

Neuroscience and the Art of Self Care with Linda Graham, MFT  
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In this experiential workshop, We learn to harness the neuroplasticity that re-wires our brains. We practice empirically-validated techniques that reduce stress and burn-out, restore our sense of perspective, and recover our social connectivity and intuitive creativity. The handout below is excerpted from a previously published article. More materials will be available through the workshop.

The Neuroscience of Resilience by Linda Graham, MFT  
 Newsletter of Healing and Awakening into Aliveness and Wholeness, June 2010  
 Wise Brain Bulletin, June 2010

I've been exploring the neuroscience of self care lately, because I'm hungrily curious about both (A) how do people cope with unfathomably challenging circumstances and come out the other side with their spirits and integrity intact (when I get disoriented just trying to meet a friend for dinner at a new restaurant and have been known to cry when my computer crashes) and (B) what can brain science teach us about strengthening the capacities of self care from the bottom-up - at the level of neurons firing in new patterns that promote flexibility in the face of change.

I thank Dan Siegel, M.D., founder of the discipline of inter-personal neurobiology (how the development of the brain is kindled, shaped, conditioned and matured by mindful empathic relationships) for his model of nine functions of the pre-frontal cortex. I'm organizing my thoughts about self-care around those functions, because the pre-frontal cortex is far and away the single most integrative structure of the brain for supporting self care, considered by neuropsychologists to be an "evolutionary masterpiece."

The pre-frontal cortex integrates information vertically, horizontally, and temporally: Vertically - linking bottom up information from body sensations and the limbic system (the emotional engine of brain) with top down processing involving memory (conscious and unconscious), attention, motivation, planning, judgment, and behavior. Horizontally - connecting the different modes of processing of the right and left hemispheres of the brain. Temporally - integrating experiences from the past, present and future to create a coherent narrative of who we are and how our life makes sense.

In Dr. Siegel's model, the PFC accomplishes this regulation in nine ways:

1. Regulating the autonomic nervous system - staying calm and engaged
2. Quelling the fear response
3. Regulating emotions - especially fear and shame
4. Attunement - the felt sense of another's experience, someone else "getting" ours
5. Empathy - you know what I know, and I know that you know
6. Response flexibility - pause, options, evaluate options, make appropriate decisions
7. Insight - self awareness
8. Intuition - the "gut" feeling
9. Morality

These many modes of neural integration and regulation via the prefrontal cortex are the most influential neural substrate of self care.

So here goes:

1. Regulation of the autonomic nervous system, staying calm and engaged

The ANS is the part of our nervous system that automatically, without any conscious processing, regulates our heart rate, breathing, and digestive processes. We don't have to be conscious to breathe or to have our heart pump blood or to digest our food, thank goodness. That's all below the radar.

We can become conscious of our breathing as we do in meditation and yoga when we breathe deeply to calm the body and calm the mind. We can become conscious of our heart center, which many visionary researchers see as an auxiliary brain anyway. There are brain cells (neurons) around the heart that are

activated when we experience disappointment or grief or shame. There can be a literal feeling of heartache or heart break. When we breathe a sense of goodness and safety into the heart, the heart rate slows down. We can intuit what is going on in our gut, whether something feels OK to us or feels “off”.

The ANS is central to resilience and self-care because it keeps us in a “window of tolerance. The window of tolerance is a zone where our nervous system is relaxed, calm, alert, engaged. When we are in our window of tolerance, which we hope is most of the time, we feel centered and balanced. Everything is humming along in equilibrium. When we are in our window of tolerance, we can perceive-process-respond to life events with a kind of wise equanimity. We can cope. We can be resilient.

When something new, challenging, alarming comes up, the sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system (SNS) is automatically activated; we unconsciously mobilize to meet whatever the new situation, challenge or threat is. When we are regulated by the social engagement system of our pre-frontal cortex, we turn to people near us to help, for regulation, or we turn to memories of people, in whose presence we have felt loved, understood, supported, to keep us in the sense of everything is OK, everything is going to be OK.

*It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.*

- Irish blessing, thanks to Mary Pipher

When we are safely connected with others - either present physically or inside the mind - and thus stay in our window of tolerance, we mobilize quickly, act skillfully, take care of business and return to normal. So it's the social engagement system, regulated via the PFC, that keeps us in our window of tolerance - mobilized without fear.

