Shhhh... Listen! Do You Hear Your Social Nervous System Calling?

7 Unexpectedly Easy Tips to Help Heal Chronic Illness That You May Be Dismissing

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Shhh... Listen!
Do You Hear Your Social Nervous System Calling?

Healing Tools #1

The Importance of Pleasure

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Introduction

While treating trauma is an important tool for improving our health, following impulses for pleasure is an aspect of trauma therapy that can be used in everyday life as a way of working with an overactive nervous system. It's a way of listening so you can heal social nervous system functions and support chronic illness recovery. It is accessible to everyone. Plus, it's free.

For those of us living with chronic illness there is something powerful in honoring our impulses for greater ease, connection and other forms of pleasure. It's not about giving up on things that take effort, but about letting our nervous systems show us how to shift gears.

This post is part of a series on resources and pleasure, which is #1 on my list of tools for healing chronic illness.

Going for pleasure is about following the easy-to-miss cravings that can gradually lead us out of painful physiological states that get stuck in "doing" modes or in "being on guard." These are states caught in a cell danger response of fight, flight and freeze. And it's not psychological.

As described in another post of the series, the impulse for pleasure is not frivolous.

It is actually a way of supporting a different gear, of accessing a state that helps us rest and recover, tend and befriend, connect and settle.

This is the providence of our Social Nervous Systems, also known as "The Vagus."

This branch of the parasympathetic nervous system is able to put a lid on fight and flight, hypervigilance, and anxiety. It is capable of keeping your heart rate, thyroid function, immune system and blood pressure in check when action, self-protection, and defense are not needed.

When our Social Nervous Systems are engaged, they are also capable of reducing and softening freeze states that can make us feel exhausted (see a detailed post about the freeze state of chronic fatigue syndrome and why it's not in your head) or emotionally numb, disconnected, or hopeless.
7 Tips That Will Help Heal Social Nervous System Functions

EXPLORING IMPULSES FOR PLEASURE

The idea of exploring impulses for pleasure got me started on a way to allow room for pauses, rest and greater simplicity in my life.

I continue to explore and refine the process and I am a different person now for having cultivated this practice. The process was the beginning of a journey that has gently been helping me reclaim my whole self.

Below are some tips I've learned along the way.
The impulses for pleasure are often subtle. In my own life they seem to waft through my mind like a whiff of smoke - they "wift."

Here one moment, gone the next.

These impulses are therefore easy to miss amidst the activity of daily life.

Sometimes they come with camouflage, like the toad hiding in my flower bed in the picture below.
Hone your skills for noticing these often momentary signals by setting an intention to do so.

You might prime the pump by writing down some of your hopes and dreams (big or small) and then seeing what shows up in the next day or week.

Let your attention wander during down times to find these impulses, such as when you are taking a shower, waking from a nap, or even watching a movie, especially if it's one that makes your heart sing. What calls to you? What does your body, or your heart, or your soul desire? What does it want to do, see or say in this moment?

2. Don't Brush it Off
We live in a culture that prioritizes accomplishment and activity, where "doing nothing," sitting on the porch, or slowing down and pacing yourself can be seen as a waste of time.

Many of us grew up in a culture or in families where it was difficult to take personal time, to say no, or to slow down without feeling as though we were leaving someone else to do all the work.

Slowing down may have felt like we were being weak or "too soft." Instead of denigrating, denying, dissembling or delaying your impulses for pleasure, allow for them. Use the validation from science if it helps and give your wishes a little credit. Then you can start inviting them in, honoring them, and checking them out.

This is how you can listen for impulses that heal social nervous system activities, and in the process, help your path of recovery from chronic illness and other symptoms.
We tend to use will power to push through challenging tasks, to get things completed, or to make it through difficult days.

Let yourself allot some of your will power to making room for pleasure and following some of those impulses.

Make time and save energy for the small things. The easy things. Start there.
Sometimes it takes practice to differentiate between impulses that feed us and make us feel even one little bit better - and those that aren't quite right or that leave us feeling unsatisfied, overwhelmed or disappointed.

Learning the difference is part of the practice.

The most important qualities of an experiment are to start from a place of curiosity and nonjudgment.

Think of it as a learning process where there is no good or bad outcome, only information.

Learning to follow impulses that have meaning or that help you feel something new or supportive can take time. It can also take self-compassion. The rewards are worth it.

