

COVID Long Haulers Coach Sally Riggs to be Featured on Close Up Radio

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[/EINPresswire.com/](https://EINPresswire.com/) -- COVID Long Haulers can find a new resource to learn how to turn their lives around, with the help of Sally Riggs, psychologist and polyvagal coach, and her new Facebook community group.

Sally Riggs is a psychologist and polyvagal coach who helps COVID Long Haulers—people suffering with Long COVID—understand how to navigate the different states of their nervous system and to improve vagal flexibility and tone. Once they can do that, long haulers can spend more time in a "rest and digest" state so that their body can start the healing process and ultimately enhance physical and mental health.



Long COVID—recognized as a physiological and vascular disease—is, in fact, associated with the nervous system, which mediates many of the symptoms experienced in the disease, such as chest pain, shortness of breath, increased heart rate, nausea, dizziness, etc.

Polyvagal Theory a Key Component

Polyvagal Theory, initially put forward in 1994 by scientist Stephen Porges, focuses on a cranial nerve known as the vagus surrounding the parasympathetic nervous system. Polyvagal Theory offers implementing strategies and resources to help long haulers seek a healthy connection with their nervous system in order to enable us to respond more appropriately to stressful situations and trauma.

"Polyvagal theory is the theory of our autonomic nervous system," Riggs says. "Most of us are taught in high school that the autonomic nervous system consists of a sympathetic system and a parasympathetic system and that the two of them are supposed to work in equilibrium. In actuality, it's more like three systems in a hierarchy."

Riggs says "that's what many of us are experiencing with chronic fatigue, with Long COVID, and with other chronic illnesses that also involve chronic fatigue-type presentation."

Sally's Story with Long COVID

Riggs's journey began in 2020, a week before the official global lockdown. During that time, she began experiencing flu-like symptoms and, although never formally diagnosed with COVID at the time (which was the case for the majority at the beginning), it soon became clear that's what she was experiencing.

As time passed, she started to feel better, but then other issues came up. By April of that year, Riggs was feeling extremely fatigued, and although she has always been very fit, she could barely walk up a hill without gasping for breath. Her primary care doctor brushed it off as stress, but she knew something was wrong. After a doctor's appointment at Mount Sinai's Long COVID clinic, she finally got the diagnosis in July 2020. Unfortunately, there was no specific treatment at the time, and she was shocked when doctors told her recovery could be six months.

Little did she know, things were about to get much worse. By January 2021, she was barely getting out of bed and spent most of that year suffering from chronic fatigue and very limited functioning in her body. Each month, she cut back on work: reducing new referrals, then stopping new referrals, and in August she took the whole month off and rested 24/7. When she returned in September, she was barely feeling better.

That month, Riggs came across the Polyvagal Theory and, specifically, the Safe and Sound Protocol. She gradually started down a remarkable healing path. Today, she is still not a hundred percent there but has significantly improved after a very long and arduous road.

"That was truly the start of my recovery journey, finding myself in a place where the body could start healing," Riggs says. "We now know that the vagus nerve, which is central to the polyvagal theory, is heavily involved in body processes that are about healing if it's functioning or illness if it's not functioning."

"The intention is to get the vagus nerve to do its job properly, to increase vagal tone or to increase flexibility, so you can more easily move through the (fight or flight) state rather than get stuck or in shutdown. Most of us go up and down between the two (sympathetic and dorsal), so being able to get to a place where you have 'rest and digest' and where your body can begin to recover, is the crucial focus."

Who Typically Gets Long COVID

Many of Sally's friends who worked as health care professionals ended up contracting Omicron and a couple of months later experienced Long COVID symptoms. Primary care physicians have very little information on Long COVID, even three years later, whereas people in the Long COVID community spend their lives researching potential treatments and studies and are up to speed on the latest protocols.

For this reason, Sally truly appreciates engaging in Long COVID coaching and working with clients. Although the emphasis is on nervous system work and helping people improve their nervous system so they can begin to recuperate, another significant part is assisting people with treatment options and decisions.