But if we are startled or frightened by circumstances that overwhelm our social engagement system - which may be already weakened and vulnerable from deficits of attachment and bonding, there aren't sufficient social engagement resources to handle the stress, Then the SNS is activated to mobilize us but without enough regulation. We rev up out of the window of tolerance into alarm, agitation, anxiety, panic rather than wise resilient action. When this happens, we need to consciously down-regulate the fear and agitation, re-connect with a safe other(s); and activate the calming parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) to return to the window of tolerance where we can think calmly and respond skillfully. Where we can be resilient.

Conversely, if we are very calm, very relaxed, if the calming PNS is operating without fear, we can become blissfully immobilized as in meditation, sleep, or the afterglow of making love. These are wonderful states. But if they are not balanced by enough activation of the SNS, and if there is not enough sense of social engagement to help us feel connected and safe, and if there is fear, then we can withdraw into an immobilization of lethargy, numbness, depression, dissociation. In other words, a state of too much PNS without enough connection and engagement. We need the pre-frontal cortex to consciously mobilize the social engagement system, and to give a little more gas to the SNS rather than putting on the brakes of the PNS. This allows us to engage and respond to the challenge of the moment with resilient coping, not a numbed out withdrawal.

(See Exercise #1 below for a very simple exercise to activate the social engagement system of the pre-frontal cortex and stay in the window of tolerance.)

The neuroscience is: the amygdala in our mid-brain operates unconsciously 24/7 as our alarm center, and as our most primitive emotional processing center. It constantly assesses for threat or danger and when it perceives threat or danger, it activates the SNS plus signals the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis to release stress hormones, including cortisol. This is the body-brain's response to stress, which mobilizes us to act, to move, to protect, to defend, to change the situation, to cope.

When we don't have enough social engagement to keep us regulated in the window of tolerance, SNS and HPA activation catapults us out of the window of tolerance into the stress response of fight-flight. Furthermore, if this activation bumps us into previously learned patterns of coping through passivity, submission, confusion, withdrawal, or isolation, the body can drop precipitously into collapse-freeze, shutting down and immobilizing the system to be safe.

Either way, the antidote to the stress response of fight-flight-freeze and to dis-connection, withdrawal, shutting down, is the regulation of the ANS through oxytocin.

Oxytocin is the naturally occurring neurotransmitter and hormone of safety and trust, of bonding and attachment. It is released through warmth, touch, movement. Common catalysts for the release of oxytocin are orgasm and breastfeeding. Neuroscientists are discovering that any time we feel safe, warm, loved, and cherished, we release of small doses of oxytocin in the brain; even thinking about, imagining, remembering being loved and cherished is enough to release this oxytocin.

And oxytocin is the brain's direct and immediate antidote to cortisol. It down regulates the flood of cortisol through our system immediately. It is the hormone of calm and connect that antidotes fight-flight-freeze. You've you seen a child or a friend in the throes of an upset, and a gentle hug and a "there, there" and the child-person calms down and re-groups almost instantaneously. That's the regulating effect of the oxytocin. We come back into the window of tolerance where life can be coped with again because our higher thinking brain can stay online. We can choose how to respond. The reaching out with a hug, a hand on the back, a hand on the heart, can release the oxytocin. It also re-activates the social engagement system of the pre-frontal cortex. The oxytocin and the re-engagement creates a felt sense in the body of safety and trust, of connection and belonging. This is a neurochemical transformation to calm us down and re-engage with a safe other. It is the neurochemical foundation of resilience, lifelong.

## 2. Quelling the fear response

Not only can the pre-frontal cortex calm down the stress response and bring someone back into calm and connection through the release of oxytocin. The pre-frontal cortex can also use the social engagement system to pre-emptively quell the fear response of the amygdala in the first place. Numerous research studies at U.C. Davis and the University of Wisconsin are now showing that when someone is "primed" to feel safe, connected, loved before they experience a stressor, their body-brains have less reaction to the stressor, and sometimes no reaction at all. Stressing events simply roll off them more readily, like water off a duck's back. This is a fundamental feature of resilience, to simply be less reactive to stressful events when they occur.

