

A photograph of a person's legs from the knees down, standing in a field of tall green grass. The person is wearing light-colored leggings and white sneakers with pink laces. The background is a soft-focus green field. The title text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

Discharged!

Healing the Traumatized Body through Grounding Practices

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It's like living with a jackhammer inside my body. My teeth grate and jaw tightens. I feel the heart flutter into my throat and my stomach clenches. At the worst of times, I find myself looking out the window waiting for them to come, whoever they are. My wife would watch in concern and care, but could never understand what living with PTSD was like. I couldn't sit with my back to any door or open space; I would jump and swear if the doorbell rang unexpectedly; I'd have random, horrific visions of my dog dying while I was enjoying my morning swim.

Living with PTSD is living inside a body that is always on guard for danger, with a nervous system set up like India's electrical wiring. Always looking for the exit. Scouting places for danger. The electrical build up in my body from my always-working nervous system often led to fatigue and burnout.

Not ironically, I am trained as a PTSD specialist. I

have expertise in understanding how frightening and life-threatening experiences can impact the nervous system and brain, the endocrine and immune systems, and our mental, sexual, and spiritual wellbeing; it even affects the way we relate to ourselves, others, and the world around us. All of these factors are important when treating the complex of body, mind, and spirit that makes up the traumatized human being. There are a myriad of good trauma treatments, many of which I employ in my work with a variety of patients with PTSD. While I was trained extensively in PTSD treatments at several VA hospitals, I felt something was inherently missing from the more cognitive approaches.

PTSD can last a lifetime without intervention. It is clear my patients' nervous systems continue to be dysregulated, tightly wound, on edge, and easily startled, as they are constantly on the lookout for danger. As a longtime yoga and meditation teacher,



I began to integrate deep breathing and loving awareness practices within my treatment and noticed the immediate shift in their bodies and ability to self-regulate their own agitated nervous system. As someone with PTSD I also practice what I teach. I've become an expert in self-soothing: deep breathing, self-compassion, positive self-talk, calming down, taking time-outs, and so on. I know how to settle my nervous system. But still, something was missing in my own self-healing. I did not want to live my whole life soothing myself in response to my symptoms. I wanted to have sustained inner strength and stability.

Several years ago, I was talking about PTSD with Paul Mills and Tiffany Barsotti, friends and colleagues who are experts in the field of Energy Medicine. I wondered if the brain and body could have total remission, complete healing from the changes caused by trauma. This is personal to me, because there are many times when dealing with trauma and PTSD symptoms is simply exhausting. I really wanted to know if there was a way to not just soothe but strengthen my nervous system, and reverse the damage caused by trauma. The three of us speculated from our various medical, healing, and spiritual traditions on the subject. The term '**grounding**' kept coming up, and at the time I thought I understood what this meant: calming down.

It wasn't until I began my work with John Lockley of the South African Sangoma tradition where I actually felt energy discharging through my feet into the Earth. In this practice of connecting to the Earth through trance dance I finally understood that the concept of grounding was literal. My mind blew a fuse! I had no idea that my body was electrical, that my agitated nervous system didn't just want to be soothed, but needed to be **discharged** into the ground, and to be **recharged** by the Earth and cosmos itself.

After some time working with the electricity in my own body, and the energy of the Earth and cosmos through a variety of traditional practices, I felt a new vitality and strength inside me I had never before experienced: I am not as startled by sounds, or as

hypervigilant. When I feel anxious, down my feet it flows, leaving me more at ease and feeling strong; when I lift weights, my feet stabilize me and send the power of the Earth up my body. And when I read *Electric Body, Electric Health*¹ by my colleague Eileen Day McKusick, she confirmed what this ancient African practice has been teaching for thousands of years: the body and universe are electric, and by learning to align ourselves with the Universe around and within us, we not only regain our spent vitality, but we take on the strength of the whole cosmos.

Planting our feet in soil, dirt or clay, walking barefoot on grass or over rocks and pebbles, has an impact on our health. It is clear through the work of Elissa Epel and other colleagues that Nature itself (and being in touch with Nature) reduces stress and positively impacts cellular health and telomere length.

What is even clearer now, thanks to a handful of biofield scientists like Eileen Day McKusick is that the connection between our bodies (specifically, our feet) and the Earth allows a regeneration and restoration to our body's various systems. According to the practices of Traditional Chinese, Thai, and Ayurvedic medicines, the feet function as the grounding wire of the body's nervous system. This is where excessive electrical impulses can be safely discharged. Our feet, just as the third prong of an electrical plug, act as an "emergency path" for surging electricity to be released. Our bodies, being electrical and energy based systems, have feet for just this purpose. And as modern treatments for trauma catch up to what the biofield sciences are teaching us about our electric bodies, we will have to integrate this new information into our treatments.

When I began my studies in Clinical Psychology, I would have been skeptical and a bit disbelieving if I was told that my own PTSD symptoms and trauma responses would be decreased by trance dancing and walking barefoot in Nature. I'd say, "What's the data behind this claim?!" (A question I still ask when I hear seemingly outrageous claims even while working as a Fellow at the Institute of Noetic Sciences!) I wouldn't have been open to learning that something so simple



as grounding the excessive energy out of my nervous system would not only decrease my PTSD symptoms, but would strengthen and empower me; that the Earth and Cosmos itself would be the sources of this new inner strength, as my own body became the grounding rod between the Heavens and the Earth.

We obviously need more data to conclusively state that grounding practices have a therapeutic effect on PTSD and trauma. I am certainly not suggesting we offer trance dancing and barefoot walks in a park instead of the standard PTSD treatment protocols in our clinics, hospitals, and practices. (Maybe I am a little!) I am suggesting we **integrate** grounding practices into our therapeutic work: T'ai Chi, Qiqong, Yoga, martial arts, trance dance, and walking barefoot in parks are some of the supplemental practices we can encourage our patients to start engaging in.

We can also begin our sessions with five-minute grounding practices to help our clients before they engage in trauma treatments. This is how I begin all of my therapeutic sessions with clients, and the results of this simple practice have been profound.

My clients are noticeably different; their bodies literally vibrate with slow, calm energy, instead of the jackhammers, and they report feeling grounded, empowered, stable, and focused.

This helps tremendously while entering the potentially terrifying psychic territory of trauma.

My clients also report that these grounding exercises are just as useful as the trauma treatment itself as they now have a model and practice to use when in conflict with their spouses, family, or at work. I have seen grounding practices lead to personal empowerment, which then leads to setting healthy, firmer boundaries. When we have the strength of the Earth flowing up through us it becomes easier to stand firm and express our own truths. This simple

yet profoundly impactful practice can be taught in conjunction with standard trauma treatments in clinics, hospitals, and in *your* practices. The hope here is to create freedom from suffering and increased empowerment. Leading our patients and clients into an experience of grounding potentially leaves them feeling strong, calm, and fully alive. What better way to heal and live fully than by being discharged! €

References:

1. Electric Body, Electric Health by Eileen Day McKusick, Telomere Effect by Drs. Elizabeth Blackburn and Elissa Epel Leopard Warrior by John Lockley <https://www.michaelsapiro.com/resources/#meditations>



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