

The Role of the Freeze Response

Humans have sophisticated language skills, but holding a conversation involves more than words. Gestures, emotions and gaze are as important as words; if you don't believe this, try holding a conversation with an expressionless face and your hands behind your back.

The person/s involved in the conversation need/s to listen and understand the words, as well as watch by the use of gaze, to correctly interpret the accompanying gestures and emotions, before the whole meaning of the conversation can be absorbed. Conversational turn taking then expects the listener to reciprocate with suitable words, gestures and expressions of their own. Expressions and facial gestures are a world-wide, common "language", and even very young babies are generally able to distinguish between a smiling face and a neutral face.

Evolution has allowed "three well-defined neural circuits to support social engagement behaviors, mobilization, and immobilization" (Porges, 2011, p. 16) to develop through the autonomic nervous system. In early times correctly assessing instantly whether the approach of a person was safe or dangerous and then taking the appropriate action could have been the difference between life and death. The oldest system relies on immobilization and feigning death as a method of survival. Death feigning or "freeze" (immobilization) means the body has to slow down heart rate, blood pressure and similar systems to persuade a predator they are of no interest. The second system, governed by the sympathetic nervous system, allows increased metabolic activity and cardiac output, ready to either fight or run, described as fight or flight to respond to danger (mobilization). Finally as a result of our increasingly social and less confrontational interactions, a calm behavioral state developed that allowed social engagement. A conversation cannot be held whilst the person is in either freeze or fight/flight mode because the bodily systems in play cannot supply the correct responses needed for a conversation, as described above!

Dr Porges uses the term neuroception "to describe how neural circuits distinguish whether situations or people are safe, dangerous, or life-threatening" (2011, p. 11). Importantly, the response of the neural circuits is an **unconscious reaction** that prepares the body for fight/flight (mobilization), or freeze (immobilization) in a situation evaluated as dangerous or life-threatening, but allows social interaction if the people are deemed safe. As stated above, social interaction cannot take place at the same time the body is prepared for fight, flight, or freeze because these are responses at the opposite ends of a continuum. If the circuits of fight, flight, or freeze are not subdued in a safe situation, (e.g. there is an error in neuroception), a social approach by the other person will possibly be met with hostility or withdrawal.

The role of Integrated Listening Systems (iLS) and Safe and Sound Protocol (SSP) is to use music, movement and language to help the brain to modify itself through a process called “neuroplasticity”; neuro for the brain’s nerve cells and plastic to describe the brain’s ability to change and modify itself.

For people who want to explore these ideas further we recommend:

The Polyvagal Theory by Dr S W Porges, published by W W Norton & Company (New York)

And

The Brain That Changes Itself by Norman Doidge, revised edition, published by Scribe Publications Ltd (Victoria, Australia).