

# THE YAWN: AN UNSOLVED MYSTERY

BY JENNIFER DELANEY, LPC



Ever wondered why you yawn? It's less understood than you think, and serves a number of purposes. And, if you are not yawning by the end of this, I will be surprised!

Brainspotting teaches that as clients process they may: laugh, burp, twitch, shake, cry or yawn as one of many ways to release during the process. I witnessed a client elicit consecutive yawns for about 25 minutes. I joined her for the first five minutes in “contagious yawning” (CY). But, she wasn't the only one. Lots of my clients yawn repeatedly, although rarely for that long. And, it's not only that Brainspotting makes them tired – because Brainspotting is weirdly exhausting for sure. My guess was that it has something to do with stimulating the parasympathetic, or calming, part of the nervous system.

## YAWN FOR CALM



Authors J. and N. Askenasy conclude that “yawning is associated with a sympathetic suppression that favors a parasympathetic dominance, as indicated by the muscle sympathetic nerve activity (MSNA) and the decrease in blood pressure” ([Library of Medicine](#), August 6, 1996).

The *parasympathetic* nervous system is the part that calms us. So, clients are not only releasing tension, decreasing blood pressure and capturing more oxygen, but, in the process, they are also calming themselves as they engage with intense material during sessions.

## UNSOLVED MYSTERY OF THE DEEP BRAIN



A BBC news article explains, “Both humans and animals yawn, but why this behavior has evolved is still an unsolved mystery, researchers said. Theories suggest it may be linked to neurological function, regulating temperature or stress” ([November 23, 2012](#)). The [Askenasys](#) admit, “Yawning is a complex event that depends largely on the autonomic nervous system.” As you may know, the autonomic nervous system is coined the “automatic” nervous system, outside of conscious control.

## SUBCONSCIOUS WORKINGS

In an article, “[The Surprising Science of Yawning](#),” Maria Konnikova relates a story that further supports this idea that yawning is spontaneous and outside of conscious control.

According to Konnikova, in 1923 the British neurologist, Sir Francis Walshe, “noticed something interesting while testing the reflexes of patients... paralyzed on one side of their bodies. When they yawned, they would spontaneously regain their motor functions. In case after case, the same thing happened; it was as if, for the six or so

seconds the yawn lasted, the patients were no longer paralyzed” (*New Yorker*, April 14, 2014).

Often, when I am beginning a dance class, I yawn repeatedly. Why would this be the case? Konnikova may have the answer. “Yawning may simply signal a change of physiological state: a way to help our mind and body transition from one behavioral state to another—“sleep to wakefulness, wakefulness to sleep, anxiety to calm, boredom to alertness.” And, if my brain needs to be alert anywhere other than work and driving at this age, it’s in the dance studio!

## HUMAN ANIMALS



Horses yawn when tired, and also when in intense pain or discomfort. But, too, *Equus Magazine* explains, “equine yawns are also thought to be an emotional response, indicating relaxation or submission” (“[What’s Behind a Yawn?](#)” July 25, 2019). Sue McDonnell, PhD, explains “sometimes yawning and stretching, are used [by horses] to monitor what is going on in the nervous system” (“[What Does Licking and Chewing in Horses Mean?](#)” *Horse*, Feb. 28, 2019).

She adds, “The textbook example of this ‘relief’ behavior that humans can relate to is that moment a police car with flashing lights and sirens whizzes by without pulling you over. You might have a little itch on the scalp or neck, swallow, or take a big deep breath, or sigh.”

Or... yawn. We are human animals after all. But, we are not very good at discharging emotional tension, the way most animals do naturally. Instead, we repress emotion, especially when threatened. And then, the body takes the toll.

## ENTER FOREFATHER DR. PETER LEVINE

[Dr. Peter Levine](#) was one of the pioneers developing the understanding about trauma and creating the language that body-centered therapists use.

The Good Reads review of Levine’s book *Waking the Tiger* says this: the book “...asks and answers an intriguing question: why are animals in the wild, though threatened routinely, rarely traumatized? By understanding the dynamics that make wild animals virtually immune to traumatic symptoms, the mystery of human trauma is revealed.”

Based on the research, yawns in the therapy room may serve several purposes. It may be a way a client is comforting themselves around a new therapist. Or perhaps yawning provides a way to process, release and integrate what the deep brain holds.

***But, is there more?***

## THE CHANGING BRAIN



The brain can change at all ages. It is theorized in Brainspotting (based on studies and mind-blowing results) that old default patterns become weaker and, even, neutralized. New synaptic chains are forming. And, eventually the brain adapts to a new, calmer way of being.

Johanna de Vries, a professor of obstetrics at Vrije University Amsterdam, discovered that the human fetus yawns during its first trimester in the womb, even though babies’ lungs aren’t yet ventilated.

Interestingly, writers at BBC news report “the most likely explanation is that fetal yawning is an essential process linked to brain development... early in gestation” (“[Durham University proves Babies Yawn in Womb](#),” November 23, 2012).

***If our brains change during therapy, perhaps the mystery of yawning is a helpful way to integrate these profound changes.***

Understanding what creates calm, as well as the science behind trauma and recovery, is important to long term health. Currently, most authors writing about yawning focus on the contagious yawn and mirror neurons. Contagious yawning appears to be a way primates connect.

But, that’s another article, another time. Exploring this relative mystery was a journey worth taking. ***Next time notice how you feel after a yawn!***