

TRAUMA, TENSION & NERVOUS SYSTEM REGULATION

BY FAITH CANTER

Trauma, Tension & Nervous System Regulation

The trauma industry has become a big thing now. So many people (me included) offering up words of 'wisdom' on trauma, the nervous system and where many health ailments come from or at the very least fuelled by.

The thing is, although this seems like quite a new thing, it's not! There are many people all over the World who have been working in this field for decades.

I used to believe that I (despite childhood abuse) didn't suffer from trauma. I was wrong of course! Everyone alive is carrying some sort of trauma. For some it clearly manifests in them in continued abusive behaviours (towards themselves and/or others), but for many of us it's a little more subtle. It can show up as outbursts, trust issues, memory loss, body pain, inflammation, chronic fatigue syndrome and other physical health concerns or through fears, anxieties, and depression. We don't get to choose how it manifests, or how/when it is released. But we can keep choosing us! Choosing to put our health and happiness first and not at the back of a very long queue of 'things to do'.

Because, when we feel safe and ready to explore what trauma and a dysregulated nervous system is doing to us and the possibility of moving through this, a lot of other positive things can change. Health ailments we had no idea that were connected can disappear, our weight regulates, our skin clears up &/or we feel happier and safer than we have most of our lives and things that used to bother us don't anymore.

This is not a quick fix, quick fixes don't work, not with this sort of 'work' anyway. We/our body/nervous system needs to feel safe first and this alone may take some time.

Trauma work that makes us feel afraid, unsettled, pushed, in an adrenal surge of some sort it not helping our nervous system and may in fact be re-traumatising it (despite what some 'experts' tell us).

How We Become Dysregulated

Many of us believe that trauma itself creates all our problems, when that's just the last straw. How we behave in the World, how safe we feel, how healthy we are, all mostly stem from how regulated our nervous system is. And this comes from how regulated our first caregivers in life were because we learn how to regulate ourselves based on this connection. So, if our first caregivers were dysregulated people, they will teach us to be dysregulated too. Not only this, but we will then seek out and continue to have relationships with people with similarly dysregulated nervous systems as we grow, because they feel normal too us.

If we were taught to regulate our nervous system in a healthy way at a young age if we then suffer trauma, it is much easier for us to heal from this trauma. However, if we learn to be dysregulated from a young age and then suffer the same trauma, we are much more likely to struggle to heal from this and instead become further dysregulated.

So, although our body stores trauma and thus tension from events that have happened to us as we grow, the depth and severity of these is very dependant on how regulated we were as a child and continue to be as we grow.

The good news is that even if you learnt to have a dysregulated nervous system from a young age and have also suffered trauma(s) you can still become regulated again and release the stored trauma and tension.

