

Trauma Informed Community Matters



Conceptualising Mental Health
For the Community Sector

By Glen Monks
GreenheartCommunity.org

The Autonomic Highway - Conceptualising Mental Health

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Buckle up this could be a bumpy ride...



But as with everything in life, simple steps compound by time promises deeply impactful results.



Driving differently

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A Personal Note

This publication aims to instigate the change in the world we all would like to feel. We can only share what we experience in truth. Please approach my words with curiosity and openness; they are my truth. The topics presented culminate eight years of working in the community sector and subsequently being commissioned to develop a trauma-informed education program. I wish the message lands respectfully in your heart, causing your head to view things differently. If we all have a role in the game of change, we must meet one another with patience and understanding—but mostly with compassion.

My intention around the concepts presented is to stir a wave of possibility, that top down approaches might meet bottom up ones and merge for the betterment of the community sector. Trauma-informed education goes deep; it has to because we are multi-dimensional beings governed by complex systems. To stay on the surface of mental health and hope that talking therapies and mindfulness will solve the current mental health crisis is itself a form of dissociation.

As a trauma-informed therapist, I find the softer skills of working with individuals and supporting their post-traumatic growth far more rewarding than the politics of systemic oppression. But witnessing systems that traumatise those we care for is hard to ignore for anyone in this line of work. As a result of navigating the politics of the community sector, this commentary can be viewed through the lens of the proverbial fly on the wall.

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What is the Autonomic Highway?

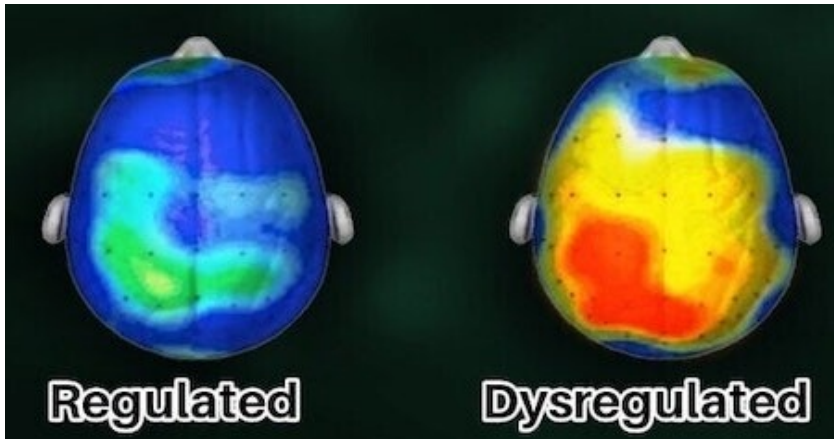
The autonomic highway represents the vagus nerve, which runs from our brain stem throughout our vital organs and governs how we respond to stimuli. Before you even speak to another individual, this conduit of the central nervous system dials online to keep you safe. It then gives signals in the form of gestures to express your willingness or aversion to what is being presented. This ability to switch between the branches of our autonomic systems has allowed humans to evolve and adapt to our environment more favourably than any other species. But what when the autonomic highway has a diversion or becomes jammed?



When over-primed, the vagus nerve either up-regulates or shuts down. I'm sure you're familiar with the fight-or-flight story of the sabre-toothed tiger. The dorsal vagal is the less spoken part of the central nervous system; it can freeze or shut down when overwhelmed. This is when the impact of trauma causes the body-mind to go into protection mode, best explained by Robert K Naviaux as the [Cell Danger Response](#). Once this part of the vagus nerve is primed, before returning to a more relaxed state, trauma victims often enter a phase of appeasement—meaning they will do whatever it takes to avoid the same thing happening again. We can liken this to a form of hopeless surrender.

But, we are wired for meaningful connection not hopelessness.

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The challenge for those with a pathology of trauma is that the vagus nerve can become triggered on the subconscious level. This means those impacted by trauma (debatably 99% of the population) can dip in and out of different poly-vagal states without conscious awareness.

