

Marlies Koel

The
playing dead
reflex

THE PLAYING DEAD REFLEX

Does it still play a role in our lives?

Dr. rer. nat. Marlies Koel

In our highly technical and digitalized world, we have often lost contact with our roots and with our natural identity. And even though we receive many suggestions and recommendations from the food and healthcare industry - according to the various current trends - we tend to lose the sense of ourselves and rush through our busy lives trying to keep everything together. We have lost our ability to listen to our own instincts and our gut feeling, and, therefore, have often lost our ability to perceive what our needs are. We have the feeling that we can act completely detached from any principles of nature and our own biorhythms. However, we are - and will remain - a species of mammals that has been influenced by the millions of years since we have been on this planet. We are thus conditioned by our genetic survival reflexes.

In this article, I would like to point out some aspects and effects of the play dead reflex that I have been observing over the years in my work. In the following article, I will be presenting several suggestions and aspects without claiming to provide a complete overview on this topic. In the following, I will therefore be describing the different possibilities. Just as in the flight and fight reflex, the play dead reflex belongs to the survival reflexes. Some consider the play dead reflex as a special form of the flight reflex and see it as an escape into a frozen state. Personally, I disagree. All three survival reflexes are genetically anchored in us and have ensured our survival on this planet over the millennia. Our genes are geared for survival. In the distant past, our ancestors were much more concerned about their physical survival than we are today. Fortunately, we no longer have these problems. For us today, it's more

about our emotional survival. Can I hold my own ground in a group or system? Humans as offended and offenders always react to their environment and interact with it, no matter whether they have found their place within or without a group or system. Human beings cannot help but to react in some form to their environment and are always in exchange with their environment and are thus always part of their environment, no matter if they feel part of it or not.

We keep forgetting that we as human beings we have gone through a very long development to reach the point where we are today. We also like to ignore the fact that we belong to the species of mammals. At the same time, we like to overlook the fact that we are influenced by our survival reflexes. Ultimately, humans are always trying to survive, both on the physical as well as on the emotional and spiritual level.

In conflicts we experience the fight reflex in impulses like "I'll show him," "I'll punch him in the face," and so on. The flight reflex is reflected in our behavior of avoiding situations, discussions and conflicts. "I'm off then" or "Gone fishing" fit in well here, too. The playing dead reflex can be found in expressions like "I would like to crawl under a rock and die," or "I wish I were invisible," "I am completely speechless/paralyzed" and so on.

These days everyone is talking about burnout and bullying. Bullying can also be seen as an expression of our emotional survival in a group. Is the bullied person part of the group or not? I would like to provide the example of bullying at school here: Before the digital era, the bullying ended when the child

came home. With social media the defamation, degradation and humiliation continues even after school is over - bullying 24/7. The stress levels never drop off and the victims of bullying usually react with retreat and become silent, preferring to be invisible. Only when the victim of bullying is completely pushed into the corner and the feeling arises that there is no way out, there may be the possibility for other response patterns to arise. They may also endure the suffering to such an extent that they dissociate themselves as much as possible and use the play dead reflex. They may no longer be capable of communicating with their people they are close to. For some people, the play dead reflex, in all its varieties, is the only way they can survive a situation, which is experienced as existential.

In stressful situations, we depend upon our active survival reflexes and even today these reflexes are necessary for our everyday survival. However, after the stress situation is over, our activated survival reflexes should revert back into relax mode. Simply put, the reflex is either switched on or off. If one of these survival reflexes is more or less permanently active, this could have serious consequences for us. This seems to occur more often than we are aware of and it seems to be a special feature in humans. If people are in the play dead reflex, they are more or less incapable of acting.

We all have been in situations in which we rush through our everyday lives with thoughts like "I still have to do this or that" etc... This pressure is not always external, rather we create the pressure within ourselves. This can lead to permanent activation of a survival reflex. We sometimes experience people like this as being permanently on the run. They can't enjoy the moment; their thoughts are racing as if

they were crossing of items on their lists in their minds. Others seem to be latently aggressive, so that no-one dares to approach them. We long a good quality of life and yet we are trapped in the survival mode. When people are trapped in their play dead reflex they are more or less functional; however, it can happen that they feel an emptiness in their mind or their mind begins to brood. Criticism triggers such existential stress that the playing dead reflex renders them incapable of acting or leads to some sort of displacement activity.

