

CALMING THE NERVOUS SYSTEM AFTER A TRAGEDY



Anxiety, panic, anger, rage, hopelessness, depression, sadness, body aches and ailments...these are some of the sensations that can hijack our nervous systems when we become overwhelmed or experience trauma. It is important to know that trauma lives in the nervous system not in the traumatic event. Whether it's watching a news show about the recent horror during the Boston Marathon or struggling to cope with a series of personal crises, these events can trigger our nervous systems to go into a heightened state of overdrive or to plummet.

So how do we catch and re-regulate our nervous systems before that occurs?

The first thing I would invite all of us to do is to limit the time spent watching or listening to the coverage of tragic events. These images and sounds may become too much for our nervous system to digest and repeated exposure to them can re-traumatize our systems. For some, a tragedy of this magnitude can bring up past traumas that they have yet to process.

During times of tragedy, when our nervous system is stressed, it's particularly important to access things that soothe, comfort, and relax us, to use the resources in our "human toolbox" that can help us live in a calming way. Begin by sitting in a comfortable chair, feeling your feet on the floor, grounding and scanning your body to see if there is a place that feels calm. Once you find this place, inviting this awareness to be present so it can infuse the rest of your body to slowly relax and soothe itself.

Becoming more aware of your body and allowing yourself the time to explore those calm places can even help to calm other areas that do not feel as uncomfortable. But remember that the nervous system needs lots of time to allow these calming feelings to broaden and anchor throughout your body. So take as much time as you need. Explore what happens in your body as you try this technique.

If you are unable to find a comfortable place in your body, you can use an external resource to help find that internal place. Imagine a place you love to go or an activity you love to engage in: lying on the beach, listening to the ocean waves, hiking in the woods, swimming in a lake, strolling through a meadow. As you imagine your special place, be aware of what you feel in your body.

Another technique that can help is to think of loving family and friends, cuddling or playing with your pets, engaging in a favorite hobby. Bring these images back to the body and inviting soothing sensations to slowly emerge.

Allow the wisdom of your body to guide your nervous system back into regulation.

Nervous systems resonate with other nervous systems. If we surround ourselves with people who have calming energy, we pick up on their calmness. Think about the times you've sat in a meditation or yoga class and how the teacher not only taught but demonstrated calmness. Remember how your body reacted to that.

One of the many ways I choose to soothe my nervous system during challenging times is by remembering a wonderful story that Fred Rogers shared. You may remember him from his children's television show "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" that aired from 1968-2001. He was originally trained as a Presbyterian minister but chose instead to educate children in his patient and compassionate style and shared the following story to calm their fears:

"When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, 'Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping.' To this day, especially in times of 'disaster,' I remember my mother's words and I am always comforted by realizing that there are still so many helpers – so many caring people in this world."

I invite you to remember Fred Roger's words of comfort for the frightened child that can live in all of us. Seeking out "helpers" will not only help us to weather adversity but restore our faith in humanity.



Rev. Lynn Bourbeau, SEP is a Certified Trauma Therapist, Medical and Spiritual Intuitive, Reiki Healer, Spiritual Counselor and former Chaplain at NY Presbyterian Hospital at Columbia and NYU Medical Center. She lectures at the Omega Institute, NYU Graduate School, Adelphi University, hospitals, psychotherapy and physical therapy groups, and has trained and supervised hundreds of healthcare professionals in the Somatic Experiencing (SE) trauma model. SE is a gentle highly effective body/mind trauma model. As an Alzheimer's caregiver for fourteen years Lynn is writing a memoir about her spiritual journey with her Mother. She has a private practice in NYC & Croton-on-Hudson at The Lighthouse Retreat and Wellness Center where she also runs groups on "Calming the Nervous System" and other topics. For more information, contact her at: Cell: (917) 596-4950 E-mail: leapb@aol.com Website: www.lynntherapy.com