

Webinar for Feldenkrais Practitioners (Canadian Region)
February 3, 2019



The Biology of Fight/Flight and Freeze

and how we as *Feldenkrais*® Practitioners
can work with that

Prepared by Violet van Hees, *Feldenkrais*® Practitioner ;
TTouch® Equine Practitioner 1; Somatic Practice (Kathy Kain's
program)

This workshop will bring together:

- current *science* about the physiological effects of fight/flight and freeze in the body,

and

- the *art* of opening up the biological capacity to learn

so that we as *Feldenkrais* practitioners can offer more pathways to make learning easier.



Ready? Let's DIVE IN!

The Foundation: why this makes sense for Feldenkrais Practitioners to know about

- Our bodies are smart! What is going on, is going on for a good reason.
- Your body believes what you *experience*, rather than what you *think*.
- In our students, when fight/flight or freeze is going on, the body is biologically “busy” with DANGER/SURVIVAL, and there is not much room or capacity for learning (unless it is directly related to survival)!



Why does “feeling safe” matter??

“If there is no safety, your nervous system will not learn how to do silly things.”



Moshe Feldenkrais, Amherst training, 1980, week 3.

Our scope of work:

As Feldenkrais® Practitioners, we work with:

- Movement
- Learning
- Awareness of one's own experience and sensations, through movement



A bit about me:

- *Feldenkrais*® Practitioner since 2007
- *Tellington TTouch*® Equine Practitioner since 2006
- “*Touch Skills Training for Trauma Practitioners*”, Kathy Kain (2016)
- Former BCRPA *Trainer of Fitness Leaders*; fitness professional from 1982 to 2017
- BA, Geography (1980)
- Professional Teaching Certificate
- Advanced First Aid, Wilderness First Aid
- I love to learn, and to play!!



A wee bit of Background: The Autonomic Nervous System

The *Autonomic Nervous System* takes care of things that are “running in the background” – like blood pressure, breathing, digestion, etc.

There are two main divisions in the ANS:

- The Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS)
 - arouses the body, fires things up, and supports ACTION.
 - This is the division that also governs “Fight or Flight”
- The Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS)
 - slows things down

For a long time, the model of the autonomic nervous system has been of a 2-part “up/down” balance:

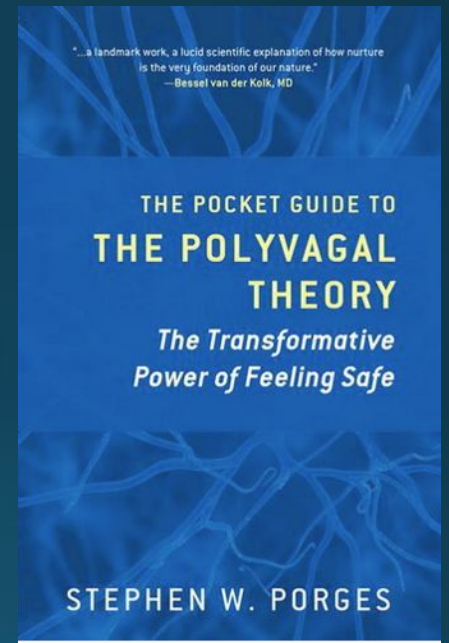
Arousal/action (Sympathetic Nervous System): “Up”



Calming/slowing down (Parasympathetic Nervous System): “Down”

Dr. Stephen Porges: The Polyvagal Theory

- In the early 1990's, Dr. Stephen Porges discovered that **in mammals, there are three (not just 2) autonomic nervous system circuits:**
 - The Sympathetic NS, and
 - **TWO pathways/circuits in the Parasympathetic NS (PNS)**
- When a person's nervous system slows down – that person may end up in one or or the other of these PNS circuits... *and the two are VERY different!*



It's like a bridge that connects 2 countries that *look* similar, but
one country is NOT like the other...

