

DANCING WITH SHOCK AND TRAUMA

By Karen Melin

Note from Adam:

I have known Karen for some years now, and have witnessed many stages of the journey she writes about here. I have huge respect for the way she has been able to navigate extreme experience both within and outside of her 5Rhythms work, and for the way she is turning that into an offering for others now as a therapist. I asked her to tell some of her story here in the hope that it would be inspiring and encouraging for others.



When I began dancing the Rhythms, I started having what I felt to be unusual responses. I arrived to the dance floor with little knowledge of the practice or its power. My first two decades had been focused in elite sport and the freedom granted by the inclusive and non-judgmental environment appealed immediately. The combination of dance and the fractal nature of the maps suited me: my default language has always been physical movement and I was raised a thinker, with a scientist's curiosity and love of understanding.

During my first full workshop, my once trained athlete's body felt like I had registered for a dietary cleanse. I justified it as overtraining or the change in exercise volume from my usual though it was less clear why I spent the subsequent five days vibrating, unable to eat or sleep. As my practice developed, the effects became more significant and unpredictable: muscular contractions, loss of appetite, flu-like symptoms, emotional outbursts, prolonged sadness, physical contortions, strange movement patterns and experiences, episodes of primal screaming that tore muscles and flashes of memories (many quite brutal) that I knew weren't mine. There was no evidence or acknowledgment that others were experiencing this impact. Over time my responses grew more difficult to accept, both on the dance floor and off; the intensity and pain were at times overwhelming and had become highly disruptive to my life. No one seemed to have an explanation. If this was normal, nobody was talking about it.

The lack of answers bothered me - I couldn't be the only one in the practice who had reacted like this. I began logging my experiences like an experiment, comparing responses to rhythms, seeking patterns, and trusting that the process of whatever was unfolding would yield understanding.

My inquiry eventually led me into a fully reactivated state of shock, sitting terrified and immobile against a wall for the duration of an entire workshop, freezing cold despite being layered in wool and feather down, sobbing, hyperventilating, physically unable to speak or be near people. The immediate after-effects were severe; the longer-term effects gruelling — emotionally, physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually — as the accumulated pain, injuries and responses of what could not be felt decades earlier emerged relentlessly over a period of several months. Bruises, fractures, flashbacks, a complete intolerance to sound, scents, movement and people. It was an extremely isolating and arduous time. The ordeal also catalysed great understanding, explaining everything I had been experiencing in the practice and propelling me into what would become several years of diligent work, healing, education and training in the field of traumatic stress physiology.

The Rhythms bring buried treasures to the surface: moments of clarity, hurt, beauty, desire or, long ago stresses asking to be resolved. With sufficient hurts, a body acclimates to a state of being hurt or stressed; enough small shocks can eventually lead to an overall state of shock in one's physiology just as someone who has endured a significant trauma is left to deal with its aftermath. The emotions, brain, body structures and autonomic nervous system adopt different patterning — life saving at the time the incident(s) occurred — that is meant to be short-lived rather than designed for day-to-day living. The effects of the dance that I had been trying to understand and relieve finally made sense through the physiological context of shock.

Whether we're at rest, dancing or at the edge of survival, the autonomic nervous system regulates and prioritizes many of our body's functions including motor control, vision, speech, heart rate, digestion, organ function, elimination, circulation and breath. When threatened by a possible danger, information is relayed through the body to support mobilization ('fight or flight'). When that action is unavailable or unsuccessful, the nervous system perceives imminent death and makes the rudimentary survival attempt of immobilization ('freeze or collapse'), otherwise known as shock. It's a state that can occur anytime we feel helpless and hopeless, and therefore has varying degrees to which body functions are slowed or arrested. Our physiology is in charge, making these body based decisions solely on what is the priority for life. When we live through any such event, we must re-engage and when physiologically safe enough, we encounter the aspects of our bodies that were inhibited by our nervous system.

My history of intense mental focus, physical demand, repetitive stress and impact traumas beginning at a very early age had dys-regulated my nervous system through frequent shock experiences, leaving me physiologically locked in survival mode. The Rhythms provided an environment where physical movement equated to expression rather than performance and yielded a safety I had never known. At a nervous system level, I was challenged by the invitation to move through and between these various physiological states. Any felt sense of safety or rest brought me out of 'freeze' into a highly aroused state (fight or flight behaviour) while any activation that felt overwhelming or unsafe, including too much support, took me further into shock. Each state impacted me with its associated symptoms. I had little resilience to move in either direction; a common characteristic of traumatic stress physiology where people can appear either highly functional or completely frozen, and often both simultaneously. What had begun as a necessary survival strategy during my gymnastics career — pushing beyond healthy physical and mental limitations while denying all stress, overwhelm and emotion — had stayed my physiology's default operation long after it was needed.

