

Hurt at Church

Two-way tensions: Body and Soul

I wonder if you've ever walked alongside a sufferer and felt stuck? You're perplexed. They're serious about Scripture and they apply it to their lives. They confess and repent of sin. They serve and encourage others. They're regular attenders at home group, prayer meetings and corporate worship. They participate in the means of grace God has given to help us grow in communion with Him and with others. And yet, in their specific struggle, it seems there's a disconnect between what they *know* to be true and what they *feel* to be true.

Although there are many possible explanations, this disconnect may be related to what is going on in the sufferer's body. The body tends to be neglected in pastoral care. After all, we're 'transformed by the renewing of our minds' (Romans 12:2), aren't we? Yes, but being human means our body and soul are intertwined; our body affects our soul, and our soul affects our body. Our bodies implement the thoughts, beliefs, and desires of our souls. But conversely, our thoughts, beliefs and desires are significantly shaped by what is happening in our bodies. Wise and biblical pastoral care sees the importance of both body and soul.

Our incarnate Saviour demonstrated his embodiment in the fullness of his humanity. In the Garden of Gethsemane, his blood-stained sweat revealed the extent of his anguished soul and body. As image-bearers of our Lord, we too are body and soul. As Jesus perfectly demonstrated, anguish in our body does not necessarily limit faith fuelled growth. But in our fallen fallibility, sometimes it can. As we consider this reality through a biblical framework, we'll see that incorporating bodily awareness can help reduce barriers to growth which can arise if there is a dissonance between what we *know* to be true in our mind and what we *feel* to be true in our bodies.

The body in Creation

In Eden, Adam and Eve perceived their physical environment via their senses, just as we do. As they listened to bird song, tasted delicious food, smelled the fresh new dawn, touched clear water, and saw beauty all around, they knew everything was good. The inner belief that they were content in God's loving care, was felt in their bodies. Safety, connection, curiosity, and peace prevailed; rest and bodily functions operated in perfect balance. There were no tensions between body and soul. The two-way intricate workings of body and soul were in sync.

The body at the Fall

However, in Genesis 3:8 we read 'Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the LORD God among the trees of the garden'. Fear, shame, and conflict came into the world. With sin came the reality of danger and disconnected relationships.

Adam and Eve felt the weight of their disobedience; humanity was tainted forever because they chose their way not God's. In their souls, their guilt shouted their transgressions, their shame whispered their fallen identity. Their bodily senses now perceived different messages. What had been certain was now uncertain and they hid.

Appropriate activation

In preparation for the Fall, our protective God created us with nervous systems to help keep us safe when we face trials of many kinds. How great is our God, His protective love was interwoven into the fabric of our being as He "knit us together in our mothers' wombs" (Ps 139:13).

How does that work? Let's consider an example. We're on a busy street, waiting to cross the road. We perceive it is safe to cross, we see the green man, we hear the 'peeps' and we step out. Suddenly, we hear a motorbike – it's approaching fast! We are "activated". We experience immediate physical sensations: the stomach lurch, the quickening heart, the shallow breathing, the surge of energy, and the overwhelming desire to run. Additionally, parts of our brain which control survival functions and emotions increase their activity. As a result, we reach a decision to move fast. Our nervous system activates in a way that helps us believe we're in danger. Our body and soul align towards safety. God has created us to react with a rapid physical response, a response that is primarily body based, but helps our inner self to know we are at risk. As we leap back to the pavement our senses perceive safety, and our nervous system settles to equilibrium again. We gradually return to a calm state where we can connect with others, think clearly, rest well, and enjoy life. What kindness God has shown: his mercy and grace are demonstrated through his intricate design of our bodies.

