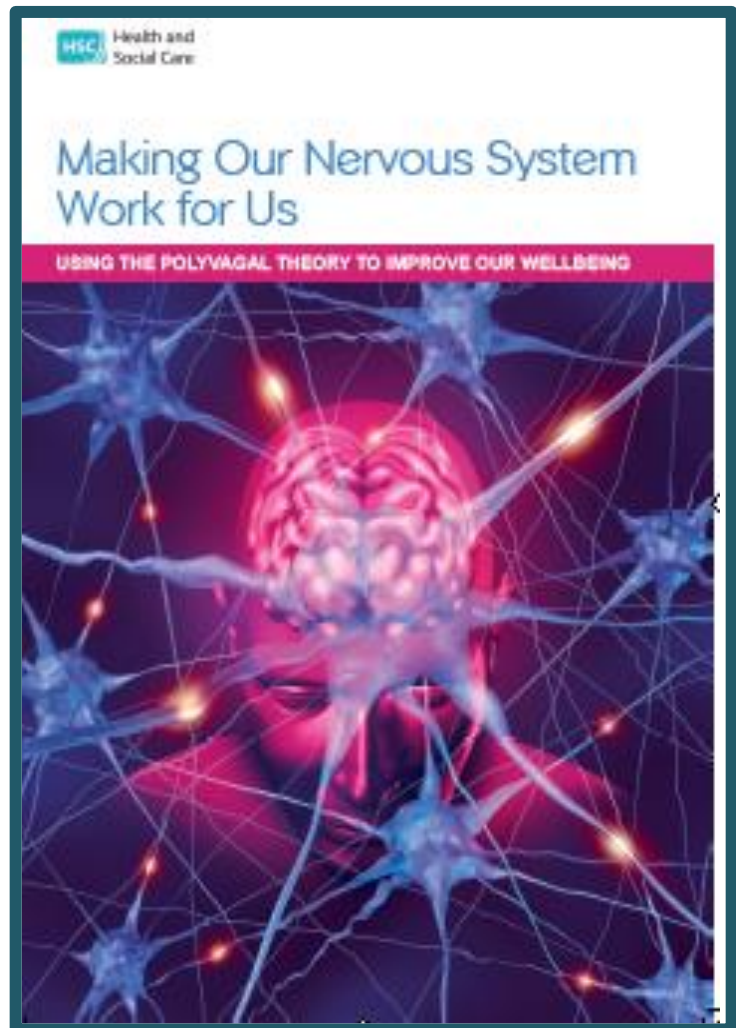
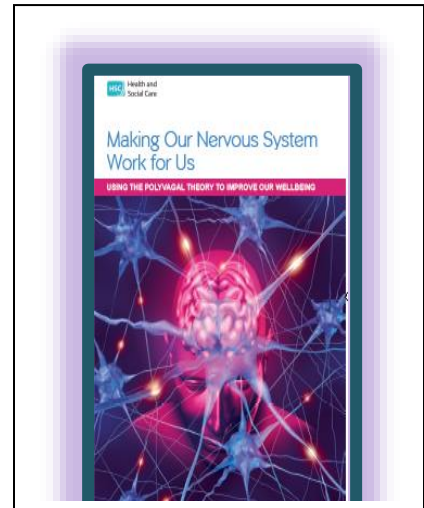


Making
Our
Nervous
System
Work for
Us
worksheets
2024



This introduction to making use of the Polyvagal Theory presents all of us with an understanding of how our nervous system responds to stress and threat. The more skillful we are at attending to where our nervous system is, the more flexibility we have in how we respond.

These additional worksheets from the main booklet have been developed to share with you the exercises in *Making Our Nervous System Work for Us: Using the Polyvagal Theory to Improve our Well-Being*.



First, using these skills is an active choice, one that can be hard to make when our emotions are high. When you feel emotions taking over, remind yourself that you want to stay calm. You want to control your emotions rather than your emotions controlling you.

Making use of these skills

Use these skills in calm times: Practice them in calm times to become more comfortable using them when you need them most.

Coping skills are not one size fits all. There is no one skill that works for everyone. Discover ones that work for you and use them with flexibility.

Have realistic expectations. Coping skills are not magic bullets. They don't work 100 percent of the time. Stay realistic.

Combining skills. You can use more than one.

Remember there is no quick fix for stress. It will take time, effort, and repetition to turn using these skills into healthy habits.

A word of caution: Stop if you these skills make things worse or are difficult to manage and discuss it with a professional.

Making Our Nervous System Work For Us - Introducing the Polyvagal Theory:

These worksheets were created to make it easier to use the work from the main booklet. We hope you find these helpful.

There is also an on-line version of the work that can be found at www.ascert.biz

- **Getting started. Understanding our nervous system and introducing the Polyvagal Theory**
 - A brief introduction to the Polyvagal Theory
 - Language is important.
- **Calming our nervous system**
 - Breathing
 - Self-containment
 - Self-compassion
 - A few more ideas for calming our nervous system.
- **Befriending: getting to know our autonomic ladder**
 - Getting familiar with the autonomic ladder
 - Attending to our Autonomic states: You can't heal what you can't see.
 - Daily Tracker
 - Daily Pie Charts
 - Anchors
- **Owning and guiding our nervous system**
 - Finding Glimmers - Glimmers to glow
 - Using your body and senses for regulation and flexibility
 - Exercising your vagal break
 - Establishing new autonomic rhythms.
Recognize, Reflect , Regulate, Create "If-Then" Statements
 - Connections and co-regulation
 - Clusters of Connection
 - Sound of your voice
 - Additional Ideas to strengthen our Vagus Nerve
 - Regulating resource map
- **End point: The quest for safety and connection and overview and take-home messages**

Your nervous system and an introduction to the Polyvagal Theory

Your nervous system's goal is to keep you safe and alive. That is its job. Your brain and body are constantly taking in and processing information: **95% of this you don't consciously notice.**

It is like our body has an **internal smoke detector** that will scan for cues of safety and danger. Information picked up gets two systems in our nervous system into gear:

- The mobilizing system gets the body for action to threat and danger (fight or flight - sympathetic nervous system)
- The calming system which acts much more slowly (parasympathetic nervous system).

