

Phone Interview Transcript

[Susan Pitler](#), Somatic Experiencing Therapist

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Susan:

Do you want to? Do you want to ask specific questions? You want me to just talk in general and see where we end up?

Me:

I really don't have a full picture of the relationship between emotional and physical sensations specifically, right? So where in the body, does emotional dysregulation show up? Where do you focus when you as a therapist are treating people physically? What is going on when someone is emotionally or physically dysregulated? What's the anatomy behind it? Where do senses fit into treating anxiety or stress?

Susan:

Okay, okay. I've given lectures on this. So perfect, just let me give a lecture.

Me:

Give me the lecture!

Susan:

So when I first start to explain this to anybody who really doesn't have a clear idea of what I do, or what we do you know, what Somatic Experiencing is about.

So it was developed by Peter Levine. Okay. He has a lot of books out there. An Unspoken Voice is one of them, Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma...anyway. So he decided, after having his own experience in a

terrible car accident, was that he wanted to study, he wanted to know, why animals like a gazelle can be chased down by a cougar and then go back to eating, you know, and go, yeah, we're fine.

So he started looking at animals in the wild. And he wanted to know why, how, why their nervous systems could be regulated so quickly, and why people seem to have such a hard time. And what he learned was, there's certain physiological responses that happen that animals do normally that we don't necessarily allow in our bodies.

If you're chased by something, you've got cortisol, and adrenaline, and all a bunch of hormones racing through your body, and I'll second, but those need to be discharged. Animals shake and some do this huffing which expels the trapped energy,

So I explain the human response to stress like this. There's, there's two rods, and one rod is the sympathetic nervous system. So our autonomic nervous system is made up of the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system, the sympathetic nervous system, I'm just going to give you the basic blocks to sort of understand it. But the autonomic nervous system is the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system together. Okay?

This is not anything we can control. Our nervous system, it just does its own thing. There's no way we can control it.

In terms of how it works, so basically, the sympathetic nervous system is about activity. The parasympathetic is about rest and restoration.

So ideally, you just start at the beginning of the day, you open your eyes, your activation level will start to go up as you open your eyes

and you stretch and you start being awake. You start moving around and your activation level rises up. So your sympathetic nervous system. Yes, exactly. So if you can just see it, like a temperature rising, and it's like you get more and more activated as you make breakfast and you talk to people.

And in a normal day, you have what's called a window of tolerance. You have activation levels that are within your experience as being normal. So you might go to school and find out that you didn't do as well on a test and feel that your activation level drops.

You may find out Oh no, the professor didn't grade it right. And now your activation level goes up.

And you may feel like it's kind of a bad day or kind of a good day, but not out of the basic normality, and that's called the window of tolerance. Okay?

So when you say activation levels drop because you're sad or because you're angry.

So say something happens like you get into the Graduate School of your dreams.

You are actually in a little bit of a hyper arousal that's a more activated state. You're still really happy and safe. That's where excitement comes in.

So if you're going to put brackets around this, the lower half of the or the lower part of the sympathetic nervous system rod, to say this is all safe. Just above excitement, a little more activation and you get agitation — agitation irritability.

This begins the unsafe section of the sympathetic nervous system. It's when we don't feel safe. Little kids will do this, they'll go to like you know, a fun house or some you know, some carnival. And they'll be really excited but then when it gets to be a little bit too much, a little too much stimulation. Maybe they get scared, maybe they get hungry. They start to get agitated, irritable. That means Yeah, it's overload.

Anger, lashing out. It can be some mania, just way over the top. Too much stimulation that feels all unsafe.

Me:

Okay, what do you mean by unsafe like unsafe for the person? Like it feels fundamentally uncomfortable for them?

Susan:

It is a state of hyperarousal. There's a threat of some sort, either internally or externally. And it feels out of control. It feels uncomfortable and people don't like it. They don't like this feeling.

Okay, got it? Now I'm going to give you the ability to set this up so you can see how it all fits together.

Now let's draw a line for the parasympathetic nervous system. It's a rod that is parallel to the sympathetic nervous system.

So the parasympathetic works as a brake to the sympathetic. You've had a good day, you've had some excitement. But as it gets to be a little bit later in the day, you start to wind down a little bit, the parasympathetic nervous system is leaning in and going, Okay, all right, like let's settle down.

It says, we've done a lot for today. We can just kind of lower that activity, that activation level, and, you know, get you into a little more sleeping into rest and restoration.

So the perfect regulated system would be I wake up in the morning, I have the right amount of activation. And then as the sun's going down, my parasympathetic comes in, sort of slows down the activation to a point where I'm sleepy, and then I go into rest. My body is able to restore in deep sleep. And then I'm ready to start all over again with that with the activation in the morning. That's how it's supposed to work.

So you have rest and restoration which is comforting, it's relaxing. It's where we find our bliss. It's safe. It's totally safe. Your mind is a little bit attentive, but your whole body is completely relaxed and safe. There's not not a single thing that's going to come into your environment, either through your brain internally or externally, that's gonna threaten you in any way.