Neuroscientists now know the pre-frontal cortex does this pre-empting by growing neuronal fibers down to the amygdala. These fibers carry the GABA (gamma amino butyric acid) neurotransmitter, which inhibits the amygdala. If you want to, you can buy GABA in health food stores as a stress reducer. (Use with caution, as with any nutraceutical product.) You can also do exercise #2 in Exercises to Practice below.

## 3. Regulate emotions; resilience is not blocked by fear or shame

The third function of the pre-frontal cortex is to regulate emotions. Emotions are waves of body sensations that signal us to "pay attention, this is important!" and that mobilize us to act. Every emotion has signature physiological markers and adaptive action tendencies. If we're angry, we contract, tense up, and are ready to fight; anger mobilizes us to take action against injustice or a boundary violation. If we're afraid, we stop, we go on alert, we become hyper-vigilant, we scan, and are ready to flee, to run. In sadness and grief, we feel waves of sensations welling up, tears welling up. We fold in and become smaller, more childlike; the action tendency is to pull for comfort and support. If we're feeling ashamed, we feel an inner drop like the rug is pulled out, we collapse, we withdraw, disconnect, hide to become invisible, to not draw attention.

All of these emotions trigger active protective responses, sometimes resilient, sometimes not. There are also emotions of delight, joy, interest, curiosity, play, when we're activated and regulated. These emotions mobilize us to move in approach toward an event, experience, person. And emotions of peacefulness and contentment allow us to remain quietly alert in our window of tolerance.

The pre-frontal cortex is what allows us to consciously feel, recognize and hold the waves of emotions as they move through our body, and they do move through our body as long as we stay regulated, as long as we're not hijacked by the amygdala revving up or shutting down the system.

We can feel hijacked by our emotion when we get into a state and we can't come back out of it for a few moments, or hours, or days, or weeks, or months. (People do get stuck in anxiety, rage, depression for very

long periods of time.) So the key to being resilient around emotions is to stay regulated, so the body sensations of the emotions can move through; even if that means becoming regulated by someone else like a therapist or a friend. Once we are regulated, waves of emotion can move through, and we can let them move through.

One skillful way to hold and process an emotion is to allow the emotion, feel it fully, compassionately, and then to skillfully allow a very positive pro-social emotion like gratitude, kindness, compassion, to arise also and allow the two emotions to be present at the same time. When the positive emotion is felt in the body strongly enough, the neural circuitry of the two emotions will begin to pair together, fire together and wire together. The positive emotion will literally re-wire the neural firing pattern of the negative emotion. (See Exercise #3 for a simple exercise to learn to do this.)

The neuroscience behind this: a mechanism of neural de-consolidation - re-consolidation discovered in the last 10 years. When we remember an event, especially if we can evoke a body memory of the event, when we bring that body memory to consciousness, we light up the synaptic connections that hold that memory in long-term storage, even implicit memory, outside of everyday awareness. The memory network is lit up, the neurons are firing. If we bring up a negative memory, and then bring up, simultaneously, a memory that contradicts or disconfirms the first memory, the two memories are now lit up together, firing at the same time. Neurons that fire together wire together; the memory networks, the synaptic connections, de-consolidate for a fraction of a second, and re-consolidate a fraction of a second later, changed. The neural networks of the two memories have begun connecting together. When the second, more positive or more wholesome memory is stronger than the first, more negative memory, the second memory trumps the first memory and changes it in a more positive direction. This change, researchers are discovering, can be immediate, and it can be permanent. . The process of deconsolidation-re-consolidation is how trauma memories can resolve, more like dissolve, and no longer hijack us.

This process of deconsolidation-reconsolidation is very important for resilience, because once we experience this resolving happen even once, we know we can do it again and again. Even knowing that strengthens our capacities for resilience.

