

## 6 Balancing the Nervous System

*The nervous system orchestrates our actions and reactions. How do we make friends with our nervous system?*

### *Central Nervous System*

Start standing:

-Let your body fall through space. Move faster than you can think. You're stimulating spinal cord reflexes. Coordinated below the conscious level, they let you walk through town without staring at your feet. Change direction; surprise yourself. Keep this up for some time. Spinal reflexes evolved with fish—trust your body.

-Continue moving and add deep full breathing. This engages your brain stem, which houses the breathing rhythmicity center. Relax your jaw; let the air fall easily in and out of your mouth. Keep moving faster than you can think, while breathing—don't hold your breath.

-Change your focus of attention reflexively. This engages your midbrain. Hear a loud crash and respond with your whole animal body. Imagine an unusual movement (like a snake in the grass) and react spontaneously. Midbrain reflexes activate your hands, feet, head and tail—your whole self turns toward the stimulus (like a child). The mid-brain is your lizard brain, non-emotional, fast, and direct.

-Continue everything you have done so far (you're building endurance) and add emotional connection to what you perceive. This is the limbic brain at work, which evolved with mammals. Take time to engage memory, association, and your imagination. Everything you see around you is recognizable because you've experienced it before. It's a storied landscape.

-Now engage the cortex. Continue moving and make choices about what you're doing. Reflect and make decisions, while noticing your appetite for movement or stillness.

-Then just dance, enjoying ease and support in the central nervous system.

### *Autonomic Nervous System*

-Continue exploring through moving. Sometimes we need fire to activate our lives. Light the match and add a dynamic edge to your physicality by engaging the sympathetic nervous system. Add a bit more adrenaline, fueling your range.

-Move larger or faster than normal. Imagine you're late to an appointment, or performing in a huge theatre and need to communicate to the back row. How much energy can you add without losing balance?

-Continue moving, but slow down, so you don't burn out. Transition to the parasympathetic nervous system. Let your movement become integrative, digestive,

and easeful, as well as highly specific. Imagine a favorite safe place that inspires your most relaxed way of being and moving.

### *Enteric Nervous System*

- Move with your gut brain, the enteric nervous system. The brain in the gut lines the digestive tract and has more nerves than your spinal cord. It's the oldest part of your nervous system.
- Let your front, belly surface be open and responsive, picking up unconscious cues from the environment and other people. Feel this gutsy organic part of yourself. The enteric nervous system can override your cortex. Follow the gut body as it leads you in space.
- Now, imagine a group of four people. Make a sandwich with all the layers: Be person A, the brain and spinal cord—directing the show. This is the central nervous system—the part that thinks it's in charge, talks, makes choices, and remembers.
- Add person B in front: you are the bones, grounding and supporting.
- Add person C as the front layer: you are the autonomic nervous system. Choose to embody sympathetic activation (too much caffeine), or parasympathetic integration (ready for a nap). A balanced state between the two is alertness.
- The front layer is the enteric nervous system—the brain in the gut, which is largely unconscious (close your eyes). But remember that you can override the cortex.
- Before moving: person A attaches hands to the hips of person B to steer. Person B—the bones—wraps arms around the front two people (like ribs) to keep everyone together.
- Now, take a walk around the space as if you are one body. Let each layer have a voice. The central nervous system orchestrates and gives commands, the bones support, the autonomic nervous system sets the tone, and the enteric picks up unconscious cues.
- Imagine you are walking downtown! If working as a group, switch roles four times so you embody all the layers.
- Dance your own dance. Engage the diversity inside. It's both complex and humorous to be human.

*We learn the parts so we can know enough, to feel enough, to be brave enough, to be fierce enough, to be free enough, to be fluid enough, to care.*