SESSION TRANSCRIPT · THE MISSING PIECES OF PERIMENOPAUSE

Nervous System Tools for Perimenopause That Nobody Told You You Needed

with Fiona L Smith · Day 4, Thursday, October 29 · The Unfamiliar Feelings

Hello and welcome. My name's Fiona Smith. I'm a Somatic Experiencing practitioner; that is, I'm a body-focused trauma therapist. I'm a massage practitioner and teacher, and a yoga teacher. I'm also a trauma-informed leadership coach. For more than 25 years, I've been working with the body, the mind, and the nervous system. Except that for the first ten years, I didn't know what role the nervous system played in the work I was doing. When I learned it, and began to put it into practice, it transformed absolutely everything: my professional practice, my clinical work, and very definitely my personal life and my perimenopausal journey.

I'm still in my perimenopausal phase. I'm 56 years old and I still have my cycle. Looking back, I'd say I began this journey about ten years ago. That's when the shift, mostly in my mind at the time, began to happen. I think it was also precipitated by a huge life transition. At the age of 45, I moved from the UK to Denmark, where I'm currently based, and overnight I became a stepparent. I was already a biological mum. There was a new language, a new culture, a new environment, new ways of working. At the same time, my maternal grandmother had just died. So I was also working with a lot of grief: grief for leaving my home, my community, my work, and my family, and of course the loss of someone very dear to me. All of this, I think, began my perimenopausal shift.

For you right now, there may be a lot of symptoms. You may be here because you're already trying everything and you're still struggling. Or you may be getting ahead of it and planning for a good perimenopause. Whatever your reason for being here, welcome. This will be an experiential class. I'm going to talk a little first about the nervous system and how it fits into this perimenopausal phase of our lives, and then we'll do some practice.

When we start to think about perimenopause, of course, we think about our hormones. Logically enough, it is a hormonal event, but only partly. It's actually a whole-system event, and our nervous system is a much, much bigger part of it than any of us were ever told. This is the missing piece I want to share with you today. And I want to say very early on: whatever you're already doing, it's great. This isn't about stopping anything you find helpful. What we want to do is become aware of how much our nervous system is driving this story, and learn to recognise what our body is trying to tell us.

I'm going to be inviting you to practise, so the first thing I'd like to invite you to do is get really comfortable. You may be listening or watching while you walk, but get comfortable and, if necessary, pause. Do you need a pillow? Do you want to move to the sofa, or sit on the floor? Get a blanket, get a pillow. And if your body is telling you it needs a glass of water or a trip to the loo, you can press pause and come back in a few moments.

So, the stress response. The nervous system. What is actually going on here? Our autonomic nervous system has one primary function: to detect safety or threat. It's not happiness. It's not productivity. It's not joy. It's safety and survival. We are scanning our environment for safety or threat, unconsciously, through the body and the mind, 24 hours a day, for our entire lifetime. It begins in utero. This is our stress response. It becomes a problem when we get stuck in a state, when we're unable to come back to a place of rest, digestion, connection, calm, joy, and aliveness. Because if we're stuck in a stress response, our hormones can't do their job properly. They're being hijacked by cortisol, by stress.

Let's begin with a picture. Imagine your body, your system, as a container. In this case, the container has a number of pebbles in it. These might be what we came in with, the things that happened before we were even born. Over time, more pebbles get added to the container. These are the events we may not have been able to process at the time they happened. Things that happened too much, too fast, or too soon. That's one of Peter Levine's definitions of trauma: what happens too much, too fast, too soon for us to process and integrate. It might also be what happened too little, for too long. Maybe we didn't receive enough touch, or we weren't listened to, or we had to behave in a certain way to feel accepted or loved or noticed.

Trauma isn't in the events. It's in what happens inside of us as a result of an event. The stored stress we hold in our container, in our body, is the survival energy that never got the chance to discharge or integrate. So we carry it in our system, and we continue to adapt around it. Most of the time it works. We live. We live a good life. But in perimenopause, when our hormones start fluctuating, the oestrogen that has been acting as a buffer, a cushion for our experience, begins to drop. It begins to fluctuate, as we know. And so everything we've been absorbing, but perhaps not processing or integrating, suddenly starts to feel like it's at full volume.

We often talk about perimenopause as the autumn of our life. It's not necessarily a problem, but it is a time for an audit, because we're beginning to feel so much more of our experience. If we add just one more pebble to our container, it might overflow. This is why the rage some of us experience can feel so out of proportion to the thing that just happened. It's everything the system has been carrying for years. And the body suddenly begins to feel so unfamiliar, even unsafe, because we have less buffering to contain it.

