

Wired for survival and completion:
Utilizing innate drives to heal from trauma.
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In the face of any real or perceived threat, we have instinctual drives that help us survive. Any type of threat to the well being of ourselves or others can be a traumatizing experience. Trauma can be defined as anything that overwhelms our capacity to integrate an experience. Something that is too much and too fast for us to manage. Our body, mind, and spirit react quickly, doing the best they can to survive. However, this reaction to trauma can leave parts of us disconnected, abandoned, conflicted, and continuing to re-live the traumatic event. This is a source of tremendous suffering for many people. After trauma, we can feel like what once felt whole is now scattered into fragments. Fortunately, there is a drive toward completion that ripples through these disconnected parts in an attempt to regain wholeness and resolution with the past. However, without greater understanding of these innate drives and often the guidance of a skilled trauma therapist the drive toward completion misses many opportunities to move forward to resolution.

I will discuss the ways in which these innate drives for survival and completion present themselves in the face of threat and pain, and how they can be utilized to heal from trauma.

There is a fundamental drive to survive that runs deep within us. It has a tremendous impact on us, especially when we are faced with some kind of threat to our wellbeing. In the face of threat, this innate drive takes over and makes quick decisions to protect us. There's no discussion. There's no hesitation. Something in us takes action to protect our physical, mental, emotional, and/or spiritual wellbeing.

We are wired for survival. Physiologically, we only have a few options when confronted with a threat. Occasionally we can communicate and negotiate with the threat to diffuse it, but more commonly that isn't an option and we have impulses to fight, flight, or freeze. By freezing we also dissociate which means our brain attempts to numb us, as much as it can, to the pain we are about to endure by releasing certain chemicals. In addition, the freeze response attempts to decrease the overwhelming intensity of pain, injury, and even death. However, freezing is generally our last resort when it comes to survival. It appears that our first impulse is to not only survive but to use our power to stop or defeat the threat and thrive. When we are able to stop the threat, we feel strong, confident, and powerful at protecting ourselves and have an easier time navigating future threats. Unfortunately, in many cases the threat is bigger, faster, or comes without warning. In these situations it is common for our brain to decide freezing is the best survival option. Freezing stops the original impulse to defeat the threat from completing. It also stops the impulse to fight or flight from completing. As a result our bodies can get stuck in a pattern of freezing, or trying to fight or flight without ever feeling a sense of resolution. The original impulses to survive and defeat the threat continue

to live in the body waiting to experience completion. Fortunately, it is never too late to heal from past trauma.

The drive for completion arises out of the protective drive for survival that compartmentalizes traumatic experiences. Compartmentalizing an experience is an attempt to take a part or all of a particular experience and to various degrees protect us from being exposed to the (cognitive, emotional, somatic, or sensational) memory because it was too painful and overwhelming. This may help us survive, however, it is not ideal to have to compartmentalize our experiences. It takes a lot of energy to do so. There is a drive toward completion that lives in these compartmentalized parts of ourselves and will move toward being connected and integrated again when it is safe to do so.

We are wired for completion. When we are not able to stop or defeat the threat, we do the best we can to survive physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, psychological, or spiritual traumas. However, once we survive a threat to our wellbeing there is still a drive to complete what is needed in order to feel a sense of resolution. This is not limited to life threatening experiences. The brain and body also respond positively to completing other experiences that were and are necessary for our growth, development, and ability to be ourselves. It could be something in the past that actually happened that we weren't able to complete or something that was missing altogether. For example, some people have not experienced secure attachment, protection, validation, empathy, or safety. These experiences are extremely important and the body needs to know what these experiences feel like in order to thrive. It is not enough to just talk about what was missing or how it would have been to receive it. The body literally needs to feel it. When the brain and body are connected and experience a completion, then we create a new experience for ourselves. In doing so, we cannot change the past but we can create a new relationship to the past.

