

Hyporesponse: The Hidden Challenge in Coping With Stress

Merete Holm Brantbjerg¹

Abstract

This article addresses the role of hyporesponse in stress management. The concept of muscle response is presented—regarding both hyperresponse (tension) and hyporesponse (giving up)—and how these two defensive strategies interact and easily polarize. Building up energy and precision in dosing is presented as a strategy to modify hyporesponse and, through that, lower the risk of losing contact with parts of the self in different phases of stress. Interconnectedness between high arousal states—both hyper- and hypoarousal—and muscle response patterns are addressed and special attention is given to potential consequences of hyporesponse in the transitions between the different levels of arousal that occur in daily life.

Keywords: stress management, hyporesponse/giving up, building up energy, arousal states, transitions

International Body Psychotherapy Journal *The Art and Science of Somatic Praxis*
Volume 11, Number 2, 2012 pp 95-118 Printing ISSN Number 2169-4745 Online ISSN 2168-1279
© Author and USABP/EABP. Reprints and permissions secretariat@eabp.org

Preface

Early on when I studied relaxation therapy in 1975-1978, I was introduced to the terms hypo- and hyperresponse, both of which would get exported into Bodydynamic Analysis as core concepts of the theory.² These concepts have proven to be very significant in helping me understand how I contain patterns of giving up (hyporesponse) and of control (hyperresponse), and readily available resources. The concepts have personally helped me to grasp the dynamics among the three aspects in me—and how closely they work together. Notably, during my personal as well as professional development, it has become increasingly clear to me what a radical strategy giving up really is because it is often invisible, because it does not demand attention.

Today my work revolves very much around bringing this invisible strategy into awareness, especially in relation to high-intensity aspects of life: stress, trauma, as well as experiences of expanded consciousness. How do we integrate our hyporesponsive parts into our understanding of ourselves and our self-regulation while functioning—perhaps even thriving—under pressure?

The thoughts I present in this article are based on more than 30 years of professional experience as a teacher and therapist. From my studies and my exchanges with colleagues and other professionals on an international level, I find my professional experiential knowledge supports and furthers my methodology. This ongoing dialogue continues to offer me new approaches to my

¹ Translation to English by Tania Christensen, Joel Isaacs & Merete Holm Brantbjerg

² Bodydynamic Analysis is a body psychotherapy system developed in Denmark and founded by Lisbeth Marcher. Several people contributed to developing the system: Lisbeth Marcher, Lennart Ollars, Ellen Ollars, Steen Jørgensen, Erik Jarlnæs, Sonja Fich, Marinanne Bentzen, Merete Holm Brantbjerg, and, since 1994, Ditte Marcher (Bentzen, Bernhardt & Isaacs, 1997; Fich & Marcher, 1997; Jørgensen & Ollars, 2001; Brantbjerg, 2005; Brantbjerg, 2007).

work by deepening my understanding of and ability to interpret the phenomena I experience on a day-to-day level.

Introduction

For some years now I have specialized in using the “resource-oriented skill training” (ROST) method when working with stress- and trauma-related issues. The key to this method is the understanding of hypo- and hyperresponse as psychological coping strategies represented in the muscles—and the importance of adapting or “dosing” physical skill training to the exact level of presence that each individual, each body area, and each muscle is capable of.³

Hyperresponse corresponds with tightness, tension, control, and holding back the emotion and psycho-motor impulse linked to the muscle in question. Hyporesponse on the other hand corresponds with giving up, withdrawing, losing energy, and relinquishing emotions and impulses. Neutral response corresponds with the individual’s free access to emotions and impulses linked to a given muscle.⁴

Hyperresponse or tension is well known and well documented as related to stress. The majority of stress literature highlights stress as an internal state characterized by the holding of too much tension, and as a state from which people need to learn to relax, find inner peace, etc. This approach is understandable given how our autonomic nervous system (ANS) reacts to stress, often displaying prominent sympathetic innervation. We see or experience how stress can manifest itself as trouble sleeping, difficulty finding rest, etc.

Yet, what doesn’t get its due attention is another, more hidden phenomenon in coping with stress—the hyporesponsive strategy. The areas of the body that have the lowest level of energy to begin with and the skills that are most often given up are those we disconnect from first when pressured, be it externally or internally. One response to pressure can be to defend oneself by giving up even more, growing distant, and losing inner fullness and presence. That way one avoids feeling pressure or the impulses and activities that go with it. One doesn’t notice when one has reached one’s limit and one’s inner energy and direction are slipping away.⁵ Hyporesponse is particularly challenging when dealing with stress issues, because the areas that have given up don’t demand attention in the way that, for instance, tight shoulders would. It is very easy to overlook the body’s signals that work by absence—which as a consequence typically reinforces the giving up mechanism. This is a vicious cycle that offers new insight to an essential dynamic at work in the phenomenon of burning out.

Learning how to relax doesn’t change this dynamic. To change it requires learning how to tolerate and maintain a level of presence. It takes practising how to find a level of dosing in an activity that will build presence instead of exhaustion. These are the basic skills that are

³ Dosing is a core concept in resource-oriented skill training as a method. The concept is further elaborated in Brantbjerg (2007) and Brantbjerg (2008).

⁴ The concepts of muscle response are developed within the framework of Bodydynamic Analysis (Bentzen, Bernhardt & Isaacs, 1997). Muscle response is not equal to muscle tone in a physiotherapeutic sense nor to levels of physical training. Muscle response is a measure of presence or fullness in the muscles. The terms hypo- and hyperresponse are formed by Lisbeth Marcher (Ollars, 1980; Bentzen, Bernhardt & Isaacs, 1997) with inspiration drawn from, among others, Lillemor Johnsen’s terms hypo- and hypertony (Johnsen, 1976).

⁵ The term “energy” in this article is used synonymously with presence and fullness. Energy is difficult, almost impossible to define and yet in my view it is a phenomenological fact that we are able to physically sense “energy” or levels of presence and fullness in ourselves and in others. It is visible to us if a body is more or less full. You can sense if a handshake is energized or distanced/lacking in energy. Without “energy”, a dead and a living body would be identical. The term “energy” in this context does not correspond with physical power, metabolism, etc., but with presence, fullness, sensing life.

weakened when in a state impacted by hyporesponse.

In my experience this adds a vital dimension to understanding and resolving stress issues. Improving one's ability to cope with stress begins with acceptance of one's inner capacity—regardless of size—and with supporting both the need for rest and building, and maintaining a level of energy⁶ and presence.

What is Muscle Response—Including Hyporesponse?

Muscle response is the term used in Bodydynamic Analysis to describe levels of muscular fullness and presence. Bodydynamic Analysis differentiates among 3 types of response, as mentioned above—neutral or balanced response, hyporesponse, and hyperresponse—and also between different levels of hypo- and hyperresponse.⁷

A muscle can be characterized by “full” presence when its psychomotor function is readily available to a person's consciousness and freedom of choice.⁸ A muscle can be characterized by tension/hyperresponse when its psychomotor function is controlled and held back. Free access to use the skill in action is not available to the person since the choice is impacted by a pattern of control.

On the other hand, a muscle can be characterized by loss of energy, deadness, lack of fullness (hyporesponse), corresponding with the individual's access to the psychomotor function being impacted by giving up, growing distant, losing energy, or being unable to act. A strong hyporesponse means the skill disappears completely out of the reach of conscious choice.

Hypo- and hyperresponse are seen as coping or defense strategies brought into use when we are confronted with situations or experiences in which inner experiences and impulses can't be contained in interaction with the particular social context. The confrontation between the personal experience or acting impulse and the surroundings' rejection or denial must be resolved in some way. Muscular giving up or control are possible “solutions” for adapting to the context within which, at this given time, the individual must function. These “solutions” leave one locked in “decisions” expressed as locked patterns.⁹

Hyporesponse as a Strategy and How it Differs From Hyperresponse

Giving up in muscles literally means losing access to sensory presence and the ability to act. The figurative logic behind this is one, then, of not having to sense the part of the self that one

is not able to handle in the given context. If, for instance, I am very busy and it has been a while since I have had time to make love to my husband, sensing my inner thighs would lead to sensing my sexuality—but also pain, longing, frustration, anger, “impossibility”. My “solution” could then be increasing my inherent tendency towards hyporesponse in parts of my inner thigh muscles, resulting in my simply not sensing the impulse towards sexual contact. I no longer sense my sexual desire—a “solution” I share with many others who find themselves under stress. Disconnecting from sexuality then can become an aspect of the locked role I function in if I become too efficient, too quick, while having to make it all work, etc.¹⁰

A natural explanation for sexuality disappearing like this is locked states in our ANS¹¹. Above, I added a muscular dimension to the disappearance of sexuality which can be very helpful if one wants to reconnect with it. Once the stress level lowers or if one wants to help oneself sense that one's sexuality is still there, even under stress. Supporting presence by building energy in the muscles that gave up is one path back to the potential life energy carried in the muscles.

I personally experienced this dynamic once while leading a team project on linking psychomotor skills to gender and sexuality (Brantbjerg & Ollars, 2006; Marcher & Fich, 2010). It happened at a time when I was under massive external pressure—feeling exhausted at the meetings and with no sex drive at all. Within minutes of physical muscle activation and experimental psychomotor movement I sensed my sensuality and sexuality. Even though it didn't change the fact that I had a hard time making room in my life to express it, it felt important to sense it was still a vibrant part of me.

Hyporesponse is a powerful strategy. It can literally remove options from consciousness so they are no longer available. If the hyporesponsive strategy, involving a large degree of giving up, is established during childhood personality development, the potential skill connected to the muscles in question may never have even become accessible to the individual.