I want to give you the quickest map of our nervous system and our stress response that I can offer. There are three broad states, and each has two faces, if you like: how it performs in safety, and how it performs under threat. As I describe them, I invite you to reflect on which feels most familiar to you. We learn these responses to stress over a lifetime. We adapt and we learn, and we create patterns in our body and in our mind.

The first state is the sympathetic aspect of our nervous system. In safety, this is our get-up-and-go. It's drive and focus. It's getting up in the morning and getting on with things. It's our capacity to move towards and away. Under threat, this is our fight or flight response. There are a lot of sympathetic nerve endings in our respiratory diaphragm, so our breathing gets higher and faster, and our heart rate goes up. It's a

tight jaw and shallow breathing. It may feel restless, tired, tense, tight. It's bracing, as the body prepares to move towards something or run away. We might sound sharper, more clipped, maybe even a bit cross, and there's a lot of heat. It can feel buzzing, or like a racing heart. Heart palpitations, irritation, headaches, migraines, gut issues. It's where we get stuck in rumination and thought cycles. It's worry. It's anxiety. And as we go into a higher sympathetic fight or flight response, this is where we go into anger. Anger that has never had an expression, that has been held down and not expressed, sometimes for years, can become rage, especially if a lot has been stored.

That's the sympathetic. The parasympathetic has two branches. This is our vagus nerve. The first branch is the dorsal vagal, which runs from the brainstem down into the gut. In safety, its primary function is rest, sleep, and digestion. But it gets hijacked by stress, particularly when the sympathetic nervous system has been in fight or flight for a long time and we're heading for burnout. Then we have this dorsal vagal brake. It's like a blanket. It pushes everything down. This might feel slightly numb, disjointed, disconnected, frozen. It's the freeze response. We might sound very quiet or flat. Maybe our sentences just trail away. It can feel heavy, foggy, exhausted. And we can be in a very functional freeze state: getting on with life, coping, but with no connection to joy, to our aliveness, to our delight.

The second branch of the vagus nerve is our ventral vagal. Again, it comes from the brainstem, along the pathway to the heart and the lungs. It manages our breathing and our heart rate, and it's also how we connect with other people. When we're in safety, there's a softness. We breathe easily, and our breath might come down into the belly. We feel connected, warm, loving. Everything feels spacious and alive and safe. But under threat, this aspect of our nervous system has its own protective mechanism. This is people-pleasing, appeasing, masking: staying safe by staying in connection.

Gabor Maté talks about the fact that we're biologically designed to stay in connection. As human children, as mammals, we have to stay in connection to stay safe. But we might also be giving away a little of our own authenticity. In perimenopause, this is the reckoning: how many times have we done this, and how much of a pattern is it? Particularly for women. We've been socially conditioned from birth to be nice, to be good. We get praised for being helpful and soft. And it may not feel like a survival response, because we get our needs met, we stay in connection, we receive love and praise and attention. It doesn't feel like a survival response. It feels like our personality.

What we really want from our nervous system is for it to be flexible and regulated. When we're in safety, the states overlap, like the circles of a Venn diagram. It's like a dance. And obviously, if there's an actual threat, we want to be able to move away or go towards it. But then we also want the flexibility and the capacity to move back into a rest-and-digest state. That's our main goal here: to create more capacity. A bigger container, if you like. We want to be able to integrate those pebbles as they happen, to feel and process what comes up when it's actually happening, so we can have more aliveness and more choice in our system.

What's really important to understand about our stress response is that about 80% of the nerve fibres, particularly in the parasympathetic vagus nerve, run from the body to the brain. The mind only has about

20% of the information going back the other way. This is why mindfulness and talking can be very useful, but they're not the whole picture. We need to bring the body in. This is where all the symptoms are happening. This is where we feel stress. So when we consider the nervous system and our stress response, we have to bring our body into the picture.

So I want to do three practices with you. These somatic practices are small practices that teach the body new information: what it feels like to come back into safety and connection. Because if we've always been rushing, if we've always been pushing, if we have a pattern that feels tight and tense, we don't recognise it, because it's so familiar. It's normal. But familiar and normal isn't necessarily good. When we're practising these kinds of exercises, the invitation is just to notice. Notice what's happening rather than why. Notice what you notice, and bring your curiosity in.