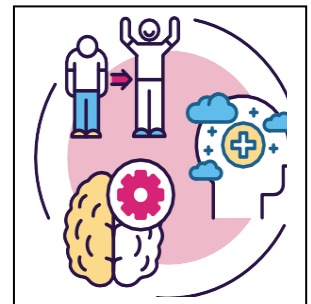


Our internal smoke detector (Amygdala) can respond in 3 ways.

The autonomic nervous system was thought to have two branches, a sympathetic branch for revving up and a parasympathetic branch for calming down.

According to Stephen Porges's Polyvagal theory, the human autonomic nervous system has 3 branches that have evolved over time. Under threat, our **Nervous System** networks are activated in a specific order, from the most sophisticated to most primitive.

- **The Ventral (Front) Vagal Branch**, part of the parasympathetic nervous system, is responsible for social engagement when you feel safe, but is switched off when you sense danger.
- **The Sympathetic Branch**, which is responsible for activation. When you feel safe, this gives you the energy to get things done, but when you detect a threat, it becomes anxiety or "fight or flight".
- **The Dorsal (Back) Vagal Branch**, also part of the parasympathetic nervous system, is responsible for immobilization (stillness). When you feel safe, this allows you to "rest and digest" but when you become overwhelmed by a lack of safety it becomes "shut down or collapsed".



What is the Vagus Nerve and what does it do?

The Vagus Nerve is the sensory highway that tells your brain what is going on in your organs and muscles. It runs from the base of the skull to all the organs in our body and is part of the calming nervous system, which helps calm our organs and deal with the aftermath of a fight-or-flight.

The word "Vagus" means "wanderer" in Latin. It wanders all over the body and reaches your organs. It is our internal control center, allowing the brain to monitor and receive information about things like heart rate, blood pressure, sweating, digestion, and even speaking. You can think of the Vagus Nerve as a busy highway with four lanes going north carrying messages from the body to the brain. The one going south is the brain communicating to your body.

The way our nervous system scans for cues of safety or danger and threat without involving the thinking parts of our brain means it is picking up what's going on in our muscles and organs, what our senses are taking in and between us and other people, through tone of voice, body language, facial expressions.

The Vagus Nerve branches into two pathways. One pathway, known as the **ventral vagal**, responds to cues of safety and supports social engagement. The **dorsal vagal** pathway responds to cues of threat, causing us to shut down, become numb, and disconnect.

A useful description uses a car to illustrate the nervous system. The gas pedal is our sympathetic nervous system that speeds the body into mobilization. Our brakes are the parasympathetic nervous system that slows it all down.

What the Polyvagal Theory teaches us is how to use our gears to slow the engine down or speed it up when we need to. Let's learn how to use this to our advantage.

So, to sum it up, the Polyvagal Theory identifies that there is a predictable order in which our nervous system responds to cues of safety and danger.

- When we feel connected and safe, we are using the ventral vagal pathway. When we feel too challenged and overwhelmed, this pathway goes off line and into the background.
- The next pathway that comes up to work with is that of mobilization - of fight and flight. This makes you want to either argue with someone or get out of here.
- Then if that taking action there doesn't resolve whatever the issue of the moment is, we then drop into that dorsal vagal, disconnected or frozen.

This information can be liberating. This is my body doing this, this is not my brain. I'm not making a conscious choice here. My biology has felt a threat and is taking an action to protect me. So how can I use this information?

Deb Dana, a colleague of Stephen Porges has a useful image of a ladder for how the nervous system responds and calls it our **Autonomic Ladder**.

The ventral vagal state - (Connection Mode)

safety brings us onto the top of the "ladder". This is a state of social engagement, connection and feeling safe.

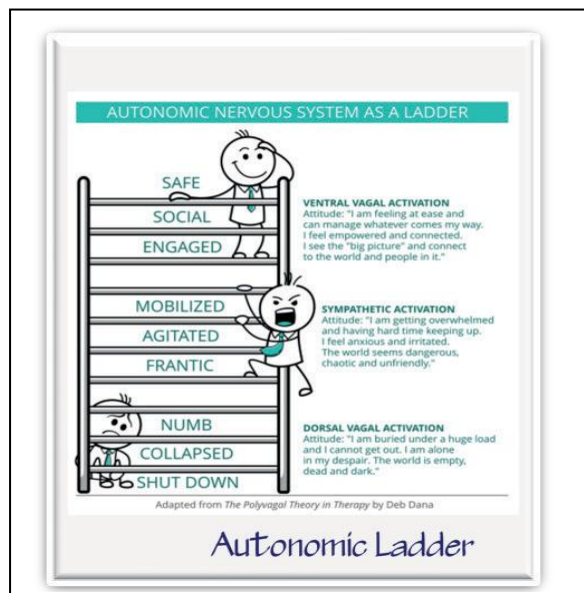
The sympathetic nervous system state of mobilization - (Fight or flight) Fueled with stress hormones we are ready for action. You may feel you need to protect yourself.

The dorsal vagal state - (Shut Down Mode)

Going down the ladder, we go into **immobilization**. Think of a turtle drawing its head inside its shell. You might feel unsafe, frozen, numb, not here, alone, hopeless.

On any given day we may shift and work our way up and down the ladder without being aware of it. No one is at the top of the ladder all the time.

Making use of the Polyvagal Theory helps us see where we are on the autonomic ladder. The more skillful we are at attending to where we are, the more flexibility we have in how we respond.



Language is important.

Making use of this work is helped by having words that work for you. Call or describe the parts of the nervous system in ways that make sense to you.