This is where hyporesponse differs from hyperresponse, where impulses and feelings that are held back still exist in consciousness. There might not be room in the body for them to unfold, but they are there. Hence, hyperresponse demands attention: Held-back feelings or impulses in the body are usually noticeable. Tight shoulders, a tight lower back, abdominal tension are all unpleasant and often painful. They draw attention to the fact that something is blocked; the free flow in the body is somehow interrupted. Often this is the kind of sensory input that will let us know that we are in a state of stress, defence and locked roles. Hyporesponse, on the other hand, will make one disappear. Parts of one become invisible and escape attention. This is a powerful and brilliant strategy for handling what seems impossible to cope with on a conscious level.

In the development of “postmodern society”, the weight between hypo- and hyperresponse as prominent defence strategies has shifted. Carsten René Jørgensen (2008), clinical psychologist, Ph.D. and teacher at the University of Århus, here supports this view (translation is my own):

¹⁰ The concept of “rolelock” or locked role is inspired by Systems Centered Therapy (SCT). A distinction is made between functional and locked roles. Being in a functional role means that a person can fill out the member role in the present context he/she is in whereas being in a locked role typically is fuelled by old automatic patterns related to a context in the past (Agazarian, 2004).

¹¹ Sexuality is basically a parasympathetic activity. If the ANS is locked in high arousal of the sympathetic branch, which is the case in most of all normal stress states, it will be difficult or impossible to let go. This is the same dynamic making it hard for people to fall asleep or to find rest. A different dynamic also exists in which hyperarousal and building up sexual energy are connected and in which one seeks stress reduction through sexual release.

⁶ “Building energy” refers to the muscular effect of working with slow muscle activation and release. Muscle activation generates heat, energy, flow—and when this is increased liveliness is not released by expression, movement etc, it stays in our muscles as an increased level of presence or energy.

Both “building energy” and “releasing energy” are viewed as physical training principles with various levels of impact depending on the level of hypo- or hyperresponse in the activated muscles. Appendix A illustrates physical training principles and their impacts on muscular hypo- and hyperresponse respectively.

At the School of Body Dynamics, Skolen for Kropsdynamik, and later within the Bodydynamic system's framework, a muscle test has been developed whereby muscle palpation registers the presence of different kinds of muscle response in a person's body. The test differentiates between four levels of hypo- and four levels of hyperresponse and neutral response. This muscle test today goes by the name of BodyMap – and forms the basis for assessment of easily and difficult accessed psychomotor skills in a person and hypothesis about personality development, character structures and trauma in the person's history and present life. (Bernhardt & Isaacs, 2006; Jørgensen & Marcher, 1998).

⁸ Bodydynamic Analysis has explored the link between specific muscles and psychomotor skills (Brantbjerg & Ollars 2006; Jørgensen & Marcher 1997; Marcher & Fich, 2010).

⁹ In Bodydynamic Analysis locked patterns are named as character structures (Bentzen, Bernhardt & Isaacs, 1997; Fich & Marcher, 1997; Marcher & Fich, 2010). A character structure equals muscularly to a certain number of muscles (approximately 30) being impacted by either hypo- or hyperresponse—all involved in a specific psychomotor developmental phase.

To put it crudely, while people in classic modernity suffered a lot from neurotic illnesses with suppressed emotions and needs, postmodernity illnesses are much more about identity disorders (Hohl, 1989). Further, it can be argued that historic changes in modern society and the human condition changed the expression of some of the classic illnesses (such as depression and anxiety). The mature defence mechanism, repression, is placed at the core of neurotic illnesses. Repression keeps “forbidden” activities, needs and fantasies more or less permanently away from consciousness. In more severe identity disorders, repression is replaced with the more primitive defence mechanism, splitting, where subjectively incompatible identity elements are kept strictly separate from each other and take turns dominating consciousness in the individual. (p. 21)

“Neurotic illnesses,” in my interpretation, corresponds with hyperresponsive states. Prominent hyperresponse in the body is linked to the classic neurotic defence strategies. Prominent hyporesponse, on the other hand, is linked to states lacking integration in the personality. Individuals with identity disorders—borderline and other similar conditions—in my view and from my experience have prominent muscular hyporesponse (Bernhardt & Isaacs, 2000; Jørgensen & Marcher, 1998; Fich & Marcher, 1997; Marcher & Fich, 2010).

For treatment purposes it becomes more and more of a challenge to identify therapeutic strategies capable of relieving these un-integrated, diffuse hyporesponsive conditions. Methods focusing on emotional release, free expression, defence relaxation, tension release and letting go will primarily target a hyperresponsive strategy. With hyporesponse, however, something is held back and in need of support in being expressed, let go or relaxed.

A hyporesponsive state needs a different language, a different focal point with methods that will support building presence, containment, focus, and identity, and developing coping skills. Today, many forms of therapy focus mainly on a presence-oriented support for building up the personality.

Resource-oriented skill training used with precise individual dosing that will adapt the physical exercises to the level of energy and presence a person’s hyporesponsive body areas can tolerate is suggested as one method to precisely hone in on the hyporesponsive strategy (Brantbjerg, 2007; Brantbjerg, 2008).

How Does Hyporesponse Impact Coping With Stress?

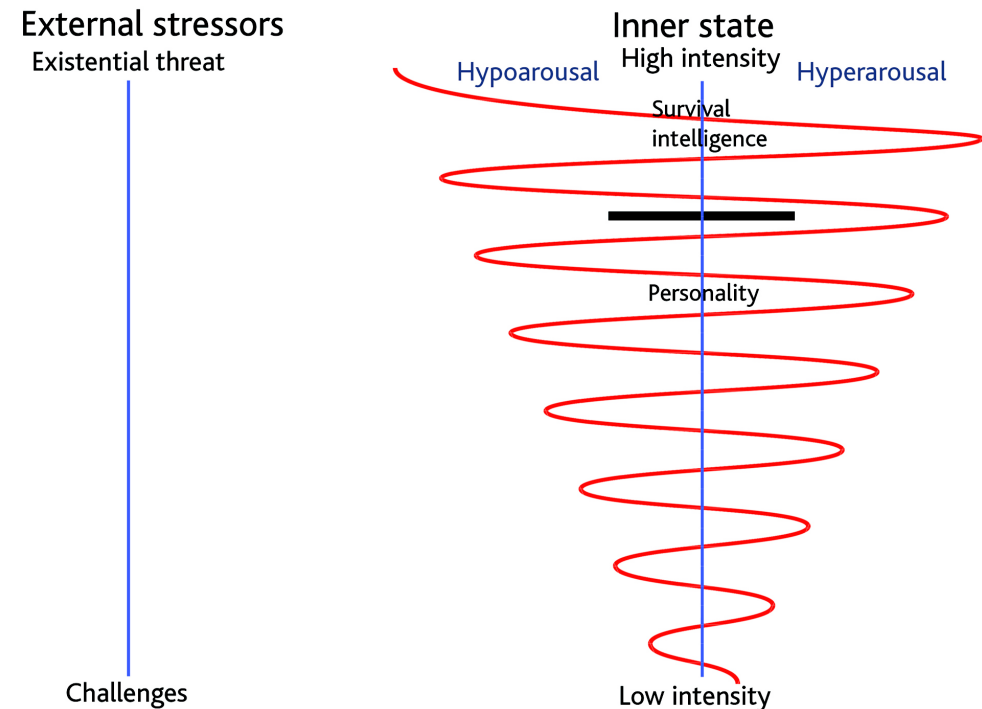
What is Stress?—Coping With Inner and Outer Intensity¹²

Stress is a word that is used to describe both outer conditions and inner states. We talk about stress both when we are facing a big outer pressure from work, for example, and when we describe how it feels inside to be under pressure (Sørensen, 2007). When I teach stress management, I use the concept “intensity” to distinguish between both degrees of impact from outside and degrees of inner intensity in our response to outer impact.

Impact from the outer world can be scored on a scale that ranges from everyday challenge all the way to existential threat. Another distinction in relation to impact from the outside is whether the impact is acute or chronic.

¹² Degrees of “inner intensity” is used here as a concept describing levels of activation in the ANS. A highly intensive inner state can thus be characterized by both high degrees of hyper- and hypo-arousal and inner sensations attached to these 2 kinds of arousal. High inner intensity correlates to the nervous system responding powerfully to a pressure from outside. Degree of outer intensity is used synonymously with how powerful an impact the outer event potentially has.

Inner states can be scored on a scale between low and high intensity, where the degree of intensity will show itself in levels of arousal in the autonomic nervous system and in the radicality of our coping style (meaning if our coping style is directed from the personality or from the “survival intelligence” containing the reactions released in high stress).



Different people have different capacities for coping with high intensity impact from an outer context and with high arousal in the nervous system. A relatively low degree of intensity in outer impact will, in some people, release a high degree of arousal in the inner response—and in others the response will remain as low or at least lower degrees of intensity. Some people are capable of staying present and proactive during high arousal and while being impacted by pressure from outside, while others lose presence, orientation and the capacity to respond actively even with small levels of pressure. What lies behind this difference? Might there be some skills that are crucial for the management of powerful impacts from the outside?¹³

¹³ This question parallels the question raised by many people in trauma research: what characterizes a “good survivor”? The book *Deep Survival* by Gonzales (2003) provides an interesting bid to answering this question. He mentions a crucial skill: the capacity to orient in reality, being able to adjust the mental map to factual reality—and to be able to establish small goals within the context of a bigger overall goal. The same idea is supported by a totally different approach called “Kaizen” (Maurer, 2004). Changing locked patterns has the biggest chance for succeeding when small steps are taken at a time. Through this strategy, inner stress is not activated, which happens if the task becomes overwhelming, “impossible”, pressing, etc. In high inner stress one is not good at changing strategy or learning something new. By choosing small enough steps at a time this dynamic is bypassed.

Resource-Oriented Skill Training

My teaching and personal experience throughout the last 30 years has confirmed that having body-based presence and coping skills makes a big difference in terms of how people tolerate and manage different degrees of intensity (Brantbjerg, Marcher & Kristiansen, 2004). This is true both for inner states and in relation to outer impact. Skills such as flexibility, centering, grounding, boundaries, containment, orientation and contact regulation all support a presence of the here and now. Concrete sensing of the body will maintain a focus on the self so that one feels that one is here. One is able to register one's body's signals and to respond to them. The sensing of one's own body serves as a container for one's emotional state.¹⁴ Concrete sensing of the external world around an individual will anchor him/her in factual reality.¹⁵

If skills are trained and used often enough, they will become automatic. Under pressure, reactions in the ANS will intensify radically, which will in turn decrease access to conscious control of actions. One will act automatically, on "autopilot" —which means that one uses skills that are automated and thereby easily accessible (Siegel, 2004; Gladwell, 2005; Brantbjerg, Marcher & Kristiansen, 2004; Gonzales, 2003). We are not good at changing coping strategies while under pressure, so we will make use of neural networks that are already mapped-out and well-used in the brain (Maurer, 2004; Gladwell, 2005).

A huge challenge arises as intensity increases inside and around us: How do we stay present? It might sound simple but for most people it is not such an easy problem to tackle.

My experience from teaching people basic presence and coping skills is that their capacity to cope with different levels of arousal clearly reveals itself with their capacity to maintain a sense of centring, boundaries, grounding, etc., and also that people's ability to stay present during external as well as internal pressure will be strengthened by training and automating these skills. Bodily skills—combined with consciously staying present—will form a basis for staying proactive when facing external influence and tolerating internal mobilization.

The weaker the skills in a person, the lower the arousal level he/she can tolerate while maintaining a feeling of inner success. Weakened centring, grounding or boundaries will soon feed experiences of overwhelm, confusion, emotional dissociation, need for control, etc.

Hyporesponse in muscles that are connected to basic presence and coping skills will lead to these skills being weakened by, distanced from and vulnerable to external pressure as well as mounting internal intensity. Increased external pressure will typically strengthen a hyporesponsive strategy. One copes by distancing oneself or distancing parts of oneself. This defensive strategy is a way to try and dive beneath the pressure, a way of escaping it. Within a hyporesponsive strategy, there is no way of meeting the pressure and taking a conscious stand.

Reactions to Stress and the Meaning of Hyporesponse

As arousal levels go up we use whatever automatic skills we have available in us. Everyone has their own distinct strategies that will be triggered at different levels of intensity. Consider what levels and kinds of arousal evoke your curiosity, readiness, presence, involvement. What levels and what kinds of arousal create uncomfortable pressure. How do you usually respond to that?

¹⁴ The presentation here is based on a conceptual differentiation between concrete body sensing and emotional body experience. Concrete body sensing is factual without interpretation or emotional charge. For definitions and elaboration see Brantbjerg, 2007.

¹⁵ Gonzales, 2003 directs attention to how the ability to navigate in factual reality and the willingness to adjust our mental roadmap is crucial for our chance of survival in critical situations.

We all have both hypo- and hyperresponsive muscles in our body, not to mention muscles with neutral or balanced response. They are all in different states of balance and to different degrees. We all have a balance between parts of us that respond to pressure by going tense, contracting, fighting; other parts that give up, withdraw, become defensive; and parts that are able to stay present and realistic when facing the pressure we are under. If the different parts of us had a voice, they might say:

Hyperresponsive part: *"I fight, I am handling this pressure. I live up to the world's and my own expectations. I shut off, so I don't have to feel so much. I don't want to be weak. I must be strong. I have to make it."*

Hyporesponsive part: *"This is too much. I disengage. I hide, I disappear, so I can't feel how overwhelmed I get. I am tired. I am weak. I can't."*

Balanced responsive part: *"What are the facts? What information do I need to obtain to be able to decide about this situation? What is my capacity? I am still present. I still have energy. I can go on for a while. I don't know for how long. I know I will need a break at some point to refuel and sense where I am at. Will I stay, meet and match the pressure? Can I create a flow, a way to tag along? Or do I want to leave?"*

How are these 3 responses balanced in you? Perhaps the balance changes depending on the level and kind of stress you meet.

Usually, the more powerful the external influence, the less flexible we become in our choice of strategy and the more dependent we will be on our already automated strategies. In a dominant hyporesponsive strategy, we succumb to the pressure. We collapse and give up—and often emerge from the situations with a feeling of failure. In a dominant hyperresponsive strategy, we will stay in the pressure without making reality-checked choices, and attempt to fight our way through, perhaps succeeding—and perhaps once again reaffirming a locked self-image. The more present we can stay, the better our chances are of making reality-checked choices.

The imagery here is of course simplified. Usually our reality is somewhat more complex. For instance, if I am too busy and react to the pressure by attempting to fight my way through, other parts of me—the hyporesponsive ones—disengage. I fight—and I lose contact with parts of myself. The parts that will disengage are those least present in me in the first place. If for some reason I haven't allowed myself time to do things out of pleasure, and if my idea of what is pleasurable to me is hazy to begin with, this part will definitely disengage under highly intense pressure where there are things to be done all the time. It will disengage by letting the muscles that carry pleasure impulses go hyporesponsive. The benefit I get from this strategy is that I no longer notice that I have no room for pleasure. The parts that were supposed to sense it gave up. That way I am able to be even more efficient. The downside is that the parts of me that should signal time for a break, time to take notice, time to breathe, to take time off, etc, are no longer present. They are not participating; they have dropped out.

My experience as a leader of stress management workshops is that most people recognize this dynamic in some shape or form. Those who have already "hit the wall" and are in the process of regenerating will recognize the dynamic as part of what they went through before the collapse. Others will recognize how they lose contact with parts of themselves under pressure while other parts tend to dominate, combining into a locked strategy.

Our hypo- and hyperresponsive parts engage in a subconscious dialogue about different ways to handle and survive pressure. None of these strategies are based on reality-checked choices. And since our hyperresponsive parts hold the most energy at their disposal, they will usually dominate our external action. This is what makes us able to push ourselves further than is good for us or than we can tolerate. In the worst case, this dynamic is what leads to

levels of burn-out or to one going on for years in the locked role of “being one that can handle anything”.

Increasing Presence by Building up Energy as a Possible Strategy

So what can we do about these dynamics?

A common suggestion, as mentioned earlier, is to teach people to relax in the sense of getting the hyperresponsive muscles to let go and relax. Another often-added suggestion is physical activity as in exercise. And bodily activity does have an impact on hypo-responsive muscles—but only as long as activities are precisely dosed, respecting how much muscular presence and fullness the person can tolerate to build. Hypo-response is not only giving up in a physical sense; it is a psychological strategy. This means that an emotional process will be triggered by inducing presence to given up muscles. The given up parts will approach a conscious level and if the physical activity fails to respect this fact you run the risk of the person being overwhelmed and the hypo-responsive muscles once again disengaging from the activity—leading the person back to a pattern where the most powerful and energetic parts engage and the given up parts in the best case are left unscathed, and in the worst case will give up even more.

In resource-oriented skill training, I will meet the hypo-responsive strategy by teaching people to dose exercises to match their inner energy level. Every time an exercise causes exhaustion or feels difficult to sense at all I interpret it as a sign of hypo-response, and I will recommend the person to go smaller, use less power or perhaps speed. “Do as you did”, I’ll say, “but smaller.”

For example, if the muscles supporting muscular sensing of the physical balance point (psoas major and quadratus lumborum) are hypo-responsive, it will become evident when doing centring exercises. Doing a standing cross/crawl movement, moving right knee and left elbow towards each other, left knee and right elbow towards each other, and so on, will activate core muscles. This activation supports one in sensing one’s physical balance point and in cultivating a feeling of being centred.¹⁶ If the muscles involved are hypo-responsive, it will feel difficult or strenuous to do this exercise. A lower dose could be decreasing the size of the movement: not lifting the leg off the ground at all and only slightly moving knee and elbow towards each other. Dosing can be regulated to the extent even of mere contemplation of movement, imagining doing it. Often the magic happens when dosing matches the person’s level of inner presence and he/she suddenly registers a sensing of the body from within—a slight muscle sensing revealing that something is going on inside! This form of muscle activation, however small, initiates a building of presence and fullness in the muscle. The part that was disengaged and given up is now once again invited back into consciousness by respecting what is a tolerable level of energy for the individual. An exercise dosed precisely to a person’s level of tolerance will very likely lead to an inner sense of success.¹⁷

In relation to coping with stress, this approach is an opportunity for insight into the dialogue between the parts of one that tend to take over and dominate, and the parts that lose energy and give up. It is an opportunity to choose supporting presence and fullness in the parts with the least amount of energy, thus raising energy and presence in the body as a whole. Often this general energy increase will make hyperresponsive parts begin relaxing on their own or be more free to choose to release tension through movement, sound, etc.¹⁸ Combined, these changes will increase a person’s

presence significantly, thereby opening an opportunity for relating realistically to the pressure he/she is under be it internal or external.

At stress management workshops I will start off by inviting participants to choose a situation from their lives they feel is stressful. It should be one with a reasonable, not overly severe level of impact so as to keep the process at an arousal level where it is still possible to explore and integrate new skills. During bodily skill training I will from time to time ask participants to think back to that stressful situation and use their new skills to relate to it. I ask, “which skills seem to support you in relating to the chosen situation?”

On the first day of the workshop I will guide participants in many exercises supporting concrete sensing of the body and building of muscular energy to slowly enhance participants’ bodily presence. Energy will rise. And as we move into late afternoon I will once more ask them to consider the stressful situation and observe how they react. Some common answers are: “*The situation seems less significant to me. I don’t feel pressured anymore. It feels easier to have a distanced view of the situation. I am bigger now; the balance between the situation and me has changed completely.*”

These answers indicate how influential the energy level in the body and our presence are to the perception of external pressure, and thereby also what reactions are evoked in us.

Coping with High Stress—Survival Intelligence Takes Over

The “autopilot” mechanism mentioned earlier is triggered when we momentarily or over a course of time experience high intensity inner states (triggered by external pressure) that exceed our personality’s limit of available resources or defence strategies. Siegel and Hartzell (2004) named this reaction “the low road”, in reference to the way the brain is activated. Put simply, cooperation between the prefrontal cortex and the primitive parts of the brain—the limbic system and brain stem—is interrupted. The dialogue, Siegel points out, between the reflex response¹⁹ on the one side and the ability to reflect and consciously choose on the other simply ceases.²⁰ We respond directly from what I choose to call our “survival intelligence”. Reactions are extremely fast, we act before we have time to think at a speed that is utterly suitable when finding ourselves in life-or-death situations. Survival leaves us no time to think or adjust to any social context before acting. Our personality’s value system is pushed aside and actions based on pure survival instinct take its place (Brantbjerg, Marcher & Kristiansen, 2004).

Siegel and Hartzell (2004) describe “the low road” as follows:

Low-road processing involves the shutting down of the higher processes of the mind and leaves the individual in a state of intense emotions, impulsive reactions, rigid and repetitive responses, and lacking in self-reflection and the consideration of another’s point of view. Involvement of the prefrontal cortex is shut off when one is on the low road. (p.156)

In comparison, “the high road” is

A form of processing information that involves the higher, rational, reflective thought processes of the mind. High-road processing allows for mindfulness, flexibility in our responses, and an integrating sense of self-awareness. The high road involves the prefrontal cortex in its processes. (p.156)

¹⁶ This exercise is described more fully in Brantbjerg 2007

¹⁷ For elaboration on the concept of dosing, see Brantbjerg (2007) and Brantbjerg (2008).

¹⁸ “Releasing energy” is viewed as a training principle in accordance with “Building energy.” (See also note 5.) A given movement can be performed either to build energy or to release energy. Releasing energy is a movement extended to its fullest and let go in the end – perhaps using a sound. (See also Appendix A.)

¹⁹ “Reflex response” is seen as the reactions and actions triggered when activation of the limbic system works directly together with the brain stem and not the cortex. These reflex reactions are partly inherent and partly automated by our experiences.

²⁰ It lies beyond the realm of this article to go into detail about brain function during high stress. Siegel 2004 presents a simple and exact theoretical elaboration on this.

What triggers this shift between coping from the personality (the high road) and coping from the survival intelligence (the low road)? In my view, the mechanism is triggered in situations characterized by an intensity that exceeds what we are able to handle with the resources and defence strategies available to our personality. That is also why it differs from person to person how much and what strain will trigger a shift. How intense an external strain or internal arousal needs to be for a person to feel threatened at an existential level to the point of triggering a shift into survival intelligence mode will vary. Or, to put it in the terms from the above quotes: The strength of a person's bodily presence here and now will determine how much external and internal intensity he/she can tolerate while still maintaining presence and cooperation with his/her prefrontal cortex. Training bodily coping and presence skills can move the shift to "the low road" further up the intensity scale. (See also illustration 2.1 on page xx.)

To be able to shift between direction from personality and direction from survival intelligence is basically constructive and crucial to survival. And no matter how good one's presence skills might be, there will always be situations in life that will trigger "the low road". For the personality to be dismissed when survival intelligence takes over is often perceived as a painful or overwhelming loss of control. Suddenly, one may say or do something with an intensity that takes one by surprise. Or in the wake of existentially threatening situations over a course of time one may feel that one behaved or reacted in ways very foreign to one's self-perception. Bridging the gap between the 2 parts of us—personality and survival intelligence—is, to my mind, a vital part of trauma and high-stress healing work (Brantbjerg, 2007; Brantbjerg, Marcher & Kristiansen, 2004).

To quote Siegel and Hartzell (2004):

One of the many important functions that the orbitofrontal cortex is believed to carry out is the regulation of the autonomic nervous system (ANS), the branch of our nervous system that regulates bodily functions such as heart rate, respiration and digestion. It has two branches, the sympathetic, which is like an accelerator, and the parasympathetic, which resembles a braking system. The two systems are regulated to keep the body balanced, ready to respond with heightened sympathetic arousal to a threat, for example, and able to calm itself down when the danger is past. The ability to have balanced self-regulation may depend on the orbitofrontal region's capacity to act as a kind of emotional clutch, balancing the accelerator and brakes of the body..(p. 177)

As long as one is able to move back and forth between dominant activation of the sympathetic (S) and the parasympathetic (PS) branches of the autonomic nervous system, one is, in my experience, able to handle external and internal intensity. As long as I am able to sleep at night, as long as I can pause and nourish myself (shift to dominant PS activation), and as long as I can mobilize a drive to match what I might encounter (S activation), I will successfully cope with the situation I am in. I might feel pressured by this state, or I might enjoy the arousal; I am familiar with both.

During high mobilization of the ANS it is possible to shift between hyperarousal (highly active S) and hypoarousal (highly active PS). In hyperarousal, we are extremely active, ready, fast, hyper-attentive. In hyporarousal, we go dead, we hibernate, sleep heavily without dreaming²¹.

²¹ Please note that muscular hypo- and hyperresponse and hypo- and hyperarousal in the autonomic nervous system are not the same. The skeletal musculature handles our psychomotor skills – and when the direction comes from the personality, our muscles are under our conscious control. We can decide to lift one arm, or not. Muscle response, whether hypo-, hyper- or neutral/balanced, is linked to the skills held in the personality. With this muscle response we regulate our access to these potentially conscious skills. The autonomic nervous system regulates vital functions such as respiration and heart rate. Regulation is automatic and beyond the personality's control.

At extremely stressful times of my life I have experienced this shift between states. Super ready and action-driven as soon as I woke up—and completely dead at a moment's pause or when sleeping at night. It is extremely strenuous to the body to function in high arousal over a prolonged period of time—but still, it is less strenuous if the ability to shift between rest and activity is intact.

The model (ill. 2.1) illustrates intensity scales with swings between the PS and the S system. The swings increase as we move up the intensity scale. The model illustrates the potential ability to maintain a swing between PS rest state and S preparedness even under high intensive influence.

Distress

Distress²² containing the kinds of stress response that are particularly strenuous to the body appears when this natural regulation between S and PS dominance is no longer intact.²³ We can get caught up in both hyper- and hypoarousal. In locked hyperarousal, an individual loses the ability to rest and regenerate. He/she is "on" all the time, constantly awake and mobilized to act and react. In a state of locked hypoarousal the opposite is the case: the body goes dead, collapses, sleeps a lot, and can't get going after sleep. The model (ill. 2.2 and 2.3) illustrates locked positions as a shifting of the spiral movement to one side or the other. Locked positions can be more or less extreme depending on how far the spiral tilts. Both extreme reactions are survival strategies that help us through periods of high intensity. They are part of the survival intelligence repertoire. At the same time, they are highly strenuous for the body and it takes time to land and recuperate from them.

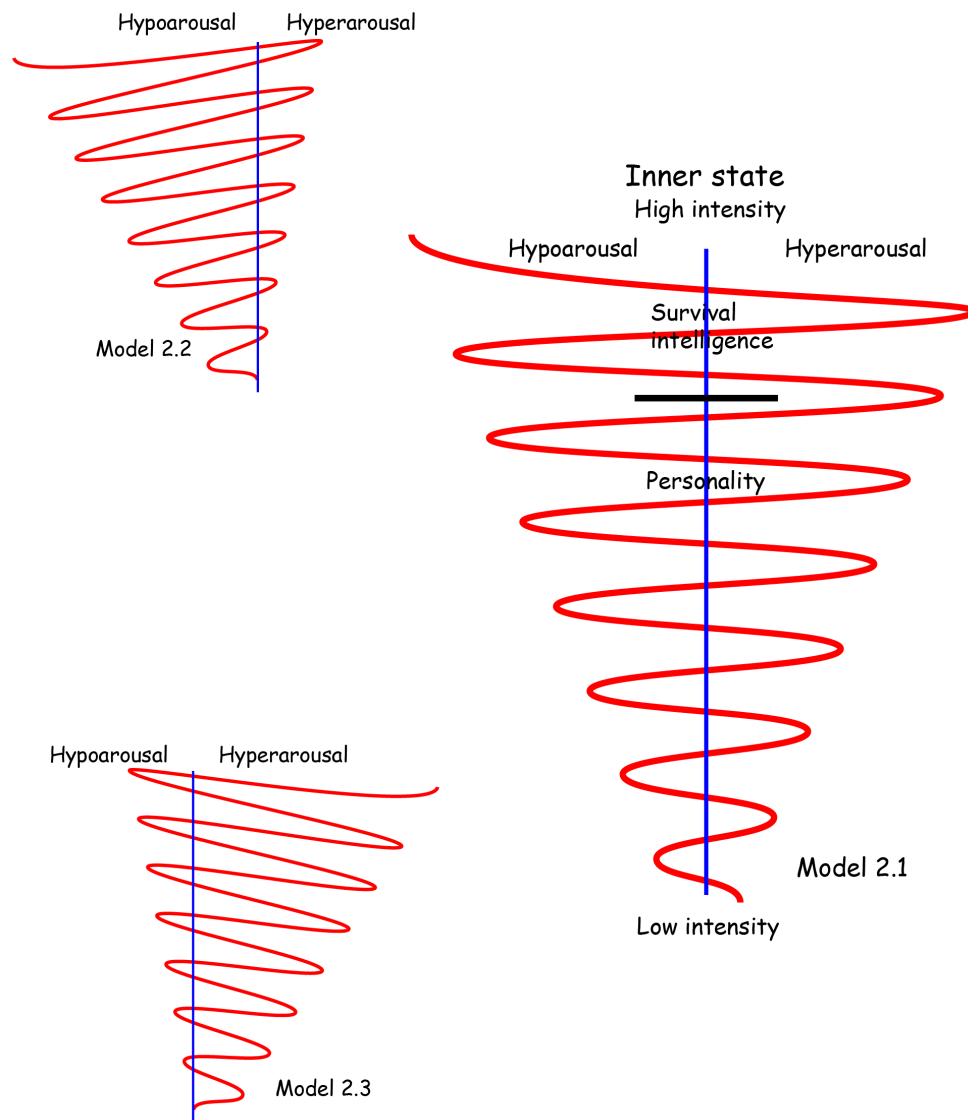
That we will experience situations that trigger these high-stress mechanisms is a fact of life. But sometimes we can make life choices that will change our circumstances to a course that better matches our ideal level of function. It can be quite important to avail ourselves of these opportunities.

On the other hand, it is my experience that high stress and trauma "happen". They are a part of life that we can't discard. We can choose to relate consciously to the reality of these phenomena, including what to do with them.

The skills we have trained and integrated well enough to be automatic will follow us into the repertoire of our survival intelligence. That means that we can expand our repertoire and widen our access to different options during high stress through skill training while we are not under pressure. This is the essence of using resource-oriented skill training as a transformational strategy in relation to stress and trauma.

²² The term distress was introduced by Hans Selye back in the 1930's. "Distress" is perceived as negatively charged stress straining the body both physiologically and psychologically. At the opposite end of the spectrum the term "eustress" is used to name stress that is perceived as positive like a euphoria (Goldwag, 1979).

²³ I use the word "dominance" to underline that the swing in the autonomic system is not a jump between either/or. The parasympathetic and the sympathetic branch are both continually active, but with one being dominant at any given time. This should also help to clarify that the terms "rest" and "activity" are relative and can be varied with different levels of activation in PS and S respectively.



Coping With Transitions

Consider: What skills help with mastering transitions between high arousal and low arousal and vice versa? What helps with shifting between activity and rest? What enables one to land after functioning by survival intelligence for a short while or over a prolonged period of time?

Mastering these transitions determines how one functions in different states. If one is able to “hold on to oneself” through transitions, the better the chances are of reaping the benefits from the states. In my experience, an internal dialogue between our hypo- and hyperresponsive parts will play a significant role in how well we transitions are handled. And being aware of this internal dialogue can offer new opportunities.

Shift Between Activity and Rest—Taking Breaks

Shifting between rest and activity, between PS and S dominance, is a skill as any other basic skill—it can be trained. Skill training, as mentioned earlier, is only effective at an arousal level at which the individual is present and able to adopt new material. When external influence and/or internal arousal intensify radically, we depend on the skills that are already automatic such as shifting between rest and activity. It pays to train the skill while not under pressure, when it isn’t “necessary”.

Now: what constitutes “a good break”, and how do you know? What determines if a break feels good or bad? What supports you in transitioning from activity to break/rest mode? And what supports you to get going again from rest and back into activity in a way that makes you feel “there”? The internal dialogue between hypo- and hyperresponsive parts of the self will often reveal itself by our answers to these questions.

For a break to be “good”, PS activity must dominate the ANS, but not the part activated in hypoarousal. One does not regenerate in a state of hypoarousal: the physical body merely survives.

Stephen Porges has introduced a theory describing three branches of the autonomic nervous system: The S branch and the two branches of the PS system. One branch, the dorsal PS, is presented as enervating our earliest evolutionary survival response to threat. One goes dead; one goes into hypoarousal. Activation of the S branch of the ANS is linked to the ability to flee and fight. Our most recent evolutionarily developed survival reaction is represented by our ability to bond and seek out social contact when we have felt threatened. This response is linked to innervating the second or ventral branch of the PS system.²⁴

I don’t possess the neuro-anatomical expertise to assess Porges’ contribution. However, from my practical experience in working with stress and trauma I do recognize that it makes a lot of sense to differentiate between two types of PS reaction. One is dominant during hypoarousal—when we need to react by survival intelligence—and one is dominant when resting, regenerating, refuelling, nourishing ourselves, making love etc. For that reason I will refer to this differentiation in the following.

Let us return to the question of what constitutes a good or functional break or the opposite. After lunch on the first day of a stress management workshop I will ask the participants if they had a good lunch break and on what they base this assessment. After they respond with their answers I define a functional break as a period of time in which one takes in something one perceives as nourishing, and in which, to a satisfactory degree, one changes focus from what one was previously doing. There is a lot of individual variation in what is considered “good break nourishment” and how much one needs to let go of the activity one was in before the break.

Nourishing the self is an activity, whether it is with food, contact, movement, nature, experiences or inspiration. It takes presence and bodily skills to let go of what one is doing, orient to what resources of nourishment are available, and choose, reach for, take in and digest them. If one is exhausted or has collapsed, this kind of active exchange with the world is not accessible. Drawing inspiration from Porges’ view on the ANS: A good break depends on the ability to engage on a social level and interact in a nourishing way. And this entails activating the ventral part of the PS system.²⁵

²⁴ OThese three survival strategies humans share with many species of animals. The “go dead” mechanism is shared with all living creatures, even amoebas. The fight/flight strategy is shared with other animals that are able to actively move themselves out of a situation. And seeking out contact and engaging on a social level is shared with animals that live in packs (Hart, 2006; Claesson, 2003).

²⁵ The expression “interacting with the social platform” or “engaging in the social platform” is used in a broad sense in the following part of the article. It can mean anything from reading a book, choosing to see a movie, go for a walk, talk on the phone, visit someone, look out the window to enjoy the view, be touched etc.—any of the many degrees of contact between the the self and the world.

How is the internal balance between hypo- and hyperresponsive parts significant for the ability to establish this involvement with the social platform from the ventral part of the PS,

The state one is in while active and preceding the break will determine how easy or hard it will be to handle the transition into break. Now, what happens when one goes to break in a typical stress pattern with hyporesponsive parts dominating while other parts have disappeared in hyporesponse? Often one will plunge into hyporesponse— or to avoid ending up down there one doesn't let go of the tension and misses the break all together.

The hyporesponsive parts are forgotten; they go unnoticed and will not attract attention to themselves. They are often pushed even further aside when one initiates action or needs to perform or be efficient, because they are slow and lack fullness and presence. In that sense, they are “difficult”. They have a hard time “keeping up” and are often expelled from our conscious self-image. And yet they are there—valid parts of the self even to those with higher energy levels and those who fight.

The forgotten, hyporesponsive parts often come to the fore when one shifts into break mode. If one did not pay attention to these parts of the body while active, they lie dormant, “waiting” for one to let go of activity. Then they emerge as a sense of emptiness, exhaustion, lack of impulse—sentiments of “don't know what I need or want”. It becomes difficult to have a functional break because the parts that were supposed to take notice and seek out potential sources of nourishment have given up.

I recognize this as my typical reaction when returning home from extended periods of intensive teaching. Parts of me that I didn't have or take time to notice or attend to will emerge when I get home—usually as feelings of emptiness, sadness or difficulty sensing what kind of nourishment I need. I am naturally tired, but I am also impacted by a degree of hyporesponse. In this situation, there is a risk I will start working again to avoid the emptiness or that I will collapse. If I stay with this feeling of emptiness and loss of energy, if I tolerate sensing these states, a sense of presence will slowly build in my body in a different way. Energy is reintroduced to the areas that gave up. Often there is a phase where I feel generally frustrated—and after that I begin sensing what I want. Relating to this dynamic on a conscious level will be supported by knowing one's own tendencies towards hyporesponse well enough. I will ask myself: What parts of the body usually “disappear”? Which parts do I easily forget to feel? What kinds of impulses do I usually lose contact with—breathing, looking around, asking myself what I want, taking direction from within, moving, feeling centred, seeking support, advancing, etc?

Based on this knowledge of myself I can make a conscious choice to support and direct my attention towards presence in these areas before initiating an activity. The intention behind these choices is consciously nourishing the parts of me that tend to get lost—not “out of pity”, but in recognition of their existence and the fact that they (no matter what I do) have an impact when I am active and also when I need a break. Increasing my presence by building energy in my hyporesponsive areas is being responsible for them as parts of myself—while including my sensing them as a basis for my conscious choices.

It is important to keep in mind that, as stated before, hyporesponse is a psychological defence strategy. Increasing presence in hyporesponsive parts of the body is a transformational process that can only happen to the extent that one is ready for it. On principle, resource-oriented skill training always encourages going for exercises that leave us with a feeling of success—which with regards to hyporesponse will mean areas with a slight tendency towards giving up that are able to regain presence by muscle activation and where the psychological material that is stirred can be perceived as a resource.

Dysfunctional breaks are often described as breaks in which one has collapsed— in which

one plunges into hyporesponse or even further into hypoarousal. An example is getting stuck in front of the TV without choosing what to watch and without being able to take in what is being watched. Or “bad breaks” can be the ones in which one remains stuck in activity, is interrupted, doesn't get to let go; so one doesn't let go of S innervation and maybe not of hyperresponsive dominance either, perhaps as a safeguard to avoid plunging into giving up.

