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What Does Feeling Safe Mean?

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‘If you want to improve the world, start by making people feel safer.’

—Stephen Porges

Stuck in Unhelpful Patterns

Over the years, people have come to me because they can't sleep, they are exhausted and have no energy, they feel anxious, restless, or they're just plain unhappy. Sometimes they've been signed off work – they've had a breakdown or burnt out. I met many people like this when I worked at the psychiatric clinic for 10 years.

Whatever it is that's brought them to me, they've got to a point where things are just not working for them anymore. Occasionally, they want something different, often they don't know that something different is possible.

Usually, they'd been stuck on a treadmill, caught up in patterns of behaviour and unhelpful cycles that they just

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couldn't change until they hit a point where they had to stop. Often, they didn't even realize how bad they were feeling. Many years ago, I worked with a senior trader and his team of 80 traders in a Japanese investment bank. He'd given me a 20-minute slot at 7 a.m. in one of their team meetings to speak to his team about stress. Perhaps a crazy gig but back then, at the start of my speaking career, I was pretty much saying 'yes' to everything. I said yes to this piece of work, not really realizing how challenging it would be. We were in a large boardroom around a long oval table, and I was at one end of the table. Even at 7 a.m., they were a noisy bunch and the energy in the room felt discordant and a bit chaotic. Fifty traders eating breakfast and fuelling up on energy drinks and caffeine for the work that lay ahead of them. Young, bright, and sparky, they didn't really want to listen to me talking about burnout. I gave them all a stress questionnaire to complete and they laughingly boasted about their scores. The head trader proudly shared his score, the highest in the room, of 85 (the scores shouldn't be higher than 35). He said to me 'I feel fine'. He looked like death, his skin covered in eczema and very overweight. I came away from the session feeling deflated. I found out a month later that he'd had a breakdown and was in a psychiatric clinic.

Sometimes we choose to ignore the symptoms. It doesn't feel safe to acknowledge them. We just keep going until we can't anymore. I know I used to do this and usually I'd get sick as soon as I stopped. Does this ring bells with you too?

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This is no longer my pattern, and I am able to work with so many people who are ready to do things in a different way. We work with each other. I show them some ways out of these patterns – resets if you like – and things start to change. The changes take place within them and outside of them. Most of them can't go back to their old patterns but sometimes a few do. They can't find the resources/willpower/energy/reasons to do it differently and end up eventually in a version of the same place.

But many do shift and change.

They find their voice, speak up, refusing to do life in that way anymore.

They leave the relationship or challenge the status quo.

They leave the job.

They move house or state or country.

They ask for help.

This is finding safety.

When You Don't Know if You Feel Safe or Not

The thing about safety is that we might not even realize that we have it or that we don't have it.

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The way I see it is that there are four options:

1. Consciously safe – I feel safe and I'm aware of this.
2. Unconsciously safe – I feel safe but I don't realize this. All is well in my world and I'm not giving it too much thought.
3. Consciously unsafe – I don't feel safe. This doesn't feel good.
4. Unconsciously unsafe – not feeling safe and not even realizing it. Numbed out. Habituated to survival.

It's confusing, isn't it? Do you have an idea where you might be in this mix? And we can feel a combination of the four different states at any given time.

The body is wise – it wants to keep us safe for our survival. Sometimes this means not being able to feel because whatever we've experienced is simply too big, it would overwhelm us. So, we learn to shut down, numb out, freeze the feelings out. I will tell you more about this in the next chapter when we look at the workings of the nervous system and how it protects us from threat.

But first, let me ask you, how are you feeling right now? Are you feeling safe or unsafe?

The process of growing, healing, learning, and evolving is moving through states of safety in an ever-deepening spiral (Figure 1.1) in which we move from unconsciously unsafe (not knowing) to consciously unsafe (an uncomfortable awareness, discomfort with life) to uncon-

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sciously safe (feeling good and not even realizing it) to consciously safe (I am safe and I know it!). We become more adept at spotting our patterns, our symptoms, the energy states that give us more information about where we are on this spiral. This knowing can be so reassuring; we don't have to move to medicate or pathologize it. We simply know that we're going through another stage of our persona growth and evolution, and we get better with sitting in the discomfort of it and resourcing ourselves with the right tools. And I'm here to help you with this!

