

Self-protective Response Cycle

a body tending practice

The self-protective response cycle provides a map to accompany us through injury or renegotiation of injury as we move through the physiological responses in different states of the autonomic nervous system (ANS). Renegotiation is an important process if the original injury was too much and too fast to deal with at the time.

- the first 3 stages come in automatically to protect us
- the 4th stage helps us to process, release and complete the activation
- the 5th stage helps us to integrate the experience into a relatable narrative. (Even if the experience lacks meaning or is too difficult to integrate completely, we can recognize that it has a beginning, middle and end to help settle our body and psyche. These stages can be moved through in minutes and they could possibly take years when that is the wisdom needed to help us slowly integrate the experience.)

Feel free to adapt and nuance the practice as needed and start out small by practicing with situations that are not too activating. Just a little charge. (eg. a real time minor bump on the elbow or shin, a memory of a minor fall, a near miss as we almost bumped into a doorway, an emotional injury from a minor conflict). More difficult experiences may initially need the guidance of a practitioner.

1. Startle / alert

In the self-protective cycle we may **startle** when something new comes into our awareness as a surprise. For example a sound, smell, movement or novelty of experience externally in the environment around us or as a sensation, emotion, image internally. Startle brings an increase in sympathetic charge to our autonomic nervous system (ANS) that is dependant on the intensity of the stimulus combined with our past experience.

Body tending practice for startle:

- notice whenever you are startled by something - even if it's a small thing, take the time to pause as you follow the body's need to feel the activation - our body wants us to notice and not override what is honestly coming up in our nervous system - it's the first moment of letting us know that something is or could be wrong (jumping, muscle tension, increased heart rate, eyes wide)
- this could be a familiar stage if we experience a chronic state of hyperarousal - we jump at small stimulus or we live in anticipation for the next threatening thing to happen (in this case it may feel blurred throughout the day and it could be helpful to choose a specific experience to work through all the stages in order to feel a differentiation from experience to experience)
- if in a chronic state of hypoarousal and a quality of numbness then these stages can help to wake our system up as we identify what is needed to feel more energy

2. Defensive orienting

Defensive orienting allows us to evaluate the source of the possible threat, assess the magnitude of a potential encounter and seek escape routes literally or metaphorically. There is further sympathetic activation in the ANS that provides the life force energy for a balanced evaluation when we have time to assess or if we have learned to navigate this threat in the past. People sometimes experience this stage as time slowing down, a calm in the storm.

Body tending practice for defensive orienting:

- evaluate what caused the startle and if it poses / posed any threat or injury - this may include some degree of slowly looking around, listening or feeling with intentional awareness

3. Specific self-protective response

In a potentially threatening situation or even just a relatively ordinary event our ANS may respond with fight, flight, and freeze / collapse as a **specific self-protective response**. If fight / flight is engaged then the sympathetic nervous system increases in activation and our body is mobilized. If efforts to protect ourselves are unsuccessful or we have a pattern of unresolved freeze then overwhelm initiates a freeze / collapse response in which the parasympathetic immobility moves us into a shut down / conservation mode.

Body tending practice for the specific self-protective response:

- consciously notice what emerges / emerged in response to the stimulus - it often is a reflex or reaction out of our control
- an example of this stage: a split second of startle / defensive orienting makes you realize that you are headed into a doorway and so just before you bump you step out of the way (flight); you push a chair out of your way that you almost stumble over (fight); you draw a blank during a well rehearsed public speaking engagement (freeze); you can't get up from the couch after many days of overwhelming events and you are in conservation mode (collapse)

4. Completion

If stages 1-3 are successful then we move into the part of the cycle where there is a balance between the sympathetic nervous system activation and the parasympathetic deactivation. Our nervous system feels flexible as we feel it move into a response and then it can settle afterward. When we are able to protect ourselves a felt-sense of coherence comes into the structures of our body and psyche. Individual parts of the body express breath and movement and the parts feel connected to the whole. Often **completion** brings a spontaneous deeper breath or sigh. If we have renegotiated a past trauma then completion can bring relief as we work in a conscious way with a small part of the experience or the larger whole. Sometimes just a little ease can feel significant.