Word used in the Polyvagal Theory	Function	Descriptive words used in this booklet	Words that will make sense to you
Autonomic Nervous System	Functions in the body that does not involve thinking - happens automatically	Cruise control of the body	
The sympathetic nervous system	Survival response to threat or danger	The 'fight or flight' or mobilization response	
The parasympathetic nervous system	Brings the body back to its state of calm.	The calming system including the vagus nerve	
Neuroception	The way our nervous system scans for cues of safety, or danger and threat without thinking	Internal smoke detector – our body scanning for cues of safety, or danger and threat	
Autonomic Ladder	The way the body responds to signals it picks up	Deb Danna's ladder of the nervous system's response	
The ventral vagal state	At the top of the Autonomic ladder	Feeling safe and connected	
The sympathetic nervous system state	Stress hormones get us ready for action to protect yourself or go into overdrive.	Fight or flight - mobilization	
The dorsal vagal state	A state of protective immobilization	Shut down mode of freeze like a deer in the headlights	
Vagal tone	How well the Vagus nerve is working		

Calming techniques that can help tone down the fight or flight response.

H.A.L.T	R.A.I.N
<p>Hungry Angry Lonely Tired</p> 	
<p>Deep Breathing</p>	<p>Movement</p>
	
<p>Use you senses</p>	<p>Self-compassion</p>
	
<p>Clenched fist</p>	<p>Glimmers</p>
	<p>Glimmers are the opposite of triggers.</p> <p>It is anything around you that sparks a sense of joy or awe.</p> <p><i>There's how you can turn a glimmer into a glow >>></i> with Deb Dana's advice!</p> <p>@HEVORAUSTHE</p>
<p>Resilient self –talk</p>	<p>Five finger breathing</p>
	

To start with use H.A.L.T. – What does your body need?

Sometimes we need to look inside ourselves to know what we need at this moment in time. This short check-in is known as H.A.L.T. What we want to do is check in with our basic needs and emotional states and respond to that need.

H - Am I **hungry** right now?

A - Am I **angry or anxious**, or otherwise dysregulated and activated?

L - Am I feeling **lonely** at this moment?

T - Am I **tired**? We do not think straight exhausted.

Feeling Overwhelmed. R.A.I.N helps.

R.A.I.N. is an acronym coined about 20 years ago by Michele McDonald. It is an easy-to-remember tool for dealing with strong emotions. R.A.I.N. has four steps:

- **R - Recognize what is going on**
- **A - Allow the experience to be there, just as it is**
- **I - Investigate with curiosity and kindness.**
- **N - non-identify.**

R- Recognize: It is impossible to deal with an emotion unless we recognize it is there. Simply notice what you feel. Don't try to push away or ignore it. Name what you are feeling.



A – Acknowledge, giving it a pause: The second step is an extension of the first. You accept the feeling and allow it to be there. Give yourself permission to feel it. Allowing means letting the thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations we have simply be there. When we have unpleasant feelings, we react in one of three ways: being self-judgmental, numbing our feelings or focusing attention elsewhere. Rather than seeing feelings as “bad” or “wrong,” simply rename them as “painful.” Acknowledge them. This is the entry into self-compassion. If you want to find out more about self-compassion, see www.ascert.biz/self-compassion/

I — Investigate with kindness toward yourself: You begin to ask questions and explore your emotions with curiosity. This may feel quite different from when we want answers or blame. Pausing to ask what is happening, what is behind these feelings adds a more active kind of inquiry and helps to move closer to a feeling, rather than away from it. Progress does not mean negative emotions do not happen. It is seeing them with a more open mind.

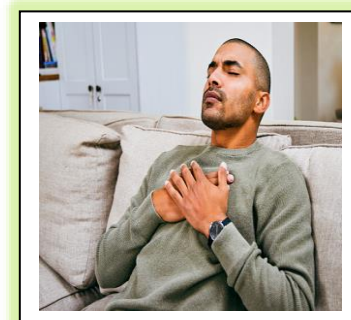
N — Non-identify: In the last step of RAIN, we consciously avoid being defined by a particular feeling. We **are** not angry, we **feel** anger. Feeling angry about something is quite different from telling yourself, “I am an angry person. It is a state, not a trait. Feelings are temporary. This opens the door to a more compassionate relationship with yourself. N can also remind you to nurture and look after yourself.

Deep Breathing

When we experience stress of any kind, we tend to breathe shallowly and rapidly. Breathing like this is part of the fight/flight/freeze response. Slow, belly breathing is effective to counter that.

Deep breathing allows lots of oxygen to quickly enter your body, which can result in a calming sensation. While sitting or standing breath with your diaphragm. (Belly) not your chest. The key to more relaxed breathing is breathing out more than you breathe in.

When you breathe in, your stomach should rise or expand, and it will fall or contract as you breathe out. Try placing one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach. Is your stomach rising? Then you're doing it right!

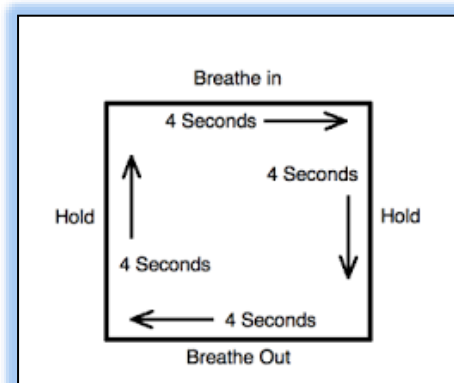


Here are some deep breathing techniques:

Box Breathing

Puckered-Lip Breathing (2-4)

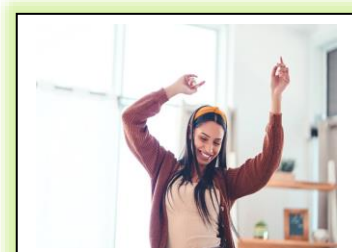
1. Breathe normally for 2 seconds.
2. Pucker your lips, as if you were about to drink through a straw.
3. Exhale through puckered lips for 4 seconds
4. Repeat



Rhythmic movement is the body's natural way to self-soothe.

