

## Polyvagal Theory in Therapy

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*Summarized by Laura Hutchison, PsyD, LP*

“The autonomic nervous system is made up of two main branches, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic, and responds to signals and sensations via three pathways, each with a characteristic pattern of response...

The sympathetic branch is found in the middle part of the spinal cord and represents the pathway that prepares us for action. It responds to cues of danger and triggers the release of adrenaline, which fuels the fight-or-flight response.

In the parasympathetic branch, Polyvagal Theory focuses on two pathways traveling within a nerve called the vagus...

The vagus is divided into two parts: the ventral vagal pathway and the dorsal vagal pathway. The ventral vagal pathway responds to cues of safety and supports feelings of being safely engaged and socially connected. In contrast, the dorsal vagal pathway responds to cues of extreme danger. It takes us out of connection, out of awareness, and into a protective state of collapse. When we feel frozen, numb, or “not here”, the dorsal vagus has taken control.” p. 8-9

<b>Ventral Vagal</b>
Safe
Social
<b>Sympathetic</b>
Mobilized
Fight or Flight
<b>Dorsal Vagal</b>
Immobilized
Collapsed

## ***Creating A Personal Profile Map***

Using colored markers, “map” your vagal system. Bring to mind a time you were in that state, then write with the color that fits best...

- What it feels like
- What it looks like
- What it sounds like
- What’s happening in your body
- What would you do
- What do you feel
- What do you think or say
- How is your sleep
- How are your eating habits

When finished with the descriptions, **write in titles** that fit each state.

Now, finish the sentence stems “**I am ...**” and “**The world is...**” for each state.

Then think about, for the sympathetic and dorsal vagal states - what brings me here? These are the **triggers** for these states. What brings you into Ventral Vagal? These are called “**glimmers**”.

## Personal Profile Map

<b>Ventral Vagal</b>	Title:	
Safe		<b>Glimmers:</b>
Social		
	I am	
	The world is	
<b>Sympathetic</b>	Title:	
Mobilized		<b>Triggers:</b>
Fight or Flight		
<b>Dorsal Vagal</b>	Title:	
Immobilized		<b>Triggers:</b>
Collapsed		
	I am	
	The world is	



## Compassionate Connection Exercises

### Three Things: Show & Tell

Have the client choose an object to represent each state of autonomic response.

- What drew you to that object?
- How did you make that choice?
- What state was the most difficult?
- What state was the easiest?
- Tell a story about each object

### Sand Tray: Taking Your Map into the Sand

### Draw The State

### Writing about your States: The Story of a State

- Write about one state
- Write about a cycle of states

### Musical Maps

Create a playlist for each state.

### Sculpting

Use a small human mannequin, self, therapist, clay/dough to sculpt each state

## Aware & Attend Exercises

### Notice & Name

1. Tune into your thoughts, feelings, and the way your body feels.
2. Notice where you are on your autonomic map.
3. Name the state.
4. Bring curiosity. What is there to learn from your autonomic nervous system in this moment?

*Four Map Tracking*

Place an "X" where you are on the ladder, write in what is going on at this time.

	<b>Time:</b>		<b>Time:</b>
<b>Ventral Vagal</b>		<b>Ventral Vagal</b>	
Safe		Safe	
Social		Social	
<b>Sympathetic</b>		<b>Sympathetic</b>	
Mobilized		Mobilized	
Fight or Flight		Fight or Flight	
<b>Dorsal Vagal</b>		<b>Dorsal Vagal</b>	
Immobilized		Immobilized	
Collapsed		Collapsed	
	<b>Time:</b>		<b>Time:</b>
<b>Ventral Vagal</b>		<b>Ventral Vagal</b>	
Safe		Safe	
Social		Social	
<b>Sympathetic</b>		<b>Sympathetic</b>	
Mobilized		Mobilized	
Fight or Flight		Fight or Flight	
<b>Dorsal Vagal</b>		<b>Dorsal Vagal</b>	
Immobilized		Immobilized	
Collapsed		Collapsed	

### Goldilocks Graph

<b>Just Right</b>	
<b>Too Much</b>	
<b>Not Enough</b>	
	Events

**Creating Safe Surrounding Exercise**  
*Cue Sheets*

**What happened?** Briefly describe the experience. Include details of the even and your autonomic responses.

**Notice and name the cues of DANGER.** What were the cues of danger in the environment? In your body? Sensed through your Social Engagement System?

**Notice and name the cues of SAFETY.** What were the cues of safety in the environment? In your body? Sensed through your Social Engagement System?



**How might you RESOLVE cues of danger?** (environment, body, social engagement system)

**How could you INVITE IN cues of safety?** (environment, body, social engagement system)

## The Autonomic Nervous System as a Relational System

### Exploring Patterns and Tempo

- Choose a relationship to focus on. Any relationship can be looked at through this process (partners, friends, family members, coworkers).
- Move through the eight broad categories and identify a general pattern of connection or disconnection for each.
  - Intimacy
  - Physical Intimacy
  - Movement
  - Play
  - Work
  - Communication
  - Daily Activities
  - Spirituality
- Review the areas of disconnection. Do you bring ventral vagal energy or are you in a state of protection? Are there enough cues of safety to support talking about your sense of autonomic disconnection? If not, is there a way to resolve the cues of danger that prevent this from happening?
- Return to the areas of connection and bring attention to the tempo within the pattern. Where along a continuum of draining to filling do you place the tempo? Is it a predictable tempo or does it change? As you bring your attention to the tempo, what information does your autonomic nervous system send to you?
- Take a step back and consider the entirety of what you have identified. Is there enough overall reciprocity in this relationship to keep you invested in making it work? Are there places of misalignment that don't overwhelm your ventral vagal state, allowing you to accept the mismatch? Are there places that bring adaptive survival response and need to be resolved for the relationship to feel sustainable? With the autonomic story in mind, what are your next steps?

