

Flight/Fight/Freeze

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I am sure that you have heard of or experienced the flight or fight response, but have you ever heard of the freeze response?

For years, I have taught that one of the many benefits of Myofascial Release and Myofascial Unwinding is the release of the holding or bracing patterns of the mind/body complex. It seems that during times of trauma the subconscious develops a protective pattern that becomes locked into the mind/body complex like a “frozen moment in time.”

I believe that it is these “holding patterns” that have frustrated therapists using traditional therapy in their efforts to help their patients have a speedy and complete resolution of their problems.

In his informative book “Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma,” Peter Levine, Ph.D., develops an intriguing model that may explain the effectiveness of Myofascial Release.

The behaviors of fleeing, fighting, and freezing are so primitive that they are thought to predate the reptilian brain. These survival tools are found in all species from spiders and cockroaches to primates and human beings. When neither flight nor fight will ensure the animals safety, there is another line of defense; immobility (freezing), which is just as universal and basic to survival. No animal, not even the human, has conscious control over whether or not it freezes in response to threat.¹ When an animal or human is traumatized, it will enter the freeze response as a survival strategy. This state of immobility is beyond conscious control and becomes a vicious cycle maintaining physiological high levels of activity of both the parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems.

In humans, trauma occurs as a result of the initiation of the instinctual cycle that is rarely allowed to finish.

The duration of the immobility (freezing) response is normally time-limited; animals go in and they come out. If the animal is not killed and when threat is over, the animal then discharges an enormous amount of energy in the form of shaking, profuse sweating and deep breathing. It then returns to a state of calm alertness. The human freezing response does not easily resolve itself because the supercharged energy locked in the nervous system is imprisoned by the emotions of fear and trauma. The result is that a vicious cycle of fear and immobility takes over, preventing the response from completing naturally. When not allowed to complete, these responses form the symptoms of trauma.¹

Myofascial Release allows for a completion of this instinctive cycle in a safe, natural and effective manner. Working in reverse, Myofascial Release and Myofascial Unwinding start with present day restrictions and compensations. The release of fascial restrictions alters the habitual muscular “holding patterns.” With Myofascial Unwinding, the therapist eliminates gravity from the system. This unloading of the structure allows the body’s righting reflexes and protective responses to temporarily suspend

their influence. The body, guided by the therapist, can move into positions of past trauma, which allow for a release of the instinctual “freeze” response in a safe, gentle and natural manner.

As this occurs, Myofascial Release techniques are utilized to eliminate structural compensations for a resolution of the patient’s long-standing symptoms.

The goal of Myofascial Release is to return the patient to a pain free, active lifestyle.

Reference:

1. Levine, Peter, Waking the tiger Healing Trauma, North Atlantic Books, Berkeley, CA 1997