Merete Holm Brantbjerg: A gentle exploration of stress

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For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: Hi Merete.

Merete: Hi Serge.

Serge: So today we're going to be talking about what happens in our body when we get stressed.

Merete: Yeah. You asked me that because I have been working with stress and trauma patterns for many years. Before I talk about what happens in stress, I'll just say that, before we get stressed, we already have patterns in the body. We already have these tendencies for tensing up parts of us. I think we all know that shoulders go up. Our neck can go stiff or our back can go stiff or we can hold our breath. Those are very normal everyday patterns, even without particular stress. And the same thing goes for another pattern that is less known. But still, if we really think about it, I think we all know it.
That is, other parts of the body could go more flaccid, more into a low energy state. We kind of forget them or energy leaks out of them. They go invisible in a way. And that's normal. We all have it before we get stressed. Then, when we do get stressed, when arousal goes up, then these patterns typically go much stronger.
So, if I get under pressure, I am up against a deadline or whatever... I have too much to do and I try and push through. What my muscle system is doing is that parts of me are really tensing up. I'm doing my very best to meet the deadline or to get everything done. And I do that by lifting my shoulders, tightening my diaphragm, not breathing too much and really pushing.
So, what does that mean? It means that parts of me actually over activate, to be able to match the increased pressure from outside.

Serge: Yeah. I like that, when you say that "part of me activates in order to meet the pressure from outside." It's very nice to have the image... What's happening to the body is that intuitive response and it matches.

Merete: Yes, we try. We do our best to be able to match it. Some parts of us may naturally have energy enough to match it. Then we don't need to tense up, but other parts are doing it in a more defensive way, which leaves us with these relatively unpleasant tension patterns in the body.

Then what we typically don't pay attention to is that simultaneously other parts of us go flaccid. Because the parts of us that have the lowest energy level already also have the lowest tolerance to stress. So, when we get stressed, then those parts of us, in a way, they just quit. They say: "This is too much for me. I'm out of here," leaving the rest of us with even harder work to try to push through. And then when we're over with the stress, which we hopefully are at some point and we want to relax, then we sometimes really get into trouble with relaxing because then the given up parts, they are in a way waiting for us.
So instead of relaxing, we collapse in front of television or... We don't really get into a regenerating relaxation, because to do that, we need to build up presence in these low energized parts again. And that's, uh, um, , I can't find the English word right now, but it's a polarity, right? This tension and giving up. It's two sides of a coin. And they work together in all stress patterns. That's what I am fascinated by and what I have worked with for many years.

Serge: Merete, I want to highlight: When we pay attention to stress, we tend to all be aware of the area where there is tension. We identify stress with that extra pressure and tension. But we tend to not be aware that the areas that are not the fault lines where we activate get much more deactivated. And so, what you really wonderfully pointed out is that, when we relax the tense parts, then there's nothing left to hold. And the collapse happened because everything was hanging up on the tense part. And if you remove it, then you have nothing left. And so, what we're talking about is really being aware of what has been invisible and is deactivated. So, then we need to activate it in order to relax.

Merete: Yeah. Yeah. You got it. And what I find especially helpful when working with stress problems is to start with the low energized ones. For exactly the reason you just went through: If we start with saying, "Oh, I'm so stressed, I need to relax," then either the body isn't allowing it, which in a way is wise. Because it, we kind of know that if we relax too much, we're just going to collapse. If we do it the opposite way, if we start out with becoming curious about where it is that parts of our body disappeared from, what parts of us went flaccid in the stress period we have gone through... And then we start with bringing activity in a very gentle, low dosed way, bringing activity into those areas again. The tendency is that the tensions start becoming much easier to negotiate.

Serge: Yeah.

Merete: Because it's not two reactions. It's really one reaction with two sides. And, if you modify one, if you make the weakest part stronger, then the tension isn't so necessary.

Serge: Right. Right. And so, I have an image that you have a team. And you have part of the team who are people who are hyper responsible and tend to just hold everything.

Merete: Yes...

Serge: ... and some people who are slackers and doing nothing. And so, if you want to relieve the people who are hyper responsible, you need to get the slackers to, to rise to the occasion and do more. And then more naturally the hyper responsible people will do less. And you're going to have more of a balance.

Merete: Yeah. And we'll also often get less judgmental, because hyperactivity often comes with that: we get a little hard or tough or pushy or... Right?

Serge: Yeah.

Merete: And if we then suddenly discover that there is support, that some other parts are taking over, then we don't need to be so pushy.

Serge: Yeah. So, then, the trick is: How do we identify and activate those parts of our body that are flaccid, that are not there now.

