
Managing the Physiological and Emotional Effects of Trauma

This document aims to give you some idea about how the body reacts to trauma and what can go wrong in our recovery from trauma plus some tips about how to help yourself to find ways of managing anxiety.

When we experience trauma our whole nervous system is challenged to cope with the terror and threat to our psychological and physical being. Most people have heard of the fight, flight or freeze response to a real or perceived threat to our person, which means that when something feels terrifying to us, our body will run, fight or, generally in the case of rape and sexual abuse, freeze. This is an automatic response to provide us with some protection against the person/situation which we feel so terrified about. We will not be thinking logically at this point, our body takes over and *directs us to do whatever we need to do in order to survive. This supersedes conscious suppression or social conditioning.*

The autonomic nervous system has two systems, the **sympathetic** and the **parasympathetic**. The sympathetic nervous system is the part of us which responds to stress and the parasympathetic nervous system enables us to relax.

When a woman is experiencing rape or sexual abuse her sympathetic nervous system is activated to allow a rapid reaction to the threat. It releases hormones such as adrenalin and noradrenalin into the blood. Adrenalin speeds up the heart beat, dilating the air passages in the lungs, decreasing movement of the stomach wall and mobilizing glucose in the liver. This means that both nutrients and oxygen are made more readily available for the organs that matter most for this type of response - the brain, the skeletal muscles and the heart, thereby increasing the probabilities of survival.

When the danger appears to be resolved, the parasympathetic nervous system takes over and counterbalances the effects of the sympathetic autonomic nervous system enabling the body to return to a more relaxed state. Where it goes wrong is when the threat is continuous, or the trauma is so great that the body does not manage to go back into a more relaxed state.

Imagine being in a car and you think you are being chased, so you put your foot on the accelerator in order to get away. When you want to slow down you would put your foot on the brake and the car could come back to a more normal speed. If the brake is broken then the car will feel out of control. This is something of how the body feels when it has experienced chronic stress. The accelerator is pressed and there is no way of slowing down. So, how can you begin to slow yourself down?

- Breathe right into your stomach, long deep breaths in and out
- Focus on something outside of yourself - make yourself scan the room and notice your surroundings
- Talk to somebody about what you are feeling
- Walk around the room
- Think about a safe place you can be in or have in mind a safe place which you can call to mind when you begin feeling anxious
- Tense your muscles, feel the power of your muscles in your arms and legs

However, it is really important to find ways of managing your stress before it gets to this point. Remember that anxiety is a natural emotional response to day to day issues. Noticing your anxiety as soon as it begins to twinge and then looking after yourself before it increases is really important.