



parenting that heals painful memories

It was a long day. I'd held it together, just barely, because I knew I had listening time coming up soon. My daughter Ella was really sick. We'd been to the doctor's office, and were told to take her home and keep a close watch. If she developed a high fever (over 103°), we were to call the doctor immediately. I let her rest while I had listening time.

I then took her temperature. It read 105°. I nearly jumped out of my skin. I tried not to panic. I took her forehead temperature three times, and each time the answer was quite different. Darned unreliable thermometer! I sent my husband to the nearby store to buy an oral thermometer. It showed that she had a temperature 103.5°. In this set of circumstances, that was dangerous. After leaving a message for the doctor, I grabbed an emergency five minutes from my listening partner. I knew that I had to think as well as I could, and my thinking was being tampered with by an overwhelming fear.

Unable to reach the doctor, I took Ella to the Emergency Room. They did a thorough check, and decided it was a mean stomach bug. After several hours of observation, we were sent home. It was nearly midnight. The good news was that she was sick, but fine.

She looked well for the next day and a half; then she went quickly downhill. The next visit to the doctor revealed the likely culprit. *Pneumonia*. Too late to get a chest x-ray, we had to wait until the next morning. Maybe another parent would have been calmer, but every cell in my body was on Red Alert. As evening turned to night, her breathing became shallow and fast. I slept fitfully by her side, awaking every hour to observe and count her breaths.

We made it through the next few days of x-rays, doctor visits, diagnosis, and shots. Ella had bacterial pneumonia. Her medication worked fast, and she was soon on the mend. Not me, though. My mind was looping. I was unable to pay attention to my child—to do much more than let her watch TV. She needed my support, but I had nothing to give. I was lost in circular thinking. I knew that if I had any hope of parenting well in the days of Ella's early recovery, I had to clear out my own feelings of fear.

Restimulation is a signal to get help!

My fear was rooted in the past. Ella's illness brought up feelings never expressed when her then-three-week-old twin sister Lauren was hospitalized for not breathing and turning blue. I then spent the first 3 months of their lives mechanically monitoring Lauren's breathing and feeling utterly powerless. Now, six years later, I was reliving these buried feelings and they were impairing my ability to be present with Ella.

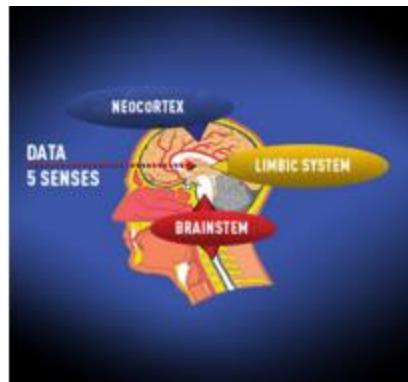
I was restimulated.

Restimulation happens when our good thinking goes offline and we are flooded with emotions rooted in experiences from the past. It can be as simple as a mom watching her two-year-old child take a toy from an older sibling. Perhaps mom gets frustrated and reacts with a forceful, "No snatching!" Mom grabs the toy from the shocked and now crying two-year-old. She may never link her own grabbing behavior to the times when, as a kid, she had her toys snatched by a younger sibling. When she complained she was told she should get over it or she'd be given something to cry about. Since children want to get along, she stuffed her feelings. Mom's knee-jerk grabbing of the toy from her two-year-old was an act caused by restimulation. In my case it was one child's illness stimulating again an old and unresolved pain caused by a different child's illness.



A little brain science might be helpful, here. A simple vertical picture of the brain shows three basic structures, from bottom to top: the brain stem (also called the reptilian brain,) the limbic system, and the neo-cortex. The brain stem is in charge of running the body, governing automatic things like digestion, heartbeat and breathing. It is also the seat of our fight/flight/freeze response. Its main job is to insure survival.

Surrounding the brain stem is the limbic brain. The limbic system, simplified, is the home of emotions. It is the place that searches for connection between ourselves and others, where our gut responses come from, and the seat of our long-term memory.



