

Polyvagal Theory in Practice



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rhythmofregulation.com

With gratitude to Stephen Porges for his
development of Polyvagal Theory...

The science of connection...

The science of feeling safe enough to fall in love with life
and take the risks of living...

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The autonomic nervous system is at
the heart of our lived experience...

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- We are always engaging with the nervous system...our own and other people's.
- The nervous system exerts a powerful control over feelings, actions, and beliefs in service of survival.
- If you could have thought your way out of this you would have done so long ago...

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Where do we begin?



State

Feelings

Behaviors

Story

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Emergent Properties

- The autonomic nervous system doesn't assign motivation or make moral meaning.
- What is biologically possible?
- What are the behaviors and stories that are supported and not supported from each state?

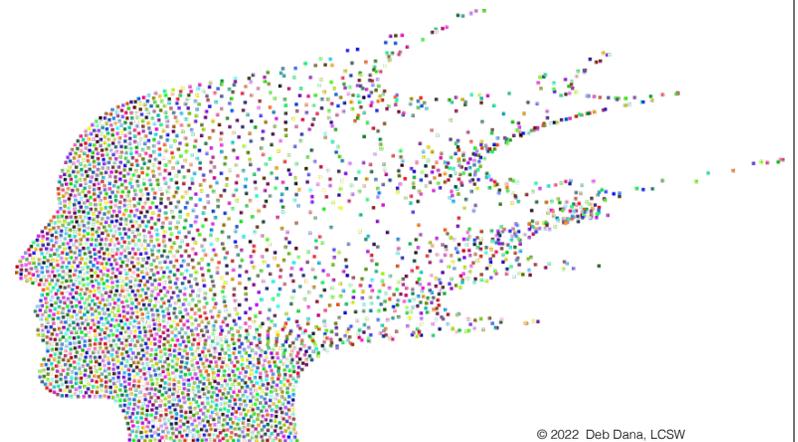
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No matter how irrational the thought, feeling, or behavior, remember the nervous system does not make moral meaning or assign motivation - it simply enacts a response to ensure survival.

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This is not a cognitive choice...it is a biological one.



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Exploring Three Organizing Principles of Polyvagal Theory

Neuroception - detection without awareness

Hierarchy - three predictable pathways of response

Ventral Vagal

Sympathetic Nervous System

Dorsal Vagal

Co-regulation - a biological imperative

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Neuroception Internal Surveillance System

The autonomic nervous system responds to signals of welcome and warning from:

- **inside** our bodies
- **outside** in environment around us
- in the relationships **between** us and others

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Take an autonomic adventure... ...tune in to neuroception

Are you drawn into connection with the image and a desire to move closer?

Do you feel a need to get away from the image or a need to fight back against it?

Do you feel yourself fading away not able to hold the image in your awareness?

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Our responsibility is to tune into what happens in our own nervous system...

...and be curious about what is happening in another nervous system.

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When there is a neuroceptive match...

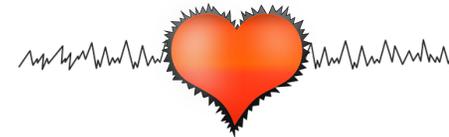
...the autonomic state will bring the energy necessary to effectively manage the experience.



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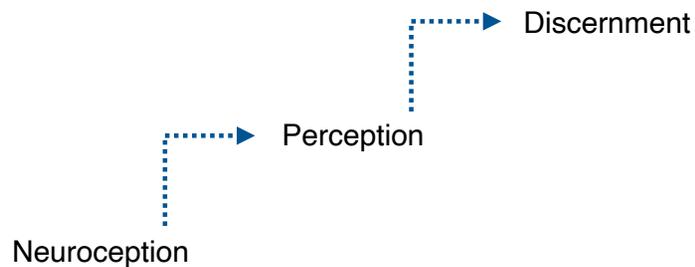
With a neuroceptive mismatch...

Inability to calm defense systems in safe environments
Autonomic nervous system activates a habitual protective response pattern — hypervigilant - alarmed



Inability to activate defense systems in risk environments
Neuroception does not signal danger when there is actual danger; autonomic response is inadequate to manage the situation — dulled, unaware or high risk-taking

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THE DISCERNMENT QUESTION

In this moment, in this place, with this person/people,
is this response/level of response needed?

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The Safety/Danger Equation

Cues of safety outweigh the cues of danger
ready for connection
new stories emerge
change is possible
wellbeing



Cues of danger outweigh the cues of safety
survival responses activate
stuck in a story
closed to change
disease

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The Autonomic Hierarchy

The hierarchy outlines predictable pathways of disconnection, mobilization, and engagement.

We are all travelers on the autonomic highway...

