

Rewiring our nervous systems for anxiety, depression and trauma

We are going to be working together using Polyvagal Exercises to support your nervous system so that you can bring more calm and clarity into your life, make the best decisions for yourself and respond rather than react to distressing situations. You know the saying, we can't control the people or situations around us, we can only control our action. However, when it feels like your body is being hijacked by your emotions, it doesn't feel like we can control what is happening.

So our focus will be to work on triggers which can lead to behaviors, thoughts and feelings that are not serving you now. This is a process and takes a while. It does not happen overnight. Please remember to be kind and gentle with yourself as you work through the process. In fact, self-compassion is a large key of this work.

We are going to work on separate lessons to teach you skills and give you time to practice. These lessons and exercises come out of the work of Stephen Porges and Deb Dana. I am using some of the exercises from Deb Dana's book, *Polyvagal Exercises for Safety and Connection*, 2020.

Lesson One: Understanding the Polyvagal System and Why it is Important

Researchers have studied the autonomic system and their work has suggested links between our autonomic nervous system and our limbic system, the part of our brain involved in behavioral and emotional responses. Polyvagal theory informs us of this bi-directional pathway between psychological processes and physiological processes. There is constant feedback between our body and our perceptions. If we are anxious our heart may beat quickly, when we notice our heart is beating quickly we are noticing we are anxious, which might make us even more anxious. Our heart, heart rate variability, in particular, and our respiratory system also influence our stress and health. Polyvagal theory can help use the science of the autonomic nervous system to learn to become more regulated, support a feeling of safety and calm and connection.

Simply put, the autonomic nervous system is shaped by our experiences and we can provide new experiences to help our nervous systems become more flexible and regulated. Older traumatic experiences may have created responses in our body that are rigid and put us in a state of collapse and despair, or fight or flight. From these states, it is difficult to mobilize in a safe, positive and connected way. These are survival states, not thriving states. They can keep us stuck.

There are 2 branches of our autonomic nervous system, (see Figure 1 below), the parasympathetic and the sympathetic system. The parasympathetic nervous system has 2 branches, the dorsal vagal and the ventral vagal. What is important to note is that the evolution and development of this system was to be in service of survival and it is a hierarchical system which has evolved over hundreds of millions of years.

Dorsal Vagal system developed 500 million years ago and served our reptilian ancestors to survive through immobilization, i.e., shut down. 100 million years later the Sympathetic Nervous System developed and the options for mobilization through fight and flight became available. With the later development and younger Ventral Vagal System, only 200 million years old, came social communication and connection. When activated, the Ventral Vagal system brings us to a state that mobilizes us in a positive, connected and responsive way in the present moment. Deb Dana states, the “ventral vagus is tasked with overseeing the autonomic nervous system, metaphorically holding the sympathetic and dorsal vagal systems in a warm embrace. When the newest autonomic pathway is directing the system, healthy homeostatis is the result.” (Dana, 2020)

Importance of the ventral vagal nerve state helps one with connection to self and world, provides flexibility and possibilities, openness to change. It is not a place where all is happy. It is a place where there is the ability to be alive in safety. We can feel both joy and sadness and all the feelings within us and still feel safe, connected to the world, and see choices instead of limitations. It helps us respond, instead of react. When our experiences overwhelm us and the ventral vagal system, other parts of this hierarchical system might try to help us survive. We might fight or flee difficult situations as our sympathetic nervous system helps us mobilize to survive. If this doesn't work, we might move down the “ladder” again to the dorsal vagal state response and go into a place of collapse and shut down. Much of this happens without our awareness. We only know our bodies are reacting. We might feel our heart beating fast, or stomach turn, or tension in our body. Think of all the ways your body reacts. You are getting feedback about your nervous system in those moments. You are getting information about whether you need to protect yourself for survival or if it is safe to move towards connection and response. We cannot hold both a feeling of safety and a feeling of danger in our bodies. It is one or the other. We are working on reshaping the nervous system for safety and reducing cues of danger.

What you need to do this work:

You will need to bring self-compassion and curiosity to this work, first and foremost. I also recommend you get a journal just for your exercises. You can get a lined, unlined or dot journal. Also, gather some colored pencils and markers and keep them handy, too.

Exercise:

Our beginning exercises will focus on getting to know and be with our bodies' reactions and triggers. Get comfortable. Bring attention to the present moment. Notice if there is a cue from the past that is coming up in this moment? Does it feel familiar? Notice what is happening in your body. Are there any sensations anywhere in your body? What are they? Is there something going on that you are reacting to right now? It may have helped you survive in the past, is it helpful now? In this moment, *are you actually in danger or are you safe?* Work on asking yourself this question a few times a day to bring awareness to your nervous system state. You are working on awareness and discernment. Right down the date you do exercise and a brief summary of the experience.

Figure 1:

