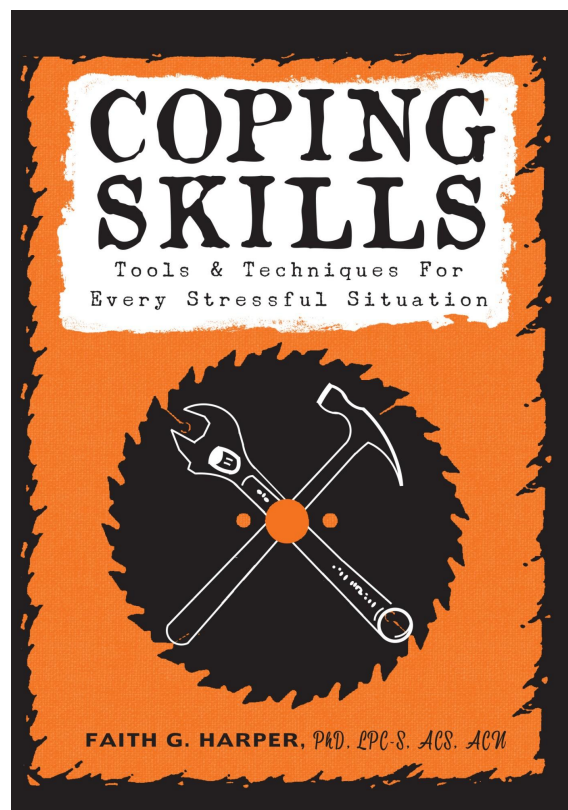


Coping Skills (Preview)

Tools & Techniques for Every Stressful Situation

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Coping skills are not woo-woo bullshit. They are mechanisms for managing an altered physiological state and bringing your parasympathetic nervous system back online. They are ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving through a physical state of stress. We cannot control our brain's survival responses, but we can negotiate with them to demonstrate that their situational read is not accurate and that we can manage our current circumstances.

The Science of Coping

At the Brain Level

(Content Warning: Nerdy shit)

First of all, junior high science flashback. Nerves are cells that have special communication functions. They communicate throughout the body as bioelectrical signals. Like, what happens if you touch a hot thing? The nerves in your hand send a message of “*fucking ow!*” to your brain, which then sends a message back saying: “*Well put it the fuck down, then! That’s the literal meaning of drop it like it’s hot!!!*”