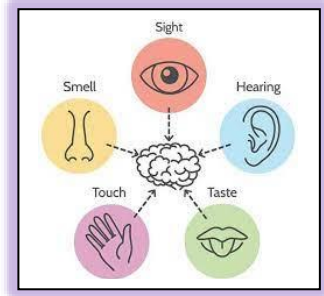
How would you calm a crying baby? You instinctually pick them up and rock them in your arms. Rhythmic movement is an ancient calming intervention: dancing, drumming, moving in circles. Here are some examples of rhythmic movement:

- Dance. It doesn't matter what type of dance it is or whether you dance with others or alone. The point is that you move your body with rhythm.
- Beat a drum. You can also create a beat with your hands on your body or on an object.
- Rock or sway. Allow your body to rock or sway at a pace that feels calming. You can use items to help with these movements, like swings and rocking chairs.



Sensory Grounding

Grounding techniques use your five senses, sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste and help the brain refocus quickly. Here are some examples:



Sight

- Focus on a particular object and notice all of the details that you see: colors, shapes, objects that you like or dislike, and so on.
- Pick five objects that you can see and focus on each one for five seconds in turn. Then move on to the next. Change the order each time you begin again.

Sound

- Stop and listen to all the sounds that you hear. How many different sounds can you pick out? Be patient, as it may take a few moments for background sounds to become noticeable.
- Listen to music. Try to isolate all the instruments you hear. Listen to them separately and then together.

Touch

- Feel the ground below your feet or the chair beneath you. Notice how it feels to be supported. To intensify this effect, press your feet firmly onto the floor or grab tightly onto your chair.
- Place something cold on your face or on the back of your neck.
- Touch something and focus on how it feels. You can use your phone, keys, a stone, a pillow. Pay attention to details of the texture and temperature.

Smell

- Stop and smell your environment. Try to identify every scent that you can. Be patient—some scents are mild, and it takes focus for them to become noticeable.
- Smell an essential oil, a perfume, aftershave, a candle, or anything that is strongly scented. Breathe it in deeply, focusing intently on the aroma.

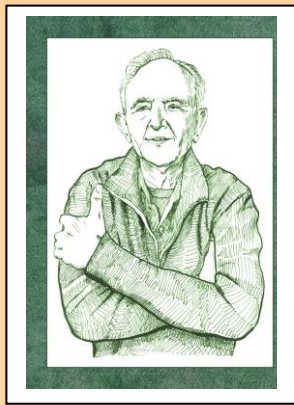
Taste

- Taste something that has a powerful flavor, like a lemon, or peppermint. Let the flavor run its course in your taste buds.

54321 is a technique using all 5 senses. Name 5 things you see in the room; 4 things you can feel, 3 things you hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 good thing about yourself.

3-3-3 is a simpler technique and can be helpful for children.: name three things you see, identify three sounds you can hear, and move three different parts of your body.

Self-Calming - self-containment.



Self - Hug: When stress gets too much, we may feel out of control, chaotic or overwhelmed. Being out of control is unsettling, even if it is unconscious.

Here is an exercise that may help. (From Peter Lavine)

This exercise helps us become aware of our body as the container of all of our sensations and feelings. When we can feel the container, then the emotions and sensations do not feel as overwhelming.

Place one hand under the opposite arm, and then place the other hand over the upper part of the other arm. You are giving yourself a hug.

Pay attention to your body. Let yourself settle into the position. Allow yourself to feel supported by it. Allow yourself to feel contained.

See if you can sit with it for a while. Let it shift your perceptions of yourself and the world before coming out of it.

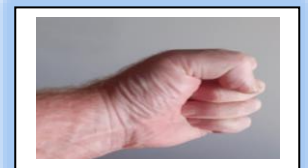
The Fist Clench exercise

This exercise (from the work on self-compassion) uses moving our senses ever so slightly into the 'fight or flight' state. This enables us to engage our parasympathetic nervous system (calming part of our nervous system) to help return to the key place of inner calm.

Close your eyes. Take a moment to feel the sensations of your body's current state. Now, clench your fists tightly.

After about 20 seconds in a soft voice, while you are still clenching your fists:

- Focus on the feelings in your hands.
- What sensations does the tightening of your hands evoke for you?
- What emotions does the clenching and tightness of your fists suggest?
- How does your body feel?

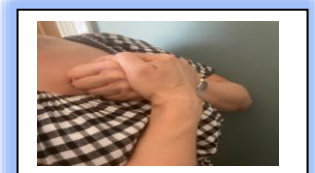
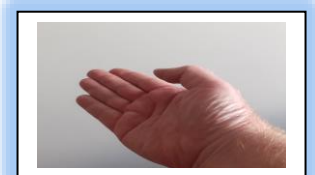


Now release your fists. Open your hands and display your palms facing upward. What shifts as you open your hands and face them upward?

Take deep breaths, cleansing breaths – breathing in hope and happiness.

How does your body feel now? Place one hand on top of the other and put them both gently on the center of your chest.

Focus on and feel the warmth of your hands on your heart and breathe deeply. What feelings, thoughts or sensations does holding your hand on your heart and breathing deeply.



Glimmers

Glimmers are the micro-moments of safety and connection that happen every day yet often go unnoticed. Seeing our glimmers help us feel safe.

A fundamental step in calming your nervous system is noticing glimmers: a picture, a certain smell, a soothing sound, or something enjoyable. Pause to take it in. These cues of safety bring us back to calmness and function as an antidote to the triggers all around us.

What we say to ourselves does matter

Emotionally resilient people are deliberate in their response to challenging experiences. They allow themselves to grieve, remind themselves of what they are grateful for, and focus on what they can control in the moment. These words we say to ourselves are not ignoring what is going on for us but reminding us of our strengths and the situation is only temporary.

- I can get through this.
- I am not going to let myself be a victim.
- Life is not always fair.
- This too shall pass; it is short term.
- What can I learn from this?
- I need some time to calm me down.
- I still have things to be grateful for
- It is what it is.
- I am going to let this go. Let me choose my battles.

**As Rick Hanson says in
Hardwiring for Happiness –
Your mind takes shape from
what it repeatedly rests on.**

Five finger breathing

One hand will be your base you hold still with fingers spread apart. Take your other hand and trace from your thumb and up and down your fingers with your index finger.

As you move your index finger up your thumb and along your fingers, take slow deep breaths in and out, perhaps allowing your eyes to close. As you trace each one, continue to breathe deeply and slowly. Let yourself relax as you breathe gently. Become more and more deeply relaxed each time you exhale.