**Arousal: Fight or Flight (Action!)
Sympathetic Nervous System**



Freeze (PNS)

- More primitive, older system – linked to older brain functions and reflexes.
- This is the freeze/ shut down/collapse protective system when sensing DANGER
- This place **does not feel safe**, to the body.
- May LOOK calm, but is bathed in stress chemistry
- Mediated by the **dorsal vagus** nerve

Thinking/Learning/Rest and Digest (PNS)

- More recent neural system
- This place FEELS SAFE to the body.
- Linked to the “thinking brain” and social engagement
- Supports health, rest, recovery, play, intimacy, emotional regulation - and learning
- Mediated by the more recently developed **ventral vagus** nervous system

The neurobiology of *FEELING SAFE*

“... when it comes to identifying safety ... **our cognitive evaluations of risk** in the environment, including identifying potentially dangerous relationships, **play a secondary role to our visceral reactions to people and places**”

Stephen Porges, *The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory*, pages 43-44.

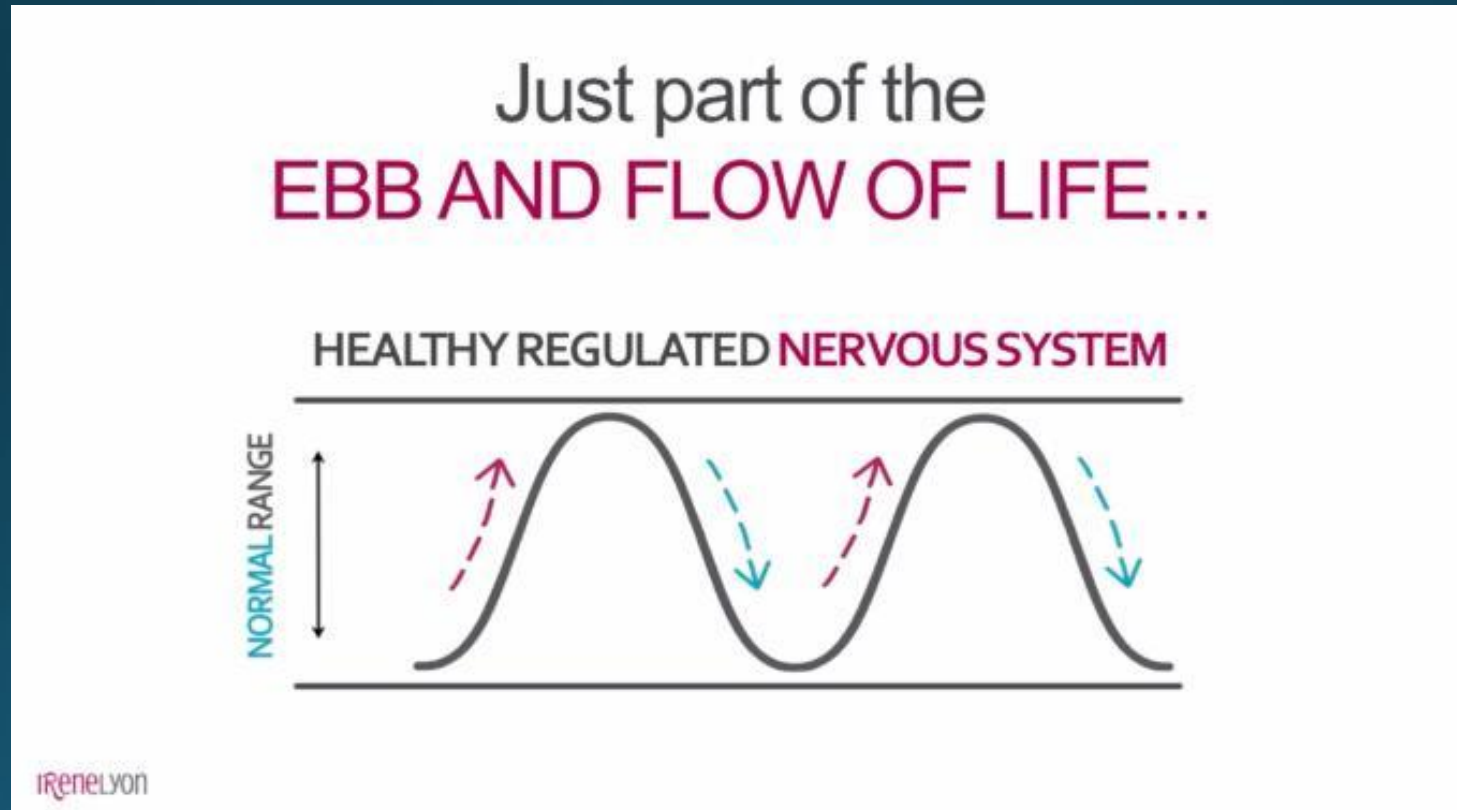
And, from Dr. Bessel van der Kolk

“When the alarm bell of the emotional brain keeps signaling that you are in danger, no amount of insight will silence it.”

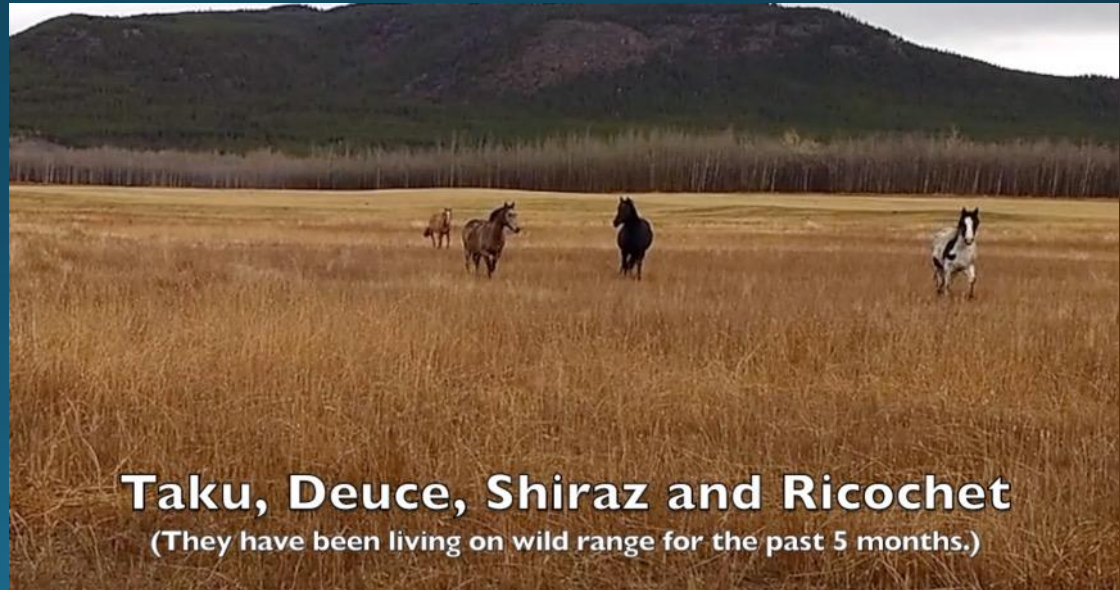
The Body Keeps the Score, pages 64

A person can have a range of experiences within a “window of tolerance” that FEEL SAFE, *without triggering the biological defense responses*. E.g.:

- “normal” up/down responses to the events of daily life
- Play / play fighting
- Immobilization without feeling in danger (during intimacy, lying on the floor for a class!, sleep)



Within that “window of tolerance” is where learning and creative exploring (and “healthy responses to life”) can happen best 😊