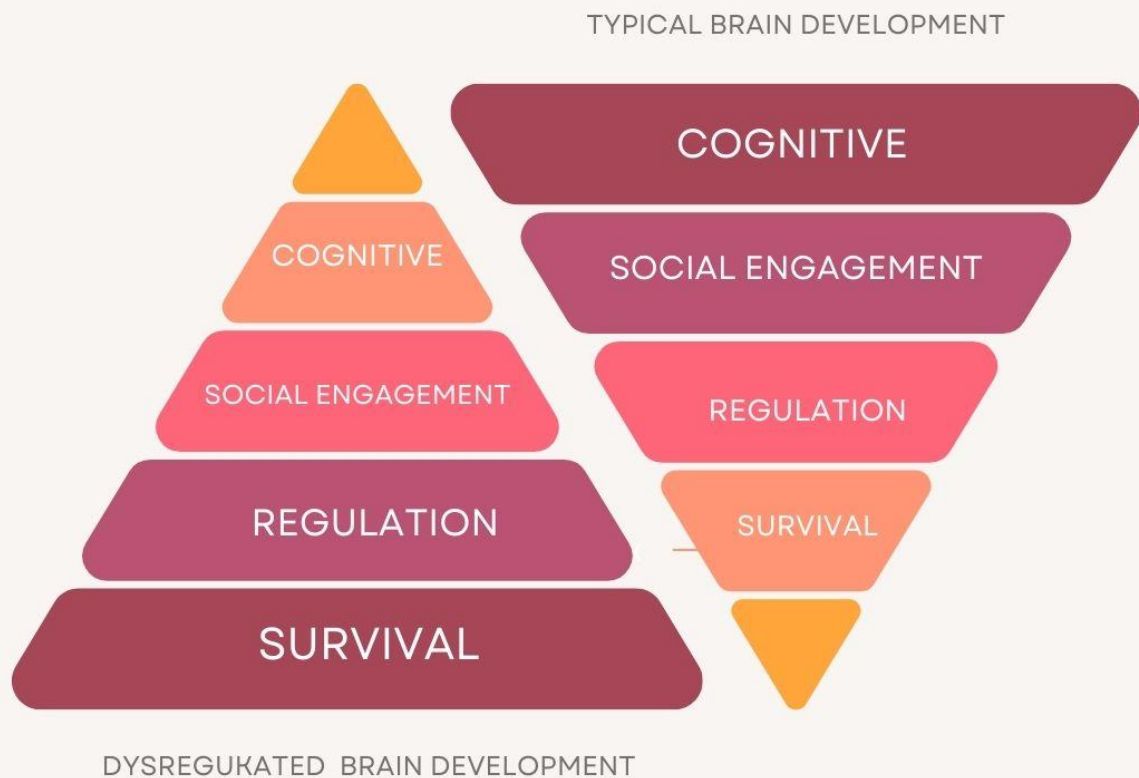
According to Polyvagal Theory there are three states that our autonomic nervous system moves between, and sometimes these overlap too. Ventral – Life is manageable, hopeful and connected (a state of health and well-being). Sympathetic – Brings energy, survival instincts, anger and anxiety (when in this state in a healthy way this regulates heart, breath and energy). Dorsal – Can led to shut-down, disconnection, disappearing and collapse (regulating digestion and moving nutrients around when in this state in a healthy way).

The idea is we do not get stuck in any of these states, even ventral, but that we move between them, always using what we need from each state in a healthy way as and when the body needs this. Even in a traumatic situation we would want to access the survival strategies available to us from each state, but then to move out of these easily once the trauma/stress has passed.

It's important to remember this as many treatments/therapies seem to be based on trying to always maintain the ventral state, when this is unlikely, unnecessary and unnatural too.

So, we aim for movement through states and not become stuck in anyone.

Nervous System Dysregulation & TRAUMA EFFECTS ON DEVELOPMENT



The above image explains what happens in a developing brain when someone's nervous system has become very dysregulated from an early age and/or they have suffered some sort of trauma(s) early on. Please note: this is based on the work of any unknown author on Telegram – if anyone knows this author please let me know so I can credit them!

The Body Can't Heal If It Feels Unsafe

For years I did, studied and taught Holotropic Breathwork and some similar modalities and believed (as I had been taught) that this was helping to release trauma. I now believe this is not the case for most people. I believe this style of 'trauma release' can be very scary and intense and does not allow the person doing it to release at a rate that feels safe for them. This is also why I personally do not believe cold plunges etc are helpful for the nervous system. I believe they have some other health benefits, but they are a shock to the body, the body/nervous system cannot heal when in a state of shock, the opposite in fact, it goes into a place of fight, flight or freeze which is fuel for continued dysregulation of our nervous system.

The key to trauma and tension release and a regulated nervous system is safety. You need to feel safe where you are, with whoever you are with and whatever you are doing. The techniques are up to you and different things work for different people, because different things (based on our past) make us feel safe or unsafe.

