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FEAR, TRAUMA AND THE BRAIN

HOW NEUROFEEDBACK THERAPY IS HELPING LOCAL ISLANDERS FEEL SAFE AGAIN, WITHOUT HAVING TO SAY A WORD!

Fear is one of the brain's most powerful survival tools. It keeps us alert to danger and helps us respond quickly when something feels wrong. But when fear becomes chronic, shaped by trauma, prolonged stress or abuse, it can stay switched on long after the threat has passed leaving you in a permanent state or hyper vigilance. The result can be anxiety, emotional reactivity, exhaustion, sleep disruption, difficulty concentrating, and in children sometimes bedwetting.

These are not signs of weakness. They can all be signs of a dysregulated nervous system caught in fight, flight fear or fawn, resulting in mental, physical, behavioural and emotional symptoms.

Trauma literally means 'wound' and it is not defined by what happened to you, which you may not fully recall or even recognise, but by how those experiences continue to affect you. The positive news is that this means change is possible, and that what you believe is 'wrong' with you is actually a natural and understandable response to traumatic experiences.

Local psychologist Zoe O'Sullivan has become Colchester's first Neurofeedback practitioner, based on Mersea Island, after witnessing its impact first-hand, including significant improvements for her own son, and is now offering sessions locally for children and adults who feel stuck in anxiety, overwhelm, burnout or trauma responses.

When the nervous system is stuck

Trauma can alter how the brain functions. The amygdala, responsible for detecting threat, may become overactive, while networks involved in regulation and decision-making struggle to settle. People may feel frozen, overwhelmed or constantly on edge.

Talking therapies can be life-changing. But insight does not always calm the body, and some people cannot, or do not want to, re-live specific experiences especially children. That is why interest has grown in approaches that work more directly with regulation, including Neurofeedback Therapy.

Teaching the brain to regulate itself

Neurofeedback Therapy is discussed in The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk, including research on its use for attention and regulation difficulties. Medication has its place and helps many people, but it typically works only while it is being taken and can have side- effects for some.

In Neurofeedback, sensors placed on the scalp measure brain activity while the client watches age-appropriate content, such as films or documentaries, and they are not expected to talk about anything during the sessions.

The system provides real-time feedback, allowing the brain to learn more stable patterns and the ability to self-regulate unconsciously. This uses neuroplasticity, the brain's natural ability to adapt and reorganise, resulting in the individual feeling more resilient and able to cope with whatever life throws at them.

Over time, many people report better sleep, steadier mood, improved focus and less reactivity whilst positively impacting their mind, body and relationships. This is a good tool to support individuals who have found it hard to access talking therapies because they can't explain the source of their traumatic experiences, which is often the case with children, or if they don't wish to relive trauma in the case of severe PTSD.

"We just wanted our son to feel at ease"

For the parents of a Colchester based six-year-old boy, family life had become a careful balancing act. Their son had no formal diagnosis, but they suspected Autism an ADHD. He struggled with emotional regulation, impulsivity, anxiety and sleep.

"We weren't chasing a label," his mother explains. "We just wanted our son to feel calmer and more settled in himself."

They tried Neurofeedback therapy and tracked what mattered most at home: emotional reactivity, focus, behaviour and anxiety. At first the changes were subtle, fewer intense reactions and more moments of pause. Then something unexpected happened. After ten sessions, their son stopped wetting the bed.

"It wasn't even something we were working on," his parent says. "I genuinely thought that would be a struggle for years."

This result is a common occurrence for the majority of children who have Neurofeedback sessions and this outcome is sustained.

By twenty sessions, friends and extended family commented, unprompted, on how much calmer he seemed. Their son enjoyed the sessions too: "It makes me feel good and I get to watch my favourite films." Parent-rated symptom tracking showed an overall reduction in severity of around 85%, with improvements sustained since the sessions ended.

External professional observation

Rhiann Marchant, Founder, Sensational Minds Ltd, Mersea Island, said: "I was skeptical at first. But I have directly witnessed significant and sustained changes in young people who engaged in Neurofeedback sessions. If an approach supports a child to thrive and a family to feel more secure, it deserves thoughtful consideration."

"I was in mental burnout"

For a woman in her forties, trauma had been cumulative. She presented with PTSD, anxiety and stress-related symptoms following prolonged stalking and domestic abuse. She was signed off work and prescribed antidepressant medication that she was reluctant to take.

"I had reached mental burnout," she explains. "My body and mind just froze."

She completed more than twenty Neurofeedback sessions. "I felt much calmer quite quickly," she says. After a distressing event nearby, she reported settling back to a calm state almost

immediately following a session, the next day. Her overall self-reported symptom severity reduced by approximately 89%. She did not go on to take the prescribed medication and says her improvements have been sustained. "I feel much more grounded and clearer in my mind," she adds.

Could Neurofeedback support you or a loved one?

A wide range of conditions it can support with are listed on braintrainuk.com. Email zoe@braintrainuk.com for a free 15-minute consultation with your local island practitioner.