The regulation of these dynamics is an interaction between regulation in the ANS and the nature of one's coping skills and is expressed in the degree of hypo-, hyper- or balanced muscle response. Usually, stress patterns are described in terms of regulating the nervous system. When under stress, we are usually locked in S nervous system overdrive; we are locked in activity and need to enter the PS and rest. Focusing on muscular hyporesponse will add another dimension to this simplified picture. Hyporesponsive muscles don't actively participate in regulating activity. They don't signal stop or continue. Often, they never really engage in the activity, or they disengage if arousal levels start going up.

Without sufficient muscular presence one doesn't land in social contact, which, according to Porges corresponds with activity in the ventral part of the PS nervous system. Instead one lands in a body characterized by giving up in bigger or smaller parts of the musculature. In this state, pausing and regenerating becomes difficult because one has difficulty sensing and acting on the impulses that will initiate nourishing exchanges with the surrounding world. In relation to the nervous system, this will sometimes lead to slipping into hypoarousal in the PS system and thereby slipping out of social involvement altogether when one should have been able to recuperate.

These states are not relieved by learning how to relax, but by acknowledging and integrating the hyporesponsive parts into the self-image and by learning how to build and retain energy.

This insight is significant:

- in transitioning from rest to activity. Increasing presence by building energy in hyporesponsive areas supports us in engaging in activity as fully as possible.
- during activity. How do we maintain contact to the parts of us that are least full and present? How do we shift between attention to parts of us that tolerate and perhaps thrive on high intensity – and parts that disengage as arousal levels rise?
- in transitioning from activity to rest. How do we support presence in hyporesponsive parts of the body when relaxing so we are capable of regenerating in exchange with the world around us instead of collapsing?

The transitions here are present many times during the day at different levels of both internal and external intensity. Our daily lives offer an endless number of transitions with which to practice our attention to how we bring ourselves through transitions. How do we get out of bed in the morning? How do we initiate the activities of the day? How do we shift between rest and activity during the day? To include attention to our hyporesponsive parts during these transitions holds a profound transformational potential. And it develops skills that are crucial when having to handle violent transitions between the personality and states of high arousal.

In and out of High Arousal—How to “Take off” and “Land”

As described earlier, the state one is in while engaging in an activity will play a significant role in how one will exit that activity. The “platform” one “takes off” from when entering high arousal will affect the platform one ultimately will “land” on. So which skills support us through these transitions, and how is attention to hyporesponse significant?

The more presence and fullness one has in the body, the more high intensity exterior influence one will be able to meet and match. In other words, one can prepare for shifts into

high arousal by building muscular energy. From an expanded bodily presence, a shift into reflex-directed reactions will seem far less overwhelming or frightening than if the body is disengaged and limp when one suddenly find oneself challenged by some form of high intensity influence.

As one shifts to “the low road”—as directed by survival intelligence—a shift will occur in motor function. As long as one is functioning directed by the personality, muscle control is governed by consciousness. One decides to lift an arm or not. In states of high arousal, movement impulses are to a large extent ruled by reflexes.²⁶ We don’t think before we remove our hand from the burning hot stove. We—luckily—get it off of there before we have time to think or feel anything.

This reflexive shift into direction is a trainable skill. The article “The Body as Container of Instincts, Emotions and Feelings” (Brantbjerg & Stepath, 2007) describes a series of exercises training the specific skill of daring to let go and allow the body’s reflex movements to take over.²⁷

If the body is dominated by muscular hyporesponse, shifting into high arousal feels overwhelming. The body is not in a state suited for handling the level of intensity that will be released in reflex movement. Take a moment to think about how your body reacts when you lose balance, are about to fall, and then quickly regain your footing. The speed and intensity in these movements are high. Now imagine that in the seconds before you lose your balance a big part of your body is in a giving up mode? What does the difference feel like? Anxiety and stiffening are common reactions. Based on Porges’ three categories of survival response it is highly likely that the body will “choose”²⁸ the most radical strategy—to stiffen and go dead.²⁹ The fight/flight mechanism demands extrovert energy. That is difficult and usually impossible to mobilize from a dominantly hyporesponsive state.

Dominant muscular hyporesponse can in other words predispose one to go dead or freeze in a state of high arousal. By contrast, dominant muscular hyperresponse will predispose one to fight or flight if the situation allows it.

The survival responses one “chooses” are based on an instantaneous scanning of options in the immediate situation combined with the accessible resources within ourselves. Working with hyporesponsive muscles and thereby raising a general level of presence in the body has proved to be a method capable of influencing the kinds of response accessible to us during high stress. Increased presence in hyporesponsive areas of the body will often lead to a greater sense of safety in letting go in the hyperresponsive patterns (letting go of control) and thereby more freely being guided by the reflexes.

Now: What about landing when returning from a state of high arousal? How does one master the transition from high to low internal intensity, from being directed by the reflexes in high arousal to being in control in the personality?

²⁶ Direction through reflexes in my interpretation also includes the use of automatic skills.

²⁷ Brantbjerg, Marcher & Kristiansen (2004) reserves an entire chapter (chapter 5) for describing training bodily coping skills as a trauma therapeutic method. There you will find an earlier version of what I present in this article. Some terminology has changed, but the basic concepts are the same.

²⁸ “Choose” is in quotation marks to stress the fact that the choices one makes in survival intelligence are not conscious. Nonetheless, there is an inner authority that scans the situations instantly and makes the choices that then dictate the response.

²⁹ To “go dead” is a powerful survival strategy. In trauma research and trauma therapy there are 2 leading perceptions of what happens in ANS in the the going-dead reaction: One idea is that the ANS is entirely dominated by PS activation, which in Porges’ version(citation??) is the dorsal branch of PS (Hart, 2006; Claesson, 2003). The other idea is that “accelerator and breaks are activated simultaneously”, meaning there is a strong activation in S on top of which lies a strong activation in PS (Levine, 1998). These two directions point to different therapeutic strategies—so it matters which one you base your interventions on. In my view, both versions probably happen—and the challenge for a trauma therapist lies in discerning when you are faced with what kind of hypoarousal. This article sees hypoarousal as an expression of powerful activation of the dorsal branch of PS.

The challenge at hand depends on whether the individual needs to find a way back from hyper- or from hypoarousal and also if the high arousal states he/she has been in were experienced as positive or negative. Landing from a positively experienced high-intensity situation³⁰ can be as much of a challenge as landing from a negatively experienced high stress experience in which one was either paralyzed/went dead or was ready for fight/flight.

For me it is a challenge to finish and return home from a big professional conference or an intensive workshop. It entails shifting from a highly intense context with a lot of people and activities back to the everyday context I share with my husband. Maintaining body presence during landing and taking actions to secure a reasonably slow lowering of arousal levels instead of an abrupt and immediate one are the best tools I have discovered for this transition.

The risk of collapsing, as I described earlier when talking about pausing, is very high when returning from a state of high arousal. The body is naturally tired from high mobilization and often there is a natural impulse towards swinging into rest mode. At the same time, one usually lands in a context where there is less involvement, less stimulus and less threat if returning from a negatively experienced situation. There is a loss in landing—a loss of intensity—that can be experienced as either a relief or a disappointment.

Different emotions can be stirred during landing. If the shift is abrupt and one loses presence and a certain level of activity in the body, it is very easy to land in collapse with dominant hyporesponse or even hypoarousal where it will be difficult to sense what is happening inside. One may not sense one’s emotional reactions to this shift in intensity levels. The challenge is to maintain enough body presence for one to be able to land engaged in the social platform. From a muscular point of view, one should retain some of the fullness and activity already present in the body and let go of it slowly instead of collapsing. Letting go slowly is a skill that takes just as much presence as getting ready by building up energy. And both will challenge the parts of the self that are impacted by hyporesponse.³¹

Another version of “landing” from high arousal is not landing at all. One “chooses” to stay in the state of high arousal. In my understanding, this is the key to unresolved trauma and high-stress states. One remains fully or partially in the high arousal reactions.

The condition for being able to land is that there is a platform to land on within oneself and in a social context. In other words: the degree of safety in the personality’s domain will determine the degree of landing.³²

The process of landing makes the transition between personality and survival intelligence visible – thereby highlighting how well the two parts cooperate. The same goes for shifting from normal arousal level to high arousal as described earlier. Below, I systematize different patterns in the relationship between personality and survival intelligence and hypo-/hyperarousal in the

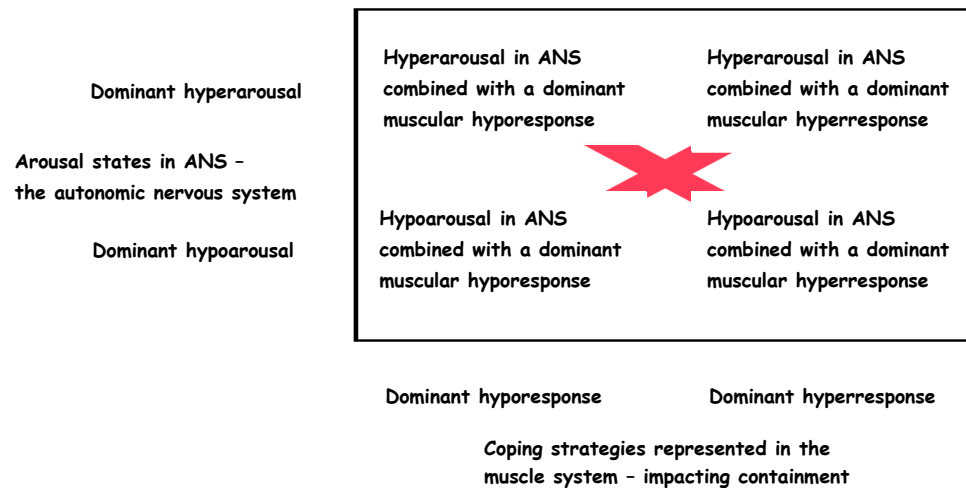
³⁰ Positively experienced high arousal events have also been referred to as “peak experiences”. These experiences hold states of heightened consciousness beyond the realm of the personality (Jarlneæs & Luytelaar, 2004; Brantbjerg, Marcher & Kristiansen, 2004)

³¹ At a psychotherapist conference in Cambridge 2007 I was asked to guide the participants in preparing for the event to come to an end and for the journey home by using body-oriented skill training. I verbally supported awareness about how ending a conference entails a shift in intensity and also guided participants in sensing basic bodily skills such as grounding, centering and personal boundaries. Part 1 of this guidance took place in the morning of the last day and part 2 was 30 minutes before the conference ended. Feedback from both participants and hosts was very positive. Many found it helpful to become more aware of how concrete body sensing can be used in coping with the transition.