So, if you are feeling called to do this 'work' then follow what feels right to you, because if you feel unsure, unsafe and unheard then whatever you are about to embark on is probably not going to be very healing for you. It might be that cold plunges don't stress you and thus don't spike your adrenals and if that's the case then fantastic... jump right in :0)

Body As Compass

It might be that a friend found a certain therapist or treatment worked wonders for them, but when you try it, you feel terrible and are told to 'push on through' / 'just keep trying' / 'it works for everyone else' and such like. Please listen to yourself, let your body be your compass, it won't work if you continue not to listen to your body like all your previous years of not listening.

Our body is speaking to us all the time, trying to get us to understand what we are doing is not helping us. We think the headache is a symptom of something else going on, but really most of the time it's the body just wanting us to stop overthinking. We think the pain is also a symptom of something else, when really it's often the body saying, enough is enough, you will stop doing this now! Many physical health ailments are really the body trying to tell us to make a change, but we have been taught to think it's something else that needs a pill, potion or lotion to 'fix' it.

When we let the body be our compass, we not only start to listen to its guidance, but this is also the foundation for nervous system regulation and thus then any kind of trauma release later down the line too.

If you are asked to an event and your body gets tense, inflamed, painful, exhausted just at the thought of it then ask yourself, is this really for me? How can I make this event feel safer? Maybe not go, or maybe only to part of it, on the outskirts or with someone that makes me feel safe? You can't bully your nervous system back into regulation, this comes from listening to your body and adjusting what you are doing accordingly.

A technique and also a way of life that I have found incredibly nourishing, reconnecting and regulating is Focusing. It's a gentle way to start listening and communicating with parts of our body that we have maybe ignored and blamed for a long time. As a 1-2-1 therapy it helps heal the wounds we have created within our body and as a way of life it reduces our triggers and helps us to have a better relationship with our body, life and others.

Your body is not against you!

I know it can often feel this way, but it's always trying to protect you, to make you feel safe or to move you away from what is not safe. Your body is always trying to communicate with you. We've just lost the ability to listen to its words.

So, instead of thinking 'oh know I have something else wrong with me', how about we ask, 'what's my body trying to help me with now'?

Body pain and brain-fog are often ways the body has learnt to protect us from over thinking, anxiety, depression etc. Weight gain and skin conditions are often the bodies way of putting a protective 'layer' around us. What could your symptoms be really telling you about what's going on in or around you? Could your body be trying to protect you from yourself or something else?

Often, we blame our body for looking after us. So, could you ask... How could this possibly be helping me, not hindering me right now? And stop blaming our body for knowing what's best for us.

The Tendency to Run Away

There is a tendency, because we don't want to feel worse, to run away from things that can or could cause us mental or physical pain. And sometimes this is the right thing to do, especially if everything in our body suggests this. However, to eventually build resilience in our system we would want to allow for a little extra stimulation that feels safe. So, we are not 'pushing on through', but we are in fact asking, what feels safe or safer? Can I still attend this event, but more on my own terms? There may be a little tension there, but not a lot and this in turn would help to build resilience in our nervous system, meaning that as and when there are stressors in our life it stops sending us over the edge and instead, we can move between dysregulation and regulation normally once more and not be stuck in a dysregulated place.

This is called pendulation. Where we learn to move little by little into the uncomfortable states we've been avoiding and quickly out again to build resilience to be able to deal with life's stressors in a healthier way.

Foundations For Healing

As I mentioned before, the most important part of trauma, tension and nervous system regulation is safety. This can be, feeling safe where you are, safe with your therapist/coach/Doctor and/or safe with yourself. And this can and should be allowed to change. Just because you felt safe the first time, does not mean you will the next time. So, keep coming back to the question 'how can I feel safer?'. Maybe that's to walk away from the session, ask for clarity or maybe that's as simple as changing positions, volume or even clothing. Do what feels right for you to feel as safe as you can in that moment.

The next part is to really start listening to your body. Let your body decide if this is safe or not and don't push through.

