Differentiating low energy states related to stress

by

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Stress in modern life – an example

Managing high amounts of information and impact is an embedded part of modern life. It can hold rich experiences, with a high availability of knowledge and adventure – you just Google a word or 2 and you have access to articles, research – or fun and entertainment. You can go to Facebook or Linkedin and spend hours on networking electronically.
However, the high amount of information is also a challenge to our capacity to cope and stay present in ourselves, in relationships and in relation to the information coming towards us. It triggers innate stress-responses only too easily.
Here is an example: I am planning a new workshop, so I 'google' some of the theoretical concepts and find at least 10 interesting articles. I track a number of known reactions in myself: I get excited and curious, I want to start reading right away. Another part of me gets overwhelmed. There is too much information: How do I prioritize? Do I read these articles prior to the stack of unread books lying on my desk? I don't have time for reading at all right now. When overwhelmed I feel a weakness in my body, a loss of orientation, I loose energy in my center. I become diffuse or scattered. A third part of me is starting to plan rigidly, when to read what, cutting out my curiosity, getting "realistic" in my choices in a closed way.
Then, I slow down inside and also detect some sadness and frustration underneath. The reality of available time and resources is frustrating and painful. I make space for my emotional responses including my natural tiredness related to all these tasks I am facing. From there, I can look with realism at my available choices.

Psychomotoric skills and muscle responses

What are the skills that got challenged in the above example?
Our muscle-system holds a large number of psychomotor skills like centering, grounding, orienting, boundaries, flexibility, regulating contact and containment of emotions. (Brantbjerg & Ollars, (2006), Brantbjerg, (2007), Marcher & Fich, (2010)).

Ideally our muscles are filled out with life-energy and the psychomotoric skills are available for us when managing our life. Sadly enough that is not the full picture: our muscular system also holds the compromises that we have already made in our lives when coping with impossible dilemmas between our own emotions and impulses and the surrounding context - compromises that have left us with patterns of either control, holding back in muscles – or giving up and going into a low energy state. When facing challenges and stressors in daily life, these habitual patterns of controlling and giving up come into play and impact how we respond to the present-day stressors.
In the above example, the muscular reality behind the experience of becoming diffuse is that several of my core muscles go into low energy-states as a response to additional stress – my pelvic floor, the support muscles in my back and some of the muscles deep in my stomach. When I shift to becoming rigid and shutting down, control in another set of muscles becomes more in the foreground – my back muscles, the outside of my legs, shoulders and jaw tense up. The low energy state is still there - lying underneath. So, I am now stuck in an inner polarity in relationship to an outer stressor and I no longer have free access to reality-based choices.

Slowing down and greater internal awareness helps me to negotiate this stuck polarity. I can invite energy back into the flaccid muscles – and I can invite a relaxation in the tense ones. With that defense-modification I can get proper access to my skills again – I can feel centered and grounded, I can feel my body as a container for emotions; and I can track my emotions. And from there, I can orient to factual reality and the choices that I have in reality.

Stress reactions

Tensing certain sets of muscles and going into hyper-aroused states in the nervous-system is a well described response to stress. The extreme reaction of going into collapse, hypo-arousal is also described in various theories about trauma and stress. (Porges, (2011), Lanius & colleagues, (2003))

However, going into a low energy state in the muscle system, as a normal defense mechanism - parallel to tensing up - is less well described. In this article, I will differentiate between three levels of low energy reactions in the body, as responses to stress – and reflect on how to contain and modify these. The three levels are:

- Natural tiredness
- Giving up in muscles = loosing access to impulses and emotions
- Hypo-arousal, a survival-reaction in the autonomic nervous system (ANS)

Natural tiredness

Relating to a very complex outer and inner reality makes us naturally tired. We have a natural swing in the ANS between sympathetic activation, where strong outgoing activity is more in the foreground, and parasympathetic activation, where a more restful level of activity is in the foreground. The same swing is found in our breathing rhythm. We expand and reach out on the in-breath – and we settle back into ourselves and rest on the out-breath. These basic rhythms are easily disturbed by the fast speed and high level of information of life in our modern Western civilization.

One of the first experiences that often emerge in participants in my workshops is a natural tiredness that has been pushed aside and ignored to be able to cope with our daily life. When you become more concrete and experienced in body awareness and gain more fullness in your muscles, this natural level of tiredness can be differentiated from 'withdrawal' or from 'giving up'.

If you can feel your center of gravity, your feet on the ground, support from your back, energy in the front of your body, and your skin-boundary etc., then you can open up safely to feeling tired – if that's what you feel - and to share that experience with others, so 'natural tiredness' can become normalized and acknowledged in a such a sub-group.

This process breaks a typical cultural pattern of trying to hide our tiredness, framing it as 'not social', or being ashamed of it. An emotional boundary is re-established between 'natural tiredness', 'withdrawal' and 'giving up'. Without this boundary, tiredness and giving up merge and our presence is diminished both bodily, mentally and psychically. You can be tired and present in the same time, if your body and mind support you in staying aware of yourself and of the context you are in. A person who is 'naturally tired' has a different presence to a person who is 'withdrawn' or 'given up'.