While she is not a physician and cannot give medical treatment, Sally plays a crucial role in two ways: First, in connecting people with the doctors who have significant knowledge about Long COVID. Second, in helping clients calm their nervous systems so that they can reduce overwhelm and make the next right decision.

"Cutting-edge research is emerging, but there are still plenty of people out there who will try and sell you an expensive quick cure when one doesn't exist, and folks with Long COVID are very unwell and therefore vulnerable," Sally says.

Sally enjoys coaching people through these decisions and getting to use all the wealth of knowledge she never even knew she needed pre-COVID.

Generally, Long COVID predominantly affects women between 35 and 55 who are very athletic, driven, and with type A personalities. Other risk factors include childhood allergies, childhood asthma, other earlier infections like Epstein-Barr, or pre-existing conditions such as fibromyalgia.

"There are currently 150 million people in the world with Long COVID, 25 million of them in the US—and those numbers have doubled in the last year. So we want to think about how we can help people who's experiencing it."

That's what Sally does with her coaching and with educating people about how they can prevent everyone else who hasn't gotten long-term COVID from getting it.

Techniques Long Haulers Can Use to Bring Their Bodies Back to Safety

The Polyvagal theory is the framework on which Sally's coaching is based. This pertains to experiencing symptoms while the nervous system is in a state of immobilization, "so, as a result, we experience chronic fatigue and it becomes really difficult to function," Sally says. "Essentially, our body is shutting down."

As a Long COVID coach, Sally practices interventions to help befriend their nervous system— by getting to know it, paying attention to it, and slowly, over time and with specific tools, shifting gently from one state to another while still living their day-to-day life.

Essentially, clients are learning to tune into their nervous system while building in a number of techniques, minuscule things that bring their bodies back to safety in a moment when they are asymptomatic, triggered, or overwhelmed.

Sally's coaching techniques offer her clients a whole range of capabilities. People can go about their day and have minor symptoms, utilize a strategy that they can do at that moment to help it shift a little bit, and then, as they engage in different activities, use another strategy. The whole day can be spent regulating your nervous system, being much more connected to your body, and being able to live your life from a place that is driven by that.

She finds that most people who have Long COVID are remarkably driven, so, despite their symptoms, they are still working, going to school, and engaging in everyday activities. A significant portion of Sally's amazing work is helping them slow down, relax, understand pacing, listen to their nervous system, and tune in to what their body is telling them.

Part of that process, as they get overwhelmed with these particular treatment options, enables them to leverage those same principles to figure out where to go next with their treatments. Sally's clients are very motivated and spend many hours on the internet researching how to recover from Long COVID. They come up with all the studies and clinical trials as well as possible experimental treatments. But they also find themselves overwhelmed by choosing from a bounty of expensive treatments, some of which would require them to go out of state to get it, among other issues.

That is called "treatment decision overwhelm" and unfortunately contributes to their symptoms. Sally helps them to slow down, listen to the body and the nervous system, help them improve their vagal tone and their vagal flexibility, and tune in to both what their body really needs and where it's telling them to go next on their life's path.

Sally is still working through that as part of her own journey.

"For example, when I do a podcast or workshop, the body is naturally going to go into fight or flight so that I perform optimally," Sally says. "I have to pay attention to my nervous system and perform grounding strategies before and afterward to bring it back again."

All people can build these techniques back into their way of being and into their lives, which is enormously positive, she says. Many people with Long COVID have had to take medical leave and have really struggled with going back to work or changing careers.

Background on the Safe and Sound Protocol (SSP)

The Safe and Sound Protocol, launched by Stephen Porges in 2017, was essential to pivoting Sally on her own recovery and is now a crucial part of Sally's Polyvagal coaching. SSP is music that has been modulated, removing the high and low frequency until you are left with just the middle frequency, which corresponds to the human voice. The concept of this intervention is to use music delivered over headphones and provided in co-regulation with a certified practitioner.