Reaching your little finger, reverse direction. Focus on your slow breaths and the sensation of your index finger tracing your skin. Continue this exercise as long as you need to and when you are ready, open your eyes and bring any relaxation you have found.



Befriending: getting to know our autonomic ladder.

Adding Language to the three autonomic states is a way to get to know them better.

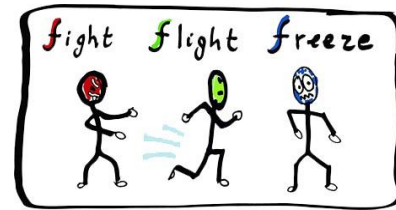
<p>Smoke detector picking up feeling safe, connected. Ventral Vagal: Neuroception of safety</p>	<p>Smoke detector picking up danger - Fight or flight Sympathetic State: Neuroception of danger.</p>	<p>Smoke detector picking up life- threat: Immobilized, freeze, shut down. Dorsal Vagal: Neuroception of threat.</p>
		

What difficulties or situations tend to overwhelm you?

<p>Are there times of feeling safe and connected (ventral vagal) that comes to mind? By yourself? With others?</p>	
<p>What does fight or flight look like for you? (mobilization) Where does that mobilization take you?</p>	

Having the ability to name your states and recognize shifts between them, helps you see how you move up and down the Autonomic ladder.

You can choose other names for the 3 states:



- Safe, connected (ventral vagal) -
- Fight or flight (sympathetic) -
- Shut down (dorsal vagal) –

What color would you give them?

- Safe, connected (ventral vagal) - _
- Fight or flight (sympathetic) - _
- Shut down (dorsal vagal) - _

What animals would you use for each?

- Safe, connected (ventral vagal) - _
- Fight or flight (sympathetic) - _
- Shut down (dorsal vagal) - _

What places or scenes (like nature) describe them?

Safe, connected (ventral vagal) - _

Fight or flight (Sympathetic) -

Shut down (Dorsal vagal) - _

Now complete this with two sentences for each state: “I am...” and “The world is.

You	I am...	The world is...
Safe, connected (Ventral vagal)		
Flight or fight (Sympathetic state)		
Shut down (Dorsal State)		

[Type here]

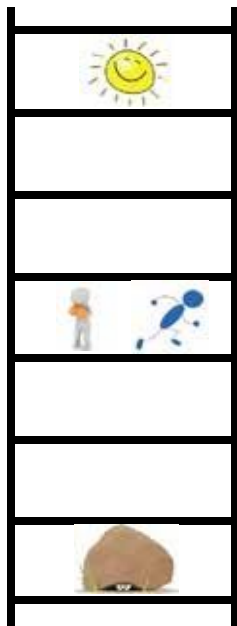
Daily Tracker

Reflecting at the end of a day on the small autonomic changes is an effective way to see the moves up and down the ladder you had that day.

This brings a deeper awareness and understanding of the ways your autonomic nervous system shapes any given day.

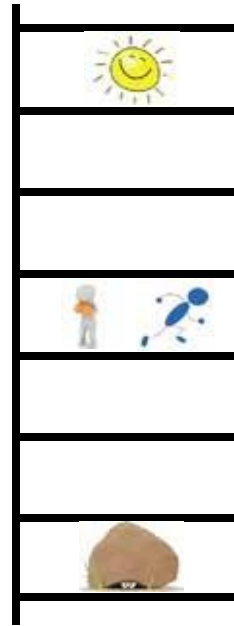
Remember that your autonomic response is an adaptive one. Don't look for what is good or bad. Look for what was present with no self-judgement. Regular tracking practice helps you see the small shifts in patterns of your system going up and down the ladder.

Morning



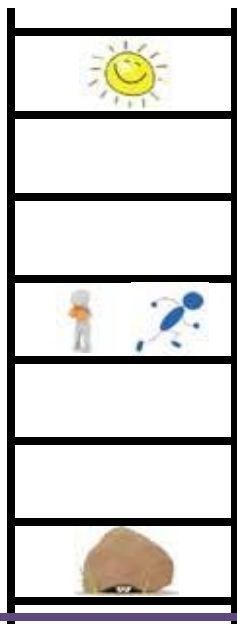
What does my nervous system need right now at this moment?

Noon



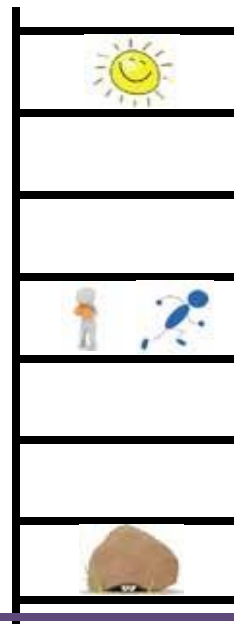
What does my nervous system need right now at this moment?

Afternoon



What does my nervous system need right now at this moment?

Evening



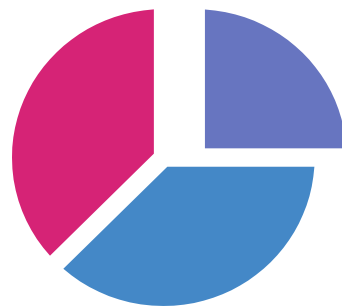
What does my nervous system need right now at this moment?

[Type here]

Using pie charts to track your states over a week.

What color would you give?

- **Ventral Vagal state:** safety and connection _____
- **Sympathetic state:** danger, fight, or flight _____
- **Dorsal Vagal state:** immobilized, shut down. _____



--	--	--

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Is there an overall tone for the week?

Is there a day of the week that repeatedly brings the same autonomic responses?

Is there a pattern to your weekend?

What are my anchors?

Our anchor reminds us, the world is OK, and I am going to be OK in it. This exercise helps you name and own what are anchors for you.



Who?

Think of the people in your life and make a list of the ones who bring you a feeling of being safe. You might also have a pet that does that. Your list can include people who are no longer living, and spiritual figures.

What?