Natural frustration is another experience that comes to the foreground with greater fullness in the muscle-system. The more complex our context is, the more challenging it is to stay grounded and oriented to reality. This process holds natural frustration – and frustration is often pushed aside, denied, or becomes framed as "something is wrong", etc. Making space for natural tiredness and for natural frustration go hand in hand and they are both supported by a fullness in the muscles, and with that access to psychomotor skills.

A boundary is established between one's natural experiences and the habitual solutions of 'giving up' and 'holding back'. (Any further exploration of the processes around natural frustration belong in a different article)

Hypo-response – giving up as a defense strategy held in muscles.

"Muscle-reponse" is the term used in Bodynamic Analysis to describe different levels of muscular fullness and presence. Three types of responses are differentiated – balanced, hypo- and hyper-response, and also different levels of hypo- and hyper-response. (Macnaughton, (2004), Marcher & Fich (2010)).

- Balanced response (fullness) means that the various emotions and impulses related to a muscle's psychomotoric function are freely available to a person's consciousness and with that comes access to reality-based choice-making.
- Hyper-response (tension) means that emotions and impulses are held back, or controlled;
- Hypo-response (low energy) means that emotions and impulses are given up.

Hyper- and hypo-response are both defensive strategies that get established when we are facing challenging dilemmas between aspects of our own life-energy and the social context we are in. We "solve" these dilemmas by 'holding back' and by deadening our impulses and emotions – leaving us with decreased access to our psychomotor skills. Our defensive personality patterns are bodily held by a combination of hyper- and hypo-response in the muscle-system – as described in the example in the beginning of this article.

(Note: In the following I will use the more common language of tension and low energy in place of the more technical concepts of hyper- and hypo-response.)
In relationship to stress, 'tension' has been thoroughly described as a typical response. Tense shoulders, backs, jaws, diaphragms, etc. are known reality to most of us as a response to stress. Giving up, going into low energy, losing contact with parts of ourselves is much harder to track – and is also much less described.

Patterns of low energy present us with a different and usually hidden challenge in coping with stress. (Brantbjerg, (2012)).Tension calls for more attention due to the static energy-state caused by holding back. Low energy doesn't call for attention – it goes invisible instead. We can easily lose energy in various parts of our body without us noticing it. We may possibly notice that we have become diffuse, vague, tired or distant. But which muscles going into low energy are involved in this reaction?

When interacting with a challenging context, the parts of our body that hold a habitual pattern of low energy will be the first one's to respond to, and interpret the challenge as stressing. Your capacity for meeting and matching the outer reality is dependent on your available energy-level.

Low energy areas will easily go into overwhelm quite quickly, "solving" the experience of pressure from outside by withdrawing. Other parts of us will typically try to compensate for the loss of coping capacity by tensing up. If we don't look for the low energy parts, they may go unnoticed – and then we are stuck in an inner polarity.

Tracking low energy can be trained. Just by asking yourself where in your body you are feeling less present starts an inclusion of low energy into your awareness. Comparing body-parts can be helpful: you can track differences in 'fullness', when comparing the outside/inside, right/left side, back/front, depth/surface, and upper/lower body.

These comparisons can bring awareness to parts of your body that you habitually don't notice. A further modification of the defence strategy can happen by building up energy in the low energized muscles. When modifying tension releasing, relaxing, and expressing work. Those strategies don't work for low energy.

Building up energy happens by activating muscles slowly, "dosing" the muscle-activation low, keeping the activation while you breathe – and letting it go slowly. With that sort of sequence, you train the muscle to hold more energy and keep it. "Dosing", using a specific and often small level of activation, is a key element in modifying low energy muscles. (Brantbjerg (2007, 2008). If you work hard bodily, you easily overwhelm the low energized muscles, and they will automatically check out. Approaching, and including, low energized muscles can be supported by slowing down and listening for subtle, small signals from the body.

If the 'energy-building' in the low energized muscles is successful, then impulses and emotions will start coming closer to one's consciousness again. In the example earlier in this article, sadness, frustration and tiredness came into my awareness when energy returned to my center and back. With that, my capacity to contain these emotions came back, including my curiosity. Energized in my center, and supported from my back, I could start listening further for reality-based choices. Regaining access to impulses and emotions that have been hidden in low energy is often a slow process, especially if the low energy patterns are part of one's old defensive solutions. Building up energy in the muscular system, builds a container, and the 'given up' aspects are invited back at a speed, that is safe enough for our self-perception. We need to expand how we see ourselves to invite back what we once gave up.

Example of building up energy in a core-muscle:

Bring your right knee and your left elbow towards each other. Then left knee and right elbow. Alternate. Notice how your lumbar vertebrae rotate, and your abdominal muscles activate - superficial as well as deep muscles.

This cross-movement activates the Psoas Major muscle in front of and on the side of 4^{th}-5^{th} lumbar vertebrae, the area of your physical balance point.