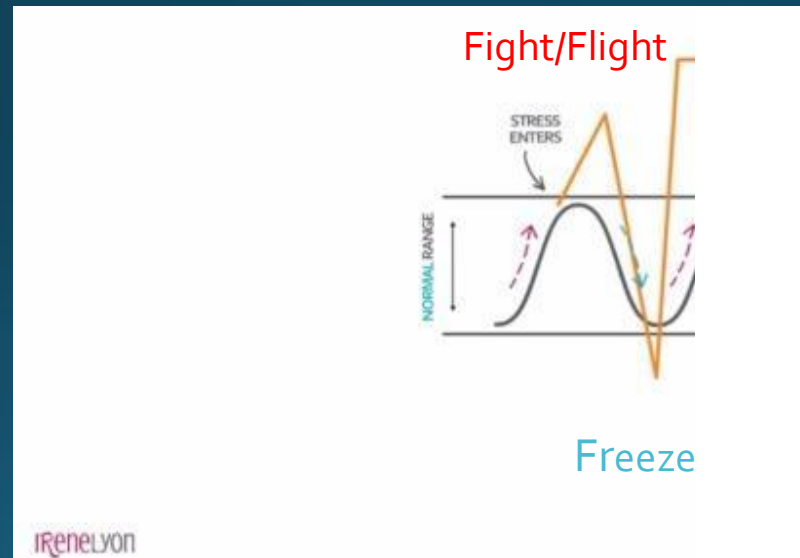


Taku, Deuce, Shiraz and Ricochet
(They have been living on wild range for the past 5 months.)

However, when the sense of **DANGER!!** is too fast, too great or too constant, the **BODY IS OUTSIDE OF WHAT FEELS SAFE.**

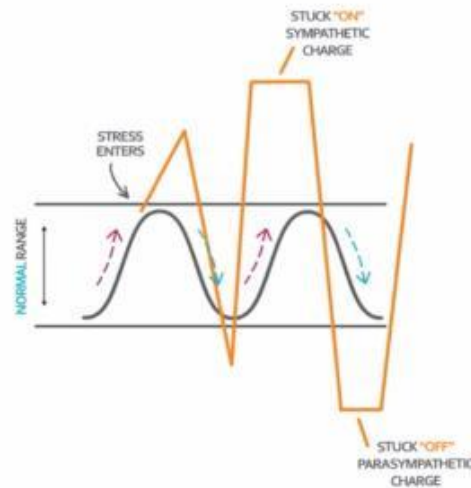
The experience is no longer interesting, or fun. It feels scary.

That's when **fight/flight** and/or **freeze** kick in – *to protect us.*



It is possible (and not uncommon) for Fight/Flight and/or Freeze to be not just a short-term response to something. For some people, it is constantly running in the background.

DYSREGULATION - STRESS ISN'T DE-ACTIVATED = CHAOS



irenelyon

Here, the stress response can become chronically “stuck” in the body, running as that person’s “normal” state.

Biologically, what happens during Fight/Flight and Freeze?

Fight/Flight: “foot on the gas”

- Heart rate and breathing increases
- Blood goes to the arms and legs
- Constant vigilance
- hyper-sensitivity
- Often adrenalin-fueled
- “Action” mode!

Freeze: “foot on the brakes”

- Heart rate decreases
- Blood goes to the core
- Numbness, reduced sensations
- May have adrenal and body exhaustion
- Low oxygen, low metabolism.
- May LOOK calm, but the body is flooded with stress chemistry /physiology.
- Energy conservation: shut down, collapse.

In both these states:

- Digestion, rest, recovery are not priorities for your body!
- Social engagement is reduced, compromised.
- Learning is largely shut down, unless it is directly related to survival.

Note – some folks may have **both** states happening at the same time!



Key Point:

When Fight/Flight and/or Freeze kick in, this is the BODY'S BIOLOGY taking action – and taking over – as a protection against ***sensed Danger***.

- This is not a mental “choice”.
- The danger can be actual, or perceived, or anticipated
- These responses are rooted in survival energy, and *biologically, survival has a higher priority than thinking and learning!*

So.....