Think about what you do that brings your sense of safety and connection alive. Look for small actions that feel nourishing, relaxing, and soothing. Keep track of the things that bring moments of safety and connection.

Where?

Take a mental tour of your world. Name the physical places that bring you cues of safety.

Look around your home, your community, your workplace, a place you feel a spiritual connection. Nature does that for a lot of people.

When?

Identify the moments when you feel anchored in safety (your ventral vagal).

Take a moment and be aware of them. Write them down. When you do this, take notice of what it does for you.

If you have anchors, good. If you struggle a bit with this, start small and build on them.

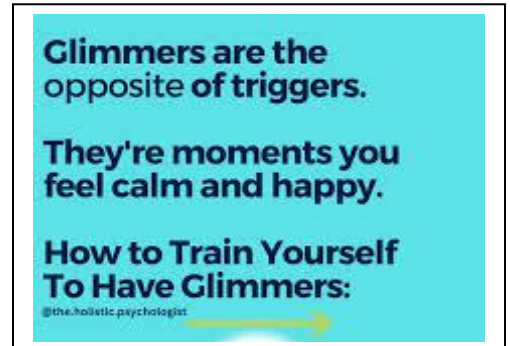
Owning and guiding your nervous system:

In this section we will share with you a number of exercises to help you get more control of your nervous system.

Creating Glimmers

Glimmers are the micro-moments of safety and connection (ventral vagal experiences) that happen every day yet often go unnoticed. Glimmers help us feel safe, connected to ourselves and other people.

Some examples of Glimmers: The smell of cut grass. Spotting a rainbow. a spectacular sunrise or sunset, reminder of someone close to you, a smell you like,



1. Make a menu of glimmers that work for you.
 -
 -
 -
2. Set a goal to look for a certain number of glimmers each day.
Today I will.....
3. Look for glimmers during your day. Glimmers happen regularly, but because they can be small micro-moments, you need to be on the lookout for them. Notice when you feel that spark of feeling safe and connected (ventral vagal)
4. When you notice a glimmer, stop, and appreciate it. Acknowledge a glimmer when it happens. You might bring attention to the moment by simply saying “glimmer” or with a small movement like your hand on your heart.
5. Write them down. Create a daily glimmers notebook.
6. Look for glimmers in specific places, with particular people, at certain times.
7. Share your glimmers .

From Glimmer to Glow

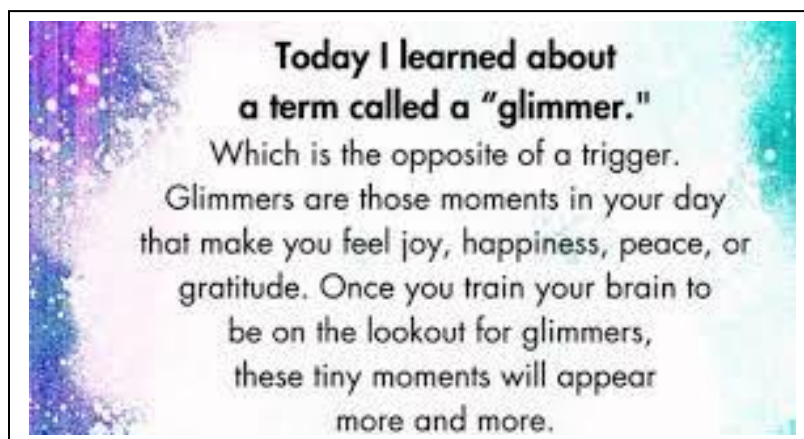
Just as sparks can ignite a fire, glimmers can be turned deeper into a glow.

Pause just long enough to acknowledge that a safety and connection moment is happening.

Stop and celebrate the glimmer. Take time to soak it in and give it deeper meaning.



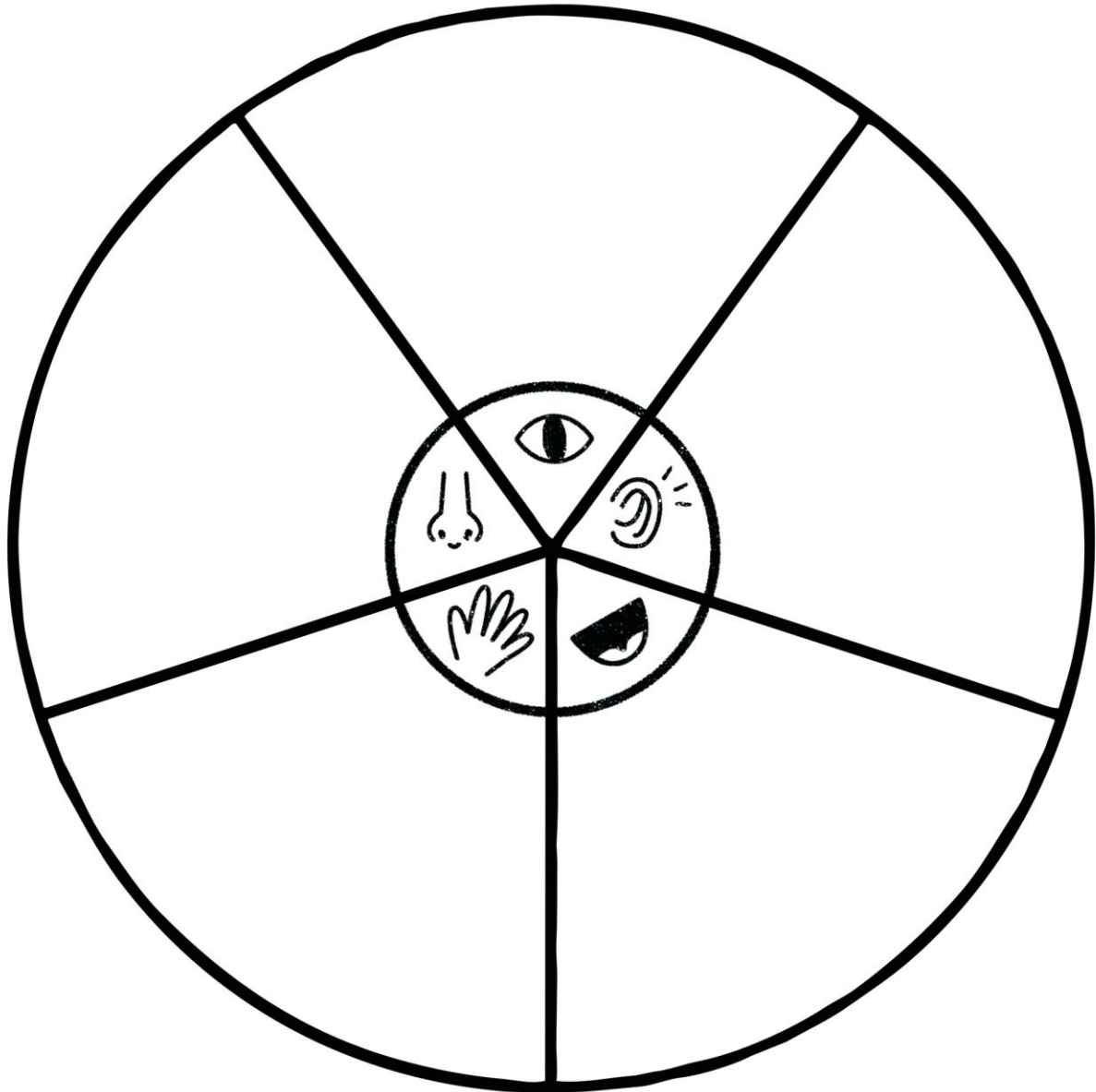
1. Notice a glimmer, stop, and let the experience fill you. Move beyond a few seconds and stay with the experience for half a minute or more. Give the glimmer time to become a glow.
2. Feel what happens as you move from connecting from a micro moment to a longer experience of taking it in.
3. Describe your experience of the glimmer and the glow.
A glimmer moment might be a quick hit of happiness that brings a smile. When you turn a glimmer into a glow, the experience feels like basking in the warmth of the sun while breathing a sigh of contentment.
4. Listen to the story that comes with the glow.