³² Optimizing safety is the key to landing and to integrating the parts of a person that has stayed stuck in unresolved trauma reactions. “Safe base”, “anchor” and “safe place” are terms used in all kinds of trauma therapy (Bowly, 1988; Rothschild, 2000; Levine, 1998; Anstorp, Benum & Jakobsen, 2006).

autonomic nervous system. The presentation is based on my interpretations of patterns I have observed in clients, students, colleagues and myself through many years of working with stress and trauma. I also include ideas of treatment strategies in relation to hypo- and hyper patterns that I have experienced as effective.

Schematically the options can be presented as follows:



Hyperarousal in ANS Combined With a Dominant Muscular Hyperresponse

A state of being ready for fight in the nervous system and of predominating muscular tension and control will mean that the body's energy levels are VERY high. Typically, one will be locked in high intense activity and if one takes time off one will still be active. Another option is that one doesn't land and never takes time off because the personality one was supposed to land in doesn't allow it. One keeps going all the time. The hyporesponsive parts of the person—if they exist—are kept far from consciousness and will never come to light. They are expelled from one's self-image completely.

For one who has this combination of hyperarousal and dominant muscular hyperresponse, there is a need to learn how to relax enough for one to start noticing the parts that have never been noticeable. After that, it is wise to work on building presence in the neglected parts at the same time as focusing on relaxation. Such a powerful tension strategy is there for a reason. What has been avoided by maintaining such a high activity level? Those secrets are usually well hidden in the neglected hyporesponsive parts.

Hyperarousal in ANS Combined With a Dominant Muscular Hyporesponse

This combination often leads to the person shifting between being unwilling/unable to land and collapsing. Dominant muscular hyporesponse will make it difficult to "land engaged on a social platform" (corresponding with the ventral branch of PS according to Porges). As soon as intensity drops the tendency towards collapsing shows and instead of landing in a nourishing exchange with the world, one ends up in passive giving up or, in extreme cases, hypoarousal. Or

one stays mobilized in hyperarousal with drive, in high gear, social in the way one can be when in high arousal, lest one end up collapsing.

I very often see this combination either as a main pattern or part of a pattern in people having unresolved trauma issues. Working to build presence in the hyporesponsive musculature and, through that, adding more coping skills to the personality is crucial for initiating a transformation process. A strategy targeting the hyperaroused part of the pattern, teaching the person to relax, will not work. In the worst case, it will trigger collapse in hypoarousal where no healing happens and that is often difficult to get out of once one is in it.

People that "burn out" know this pattern. They have been in hyperarousal for a long time, covering up the patterns of resignation by high stress mobilization—until the system gives in, and they collapse into hypoarousal. The missing piece is learning how to build presence and energy in a way that respects inner dosing. By slowly gaining skills, a person becomes able to engage in the social platform from the personality and not from the high stress pattern.

Hypoarousal in ANS Combined With a Dominant Muscular Hyperresponse

Hypoarousal states are terrifying to most people because they hold a profound feeling of powerlessness. Landing from hypoarousal is a challenge to everybody and my experience, along with that of other trauma therapists, indicates that landing only happens if safe contact with safe people is available—contact that includes acceptance and understanding of the deadness and lack of impulse in the state (Rothschild, 2000). This form of contact offers a way for the state to start shifting. When that doesn't happen (which is the case in many unresolved trauma and high-stress patterns), how will one "land" in personality? One option is to use all one's available hyperresponsive patterns to keep the state of hypoarousal at bay from the consciousness. In other words: always remain on the go, always active. It is difficult to relax in such a condition. Giving up is lurking underneath, ready to take over as soon as one lets go even a little. So one will try to avoid that. From time to time a state of hypoarousal will break through the defences of the personality, and then a new struggle for escaping deadness and getting back into activity will begin.

What works here is a slow build-up of presence in the hyporesponsive parts of the body. This will facilitate approaching the deep experiences of powerlessness and deadness from a more resourceful place within. We need to build a container in the body and personality that will be able to tolerate the states, making it possible to acknowledge and integrate them. After all, they are natural reactions to extreme impact.

A strategy targeting relaxation is absolutely contraindicated. Relaxing with this pattern equals plunging into hypoarousal—and as long as there isn't a container for the state, there is no other option than fighting your way out of it again and thereby re-establishing control via the hyperresponsive muscles.

Hypoarousal in ANS Combined With a Dominant Muscular Hyporesponse

This combination contains profound giving up both as survival strategy and as personality defence. This state will often express itself as difficulty functioning in normal life. With dominant muscular hyporesponse, one is left with no way of escaping from the powerlessness and the deadness. There is no container or acting ability to remove oneself from the deadness. Slow and careful building of energy—with continuous integration, verbalization and building

of coping skills in a therapeutic relation—stands a chance of having an impact on this state. Strategies focusing on relaxation and emotional release are contraindicated in this case. The issue is that there is no centring, no gathering, no ability to act—there is nothing to let go of.

The above presentation is, of course, simplified. Most people usually have more than one of these strategies available to them—and will shift between one and another—though often favouring one that will dominate. My key intention is to communicate an idea of how vital building of presence in hyporesponsive musculature is in coping with and landing from high-stress states. It is the strength of one's personality's container, supported by one's muscular presence, that will determine how one is able to interact with the social platform. And it is this interaction with the social platform that offers an opportunity for landing and releasing high arousal states.

A Physical Add-on: One More Piece to the Hypo/Hyper Landscape

When observing people in high-stress states, the related question is how these states manifest in the body. Muscle response patterns manifest themselves by the level of distance/deadness, fullness/presence or tension in the muscles. Arousal states manifest themselves in the changing of the pulse, heart rate, pupil dilation, temperature, respiration, etc. But they are also expressed in the state of the body's connective tissue—tendons and fascia.³³ The connective tissue is the first tissue to mobilize when we first even think of moving—before our muscles are activated, and before consciousness realizes that we are getting ready for something.

To feel the difference between muscle activation and connective tissue activation, try the following:

Let one arm hang down by your side and then lift it out to one side. Use your other hand to feel the muscle on top of your arm (the deltoid muscle). When the arm is lifted out to the side, the muscle is activated, which is felt as a firming and hardening of the muscle. This is muscle activation.

Now let the arm hang by your side again. Simply think of moving the arm to the side, and notice the mobilization that happens when you do that. This mobilization happens in tendons and fascia around the muscle. Also notice the state of readiness that is activated by this almost invisible physical mobilization.

Connective tissue is activated when we mobilize to get ready for action. Connective tissue activity links to our intention of moving—not the movement itself.³⁴ It is noticeable as a feeling of energy in ourselves and in others. Even connective tissue can be hypo- and hyperresponsive. This adds another piece to the puzzle and another series of possible patterns and combinations of hypo- and hyper patterns. I will not go schematically through these options, merely highlight one pattern I often see in people with locked stress patterns.

Hyperarousal in the ANS is often combined with hyperresponse in the connective tissue (whereas hypoarousal is linked to hyporesponse in the connective tissue). The body has a tense expression that stems not only from the nervous system, but also from how energy radiates from the tense fascia system. The body is fixed in a permanent mobilization.

If you as the therapist don't look for muscular fullness or think that there might be a dominant muscular hyporesponse beneath the tight connective tissue, you might miss it and

³³ Fascia are thin connective tissue membranes, enveloping all the body's tissue, muscles, bones, organs. They are tied together into one big system connecting the whole body.

³⁴ I learned the term "intentional movements" related to connective tissue from Peter Levine back in the 1980's. Intentional movement is a key concept in working with trauma (Levine, 1998)

opt for a strategy of helping the person to relax. This strategy is not recommended. With an underlying dominant muscular hyporesponse there is no desirable base for landing. Mobilizing for action in survival intelligence is not the same as having access to impulses for action in the personality. There is still a need for building muscular presence and training basic psychosocial skills that in time will help establish a landing platform in the personality.

Concluding Remarks and Perspectives

The focus of this article has been to bring the concept of the hyporesponsive strategy to the foreground, especially in relation to different levels of stress. Hyporesponse, as the title indicates, is a hidden challenge in coping with stress because it doesn't call attention to itself. Acknowledging and accepting the presence of hyporesponse in the body is a powerful process potentially capable of transforming a person's self-perception. To most people I teach for the first time, hyporesponse is an unacknowledged part of their bodily reality and self-image. Signals from hyporesponsive parts of the body are often interpreted as "tension" and habitual thinking often leads to the conclusion that the cure is learning how to relax the body. Naming hyporesponse as a reality in parts of the musculature equal to hyperresponse will expand our perception of ourselves and also our frame of interpretation of the body's signals.

When one is unaware of something, one cannot consciously take responsibility for it. Acknowledging the existence of hyporesponse offers an opportunity for taking responsibility.³⁵

One can choose a conscious strategy towards one's own hyporesponsive parts. Knowledge of and experience with bodily strategies such as building energy and respecting individual dosing as effective strategies in dealing with hyporesponsive areas makes it possible to choose to relate actively to these hyporesponsive parts. One is then provided with the conscious choice of how. How do I, on the one hand, respect hyporesponse as a defence strategy I will not be able to change in the blink of an eye and, on the other, actually be able to reach behind the strategy using a realistic dosing and establish contact to the psychomotor potential lying in the muscles?