**What helps to create a sense of safety,
and opens the capacity to learn?**

Dr. Stephen Porges:

- Develop the ventral vagus capacity *through developing social engagement*
 - the *relational* part of what we do
- Listen to our own body's responses, and respect the responses of others



Kathy Kain:



- Social engagement that includes “gut feelings”
- “Pinging” off another nervous system that is safe and well-regulated.
- Help the person learn how to **notice their own body sensations, and *be curious* about them.**
- Develop **orienting skills, and defensive/self-protective responses.** These are the base skills, that need to be built first.

Dr. Bessel van der Kolk:



“Visiting the past... should be done while people are, biologically speaking, firmly rooted in the present and feeling as calm, safe, and grounded as possible.

‘Grounded’ means that you can feel your butt in your chair, see the light coming through the window, feel the tension in your calves, and hear the wind stirring the tree outside.”

Dr. Peter Levine:

- Recognize that stress/trauma may be trapped in the body, and can be released – by the body.
- this release happens best:
 - in small, manageable bits (“titration”)
 - With the choice and capacity to move in and out of the experience (“pendulation”)
- A shaking “discharge” of excess stress may show up
 - This is the body taking action to release the stuck stress.



Linda Tellington-Jones:

- “Put your heart in your hands, and your hands on your horse” (person! 😊)
- Be present! (brain waves; heart coherence)
- Watch for *whispers* of concern, and if needed, adjust what you are doing to reduce concern.
- “Chunk it down”: offer interesting, novel experiences in small bits that can be successful

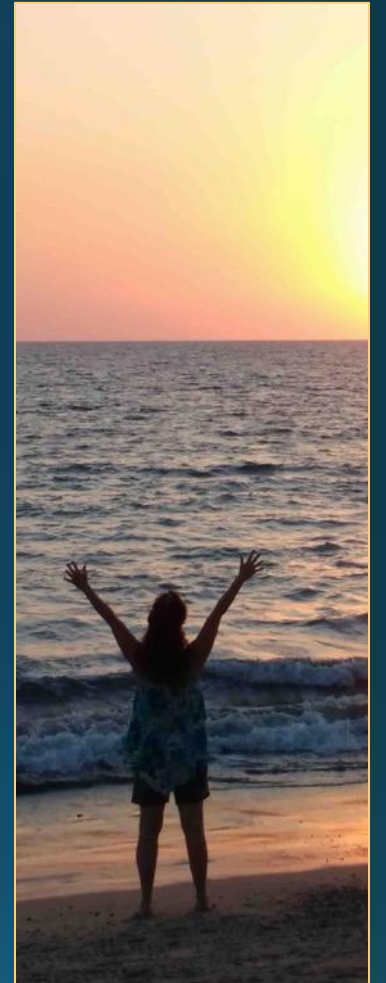


Irene Lyon:

- Become familiar with (and friends with) your own nervous system – and invite those you work with to do the same.
- Nervous system regulation is foundational: It needs to happen first, before other learning can take root.
- Trauma is trapped resource/vitality.
 - You can free up that life force – for good stuff!



7 Things We Can Do as Feldenkrais® Practitioners



1. Be fully present

Be clean, clear, and present

- your participant(s) will sense your state

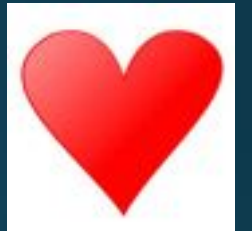


One tool to help with this:

- A big breath OUT, with the sense of landing on your bones and finding the support of the ground
 - (This works great for things like learning to paddle board, too!)

2. Cultivate “your body is smart!”

- Your body is smart. It learns and adapts.
- Your body is doing what it is doing, because it was “a good idea” when this first started as a way to:
 - Keep you safe, and
 - Keep you going.
- Let’s acknowledge and appreciate how hard your body has been working for you 😊



From here: Is there something that could work even better, now?

3. Ask your body: Does this *feel safe*?

Guide the person to check IN THEIR BODY:

- ❖ Does this *feel safe, in my body*?

Ask your BODY 😊

- *Your body may have different thoughts on the matter than your brain does!*

“No” → body resistance to doing it.

