The Three Hidden Senses: How the Body Keeps the Past Alive

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In this series, we have been exploring the phenomenon of flashback, the way the past erupts unbidden into the present, hijacking the nervous system without warning or consent. But a question has been waiting quietly beneath all of this: *how*, exactly, does the body hold a memory that the mind has long since tried to put away?

The answer lies not in the five senses most of us learned about in childhood, but in three others that we were never taught to name. They operate below conscious awareness, beneath language, below the threshold of narrative. In the person who has lived through trauma, they become the most faithful archivists of everything that happened.

I Feel, Therefore I Am

René Descartes declared: "*I think, therefore I am.*" The cogito placed reason at the centre of human existence and reduced the body to a vehicle for the mind.

Antonio Damasio proposed a different foundation: "*I feel, therefore I am.*" The body, he argued, is not a passive carrier of the thinking self but the very ground from which the self arises. Our sense of who we are, our emotional life, our capacity for decision and desire, all of this emerges upward from the body, not downward from the cortex (Damasio, 1994). When the body holds pain, it holds something that shapes every present moment from the inside out.

The Vestibular System: Where Am I in Relation to Gravity?

The vestibular system, deep in the inner ear, tracks the position and movement of the head in relation to gravitational force, reporting continuously: *'am I upright?', 'am I stable?', 'am I safe*?' Under ordinary circumstances, it simply maintains us in space.

But in the person who has experienced trauma, this system may carry a kinesthetic memory that surfaces as sudden, profound loss of equilibrium. Consider a veteran who lost a close friend in a battlefield explosion. Years later, a door slamming or fireworks can trigger complete destabilisation of his balance, nausea and dizziness, and cause him to fall to the ground seeking cover, though the earth beneath him is entirely safe. His vestibular system, registering his head position at the moment of the original blast, encoded that shockwave as mortal danger. When a similar head position and sudden impact-sound align again, the body responds with the full force of what that signal once meant.

This is not weak willpower. This is biology doing precisely what it was designed to do.

Proprioception: The Body Remembers Its Own Positions

From the Latin *proprius* (one's own), proprioception is the sense that tells us, moment by moment, where each part of the body is in space: the angle of a joint, the degree of muscular tension, the shape we are making with ourselves in the world.

In a person who has been through trauma, the body may hold, in its very musculature, the positions it occupied at the moment of overwhelming danger: the gesture that was interrupted, the movement of protection that was never completed. The shoulders held high for thirty years. The fists that never quite uncurl. In the consulting room, we sometimes witness a client entering a flashback whose body folds into a posture of defence they did not consciously choose. The muscles are remembering, replaying with faithful precision the shape of what was.



Interoception: The Body's Internal Weather

Interoception is the capacity to sense the body's internal states: the rhythm of the heartbeat, the quality of the breath, a pressure in the chest, a coldness spreading outward from the sternum. These signals, Damasio demonstrated, form the neurological substrate of emotional experience itself (Damasio, 1994; Craig, 2009).

In trauma, this inner reporting system can become either amplified or silenced. For some, every small sensation rings as an alarm. For others, the system shuts down almost entirely, the person losing access to their own emotional life, unable to feel anything at all, resulting in the incapacity to express their emotions. This condition, known as alexithymia, is not weakness. It is the body's protective response to a past in which feeling too much was unbearable.

Our veteran, in the full grip of a flashback, is not simply remembering the explosion. He is re-living it, re-experiencing it through all three hidden senses at once: the vestibular destabilisation, the proprioceptive memory of his body's position, the interoceptive flooding of fear in its rawest biological form. The past is not filed somewhere behind him. It is living in him.

Earlier Than We Think: Early Life Trauma and the Interoceptive System

It is important to state that interoceptive dysregulation does not begin on a battlefield. For many, the disruption takes root far earlier, in the first years of life. Childhood trauma is negatively correlated with interoceptive ability, and early adversity hinders the development of the very cognitive and emotional brain circuits that overlap with interoceptive networks (Bonaz et al., 2021). The effects of stress hormones on these circuits can crystallise unpredictable, poorly regulated interoceptive representations into enduring patterns of ill-health, patterns that express themselves not as psychological symptoms alone but as physical ones: dysregulation of the cardiovascular system, the gastrointestinal tract, the respiratory system, the pelvic floor, and conditions such as fibromyalgia. For those with connective tissue variants and hypermobility, the interaction between psychosocial stress and intrinsic physiological vulnerability may be particularly pronounced. What begins as an overwhelmed nervous system in a small child can, over decades, reorganise the body’s internal landscape entirely.

Why This Matters: The Body Is Not a Metaphor



One of the quietest insights to emerge from trauma neuroscience is this: talking is not always enough. The memories stored in these three sensory systems do not live in the cortex, where language resides. They live lower down in the brain, in older brain structures, encoded not as stories but as sensations, postures, autonomic responses. To reach them, we must approach them in their own register, which is why the embodied tools of return

matter as they do: the feet on the floor, the deliberate breath, the hand placed steadily on the back of the heart. These are communications addressed directly to the nervous system in its own language, and it is why the fourth stage, the work of biodynamic vegetotherapy, offers something irreplaceable: a guided return to the body's held memories so that what was frozen there can, at last, complete itself.

The body does not lie. It does not forget as it can repress. It is doing what it was designed to do: keeping us alive in the only way it knows. Our work is to listen to it with the patience and precision it deserves, and to help it, gently and over time, discover that there is something new to know.

The next blog in this series will continue explores the stages in depth: starting from the art and practice of recognition, and how naming a flashback begins to change its nature.

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In accordance with ethical requirements, all identifying details of clients have been changed to safeguard confidentiality.

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