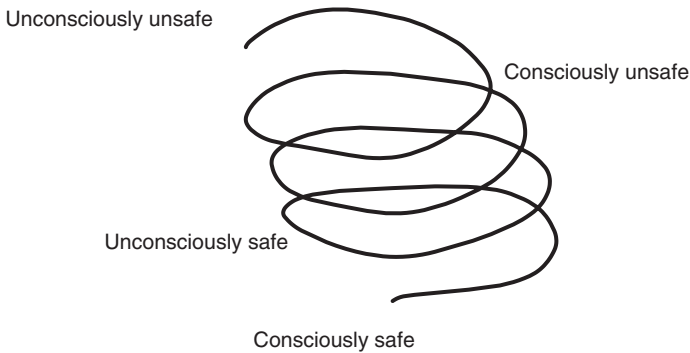


Figure 1.1 The spiral journey of finding inner safety.

Unconsciously Unsafe

Here we have no self-awareness. We don't realize that what we are feeling is unsafe because we haven't allowed ourselves to pause. Maybe life hasn't made us stop and feel. This is a sort of blissful ignorance.

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We might numb out with:

- Food
- Catch-up TV and Netflix
- Work
- Sex
- Prescription medication
- Exercise
- Alcohol
- Drugs
- Obsessive busyness
- Work (even if we hate what we're doing)
- Social media
- Obsessive control over our environment
- Perfectionism
- Self-harming.

We might also 'numb' out with excessive preoccupation with how we are or aren't sleeping. This is often what brings people to my door. They can't

- get to sleep;
- stay asleep;
- get enough sleep;
- stop waking up at night;
- stop grinding their teeth;
- stop the thoughts at night; and
- stop crying out in their sleep.

Because they don't feel safe. (And don't forget, we sleep when we feel safe.)

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When we're unconsciously unsafe we stay stuck in unhappy situations – at work, at home, in our relationships. We don't speak out. We hold ourselves tight. We grind our teeth. We live in hypervigilance without even realizing that we're constantly on the lookout for threat. We keep trying to overcome without realizing that what is driving us is the constant background noise of fear and anxiety.

Often people habituate to a level of unhappiness (and un-safety) and they stop questioning it, noticing it – as I described previously with the banker and his team.

It's odd but there's a level of 'safety' in numbed out habituation – do you agree?

Consciously Unsafe

Now we know what we're dealing with.

Maybe we've been brought to this point by burning out, breaking down, or breaking through. Whatever the route that brought us this point, we've arrived in a place of knowing this isn't good. This is not how I want to live my life. Something needs to change. I want something different.

Now you start to feel. Really feel. Your nervous system is lit up and activated. Your nervous system is nervous. You might feel dissatisfied, angry, grief-stricken, afraid, heartbroken, lost, confused, desperate. There are times

when you might even feel hopeless, exhausted, and depressed. What's the point?

It's normal to start feeling when we reach this point of realization. This is the thawing out of numbed out, long-frozen feelings. If we allow this process, sit with it, breathe through it, there will be the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel . . . I'm going to show you how to do this.

Unconsciously Safe

This is a strange one. How could we be feeling safe but not knowing that we are? We might have become so caught up in feeling 'not safe' that we have again habituated to the 'symptoms' of this stage. Until life starts to give us these moments.

I call them 'glimmers and glimpses'. Moments when we find ourselves laughing at something. An unexpected bubbling up of mirth from the depths of our being. We surprise ourselves at the sound of our voice because we haven't genuinely laughed for so long.

Feelings of contentment and peace – sometimes for no particular reason other than just feeling good in our own skin, as the French say '*Bien dans sa peau*'.

And it may well be that nothing has particularly changed 'out there' but we've found something deep within ourselves, something 'in here'. Something strong and anchor-

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ing. We know we'll be OK no matter what happens in our external world.

The first time I felt this was in 1999. I was sitting on a veranda in Brisbane having left my marriage, my job, suddenly stopped taking prescription mood stabilizing meds (against my doctor's advice). To all intents and purposes, I was free falling, going cold turkey. So, there I was sipping a latte and trying to pour my feelings into my journal in the hope of ridding myself of the uncomfortable feelings of fear and loneliness.

Then – and it felt like it happened in a moment – I looked up from my writing and everything looked different, more vivid. I felt as if I was viewing nature for the first time ever. Suddenly the greens were greener, the birdsong louder, the feeling of spring sunshine on my cool skin somehow more delicious. My senses were alive and dancing. I felt joyful, peaceful, grateful – and for no particular reason that I can identify. Nothing had changed in my external world. It was just a moment. But it was an important moment and one in which something shifted in my internal world that was to change my life forever.

This was my first conscious experience of feeling safe – although I didn't call it that at the time. I just knew that I'd experienced a deep feeling of contentment, peace unlike anything I'd ever felt before and that I wanted more of this. Importantly, I knew I could have more of this – I just needed to keep slowing down and coming back to this place within me.

What exactly happened on that veranda in Brisbane?

