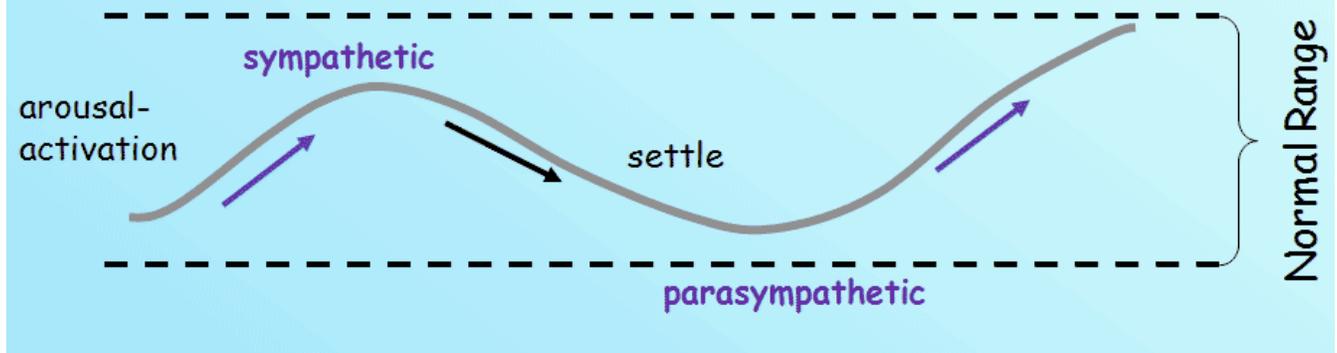


Maps for Recovery from Shock and Early Trauma

A Healthy Nervous System



When in a state of health, each of our nervous systems has the capacity to self-regulate in response to external circumstances. Some experiences evoke arousal/activation: the nervous system gears up in case we need to respond to a threat with alertness, alarm, or active self-protective strategies – the fight or flight reactions of the sympathetic nervous system. Then, when the signal comes that circumstances are again safe (safer), the nervous system settles back into the rest, digest and recover responses of the parasympathetic nervous system.

When my Nervous System is balanced and my activation is low

I feel:

Open, curious

Embodied

Available for connection

Fluid, resilient

Competent - a sense of mastery

Relaxed yet alert

Appropriately reactive

Able to be present

Emotionally stable

Healthy - symptoms are manageable

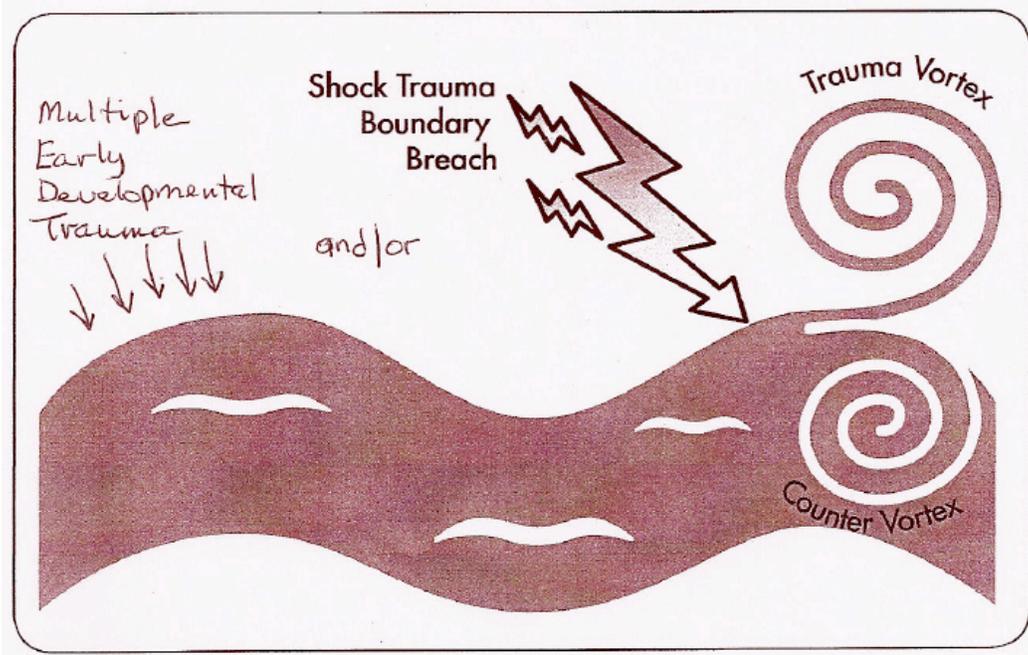
I have choices and options

I recognize when I am moving out of my functional range and have tools to return to stability and stabilization