Listening to the body also means listening to its needs. We are taught at such a young age not to do this, to only go to the toilet in lunch breaks or eat and drink at certain times too. This causes disconnection and dysregulation as we start to listen to others over our own body. So, a simple thing we can do to promote connection and regulation again is to go to the toilet when needed (not after the list of other things we 'must' finish first) and to eat and drink when needed. Your nervous system will slowly start to notice you are listening to its whispers again and stop putting up SOS flares instead.

Disconnection to Connection

Everything we are doing when regulating our nervous system is creating a better connection to self, others and life. When we are in a very dysregulated place, we are very disconnected from ourselves and life. We are shut down, are in protection mode and have many walls and barriers up as a way of not getting mentally and physically hurt again. We are no longer listening to most of our body's whispers, we constantly think there is something wrong with us/our body and we often feel very alone, isolated and lost. This is because our dysregulation has taught us to stop listening and connecting as a means of protecting us from whatever was/has been traumatising us.

As I mentioned before, simply going to the toilet and eating and drinking when needed starts to build connection again. As do simple things like connecting with nature. For many years now I have raved about the many benefits of grounding (getting your skin in contact with the earth) for overall health, the thing is it's doesn't just have huge physical benefits, but in fact is incredibly regulating for our nervous system too. We humans are not meant to be so disconnected from nature, we are nature and as such our connection to it keeps us happy and healthy human beings. Constant or long-term disconnection from it makes us unwell and dysregulated because it goes against our true nature. Being in nature in any way possible as often as possible allows us to feel connected to something bigger than us, allows us to regulate and to feel stronger again. It's like a power-bank for health and happiness.

Nervous System Soothing Techniques

There are a few things we can do to sooth and regulate our nervous system. Just like everything else I have already talked about, do the things that feel safe and soothing for you. You don't have to do them all and what works for you might not for another but give them a go and see which one's resonate with you.

These techniques can be used whenever you notice you are not feeling regulated are more triggered than normal, before bed (when waking in the night) and before food, so that you are in a more regulated place to make the most of the rest, nourishment and nutrients. Here's a video of some Nervous System Soothing/Regulating techniques:

<https://youtu.be/HpmjrQNWFP4>

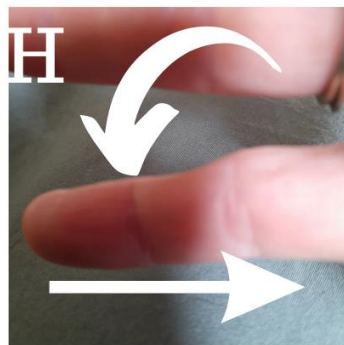
And, a reminder of them is below...

Most of the techniques discussed below and in my video are helpful because they work with the vagus nerve to sooth your nervous system. However, anything you do that feels soothing to you is helpful for regulating your nervous system.

I HIGHLY recommend you write a list of things you find soothing and refer to this list whenever you feel in need. As an example, mine would include things like, getting my

skin in contact with the earth, listening to the birds singing, watching my chickens and geese, making time for drinking a cup of tea sitting down and whilst it's still hot, getting down on the ground and looking at the mini forests, being in or near a river, stroking my dogs or a combination of a few of these. You will see it does not have to be some fancy-ass trauma and tension technique to help regulate your nervous system, it can be anything you personally feel is soothing and/or grounding for you.

Regulating Points



A – Gently move the skin in the indent at the top of the ear (don't push hard) around in circles in both ears, either at the same time or in turn. Wait for some sort of release (this could be a yawn, laugh, tear, shudder, sigh or something else).

B – Gently move the skin around the opening to the ear canal (don't push hard) around in circles in both ears, either at the same time or in turn. Wait for some sort of release (this could be a yawn, laugh, tear, shudder, sigh or something else).

C – Gently pull the ear down (don't pull hard), either at the same time or in turn.

D – Gently pull the ear back (don't pull hard), either at the same time or in turn.