Some might call it:

- An awakening
- A moment of grace
- An encounter with God
- A shift in consciousness
- A breakthrough.

In my effort to understand, I have read so many books that have described such moments in religious, spiritual, and even scientific terms. My mind always wants to understand.

What I do know is that that was my first conscious taste of feeling safe. Have you ever felt this too? If so, what was your experience?

Consciously Safe

This is a destination. It is the light at the end of the tunnel.

Feeling safe is a deeply embodied feeling. It resides in the body. I have to keep using these words because I want to move you away from viewing safety as a thought process – I feel safe because I have good friends, I feel safe because my wife loves me, I feel safe because I've been promoted, I feel safe because I have money in the bank.

Because life is so imperfect, so changeable. We actually have far less control over it than we believe we have.

Four Levels of Safety

Human beings are complex. We are multidimensional beings. As such, safety can reside within us on four different levels.

As I describe these levels, you might wish to think about how they apply to you. You might realize that you feel very safe at some levels but less so at others. However, these levels are not distinct or separate but rather, they connect and interact with each other.

Physical

I am physically safe in my environment, I have a roof over my head, I have enough food and water. I have enough money. My family and I are warm and protected from external threat. In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs this is the base of the pyramid. Feeling physically safe also means that I have the vitality and strength to fight threat if I have to. I have the energy to live a fulfilling life, to achieve what I need to achieve.

There is also feeling safe in the container of your body, knowing that it is strong, vital, flexible, and adaptable. That it can withstand and endure. That it is resourceful.

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As the poet John O'Donohue says, '*The body is your clay home, your only home in the universe.*' When we don't feel safe in our bodies, we might feel weak, powerless, afraid, stuck, or rigid. We lose trust in ourselves. Lack of safety can show up in the body in all sorts of way, including insomnia and restlessness, and even pain. Feeling numb, or ungrounded, is also common when we don't feel safe in our bodies.

Emotional

When I feel safe emotionally, I have connection in my life in the form of warm and loving relationships. I have the emotional flexibility to bounce back from disappointment, frustration, and loss. It is safe for me to feel a range of emotions from anger, sadness, and fear to happiness, playfulness, peace, and joy. It is safe for me to feel whatever I need to feel, whatever I am feeling in this moment. I trust to ask for help and lean on others for support in times of crisis. I trust to allow myself to open up and show others who I am. I trust to open up to loving another even though I could get hurt.

When I don't feel safe emotionally, I shut myself down. I don't trust others and I am wary and judgemental. I isolate myself from others. I am avoidant in relationships, looking for reasons to leave, or I am overly anxious in relationships, constantly seeking approval, reassurance, and validation. I don't trust myself to speak up, so I hold myself back, afraid to show others who I am. I grind my teeth at night because there is so

much I want to say but I don't feel safe to. It is not safe to feel so I 'numb out' with exercise, food, sex, drugs, mindless TV, alcohol . . . (feel free to add your own).

Mental

When I feel safe mentally, I know when to say No and when to say Yes. I feel focused and en-missioned. I can tap into my creativity and I trust my intuition. My time is precious, and I know how to use it. In these times of information overload, I know when to stop and rest my mind and I feel safe to do so. I know how to recognize and override any tendencies to pessimism and self-flagellation and I know how to calm these tendencies when they do inevitably arise.

When we feel safe mentally, we are able to create boundaries in how we use our time so we can stay focused without burning ourselves out. We know when to say No and we are not afraid to say it. We are not ruled by the 'mad monkey' in our brain that says we can't stop.

When you don't feel safe on this level you have to stay leaned in, stuck in striving mode. You are ruled by must do's, should do's, have to do's . . . and yet it's never good enough. You hardly notice or celebrate our successes. You play them down or you might even feel ashamed of them. You suffer from imposter syndrome and extreme perfectionism.

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Not feeling safe on the mental level can spill into the body in the form of tightness and rigidity; creaking and aching joints; back pain; tightness of jaw, neck, and shoulders; inability to digest food and irritable bowel. You lie in bed unable to sleep, fretting and wired from the day, unable to let go. Holding yourself tight in this way can eventually cause exhaustion, chronic fatigue, and burnout.

Spiritual

This is the ultimate safety level.

I trust the process of life. Even when things are going wrong, I have faith that I will be OK. I am able to connect with something beyond myself and this calms, reassures, and bolsters me. I know what is important to me – what I value – and I am committed to living my life according to these values even if this sometimes causes personal sacrifice. I can rise above the messiness of a situation and see the learning for me, even the gift. I can see the Why.