#### 4. Attunement: the felt sense of another's experience, someone else "getting" ours

Our pre-frontal cortex learns the first three functions - regulating the ANS, quelling the fear response, and regulating emotions - in large part by being in relationship with caregivers who can do that for us. Consequently, the capacity of caregivers to regulate their own ANS and quell their own fear response and regulate their own emotions is a major factor in developing the regulatory capacities of the pre-frontal cortex of the growing child, or de-railing them. The empathic attunement of a parent to the child's needs, moods, fears, joys, internalizes in the child a felt sense of a safe haven in the parent, and fosters an internal secure base within the child. When the child experiences fear, he or she runs to the parent for protection and comfort. We are neurobiologically hardwired that way. The drive to seek physical proximity to a caregiver in times of perceived threat and danger is more primary than the drive for food, and operates lifelong. When the parent protects-comforts the child, the fear response is quelled and the exploration, play motivational systems open up and the child goes off to learn. If children experience fear when they are away from their parent, but can remember or imagine the protection and comfort of the parent, they can regulate and soothe and comfort themselves, re-group and go out to play or deal again. They are becoming resilient.

The attunement of early attachment builds a healthy resonance circuit in our brains. Very briefly - neural networks fire in our brains when we "read" another's facial expressions, eye gaze, body language or hear the emotional meaning of their tone of voice. With input from the emotional processing center of the limbic system - in the junction of the temporal-parietal lobes (where "mirror-like" networks are) and in the insula (the structure of interoception, of knowing what's going on in one's body) the signals travel up to the pre-frontal cortex. This is when we "know" what the other person is feeling, the foundation of the next function of the pre-frontal cortex - empathy.

The pre-frontal cortex takes about 25 years to fully mature, well into adulthood. So there are many opportunities for the brains of others - including relatives, teachers, coaches, peers, and partners - to help the pre-frontal cortex of the child's brain mature the resonance circuit that supports the capacities of resilience. And even after the child becomes an adult and the pre-frontal cortex becomes stable in its

functioning and the neural circuits of response to life become somewhat fixed, automatic and predictable, (sometimes seemingly intractable) the brain retains the capacity to grow new neurons and re-wire its circuitry lifelong. It's the neural plasticity of the brain and ongoing experiences of "feeling felt" that help us continue to mature, or recover in the first place, these functions of the pre-frontal cortex well after adulthood.

*The roots of resilience are to be found in the felt sense of existing in the heart and mind of an empathic, attuned, self-possessed other.*

- Diana Fosha

#### Step 5. Empathy: You know what I know, and I know that you know

Neuropsychologists see empathy as the integration of body-based information and emotional signals and cognitive thought and beliefs about another's experience, making sense, making meaning, creating understanding, and then checking out the accuracy of that understanding through a verbal feedback loop. I experienced the difference between attunement and empathy when my mother died. Many, many good people could attune to the grief and disorientation I was feeling. And I found it was the people who had lost someone to death themselves who could deeply understand, and convey that empathic understanding of, what I was going through, oftentimes more than I could grasp myself at the moment.

Neuropsychologists now posit it was the need among our ancestors on the savannah to understand quickly what other members of the tribe needed to communicate in terms of potential danger to the tribe, and the need to nurture a growing child and developing brain through such a long period of dependence and maturation, that was the most influential factor in driving the evolutionary development of the "higher" human brain, the complex frontal lobes of the cortex that eventually developed language and all the capacities of thinking evaluating, planning. The pre-frontal cortex is considered the evolutionary masterpiece of that cortex.

The title of "evolutionary masterpiece" is important not just for the nine functions of the PFC individually, but for the integration of all nine functions that allow us to be fully resilient.

The pre-frontal cortex integrates bottom up processing of body based sensations and emotions with the top down processing of conscious reflection and awareness.

The pre-frontal cortex integrates the approach bias of the left hemisphere with the avoid bias of the right hemisphere so we can wisely engage and have good boundaries.

The pre-frontal cortex integrates the logical, linear, language based mode of processing of the left hemisphere with the holistic, imagistic emotional-relational mode of processing of the right hemisphere, vastly increasing our options through greatly expanding our perspective of choices.

The pre-frontal cortex also integrates memories, explicit and implicit, of experiences of the past with experiences of the present and projections into the future so we can develop a coherent conscious narrative about all of who we are, how we came to be where we are in life, and what we can do about the next unknown.

The pre-frontal cortex, through self attunement and self empathy, allows us to integrate all the parts of who we are, including split off, exiled parts, so we have all of our innate wisdom from all layers of our being, and so we use up less energy managing those split off parts through denial and dissociation. This integration frees up so much energy for resilience.

