

# The Importance of FEELING Safe

Violet Van Hees knows a lot about feeling scared.

She is learning to surf. “When I get scared, my learning stops. I go back to old bracing patterns, my finesse tanks, and usually, I wipe out!” She noticed that when she is able to shift herself into feeling more safe, she surfs better.

Violet also has decades of first aid training. She became intrigued by what happens when someone goes into shock. “It is often the shock. . . that kills [you], not the injury itself.” She recognized that shock is a parasympathetic response: indeed, the same response that supports rest, digestion, and recovery. She became curious: why and how are there such dramatic extremes in our parasympathetic response capacity?

In her work with animals, she observes similar parasympathetic reactions. From her experience with horses, dogs, cats, and other animals, she believes, “It’s clear there is something in our shared biology that is at work here.”

*“If there is no safety, your nervous system will not learn how to do silly things.”*

*(Moshe Feldenkrais, Amherst Training, 1980, week 3.)*

We asked Violet if she would provide some bullet points for Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioners<sup>CM</sup> to determine whether a client feels safe, or not; and how to create conditions in which a client can experience, or transition into, a healthy nervous system response. Here are her guidelines:

Signs that a person is likely in a “healthy” nervous system response state i.e., with a healthy sympathetic and parasympathetic balance:

- the person FEELS SAFE and has a gut sense that all is well. They don’t just think they are safe, they actually feel safe.
- they can explore, and play, and be curious – with attention and interest and fun.
- they can truly rest. They feel calm, not just look calm.
- they are open to learn new things, and they can retain and draw on what they have learned.
- their voice is expressive, they make eye contact
- they can talk, listen, and respond with a sense of connection

Signs that a person may be in a “danger response” nervous system state:

- the person FEELS NOT SAFE (even if they think they are safe and that they ought to feel safe, they don't)
- the person may seem agitated and hypervigilant – or they may seem kind of numb or withdrawn
- their ability to learn something new may seem very scattered, fragmented, or fleeting: the learning doesn't seem to sink in
- social engagement is less (voice expressiveness, eye contact, connection)
- a spectrum of responses are possible: the person may be clearly in a danger response, or they may seem to be functioning reasonably but somehow stuck (e.g. a “functional freeze” state).

How we as Feldenkrais Practitioners can create an environment that can help a person to feel safe, and to be in (or transition into) the healthy nervous system response:

- **Convey a way for the person to befriend their experiences in their own body**, for example:
  - “Your body is smart! What is happening is here because it was the best strategy at the time it was first needed, to keep you safe and keep you going. And clearly it worked – you are alive and here. That’s impressive! So now, we can explore whether there are some

additional options that might work at least as well to do what you need – that might feel even better, and suit you well now.”

- **Ask (often!): How is this – does this FEEL safe?**
  - You may need to guide the person to notice what they are sensing, rather than what they are thinking.
  - Many people have told me that they were surprised to be asked this – and that they now LOVE this question.
- **Listen to whispers – and help the person listen to their own whispers.**
  - Notice signs of concern early, when they are small. (This can make a BIG difference!)
- **If What is going on is causing a level of concern that is blocking learning, change something.**
  - Change what you are doing, or
  - Change how you are doing it.
- **Settle into “here and now,” by having the person notice their body sensations and their environment at the same time.** Examples:
  - Notice the sensation of your butt on the chair. Notice the sensation of the chair meeting your butt. Are those two sensations different?

- Notice your out-breath: sense the air moving out. How do you know when to start to breathe in? Is the air warm or cold?
- Notice an object in the room (e.g. a plant, a ceiling tile, a chair): what details do you notice? How do your eyes and head move as you look at it?
- **Exhale – and notice how and where you land.**
  - The exhale is regulated by the parasympathetic nervous system. You could land in different PNS states, for example:
    - In the restful and safe-feeling support of your body and the ground,
    - or, in collapse.
    - test out and notice different ways to “land” during the exhale, and what they each feel like.
- **Offer freedom to move:**
  - To move in and out of a situation
  - To change position if they feel the impulse to do so
  - Teach how to get down and up, before teaching a lesson lying down
- **Offer new experiences in bite-sized pieces**
  - Generate intrigue and success (rather than overwhelm)

- **The power of the pause:**
  - A person needs time, without new input, to access their inner sense of “does this feel safe”
  - Only when something feels safe will the body say “yes” and integrate it
- **Offer safe social engagement**
  - Connection, relationship, in a clean safe-feeling way

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Violet Van Hees presented a workshop, “The Importance of FEELING Safe, and how we can help build that foundation” at the 2019 FGNA Conference in Boulder, CO. Violet’s “safety explorations” are based on recent scientific findings in neuroscience, polyvagal theory, trauma research, and brain wave studies. Learn more about Violet at [www.violetvanhees.com](http://www.violetvanhees.com)

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