Imagine yourself at a restaurant with a friend. Pretend for a moment that all the items on your menu are all of your life experiences from day one until now. Your friend's life is different than yours, so they have different items on their menu. Let's say that your friend tells you they are going to order an apple pie. You look at your menu and you don't see that listed, you don't even see apples on your menu. So you ask your friend what apple pie is. They describe to you what apples are and how they are prepared and baked to make apple pie. However, if you have never eaten an apple in your life it might be hard to imagine what your friend is talking about. The best you can get is some conceptual idea of what apple pie is. You won't know the smell, taste, texture, or the details of what it looks like. It isn't until you get the experience of eating apple pie that you can really know what it is. Your body must experience this for you to have it on your menu. Items need to be on your menu in order for you to be able to order them. It is also important to experience what apple pie tastes like in order to know the difference between apple pie and other kinds of pies. When you take this analogy into the real world and you want to get people who respect your boundaries on the menu for example, then it is important to know the

difference between people who look like they will and the people who actually will. In this analogy you can see that if you don't update your menu or have new experiences, you will continue to order the same things off the menu. In life this could look like getting into the same kind of relationship that doesn't work for you, using substances or food to numb emotions, people pleasing, or criticizing yourself. In a way, I see healing from trauma as a process of updating our menus. Getting things on the menu that were missing, separating the things that got mixed together, bringing together the things that got pulled apart, having more options, and not feeling stuck ordering the same things over and over again.

Without updating our menu we can feel limited in our lives. We can feel inhibited from engaging with others and with life. This is exhausting and often isolating! Next, I will discuss some of the methods I use to help people heal from trauma. I will specifically focus on the methods that were developed by Dr. Peter Levine and Dr. Richard Schwartz.

Peter Levine, PhD developed a body-based method for healing from trauma called *Somatic Experiencing*® (SE). Dr. Levine's work started with a burning question; why don't wild animals become traumatized when their lives are routinely threatened? A very simplified summary to what Dr. Levine found through his years of research is that although mammals have similar nervous systems to humans, the reason why they don't exhibit signs of trauma after a life threatening experience is because they rarely disconnect their awareness from their body. The times that they do disconnect during a freeze response is time limited. Wild animals quickly connect back to their body and it's innate impulses, and freely allow them to complete. Humans, however, can inhibit this natural process by staying disconnected from their body. The impulses to heal from trauma do not disappear, but we lose track of how to connect to them. Somatic experiencing is a process of bringing awareness to the body and nervous system. Through this awareness we connect our mind and body. This connection allows us to experience our innate drive for completion. The body-mind connection can also be utilized to regulate the nervous system or internal state. As a result, we can learn to regulate intense feelings and emotions. Ultimately, we become more embodied and resilient to future threats as we are more aware of our connection with our bodies.

Richard Schwartz, PhD developed a method called Internal Family Systems (IFS). He identified that there are *exiled* parts of us that hold the pain and vulnerability of traumatic experiences, and that there are also *protective* parts that are trying to protect us from this pain and from getting hurt again. The us that these parts are being exiled from or that is being protected is identified as the *Self*. Dr. Schwartz describes the Self as our true self where we experience openness, curiosity, compassion, presence, calm and clarity. It is from this state that we want to engage with the other parts of ourselves in order to assist them to resolve past trauma. When there is a traumatic experience, the protective parts try to help us survive by taking over in the best way they know how. This results in the exiled parts becoming abandoned or compartmentalized. However, the exiled parts are determined to

experience completion and in due time will try to get the Self's attention in order to heal. Once the exiles are able to feel heard, understood, and *unburdened* they can experience resolution with the past and the protective parts can take on more supportive roles to the Self. As we work with our parts and help them experience completion we are less fragmented and more integrated. Our whole internal system shifts so that we are more aware of our parts and able to lead from and stay connected to our Self.

Dr. Levine's and Dr. Schwartz's methods both address the need for completion unlike many therapies that focus on managing the symptoms of trauma, aggressively pushing down thoughts and actions that appear disruptive or destructive, or desensitizing people to the symptoms of trauma. Unfortunately, many kinds of therapeutic modalities do not assist our innate drive for completion to experience resolution. Dr. Levine's and Dr. Schwartz's methods of completion compliment one another and in my experience create a very effective, efficient, and integrative way of working with trauma. SE can deepen the completion on the physiological level by tending to the nervous system and IFS can deepen the completion with our inner system of parts. IFS expands the territory for SE by identifying exiled and protective parts as well as working from a central state called the *Self*. SE can embody IFS by bringing awareness to the body throughout the whole process. Together they return power as well as connection to our self and others where it was lost through trauma.