



Safe, Sane, and Stable in Turbulent Times

Highlights & Key Concepts

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Summary Ideas:

Emotion suppression can occur when we are constantly busy.

- Keeping busy may become a habit to avoid or numb painful feelings and situations.
- While staying busy can bring great relief, it is important to note that **avoiding** painful feelings can **increase anxiety/depression** because it doesn't provide the opportunity to experience the discomfort and work through it.

Observation of emotions is an important step in healing from trauma.

- While observing our emotions may be painful, awareness of what we think, feel, and sense in our bodies is the first step in healing.
- Noticing and being conscious of what we think and feel is how we track what things are changing or are constant.
- Examining thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors allows mental and emotional patterns to shift.

Questions & Responses:

Q1 *The problems we face today can seem overwhelming. How might people find safety and healing, and the will to help others, in light of current problems?*

A1 It is easy to get overwhelmed by the enormity and complexity of the issues we face today, such as racial injustice, climate change, and COVID-19. Still, it is essential to remember that these problems will not be resolved overnight, just as they were not created overnight. It is easy to become cynical and get overwhelmed when we do not have patience and want things to be changed now. The only way through is taking it one step at a time, one breath at a time, and one day at a time.

Q2 *How do issues of racial injustice and health disparities intersect with a sense of safety, healing, and recovery?*

A2 The issues of racial injustice and health disparities intersect with a sense of safety, healing, and recovery because injustices and inequities in our society have prevented many individuals from feeling safe and being able to heal and recover from the trauma that has been inflicted upon them. In order to heal, recover, and increase the feeling of safety in our society, people must learn and become educated on what people of color face and have been facing, as well as becoming aware of the price of white privilege and profit. To become aware of our implicit biases and the effect of white privilege, we must also become conscious of how we feel these things in our bodies and what our thoughts, beliefs, and emotions are around things like racism. This is how we can learn to combat our implicit biases and create a more just and equitable society.

Q3 *How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected our individual ability to cope?*

A3

By forcing many of us into isolation and removing many of our usual distractions and coping tools, the COVID-19 pandemic hampered many people's ability to cope with stressful situations and uncomfortable emotions. The loss of coping tools and distractions has forced many to face their feelings directly, which subsequently increases their stress levels and activation of their sympathetic nervous system (i.e., the system responsible for our “fight, flight or freeze” response).

Q4 *What is the role of the brain in regulating our stress response?*

A4

There are several areas of the brain that regulate our stress response. The amygdala acts as a smoke alarm-- it warns us when there is danger or a perceived threat. The medial prefrontal cortex serves as the watchtower for our brain, regulating our decisions, emotions, and responses to stimuli. The thalamus is the gatekeeper, telling us what information can be ignored and what information is important for our safety.

Q5 *The parasympathetic nervous system is another aspect of the body's stress response, the one that calms you down. How can people consciously target their nervous system to invoke a calming, healing response?*

A5

One method to target your nervous system and invoke a healing response is to use auricular soothing. Auricular soothing is a technique to deactivate your sympathetic nervous system and activate your parasympathetic nervous system (the “rest and digest” system). This activation releases endorphins that have a peaceful and calming effect, promoting immune and emotional health. To perform this technique, begin by sitting or lying down somewhere quiet. Next, find the concha spot on your ear, just above the ear canal. Then gently massage that area with your finger in tiny circles while taking long and slow deep breaths.

Q6 *How can breathing exercises be used to invoke a calming, healing response?*

A6

One breathing exercise is 6-1-8 breathing. This breathing exercise prompts you to exhale longer than you inhale. This is effective because long, slow exhalations cause the vagus nerve to up-regulate the parasympathetic nervous system (the “rest and digest” system). To try this exercise, first sit or lie down and close your eyes. Then breathe slowly through the nose for six counts, then hold gently for one count, and finally exhale slowly through the nose for eight counts. Repeat for three to five rounds.

Q7 *How do you stay inspired to keep helping others during chaotic and turbulent times?*

A7

These days, in a world that feels excessively chaotic, where it's easy to lose hope, we can draw inspiration and motivation from others working in the behavioral health and social service field who continue to do the hard but essential work. Especially inspiring are those who continue to help people manage their stress during these taxing times.

Resources:

Recommended Reading

- *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk
- *My Grandmother's Hands* by Resmaa Menakem
- *Behave* by Robert Sapolsky
- *So You Want to Talk About Race* by Ijeoma Oluo
- *Activate Your Vagus Nerve* by Navaz Habib

Additional Resources

- [Provider Well-Being Resource List](#) from Northwest MHTTC
- ["The Parallel Process: Trauma-Informed Considerations for Individuals & Organizations"](#)

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