

Polyvagal Theory

Polyvagal Theory (created by Dr. Stephen Porges) is a way of understanding how our intricate nervous system responds to our emotional experiences such as stress, danger or safety.

The vagus nerve activates the body's relaxation response and helps regulate symptoms of anxiety & stress.

The Three States

Our autonomic nervous system has 3 states of response, which we move through in a predictable hierarchy.

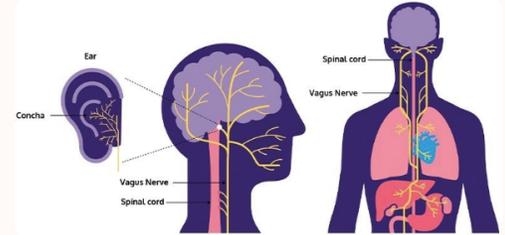
The **ventral state** is a place of well-being, we feel safe and connected in our social environment. We are organized, regulated, clear headed and ready to engage. We feel calm and in control, present.

When a moment is too big or overwhelms us, we shift down

The **sympathetic state** is a system of mobilization such as heart rate, breath and energy. In survival mode, it activates our "fight or flight," response and pulls us into anger and anxiety.

If the threat causes a trapped feeling or a fear response, we drop again

The **dorsal state** is parasympathetic and controls digesting, sleep and dreaming. In survival mode it activates our "freeze," response: we disconnect, disassociate, withdraw, shut down and feel depressed.



Your vagus nerves are the longest cranial nerve, running from your brain to your large intestine, traveling down the right & left side of your neck.

Awareness of the thoughts and feelings typically associated with our "fight, flight and freeze" responses will allow you to recognize when you are dropping through the hierarchy of your nervous system.

The following Polyvagal Exercises will help you change course.

Vagus Nerve Massage

About 5 Min

1. Inhale slowly, in through your nose & out through your mouth as you move through the massage
2. Use your clavicle as the starting point. From there, apply light pressure in an upward movement along both sides of your neck.
3. Rub the top of your earlobes, the base, and the cartilage at the ear canal. These parts of the ear contain vagus nerve-stimulating pressure points.
4. Place interlocked hands behind your head, keeping your head straight, but look to the right. Hold this position until you feel a yawn come on. Yawning is a response to vagus nerve stimulation. Repeat on the left side.

Why is "breath work" important?

Our body awareness is more accessible, our focus can be more attuned, and there's an immediate regulation that comes from this predictable and involuntary behavior.

Quick & Simple

Singing, Humming, Chanting (Om) and Gargling: The vagus nerve is connected to your vocal cords and the muscles in your throat so activating these muscles will stimulate the vagus nerve.

Cold Exposure: If cold plunging isn't for you, 15 Seconds of Cold at the end of a shower or an ice-water facial will trigger the mammalian diving reflex, which activates your vagus nerve.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation: A heightened state increases your heart rate and contracts your muscles. Breathing deeply, tense and relax muscles moving from your forehead to your toes to calm the sympathetic output and increase agency in distress.

A Meditative Mantra

Walking by the sea...
The sand and waves
nourish me,
I am filled with peace