E – Gently pull the ear up (don't pull hard), either at the same time or in turn.

F – Gently pull the skin behind the ear down (don't pull hard), either at the same time or in turn.

G – Gently push the skin behind the ear up (don't push hard), either at the same time or in turn.

H – Massage along the inside of the little fingers.

I – Cup hands behind head and bring elbows back to level with head, then move eyes all the way to one side and wait for a release. Then repeat on the other side. Don't force this, if it's painful just do the parts you can without pain.

I'd like to say here that practices like Emotional Freedom Technique/Tapping, meditation, breathing etc are all helpful for regulating the nervous system too, as long as they are completed from a place of nourishment, safety and ease. Anything we do in a place of push, perfectionism and people pleasing (for instance) won't be regulating for the nervous system. You know what feels best for your nervous system if you slow down enough to feel it. For me making time to sit and drink my tea when it's still hot really helps me regulate, it's such a small thing to allow myself this time and enjoyment, but it makes such a huge difference. Getting as much skin in contact with the earth as possible and just listening to nature also helps me regulate, a lot!

Load noises, places, people etc will often dysregulate us, as can strong smells, lights and too many sensations going on at once. Do what feels regulating for you, when and where you find it the easiest to do.

Being Sensitive

Many people these days believe there is something wrong with them (or are told by others there is something wrong with them) because they are so sensitive. Or the other way around, they believe there is something special / out of the ordinary about themselves because they are sensitive or an empath.

I believe we are all meant to be sensitive. I believe that's how we survived for so long living on and from the land. I feel that we needed to be very sensitive beings to know what to hunt and forage for and when, to know what the weather would be doing so to know what to focus on next for the health and strength of our tribe/family. We needed to be able to listen to each other, nature, animals, predators and react accordingly for survival. This was just part of who we were and how we lived connected to nature.

I believe that as we started to live in houses and then towns and cities and then started numbing ourselves with drink, drugs and things like coffee and sugar that many people slowly lost or hid this sensitivity.

However, it's part of what makes us human and not something wrong or special with us and should be embraced. To push a part of our humanness away is to continue to remain dysregulated and disconnected from self, others and life.

To be able to feel your body and nature is a great gift. Sometimes that means you feel the not so nice things too, but we can't have one without the other and there are plenty of beautiful connections to be made in the world if you embrace your sensitivities to it.

Diet & Dysregulation

I wanted to add in a bit about diet and how this effects feelings of safety, anxiety and dysregulation. A dysregulated nervous system can have a huge impact on the health of our digestive system, but also what we are putting into (and onto) our body has a huge impact on how easy it is for us to regulate our nervous system, everything is so interlinked and does not just work one way around.

Foods that make it tricky to regulate our nervous system are foods that spike our blood sugars and/or foods that are hard for us to digest.

It will be much harder to regulate your nervous system if you are regularly consuming...

Caffeine, chocolate, cacao, processed sugars, a diet high in white carbohydrates (like potato, rice, flour) and a lot of high sugar fruits (like banana, mango, papaya, pineapple etc). A little of any of these is usually fine, but if your diet is rich in these foods and drinks, you'll struggle with maintaining regulation.

It's also harder to regulate your nervous system if you are fasting a lot. The body thinks it's starving and goes into protection mode and thus it's harder to be regulated when it's in this place.

Once Regulated

Once we are finding it easier to regulate our nervous system we can work on building resilience within the nervous system. Resilience means we can deal with life's stressors, without becoming ill, exhausted or stuck in a dysregulated place again. We do this (as I mentioned before) by slowly moving in and out of safety and a little unsafety (just minor changes at this stage). We pendulate between these places, never staying in a place of feeling unsafe for very long, just long enough to get a taste of it, but not lost in the story of why we feel unsafe. We only do this when we feel ready and not when anyone else tells us we should be ready.