Using Our Senses

Grounding techniques use your five senses, sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste helps the brain refocus quickly.

What can I see, hear, taste, touch, smell?



Using Your Vagal Brake: Meeting demands of the day.

The vagal brake describes actions to slow down or speed up the heart, supporting a flexible response to challenges. Think about the vagal brake working like the brakes on a bicycle.



Find an image of your vagal brake that works for you which gives you a feeling of control. We mentioned images bicycle brakes. Other images include:

- a bridge that opens and closes to let ships pass.
- a faucet: how fast do we want the water to run.
- a volume control knob: we control the level of sound.
- a dimmer switch: how much light is needed.

Use the image and/or movement to intentionally engage, relax and reengage the brake. See yourself as an active operator of your vagal brake, shaping the rise and fall of energy. yourself adjusting it.

1. Write a simple story about your vagal brake using the image. Describe your image and how you use it to increase energy and return to calm.
2. Use movement or your senses. Not everyone uses imagery. For some people movement or your senses, works better.
3. Connect your vagal brake image and/or movement to your breath cycle. A subtle pattern of relaxation and re-engagement happens with every breath cycle. With each inhalation, the brake relaxes then re-engages on the out breath to bring a slower heartbeat. Try this. Feel your vagal brake relax, then re-engage with each breath. Move through several breath cycles until it begins to feel natural.
4. Intentionally exercise your vagal brake. Start with a small challenge, something that is commonly experienced in your day-to-day life. On a scale of intensity from 1–10, choose something in the 1–3 range.

Experiment with a variety of challenges. Build confidence in using your vagal brake to meet everyday challenges. You can practice using your vagal brake with things in your environment, play or with relationships.

Once you feel confident in successfully meeting small challenges, choose a slightly stronger challenge.

Establishing new autonomic rhythms. Recognize, Reflect , Regulate, Create “If-Then” Statements

When we notice our automatic states, (connected/safe, fight or flight; shut down) we can engage with it, not to be engaged by it.

Recognize: Autonomic awareness is a protective factor. Without the ability to recognize states and state changes, you risk being stuck in dysregulation.

Ready to try something new?

The question, “Where am I on my autonomic ladder?”

- **Notice:** As we have talked about, be aware of your autonomic state.
- **Name it:** Don’t get bogged down in a story. Just put a name on it. Where are you on your autonomic ladder?
- **Do this often:** With practice you can quickly and accurately place yourself on your autonomic ladder.

Reflect: Once notice-and-name becomes easier and automatic, add the next step of listening to what it is telling you. Don’t spend a long time hearing the full story. Just take long enough to get the general idea of what is happening.

1. Be curious about what just prompted a mobilization of your flight or fight state (sympathetic system), a descent into shut down (dorsal vagal) or an experience of safety and connection (ventral vagal).
2. Listen to what your state wants you to know.
 - My flight or fight (sympathetic mobilization) is telling me . . .
 - My shut down (dorsal vagal state) is letting me know . . .
 - My connected/ safe state (ventral vagal system) is inviting me to . . .
3. Listen with curiosity and without judgment. Don’t spend more than a minute or so listening. This practice is a quick experience of listening to the outlines of your story and not diving into the details.

Regulate: Setting goals helps you achieve something.

Consider the goals you want to set. Ask yourself:

- Where do I want my autonomic patterns to take me?
- What do I want to change?
- What do I want to deepen (glimmers, glow)?



Write down your goals. Begin each statement with the words “I intend to.” For example:

- I intend to not get stuck in shut down (dorsal vagal collapse)

- I intend to manage my flight or fight response (sympathetic response) with ... (you decide what you will use: breathing, self-containment, your senses)

- I intend to find moments of safety and connection goals with glimmers (ventral vagal).

Create “If-Then” Statements: Once you identify your autonomic goals, translate your intention into action by adding what is called an if-then statement.

An if-then statement identifies when, where, and how you plan to respond to a situation. Writing if-then statements creates a link between triggers and responses, making it easier for you to recognize situations and do something.

