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Gut and Digestion Problems and Dyslexics

By Kathleen Dunbar, Certified Hakomi Therapist, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist #39880

Fight or Flight: Your body doesn't know or care what threat you are experiencing—tiger, mean teacher, even the memory of a mean teacher from long ago, or the boss just walking into the room at work—when we feel threatened, our sympathetic/fight-flight nervous system comes online to help us mobilize against threat. It pumps big doses of adrenalin and cortisol into us and our digestive system shuts down because the body is prioritizing mobilizing the big muscle groups to fight or to run over digestion. Any person who becomes activated, whether neurodiverse or not, has some kind of reaction in their gut when they are in fight-or-flight mode. If feeling activated in this way becomes chronic, it can include constipation, IBS (constipation and diarrhea), stomach ache, etc. Dyslexics going through the conventional education system have often been so traumatized by their experience—as kids they often report having had stomach aches around going to school—that these feelings can last long into adulthood in the symptoms described above. Trauma and gut problems so often go hand-in-hand.

Freeze/Collapse: When your fight or flight responses can't help you because fighting or escape is not possible—like being forced to go to school every day and remain in classes where you are shamed—your body then takes you into a collapse/freezing mode to protect you, like a hedgehog rolls up, or a possum plays dead. Parasympathetic/dorsal vagal is the fancy term. You may feel you have “gone offline,” get very sleepy, numb, have a big inner critic attack. Have you ever not been able to speak, or speak much, when you've become overwhelmed? The reason is that you literally don't have access to your speech centers when you are in this mode because your brain function is no longer in that area. It's gone into collapse. This is also why it is impossible to read and write when you are in this state—your brain function is prioritizing freezing to protect you.

Happy Village/Social Engagement: The medicine for all this is bringing back online the parasympathetic/ventral vagal, rest-and-digest nervous system—what I call “happy village”—flushing out adrenalin and cortisol and making room for feel-good hormones. How to do this: When you are calm, practice mindfulness, breathing and grounding practices, and put the faces and bodies of people who unquestionably love you and support you around you. The heart goes beyond time and space—use your memories of only the easiest, kindest person or two and put them next to you. If there's no one in your life right now, use the Dalia Lama, or Big Bird, or a redwood tree. Doing these practices literally changes up your nervous system.

When you are calm, it is easier to use and develop these practices that return you to your Wise Self. Then, when you are triggered, you can begin to use these same practices to calm your nervous system and balance your brain. It's like pressing a reset button—you flush out the adrenaline and cortisol, bring back the feel-good chemicals, balance your brain, and come back to the present with mindfulness, breathing, grounding, and remembering key kind others. The good news is, you can learn over time to be less triggered, recover more quickly from triggers, and to live from your grounded, present-time experience in your “happy village” nervous system where you have a lived, felt sense of connection with kind others who support you.

Psychotherapy from a trauma specialist who understands the dyslexic experience can help facilitate this. Mindfulness and gratitude practices of all kinds help. Of course it is always good to have a general physical to rule out or treat any underlying gut conditions or disease and find out about allergies and food intolerances. If you'd like to learn more about what is going on with anxiety, PTSD, trauma and panic attacks, and helpful suggestions to find your way back to your Wise Self, here is a link: <https://dyslexicselfesteem.com/anxiety-fear-ptsd-trauma-and-panic-attacks>