Then below, rest and restoration is getting into a little bit unsafe territory. The first thing is dissociation. When you're dissociating, you're restful, but you kind of go out of it a little bit. You're going I don't feel like I'm really my body. Like this is all happening but I'm not kind of a part of it.

Dissociation is connected with the survival response of freeze. Anger agitation, irritability mania. that's connected to fight/flight.

Below disassociation is you know, you go into a coma and basically what that is what's called a dorsal dive. People can get catatonic, where they can't move.

So now I'll give you an example of how we evolved and how it works in today's world.

So our brains are really complicated. But for us, we're gonna just concentrate on the base of the skull, which is called the amygdala. The amygdala is all about survival. It controls heart rate, and breathing.

It's not usually on when there's a threat. If you're just going along, and normal activation, it's not activated.

But then there is in, in the middle of the brain is the limbic system. Now, the amygdala was the first part of the brain that was ever that ever started to form. And it is fight flight. It's often called the reptilian part of the brain.

Then came along, mammals. And mammals' brains changed. Because they needed to be able to connect with one another to survive.

You know, if you're a rabbit by yourself, you pretty much died. But if you get together with other rabbits, they will survive. Animals and people started to have relationships. So the limbic system is about emotions. It's also where a certain kind of memory process takes place.

I'll explain that in a second. Just make that as a note, okay.

Now, modern day people have another part of the brain, which is in the front. It's called the prefrontal cortex. It is all of your executive

functioning — planning, classifying, counting, sequential thinking, rational thought. Organization. Everything you need for being in school, and to work in and be in today's society. Thinking, planning ahead, you know all that stuff. That was the last part of the brain to be developed.

So do you have any questions so far?

Me:

No, this is amazing.

Susan:

Good. Yeah, it's really far there.

Me:

Actually, I do have one question. In terms of sensory input, or like, what is in our brain that interprets sensory input? Is there one of these places kind of where that information goes? Are these three like emotional processing, but not sensory processing?

Susan:

That's a really good question. Let me just, I think it would be too simple to, I think it would, I think I need to explain it in a different way. And I think it will answer your question.

So you belong to a tribe, and you are in the grasslands, and you're hanging out, you're trying to walk in, and you're looking at, you know, wild flowers or whatever is coming up.

Your amygdala is picking up all kinds of sensory information. So I guess I would say that that's where all your sensory information goes first.

It's using your smell, it's using your site, it's using your, just the vibration in the air. That part of you that knows before you know? Before you even realize it, your Amygdala was going there's something wrong in my environment, there's something it's always looking for something new or novel.

Anything that is ordinary will, they'll let it slide, they'll go, I've seen it before. That's nothing. Anything new or novel will catch its attention. So, it may be a tiny little sound, it may be a smell. Your brain goes, there's something new or novel — you can't even fathom how fast this happens — immediately your body starts to act as though you are under a threat.

You're still walking, you're still sitting and looking at a flower but you're not it is changing and what's happening is that your heart rate starts to go up. Because it needs to pump more blood to your limbs to fight or run. Your breathing gets a little shallower, short, high, shallow breaths to get more oxygen in quickly.

New, your eyes start to dilate, so that you literally take in more vision, more your vision, your field of vision, and larger. So you can see all kinds of things, shadows, all kinds of things.

Your hearing ability changes. You no longer can hear high sounds, because those are generally not threatening birds. So your ears change, and you're able to pick up low sounds.

So all this stuff is happening. Cortisol, adrenaline hormones, flooding your body. This is when your thinking brain starts to notice what's happening and you start to look around. As your thinking brain is

going to something happening and you look and you see the saber toothed Tiger crouching.

All of our great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandfathers and grandmothers. As soon as they recognized the danger, they ran as fast as they could. And that's the best, most reliable way of surviving an attack.

Okay, so say, you're running as fast you possibly can. And you kind of look back, and you go, Oh, crap, the saber toothed tiger's coming at you. And it's gonna be it's gonna come up on you. Your amygdala realizes you need to fight. Yeah. So you stop, you turn around, you look for a weapon, you may find a great big stick.

You start like throwing rocks or thrashing the stick around. A lot of times an animal might go, I'm not going to do that. And it will run. So those are the two best things: fight and flight to ensure our survival.

Now, when that happens, the other two things that happen in your body. When you're in fight or flight mode from your amygdala, your neocortex goes completely offline. It is no longer in use. Your digestion goes completely offline. Your body wants to conserve every single ounce of anything it has for survival.

Okay, so those two things happening, alright. So that was how we normally survive. Now, say you put up the stick, and the animal doesn't care. You're there, you can't run and you can't fight. The only thing left to you is to collapse in a freeze if this comes up.

When you are overwhelmed, and you can't run away — this is applicable to today's society, and how we respond. So just remember that when you can't run, or, or fight, you go into a freeze. And that is

numbing. That is a dissociation. You leave your body. It is to protect you from the shock of being eaten.

[Transcript Ended]