Our neo-cortex surrounds the limbic brain like a skullcap. Within it, located just behind the center of the forehead is an area called the pre-frontal cortex. This is the seat of reason and is uniquely developed in humans. It is the part of our brain that governs rational thought. When we are thinking well, making good decisions, being responsive (not reactive) to circumstances, our pre-frontal cortex is “online” and running the show.

Restimulation causes it to go offline. The limbic brain takes over and we are overcome with emotions and may even “flip our lid.” We have no conscious awareness that these feelings are connected to the past. They seem to be in direct response to present time events.

They are not.

We may have no conscious memory of the past experience that is attached the current flood of feelings. Yet, this knee-jerk emotional response is not bad. In fact, it is a gift. Restimulation is rooted in a past experience that *is now asking to be healed*.

Strong emotions flash, much like the service light on our car’s dashboard. Big feelings warn us that stored emotions are currently being triggered. The opportunity to heal from past hurt is at hand. Our listening tools are designed to rehabilitate these stored painful experiences. We can release our old, stuck emotions through the talking, laughter, crying, yawning and other emotional expression when a compassionate adult listens to how we feel, without judging us for having those feelings.

Listening Partnerships and Parent Support Groups are where parents can go to get our old hurts healed. As we heal, we have the capacity to help our children heal by Staylistening, where we warmly listen to a child when he cries. We can also Playlisten by taking the less powerful role, thereby finding the sweet spot of healing laughter in our child.

Listening brings healing

During my next call with my Listening Partner, I took a risk. I had recently tried shaking my body during listening time as a way to release stored physical tension. It seemed to help me move through feelings better. As I began retelling, again, the story of Ella’s illness, day by day, event by event, I allowed my body to shake which freed my mind to go where it needed. It regressed back to those days when my newborn was hospitalized. I kept shaking.



As I told that story, I began to get angry. I kicked and punched a mattress. I yelled, growled and made lots of noise. I was crying, sweating and fighting. I kept fighting until I felt like I couldn't breathe. Yet, I was breathing just fine. As I kept fighting, I realized that I had several bouts of bronchitis in my first year of life, and must have had the experience of not being able to breathe. When kids and adults release emotion they sometimes re-experience the physical symptoms, like what had just happened to me. Before the end of our Listening Partnership, the tightness in my throat was gone, and I felt a warm relief wash over me.

My intense reaction to my daughter's illness, my panic, and my inability to think were all signs pointing to the fact that it was this implicit or buried memory of not being able to breathe that was being restimulated. My limbic brain was in charge. The power of my listening partner's warmth, presence and uninterrupted listening allowed this memory to resurface, release and be healed. My good thinking returned.

Afterwards, when I would think back about Ella's getting sick, I remembered it, but stayed calm. No longer did I get agitated or need to talk about it all the time. When I thought about her sister's hospitalization, I could remember that, too, without heavy emotion. I began to trust my body and the process of using my Listening Partnership well. My body knows, even better than my mind, exactly where I need to go, to heal what needs to be healed. I never knew my body was so wise.

An unexpected result is the deepening of my capacity to Staylisten with my kids. I know what it feels like to need to hit, to scream, to fight. I know what it is to feel like I'm having a hard time breathing while upset, despite breathing just fine. When they express big emotions, I support them. I am finding that they go deeper with me and get more into their feelings as they fight hard to free themselves of their fears. One night Ella said she was afraid and wanted to hit, bite, and fight but didn't want to hurt anyone. When we got home, I gave her a bat and a yoga bolster, and she attacked the bolster. She screamed, beat it with a bat, bit it over and over, stomped on it and screamed. She didn't need to pick a fight with her sister or use another pretext to let her feelings out. She identified her fear and fought hard through it. My six-and-a-half-year-old child was doing exactly what I had done in my Listening Partnership, and I was so proud of her.