Body tending practice for completion:

- notice if you feel safe or safe enough again as your heart rate returns to normal and any tensed muscles can relax - let this settling in your nervous system deepen in your awareness as you feel deactivation - it could feel like a wave subtly moving through an area of your body
- to aid this you can ground yourself by giving yourself a hug or lean against a wall for support and connect with the earth through your feet, or support a part of your body with hand contact
- if it feels accessible you can look around in exploratory orienting and see if you can notice things that bring you enjoyment like a favourite object or a tree out the window

5. Integration

In a self-protective cycle we integrate our experiences of success, assimilating lessons learned to help us manage future similar circumstances. We may feel what Richard Swartz through Internal Family Systems has identified as the 8 C's of 'Self' energy: confidence, calmness, creativity, clarity, courage, compassion, and connectedness and I would add skillfulness and self-efficacy for navigating what was difficult. An ongoing journey in learning how to have our

own back and also the backs of those who we care about. After integration we can often share our story in a cohesive narrative that feels less fragmented and more organized.

Body tending practice for integration:

- notice and perhaps journal or create something to express how this feels in your body - what are the sensations? Is there any new freedom of movement, any new insights?
- see if the memory can come up or as you share the story with someone else there isn't too much charge - there may be emotion but you are able to stay connected to yourself and then move on from the experience with understanding and care for yourself - if you still feel a lot of activation there may be more to work with one of the stages at another time (take it slow) - if the experience has been difficult it may take more time to integrate

During renegotiation possible Somatic Experiencing® questions:

1. **Startle:** *"As you reflect back on the situation when did you first notice that something was off?"* The person may draw a blank indicating a need to work with this stage and perhaps needing to go back further to a time well before the experience when they can put themselves in space and time.
2. **Defensive orienting:** *"Would it feel ok to look around right now?" "If so would it feel better to look to the right or to the left? Only go as far as it feels accessible."* When in survival mode it is different than exploratory orienting which may allow a full range of motion, instead it might be just a few centimetres and respecting this range can hold potential for renegotiation.
3. **Specific self-protection response:** *"I see you moving your hands back and forth, I wonder what might happen if you slow that movement down a bit?"* Could be startle or fight energy.
4. **Completion:** *"When did you first notice some ease after this experience?"* Sometimes people realize that they have not felt any ease yet and this is the first time they take a deeper breath of letting go.
5. **Integration:** *"As you reflect back now what do you notice in your body / understanding?"* Perhaps there is a feeling of spaciousness and a peacefulness in the heart, a new sense meaning, or a feeling of increased capacity.

*During the completion stage we may need to build capacity slowly to feel completion - it may not feel safe to feel safe. We can just dip our toe into completion through the invitation to step back if needed even from pleasant feelings. The body will guide the process and give signs of capacity and care.

*This self-protective response cycle can be used for psychological and spiritual changes and difficulties as well because the body responds to anything we go through with a physiological experience. The focus is on the physiological response in our body to the situation and not the content. Once our body is supported through the effect of the situation on our physiology then wisdom can emerge.

This practice by Nicola Usher is based on Peter Levine's self-protective response concept as it is presented and explained by Alaine D. Duncan and Kathy Kain in their book *The Tao of Trauma*.

Self-protective Response Mapping

Startle / Alert / Awareness - increased activation in SNS (sympathetic nervous system)

Name what startled us / got our attention and list any sensations and movements that were / are present: (Jumping; muscles tension; heat / cold; increased heart rate; eyes wide.)

Defensive orienting - increased activation in SNS

Am I in any immediate danger?

If yes, seek escape routes.

If reflecting on past experience note what you did to defensively orient and see if there are still movements in your body that want to be expressed like looking around by turning your head, moving your eyes, rotating your body and then note them and / or enact them to acknowledge fully:

Specific Self-protective Response - increased activation in SNS - action can be imagined or enacted

Fight - push away; punch; grab; scratch; growl; hiss

Flight - run; walk with direction and purpose

Freeze - we stop talking; body immobile; may feel charge underneath; can feel like the gas and brake are on at the same time

Collapse - fall down; completely spent - this may have a quality of relief when there is no immediate threat as conservation mode can include the mind letting go of trying to figure things out

Note what state you experienced or you are still experiencing. If it has passed note how it showed up and if it is still present see if there is an action that needs to be followed now to honour the state of your ANS:

Completion - deactivation in our nervous system (deeper breath can come in, normal HR, able to settle, softening in muscles and body, feeling calm)

Consciously acknowledge and note how completion may have happened and we did not realize or a small part completed or return to an earlier stage to see if something else has to happen first:

Integration - flexibility and balance in our nervous system, a sense of self-agency, a feeling of accomplishment as we moved into our growing edges and feel more connected to ourself
Note how you might acknowledge and express this integration through kind self-talk, journalling, creating art, dancing, etc. If activation shows up during this expression then slow the process down and be gentle with yourself as there may be many layers to work through over time.