The pre-frontal cortex, through attunement and social engagement with others, integrates our experience of self and others with other people's experience of self and others, including us. Brains develop in interactions with other brains, and the pre-frontal cortex allows us to learn how to live life resiliently from people close to us as well as from mentors, role models, literary and historical figures. We can take in their resilience and help it inform and expand ours.

The pre-frontal cortex allows us to integrate various levels of consciousness, from clear spacious awareness in the moment, not hooked anywhere, to moments of awareness and being with experience in the moment, often many at a time, to moments of recognition of being embedded in an experience, caught in the moment, believing this moment, this state, is the only state that's true.

It is those many modes of neural integration from the pre-frontal cortex that promotes - is, in fact, the neural substrate of - resilience.

## 6. Response Flexibility

We see the integrative function of the pre-frontal cortex operating on steroids in the capacity of response flexibility: the capacity to stop, hold the experience, whatever it is, regulate the body arousal and emotional waves triggered by it, step back (which may require lots of practice dis-entangling from one's experience in the moment, seeing clearly that this is one experience in one moment, not the only truth forevermore), think, reflect, evaluate. And then, from unentangled engagement and responsiveness, choose wisely and act.

Response flexibility is the fulcrum of resilience. (And it's where most coaching about resilience begins.) In order to cope with change, we have to be able to change how we cope. The more flexible someone can be, not chaotic or floundering but simply no longer embedded in their neural cement, the more options they can identify, the more resilient they can be.

I recently learned an excellent protocol to promote response flexibility, from Alan Marlatt who uses it in recovery programs: S.O.B.E.R:

**STOP** The reactive emotional system gets a few seconds head start on the pre-frontal cortex when we feel stressed or upset, so we need the pause to hold the turbo-charged reactivity of the ANS and the amygdala. Just counting to ten, five deep breaths, is often enough for the pre-frontal cortex to be available to process the experience.

**OBSERVE** Mindfulness practice is exquisitely excellent in training the mind to observe what is happening in the mind and body, or the external environment, without reactivity, judgment, without moving to fix or running away. Mindfulness breaks the automaticity of our habitual reactions and allows us to see clearly what is actually happening out there and in our inner landscape of response.

**BREATHE** Deep breathing does calm down the nervous system (back to the window of tolerance, always back to the window of tolerance) and creates the pause we need to see clearly.

**EXPAND PERSPECTIVE** To be resilient, we must be able to dis-embed from the neural cement of habitual response - to detach from the experience for a moment, to see the experience of the moment as only one possible experience out of many moments. The experience of this moment is here now, but is not the only experience in this moment, and it is not the only moment in a life. When we can dis-entangle, step back, reflect, we can move from "poor me" to an empowered "I" that can act on its own behalf. This expanded perspective allows us to see any previous patterns of response as patterns. There can be new responses, new patterns, and once we see that, even once, the door is open to look for options and choices about anything and everything.

**RESPOND WISELY** Role models and proven paths of wise effort (letting go of the unskillful or unwholesome, cultivating the skillful or the wholesome) can be great guides to making resilient choices once we see - from an expanded perspective - that we have choices. Sometimes the most skillful action at the moment is to endure, SOBER, in faith that eventually we can effect change, because it is in the nature of everything to change.

*Between a stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom. The last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.*

- Viktor Frankl

## 7. Insight - self-awareness

The integrative capacity of the pre-frontal cortex is also essential to be able to take in the difficult truth of trauma or tragedy - that “bad things happen to good people.” To cope with the mysterious and precarious unpredictability of life, we have to be able to expand our perspective from “why me?” to “why not me?” To realize my pain is part of the pain of the human condition, and get on with the work of coping.

The pre-frontal cortex is what creates the coherent narrative of a life - making sense, making meaning of everything that is happening to us as it happens (or later in wise retrospect). To make sense of everything that has ever happened to us in one coherent whole, we must be able to integrate “here’s what happened; here’s what I did or didn’t do; here’s how well that worked, or not; here’s what I’ve learned; here’s what I would do differently now or here’s how I am different now.”

The pre-frontal cortex creates the neural integration of the “story” - how we relate to our experience that becomes the platform for Dan Siegel’s acronym for mental health: FACES - to be flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, stable - and that is the platform for the next step into the unfolding unknown.