To build up energy you do the movement slowly. You can do the movement smaller or bigger. You can do it small by just moving the opposite shoulder and hip towards each other – or just intending the cross-movement.

What kind of resources become available to you with different dosages?

Hypo-arousal – a survival-reaction

In this paragraph, a third version of low energy will be differentiated and described:
Hypo-arousal, which is a survival-reaction with a highly predominant activity in the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous-system. When stress is no longer experienced as a challenge, but as a threat to our life or integrity, more radical responses emerge. The swings in the autonomic nervous-system get bigger. High activation in the sympathetic branch is called hyper-arousal – and high activation in the dorsal part of the parasympathetic branch is called hypo-arousal. (Porges (2011))
Hyper-arousal signs are often part of what we in daily language call "feeling stressed": an increase in heartbeat; a difficulty in sleeping and resting; being hyper-alert; fast responding; being on autopilot; being high on adrenalin.

Hypo-arousal is an even more radical strategy. When we cannot solve whatever we are facing through the outgoing impulses in hyperarousal: flight or fight, protection, etc. (Brantbjerg & Jørgensen, (2011)), we can swing over to the other extreme. We can collapse, loose our grip, or dissolve. Experiences of helplessness, hopelessness, powerlessness, feeling lost, falling into a void, being pulled into a drain, feeling numb, feeling dead, etc. are typical in hypoarousal. Our life-energy goes into a very slow rhythm.

Experiences of hypo-arousal often don't get regulated after the stressful or traumatic event is over. Very often these experiences end up being dissociated instead. Relating to hypo-arousal challenges the skills and identity of both care-seekers and care-givers. We can easily polarize to the extreme slowness by unconsciously shifting into hyper-arousal, trying to get the person or ourselves out of "deadness", to get alive again, which leaves the hypo-arousal reaction unintegrated.

How can we approach un-integrated hypo-arousal?
The key, as I see it, is to find acceptance of hypo-arousal states just as they are, including them in who we are as human beings. To do that you need to become capable of staying present on the edge of the collapse, without dropping into it, and having your observing self on board, so you can observe and name the information that becomes available from the collapsed state – not be it.

Differentiation between low energy (hypo-response) in the muscles and the connective tissue on one hand, and hypo-arousal as a nervous-system response on the other hand is useful in this process. Low energy in muscles and in connective tissue can be approached and modified through choice. We can choose to build up energy in areas of our body that hold low energy. We can train ourselves in doing this with precise dosing, and through that we can build a better capacity for containment of emotionally loaded states – including hypo-arousal.

Micro-activations of the connective tissue, in my experience, supports our capacity to stay present on the edge of collapse, so we can get to know the part of us that lives inside the collapse. This can allow a natural regulation in the nervous system to happen. (Brantbjerg, (2012))

Nervous system regulation "happens" – we can't "do" it. Regulation of both hyper- and hypo-arousal happens naturally, when the body feels safe enough. The challenge is how we can support ourselves and others to optimize safety in a way that allows this regulation to happen.

Building up energy gently – and with that differentiating between the collapse and presence in muscles and connective tissue – holds the potential for both care-giver and care-seeker to be able to stay present and allow regulation of hypo-arousal to happen by itself. Building up this capacity takes time – sometimes years – and experience shows that it works.

Without differentiation between low energy in muscles (hypo-response) and hypo-arousal, the two types of giving up easily merge – which means being sucked into the collapse if you get close to it, because a certain amount of your muscles give up holding a container for you, as a protection from feeling the experience of the collapse.

An example of a microactivation:
Pn the upper body push your fingertips VERY lightly together. Let your shoulders relax while doing it. This activation brings energy into the connective tissue on the front-side of your body – the front gathers.

Low energy states

What are the low energized parts holding for each of us and for our larger contexts?
And how do we model their integration in our clinical work?
Low energy states – whether it comes in the form of natural tiredness, giving up impulses and emotions in muscles or hypo-arousal in the ANS – are typically given low status in our world. One-down roles are often formed around these low energy phenomena, placing them low in social hierarchies. (Brantbjerg, (2012 video)). This holds an exclusion of information for all of us.
What is it we as a culture, as a society, keep hidden in the low energy states?

I am not going to attempt an answer to this question. I am just posing it to spark my own and everybody else's curiosity. What I do know is that accepting and including my own low energy states has regulated fear in a way other methods didn't do. I feel safer, less scared because I don't fear my own or others' giving up or underlying collapse anymore. I also feel more compassionate. Instead of polarizing to or identifying with the low energy states, I can reach for those parts of me by gently bringing energy into them. I have more access to a natural swing between outgoing energy and resting energy. I don't have to use my outgoing energy to compensate for the low energy states. That has made life easier and more fun for me .

As therapists we are confronted with visible or invisible low energy states in our clients and in ourselves, whether we know it or not. Normalizing them and knowing how to modify them makes a difference. We can include the low energy states as useful information about the client's process and about what is going on between us right now. We can train ourselves and our clients in tracking when, where, and to what degree we go into low energy – parallel to tracking how we go tense. All of this potential builds on the willingness in ourselves to include low energy states as part of who we are.

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