My experience may be unusual, however many of the symptoms I had are common for dancers who encounter residual experiences of shock in the practice. As a physical practice, 5Rhythms works directly with the physiology and can be very catalytic, especially for those with deep or early shock experiences. What couldn't be allowed at the time of the original event is awakened in the body, what was collapsed gains shape, and what was immobile can move. When I paid close attention on the dance floor, my body provided clues corresponding to my physiological state. I gradually learned to navigate those subtleties before I understood them, offering me the choice of whether I had the capacity to face and heal an old wound or allowing myself to rest. For instance, my core temperature would often drop, which is an early sign of shock. By putting on more layers, I could avoid revisiting the experience whereas if I stayed in the dance, my physiology would be drawn closer to the incident. Understanding these responses offered me the chance to make choices that better supported my whole being, which engaged and developed a different part of my nervous system than what had dominated during times of shock. It wasn't natural or comfortable but it was effective. Without constantly being caught in the intensity of my old patterns, I began being able to move with more ease and fewer adverse effects. Survival patterns wield enormous power, and releasing these patterns too quickly can be harmful.

I was unaware that I carried a traumatized physiology; it had been essential for a very specific purpose. I couldn't even relate to 'trauma' until after studying it and gaining broader perspective. Adjusting to such changes at the nervous system level takes time. Chemicals previously used to hold shock patterns in place had to detoxify from my body and new neural pathways had to develop; this can require profound rest, focused nutrition and for me in particular, vast muscular and proprioceptive changes since the physical patterns were so established.

My history of intense mental focus, physical demand, repetitive stress and impact traumas beginning at a very early age had dys-regulated my nervous system through frequent shock experiences, leaving me physiologically locked in survival mode. The Rhythms provided an environment where physical movement equated to expression rather than performance and yielded a safety I had never known that invited me to move through and between these various physiological states. At a nervous system level, any felt sense of safety or rest brought me out of 'freeze' into a highly aroused state (fight or flight behaviour) while any activation that felt overwhelming or unsafe took me further into shock, Each state impacting me with their associated symptoms. I had little resilience to move in either direction; a common characteristic of traumatic stress physiology where people can appear either highly functional or completely frozen, and often both simultaneously. What had begun as a necessary survival strategy during my gymnastics career — pushing beyond healthy physical and mental limitations while denying all stress, overwhelm and emotion — had stayed my physiology's default operation long after the actual threat had been removed.

My experience may be unusual due to the extent of memory bound to physical movement, however many of the symptoms I had are common for dancers who encounter residual experiences of shock in the practice. Because 5Rhythms is a physical practice, it works directly with the physiology and can be very catalytic, especially for those with deep or early shock experiences. What couldn't be allowed at the time of the original event is awakened in the body. What was collapsed gains shape, what was immobile can move. When I paid close attention on the dance floor, my body provided clues corresponding to my physiological state. I gradually learned to navigate those subtleties before I understood them, offering me the choice of whether I had the capacity to face and heal an old wound or allowing myself to rest. For instance, my core temperature would often drop, which is an early sign of shock. By putting on more layers, I could avoid revisiting the experience whereas if I stayed in the dance, my physiology would be drawn closer to the incident. Understanding the way my physiology responds gave me choices that supported my whole being. Without constantly being caught in the turmoil of old patterns, I was able to move more freely. Survival patterns wield enormous power, and releasing these patterns too quickly can actually be harmful.

I was unaware that I carried a traumatized physiology; it had been an essential physiology for a specific purpose. I couldn't even relate to 'trauma' until after studying it and gaining broader perspective. Adjusting takes time. Chemicals previously used to hold shock patterns in place had to detoxify from my body and new neural pathways had to develop; this can require profound rest, focused nutrition and for me in particular, vast muscular and proprioceptive changes since the physical patterns were so established. I had to acknowledge and clear a lot of emotions to come to terms with what I had undergone as a child, and the ensuing impacts on my life that they've had. My behaviours, relationships and beliefs have had to change too, to better reflect my newfound state. Integration is complex.

This exploration has not been easy, particularly when attending a class or workshop necessitated days of recovery without understanding why. The practice helped me access a life force I was unaware of, so hidden and barricaded within that when it finally broke through, parts of me weren't prepared for its enormity and how I had unconsciously and necessarily contorted myself around it. Accepting that my place in this tribe, for a while, was not on the dance floor was difficult. I've

required much time on my own, moving in silence, seeing how my energy responds to the slightest changes and learning a truer version of who I am through a very subtle application of the maps. Somehow, I've remained fascinated. My practice has changed too: I move more slowly, I track different parts of my being and my inner movements more carefully, I cherish the nuances, and I am — for now — diligent about doing my dance and keeping my nervous system within certain tolerances. The Rhythms can be demanding, but they can also be great fun. And as with most things that are both difficult and enjoyable I've learnt that when I'm willing to commit long enough to discover what they hold for me, I can be rewarded with beauty I never knew existed.

If you find yourself experiencing something similar and would like help navigating this terrain, I am a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner with additional specialized certification in touch skills that are often critical and beautifully attend to early and complex trauma. Woven through my understanding of traumatic stress physiology was a deep investment in the maps to be able to correlate what occurred on the dance floor, and the impact and benefit each Rhythm offered as I navigated my exploration. I'm available via Skype and it would be a privilege to help guide you through these depths that I've come to know so well.
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Whilst I have the advantage of being familiar with the 5Rhythms, you may wish to find someone locally to work with so you can be physically in the same room. Both Adam and I recommend therapists trained in Somatic Experiencing, and you can [follow this link](#) to find someone near you.

*May this be of service,
Karen*