Merete: That's the thing. And it needs a little training. That's what you and I talked about. And we could do a little of that now.
For me, it would go in two steps. The first step is actually to invite the body to let go of some of the superficial tension that most of us have all the time. Especially when we are on, and we're talking and there is this little alertness. The first step would be to just invite, that we get present here. And then I'll bring in examples of small ways we can activate parts of the body.
We can do it gently small, and then we'll see what comes out of that. Right? So, I'll talk to us, but I'll also talk to the public who's listening, and invite all of us to find a way to sit that feels comfortable. Where we have support from the ground and from the chair, which also means to sit relatively symmetrically, so both feet and both sitting bones can feel the ground and the chair. And, if you have your back into the chair, that you can also feel the support from that. And then with that, just invite the body to land, just to settle in.
This is where we are right now, sitting in each of our chairs. We can pay attention to our breathing. Often, with this invitation to land, it goes with an out-breath. We're just calming down, slowing down also. I'm calming a little more in both (breath) Yeah. I notice, for me, that my whole speed goes down, and I start feeling my stomach. Yeah.
Do you have any sensations?

Serge: What I'm noticing is a sense of feeling, um, straighter, calmer. Um, Like that sense of stillness.

Merete: Yeah. Well, I see you get into more calm, probably both your and my nervous systems swing a little over into rest. More than being on and being active. We swing a little over into also resting.
You could say that what we just did is a very. well known part of supporting presence bodily. It's to stimulate that kind of relaxation. And it works, it had an impact on both of us. Then what I'm adding is that if we want to keep it, we really benefit from also paying attention to the low energized parts. Because otherwise, there is a tendency for either starting to slip down into collapse, or to go tense again. So, if we want to get into a more sustainable presence, we benefit from including the low energy. So that's where I'll go now. And, instead of asking where it is, I'm just going to guide us into a way of activating places in the body and see what that way of working does.
It's a way that's designed to modify low energized places. The principle is to bring in energy in a low dose, so it doesn't feel like hard work, it just feels like doing a little bit. Right? So, we'll start with the feet. Just like before I invited us to get down into the feet.
Now, I invite the opposite movement, which is to let both feet make a tiny little pressure into the ground, into the floor. Just a tiny little one, and even with a tiny little push with the feet, what happens is that you stimulate an upgoing movement in your body. Just see that the center is getting in quite strong here. So, this tiny little push will make an up-going movement. It will even go into supporting a little stretch in your neck. So, we're really straightening up just like if somebody pulled

your hair here, but it comes all the way from your feet and up. And what I ask you to experiment with, is the dosage.
Because you can do this with more physical power or you can do it very, very gently, almost only thinking the movement. You will still stimulate the same reflex movement that goes all the way up through the body. And just check out if there's a dosage that feels more supportive for your body than another dosage.
And then you can add two more versions to play with. One is that you make the push with the feet, mostly with the outside of the feet. Then the activation goes into the outside of your legs, that cooperates with your back. And again, it can be done very small, gently, or you can do it with more physical substance to it.
And you can experiment with making the push with the inside of your feet. If you do that, then the activation comes up on the inside of your legs, comes up to your pelvic floor, and it goes all the way up on the front side of the spine.
There are small differences between how these three versions, the whole foot, the outside, the inside... how that is experienced by different people. And also which of them feels most supportive. So just go for your version, let the rest go, don't try to get it all. Just selecting is also part of dosing and it's really allowing us to go for what works.
And in this setting, what we're going for is something that feels supportive, something that gives us something that we can describe as some kind of resource. It could be feeling stronger. More centered. More upright. Getting more energy. It could be many things. So, I suggest that you and I describe our versions and our words for them, just as examples, to inspire people to get this.

Serge: Yeah. So, for me, what I'm noticing is how almost magically, the spine elongates. So you were describing it as something that comes as if it's a pull, but it really more comes from inside. And that sense of that unfolding.

Merete: Yeah. Nice word. Like something unfolding all the way up through your body.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah.

Merete: Do you have a preference between the outside, inside, or whole foot?

Serge: Um, I like the whole foot. Um. But I, I enjoy actually noticing the difference between outside and inside. I was also playing with heel versus forward. And so, it's, it's nice to notice the nuances.

