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Safety Reappraisal for Neuroplastic Pain or Symptoms

Why Safety Reappraisal Works

When you experience neuroplastic (mind-body) symptoms—physical sensations like pain, dizziness, nausea, brain fog or fatigue that are generated by your nervous system rather than structural damage or disease—your brain has learned to interpret certain triggers as dangerous. These triggers might be movements, emotions, situations, or even thoughts.

Each time you respond to a symptom with fear (*What's wrong with me? Is this serious?*), you send a danger signal to your brain. Your brain responds by amplifying the protective response—creating more symptoms. This creates a vicious cycle: symptom → fear → more (or stronger) symptoms → more fear.

Safety reappraisal interrupts this cycle. When you consistently respond to sensations with calm acknowledgment rather than fear, you send a different message to your nervous system: *This is uncomfortable, but I'm not in danger*. Over time, your brain begins to unlearn the protective response, and the neural pathways that generate symptoms can weaken.

This process works through neuroplasticity—your brain's ability to rewire itself based on repeated experience. Just as your brain learned to produce symptoms in response to certain triggers, it can learn to stop producing them when those triggers are consistently paired with safety rather than danger.

Important: Safety reappraisal is not the same as positive thinking or pretending symptoms don't exist. It requires genuinely ruling out medical causes first, so you have evidence of safety. It also takes repetition—one reappraisal won't undo months or years of learned patterns.

How to Practice Safety Reappraisal

1. Notice the sensation without judgment

When a symptom arises, take a deep, slow breath, pause, and simply notice it. Where is it in your body? What does it feel like? Try to observe the sensations from a place of curiosity, just like watching fish swimming in a tank. Resist the urge to immediately catastrophize or analyze what might be wrong. Just observe without judgment or fear.

Example 1: "I notice tightness in my chest and a wave of dizziness. Hmm. That's interesting."

Example 2: "I'm knitting, and I notice my right hand is getting a little numb. Hmm. It feels weird, but I'm okay."

2. Remind yourself of the facts

Recall the medical evaluations you've had. Your doctor has ruled out dangerous causes for your pain or symptoms. This sensation is uncomfortable, but it's not dangerous. It's your nervous system being overprotective.

Example: "My doctor examined me thoroughly and ran tests. This isn't an injury or a dangerous medical condition. This is a false alarm from my nervous system, which is trying to protect me."

3. Speak the safety message

Say it out loud if possible, or clearly in your mind. Use simple, direct language that feels authentic to you.

Suggested phrases:

- "This is just anxiety. I'm safe."
- "This is my nervous system overreacting. There's no real danger here."
- "This is uncomfortable, but my body is okay."
- "My nervous system is trying to protect me, but there's nothing to protect me from right now. I'm actually safe right now. "

Note: At first, these words may feel hollow or false. That's normal. Your nervous system has been operating on the assumption of danger for a long time. Keep practicing—belief follows repetition. Trust the process.

4. Continue your activity

This is crucial. After reappraising the sensation as safe, and taking a couple of slow breaths, continue what you were doing (if possible). This teaches your brain through action that the sensation isn't a reason to stop, flee, or protect yourself.

If the symptoms are too intense to continue, that's okay—don't force it. But when you can, gently persist in your activity while holding the awareness that you're safe.

Example 1: "The dizziness is here while I'm making lunch, but I'm going to keep chopping these vegetables. I'm safe."

Example 2: "My knee feels sore while I'm walking up this hill, but I know my knee is fine. I'll just remind myself that it's not dangerous and enjoy my walk. "

5. Look for patterns

Pay attention to when your symptoms appear. Do they arise when you're stressed, overwhelmed, thinking about certain things, or in specific situations? Noticing these patterns helps you see the connection between your emotional state and your physical sensations, and helps you recognize "conditioned responses," where your nervous system creates symptoms because of a habitual response to certain situations.

Recognizing when symptoms are triggered by emotions or conditioned responses reinforces that they are safe.

Example 1: "I notice the nausea always comes when I'm packing for a trip. It's not about the food I ate—it's about my anxiety about traveling."

Example 2: "I notice my bladder symptoms are worse when I'm in the car. It doesn't make sense that the motion of the car affects my bladder more than walking, so it's likely a conditioned response."

6. Be patient and consistent

Your nervous system won't change overnight. You're rewiring neural pathways that may have been active for months or years. Some days will feel like breakthroughs; others will feel like setbacks. Keep practicing. Every single time you respond to a sensation with calm acknowledgment of safety rather than fear, you're building new pathways.

Recovery is rarely linear, but consistency pays off. Trust the process.

Additional Considerations

- **This is not a substitute for addressing the underlying stressors in your life.** Safety reappraisal helps your nervous system calm down, but you also need to work on the root causes—whether that's unprocessed emotions, people-pleasing, boundary issues, perfectionism, or other sources of chronic stress.
- **If your symptoms worsen or new symptoms appear, check in with your doctor.** Safety reappraisal works when you genuinely know you're medically safe. If something changes, get it checked out.
- **Be kind to yourself when it's hard to believe the safety message.** Your fear response is trying to protect you. Thank it for caring about your wellbeing, and then gently redirect it: "I appreciate you looking out for me, but I'm okay right now."
- **Consider working with a therapist who understands mind-body symptoms.** Recovery often goes more smoothly with professional support, especially if you're also working through trauma, grief, depression, anxiety, or other emotional challenges. Look for a therapist trained in Pain Reprocessing Therapy, Emotional Awareness and Expression Therapy, or another type of Neuroplastic Recovery Therapy that is evidence-based. If you're located in California, you can reach out to me through my website at <http://merilevy.com>.