I know when to reach out for support when I can't do it on my own

How trauma alters this healthy rhythm of activation and settling – The Stream of Life image

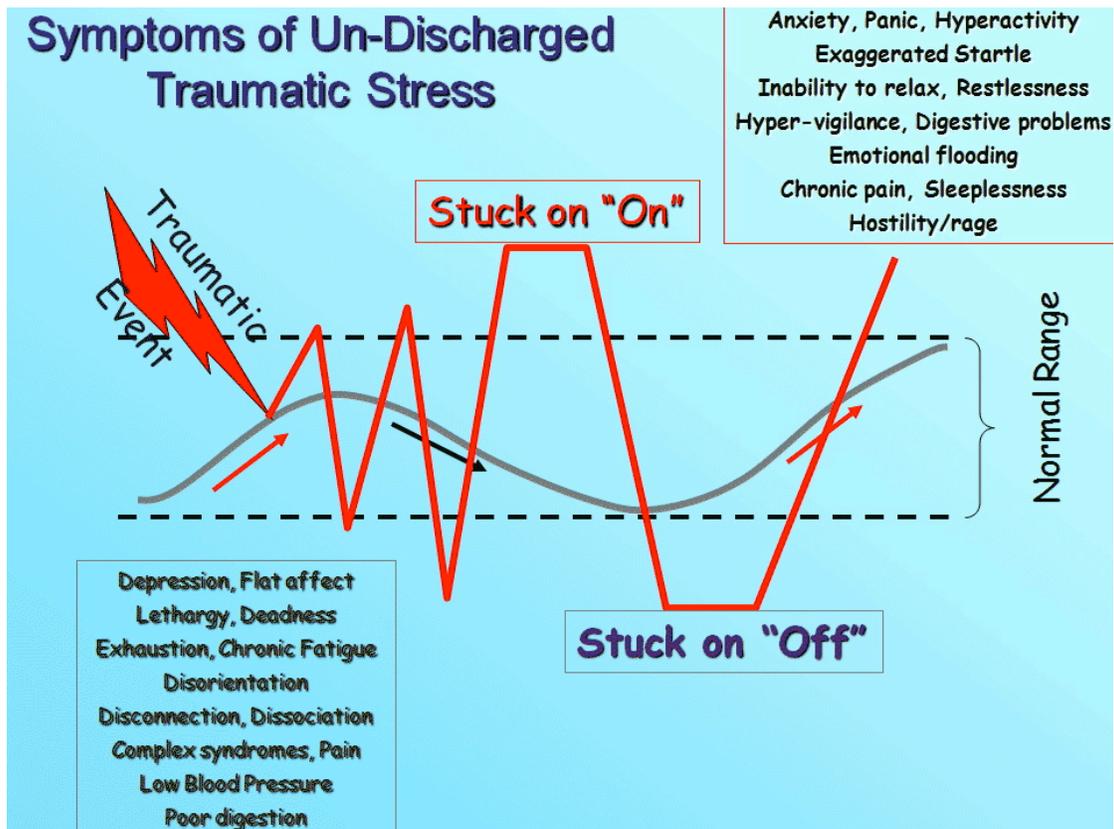
The Stream of Life is a metaphor representing our emotional (and energetic) life running like a river contained within its banks. The stream contains our thoughts, feelings and behaviors that are under our control. These banks, the self-regulation of the healthy nervous system's rhythm shown in diagram 1, are the boundaries against excessive stimulation. They are our container for life experience, allowing us to feel in charge of our lives in a relaxed and spontaneous way.



Shock trauma arises from any event that was too fast, too much for our nervous system to integrate or manage. Such events breach the banks of the stream of life – our barriers against excessive experiences – and overwhelm our capacity to respond, triggering feelings of intense fear, helplessness and loss of control. Shock trauma/boundary breach may accompany accident, assault, surgery/medical interventions, war or disaster. Life energy is stuck in a trauma ‘vortex’.