It seems that whilst we believe we are the drivers of our mind-body vehicles, we are deeply connected to and stimulated by other drivers on the autonomic highway of life—often in ways we cannot explain. Understanding these [poly-vagal states](#) and their nuances can help us reduce some of life's anxiety. However, as everyday living becomes more marginalised and incongruent, many vagus nerves become stuck in functional freeze.

We should not have to work hard to instil the right to feel safe.

Destination - Truth and Transparency

You cannot measure the success of a health sector by the number of services it delivers. On the contrary, a genuinely successful model would regulate a thriving population needing fewer healthcare services. Unfortunately, we have become so far removed from wholeness that the number of people in, or heading towards, crisis mirrors a system struggling to cope. But, as health services exceed capacity, what can we do about it?

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Imagine a time when youngsters require minimal safeguarding, the elderly have firm ability, and poverty is swiftly dealt with—where every human autonomic nervous system operates with eco-logical synergy. To arrive at this point, we have great work to do.

Responsibility is a Heavy Responsibility

Viewing the current landscape, it seems our 'response-ability' is fading. Most people have positive solutions for change, yet nearly as many are losing the ability to improve things. The consensus is that a systemic shift is needed to care for people more humanely. But if the system has numerous radicals with answers for change, where are we going wrong? To answer this, we have to journey deep within the human psyche and learn how we got here in the first place.

The Current State of Health Care

As with most journeys worth travelling, we must know the terrain to navigate the pitfalls and arrive safely at our destination. Therefore, you can view this section as a diversion from the autonomic highway. Our cruise together, along this road less travelled, may present some turbulence so remain grounded as best you can.

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The stark reality is that we have a service delivery, governance and management crisis on our hands. Combine this travesty of disembodied work ethics, and the care sector has large potholes to fill. As patients, we've been brainwashed to believe that doctors fix us when we're poorly and that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. As a result, we have handed our internal response-ability, our immunity, to something outside of us.

The Immune System Paradox



The human immune system is multi-dimensional and not governed by genetics alone. Various childhood experiences shaped your immunity and will continue to develop into your senior years. We develop new sensory awareness for future biological adaptation as we respond to specific situations. Our survival response is well-equipped to handle short, intense periods of stress, which helps us to

build resilience. However, our nervous system, like our immune system, is paradoxical; it has a beneficial role that sometimes displays adverse effects.

As we have covered, when over-primed by stress, our survival pathways can become dysregulated and fire out of context. The impact of pressure on the nervous system impacts our mental health, and no one is immune to this. For workers in the care sector, those carrying the load of others as well as their own, the need for balancing stress is imminent. Developing a well-balanced, fully functional health force with the response-ability to care for others requires impeccable resilience.

Building resilience requires a multifactoral and multi-agency approach.

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Compassion Fatigue and Performance Survival



It is documented that many front-line care workers and managers are certain personality types. The quest to put others first is an admirable quality not everyone aspires to. The psychopathology of such individuals mainly guides the reason they want to help, heal or support those in need.

Their drive often stems from an unpleasant childhood experience they once endured. The event, no matter how small or large, was so harsh to deal with that it caused their psyche to fragment. As a result, they develop a subconscious drive to save others from similar emotional pain in a bid to make things whole again. The autonomic nervous system of such people is primed to excel when the chips are down. However, without the correct training and support, many care workers hit 'compassion fatigue'.

The tenacity and purposeful dedication of those delivering front-line services is rarely equalled with the respect, dignity and validation they deserve. Such ignorance can seem insulting, and this pours salt on unhealed emotions. One definition of lived trauma is the inability to process and manage daily events that provoke disruptive memories. Trauma fuels a lack of empowerment and beliefs of being misunderstood or unseen. A single incident is not necessarily traumatising, but the fragmentation of an individual is. Over time, if emotional insults continue, a trauma victim's psyche can end up in a land of confusion—resulting in stress related illness.

