Resilience and the Body: Our Blueprint for Resilience

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Humans, as well as animals, are born with the blueprint of resilience. We are born with a predisposition to survive in order to keep the species thriving. Part of the program is to enable an organism to fight, flee or freeze, depending on the type and frequency of challenges and threats in its life. During the formative years, we become skilled at responding to certain types of threats. When humans and animals are repeatedly exposed to the same kinds of threats, their survival response becomes habituated. When *not* exposed to a lot of threats and challenges, survival responses are less predictable and automatic. Any threat can be perceived as life-threatening, when it fact, it may not be. For instance, being put on the spot, sensing a change in a relationship or a loud noise in the middle of the night may actually be life-threatening for a very few, but simply feel momentarily life-threatening for others.

The two primary types of survival "software" are: hyperarousal and hypoarousal, both are assets for different types of threats. The "hyperarousal" style prepares the body to TAKE ACTION. Fight responses move us toward the threat and flee (flight) move us away from the threat. The "hypoaroused" response prepares the organism to surrender, hide or even to die without extreme pain. Some theorists believe that there may be a genetic predisposition to the styles, as well as an environmental influence.

The survival style engages all aspects of the body. Heart rate, blood pressure, speed and placement of respiration, size of pupils, and the parts of the brain activated which impacts how we process information, the timing and type of hormones released, how the blood pools in the body all depends on our type of survival "software." Each style has assets which serve to assist us and liabilities which can have negative consequences.

During a hyperaroused (fight or flee/flight) survival response, the body is preparing for movement, so heart rate, blood pressure and respiration increases and the breathing becomes high in chest, rapid and shallow (instead of diaphragmatic breathing or "yoga breathing"). Stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, flood the body to enable the engine to move. During a this type of response, the eyes focus in, narrowing, usually causing the eyebrows to furrow (unless Botoxed!) and making others possibly perceive them as hostile, irritated, impatient or disrespectful. Although a fight response is the expression of taking action by moving toward the threat, it typically does not result in verbal or physical aggression. An emotionally healthy person with this habituated response may become directive and take charge when a challenge or threat looms, which can be an asset in situations which require immediate action, but a liability when more subtlety or restraint is needed. Because an activated fight response usually moves an individual into an "efficient communication style," statements may be short, to the point, with a clipped, pressured tone and higher volume and hand gestures may be choppy and emphatic, but not usually menacing. The fight response individual gives off an alpha-like energy, much like the dominant animal in a pack. "Efficient communication" is the antithesis of "relational communication" and this is one of the primary liabilities of fight style individuals. In fact, a fight response can activate another's survival style. Let the games begin!

The flee response is also a hyperaroused response with similar physiology as the fight response, but with a much simpler goal – to be removed from the threat at hand. The asset

is decreased exposure to intensity and the liability can be removing themselves prematurely from situations that may be *worked through*. The flee style is often very animated physically, sometimes giving off the impression of being nervous or flighty, which may not be true.

The single hypoarousal response is seen, initially, as outward inactivity. In particularly intense situations, the organism may "freeze." The inactive response can give time to stop – look – listen and assess without being noticed. An example might be a deer in the woods freezing at the sound of a branch breaking in order to not draw attention to itself from a predator. They simply blend into the scenery, hopefully eluding notice of that predator.

A person with a freeze response typically becomes very quiet, very still while as their heart rate and respiration slows. They may hold their breath for long periods of time. Because of the inability to project their voice without the breath support, their vocal tone often changes as well, particularly common with women. In intense situa-tions the voice may get breathy, soft, higher pitched or strained. Men often yawn repeatedly when the response is activated. When the person becomes less animated and less vocal during conversation, their body stills and they often will automatically protect their core (abdominal) area. The bodily responses which helped the hyperaroused responders respond to the threat, temporarily disables the freeze responder. The release of stress hormones are delayed up to 24 hours and the respiration and heart responses are inverted.

The assets for a slight freeze response is being less likely to interrupt others, they may come across as more of a "team player," less likely to activate overt conflict, and may be perceived as cautious and thoughtful, which may or may not be accurate. There may be the desire to verbally or physically response or react, but may become "stuck" in acting on the desire. The liabilities can be, difficulty being assertive (particularly in the situations when they most need them), may not take a stand and may not outwardly show their abilities and strengths as easily during high-stress or fast paced situations. These behaviors will be seen in all types of situations, from early childhood, school and work settings and in relationships. In cases where these individuals have experienced a great deal of life trauma, they are more vulnerable to being re-traumatized because of the freeze response.

Most individuals have predictable styles when under great stress, ill health, grieving or in a chaotic environment. It is essential to recognize the resilience assets of these styles, yet not use them to put people in a box. Understanding the body styles, as we might the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), can help family and work systems understand and work together more effectively. With training, therapy and/or education, people can learn to modify their style when it is no longer serving them. So, embrace your resilience blueprint and go forth and thrive.