If you have an injury or pain, you can either imagine the movement, or do just a little of it, within your capacity today. For two years of my perimenopausal journey, I had a frozen shoulder. When there isn't enough oestrogen reaching the tendons, we can get a lot of joint aches and tendon pain. So if you have any restricted mobility, just do what you can, and adapt.

The first practice is orientation. Let's take a moment to pause. Feel your feet on the floor. Just notice your experience of having your feet on the floor. Are they warm or cool? Is the floor flat or textured, smooth? Are your feet wriggling or moving, or is a little bit of tension coming into them? What is your connection with gravity? Just pause and notice the support of the chair. Where do you feel your weight?

Now let's have a little look around. Just notice your environment, and name a few things you can see. A picture. A clock. Clouds moving. Can you smell anything in your environment? And just notice: what is your breath doing right now? Does your body want to do anything? Do you want to stretch? Do you notice an extra breath? Notice the feeling of your clothes on your body, your hands perhaps on your knees, or a pillow pressed to your belly.

What we're doing is pausing and coming back into the present moment. The language of the nervous system is primarily sensation, so we use the senses to remind our body that right here, right now, we are safe enough. And you may notice that the body shifts. Maybe there's more heaviness. Maybe there's a deeper breath. So we orientate to our environment using our senses: what we feel, what we see, what we hear, what we taste, what we smell. Do it for as little as one minute.

The second practice is pushing. If we're in a state of some tension, if we're feeling a little irritated or angry, our body is telling us it needs to do something. We need a sense of agency through our arms and our legs. So let's use that energy. You can press pause between these exercises if you need to. I'd like you to think of something right now that's a little bit irritating. Not the thing that's a ten out of ten. Something around a five. We're going to create a little bit of space from it.

Imagine there's a boulder, and we're going to push it away. Bring your shoulder blades together at the back, and put your hands on your imaginary boulder: this thing, or person, or situation that you want to push away. We're going to do it slowly, and notice what the arms feel like. The muscles. Maybe the

breath changes. Maybe your belly tightens. Maybe your legs get more active as we push. You may feel some shaking. You may feel heat. You may feel your jaw tightening, or want to bare your teeth. Pushing slowly, all the way away, until your arms are straight. Push, push, push, push, push. And release.

Notice your breath. Come back to feeling the floor, and pay attention to what you're noticing. Perhaps sensations in your arms or your legs. Maybe there's a feeling of more space. Maybe you want to move a little. Notice if the breath drops. One of the very important things here is that down-regulation is slower than going into activation, so we need to create space for it.

Our third practice is "voo." Again, you can pause between practices and return. It's a sound that comes from the belly: "Voooo." You might like to put a hand on your belly. We'll do this together, and it's only an invitation, so do it if you feel like you'd like to. Breathe in. "Voooo." Now let the breath come back naturally again, and allow your eyes to look around. Noticing. You may notice a little movement. Perhaps the breath gets bigger. This is a great one. If we're feeling really flat or disconnected, it will gently wake the system up. If we're feeling a little activated, and we've tried pushing and want to down-regulate and create more calm, we can use it then too. It works in both directions, the way we need it to.

So those are three practices, done quite quickly: orienting to the environment, pushing, and voo. Of course, we don't change a lifetime of patterns with one exercise done once. We use these somatic practices to build capacity: to notice our experience, notice what our body needs and what it's telling us, and do something to create more space and greater regulation in the system. So there's more room for life, and we're not simply coping.

Our nervous system isn't failing us in menopause. It's simply a system that has often been carrying far too much, for far too long. And life is going to keep on happening. So we need tools, simple tools we can use every day, even at three o'clock in the morning, to create more space and respond to what our system needs.

I have two things for you. The first is the Calm Body, Quiet Mind meditation. It also comes with a PDF, Nervous System Foundations, which explains a bit more about what we've been doing today. That's a free gift for you inside this summit. And if you've signed up for the pass, you'll also have access to my Somatic Stress Toolkit. That's 24 of these practices spaced over 21 days, and you get SomaBot, an AI coach trained by me, that you can ask about how to use the practices and when best to do them. It's available to you at 3am, when I'm not.

Thank you very much for joining me today. I hope you found the practices useful. My name again is Fiona Smith, and you can contact me through my website. I'm also on Instagram at @fionabodywisdom. I'd love you to come and follow me, and I'd love to hear from you if you found these practices useful. Please enjoy the rest of this amazing summit.