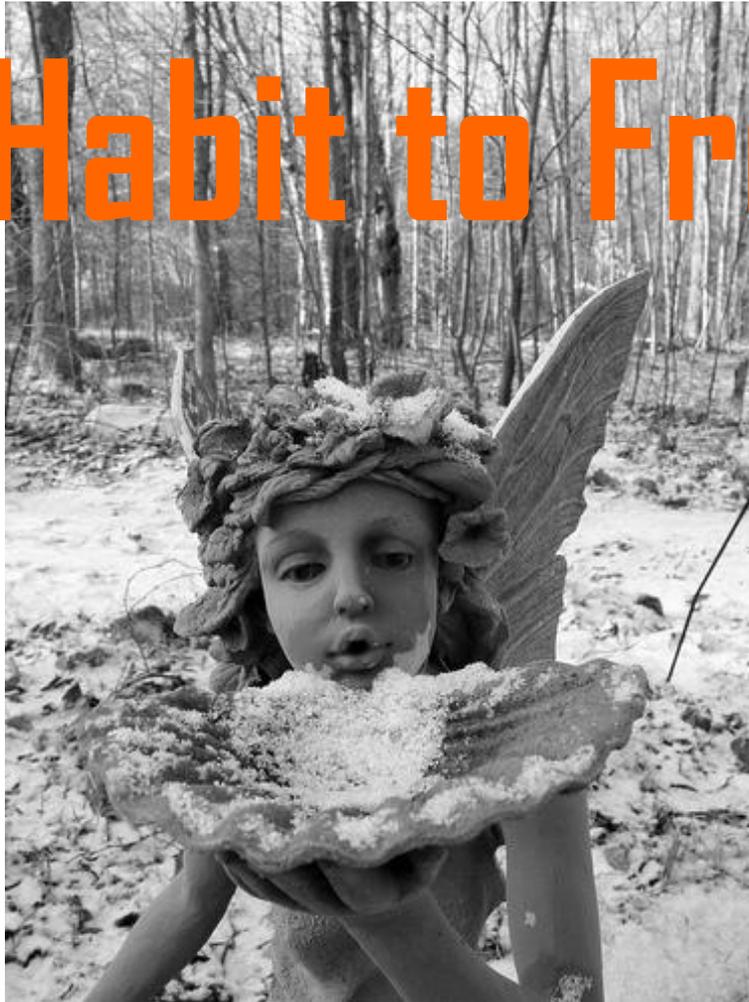


The Habit to Freeze



By Jonathan Tripodi, BA, BS

The American Institute of Stress declared in Time Magazine that stress-related disorders make up between 80-and-90 percent of the ailments that bring people to family-practice physicians. The United Nations has referred to stress as the "20 th Century Disease". For massage therapists, this news is no surprise. They treat stress related tension everyday.

Massage clients often confess that they can't relax or don't know how to let go of stress? Many of them report an inability to rest - tossing and turning or waking up during the night. Their hard bodies soften some from massage but often become hard again a few days later.

Why does the body remain tense and restless even while at home or during a safe, nurturing massage? The answer might be that the body is still responding to stressful experiences from the past that were internalized and held there by a natural protective response called - *the freeze response*. When an experience is threatening, painful or stressful, the primitive *fight or flight* response becomes active in the body and triggers a person to take action - either confront the stressor (fight) or escape it (flight). If unable to confront or escape, a secondary protective response - *the freeze response* - is activated.

The body cannot release stress and be in the freeze response at the same time. In other words, the freeze response prevents the body from relaxing and healing itself. Herein lies the problem. In our western culture, the freeze response has become a habit. The stressful lifestyles that have become so common trigger the body to remain in the freeze response most of the time. Instead of releasing stress each day, the body is accumulating it. We have adapted to this protected state to the point that it feels normal. *In Massage Therapy, the accumulation of stress in the body is now referred to as body memory.*

This article hopes to educate about the freeze response, the effects of accumulated stress in the body and the process of releasing body memory

The Freeze Response

The freeze response is activated due to a perceived or real inability to take action. In essence, one feels helpless to change the threatening, painful or stressful experience. The freeze response is also described as the "deer in the headlights" affect. The body becomes both tense and paralyzed at the same time. The thoughts, sensations and emotions of the stressful experience become suppressed or internalized, not only in the mind but in the tissues of the body.