Now let's consider another example. A powerful person in our lives is unpredictable. We feel as though we have to walk on eggshells around them; we never know what to expect. Due to past behaviours, we rightly believe we are at risk: emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, and perhaps physically. The beliefs and desires of our heart correctly warn, 'all is not ok'. But it is not just our souls which know this – our bodies do too. Our senses rightly perceive danger daily. We become hypervigilant, constantly looking for signs of their displeasure. We fear their response and find ourselves changing our behaviour frequently to win their approval. When our environment is regularly uncertain, we feel insecure. When we are at risk of a punishing response, our nervous system activates to 'flight and

fight', and it increasingly stays there. We feel on edge, unable to rest, and we may well start to experience wider health issues. We may find it hard to connect with others. Our ability to think clearly and constructively may diminish.

If we realise we have no ability to escape from such a situation, God has equipped our bodies to find a sense of safety another way, by mentally escaping. We know we would be in more danger if we tried to fight or run, so our nervous system activates to a state of overwhelm or shutdown. We can't escape with our bodies, but we can protectively disconnect from the present fears with our minds.

As suffering continues, we can move from:

Connection and calm → Protective fight and flight → Freeze and shutdown

It is not wrong for our bodies to activate into these states. When we are in danger, it is exactly what is needed. Our nervous system states are normal responses to abnormal events in this fallen world. They are how our loving God has equipped us to react when the situation demands. Scripture is not the only place that speaks of God's protective care. Our created bodies speak loudly of it too.

Dysregulated activation

The problem is our bodies can get stuck in fight or flight – or in freeze and shutdown. Someone who has grown up in a turbulent home, learning to walk on eggshells to placate volatile parent, will likely exist in a state of hypervigilance long after leaving home. It can take many years for our body and our beliefs to readjust and read signs of safety correctly. The past can continue to intrude in the present, even though the dangers have passed. Being stuck in these activated states causes other difficulties too: we experience decreased activity in the part of the brain necessary for concentration and reflection. It becomes harder to consider Scripture and meditate deeply on its truths. What are the implications of this? We can know Scripture well, know it is true, but we struggle to meditate on it, chew it over and apply it to our lives. We want to be moved by it, for the affections of our heart to be stirred by truth, but the part of the brain that does this is diminished in activity. The feelings in our body still scream danger, and a 'peace that surpasses all understanding' never seems to come.

Redeemed bodies

We're told in Hebrews 4:12 'the Word of God is alive and active.' God's Word has power. Scripture, applied by the Holy Spirit, can (and sometimes does) dramatically intervene. Suddenly, an activated body can be overwhelmed by the truth that God is near, holding our right hand and helping us. A peace that surpasses all understanding can suddenly calm our nervous system and hypervigilant senses. The Spirit can and does take God's truth and supernaturally stir the affections of our heart.

However, sudden change is not usually the pattern we observe. There is a blessing in gradual change. Slowness can bring both the helper and sufferer in humble dependence to the foot of the cross. The greater our need, the more sufficient is God's grace, and the more evident his redemptive care.

If we want to grow in our ability to love the hurting well, we need to understand the impact our body sometimes has on our soul and vice versa. We need to become more discerning about how our bodies can make it feel hard to engage with Scripture. A body stuck in an activated state does not point to a lack of faith, it evidences a depth of struggle.

Pastoral care that is attentive to the body helps us become more thoughtful in how we apply Scripture and metaphor. It can also encourage us to use helpful body-based exercises to send messages to the nervous system to bring calm. This might include breathing, relaxation and grounding techniques – examples of these can be found on the BCUK website.

Compassionate care needs to be creative care if it is to help the body and soul to work together well again. Instead of focusing on the mind alone, we can wisely work with the body to replace two-way tensions with two-way traction. This can make all the difference in helping someone experience in their bodies the truth they know in their minds.

Glorified bodies

One day, in glory, we will have new bodies. Our senses will perceive joyful safety and connection as we worship the Lord in perfect harmony together. Our body and soul will be perfectly aligned: there will be no more tears, suffering, sorrow (Revelation 21:4). There will be no need for our senses to read 'danger', we will be present, connected, full of joy and curiosity at the eternal wonders to come. What a glorious hope we have! But in the meantime, as we face many fearful trials, let us imitate the gentle and careful love of our all-knowing God. Let us point others to his protective care built into their beings and help them draw closer to him through embodied care.