Merete: Yeah. It's like, I often experience it as having some kind of instrument. The different notes. You can play these different tones, right? My version is, and it pretty much always is, that I prefer the inside. Which is because it balances out a typical stress pattern in me where I'm kind of overfilled out in my outside. I'm very bounded, you could say. But I'm also tensing up more than I really need to... But that's, that's one of my stress patterns: I go out there and hold. And as soon as I do the inside, that whole imbalance relaxes or I get back into a much better balance.
So just a tiny little push with my inside, then I get happier inside. I get lighter. I get more alive. Less kind of overstructured. And you can get curious about which of these small possibilities actually make a difference for you. I think one important aspect of this is trying out the really small versions because we are so used to, in our culture, that when something is difficult, we need to do more, right?
And, with this principle, I'm training the exact opposite: if something is difficult, do something smaller. Because if something is difficult, it's likely that you have tapped into an area where the

pattern is that you're losing parts of yourself. You're losing energy. And if that's the case, it doesn't help to push. It doesn't help to do more. It makes it worse because it makes you more polarized inside between the parts of you that have the energy to push and the parts of you that don't. And if we want to include those parts that don't have that energy, we need to do something small, small and gentle.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. It's almost as if we try to run with a bunch of people and we run too fast. Then there's going to be a big spread between the top people and the followers. And running slowly allows everybody to be part of it. Y

Merete: Yeah. And if we really move slowly, we build up energy and then we get stronger. And then at some point, maybe we can run really fast. Then we can go for releasing energy. But if this buildup hasn't happened, then we're at risk that, when we release, one part of the group is running way in the front and somebody else is lost behind. So this goes for the dynamic in groups and it goes for the dynamic inside of each of us...

Serge: Yeah.

Merete: What, what do you think, Serge. Should I do one more place in the body?

Serge: Yeah, yeah. I think that's a great idea to do, to show what we can explore.

Merete: Yeah. Because this, what we did with the feed is very much about the vertical line, but then there's also this whole sense of having a field around us or having space for ourselves, which is much more about the upper body and front side and backside.
And there are also simple ways. I'll give two examples of what we can do. One goes for activating the front side and the other goes for activating the back side. And then again, we can compare and see which of them we liked best, at which dosage. So, if you start with the front side. I'm going to show you. You can put your fingertips to touch each other. And then put your arms down so that you do it with your hands resting in your lap. No hard work with shoulders. Arms resting, fingertips to each other. And then if you let the fingertips push into each other... What will happen is that the whole front side gets gathered. And that goes for the muscles in your chest and your stomach. And it goes for your connective tissue.
Again, you can experiment with dosage, you can do it with more physical strength, or you can do it tiny little. Go for a dosage that allows you to breathe freely, so that this thing with activating muscles is not about holding your breath. It's about getting a better container so that you have a more energized body to breathe in. And just notice if your body likes this activation of the front side or not.
And then I'll give you the other one, just for comparison. I'll show it up here again. You can put your fingers like this so that they can pull in each direction, give resistance to each other.

Serge: You make two hooks with your hands. Getting into each other.

Merete: That's right. And again, let your arms relax in your lap while you do it. And when you pull in each direction, your elbows will also just go a tiny little bit backwards. And with that, the whole support system muscularly in your back will activate. And again, you can do it small. You can do tiny little. You can do it with more physical strength. All of it is fine. But there will be very likely a dosage that works better for your body than another dosage. There's tthe standard. If we find a dosage that

really works, it feels good. Then it's like, Oh yeah. Oh yeah, I like this. And if we don't find the dosage that fits, we don't have that pleasurable experience. So this is really going for something that your body likes.
And again, compare. That can be very different resources and experiences, connected to activating front side or back side. And we have our preferences. We start out from the beginning with different bodies.
So, let's just make that little comparison. The two of us again. That's the live examples we have right now of people doing this.

Serge: So, what's really nice is to see what your body really likes. The experience is the sense of pleasure that comes when you notice that there is just a little bit of activation, just a little bit of, of either pushing on the fingers or pulling on the two hooks, and it is enough to actually start something. And so that feels in itself very pleasurable. Ummm. I like both in different ways. With the two hands, with the fingers touching that way, there is a sense of feeling the energy in the hands and in the body, and then a sense of the shoulders expanding and the head coming up. With the two hooks, it feels to me even more of a straightening. It gives me the same sense as if I'm on a roller, lying on my back on a roller. And I feel my upper back stretching from forward to backwards. Kind of that stronger opening of the back.

Merete: Okay. You have very good descriptions of what it does, bodily. Does it also translate into something more emotional? What kind of support does it give you?

Serge: That's why I started with that sense of pleasure. And when you asked, , the more laughing, that sense of relaxed, that sense of safety.