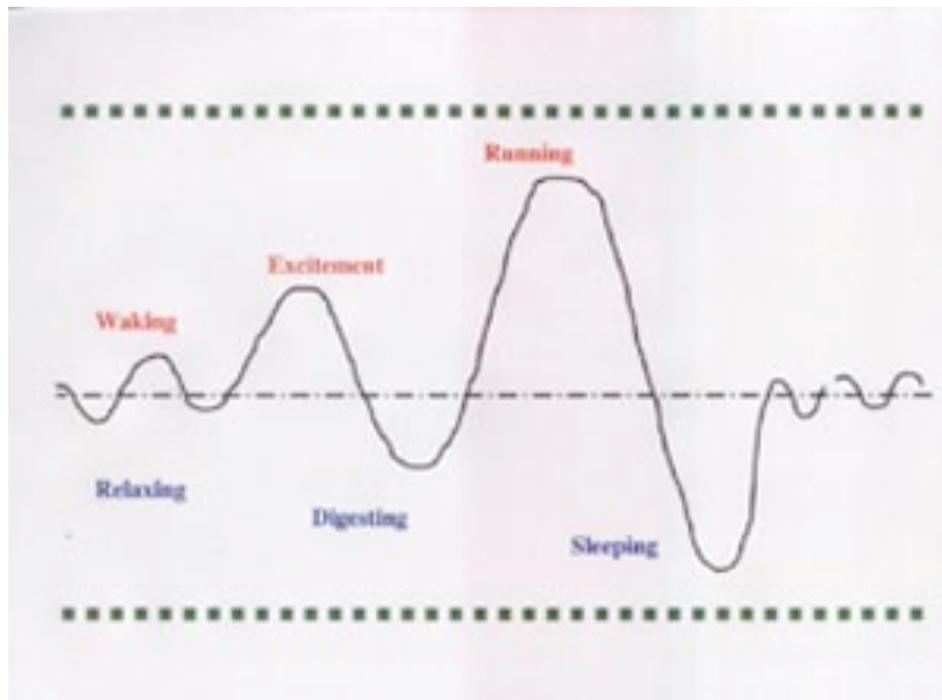
Developmental trauma arises from overwhelming experiences in the very young (where events that may seem minor to an adult can much more easily provoke the same experiences of fear, helplessness and loss of control of shock trauma in adults.) These events can occur prenatally, during or after birth, through infant-parent bonding challenges, from neglect, abandonment, abuse. Often early developmental traumas are intertwined with shock trauma experiences. They often underly syndromal medical conditions: chronic pain or fatigue, IBS, migraine, fibromyalgia.

Immobility, dissociation and freeze: when fear, helplessness and loss of control (actual or perceived) become extreme, the nervous system is designed to shut down. The freeze state is the most extreme defense strategy at our disposal; **unconscious processes in the brain** suppress the fight/flight response, throwing the system into the freeze state in an attempt to survive until the danger is past. Overwhelming experience in early childhood or after a major shock trauma can predispose the nervous system to go into freeze more quickly or when associated signals in the environment or in relationship trigger it. Often, people don't understand why they become immobilized or dissociate/spaced out. Shame about not acting may then add further suffering. It's important to understand that the freeze state is a normal, natural biological protective strategy. It's also important to know that the nervous system's response capacity can be restored so the freeze response becomes less automatic, less severe, less frequent and can often be resolved.



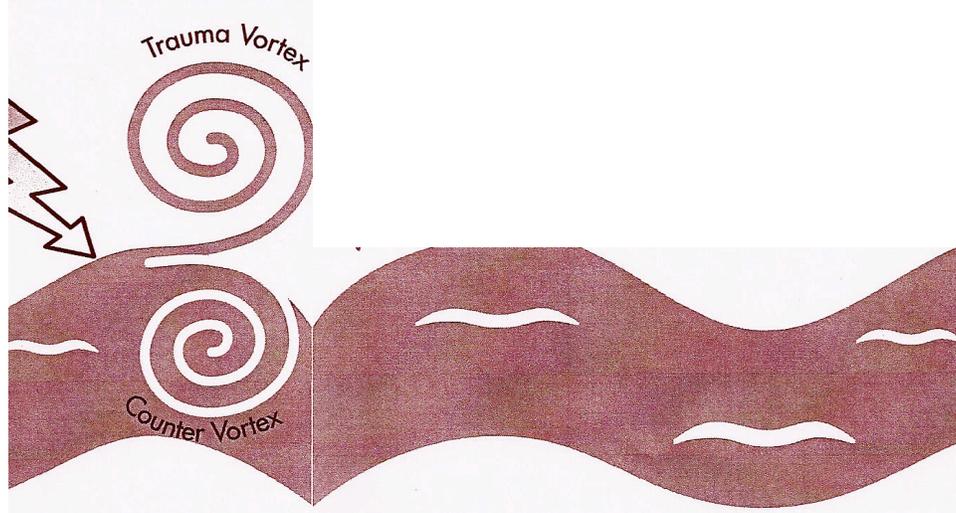
Reclaiming the nervous system from trauma: restoring the Stream of Life to flow within its banks