As we practice this our nervous system learns it's OK to be here and nothing bad will happen and it begins to feel more at ease with the World we are in and our body stops being on high alert all the time. At this point we find we can function much easier, happier and healthier in this crazy-old-World we live in.

Another thing that is helpful at this stage is to allow the body to have experiences that contradict the helpless feelings of trauma. By this I mean allowing your body to say no, stop, run away or even fight back. To 'play' out these more empowering physical experiences that maybe you could not or didn't do when you were traumatised. This practice is best completed with a therapist of your choosing but can be very helpful in completing events that are left incomplete from the past.

Trauma interferes with part of the brain that makes us feel alive and instead makes us hypervigilant. So, by practicing things like pendulation and contradicting the feeling of helplessness we allow our nervous system to understand it no longer needs to protect us in such a hypervigilant way and we can start to feel alive again.

Trauma & Tension Release

Often just regulating the nervous system alone we will find many health concerns (and some trauma) simply disappear and if not, completely then many will be reduced in severity and frequency. Sometimes though there is a little more 'work' to be done with releasing trauma, which is often creating tension in the body.

There are many trauma releasing exercises out there that, again do what feels right to you when you feel safest. If you push to release or don't feel safe in the place or with the people you are with you can retraumatise yourself instead of release.

I experimented with and trained in many modalities that claim to release trauma and tension. What I will say though is that if you don't feel safe and ready it will likely not work.

The practices I use mostly these days for releasing trauma and tension are Focusing and TRE – Trauma/Tension Release Exercises. These exercises have helped me far more than any other practices I have tried (but remember what works for one may not work for another). For me, with sexual abuse in my past I have found that shaking from the hips outwards that happens during TRE helpful for releasing a lot of stored pain. When I first started doing it though I did not think it worked, I was frustrated and in more pain. My body clearly was not ready and did not feel safe. My teacher asked me to take it slowly and eventually things started to happen. I share this so you can see these things take time, a feeling of safety and the space to unfold.

Something else that I have found very helpful for trauma/tension release is Cranial Sacral Therapy, especially working within the area of the mouth. For people who have suffered sexual abuse, sometimes the pelvic area is too scary, too much and too traumatised to even think about working there. But the mouth and the genitals are very closely related and when we work on one, we often work on the other. I share this in case your trauma feels too big and scary, there is almost always another softer, easier and less intense way to work with it.

I won't be sharing here any trauma/tension releasing exercises here as I do believe, at least for the first few times that these should be performed with an experienced practitioner. You should not feel pressured, you should feel safe, and you should stop if ever things feel too big or scary.

One last note; Plant medicines claim to be very helpful for trauma and tension, however this could only be the case if taken in a therapeutic background. Taking large quantities whilst partying is very unlikely to help you medically. Sometimes though small quantities taken in a therapeutic background are thought to be helpful to some people. Again, only if they feel safe and able to open up. With plant medicines the integration stage after or between sessions is the most important part and should not be skipped.

Many moons ago I decided to go into the Peruvian Jungle to take plant medicines with one of the oldest tribes there, the Shipibo Tribe. I believed if I took the medicines in the traditional way with traditional people this would be it's most helpful. However, there was no integration, no real preparation, and I'm afraid to say that these ceremonies are more about making money for the local people now than about helping the pilgrims that turn up there looking for hope. I saw many people in my time there become very mentally and physically unwell, with little or no support for them and have to leave. I share this last story to give an example of the tricky path of trauma and tension release if you choose something like plant medicines which could become easily out of your control.

In Conclusion

In conclusion, trauma, tension and nervous system regulation is a slow process of starting to listen to your body again, respond to its whispers, nurture and nourish, slow down and becoming much more connected to yourself, others and life again. It's not going to be 'fixed' overnight or by some pill, potion or lotion. It's not about how traumatic the event(s) were for you, but more so about how regulated you are and this comes mostly from how regulated your first care-givers in life were and thus how regulated they 'taught' you to be. You can be just as traumatised from something someone else considers as something small, as someone that has been through huge and life-threatening traumas. Your trauma as such is no smaller or bigger than anyone else's but more based on how regulated you were and are growing up. This means, that to help trauma (past, present or future) the priority should always be nervous system regulation.