In his book, *Waking the Tiger*, PhD psychologist Peter Levine explains that when an animal is approached by a predator, he will attack, run away or freeze.

For example, consider the interplay of a cat and mouse. When a mouse is approached by a cat, it will run away. If cornered, the mouse might try to fight back. Once the mouse realizes that it can't win by attack and cannot run away, it becomes paralyzed with fear. The cat might swat at it with its paws and may even bite it, but the mouse remains frozen with tension. The cat will eventually interpret the mouse's frozen state as a sign that it is dead and will leave it in search of more stimulating prey.

Once the threat is over and if the mouse still lives, it will come out of the freeze response and discharge the fear and tension incurred by the attack. His body will shake as the body memory from the attack is released from his body. Once the body memory is released, the mouse walks away as if nothing ever happened. The mouse has effectively survived and released the traumatic experience. He does not carry any protective tension from the attack. His body is at ease (for a mouse that is).

The same sequence of survival and healing responses occurs in humans beings. The primary difference is that humans have the ability to remain in a protective state long after the overwhelming event has passed. While the freeze response remains active, relaxation and self-healing are prevented. The release of the freeze response and the associated tensions and fear from the overwhelming event may occur gradually over time or not at all.

The Habit to Freeze: A Cultural Epidemic

People remain in the freeze response out of habit. When a new stress is encountered, the body freezes as a conditioned reflex.

Because it is unconscious, the reflex to freeze can remain active for years. The longer one remains in the freeze response, the more easily overwhelmed they become. A loud noise, traffic jam or an unexpected change at work can trigger the reflex to freeze. Once tensions accumulate, it becomes increasingly hard to relax. Eventually the body can no longer adapt and symptoms develop. Common signs of the freeze response are anxiety, chronic muscle tension, pain, poor alignment, grinding of teeth, mood swings, depression, digestive and elimination problems, high blood pressure, fatigue and low libido.

Ideally, experiences are felt fully. However, if overwhelmed, the body's protective responses engage that allow one to manage. Then, at a later time, one can allow themselves to let down their guard and release stress including feelings and emotions. By accepting experiences and letting them flow, the body remains balanced, vital and adaptable to new experiences.

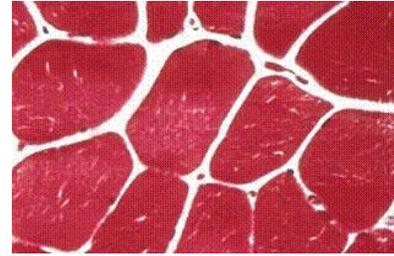
Consider the rhythm of breathing. We breathe in and we breathe out. Imagine what it would be like to inhale and then hold it! To a lesser or greater extent, this is what is happening while in the freeze response. Experiences go in but they don't come out. Shallow breathing is a common indicator that the freeze response is active.

Body Armor/ Connective Tissue & Microtubules

When a person remains in the freeze response over time, the body's connective tissue or fascia hardens to form a protective shell – originally referred to in the 1940's by psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich as *body armor*.

Hardened Fascia (white) around Muscles

Connective tissue surrounds every structure in the body. It consists of two primary ingredients, collagen and elastin. Elastin provides flexibility while collagen provides strength. Collagen is also *piezoelectric* which means it's a conductor of bioenergy.



Collagen is composed of smaller proteins called *microtubules* which are suspected to contain the bioenergy of the stress we suppress. Biophysicists and neuroscientists have discovered that microtubules are partially responsible for encoding and storing memory of repressed experiences. Every cell in the body is surrounded in a connective tissue membrane that is saturated with memory storing microtubules – giving credence to scientists, therapist and psychologist who identified stored stress in the body and called it *cellular memory*.