## Toning the System with Breath & Sound

### Two Breaths in Transition

The **breath of fear** is initiated with a sense of startle accompanied by a quick, audible and often a brief holding of breath. One hand moves to the heart, and the shoulders tense upward. The face freezes with eyes opened wide. If standing there is a move up onto the toes, and when either standing or sitting there is a sense of energy moving upward and of losing contact with the ground triggering a sense of being unanchored.

The **sigh of relief** that follows begins with the release of breath in an audible, deep sigh characterized by a long, slow exhalation and some form of resistance to the breath either through contraction at the back of the throat or slightly pursed lips, often followed by a moment of apnea (temporary suspension of breath). The hand remains on the heart as the shoulders relax. There is a feeling of the face softening, especially around the eyes. If standing, there is a settling back onto the soles of the feet and when either standing or sitting there is a sense of energy moving down to connect with the earth, bringing a sense of being safely grounded.

### Four-Square/Box Breathing

### Bubble Blowing

### Playing with Prosody

	What words activate each state?	Tone?		
<b>Ventral Vagal</b>		Monotone	Shrill	Deep
Safe				
Social				
<b>Sympathetic</b>		Tone?		
Mobilized		Monotone	Shrill	Deep
Fight or Flight				
<b>Dorsal Vagal</b>		Tone?		
Immobilized		Monotone	Shrill	Deep
Collapsed				

Energizing Words ...Make a list of words that bring your ventral vagal energy alive

## **Regulating through the Body**

### Touch

- What type of touch is an effective regulator?
- What kind of touch predictably dysregulates?
- When might regulation through touch be helpful during the therapy session?

### Movement

- Regulate on a exercise ball or rocking chair

### Three Movements Exercise

- Begin in “center” - the posture that brings a sense of being anchored in ventral vagal regulation.
- Slowly move inward, lowering head, pulling in arms and legs. Track shifts and continue inward movement until at the edge of safety.
- Reconnect with center again.
- Next slowly transition outward, stretching arms up and out, lifting chin, arching back. Track shifts and continue extension until at the edge of safety.

### Savoring the State

- Bring attention to a moment of ventral vagal regulation
- Stay present to the physical sense of the state (e.g., breath, heartbeat, warmth, energy, moving, a sense of internal space)
- Imagine your vagal brake working effortless, smoothly, keeping the flow of ventral vagal energy moving
- Bring your attention to fully savoring the state. Stay in the savoring experience for 20-30 seconds.

### Savoring the Experience

- Bring attention to a moment of ventral vagal regulation.
- Sense the moment in your body and then invite in the images, feelings, and thoughts that accompany the moment.
- Actively receive the fullness of the experience: sight, sound, emotion, belief, and body. Invite physiology and story to move together.
- Bring your attention fully to the experience for 20-30 seconds.

### SIFTing as a Resource

S - body **S**ensation

I - **I**mage

F - emotional **F**eeling

T - **T**hought

Find a moment where a ventral vagal memory is brought up OR actively retrieve a ventral vagal memory to use.

- Tell the story of the memory. Listen for the starting SIFT element. Repeat the clients starting SIFT element.
- Have the client add one element at a time, repeating each one after it's added.
- As each element is added, build the layers of the SIFT, repeating the sequence each time.
- When the four layers are complete, narrate the full SIFT for your client, inviting them to rest in the completed SIFT and let it fill their body and mind.
- Ask your client to give their SIFT a title as an easy way to reconnect with this resource.

### Seeing through States

- Choose an experience
- Create a simple statement to describe the experience.
- Say the statement as if you were speaking from each state. The same words will sound very different and convey different meanings when spoken from each state.
- Notice the sound, feeling, and story, and compare the three experiences.

### **Patterns of Play**

In each category list ways you played, identifying past and present experiences.

	Past	Present
Attunement		
Body Movement		
Object		
Social Interactive		
Imaginative Pretend		
Storytelling		
Creative Fantasy		

- What categories are missing from your past or present play experiences?
- What are your play preferences?
- How have they changed?
- What themes emerge?

**Exploring the Story of Stillness**

**Name It** - Experiment with different words that describe the experience of being safely still, such as ...

- Immobile
- Quiet
- Inactive
- At rest
- Embraced
- held
- Stable
- Static
- Stationary
- Undisturbed
- Stagnant

**Observe It** - What does a safe moment of stillness look like? Describe a picture of stillness. Looking at the picture, what are the cues of safety? What are some words that come to mind?

**Experience It** - Practice different moments and kinds of stillness, alone and with others.

### **Connecting with Awe**

- Make an intention to find one awe-inspiring moment each day.
- Connect with the natural world and look for tiny moments of awe in the patterns of nature.
- Experiment with music and find compositions that reliably bring wonder, amazement, or reverence.
- Find works of art that inspire awe for you.
- Keep an awe journal to remember places that you experienced awe. Include everyday places and extraordinary places.