Stuck in Survival

Somatic Experiments Towards Embodied Safeness

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Overview

- Inspiration:
  - Neuroception of Danger & Life Threat: Animal Survival Responses
  - Videos
  - Case presentation

- Educational tools:
  - Traumatic Stress and the Nervous System
  - Window of Arousal

- A gentle path forward:
  - Polyvagal Theory and Therapeutic Presence

- Skills:
  - Self-regulation tools
Neuroception of Danger & Life Threat: Animal Defenses

- Ventral vagal brake disengages
- HPA axis activates
- Limbic on, PFC off
- Dissociated states in service of survival
- Endogenous cannabinoids

Endogenous opioids (endorphins)

Adapted from Pat Ogden
Playing Opossum: Inescapable Threat
"Discharging" survival activation
Stuck in Survival: Possible DSM Diagnoses

Diagnoses of Coping:
- Substance use
- Disordered eating
- Gambling & other behavioral addictions

Conduct Disorder
Oppositional Defiant Disorder
Intermittent Explosive Disorder

Freeze

Panic Disorder
Flight
Rage

Panic

Borderline PD
Attachment Cry
Fright

Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Bipolar
ADD/ADHD
Dissociative Disorders
Personality Disorders
Schizophrenia

Shame, Despair
Feign Death
Endogenous opioids (endorphins)
Depression

Endogenous opioids (endorphins)
Case presentation 1: Carolyn
Traumatic Stress & The Nervous System

Traumatic Event

Stuck on “ON”
Hyper Arousal

- Hyper vigilance
- Hypersensitive
- Avoidance
- Intrusive thoughts
- Re-experiencing
- Re-enacting

TRIGGER

- Anxiety
- Panic
- Fear
- Rage
- Terror

Stuck on “OFF”
Hypo Arousal

- Hyposensitive
- Numb
- Shut down
- No energy
- Hopelessness

- Futility
- Impotence
- Shame
- Despair
- Defeat

activate
settle
activate
settle

Parasympathetic
Sympathetic
Dorsal Vagal
Ventral Vagal
Window of Arousal (Window of Tolerance)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hyper Arousal (Fight-Flight-Freeze)</th>
<th>Optimal Energy</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hyper vigilance, hypersensitive, avoidance, intrusive thoughts, re-experiencing, re-enacting, anxiety, panic, fear, rage, terror</td>
<td>Safe</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fidgeting, anxiety, irritation, frustration, impatience, impulsivity, jumbled/looping thoughts, defensive, feeling attacked</td>
<td>Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety in connection in action</td>
<td>Engaged</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Can think and feel simultaneously w/o overwhelm</td>
<td>• Capacity for self-reflection &amp; perspective-taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Capacity for patience, empathy &amp; compassion</td>
<td>• Capacity for connection to self and others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Curiosity, wonder, imagination, awe</td>
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Adapted from Dan Siegel
How Does Therapeutic Present Promote Safety and Therapy Effectiveness?

Therapist Attunement to Self

Therapist Attunement to Client

Client feeling felt, calming, becoming present within (safety)

• Client feeling safe and open to engage in therapeutic work
  • Strengthening of therapeutic relationship
• Therapist responses and interventions attuned to the optimal moment for client to receive

Note: Repeated engagement and presence from therapist also exercises neural regulation of the muscles involved in the client’s experience of safety in self and in relationship.
Somatic techniques for self-regulation

- Proximity, placement of self and furniture
- Grounding through the spine
- Breathing techniques:
  - Yogic three-part breathing
  - Brahmari (Kuppusamy, 2020)
  - Nadi shodana (Telles, Sharma, & Balkrishna, 2014)
  - 4-7-8 breathing (Dr Andrew Weil)
  - Box breathing 4-4-4 x 4 times
  - Long exhale 4-8
- Releasing with sound:
  - Humming (Weitzberg & Lundberg, 2002)
  - Singing (Olsson, von Schéele & Theorell, 2013)
- Eyes: passive & active tension release, orienting
- Jaw: chewing gum, tacky foods, hard crunchy foods
- Hands: fidget toys, stuffies, certain fabrics, crafting, adult thumb suckling
Somatic techniques for self-regulation

- Pressure: weighted blankets, sandbags, compression clothing
- Rhythmic movements
  - Rocking chair, swings, bouncy balls
- Vestibular system
  - Slowly lift alternate heel
- Bilateral movement
  - Arm scissoring
  - Cross body tapping
  - Cross body marching
  - Cross body reaching
- Pushing
  - Against a wall
  - Opposite hand into opposite thigh with counterforce
- Stretching and lengthening the side body
- Legs up the wall/on a chair/over a pillow
Sympathetic mobilization: Working with the Fright response

- Neck stiffens, tightening in the jaw, ears perk, eyes tighten, orient towards (fight), orient away (flight), show no response (immobilization response)
- Reach hands into the air + wave them around (releases the diaphragm)
- Fright breath in + any sound on the exhale
- Embodied sounding
- Pull on the ears in all directions while releasing the jaw
- Eye rolling (active stretch of ocular nerve) + orienting
Techniques for Co-regulation

- Self-holding + imagining
  - Hands
  - Thumbs
  - One hand on heart, one hand on belly
  - Hands on heart
  - Face
  - Head
  - One hand on face, one hand/arm on torso
References