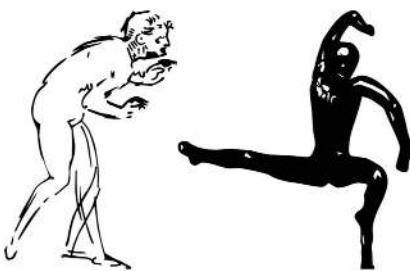
Ignorance is the biggest is the biggest threat the humanity.

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The motive to fix something broken lies deep within us; we are all wired for compassion and connection. Those who reach positions of power are not exempt from emotional turbulence, although it often seems this way to those further down the food chain. The collateral damage caused by getting to the top can be identified through behaviour; some seem to fight to maintain their position, while others thrive on control. But these survival tactics eventually take a tumble when exposed. The critical issue at this level is 'performance survival'. In the game of snakes and ladders, players experience emotional intensity through their wins due to the dread of sliding back down the ladder. Welcome to the corporate care sector, governed by policymakers, commissioners and project managers who often live this ordeal.

Fragmentation Propels Trauma



As a result of the above examples, we have stressed-out leaders governing a hyper-sensitive workforce. With pressure mounting, we need reform for those delivering and being pressured to improve and monitor outputs. A functioning system requires all of its components to flow harmoniously. The human heart requires fresh oxygenated blood to fuel our movements and thoughts. The result of fragmented community care is trauma—even for those that least expect it. We may not be able to reverse trauma but armed with knowledge, we can listen, validate and support one another at whatever level on the ladder of success.

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Crisis Conflict and Systemic Fibrosis

Fibrosis is a lattice-like formation that starves tissue of oxygen and fluidity; as a result, the surface area becomes dormant and stagnates. Fixation is a form of fibrosis; it lacks room for pliable adaptation.

Corporate business thrives on growth generation and cutbacks—sometimes to the detriment of customer care, but never its shareholders. Similarly, strategic business methods around community care isolate those that need the most resources. When a GP seeks the expertise of a specialist he recognises his limitations. The specialist then focuses on a targeted organ to decide if sedation or organ removal is required. Cardiologists focus on congestive heart failure, but with early intervention from a GP the patient can be saved from surgery? Similarly, through trauma informed education the heart of community becomes [palpable](#).



A corporate approach to community care diminishes the care sector's resilience and flexibility. Resilience is a process, not a target-driven destination. Developing a resilient community care sector does not imply we work up enough gumption to 'carry on regardless'. On the contrary, enduring stress fuels compassion fatigue and survival fatigue. To combat these debilitating traits, the focus of those in positions of power must be on regulating stress through trauma education. The work is to train decision makers to explore and embrace their vulnerabilities and become mature embodied leaders. This will help to achieve a more grounded and flexible workforce and lead to sector homeostasis.



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A more creative approach may seem impractical for those dominating the sector. However, the current system appears fibrotic to those being governed by it. Low staff retention in the search for meaningful purpose expresses such rigidity. To be stuck in a system fixated on power over people fuels neurosis and breeds an unhealthy environment. Like the process of autoimmunity, where human cells overreact and begin attacking themselves, the system itself is often at the root of the problem. The stain of systemic oppression must be removed before a new set of blueprints can be written.

Road Blocks

It is evidenced in biology and science that the human form is a multi-faceted bio-psycho-spiritual organism that does not perform well alone. A cancerous cell is a wandering cell striving to align its structure with other cells. In isolation, cancer cells manipulate blood vessels to survive, but this causes them to metastasise and spread—[the 'as within so without' theory](#).