Everybody comes to a point in their life where they feel extremely offended, desperate, angry etc. This usually already happens early in childhood. At this moment, we subconsciously decide how we will take on life and from which perspective we will look at it. At this particular moment, we all feel confused, disorientated, helpless, or powerless, and we decide then what our point of view on life will be. Figuratively speaking, we see the world as "the glass is half empty." In this situation, a need also remains unfulfilled and we try to find its fulfilment externally. Moreover, one of our survival reflexes are activated, because, as children, we experience this situation as existential. As adults, however, we view, evaluate and perceive this situation in a completely differently way. Children experience this situation and this moment as extremely stressful and in this moment decide with which conceptual idea and belief system it will confront life. The event and the determined belief system are then filed away into the subconscious like a computer would and from then on this belief system determines our life. The result is that as adults we generally are not capable of making rational decisions to bring change into our lives. We have to go back to our subconscious level to make new choices in life. It usually doesn't work if

we consciously want to deal with stress and conflict situations in a different way. For, when we get to the respective situation we generally react as we always have.

At this distinguishing point in our lives, where we have usually decided that the “glass is half empty,” we also decide whether we want to attack (fight reflex) or retreat (escape and play dead reflex). In most cases, every person has a preferred survival reflex, which can vary depending on the situation in life. In the following I put the play dead reflex in the foreground.

In addition, we make another important fundamental decision in our childhood. Children have a lot of questions to ask and parents don't always feel like answering them. Children are like seismographs that also address things that parents don't want to deal with. We all have heard parents say “what's your problem?” and so on. If parents refuse to answer certain questions, the child makes a decision as to how he or she will deal with them in the future.

There are four main directions:

- What I feel is true and I don't believe my parents
- I feel, but will obey my parents (taking the word for true)
- I will stop feeling and will continuously scan my environment whether danger is looming or if problems are arising etc.
- I am completely confused

Of course, hybrid forms exist and the first and the last variation are quite rare. I have experienced the last mentioned possibility only a few times in practice.

A question that I also like to ask my patients is where in primary school they found their place in

the community and with whom they found their affiliation with during these years. Just as we positioned ourselves during our primary school years, we generally position ourselves in the community as adults.

Case Study Patient X:

Mrs. X was an employee in a bank. For her, the worst thing was that her boss wanted to further her career by making her learn something new. She disliked any change and the notion that she would be working in the same job, doing the same routine at the same time of day in five years time was absolutely reassuring. She experienced anything else as stress.

By finding out what the fundamental situation was, she was able change her perspective and make fundamental new decisions in her life and she was able to develop a moderate flexibility.

In my experience, the trauma is a reaction to an affront. Example: I have suffered a massive affront, which has completely fragmented me emotionally. Perhaps the only way of reacting to the emotional pain of this existentially experienced insult is to completely dissociate from it and we use the trauma as a strategy to achieve this. This existential experience can only be survived through disassociation and splitting off the associated emotions. Trauma as a reaction can occur in all survival reflexes. In the play dead reflex, one of the consequences is that one feels like a victim and possibly further develops this role as a victim. As a result of the play dead reflex, our ability to act is also limited. If we are stuck in our play dead reflex, it is an enormous challenge to make important choices and decisions. We often choose the following survival strategy: To fulfill the expectations and desires of others and to forget oneself in the process. Responsibility is taken for

others, but not for oneself. Moreover, decisions are usually made easily for others but not for oneself. And those stuck in this reflex have the feeling that they are not involved, like functional units that will do everything to fulfill and meet other people's needs to the fullest satisfaction. This survival strategy secures the affiliation to the system and the place. If a decision is made over the head of the person, the person may overreact. However, it is possible that this situation will also be tolerated.

