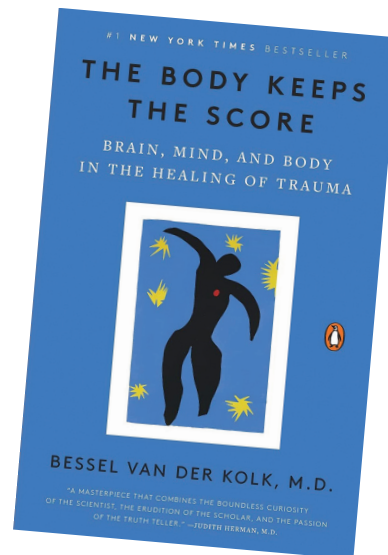


Reviewed by Martina Vasil

The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

Written by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.
Penguin, 2014



In 2017, my older sister passed away very suddenly and unexpectedly. At the time, my mind and body submerged into a thick fog of numbness and pain that was difficult to process and comprehend. Since then, I have read many texts that aided my journey to healing, including *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Upon completing this book, I thought of all the children and families who shared the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic in addition to other traumas they are experiencing or might have endured. This book will be helpful to any educator who wishes to understand more comprehensively what trauma does to the brain, mind, and body and to gain tools for how to help themselves and others.

The author, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, is the founder and medical director of the Trauma Center in Brookline, Massachusetts, professor of psychology at Boston University School of Medicine, and director of the National Complex Trauma Treatment Network. In short, he has dedicated most of his career to investigating trauma. In this book, van der Kolk synthesizes over 30 years of research, providing the reader with examples of many of the patients with whom he has worked. The book is divided into five parts: (1) “The Rediscovery of Trauma,” (2) “This Is Your Brain on Trauma,” (3) “The Minds of Children,” (4) “The Imprint of Trauma,” and (5) “Paths to Recovery.”

In Part 1, “The Rediscovery of Trauma,” van der Kolk introduces his early work with Vietnam veterans suffering from PTSD when he served as a staff psychiatrist at the Boston Veterans Administration Clinic. From there, he discusses research on the mind and brain. Trauma activates the limbic area of the brain (the “emotional brain”), and the amygdala, which warns us of danger and activates the body’s stress response system. Thus, many trauma victims are stuck in a cycle of fight or flight—memories activate the body’s alarm system, causing victims to relive their trauma, which affects memory, attention, sleep, and irritability and can lead to long-term health issues. For others, their body registers the threat, but their mind disassociates and goes on as if nothing has happened. Trauma also affects the left frontal lobe of the cortex (Broca’s area), which is one of the speech centers of the brain. This is why it is hard for people to talk about their trauma—they literally cannot find the words to describe it because that area of the brain “went offline” during the event, although later they might be able to tell their story.

In Part 2, “This Is Your Brain on Trauma,” van der Kolk provides more detailed information on the structure of the brain and how the body is wired for survival and connects this information with more stories from his professional career. He critiques the use of desensitization, which is having trauma victims relive or describe their

trauma again and again in an effort to reduce the emotional response over time and make them less reactive. Instead, he describes a more effective treatment through reconnecting the mind with the body to deactivate the body's alarm system—for example, using yoga to help people reconnect with their disassociated bodies.

Part 3, “The Minds of Children,” was the most difficult section for me to read. In story after story, van der Kolk describes how adverse childhood experiences, or ACE, deeply scar the psyche and affect children's abilities to function as healthy adults. Abuse destroys children's natural need for attachment and security, which affects their emotional and physical states. They have difficulty distinguishing between safety and danger and what love or healthy relationships are like because they have no internal sense of security. Many find ways of coping with the abuse. Some disassociate when the abuse occurs, allowing the mind to go to a different place as the body is experiencing the abuse. Others engage in self-harm as a way to try to escape the pain of their abuse or traumatic memories. The author shares information on how trauma is diagnosed in children and notes various organizations that have been created to help. He concludes this part by labeling child abuse “our nation's largest public health problem” and provides data that shows the long-term costs and health effects of ACE.

In Part 4, “The Imprint of Trauma,” van der Kolk explains the difference between normal memory and traumatic memory. He provides some history behind talk therapy and how memory has been critiqued in court trials, while stressing the realness of traumatic memory and the importance of listening to survivors.

The last section, Part 5, “Paths to Recovery,” features a variety of therapeutic approaches for trauma victims. Limbic system therapy centers on calming the nervous system, establishing a support network, and reacquainting the patient with physical sensations. It can include breathing exercises, yoga, and any practice that uses mindfulness, movement, rhythms, and action, such as art, music, and dance. Using language, such as patients writing letters to themselves, participating in theatre groups, or restructuring inner maps (projecting their inner world into

three-dimensions), can also be effective. Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) involves patients keeping their eyes focused on the therapist's finger as they recall memories and sensations from their trauma. The process takes patients into a dream-like state of loosely associated memories and images—like the rapid eye movement (REM) stage during dreaming—that allows them to place their traumatic experience within the larger context of their lived experiences. Last, van der Kolk describes his use of neurofeedback to show patients electrical patterns in their brains that might be responsible for their lack of emotional control or difficulty with focusing. Neurofeedback helps people retrain their brains to generate different frequencies and patterns.

In sum, this book provides the reader with a strong base of research on how trauma affects the brain, mind, and body. The chapter on child abuse alone offers insight for any teacher seeking ways to meet the needs of their students more effectively. It is important that readers take their time with this book. The content can be triggering, and I found myself having to reflect and process quite a bit after each chapter.

Perhaps most relevant to us as Orff Schulwerk teachers is the section on how to help trauma victims. Research strongly points to the positive effects of music and movement in processing these events. This is likely not surprising for most Schulwerk teachers, who have seen for decades the benefits of movement and active music making in our classrooms. Overall, I found this book a thoroughly informative and stimulating read that left me yearning to do better for my students. It is my hope that through understanding what trauma does to the brain, mind, and body, we can more intuitively perceive and address the needs of those we have the honor of educating. ■

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