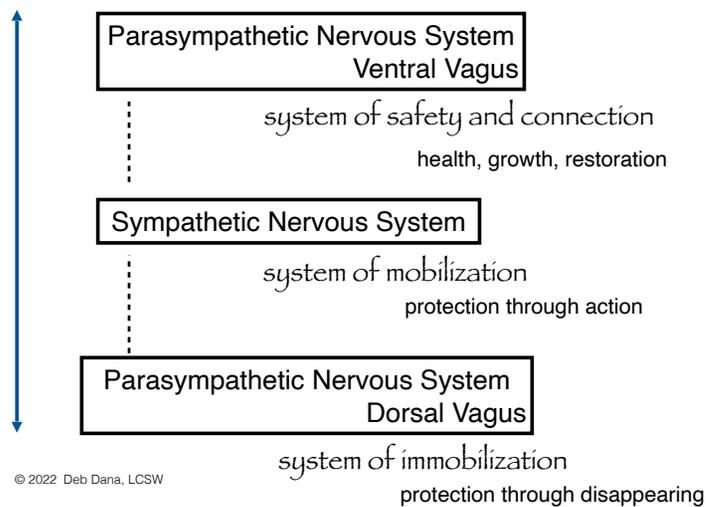
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The autonomic nervous system is the common denominator in our human experience.

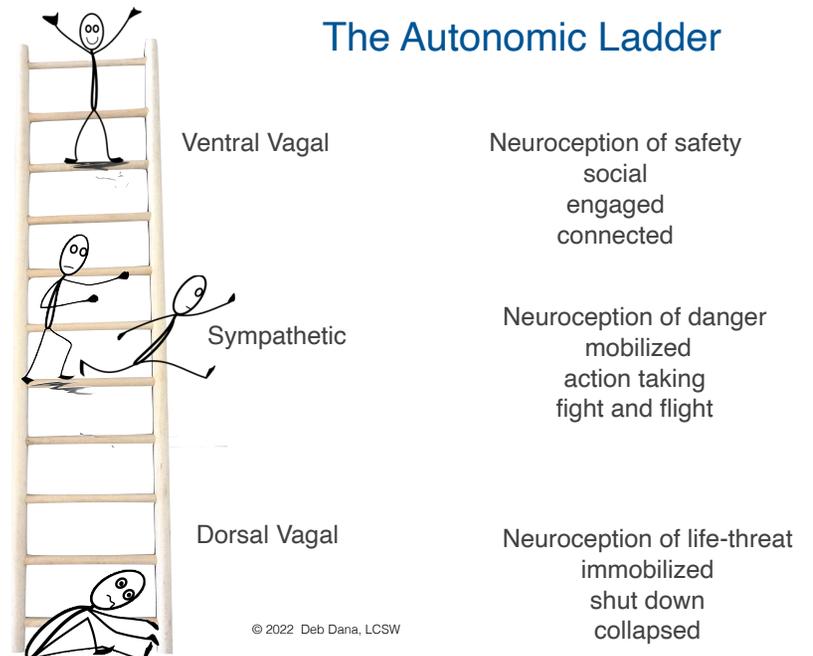
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Hierarchy of Response



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The Autonomic Ladder



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Emergent Properties of a Ventral Vagal State

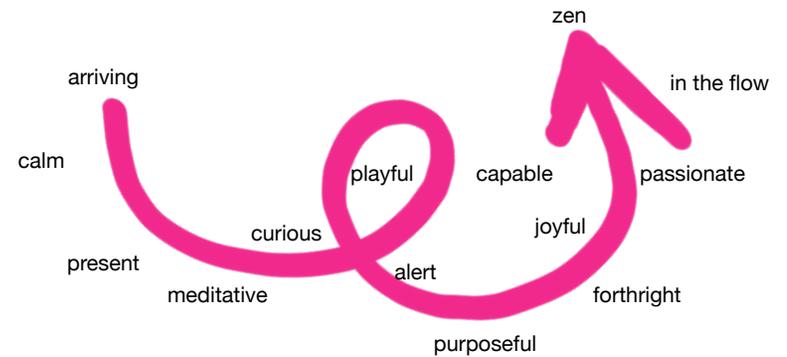
...a story of possibility



- co-regulate and self-regulate
- connect to self, others, the world, spirit
- tune into the moment and tune out distraction
- resourced and resourceful
- reach out for, and offer, support
- compassion, self-compassion
- flexible, resilient
- explore options
- hope

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The Flavors of Ventral



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Emergent Properties of Sympathetic Survival

- sense of unease and impending danger
- mobilization of fight and flight
- active aggression or escape
- alarmed, hypervigilant



...a story of an unsafe world and unsafe people

- looking and listening for danger
- miss and misread signs of safety
- sense of separation - cut off from others
- disrupted connection from self, others, world, spirit

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Heading into the Storm

Get to know your fight and flight pathways.



These two survival pathways come with their own particular energies, and we name them in many ways. We can think of these under the general headings of *anger* (fight) and *anxiety* (flight) and get to know the flavors of each.

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Emergent Properties of Dorsal Survival

body enters conservation mode
numb, foggy
collapsed
disconnected, untethered, floating
alone, lost, abandoned, unreachable
hopeless
disappear
safety and hope feel unreachable



...a story of despair

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Down to Dorsal

When we are pulled into dorsal, we begin to feel depleted physically and emotionally. We feel the shift from the intensity of sympathetic energy to the disconnection of dorsal in our bodies, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Understanding how we experience a dorsal state gives a framework to make it a less mysterious and scary moment.



