

A Neurodivergent Review of the Safe and Sound Protocol



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The Safe and Sound Protocol is a powerful trauma intervention designed by Dr. Stephen Porges and team. Dr Porges is best known for developing the Polyvagal Theory. The protocol involves 5 hours of computer modified music. The music is pop music and it sounds a bit like listening to an old radio. The computer filter that is added to the music exercises the inner ear

at a microsecond pace. Did you know? the brain scans for safety 4–5 times per second.

Listening to the music sends a very powerful You Are Safe signal to deep parts of the nervous system via the inner ear and Vagus nerve. Like many other trauma interventions such as EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) or TRE (Tension & Trauma Releasing Exercises), pacing is key to keeping the Safe and Sound Protocol helpful and not harmful.

How does it feel?

What SSP does in my body feels the same as what craniosacral does and very similar to what EMDR does. Listening to the protocol causes me to experience an involuntary internal dance of deep inner muscles in a bilateral pattern — especially my ears, eyes, and psoas muscle (This muscle connects the spine to the hips. The spontaneous motion of the psoas in response to inner ear movement is why we have the impulse to dance when listening to music). This dancing motion of deep inner muscles was surprising at first and then enjoyable as I got used to it.

What is a good pace for the SSP?

The original recommendation was for trauma survivors to listen to one hour of this filtered music each day for 5 days. That recommendation has been amended, as this pacing has been found to be too fast for many people. The current recommendation is to try 10–15 minute segments, and to take breaks between listening days. Even this pace can be too much for some people's nervous system. For some people, a good pace involves listening to as little as 30 seconds of the protocol at a time. For other people, this tool may just not be a good fit in any format.

I want to be clear that I am not sharing these opinions to discourage anyone from trying the SSP if they have access to it. It's important for people to be aware of the potential downsides to any trauma intervention so that they can make an informed decision about their treatment plan.

How do we know when the pacing is too fast for our system?

If there are signs of overwhelm or shutdown during the listening, that's one clear sign that the pacing is too fast. Sometimes, you might not notice it's too much until after the session is over. Even if the session is comforting or enjoyable, pay attention to your nervous system over the next day or two. Overwhelming sensitivity or intrusive trauma memories in the 24–48 hours after listening are signs you are going too fast.

What is too much safety?

Imagine someone screaming, YOU ARE SAFE. How safe does that really feel? Or imagine trying to drink from a fire hydrant, because you know the water is technically safe to drink. A safety signal that is too powerful for our nervous system can lead us to emotional flooding and the resurfacing of trauma memories that we are not prepared to integrate. Even good stress is stress. A too intense safe signal can lead to central sensitization, higher than usual sensitivity or pain, and then eventually guarding, isolation, or shutdown.

Most people who have a lot of trauma to process only need a little bit of this kind of deep ventral safety at a time. Small doses of deep safety, sometimes by the spoonful are as much as our sensitive systems can handle. After each

experience of increased safety, we need time to process and integrate that new level of inner connection.

What is my pace?

SSP has been difficult for me to titrate. It's very easy to listen for too long because listening feels good, and the effects of too much may show up a few hours after listening. But I feel I've found a pace that works really well for me now. What works for me is listening to 30 seconds to a minute and a half every other day. I stop when my body gives a spontaneous cue that signals a nervous system shift has happened (something like a sigh, swallow, yawn, shake, burst of emotion, or change in breathing) or when I reach a minute and a half, whichever happens sooner. I also don't push myself on days I feel reluctant to listen — those are days to skip it and let my system rest. I'm glad that I took the time to trial-and-error it, because SSP is now one of the extremely powerful options in my trauma toolkit.

Is the Protocol safe on the meta level?

I have a bit of a personal ethics quandary here. When solutions to our cultural lack of connection are monetized, it rubs me the wrong way. The system that created the problem sells us the solution to the problem. It is frustrating that access to the SSP only exists through professional gatekeepers. The most worrying aspect of it all is that the development of the protocol relied on a perspective on autism that is ableist and incorrect, namely that Autism is equivalent to a deficit of function in the social engagement system, and restoring function will reduce Autistic traits. It is important to know that SSP cannot reduce the traits of a genetic neurotype. In fact, many autistic people have reported feeling more Autistic (more sensitive and more themselves) after treatment with the protocol.

What other Neurodivergent people are saying about their experience with the protocol...

I polled my Facebook audience about their response to the SSP protocol if they had tried it. A number of neurodivergent people reported how it made them feel, and here is a summary of that information.

For some neurodivergent people, going too fast with SSP resulted in: hyper- or hypo-activation, digestive symptoms, increased sensory sensitivity, tinnitus, meltdown, cold or tingling in previous injury sites, pain, intense waves of difficult emotions like anger, frustration, or sadness, resurfacing of trauma memories, burnout-like symptoms

For some neurodivergent people, the positive effects of good pacing with SSP included: sense of coherence, increased ability to use resources, relaxation of tense muscles, increased sensitivity (reconnection to parts that were numb), reduced sensitivity (in parts that were hypervigilant), more calm assertiveness, greater ability to communicate needs and boundaries, less anxiety, less depression or shutdown states

This blog article describes some ways that the protocol was too much for one neurodivergent person. [Healing through sound : I tried SSP \(Safe & Sound Protocol\) — Healing Room](#)

I was surprised to learn that SSP has also been used with dogs successfully. [Using SSP with Dogs — www.HaltonTherapy.com](#)

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In conclusion, I want to share the chronology of my own experiences with the Safe and Sound Protocol as a neurodivergent case study to demonstrate the

broad range of both the helpfulness and potential dysregulating effects of this tool.