Over the years I have been amazed by how just one session of something can release so much pain from a part of my body I have had for many years (it never released it all). Or, how just by listening to my body I feel safer in the World again. I've stopped giving myself a hard time for not 'fitting in' and I have embraced my sensitivities as superpowers and allowed myself to be my real and natural feminine self instead of always trying to be more, do more and have more and thus not be me at all and in fact I found myself being really rather masculine in my energy, which fuelled ill health.

Our body is speaking to us all the time, when we learn to stop and listen, we become that human being we really came here to be!

Trauma, tension and nervous system regulation does not mean we'll never get triggered in life again, it means we can deal with life's stressors without them effecting our health and it also means we don't get stuck in them so easily. We move through them with more ease, less tension and hopefully without traumatising ourselves too much again along the way. Our body finds a place of balance, and illness, pain and discomfort start to fade away. We can learn to thrive, rather than barely survive.

Notes from the author...

Hey, I'm Faith Canter, Scotland born, south coast of England raised and currently living in rural central Portugal, off-grid and from the land as much as possible.

Some years ago, I recovered from Chronic Fatigue Syndrome, Fibromyalgia, severe depression, anxiety, body hate, chronic pain and insomnia. I was ill with CFS for about 6.5 years, but I now see I was ill for much of my life before this too. Always picking up bugs, adrenal fatigue, headaches, body pain and so much more. I burned the candle at both ends, I hated myself and my life and I was a heavy user of legal and illegal drugs (including alcohol) to help me numb the mental and physical pain I was in.

I see I got myself into this pickle because of trauma and a very dysregulated nervous system, which started from a very young age. In fact, my clever little mind had blanked out much of the trauma that happened to me as a child (which also includes most of my childhood memories before the age of 7) to protect me.

I have come to understand that most of what we think of as problems in the body are in fact ways the body, mind and nervous system have learnt to protect us. To help us feel safe and to be able to survive in this crazy-ass World. As such, when we stop looking at our ailments as something wrong with us and start hearing them as whispers from our body, we stop fuelling those ailments and we start to find not only regulation within our nervous system once more but also resilience too.

We will never get rid of all our traumas and tensions (they are, after all what made us, us), but we can feel more peace and ease with them and thus more peace and ease in the World again.

Recommendations

During my time down the nervous system, tension and trauma rabbit hole I have come across many wonderful people doing amazing work/research and here are just a few of them that stood out for me...

Dr Peter Levine

Ann Weiser Cornell

Dr Deb Dana

Dr Bessel Van Der Kolk

Dr David Berceli

Dr Scott Lyons (Or, anything from Embody Lab, which he created)

Stephen W. Porges

How to contact Faith...

Website: www.faithcanter.com

Telegram Channel: <https://t.me/faithcanter>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/faithcanter/?hl=en>

Check out my books here: https://www.amazon.co.uk/Faith-Canter/e/B01N4PYMK6/ref=sr_ntt_srch_lnk_1?qid=1547645019&sr=8-1

The Freedom Movement Membership Site: https://network-1581987.mn.co/plans/37054?bundle_token=ec4b3a81f9a3901a11dec5644944f0b4&utm_source=manual

Free 30 Day Chronic Fatigue Syndrome Program: <http://faithcanter.com/sign-up-for-the-30-day-free-chronic-fatigue-syndrome-training/>

Project Roots YouTube Channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzIkhj9EXbIQyCb1UImNn1Q>

Project Roots Telegram Channel: <https://t.me/projectrootsportugal>

Project Roots Instagram Channel: <https://www.instagram.com/projectrootsportugal/>