At the moment of feeling offended, a need for recognition, attention, etc. often remains unfulfilled. In this situation, we have not only unconsciously decided not to make a decision, but we are also feigning death (like a possum) in order to avoid this situation. The play dead reflex can have the effect that we don't want to show ourselves to others, because when we show ourselves, we feel existentially threatened. So, we develop strategies that seem to be real, but, at the same time, we are not there mentally. We are not part of the picture and act as functional units.

If the playing dead reflex is permanently active, we are not capable of making a decision for we are feigning death like a possum, we are petrified, and then decisions play a lesser role or no longer make a difference. This is a very tricky way of taking us out of our life even though it may look like we are socially active and we may be involved in this or that and appear dedicated. Certainly, this restraint in one's life is not often perceived by others.

If the play dead reflex is activated, it is also possible that we experience a subtle level of boredom and emptiness in ourselves. Basically, we have the feeling that life has nothing to offer and that to a certain

level it is pointless. Life is without highs and lows and we lack the feeling of liveliness. Everything is boring and monotonous. Either we keep ourselves busy or we go into the other extreme of total retreat or, in order to feel oneself, we try to experience extreme external stimuli. Others are overly busy but still feel this inner emptiness. We are then not part of the picture and are not really participating in life. We only do it for others. We feel cut off from life and from ourselves even though we long for contact. We therefore wonder why our friendships and relationships don't work. Moreover, we have this feeling that we lack liveliness. People with a more active play dead reflex, which has a greater influence on their everyday life, appear to be more or less functional and active. However, they may also appear to be inactive to others but in their heads, the ideas are flowing. Another aspect of this reflex is that they tend to black out when subjected to criticism, when mistakes happen and under stress or they tend towards displacement activity.

When the play dead reflex is active, people quickly feel alone, lonely, lost or set back. In extreme cases, they do not feel or believe to be affiliated to a system. Sometimes, they even try to test their boundaries. This disbelief can be pretty tiring for the person's environment. For, if I generally do not feel welcome, then I want to be, to do or have something special.

Instead of refocusing on oneself in order to feel to get in touch with oneself again and bring the play dead reflex back into a hibernation mode, these people will probably enter into disastrous private and business relationships. They are struggling and the person concerned lose out.

Case example Ms. F:

Ms. F. is a committed teacher and already in our first conversation it became clear that the topic of death was very burdensome for her and that she felt paralyzed when the topic of death came up. Her husband would regularly ask what they would want to do. Her problem is that she is never able to come up with her own suggestions and always does what her husband wants. She is unable to provide her own impulses for common activities. Everything her husband suggests is accepted as good and is done. Her main concern is that no ideas are expected from her and she can "tag along." She likes it that way and experiences it as pleasant.

People with an activated play dead reflex tend to dislike change in their lives and if they want to change something, it is an enormous challenge because their ability to act is limited. Typically they say things like "I would like to, but I can't." Moreover, they tend to stay in the background and prefer not to be seen at all, even though they do actually long to be noticed and they do want to be of interest to others. It can also happen that they complain that they are not being noticed or heard. It's just that they don't hear and see themselves. Or, when they do want to show themselves and, in front of strangers, this creates a great amount of stress in them and sometimes almost triggers a "shock paralysis."

They tend to be found more in the role of the helper or the victim. They sacrifice themselves for others, usually opting for other people and for the system just not for themselves. Through their sacrifice for others, they want to establish themselves in group and try to make themselves indispensable.

Case example Ms. C:

Ms. C., took on the role of being there and sacrificing herself for others and still was privately and professionally functional through all this. Still, she was always very exhausted in the evening. At first, she didn't feel this exhaustion, but her body increasingly developed symptoms, which derived from the permanent stress and tension. She was always scanning her surroundings to see if anyone in her environment needed something and if she could do something for this person. Her entire body was tense and her other symptoms were back aches, insomnia, heartburn, teeth grinding and so on. Her entire diaphragm was so cramped that, at night, her heartburn triggered a massive reddening of the throat. Also, it was difficult for her to breathe deeply.

Am I living actively or passively in my play dead reflex?

What would it feel like if my play dead reflex were no longer permanently active?

What would it feel like if the observation of the effect of my permanently active play dead reflex no longer had an effect on me?

Quote from Father Kneipp:

"Only when I brought order to the souls of my patients did I succeed."