#### 8. Intuition: the “gut” feeling

Besides a clearer and more conscious knowing of what’s what and what choices we can make to cope most resiliently, the pre-frontal cortex allows a person to sense into their own core values, to know at a deeply intuitive level, what’s right for them to do or not. We call this a gut feeling because the ANS - breath, heart and gut - are involved. But intuition is a deep and profound knowing often below the level of conscious processing of what makes the most sense. The pre-frontal cortex integrates that “felt” knowing with conscious knowing and allows our intuition to guide our choices. (See Exercises to Practice below for simple way to tune in to your own intuition.)

#### 9. Morality

The words integration and integrity have the same Latin root meaning “whole” or “entire.” This last function of the pre-frontal cortex - morality - is not about right or wrong in the sense of following the rules. It’s more based on empathy, and an understanding of the inter-connectedness of all beings, and therefore we can make choices not just for personal survival (which the amygdala does full-time) but for the common good. And when we can let ourselves care about the common good and receive from the common good, we can be much more connected and be much more resilient.

### EXERCISES TO PRACTICE

Exercise #1 Hand on the Heart: I’ve offered this exercise to activate the social engagement system and keep us in the window of tolerance. It’s worth its weight in gold.

Place your hand on your heart. Breathe gently and deeply into your heart center. Breathe into your heart center any sense of goodness, safety, trust, acceptance, ease, you can muster. Once that’s steady, call to mind a moment of being with someone who loves you unconditionally, someone you feel completely safe with. This may not always be a partner or a parent or a child. Those relationships can be so complex and the feelings mixed. This may be a good friend, a trusted teacher. It may be your therapist, your grandmother, a third grade teacher, a beloved pet. Pets are great.

As you remember feeling safe and loved with this person or pet, see if you can feel the feelings and sensations that come up with that memory in your body. Really savor this feeling of warmth, safety, trust, love in your body. When that feeling is steady, let go of the image and simply bathe in the feeling for 30 seconds.

Why might this practice help keep us in the window of tolerance? The hand on the heart and the deep breathing activates the parasympathetic nervous system and calms us down. Evoking the image of feeling safe and loved can activate the release of oxytocin in the brain.

Exercise #2. Quelling the fear response. Think of someone who loves you, supports you, believes in you. It helps if you are remembering or imagining someone who is somewhat resilient themselves, but it's more important that you feel safe, connected, understood, and cared about by them. This could be anyone, partner, friend, parent, child, grandparent, teacher, coach, pet, a spiritual figure or mentor like the Buddha, Jesus, the Dalai Lama. Or you may choose to think of several people, many people. When someone has to face a boss or a doctor, it's sometimes helpful to have a roomful, a whole circle. Let yourself feel this sense of love and support throughout your body. Really soak it in and savor it. This is your refuge for pre-empting stress, and your resource for coping with whatever might come up as you go through your day.

Exercise #3. Regulate emotions. This is an exercise to create the inner space where emotions can be skillfully felt, processed, and moved through. First, sit quietly, comfortably. Breathe gently into your belly, slowly in and out. Breathe a sense of goodness into your belly. Breathe into your belly as though you were safe.

Now remember people or things in your life you are grateful for. Savor the gratefulness throughout your body. Remember moments of kindness in your life, when people have been kind to you, then when you have been kind to others. Savor the feeling of kindness throughout your body. Remember a moment of feeling loved and cherished by someone, then remember a moment of you loving and cherishing someone, even a beloved pet. Savor the feeling of love throughout your body. Let yourself claim the goodness of your own self now.

Then bring into this field of positive emotional energy and well-being a memory of loss, sadness, grief. Maybe not the most overwhelming experience in your memory bank, but an experience of loss, sadness, grief, current or past. Remain mindful of the feeling of the positive state in your body, and allow the feeling of the loss, sadness, grief to be present in your body at the same time. Your mindfulness and perhaps compassion for yourself holding both at the same time. Simply notice what's happening to the feeling state in your body, noticing and being with. And when you're ready, letting them move through.

#### Exercise #4 Feeling Felt

This exercise requires working with someone who can be present, open, engaged, curious - about anything - and then able to tune in to you in the moment. Someone who can pay attention and "read" your facial expressions, the body language of your postures and gestures, hear the meaning in your tone of voice. Someone who can resonate from within themselves with your experience in the moment.