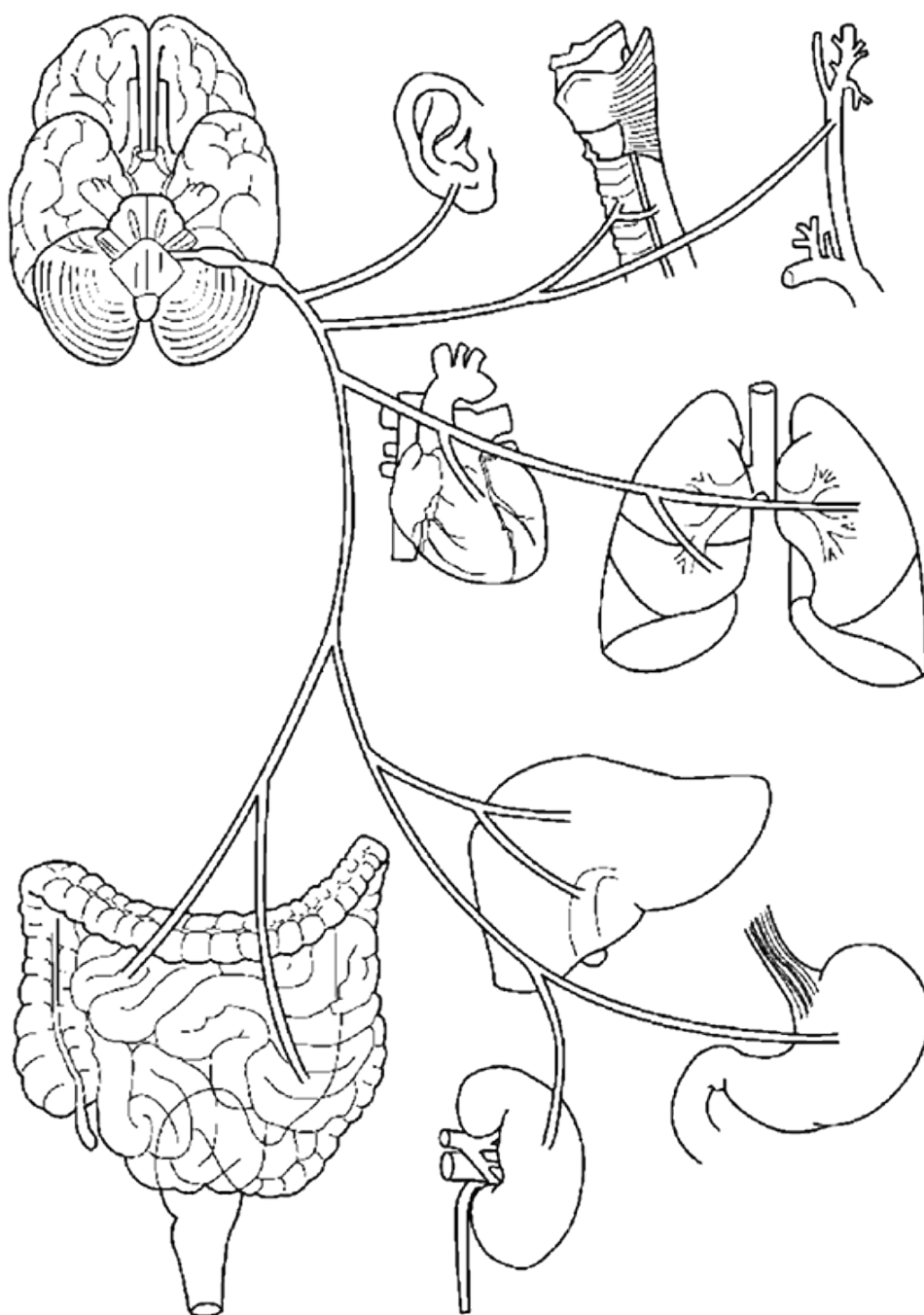
The *vagus nerve* (also called the 10th cranial nerve or Cranial Nerve X which sounds all sci-fi as fuck) is the longest, weirdest, and most complex of the twelve pairs of cranial nerves. The name itself (*vagus*) comes from the Latin word for “wandering” because this nerve wanders all around the damn body, sending information to organs and tissues. It wouldn’t be irrational to say that this particular nerve is an information superhighway.

Ok, now stay with me. There won’t be a test, cuz you can’t flunk a self-help book. But it will *really* help make all the coping skills information make sense in context.

So your nerves aren’t running around like anarchist messengers. They’re organized into systems. Nervous systems are the networks of the nerve cells and fibers that transmit messages. Nerve cells don’t just bop around aimlessly like your useless ex. They are organized into systems that make the messages transmit more efficiently. So that you will, indeed, drop it like it’s hot when need be.

Now, human beings have three nervous systems, all of which are autonomic. Autonomic just means they are essentially self-governing. They work involuntarily and are not under conscious control. Because you are *not* allowed at any time to decide whether or not you are going to drop the hot thing. That’s the kind of shit that will get you killed. Your body is not interested in negotiation, shit’s just getting dropped. You starting to feel me on why this is important info, yeah?

These three nervous systems are known as the sympathetic, parasympathetic, and enteric nervous systems. Again, no test on this. But it’s important to understand how they work in relation to each other because pretty recent research has found that these three nervous systems work in ranked order (a hierarchy). This research led a dude named Stephen Porges to develop what he terms *polyvagal theory*. And this is



This? The Fancy Fucking Diagram of the Vagus Nerve. So You Can See How the Brain Communicates with Every Major Organ in Your Body. No Pressure to Remain Calm Then, Right?

immensely critical to our understanding of how our stress response turns off and on and how coping skills mitigate that response.

In order to understand polyvagal theory, we first need to remember that the fundamental reaction of all animals in the face of a threat is to engage in the fight, flight, freeze response, which is activated (*involuntary*, remember?) by the *sympathetic nervous system*.

