

Guide

The Polyvagal Theory

People: Ideally your whole group

Time: Approximately 45 minutes to read and discuss this Guide

Resources: This Guide and a place to meet

How Can This Help Us?

Our bodies are constantly scanning the environment for signs of danger – and responding! – without our even knowing it. This can create difficulty in group cultures, because we become less able to connect and collaborate when our bodies are mobilized for defense. By learning about the (3) different states of our Autonomic Nervous System, we are better able to notice when our bodies are becoming activated, and to take the opportunity to re-establish the safety we need in order to come back into relationship with others.

Because human Nervous Systems communicate with each other non-verbally, when we create safety within our own system, we also contribute to the safety experienced by other group members. Therefore, being in an attuned relationship with our own Nervous System is a powerful form of leadership within our group cultures.

The Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)

Refers to certain parts of the brain, as well as the nerves they connect to, which regulate body functions that happen without our conscious control, eg. breath, heart rate, constriction or dilation of blood vessels, digestion. The main nerve involved is the Vagus Nerve (10th Cranial Nerve). The ANS plays a fundamental role in helping our bodies respond to dangerous and safe environments.

A 3-Circuit System

We used to believe that the ANS had two branches, one which increased the energy and activity in our muscles and organs (Sympathetic), and one which decreased it (Parasympathetic). More recently, the work of Dr. Stephen Porges on the “Polyvagal Theory” has demonstrated that the ANS in fact has three main branches.

Which Branch Engages?

The ANS activates different branches depending on the degree of threat it perceives in the environment. In conditions of relative safety, the ANS uses the Social Engagement System to

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support connection with other mammals to resolve challenges in a friendly way. To use the metaphor of a traffic light, the Social Engagement System comes online when the ANS gives a Green Light, signalling safety in the environment.

The ANS will engage its Activation System (commonly known as the “Fight/Flight” response) when it perceives that there is a moderate threat of danger – one that might successfully be fought with or fled from – in the environment. This response is like a Yellow Light signalling the body to proceed with its defense circuits activated.

If the ANS perceives that there is inescapable, overwhelming danger in the environment, it will activate the Immobilization System (commonly known as the “Faint” response, or “dissociation”) to numb the body in preparation for the pain of death. This response is like a Red Light, bringing an abrupt halt to the body’s movement.

Do I Have a Choice?

The ANS decides which branch to activate based on a split-second process called Neuroception, in which it interprets cues from the inner and outer environment as signalling safety or danger. With practice we can influence this process by noticing our body’s cues as it goes into Activation or Immobilization, and support it to re-establish the sense of safety it needs to come back into Social Engagement. However, trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) compromise our body’s ability to “shift gears” between states, and can make it much harder to return to Social Engagement at will.

The ANS in Groups

The ANS underlies our responses to ourselves, each other, and our environment. By paying attention to our bodies’ signals, by self-regulating, and by creating group cultures that send plenty of safety signals, we can increasingly use the Social Engagement System instead of our defense systems to deal with conflict and challenge, to learn and experiment with new behaviours, and to promote an atmosphere of healthy collaboration and interconnection in our groups.

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