4. A simple model: Look for the “5 F’s”

Tellington TTouch® talks about “the 5 F’s” that are coping mechanisms that indicate **concern**:

- **Fight**
- **Flight**
- **Fool around/fidget**
- **Freeze**
- **Faint**

If you notice concern that is getting in the way of learning, *change something* to reduce the concern 😊

5. Orient to/ anchor in the environment

Awareness of your self – in your environment, here and now:

- Notice with the senses, your *relationship* to what is around, e.g.
 - Feel your butt on chair, and feel the chair under your butt
 - Notice a shape, colour, smell, sound, temperature, etc. (e.g. notice every detail about the ceiling, in the dentist's office 😊)
- Notice *who* is around you, and *add a little bit of social engagement* (e.g. say Hi, or nod)
 - At the start of a class or session, and
 - At the end of a class or session.

6. Teach how to get down and up – BEFORE having someone lie down

Build self-protection skills and capacity, e.g.:

- How to get down to the floor (or table), and back up again
- How to push, use the base of support, feel strength

Give permission to move

- Move into or out of a situation
- Move if being still feels anxious or unsafe



7. Offer *small bits* of new experience, plus lots of time to integrate

- “chunk it down”
- It is during the rests, that the body checks it out and does the integration



Woo HOOOOOOOOOO!!!!



In summary:

You can do this!

- Offer a clean, safe “Hi” in your presence
- Trust your hands, and Just Do The Work
- Notice whether the receiver is OK with what you are doing – and adjust if needed.

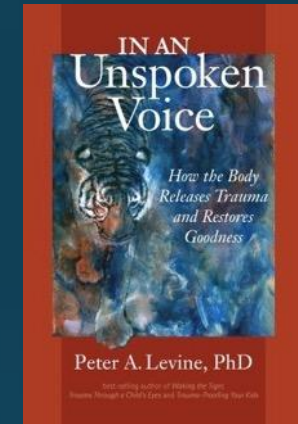
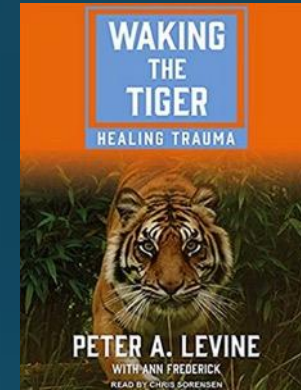


Let your biology – and your humanity -
guide you as you work.

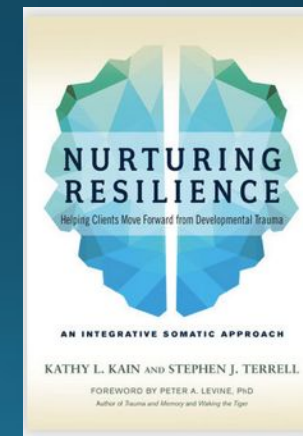


Some Great Resources:

Dr. Peter Levine (Somatic Experiencing):

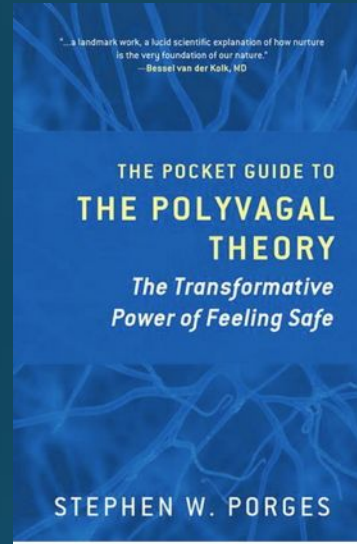


Kathy Kain: <http://www.somaticpractice.net/>

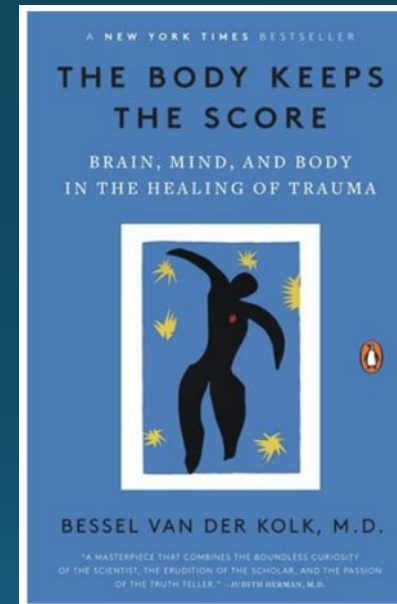


Great Resources (continued):