For the autonomic nervous systems' of our communities to stabilise, we must remove the roadblocks that isolate them and reformat the meaning of success. We may need academics and strategic think tanks to help monitor, measure and evaluate progress. But a top-down, hierarchical approach that fails to engage on the cellular level disenfranchises everyone. The depth of control must

drop as the government leans on community groups to spread their load. Questions for compassionate inquiry would consider: *How can we focus less on immediate outputs and more on lasting legacy? What will it take for the language of compassion to become fluent across trusting partnerships? How can the monitoring and evidence process be relaxed on a case-by-case requirement?*

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Tenacity is focusing on the bigger picture, even when distracted by short-term wins. Destiny aligns our life lessons with passion and purpose by detaching from anything less significant or ego-luring. The struggle between accountability and trust comes into play here. Outputs may hit targets, pay higher salaries, satisfy commissioners and sign off budgets. But outcomes instil

confidence, build trust and foster resilience—the fuel for longevity. Initially, the former may seem more tangible, but with scrutiny, the latter evidences a more functional formula. Community care must be led tenaciously by the passion and purpose of the community. But why aren't they engaging?

Logical Progression

We need to look no further than the integrative medicine model to employ logic. Here, the doctor employs holistic and ethical practices in keeping with the laws of nature. Integrative medicine treats not a single dysfunctional organ but the pathway of disease. Diabetes is a good example, where the overwhelmed pancreas loses its ability to produce insulin in response to imbalanced blood sugar levels. Due to too much stimulation, the pancreas becomes dysregulated and sluggish over time. The outcome is that the person with diabetes has to introduce insulin exogenously or take medication to counteract the impact of sugar on the body.

If we address the root cause of why the pancreas of community care is overwhelmed, we will gain a more polarised understanding of the problem. We cannot sweeten community morale insensitively.

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Sweetness imbalances have their roots in the over-indulgence of carbohydrates and refined sugars, causing the pancreas to overwork. But what drives the patient's emotional need to binge this way? Another possible driving factor is the stress hormone cortisol, which floods the body, causing glucose to mobilise the fight or flight response. If so, what's driving this hormone release—is it bacterial, pathogenic or toxicological? When we understand that Diabetes involves all of these pathways new treatments will emerge. Similarly, an integrative approach to community

care will address people's current life stance and pathology before giving a prognosis. How can the system prescribe a cure without identifying the origins of how it impairs its people?

Heart Math Sums Things Up

The point is that corporate care looks good on paper, but the nuances of authoritarian governance result in an oppressed workforce, and this filters down the grapevine into the veins of community.

To repopulate the breeding ground of emotional dysregulation, disability, need for safeguarding, and inequality is paramount. It is evidenced in medical science that improving the terrain significantly impacts a patient's ability to maintain homeostasis; our wholeness relies on how we are treated.

The emotional barometer of the heart has a magnetic field that reaches out several feet; It scans for vibrational congruency and safe bonding. Our hearts truly are a device for seeking compassion.

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Your heart valves filter around 6,000 litres of dirty blood daily to reimburse you with the gift of life. How hard the heart works emotionally reflects how much it lacks externally. When we live and work in a stressful environment, the heart has more toxins to filter. The role of a trauma-informed community is heart care.

If promoting the intangible sounds a little whimsical, if the idea of psycho-emotional beings sounds like a conspiracy theory, you need look no further than the greatest intangible asset known to man/woman your breath. A hypoxic cell is one starved of oxygen; it can't relax or breathe.

The lungs and vascular system are your first line of defence. When we ingest the outer world, we either tense or relax, and our heart responds accordingly. The biology of your mind and body ride on the back of your breath. This rich commodity cannot be touched, seen and barely heard; we take it for granted, but if it didn't exist, neither would we.

The system must relax and approach the heart and lungs of the matter. The answer is person centred, non-clinical, informative interaction around the impact of oppression. Trauma awareness is social work.

Community Ecological Togetherness

Community Ecological Development is when we work collaboratively, and togetherness becomes the main lead—when we work for the collective heart. As already established, with collective purpose, human cells flourish. When communities focus on the totality of their efforts, they thrive from the standpoint of we over I.