My personal experience with SSP

October 2020

The protocol is typically given in 1 hour sections for 5 days. I can only listen to 15 minute increments every other day or every 2 days. This treatment is not gentle for a hypersensitive human.

I feel weird pressure in my ears dancing in synchronous patterns while I listen to the computer generated music. The internal sensation is intensely pleasurable.

The feeling in my 4th left toe suddenly returned during one session. My toe had been numb for years ever since I broke it by accidentally kicking a vacuum cleaner.

Each session after that has been bringing hip and pelvic nerves back online that had stopped firing due to trauma.

The nerve activation follows this pattern: a sudden flood of tingly prickly pain, a day or two of soreness and achiness in that spot, old stored feelings coming to the surface of my awareness to be processed, the magical integration work of reprocessing traumatic memories with the help of my masterful and kind Inner Mentor, and finally spontaneous full-body shakes and tremors releasing the energy that no longer serves me. After all that I listen to another 15 minutes and do the whole process again.

My theory on the physical mechanisms for how this is working is as follows... Fascial constriction in the presence of threat leads to nerve numbing. The SSP computerized music is giving a powerful “You are safe right now” signal to my central nervous system. When constricted fascia “hears” that signal, it begins to allow water and vital nutrients to flow through it again. This expansion allows normal nerve function to resume. The process of sensation awareness, flashbacks, reprocessing, and trembling fit everything I’ve learned about somatic healing.

Because this treatment is so intense, I’m really glad I’m taking it slowly and getting the full benefits rather than rushing through it and overwhelming my system.

If I listen longer than 15 minutes, my body senses the safe signal is a lie, and I get cold and sleepy (dorsal vagus shutdown). Calibrating the nervous system to “this sense of safety is not a threat” needs TIME and significant support.

This treatment is changing everything for the better for me, but only because I have been practicing listening to my body for the last few years and can track the exact moment when therapeutic activities shift into overwhelming activation.

Early November, 2020 (trigger warning: description of somatic trauma flashbacks and dysregulation)

Just like EMDR has often been too much for me, SSP is not working for me anymore. The hip and pelvic nerve activation caused by the music triggered the resurfacing of intense somatic memories of being spanked in childhood. This has involved intolerable nerve pain in my legs and butt at

random times of the day, the pain flares bring lots of crying and the feeling like I can't stand up / need to collapse and curl into a ball.

Maybe I would have the support to cope with this if we weren't in a pandemic? I don't know.

My sound sensitivity increased from a level that was easy for me to compensate for to a much more disabling level over the course of the treatment (15 minutes every few days). I've been in a weird state of depression/burnout since the last session I did. I've been researching to figure out why my reaction was this way, and I keep coming back to this idea that researchers always assume stimulation of a nerve or muscle will restore function, but my system is hyper-functional and does not habituate to stimulus.

So I'm experiencing a regression of skills, because of trying this therapeutic tool, and I'm questioning if I've been re-traumatized yet again by a therapy designed on the assumption that my nervous system is dysfunctional.

December 2020

I'm still having big feelings about my experience with the Safe and Sound protocol. My provider person said "I've never had anyone react negatively, so I'm sure you'll be fine." And my gut said, probably not, I'm always the outlier, the one who reacts negatively to therapy that is useful for others, but we'll try it and see.

I'm a bit angry with myself for trying a new therapy during a pandemic (knowing I had less access to support) when I was actually doing perfectly fine with my existing tool set.

The more I read about the origins of the protocol, the angrier and sadder I get. It apparently started out as an attempt to reduce auditory hypersensitivities in autistic people based on a flawed assumption that our middle ear is dysfunctional and that is why we have auditory processing differences. Their theory is that hyperacusis is why autistics feel unsafe so much of the time and if we had more functional inner ears, we would feel safe more often. UGH.

Autistic people frequently experience a lack of connection that has nothing to do with how much we desire connection or how safe we feel with others — it is about the fact that others may not feel safe with us because they expect neurotypical socialization. If I do all this work to tell my system it's safe and then there is no one to connect with, it feels much worse than when I didn't have such frequent desire for connection. Maybe I'm doing that thing again where I focus on "deficits" in my system without accounting for deficits in society.

February 2023

I've been "microdosing" the safe and sound protocol — listening for 30 seconds to a minute and a half every other day for about 2.5 months now. This pace is helping me use my resources more and it's not bringing up trauma to process like 10–15 minutes at a time was doing.

I notice improvement in digestive symptoms immediately after listening. I seem to have better executive function and more ability to notice hunger and prepare food (something that's been very difficult because of ARFID). I think this newish pattern of self caretaking is coming from the very balanced vagal stimulation I'm getting from stopping the protocol at the

first hint of a nervous system shift (yawning, sighing, shaking, or intense emotion).

After beginning the second “day” of music, I’ve had to take some longer breaks from the SSP. Even with these mini 30 second – 1.5 minute listening sessions, my nervous system is getting activated enough that I need several days off. If there is any resistance in my body to listening that day then I don’t. I am only listening on days that my body feels interested in and open to the protocol. This means that my pace of moving through the music has slowed a lot, but I’d rather go super slow than trigger burnout. I believe I’ve listened only 3 times in the last 3 weeks – that’s the pace that feels manageable to me right now.

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Finally, I want to emphasize something I already said. I am not sharing these opinions to discourage anyone from trying the SSP if they have access to it. I wrote this review because it’s important for people to be aware of the potential benefits AND downsides to any trauma intervention so that they can make an informed decision about their treatment plan.

The SSP is an extremely powerful tool. Pacing that considers each individual’s unique nervous system is key to keeping it helpful and not harmful.

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You can find their free educational infographics here: linktr.ee/TraumaGeek.

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