

COVID-19: FELT SECURITY AND NEUROCEPTION

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It may be obvious: our nervous system is impacted by everything we do. Likewise, at this time of collective contagion, we should reflect on the meaning of “being safe” and on what triggers us when we feel in danger. There are common mechanisms that, however, activate individual reactions: none of us presents the same response in case of danger as none of us has the same experience of felt security.

Therefore:

How do we face risk, be it real or perceived? How the individual perception of risk turns into a shared perception of a community perception? How do we experience social isolation?

What does it happen when we perceive a risk?

Rooted into phylogenies and Evolutionary theory, *Polyvagal theory* by Stephen Porges (2018) – especially the idea of **Neuroception**, gives us some insights into how COVID-19 may impact on our physiological and emotional regulation to address risk, both at an individual level and a collective level.

Our nervous system reacts to stress and danger according to a hierarchical organisation that relates to the different stages we went through during our evolution: Immobilization, Mobilization and Social Engagement. Let’s address them closer.

Immobilization: this is the most ancient reactive pathway, which comes online when we perceive to be in extreme danger or threat. This causes the immobilization of our body. In this case, we respond to our fears and terror by freezing, extreme numbing and shutdown.

Mobilization: a more common reaction of the population during COVID-19. We respond via an activation of the sympathetic nervous system; in other words, we mobilize ourselves to face danger and react with flight or fight responses that are a set of common reactions when we feel to protect our survival.

Social engagement: it describes the most recent and sophisticated part of our nervous system. We activate this pathway when we perceive a sense of safety and connection with others. Social engagement enables our communication, bonding with the environment.

What are the mechanisms that come online?

In daily life, there are moments when we perceive a *felt security* and others when we perceive we are in *danger*. Our responses shift between those two states depending on the need for protection and the need for avoiding danger. COVID-19 made the population shifting towards a survival mode of fight/flight and has blocked social engagement as the latest was undermined by the spreading of the virus itself and by media coverage that was mainly alarmist and not favouring the maintenance of a calm state.

The feeling maybe that of not being able to trust and to feel trapped along with an activation of

distress, fear, mistrust – that are not always proportioned to the real situation. Sometimes anger towards the infectors, or shame to have been potential infectors are also present. We have shut down the social engagement, as the environment is not at the moment a realm of felt security.

Our Neuroception regulates all these perceptions and they describe how our autonomic nervous system constantly monitors and interprets the environments. It might then send the message that the context is safe, or a source of danger and threat. This is a process out of our awareness and an adaptive mechanism.

Neuroception may also determine *if and how to communicate, if and how to react in our communities* as it links the assessment of risk to social behaviour. The collective neuroception is also sustained by media coverage and by superficial messages about psychological reactions, frightened rather than well thought.

We moved from a state of physiological calmness – needed for the social engagement – to a state of defence because suddenly:

We felt of being at risk as individuals and we felt to be surrounded by a risky social system.

The environment ceased to be safe enough to inhibit defence mechanisms that we share with other mammals. The survival mode made us to rush to supermarket, to make people saying that there is the 'COVID psychosis'. This is not psychosis, rather an ancestral response that people activate also when exposed to potential traumatic events or to traumatic events.

What can we do?

We can learn to listen to our body. We are not so used to return to a state of calmness when we perceive stress around us. However, even in such situations we should train our body to feel a loose of tension and to contribute to that of others. We should practice breathing exercises to anchor ourselves in the here and now and to concentrate to the frequency of breathing. When we are in state of perceived danger let's breathe with a higher frequency and less intensity. Slowing down the breathing frequency and for longer we can slow down the heart rate and favouring calmness.

Change of polarity. All tools that favour the homeostasis for our nervous system would help our neuroception of calmness to be contagious also for others. Let's be brave.