

The Breath and Trauma Connection

1. The Nervous System's "Fight, Flight, Freeze" Response

When we experience a traumatic event or are under chronic stress, our **autonomic nervous system (ANS)** takes over. The ANS has two main branches that govern our response to threat:

- **Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS):** This is the "fight or flight" response. It's designed to help us deal with danger. When it's activated, our body gets ready for action: our heart rate and blood pressure increase, and our breathing becomes rapid and shallow, often confined to the upper chest. This breathing pattern is an immediate physical manifestation of the stress response.
- **Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS):** This is the "rest and digest" or "freeze" response. When the threat has passed, or when the threat is overwhelming and we can't fight or flee, the PNS helps the body conserve energy. In a "freeze" response, breathing can become very shallow, held, or even feel like it stops altogether. This is the body's way of shutting down to survive.

2. Trauma Gets "Stuck" in the Body

One of the most important concepts in trauma healing is that trauma isn't just a mental event; it's a physiological one. The stress hormones and physical tension from a traumatic event can get stored in the body. This can lead to chronic muscle tension, headaches, digestive issues, and a constant state of hypervigilance or anxiety, even long after the event is over.

Because the breath is so intimately linked to the nervous system, a person who has experienced trauma may have a perpetually dysfunctional breathing pattern—shallow, held, or erratic—that keeps them locked in a state of chronic stress. Their body and brain, particularly the amygdala (the brain's fear center), are constantly on alert, even when there's no real danger.

3. How Breathwork Helps: The Body-Mind Connection

The beauty of breathwork lies in its ability to consciously and directly influence the ANS. While the stress response is largely involuntary, we have conscious control over our breath. This gives us a direct pathway to communicate with our nervous system.

- **Regulating the Nervous System:** By practicing slow, deep, and rhythmic breathing (like diaphragmatic or "belly" breathing), we intentionally activate the parasympathetic nervous system. This signals to our body that we are safe. It lowers our heart rate, reduces cortisol levels, and begins to undo the physical and emotional patterns of stress. This helps to re-train the body to a more balanced state, moving it from a state of hyperarousal (fight/flight) or hypo arousal (freeze) back to a state of calm and regulation.
- **Releasing Stored Trauma:** Some more intensive breathwork practices, like Holotropic Breathwork, can help individuals access and release emotions and memories that are stored in the body. The specific breathing patterns can create an altered state of consciousness that bypasses the "thinking brain" (the prefrontal cortex) and allows

access to the limbic system, where emotional responses and repressed memories are stored. This can lead to a powerful, cathartic release of stored energy, often manifesting as tears, shaking, or other physical sensations.

- **Creating a Sense of Safety:** For many trauma survivors, their body can feel like an unsafe place. Focusing on the breath provides a point of anchoring and presence, helping them to slowly and gently re-establish a sense of safety and ownership in their own body. It teaches them that they have the agency to influence their internal state.

Important Considerations for Your Series

It's crucial to approach this topic with sensitivity. For some individuals with a history of trauma, focusing on the breath can be a trigger for anxiety or even panic, especially if their trauma involved suffocation or a feeling of being unable to breathe.

- **Start with Gentle Practices:** Emphasise slow, gentle, and non-forceful breathing techniques. Diaphragmatic breathing is a wonderful starting point as it is very grounding.
- **Encourage Self-Awareness:** Remind participants that their breath is a guide and they should always listen to their body. The goal is not to "do it right," but to become aware of their own patterns and to find what feels safe and supportive for them.
- **Mindful Language:** Use language that is gentle, invitational, and non-judgmental. Avoid words that might imply a need to "fix" or "force" anything.

The connection between breath and trauma is a powerful and validating concept for many people. It offers a tangible, accessible, and empowering tool for healing, and it can be a deeply impactful part of your client's process.