

Stress & The Brain
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Stress vs. Trauma

Stress: Your brain & body's way of responding to any kind of demand.

Traumatic Stress: Shocking and/or painful situations that overwhelm your ability to cope mentally or emotionally

- Your brain's perception of Stress and Trauma is **highly subjective**, and will vary from person to person.
- Many factors determine whether an event will be perceived as traumatic or not (age, gender, trauma history, resilience, emotional resources, social support, etc.)
- The brain regards primary relationships as a survival need, therefore **threats to certain relationships can be perceived as life-threatening**, and therefore traumatic.

Your Brain

Right Hemisphere

- Holistic, non-verbal, body language (send/receive), big picture/meaning, images, emotions, gut feeling, intuition
- More directly influenced by body and lower brain regions
- No sense of past or future, only present
- Develops age 0-3

Left Hemisphere

- Logical, Literal, Linguistic, Linear,
- Desires order
- Figures out "Why"
- Develops later... kids start asking "WHY?"
- Puts life events in chronological order

"Upstairs"

- Behind forehead
- Cerebral cortex
- More evolved, sophisticated, complex
- Executive Functions: thinking, imagining, planning, decision-making
- Self-reflection
- empathy, morality
- emotional regulation

"Downstairs"

- Bridge of nose to top of neck
- Brainstem & limbic region
- Amygdala
- Primitive brain
- Basic functions (breathing, blinking)
- **Fight Flight Freeze**
- Strong emotions: Anger, fear

Trauma & The Brain/Body

When the **amygdala** senses danger, the lower brain regions **hijack** the upper regions. Some parts of the brain are **activated**, while other parts are **suppressed**.

- Physical discomfort
- Urge to fight (control) or flee (avoid)

- Reduced problem solving
- Reduced empathy
- Tunnel Vision
- Increasingly Negative Perspective

How We Usually Cope

- Fight, Flight, Freeze!
- Isolation, withdrawal, freezing, avoidance
- Arguing, fighting, attempts to control situation
- Self-meditation: drugs, alcohol, compulsive behaviours
- Only Temporarily helpful

What's Wrong With This?

- These behaviours tell the brain the danger IS LIFE THREATENING (even if it's not)
- The brain will react with EVEN MORE ANXIETY next time.

A Better Way

Create Perception of Safety

- Safe Place Imagery

Relax the Body

- Slow the breathing
- Consciously relax muscles

Mindfulness

- Writing down Thought-stream
- Focusing on 5 Senses

Integration / Right Brain Activation

- Writing with Non-dominant hand
- Cook's Hookups

Art Therapy

- Drawing / coloring emotion
- Drawing with non-dominant hand

Resources

Books:

The Relaxation & Stress Reduction Workbook – Davis, Eschelman, McKay
Managing Traumatic Stress Through Art – Cohen, Barnes, & Rankin
The Body Remembers - Rothschild
The Whole-Brain Child – Siegel
Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain - Edwards

Website:

Centre for Clinical Interventions: What me worry?

Apps

Breathe 2 Relax
Stop Breathe Think

Activities

Yoga – Hari Om Yoga Langley
Meditation – Fraser Valley Meditation Centre
Chopra Centre 21-Day Meditation