The nervous system maintains homeostasis by balancing input from both branches of the Autonomic Nervous System (sympathetic – activation) and parasympathetic – settling) by balancing input from both branches during activities ranging from relaxing, digesting and sleeping to waking, feeling excited and running. Mindful breathing/meditation and mindful physical activities like yoga, tai qi and dancing bring together the best of both branches.

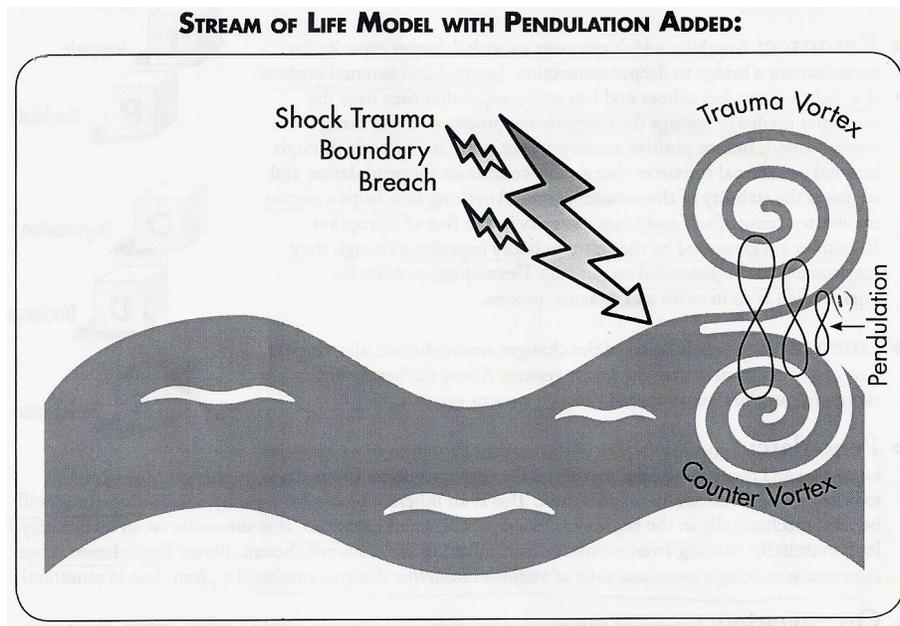


Somatic Experiencing addresses the energy bound in the trauma vortex

There is life on the other side of the trauma vortex!



- Weaving from the healing vortex to the trauma vortex (a process called pendulation) helps bring life energy that was trapped in the trauma vortex back into the stream of life. Doing this safely, in a supported, contained, titrated way is the key to skillful trauma resolution. In safe and successful trauma resolution work, “less is more” until the nervous system has a greater capacity for more to be contained naturally. This is especially true when there’s been early developmental trauma or lack of safe, consistent parenting/caregiving.