Targeting the muscle in the middle ear, which attaches to the top of the vagus nerve at the bottom of the brain stem, emulates a human voice frequency to give the nervous system cues of safety and resilience, helping the body build more flexibility so it doesn't get trapped in fight or flight.

"In this state, it is more able to spontaneously move back to rest and digest, which is where we want to be," Sally says. "Its popularity has grown now that more people are thinking about the nervous system, especially in terms of Long COVID and other chronic diseases."

Many people have also been researching external vagus nerve simulators which use tiny gadgets such as alpha stim and gamma core that are used in the ear to activate the vagus nerve. While utilizing these external simulations, your body is in "rest and digest," so many people notice symptoms subside.

Sally feels that the Safe and Sound Protocol differs from external vagus nerve stimulators because it's a complete intervention from start to finish. It takes five hours in total and is done very gradually over about three to six months. By the time it's over, your nervous system is permanently changed in a positive manner so you no longer have to listen to something every day to build yourself up, and your body naturally improves its ability to do that over time.

The Safe and Sound Protocol has been in clinical use since 2017 and is commonly used for adults and kids with autism, trauma, anxiety, sensory processing differences, and much more. It is used in therapy, in schools, and other organizations. Sally stumbled across it through her primary care physician in September 2021, and it just made sense to her in every way. It was the beginning of her life-altering journey to healing her mind, body, and soul.

"It is just so groundbreaking and exciting," Sally says.

There is a Silver Lining to Experiencing and Recovering from Long COVID

Despite the immense tragedy of COVID, Sally believes there are many positive things that have come out of her experience, although getting to a place where that was noticeable was a process. One was being more connected through Zoom when you feel too tired to leave your home. Another was having extra time to self-reflect and form new social groups with people who

have also suffered through the same grinding effects of Long COVID.

In the nervous system world, it is imperative to learn to slow down, relax, pay attention to our bodies, and experience things we had never done before. Sally admits it was a huge wake-up call but is extremely grateful that it happened because she got to rebuild her whole life from the ground up into what she wanted it to be, including the rewarding job of coaching people to recover and find new meaning in their lives.

Sally is also excited to be launching a Facebook community group to connect with COVID Long Haulers who are interested in working with her and have attended her free workshops. This will be a safe space for people looking to build new relationships which are fundamental to their recovery, as well as build community cohesiveness. It will be a place to share top tips on nervous system and mindset work and to ask questions. It will also help get out the word that she is here and available to help people still suffering silently from the effects of Long COVID.

"If you think you have Long COVID, you definitely do. It's not psychosomatic, it's 100% physiological, and recovery is possible. The role of the autonomic nervous system in the pathology of Long COVID is very clear. Evidence is building day by day and there are definitely things we can do to help you improve your vagal tone, improve your vagal flexibility, get back to rest and digest, and begin to recover.

"Many people ask me about acceptance; oftentimes when we have a chronic illness everyone wants to tell you that you just need to accept it. But, it's really hard to have acceptance when you're immobilized. So you can be kind to yourself, but it's not easy to do acceptance when you're feeling so sick. Acceptance is slightly different than what people think: I can accept that this is exactly where I am today even if I am super symptomatic, even if I'm feeling awful, but I do not accept that I will be like this in the future.

"That's the sort of key thing that we're also focusing on in coaching: Helping you to be OK with now, but also helping you to know wholeheartedly for sure in your body that now will not be forever."

Close Up Radio will feature Sally Riggs in an interview with Jim Masters on Tuesday November 29th at 1 p.m. EST and with Doug Llewelyn on Tuesday December 6th at 1 p.m. EST

Listen to the show on [BlogTalkRadio](#).

If you have any questions for our guest, please call (347) 996-3389.

For more information, visit www.sallyriggs.com

Written By: Beatrice Maria Centeno

Lou Ceparano
Close Up Television & Radio
+1 631-850-3314

[email us here](#)

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