.

Some people position the tip of your tongue against the ridge just behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there while doing this exercise.

Use the relaxing breath to help you relax, go to sleep, or when you are aware of tension or stress.

BRAIN BODY TOOL #3: EMOTIONAL FREEDOM TECHNIQUE (EFT)

How it helps: In a short time, you can:

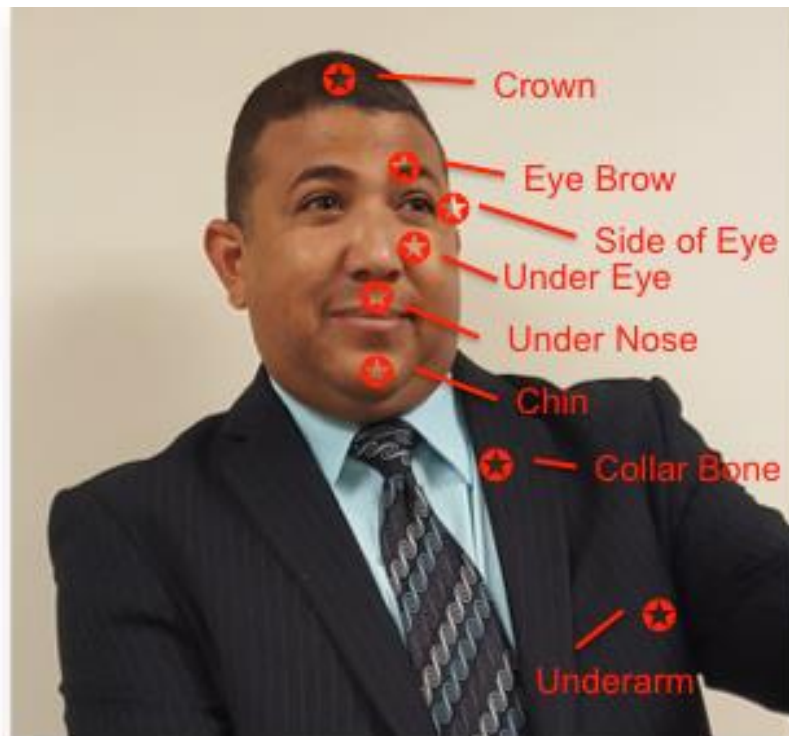
- Release strong emotions like anger, sadness, fear, guilt, or regret and feel calmer.
- Identify and release physical sensations such as tightness in the chest, a lump in the throat, a knot in the stomach, and physical pain from injuries or stress.
- Identify and examine your thoughts and the meaning you have given to events, which helps you make better decisions.



If you've never heard of EFT, it may initially feel strange to you. Once you experience the results, however, you'll be amazed that you have such a powerfully effective and fast-acting tool literally in your own fingertips. You can use it personally, and there are ways to safely use it in groups. Even children can use EFT on themselves.

EFT involves tapping on acupoints with two fingers. It is sometime called a needleless form of acupuncture. You usually tap on yourself, so you don't need to worry that anyone else is putting something into your body, mind or spirit.

The easiest variation of EFT is to just tap with two fingers on the points shown below on the picture when you're feeling strong emotions, jumbled thoughts or have physical pain or tension. You can use either hand and tap on either side of your body. You can tap the points in any order. Pause every once in a while to take a deep breath. Here are the points:



You can also tap on the points while saying (out loud if possible, silently if it isn't) what is bothering you.

For more complete instructions and research outcomes, you can download a free manual (in 24 different languages) here:

<http://www.eftuniverse.com/navigation/eft-manuals>

BRAIN BODY TOOL #4: FIND SOCIAL SUPPORT

How it helps: it reduces feelings of isolation that are common in trauma, which calms our brain/body by giving us a feeling of safety.

We turn toward home and loved ones in times of trouble, even if home isn't perfect. In the safety of each other, our bodies calm and muscles relax.

Social support is not only about being around other people, but truly being heard and seen by the people around you. Over time, look for people to support you if you don't find it at home.

It's best to have social support from people who are with you. That's not always possible in every area, so look for support and information from reputable sites on-line to fill in gaps. A good source of support if you think you may have Post Traumatic Stress is <http://www.HealMyPTSD.com>.



There are dozens of ways to calm the Brain/Body

Knowing multiple ways to release trauma and stress is empowering. The Capacitar organization is a resource for learning a variety of such tools:

<http://www.capacitar.org/>

Wishing you well!