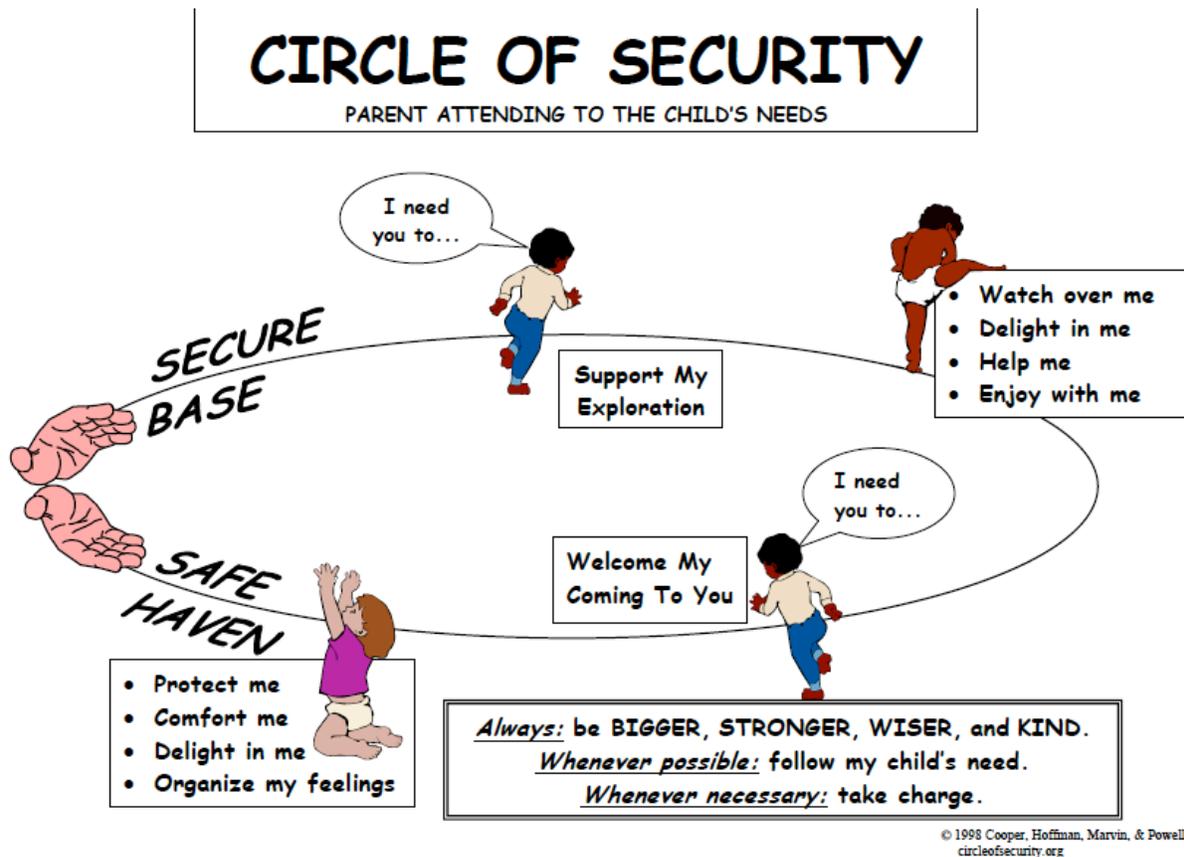
- Trauma resolved at the level of the nervous system helps us to naturally process and correct the negative beliefs that inevitably attach to traumatic events. This process transforms our lives - it is a process of liberation. Life energy is again available to flow spontaneously in the stream of life.
- We can become aware of how the liberation process is proceeding by noticing

our body's reactions when we recall (initially in a safe situation and with appropriate resources and support) various aspects of a traumatic event.

We can learn to sense rising activation and increasing constriction in various areas of the body. These indicate that there is more to resolve and release. Calmness, tenderness, gratitude, joy and possibly even forgiveness can arise spontaneously as trauma is resolving. They don't need to be - and can't be forced or rushed. They simply occur as part of healing, as the fruit or blossoming of what is sometimes called "post-traumatic growth".

With developmental trauma, some form of attachment repair work is often needed. We are at the beginning of learning how to apply parent/child attachment theory to adult healing. *Circle of Security*, originally designed for at risk infants, is a great resource. Two of their diagrams are below and on the next page.