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Mental health may be the current focus, but we remain fragmented until we treat this as a system-based problem. Due to the monitoring, proofing and evidence process, medical research takes many years to establish new protocols. But, we humans, in our wholeness, can address change today. Reformation thrives on wholehearted connectivity and communication. How we interact with ourselves, others and our environment paves systemic harmony.

Pulling out of the fast lane into a smoother, autonomic highway requires deep reflection on the current traumatised system. When we find the agency to recognise that we have been traumatised, we reduce our outward frustrations towards easing our inner conflict. How future generations heal is down to how we redefine our purpose today.

The role of a trauma-informed community is to reduce the amount of sick care intervention needed and to enliven our communities to become whole again.

Steps for Change



We clearly witness the power of connection through mature interpersonal relationships. However, authentic expression is often frowned upon in the corporate care sector. It's unacceptable to 'wear your heart on your sleeve' or become a disruptor—fuelled by the fear of losing popularity or even your job. But, if relationships built on transparency present our greatest work, there is no room for snakes on the community ladder. Being validated, heard and understood in a safe environment is the remedy for our collective traumas.

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Internal Coherence - sector communal kinship



Cultivating safety, belonging, and dignified relationships is the purpose of a trauma-informed community. Without connection, the human nervous system looks to fix what's missing. The first relationship we must nurture is the one with ourselves. Aligning our inner dialogue liberates us and propels a more coherent and purposeful life.

Congruency is recalibrated through physical stature and is reflected by our actions. By aligning with others, we discover their truth and our own. We liberate ourselves when we listen to, support, and coach others to find their truth. Compassionate enquiry is a transferable skill. Through trauma

informed education we have the ability to light up parts of the pre-frontal cortex of community that cannot be reached—we become wired for kinship.

“To rewire the pre-frontal cortex of community is to reduce social isolation and build a cohesive community. This is a journey we can all play a role in.”

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The worse the adversity the greater the opportunity



With the current state of health care heavily involving the community sector, we are in the midst of extraordinary times. The thing to remember is that our main driving forces are togetherness and vulnerability. We cannot move forward without sharing our vulnerabilities. This means everyone involved in supporting community care would do well to recognise that a fragmented system leads to adversity.

Owning this takes courage and the ability to respond with authenticity and transparency. The higher the responsibility, the more profound and significant these requirements. For marginalised communities to gain stability and respond, they need their fundamental living requirements met—this must be led by example.

As Charles Eisenstein Observes - [sanity_project](#)

"We see again and again, within environmental organisations and leftist political groups, the same bullying of underlings, the same power grabs, the same egoic rivalries as we see everywhere else. If these are played out in our organisations, how can we hope they will not be played out in the world we create should we be victorious?"

With some of the bravest hearts and wisest minds that have gone before us, stating this fundamental flaw in humanity, organisations involved in community development are invited to act accordingly. The organisations that thrive on uncovering their blind spots will pave the way for a more humanely efficient autonomic highway.

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Final Thoughts...

To sow the seeds for liberation you might ask :



What are my personal boundaries, and are they realistic?

Do I feel safe to express myself in any environment, and if not, can I articulate this and maintain resilience?

Am I an influencer, and if so, how can I establish more equanimity in those who look towards me?

Because we are multi dimensional beings we cannot apply a top down approach and think ourselves into healthier mental and emotional well-being. Trauma-Informed Education is a body based approach—we have to feel into community at the grass roots level. To instil this message into our communities we need top down support – from those in positions of power – to become examples of trust and to show up with total transparency and authenticity.

Reflective Homework :

How might your life and the lives of others differ as you advance down the autonomic highway and become deeply connected to your authentic self?

The Definition of Commitment

The definition of commitment is:

*"Doing things that you said you would do,
long after the mood when you said you would
do them has left."*



Take the - Well-being Test

Get Your - ACE Score

Step on to - The Wheel of Life

Read - The Greenheart Manifesto

Contact - grenheartdoncaster@gmail.com