When we are spiritually safe, we feel a sense of trust. We have faith even in times of adversity. We are aligned with our values and are not afraid to live our lives by them. We continually search for meaning, knowing that it matters. We refuse to play the victim, never giving up on life, recognizing that each wound takes us into deeper healing and greater strength. We courageously seek to understand our unique purpose in life – our *dharma* – knowing that this brings us ultimate joy and deepest safety.

What Does Feeling Safe Mean to You?

What has brought you to my book? What does feeling safe mean to you?

Something has drawn you to my book and I wonder what that is.

Each of us has a different relationship with feeling safe. In the course of writing this book, I asked many people to consider what ‘feeling safe’ meant to them.

Some talked about relationships with family, friends, neighbours. Many talked about stable jobs, having money in the bank, a roof over their heads. And of course, at the time of writing the final version of my book during the Covid-19 pandemic, many people talked about whether they felt safe to leave their houses, wear a mask, not wear a mask, hug other people, have the vaccine, hug people who’d had the vaccine. The issue of feeling safe was inescapable!

Some didn’t know and couldn’t answer the question. Others said the question made them feel profoundly uncomfortable, maybe even a bit sad. Often these were the ones who were not able to send me a response.

From Outside In, to Inside Out

I surveyed a group of people on social media – Trauma Thrivers they called themselves – and their answers were

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very revealing. This group of people had suffered extreme traumas and adversity, but they had come through it and no longer considered themselves to be victims of what they'd experienced. They considered themselves to be true thrivers.

Unlike most of the people I surveyed their focus was primarily on how they were feeling inside. They didn't seem to be as concerned about what was happening in their external world. The state of their inner world seemed to be what was most important rather than what was happening in their external world. It was as if they had been through so many traumas in their life that they had been forced to find a deeper sense of inner safety in order to thrive. Many of them also said they had a strong sense of being connected to something other than themselves and their external world and this was a significant source of safety for them.

Many people look outside of themselves for safety. It has become their normal way of being, their *modus operandi* – wake up in the morning, reach for the phone, what lies ahead in the day? What is happening in the world? Can I keep up? Am I good enough? How do I compare?

Safety has become externalized. Out there. We rely on the news or social media feed to tell us how to feel. We've forgotten how to be with ourselves, with quiet mornings, simply receiving the information coming from our own bodies, minds, hearts . . . we've forgotten how to listen.

Inside Out Versus Outside In

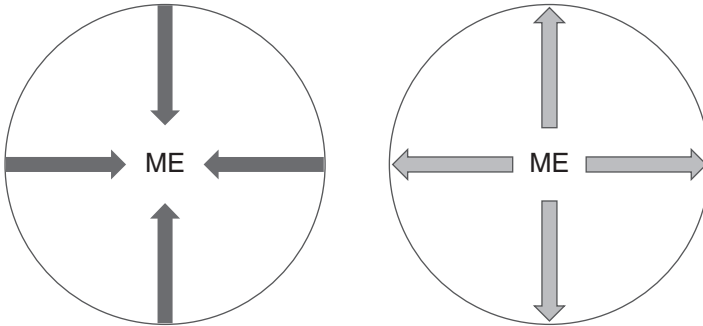


Figure 1.3 Outside in versus inside out approach to dealing with life.

When we respond to life from outside in, we end up simply *reacting* to life. What is happening *out there* determines how we feel *in here*, what we will do next, how we will think and behave, whether or not we will feel safe. In reality we have very little choice over what happens out there in the world and so we become victims of our environment and the world (See Figure 1.3).

Shifting the focus and responding to life from inside out – like the trauma thrivers, like I did in Brisbane all of those years ago, enables us to *respond* to life. We tap into a wellspring of resource and strength and this pathway, when travelled enough times, becomes our route to feeling safe. This re-routing isn't just a psychological or spiritual process, it is

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embedded in the nervous system. It is only when we understand and befriend our nervous system that we can find true inner safety.

Reflection Exercise: Embark on Your Journey

I urge you to consider your relationship with feeling safe and what it means to you. And in doing so, please be kind with yourself because you may stir up some feelings. That's normal.

I invite you to complete this exercise now. I suggest that you light a candle or sit in nature as you read these words. A notebook and pen beside you to journal your reflections and insights would be a good idea too.

With your eyes open or closed, reflect on these questions.

- What does feeling safe mean to me?
- How do I know when I am feeling safe?
- When have I recently felt really safe?
- What was I doing?
- Had something just happened or was it just a feeling that came over me?

Don't worry if you find these questions difficult to answer. It might be helpful to keep coming back to them as you progress through this book. For now, it might be enough to simply keep them in mind.

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I want to take you into a deep journey with yourself. Consider what might support you as you read these words and do this work.

You could even gather support around you – maybe a friend or a group of like-minded individuals – who will go on this journey with you.