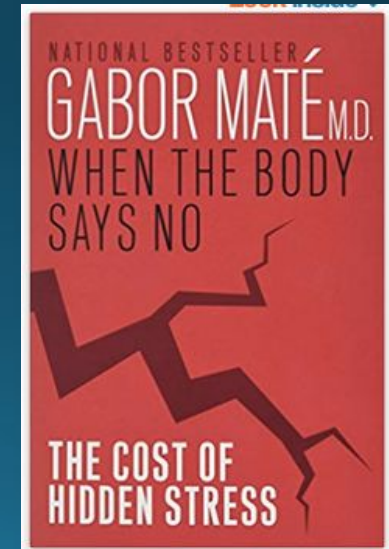
Dr. Stephen Porges



Dr. Bessel van der Kolk

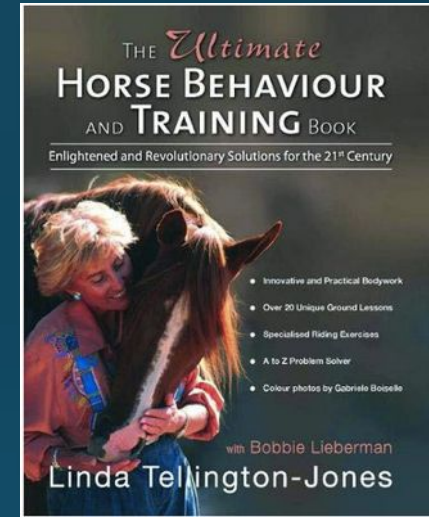
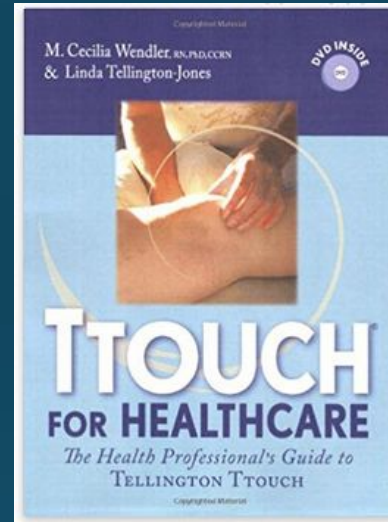


Dr. Gabor Mate

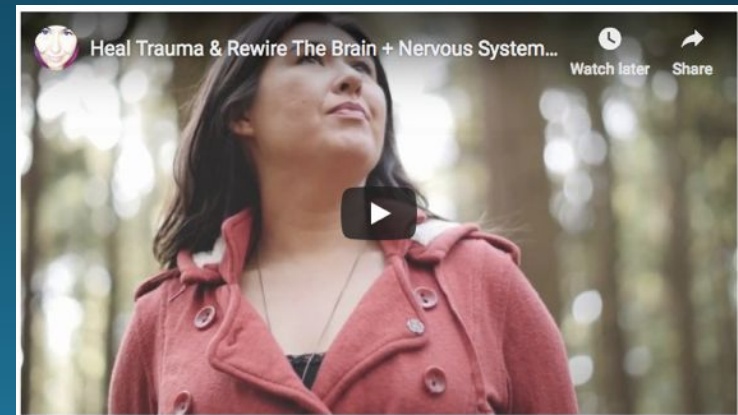


Great Resources (continued):

Linda Tellington Jones:



Irene Lyon: www.irenelyon.com



Thanks!



Got questions? Please get in touch! I'd be happy to talk with you 😊

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