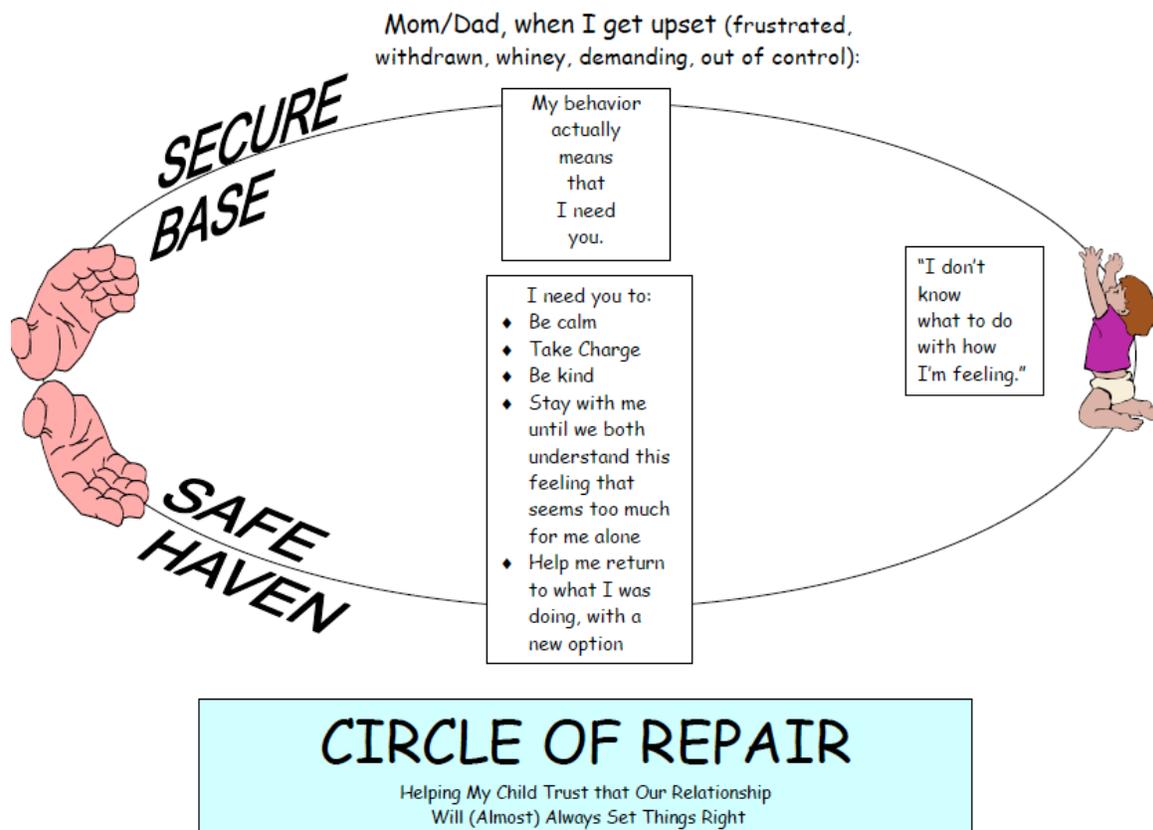
Successful developmental trauma resolution leads back to the lower blue box on p.1 "I recognize when I'm moving out of my functional range. I have tools to return to stability. . . I know when to reach out for support" when doing it on my own is still beyond my reach at this stage in my healing – and we will always need each other.



This kind of parental/caregiver support provides/mirrors/"bio-entrains" a calming and attuned response to dealing with distress – our own or that of others. The infant/young child learns this -- or the opposite, from the beginning and over time, from the parent. The child's nervous system's capacity to effectively contain and deal with stress (resilience) is learned, body to body, mood to mood, heart to heart, beliefs to beliefs, from those around them. Siblings, extended family members, neighbors, baby sitters, the community can also have a profound influence on how the nervous system is "set" until it can be reset.

Attachment distress/dysregulation occurs when the child lacks this sense of safety. Many of us did not get this secure and supportive type of parenting – there were no safe hands to come back to, or a parent was so inconsistent we could never figure out what we “did wrong” so there was no safe harbor of acceptance and protection that we could rely on. When our parent(s) or caregiver didn’t get their own attachment needs met, and therefore couldn’t offer a secure base to connect to (attachment), we didn’t have a chance to ‘internalize’ (take into ourselves and make our own) a sense of inner security - in general or sometimes only in certain situations.

So we may not be able to create a Circle of Repair – yet. It is a skill that can be learned.



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Somatic therapies like Somatic Experiencing inform attachment repair approaches like DARE (Dynamic Attachment Re-Patterning experience) and NARM (NeuroAffective Relational Model). These are especially helpful when people’s stress reactions trigger physical pain, immune and hormonal imbalances and mood difficulties. EFT (Emotionally Focused Therapy) couples/family therapy is particularly helpful for couples/families who wish to learn to support each other when early lack of attunement and safety plays into current, ongoing relationship challenges.

Illustration Sources and Resources: All works by Peter Levine, especially *In an Unspoken Voice*
<http://www.traumahealing.com/somatic-experiencing/index.html> (diagrams 1, 2, 4)

Somatic Experiencing training manual (diagrams 3, 6, 7)

<http://www.veroniqueamead.com/pns.php> (diagram 5)

<http://circleofsecurity.net/stipulations/> Click “I agree” to access the illustrations (diagrams 8, 9)

Learning to Draw on the Healing Vortex to Heal Trauma

Gina Ross’s books [Beyond the Trauma Vortex A Guide for You](#) which has versions for Diplomats and NGOs, Psychology and Education, the Medical Field and the Military.

http://www.traumahealing.com/somatic-experiencing-trainings/bookstore_all.html