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Association of Christian Counsellors and Pastoral Care UK

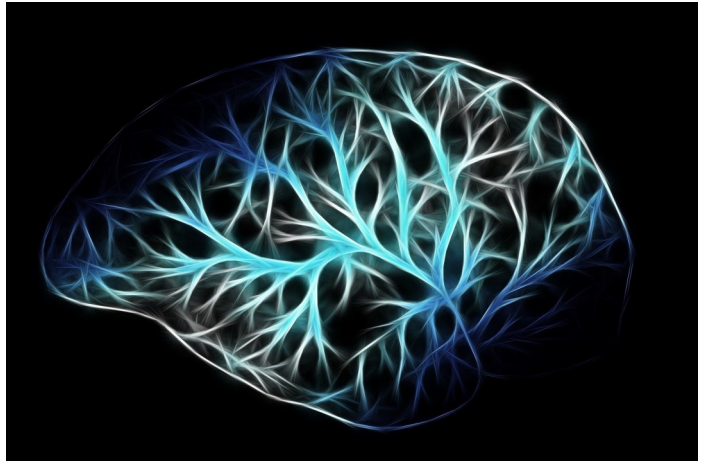
Counselling and the Body—current secular and spiritual thinking

Five Minute Briefing: 'Oh, my poor nerves!'

It is now well-known that the body keeps the score on emotional distress. Counsellors today are encouraged to be aware of our client's embodied processes and feelings, as well as our own in response. We've learned that distress closely involves **nerves and biology**, even more than the mind.

Research on how we respond to a threat indicates that the challenge may **freeze** our body and feelings, binding us emotionally into **distress**. This is especially common in pre-verbal childhood trauma as the fight, freeze or flight defences of the body's limbic system take over the nervous system. Our thinking brain (neo-cortex) is then at a loss, limiting benefit from talking therapy.

Benjamin Fry, a UK leader in this area, had a major breakdown in his thirties. He had lived years of anxiety, isolation and emotional pain, its source then identified as losing his mother at age eleven. His nervous system was still operating out of the frozen experience of past trauma, which his conscious mind did not understand.



He was trying and **failing to suppress** it by living a 'normal' life.

He suggests that many addictions, OCD, ADHD and relational difficulties arise out of **our efforts to control** such deep, unrecognised threats to our lives. He depicts this as being like trying to live a normal life when the nervous system believes it is running away from a rampant lion.

Such experiences of **unresolved threat** help to shape our expectations of the world, ourselves, relationships and how we live, but are unlikely to be conscious or understood in their long-term effects. Therapists also offering creative activities using non-verbal communication find these to be useful in uncovering our deepest thoughts, feelings and beliefs where these limit our functioning.

Accord magazine and membership

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The **core of trauma** may include a complex of fear-based emotions including rage (at perceived injustice), feeling alone and unable to reach out in trust to others. Such a state is likely to lead to entangled relationships in adult life as the traumatised client is unable to relate from a secure base. Therapy that helps the client to bring inner processes into consciousness also changes physiology. If our bodies are the place where our life stories are written, remembered and given a meaning, they are likely to influence every aspect of our being in the world. The survival strategies we adopt, being frozen in time, then lock us into negative views of self and life's possibilities. Helping the client to **experience themselves** what is going on inside them, as a basis for change, is our vital therapy goal.

Our nervous system from infancy is regulated through **attachment** with a caregiver, where in trust the child gains security for life in learning co-regulation. The current high level of mental distress in the population does reflect how society has failed to understand and fully support this process. All therapists are in principle trained to build relationship and trust as a basis for healing these wounds.

Polyvagal theory draws on research showing that the dorsal ventral vagal pathway in the para-sympathetic nervous system works in opposition to the sympathetic nervous system, in regulating how we respond to threat. Early trauma may lead us to live either in 'shut down' dorsal vagal mode or 'fight or flight' sympathetic mode, so therapists teach clients what 'safe and connected' feels like and how to live on this basis themselves. Does this perhaps ring a bell for us as believers and carers?

Religious practices such as tai chi, yoga, and Buddhist meditation are acknowledged scientifically as regulators of the nervous system. Secular psychotherapists are increasingly integrating spiritual and meditation practices from other religions into mainstream treatment of complex trauma. Yet proven Christian practices such as group and personal prayer, praise, Bible study, biblical meditation and prayer ministry re-regulate our nervous systems **safely** in close spiritual fellowship with our Creator and Lord. Secular psychotherapists recognise that Christian spiritual practices are related to our God so focus only on non-Christian meditation. They believe all other religions to be benign, trustworthy.

By contrast, believers have always known that there is **no** neutral spiritual ground. Direct connection with unknown spiritual influences has never been safe. As counsellors, we need to identify and make full use of our precious faith resources, not letting ourselves be intimidated. We can celebrate the new scientific research affirming how God designed us to receive spiritual healing together in **Him**.

For a full discussion of somatic approaches to counselling in current practice, please refer to Sally Brown's article on the emergence of embodied therapies from the margins into mainstream practice in BACP's **Therapy Today**, June 2019, Volume 30, issue 5, pages 8-12, on which this briefing draws. Benjamin Fry offers to send a free copy of his book *The Invisible Lion* to anyone who cannot afford it: email benjamin@benjaminfry.co.uk