The fight, flight, freeze response is critical to our survival. It is activated in the face of a threat or perceived threat, whether it be to our actual, physical safety, the individuals we love and care for, our possessions, or our needs, wants, desires, well-being, and belief systems. Essentially, anything that challenges the core of who and what we are and who or what belongs to us invokes a protective response.

If we perceive aggression as a means of escape, we will fight. If our instincts tell us we can fight effectively but we can escape, we will flee. If neither of these responses are likely going to be effective, we will freeze.

All of these strategies are purely defensive ones. The intent is not to win against or overwhelm the threat, but to survive. The body's job is to size up the situation and figure out the best means of staying alive. It chooses a strategy based on the information it is receiving and past understanding of the threat. We may move back and forth between strategies as we take in information and gauge our effectiveness at managing the perceived imminent threat. All three responses are part of our defensive, survival instincts.

We read often about the "fight or flight" response, but the freeze response is often left out of literature describing trauma reactions. The freeze response is the one that most human beings are embarrassed about, although it makes just as much sense as a protective strategy as fight and flight do. A freeze response is no more a failure than any other protective coping strategy and is nothing to be ashamed of. Peter Levine states that there are four potential evolutionary survival benefits to the freeze response:

- Most predatory animals won't eat an animal they believe is already dead unless they are really hungry. Most animals have encoded information that meat that is already dead may be spoiled and therefore is a risk to eat.
- It is more difficult for predators to detect prey that is not moving. Immobilization shuts down all movement responses. Even if we are trying to be still and quiet it is difficult to do so unless we have become biochemically immobilized.
- When one animal collapses in a group, this distracts the predator from the rest of the group, allowing their escape.
- The freeze response releases a numbing agent in the body that makes the pain of attack more bearable.

Now obviously, it makes sense that the sympathetic nervous system should not be in charge all the time. It would make us fall apart at the seams pretty quickly (and

this is why people who don't have conscious ways to cope with chronic stress *do* fall apart at the seams pretty quickly).

Our second nervous system, the *parasympathetic nervous system*, is the one associated with social relationships and bonding. We're pack animals. We need to connect to other human beings for long-term survival, not just for mating season, and be able to navigate the world without feeling batshit crazy and threatened by our surroundings all the time. Being relaxed and alert is how we best engage with the world around us. This means that when the parasympathetic system is in charge, we are able to connect and communicate and form social relationships because we feel safe to do so.

When Porges said these systems are hierarchical, he was saying that the parasympathetic system is newer and inhibits the older systems. We turn off the fight, flight, freeze response so we can live and work in cooperation and build relationships.

But when something challenges our sense of safety at our lizard brain level, the parasympathetic system goes offline. The sympathetic nervous system is *myelinated*, while the parasympathetic nervous system is not. I know, I know with the science textbook words, but this is actually an important point. Myelination provides insulation...which speeds up the sending of the messages. So the nervous system that is in charge of our stress response works *faster* than the one that is in charge of our chill response.

Both systems operate involuntarily. And the sympathetic nervous system has to be turned off for the parasympathetic nervous system to work, meaning it has to determine that there is no stress or threat and that you are allowed to go about your day. But the sympathetic nervous system is still humming in the background, watching for danger. And it works faster than the chill system, so it will *shut shit down* on a moment's notice.

Any of us with unresolved trauma histories are far more likely to have our parasympathetic systems go offline, putting us into survival mode. I wrote a whole book about how all this goes down in the brain, by the way (*Unfuck Your Brain*, Microcosm Publishing, 2017).

Good coping skills help us manage circumstances without the sympathetic nervous system going into overdrive. Or, even, if you are activated, coping skills can help you de-activate much more quickly (and start to untether the freak-out response that has been ruling your brain for so long). Simply put, good coping skills help keep the parasympathetic nervous system online so we can stay calm and connected. Or they help us manage our sympathetic nervous system activation far more effectively, while getting it turned back off again as soon as possible.