Attunement is deep listening, below the level of words, to the emotional meaning of your experience. This attuned listener could be a partner, good friend, therapist, or someone completely outside your regular acquaintance. I've told the story before of a nurse who simply sat with me in the parking lot of the skilled nursing facility where my 80 year old dad refused to stay after a stroke. She simply tuned into my grief, confusion, despair, holding her hand on my back until I calmed down. No words, just presence, until I could re-group and find the resilience bring my dad home for another nine months of pretty good living until he died. That's attunement creating the neural conditions of resilience.

Find a partner you can share an emotional experience with (a positive, joyful experience counts, too!) Sense their "getting" you, resonating with you, even without words. Please practice this exercise with various people until you find someone who can indeed be a true other to your true self.

Exercise #5 Self Empathy: This exercise is for the parts of ourselves that may be struggling to be resilient.

Identify any voices in your "inner committee" that are struggling to be resilient in the current moment. Any parts that are scared or shamed or too angry to think clearly. Let them into your awareness, let them be without trying to change them or push them away again. Then, to create the self-empathy for them, bring to mind someone you love, someone you can unreservedly, unconditionally love. This could be a benefactor, a dear friend, a beloved child or a beloved pet. Feel the love you feel for them in your body. Sense the flow of love from you to them. Then, when that's steady, simply slip the struggling parts of your inner self into that flow. Keep the love and empathy flowing. Don't blink an eye. Let the love and empathy flow to yourself. If you can, let yourself receive the love and empathy; receive the care, feeling loved and cared for by your larger self. Once these parts feel accepted and included - this is the integrative function of the pre-

frontal cortex at work par excellence - your wiser self can once again be in charge of responding flexibly to the situation.

Exercise #6: Response Flexibility: Here's one exercise to help with the Expand Perspective step of S.O.B.E.R.

Sit quietly. Focus your attention on one particular challenging situation in your life right now. Perhaps not the most difficult right off the bat, but something sticky you'd like to practice expanding your perspective around. Allow yourself to sit with the whole of the experience for the moment, noticing the way it feels in your body, the emotions it evokes, any thoughts and beliefs about yourself coming into awareness. Then remember the many other things going on in your life at this very same moment. People, activities, other priorities or interests that may have been pushed to the background temporarily. Especially identify things in your life that are not this problem. Place the challenge in the context of the whole of your life. Then begin to imagine how you might be relating to this experience a year from now, then five years from now; see the challenge in the context of your entire life. Begin to see how this problem is not the only thing happening in your life at the moment, and this moment is not the only moment in your life. Sense a spaciousness in your consciousness about this problem, and from the spaciousness begin to identify different possible responses, even if they stretch what's ever been possible before.

Exercise #7 Coherent Narrative: This exercise is to integrate at least one troubling or traumatizing experience from the past into the coherent narrative of your life now. Remember an event that was troubling or traumatizing for you in the past. State as objectively as you can - here's what happened. Remember what you did to cope at the time, how you survived. Identify what you learned from the experience, what you would do differently now that you couldn't do then. (If you haven't done this step of learning up until now, take the time to do it now.) Have the sense strongly that you are who you are now, remembering what happened then. Have a sense of yourself now large enough to hold what happened then.

Decide for yourself right now how you will hold what happened then in the story you have of your life now, how it's part of the meaning of your life now, whether it's lessons learned or skills developed since. If you can identify how what happened has contributed to you resilience now, great, but at least accept that what happened did happen, and it is an intact, not pushed away, part of who you are now. No shame, no blame, just part of the resilience you have now.

Exercise #8: Intuition I've often done this technique with clients, with myself and it works more often than not. Say you have to make a decision and you're ambivalent, both sides have pro's and con's and you're not sure what to do. Decide in your mind which one of these decisions is heads and the other is tails.

Notice what happens when you toss the coin. It's not that the coin toss decides, but there can be an instant flash of knowing whether you were glad for the decision, there's relief, or you were disappointed. That flicker of gladness or disappointment is your gut reaction, your intuition telling you what you're feeling right away. You don't have to follow it, but it's there.

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