Merete: Yeah. Yeah, I'll build on that. You could say, when we gather the front side... I love that one. I love fingertips to each other. For me, it cooperates with the inside of my feet. It gathers my whole front side. And when I have energy enough in that, I feel much more protected. Not protected... I mean, I can't decide whatever happens out there, but I have my energy here. It's gathered around me, which means that in a sense, I am safer because I am more present with what's there. While if my front side isn't properly gathered, the energy from the outer world literally walks into me. I get too exposed. So, I think there is a logic to, when you say that you feel safer. It's the kind of safety level that comes with... that we have our own energy available to hold us.

Serge: It's like an energy shield, as opposed to something that's rigid, that's armored, that is trying to tense up against it. In that sense, I don't need to tense up because I have that energy shield.

Merete: Yeah. Yeah. So, you mention the tense, rigid, armored version and I talked about the flaccid version where we forget that we can say stop or we get invaded. So, we have those two defensive styles. Either I am shielding defensively, or I'm giving up on defending myself. Or you have this natural protection that comes from "But I am here and I have my energy."

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. The context is very much that the way we function in the world is... Evolutionarily, we're geared to noticing threat and to adapt to threat. And so, we have these responses, these reactivities, that rigidity or collapse... But it's about finding a way to respond to threat as opposed to reacting to it. To feel safe in managing threat in a way that feels safe.

Merete: Yeah. Very nicely put. Because what you just described there is, for me, the difference between our autonomic nervous system reactions, something threatens us and we have these automatic survival reactions. We can fight. We can flee. We can collapse. We can do many things. They are reactive, automatically reactive. And then we have this other system, which is what I have focused on up to now here. Which is our muscle system, which of course has a link to the autonomic reactivity, but we can also... The benefit of working with the muscle system is that we can train specific skills so that we get better prepared, for stress or whatever comes from outside.
And that's exactly what we do with these small exercises. We get more of ourselves on board and we get a chance to get back parts of us that have gone flaccid. So, then we may have a little freer choices next time we get under pressure. So, I don't just automatically go there, but I could stay here and say, "Okay, so, this is happening. What are my options here?" But to do that, I need to be able to stay in myself.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. When hearing something to do with the body, people can sometimes hear it as "Here's what you do and do it mechanically." And what you're describing... the important part is that moment of staying. Observing and saying, "here's where I am. Here's what I have an intention to do. Here's what I'm allowing to happen. But it's a moment of something happening and sensing and staying within.

Merete: Yes. And that's where you could say what I add with this methodology is that including these low energy places and knowing how to energize them highly supports what you just described.

Serge: Yes.

Merete: Highly supports this capacity to actually stay present. Whereas, if we don't know what to do with these flaccid parts , we automatically go into a split between the tense parts and the flaccid parts. Right?

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. And so one very specific moment where it happens is, for instance, sitting in meditation and feeling defeated by the body collapsing or the body tensing up.

Merete: Yeah, yeah.

Serge: The physiology of these invisible parts is not taken into consideration.

Merete: Yeah. Yeah. And I'm often in meditation. I actually don't know if there are any meditative practices that consciously help people to care about these parts of us that have a hard time staying present. You know, they fall asleep, and they don't do it out of bad will. It's old protective mechanisms. And we're so used to paying attention to the "Now I tense up," but we are little trained in paying attention in a kind way to "Oh, where is this? I lose myself now."
If I sit there, and drift off, and I can't stay awake: "Where is it that it's happening in my body? And what could I do? What small energizing movements could I do to help myself to stay. And then what is it I get aware of, if I do that, because going into flaccidity is also a strategy. It protects us from something. It solves something for us. So, who knows what it is we are going to feel more of if we actually stay more? That's kind of a next step, right? But we can be curious about it.

Serge: Hmm.

Merete: Yeah. So how are we doing, Serge, timewise?

Serge: So that feels great. Just wondering if there is something we can say to put it all together, to conclude.

Merete: Well, I was asked the other day if I had short advice for people. Right? And what I came up with was: Well, if, if things start getting difficult for you, then my suggestion is slow down and ask yourself, which parts of your body did you lose contact with. Just be curious about that and assume that it's there. What I give you is an assumption. But whenever something is starting to get difficult, you're probably tense somewhere, but you very likely also disappeared.
It could be from your feet. It could be from your back. It could be your front that got too open. You could forget your arms, et cetera. But just asking that question brings you closer to yourself again. And it has the potential to take you out of the struggle and into more kind awareness.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So, if you have difficulty, then probably you're not functioning with a full deck. So, you pay attention to what is missing, as opposed to berating yourself for the difficulty.

Merete: Yeah. You got it.

Serge: Thanks, Merete.

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