1. Set goals for responding to cues of safety and danger in new ways. Set goals for all three states. Make sure your goals are not too big or unrealistic and hard to put into action. Set goals with small steps, are well defined, and you can see what happens when you follow them through.
2. Add the “If then statement”. “If this happens then I will...” for each of your identified goals.
3. Add what you will use to help you achieve that goal: breathing, using my senses or other tools we have talked about in this booklet.
4. Track what happens. As your responses shift you may want to add new goals and write new if- then statements.

Connections

We come into the world wired for connection with others. Connections are essential to survival.

According to Polyvagal theory, co-regulation, the mutual sending and receiving of signals happens all the time. It is the connection between two nervous systems, each impacting and regulating the other. That happens with parents and children and also between adults. When we self-regulate and work on co-regulation, we put welcoming cues out into the world which can be a glimmer for others.

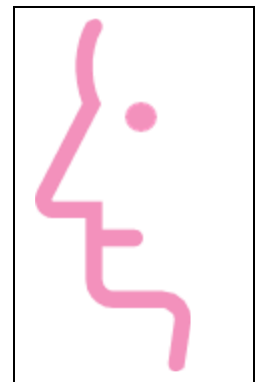


Clusters of Connection

If our connection with others is beneficial, how do strengthen them? This exercise looks at who and how you are connected in your world. Don't think of connections as right or wrong. Instead, stay curious. Look at the connections that are helpful to you and your nervous system. People (and pets) that help you feel safe.

1. Look at people in your life. Make a list of the people (or pets) you feel connected with. Listen to your autonomic response as you think about them.

Identify how close you feel to these people. Use a scale of 1–3, loosely connected; 4–7, pretty connected; 8–10, very connected. It is not the number of connections that matters; but how helpful they are to you.



2. Look at how often you connect with people in your world.

3. Look at the ways you connect during quiet moments, going out or staying in favorite activities, trying new things.

The Sound of Your Voice to strengthen co-regulation.

Our nervous system hears the tone of voice as well as the words said. You respond to the tone of a voice before you take in any information. The way you speak changes the way you feel, the story you tell and changes the way people around you hear what you are saying.



- Experiment with the ways your voice impacts the way you feel. Tell, or record, a short story in different tones of voice. Notice where the different tones of your voice take you.
- Track the way the same word is spoken in different tones of voice brings a different state and feeling. Choose a word, speak it in different ways and follow the ways your states and feelings shift. Try out a variety of words and notice the specific ways of speaking that elicit certain states and feelings.
- Talk about a difficult experience using different tones of voice. Track what happens to your autonomic state. Find the way of speaking that brings you into a sense of safety and connection (ventral vagal state)
- Find a friend and experiment. Talk in different tones of voice and give feedback.

Strengthening our Vagal Tone Worksheet

In the main workbook, we discussed different ways to stimulate your Vagus nerve. The beneficial effects of increased vagal nerve function are so far-reaching.

It is worthwhile for us all to add some of these new habits into our daily lives.

In the space below, write down what you tried and how it worked for you.

Rate how helpful they were in creating thinking time using the following scale: 1=Not helpful at all; 7=Very helpful.



What did you do?	Day tried	Success Rating (1-7)	What were the benefits of doing it?

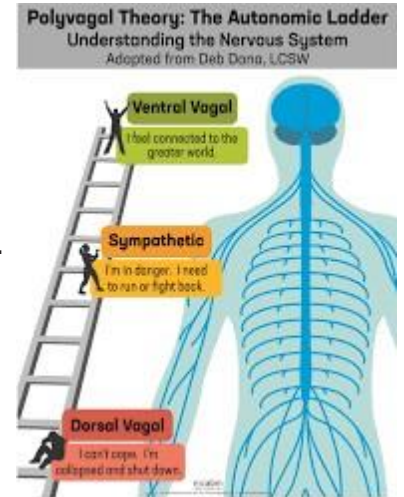
Going back to getting a general flavor of the time you were doing these things you can do a pie chart we looked at on page 20.



Regulating Resource Map

This activity is here to help you think of what keeps you stuck in a certain state (survival) and what helps you climb the ladder to where you would like to be.

Use the work from triggers and glimmers to help to complete this.



Things I do on my own or with others.

Safe, Connected Ventral Vagal	What helps me stay here?	What helps me stay here?
Fight or Flight Sympathetic State	What keeps me stuck here?	What helps me move out of here?
Shut down / Immobilized. Dorsal State	What keeps me stuck here?	What helps me move out of here?

The Quest for Safety and Connection: An Overview

Autonomic Nervous System

Part of the peripheral nervous system, outside of the brain and **95%** outside our conscious awareness.

Neuroception - that internal smoke detector - the way our nervous system scans for cues of safety or danger and threat.

SAFETY

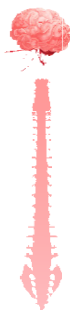
Connected, safe
Eye contact,
facial expressions,
support
(Ventral Vagal)

**DANGER
THREAT**

Sympathetic Nervous
System - Fight or flight
Mobilization

**LIFE
THREAT**

Shut down-
immobilization
(Dorsal Vagal)



Vagus Nerve - Connecting brain and body.
Vagal tone - How well your Vagus Nerve is working.

Take Home Messages

- Polyvagal Theory – autonomic scanning for safety and danger
- Our nervous system responds in a hierarchical way.
- The importance of connection as part of safety
- A regulated nervous system notices that need for safety and connection and how it can find its way back.
- The goal for regulation is flexibility.



As stated this is an introduction to our nervous system and the Polyvagal Theory. It is only the beginning.

This work was developed from two books by Deb Dana.

The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation W. W. Norton & Company; 1 2018.

Polyvagal Exercises for safety and Connection: 50 Client Centered Practices - W. W. Norton & Company 2020.

Helpful links

The website of Dr. Stephen Porges, author of the Polyvagal Theory: Home of Dr. Stephen Porges <https://www.stephenporges.com>

Deb Dana's website: Polyvagal Guided Living | Rhythm of Regulation <https://www.rhythmofregulation.com>

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