Shaking Medicine/ Coming out of the Freeze Response

As a physical therapist, I discovered that my patients have one thing in common – a chronically active freeze response and an accumulation of body memory.

During body memory treatments, patients come out of the freeze response. Just like the mouse, the person's body vibrates or shakes as the accumulation of stress discharges through the body. Often, emotions are felt and released. Afterwards, they experience a profound relief, peace and relaxation. Pain and stress symptoms diminish or resolve completely.

Bradford Keeney, author of *Shaking Medicine*, refers to shaking as the oldest medicine on Earth. "People's worst fear is losing control - "...of their emotion and especially their bodies. Yet in order to achieve the transcendent state necessary for deep healing, we must surrender control." Shaking occurs naturally when a person comes out of the freeze response. One of the most important roles I have as a therapist is to educate patients on the importance of shaking and providing a calm, supportive environment for the response to occur. Because it is both natural and foreign to most people, letting the body shake can require trust and encouragement.

People will often shake while they sleep, tossing and turning throughout the night. Those who seek treatment from a medical doctor may get a prescription for muscle relaxants or anti-depressants – both of which sedate this natural healing process. A nervous breakdown is a perfect example of the body clearing accumulated stress that has reached its limit by shaking profusely.

Until one comes out of the freeze response and releases body memory, tension will persist and accumulate. Good therapy, diet and exercise that do not release the freeze response and body memory often provide temporary relief.

Massage Tips for Releasing the Freeze Response & Body Memory

Educate your clients about the freeze response & body memory. Education will help foster awareness. During your treatment, if you see their body twitch, vibrate or shake, acknowledge it as "natural" and give them permission to shake as much as they need to.

In addition to your massage strokes, add gentle, sustained contact for 3-5 minutes or more on the head or a part of the body that is actively tight, hard or painful. Contact without movement will deepen a person's awareness to the freeze response and communicate the safety needed for them to let go. Direct your client to feel into the space under your hands and with each breath encourage them to soften.

Verbal permission is also supportive for clients to release stored emotion. Although it is natural, it may also be rare for your clients to release pent-up stress and feelings during a massage. Taking a class on emotional release and body memory is recommended and will allow you to facilitate emotional healing with structure and confidence.

Keep in mind that letting go is a natural ability and can only be supported not forced. To help someone come out of the freeze response requires patience, gentleness and stillness. The client will entrain to the calm still quality within the therapist. When touching your client, consider the concept "lighter is deeper". Light touch conveys safety. A sustained touch will interrupt defensive postures of the mind and body that actively anticipate your next move.

After fifteen years of supporting body memory transformations, I have come to realize just how sensitive we are and how much stress we hold onto. Massage Therapists have a unique ability to help people take that leap of faith, let go of the protection from the past and heal fully and naturally as the body was designed to do.

Footnotes

- 1 Levine, Peter & Frederick, Ann ' Waking the Tiger, Healing Trauma' North Atlantic Books, 1997
- 2 Mayo Clinic, Medial Edge Website, www.medicaleedge.org/2006december-2.html
- 3 Stress-Related Disorders Sourcebook by Amy L. Sutton
- 4 Body Armor by Wilhelm Reich, www.catalase.com/bodyarm.htm
- 5 Decoding Traumatic Memory Patterns at the Cellular Level by Thomas R. McClaskey
- 6 Shaking Medicine by Bradford Keeney
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- 9 Information processing in microtubules by Stuart Hameroff and Richard C. Watt Journal of Theoretical Biology 98:549-561 (1982)
- 10 Azevedo, T. Psychophysiology, June 2005; vol 42: pp 255-260. News release, Blackwell Publishing.



Author: Jonathan A. Tripodi, BA, BS, is a certified provider of education by the National Certification Board for Therapeutic Massage and Bodywork and teaches his Body Memory Recall approach nationwide. He earned his bachelors degree in movement and sports science in 1991 from Purdue University and a bachelors degree in physical therapy in 1992 from the University of Evansville.