So I said it once. And I really think it merits saying again. These are the facts:

- There are no such things as wrong responses, only adaptive ones
- What you have survived has wired your body to proceed with extreme caution on an unconscious level at all times. This is called staying fucking alive and safe

- You are not choosing to shut down
- This is not a “mental” illness; it is a physiological state of the human body
- You are not crazy; you have adapted to the environment around you with the only information you had at the time...your previous circumstances

Oh, and it’s not as important to this conversation, but in order to not leave you hanging: The third nervous system, as mentioned, is the enteric nervous system and it resides in the gastrointestinal tract. It receives feedback from the other two systems but is also able to operate independently of them, as noted in individuals who have severed vagus nerves. It is the reason the stomach is called the second brain. Curious-assed shit, right? I will go into far more detail on that in an upcoming book. So keep that idea on pause for now.

At the Mind Level

(*CW: Philosophical shit*)

Getting back to that *brain versus mind* conversation. So if all mammals have this hierarchical response system and all animals, period, are wired to respond to threats with the sympathetic nervous system, why are we the only ones that get all fucked up over it?

This is where I go back to the Jungian analysts. James Hollis writes about how humans experience two types of existential crisis that we consider impactful to our survival. The first is *abandonment*. We crave the structure and reassurance of others in the face of constant change and uncertainty. There are lots of ways we seek out constancy and many people design their lives around this need. Structured religious practice, employment, addictive behavior, and relationships that can be managed through compulsion are some of the big ones.

The other great existential fear that Hollis writes about is *overwhelment*. The world is large and scary and we are relatively powerless against so much of it. This is likely part of the reason we see so many power plays happening in human relationships. When it feels like there is so little we can control, we try to create safety nets of stability and control in our relationships instead.

If these are two core existential crisis triggers, is it any wonder that we can’t pull a Taylor Swift and just shake shit off? If something convinces the mind (the *bigger than the sum of its parts* aspect of the brain that makes us uniquely human) that we are disconnected or distressed, it sends us into a tailspin even bigger than the physiological response caused by our brain and body wiring. Humans have the unique capacity for anticipatory distress: that is, making shit up to worry about in the future based on what’s happened in the past. This triggers our fear of overwhelmment (and, honestly, often our fear of abandonment). Both these things then set off the physiological response of complete brain fuckery, what we just talked about above. Because we are human,

we have opposable thumbs and therefore access to the internet and refrigerators. But this also means we also fuck ourselves up on the regular. Helluva trade-off.

Why This Complicated Explanation?

Ok. Shit happens. Then we cope, right? Why is this complicated? Like complicated enough for a whole damn book?

It's complicated because we have these unique human minds that interact with these self-preserving human brains. And we are really good at thinking too much about something or not thinking nearly enough before we act. Essentially, we are super good at getting ourselves in trouble in the following ways:

- We have coping skills but they are unhealthy.
- We *had* coping skills but they've stopped working.
- We don't have enough strategies to fall back on when the skills that usually work don't work.
- We forget to use our strategies in the moment.
- We aren't sure which strategies we should use in which situations.

So how do we resolve these issues and be better at this coping shit?

- *Lots* of fucking practice—when you aren't activated. The therapeutic term for this is “over-learning.” Don't practice until you get it right, practice until you are incapable of getting it wrong. As Bruce Lee said, “*Under duress, we do not rise to our expectations, but fall to our level of training.*”
- Trying out *lots* of different options. If you have a couple skills that typically work for you, that's awesome. You will be far more successful if you have several more good skills in your back pocket in case your brain goes into asshole mode and doesn't respond to your tried-and-true strategies.
- Code what you are dealing with. I've created four categories of coping skills (more on that in the next section). Two are emotion-focused (meaning they are designed to deal with our internal response to something that has to be lived through, not changed) and two are problem-focused (meaning they are designed to help you navigate the world in a different way to overcome whatever bullshit you are currently having to cope with). Those aren't finite categories. Because you have to manage your own response before you go out to change the world. But being able to identify whether or not a problem-focused coping skill is warranted at any point may help stop you from doing something unproductive. Like trying

to forcibly change an unchangeable situation and being frustrated with your lack of success. When your energy would have been better spent learning to managing your own internal reactions to the bullshit around you and being really successful at those emotion-focused coping skills.



(End of Preview)

The Ted K Archive

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