Use an attitude of experimentation when you follow an impulse for pleasure. This is how your social nervous system tells you what it needs. This is how you learn what's helpful or supportive and worth trying - and what might not be worth doing again.
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- Notice what happens as you proceed - does the easy get easier? does the excitement give you a smidge more energy? does the stress change into action or into fear? do new ideas or solutions come to mind? watch, and stay curious.
- Watch how your body, your feelings or your thoughts change - it can be subtle. Do you get a little warmer or cooler? A tad more spacious in your body? Do you start to relax or settle a little? tense up? Is it tensing in preparation or tensing in self-protection? - keep watching and again, don't judge.
- Noticing what happens gives you a sense of whether following an impulse is interesting (or not), appealing (or off-putting), "neutral," or neither seemingly useful nor meaningful. All of this is information.

Now, give it time.

Sometimes you need to follow an impulse all the way through to learn what the outcome feels like.

If it scares or stresses you a little this is not necessarily a bad thing - it may be that you are taking a risk for something important.

Sometimes you will realize it's not a good fit or that it feels like too much or like a burden.

Other times it won't be until you've let yourself talk with a friend or spend time at the beach or go for a walk that's a little outside of your norm, to realize that something has shifted and you feel a little calmer or grateful or kind with yourself. This is all a part of testing things out and experimenting.
Many of us with chronic illness have limited energy and can't go out, go very far or do very much. We also have nervous systems that are sensitive to even too much of a good thing. This is because the sense of pleasure or safety may not have been a large part of your experience in childhood. Or it may have been difficult to be with experiences of pleasure or safety due to actual threat from family or home life in the past or in past generations.

Impulses for pleasure can - and often need - to be very simple to start with.

If the impulses you are having are too big to follow right now, gently put them aside and go for those that fit more easily within your capacities.
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This is another step in how to heal social nervous system functions and how it guides us to support this process.

The little impulses can be as simple as:

- calling a friend - or emailing if the phone is too much
- putting on nail polish or, if you're a guy, shaving off a few days of scruffy beard (or NOT shaving)
- taking a (short or long) bath instead of a shower
- taking a day off from thinking about work / your health / pain / or looking for solutions....
- cleaning out a corner of your garage, a cupboard or a single drawer
- purchasing a blanket in a color or texture that feels soothing or digging the special one out of your closet
- putting a picture or a clipping on your wall or, even simpler, placing one on your bedside table where you can see it if you spend a lot of time lying down etc.
6. **Keep Paying Attention**

Even pleasurable activities can turn into large or tiring projects.

If you try something and then feel done before it’s complete, trust that and see what happens when you stop or take a break.
Pleasure can take many forms. The impulses are unique to you. Pleasure does not always show up as something slow or restful.

Over time you will get a sense of what feels truly satisfying or resourcing for you, even if it might feel like a burden or a task to someone else.

Maybe doing the dishes and having your hands in warm soapy water feels comforting, for example. Or maybe reading a book of nonfiction and taking notes is your idea of a good time (it's one of the things I personally love doing).

Keep experimenting to see what ends up feeling resourcing to you.
A few more resources
The year before leaving medicine I started working part-time in order to make more room for life and play.

Two books - Living the Simple Life and Simple Abundance (the latter book was written primarily for women; the author has since put together a similar book for men) - were particularly inspiring to me at the time. They helped me create the space to keep moving in the direction of more ease. They inspired me to keep listening for what my soul was craving.

These books are just as relevant for me today. When I first wrote this post in 2015 (which I've updated primarily with new pictures), I had just picked them up from my library to read again for the first time in nearly 20 years.

While at the library, I found a new book that encapsulated the process of what it means to follow your impulses for pleasure. It soothed and calmed and inspired me. It gave me a sense of joy. It called up feelings of love and connection and gratitude.

Stir is Jessica Fechtor's memoir about her brain aneurysm and what happened after it burst - the challenging journey, the multiple surgeries, as well as the complications. In reality, though, it is about her love of food. Jess loves thinking about ingredients and combinations. She feels fed and nurtured when planning meals and making grocery lists, picking what has appeal and meaning from the shelves, baking and creating with love, and sharing meals with friends and family.

This craving and passion repeatedly pulls her onward and through as she grows and changes and stays the same and heals. It's one of those books that I was sad to finish. It also left me with a comforting feeling of being home, just where I am.

Related Posts & Resources

Making Time for Things that Resource Us

8 Steps for Healing through Impulse And Play: Treating Chronic Illness #1

Treating Chronic Illness #1.2: 9 Sneaky Ways to "Act Out"

10 Empowering Tools for Treating Chronic Illness: Building on lessons from brain plasticity, epigenetics, and trauma
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