Non-acknowledged hyporesponse is often linked to locked roles.³⁶ If one is in a dominant hyporesponsive state, one easily sees oneself as "the victim", "small", "useless." One thinks: "can't", "someone else has to do it", etc. These roles induce certain counter roles—one invites the other to take over, control, solve things, or rescue or pursue one.

Knowledge of hyporesponse and knowledge of precise methods with an effect on hyporesponse opens an opportunity to step out of these locked role interactions. For instance, I can ask a student/client locked in passivity where he/she feels a lack of presence in the body. This question alone holds the potential to break locked roles—and to initiate a mutual exploration into the world of hyporesponse.

³⁵ As said elsewhere in this article it is important to respect hyporesponse as a psychological defence strategy. Building presence in hyporesponsive muscles evoke forgotten or never integrated parts of the person—and can only lead to success at a pace that allows these parts to be integrated into consciousness. Focusing on the areas in the body or exercises, where contact to hyporesponsive muscles immediately evokes some sense of internal resource is one way to dose and respect this process of integration.

³⁶ My use of the term "roles" is again inspired by Systems Centered Therapy (SCT). See note 10. (Agazarian, 2004). Another important inspiration to my understanding of locked interaction dynamics linked to hyporesponse/giving up is Karpman's triangle of victim, persecutor, and rescuer (1973). In my experience, hyporesponsive patterns are always represented in hidden interactions among these three roles. I see distinct hyporesponsive patterns in those that carry the role as victim and hidden, often unacknowledged hyporesponsive patterns in those that carry rescuer and persecutor roles, disguised by extrovert, hyperresponsive patterns.

Where is the giving up located? Is there an impulse to move? If not, I as the therapist might suggest a movement to activate the body area in question, being very precise about dosing. Perhaps the movement needs to be very small. Or perhaps the right dosing will be to simply direct attention to the area, acknowledging its existence, or maybe just to put a hand there. Are there other parts in the body that are starting to relax as this particular place gets attention and becomes alive?

A journey into the world of hyporesponse can often evoke a sense of hope—hope that change is possible even in the places where one has lost access to one's presence and one's ability to act. This hope is not evoked by someone else's doing it for me. Hope rises from the fact that here is something I can do for myself, perhaps while supported by a contact field.

Appendix A USE OF BODY ACTIVITIES— TRAINING PRINCIPLES IN RESOURCE-ORIENTED SKILL TRAINING.

In this paper you find a description of many years of collected experience about how different forms of working with/using the body can affect muscle response (tension or undertension), and through that, the personality and psychological/emotional material connected to muscular patterns. The following scheme summarises these experiences.

Three main categories of muscular response can be distinguished:

Tension and hyper response correspond to holding back emotions and impulses

Neutral or balanced response corresponds to having access to impulses and emotions and having free choice available in terms of expression or not

Undertension and hyporesponse correspond to giving up emotions and impulses

Different physical activities have a different effect on hyper responsive and hypo responsive muscular reactions

| | HYPER RESPONSIVE MUSCULAR REACTIONS | HYPO RESPONSIVE MUSCULAR REACTIONS |
|---|---|--|
| | Tense, held back | Undertense, given up |
| STRETCHING has the effect of: | The muscles let go of some tension; often one feels more alive. Emotions may come up. One may feel a little turned inwards. | No important effect on the muscles or perhaps they become further slack/given up. The person may become withdrawn or sleepy. |
| ACTIVATING BUILDING UP ENERGY moving doggedly against outwardly given resistance) has the effect of: | The muscles tighten a little and may give an experience of tension or no effect at all. | The muscles become more active, more alive. Gives an experience of being more filled up and present. Emotions may come up. |

RELEASING ENERGY
(tensing the muscles and releasing tension in action-- e.g., pushing away)
has the effect of:

Tension in the muscles is activated and released, which leads to a letting go of tension, often in turn leading to an experience of feeling more alive and having more energy. Emotions may come up.

The muscles end up being even slacker. Often one experiences a feeling of becoming tired or exhausted when one uses the muscles.

**MOVEMENT OF THE
JOINTS**
has the effect of:

Often one feels more alive; in general no change in the tension state or access to emotions/feelings.

Often one feels more alive; in general no change in the tension state or access to emotions/feelings.

The above appendix presents experience gathered over the years by the group of teachers at Bodydynamic Insitute/Bodydynamic International from 1985-2000. Here synthesized by Steen Jørgensen and Merete Holm Brantbjerg.

BIOGRAPHY

Merete Holm Brantbjerg is a relaxation therapist/psychomotortrainer, co-founder of Bodydynamic Analysis, director of Moaiku Bodydynamic Brantbjerg, and offers a range of psychotherapeutic training workshops on an international level. Merete specializes in using resource oriented skill training as a psychotherapeutic method in relation to stress and trauma and in relation to the caregiver role.

Email: moaiku@brantbjerg.dk Website: www.moaiku.com

REFERENCES

- Agazarian, Yvonne M. (2004). *Systems centered therapy for groups*. London, UK: Karnac.
- Anstorp, T., Benum, K., & Jakobsen, M. (2006). *Dissosiasjon og relasjonstraumer*. Oslo, NO: Universitetsforlaget.
- Bentzen, M., Bernhardt, P., & Isaacs, J. (2004). Waking the body ego 1 and 2. In I. Macnaughton (Ed.), *Body, Breath and Consciousness* (pp. 131-204). Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic.
- Bernhardt, P., & Isaacs, J. (2000). The bodymap: A precise diagnostic tool for psychotherapy. *The Journal of Bioenergetic Analysis*, 11(1), 1.
- Bodydynamic Institute (1998). *Bodymap reading – bodymap interpretation*. Copenhagen. Jørgensen, S.& Marcher L.
- Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Brantbjerg, M. H. (2008). The relational aspect of resource-oriented skill training. Copenhagen, Denmark. Bodydynamic Brantbjerg.
- Brantbjerg, M. H. (2007). Resource-oriented skill training as a psychotherapeutic method.. Copenhagen, Denmark. Bodydynamic Brantbjerg.
- Brantbjerg, M. H. (2005) Muscular intelligence – an introduction. www.moaiku.com
- Brantbjerg, M. H., Kristiansen, M. & Marcher, D. (2006). Resources in coping with shock. Copenhagen: Forlaget Kreatik.

- Brantbjerg, M. H. & Ollars, L. (2006). *Musklernes intelligens*. Om 11 Bodydynamic Jøgfunktioner. Copenhagen, Denmark: Forlaget Kreatik.
- Brantbjerg, M. H. & Stepath (2007). *The Body as Container of Instincts, Emotions and Feelings*. Copenhagen, Denmark. Bodydynamic Brantbjerg.
- Claesson, B. (2003). Forskning i Vagusnervens fylogenetiske udvikling kaster nyt lys over menneskets stress- og chockreaktioner. *Psykolog Nyt* 07-2003.
- Fich, S. & Marcher, L. (1997). *Psykologi og Anatomi. En manual om barnets udviklingsfaser og deres muskulære forankring*. Copenhagen: Kreatik.
- Gladwell, Malcolm (2005). *Blink: The power of thinking without thinking*. New York, NY: Little Brown.
- Goldwag, Elliot M. (Ed.). (1979). *Inner Balance: The power of holistic healing*. London, UK: Prentice-Hall Int.
- Gonzales, L. (2003). *Deep survival*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Hart, S. (2006). *Hjerne, samhørighed og personlighed*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Hart, S. (2006). *Betydning af samhørighed*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Jarlnæs, E. & Van Luytelaar, J. (2004). The Therapeutic Power of Peak Experiences. In Macnaughton, Ian (Ed.) *Body, Breath and Consciousness*. (pp. 241-262). Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic.
- Johnsen, L. (1976). *Nøglen til livsglædens kilde*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Borgens Forlag.
- Jørgensen, C. R. (2008). *Identitet. psykologiske og kulturanalytiske perspektiver*. Copenhagen, Denmark: Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Jørgensen, S. & Ollars, L. (2001). Kropslig forankring i psykoterapeutisk arbejde. *Psykologisk Set*, 42, 15-28.
- Karpman, S. (1973). 1972 Eric Berne Memorial Scientific Award Lecture *Transactional Analysis Journal* 1973-III 73-76.
- Kæreby, F. & Sørensen J. Hardy. (2008). Dansk deltagelse ved den første internationale conference om SE-terapi. *Psykoterapeuten* 2008- 1 43-48.
- Levine, P., with & Frederick, A. (1998). *Waking the tiger. Healing trauma*. California: North Atlantic Books.
- Levine, P. (1998). Kroppen som helbreder. In Jørgensen, U. & Mathiasen, S.: *At overleve vold – om psykisk traumatisering og behandling*. (pp.73-93) Århus N. Forlaget Klim.
- Marcher, L & Fich, S. (2010). *Body Encyclopedia*. Berkeley, North Atlantic Books,
- Maurer, R. (2004). *One small step can change your life: The Kaizen Way*. New York, NY: Workman Publishing Company.
- Ollars, L. (1980). *Muskelpalpationstests pålidelighed. Besvarelse af specialeopgave i psykologi*. Unpublished dissertation. Copenhagen University, Copenhagen.
- Rothschild, B. (2000). *The Body Remembers*. New York, W.W.Norton & Company Inc.
- Siegel, D. & Hartzell, M. (2004). *Parenting from the inside out*. Penguin Group Inc.
- DAP conference (2007). Sørensen, Ole. H. :Stressbegrebets historie. (History of the concept of stress)