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- Autonomic state shifts in response to the challenges of everyday life are a normal and expected experience.
- It is not when we are pulled out of ventral that is the problem. It's when we are pulled out and can't find our way back to regulation.
- The goal is not to always be in a state of ventral vagal regulation but rather to be able to flexibly navigate the small, ordinary shifts that a part of everyday life and build enough resilience to weather the ones that are traumatic.

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Autonomic Profiles

While we move in and out of both survival states, with repeated activation we create our own protection profile. Over time, our habitual survival response leans more toward mobilization and fight and flight or disconnection and shutdown. Then when a pattern of protection is needed, we are easily transported to this home away from home.

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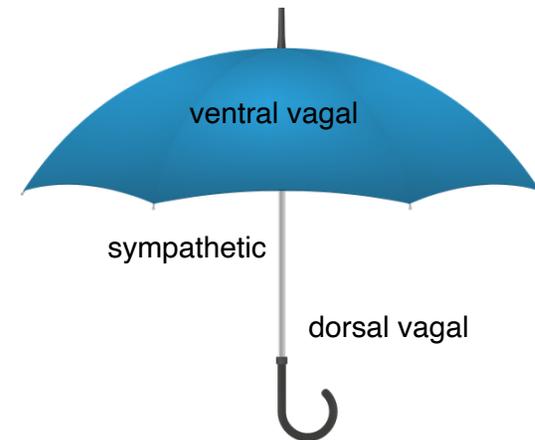
Home Away from Home

Do you tend to ride out the dysregulation in the activation of sympathetic mobilizing, action-taking system?

Do you disappear into dorsal shut down?

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Ventral Vagal Energy is the Active Ingredient



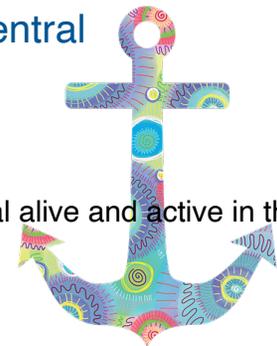
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Without a critical mass of ventral in our system, we are pulled into “conservation” and “activation” as we try to find regulation.



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Anchor in Ventral



We need a “critical mass” of ventral alive and active in the system

Reach for regulation

Find your ventral vagal anchors: who (people, pets, ancestors, guides), what (actions and objects), where, and when

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Co-Regulation



Every heart sings a song, incomplete, until another heart whispers back. —Plato

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An Ongoing Autonomic Conversation

The autonomic nervous system both sends and searches for cues of safety or danger.

We are continuously broadcasting and receiving.

Our work is to stay tuned in to the autonomic conversation.

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When we send signals of safety, we extend an invitation to connect.



When we receive signals of safety we feel an autonomic welcome and feel safe to move into connection and co-regulation.

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When we send signals of danger or receive an autonomic warning from another system, reactivity increases and adaptive survival responses are reinforced.



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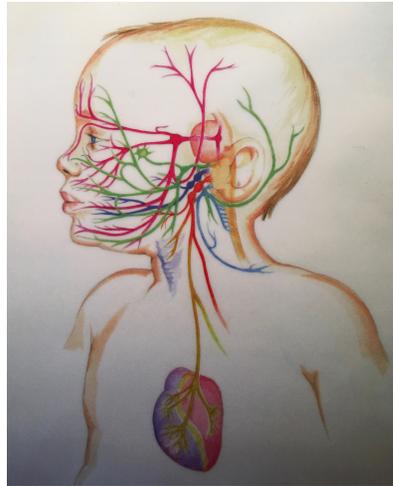
Five cranial nerves joined in the search for connection through our...

eyes

ears

voice

face and head movements



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Regulated and Regulating

"...without the experience of an organizing other...the nervous system is stunned." (Sebern Fisher)

We are responsible for being a regulated and regulating other. If we are dysregulated, there will be a rupture in connection and the other person's autonomic response will often be an automatic move out of connection into protection.

What message is your autonomic nervous system sending?

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States & Stories



Listening to the Story of Three States

At any moment, we have three stories — one held in each state.

The story we hear and are held in, is from the state that is most active in our system.

Tuning in and hearing each of the three stories is a reminder that the state is where the story begins.

Listening to three stories uses the lens of the autonomic nervous system to expand perspective and enter into a moment of reflection.

Sharing your stories with someone else brings connection.

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The Listening Practice

- Take a small, everyday experience that doesn't affect your safety or have a big impact on your life
- Look through your two survival states
- End in ventral
- Reflect on what you learned

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Explore

Identify a pattern you'd like to change.

Find the worry. If I stepped out of that pattern then...

Find the hope. If I stepped out of that pattern then...

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An Essential Ingredient

An active ventral vagal state is needed for all states of wellbeing.

Without ventral, the nervous system enters a survival state.

Simply offering your autonomically regulated presence to others, begins to change their experience.

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The Guiding Questions

- What state am I in?
- What do I need to be anchored in ventral regulation?
- Where is the other person?
- What does their nervous system need in this moment?

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The Power of Ventral

The scientific definition of contagious: something that is transmitted by either direct or indirect contact

Ventral vagal energy is an unstoppable force!