

KATIE

DILLINGHAM
INTEGRATIVE THERAPY

FROM DYSREGULATION TO
REGULATION – AN INTRODUCTION
TO POLYVAGAL THEORY



LEARN TO CALM YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

When you want to change the way you feel or respond to what's happening in your life, it can be helpful to understand *why* you feel or respond the way you do. **Polyvagal theory** is a great tool for doing just that.

As a therapist, I love diving into research and translating academic findings into relatable tools and techniques that allow us to improve our everyday lives. In my practice, I use polyvagal theory with my clients to explain the relationship between our autonomic nervous system – the involuntary part – and our behavior. Understanding this connection can help you learn to repattern your nervous system, build capacities for regulation, and learn autonomic – voluntary – methods to bring yourself back to a state of calm and connection – with yourself and with those around you.

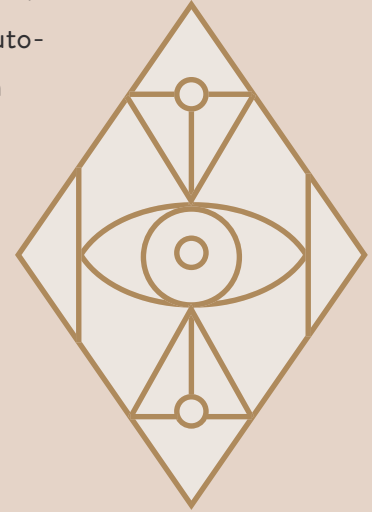


POLYVAGAL THEORY CAN HELP YOU:

- Learn to track what you're feeling from moment to moment.
- Deepen your awareness of how, why and when you might be triggered.
- Experience a greater sense of agency and control of your feelings.
- Learn tools to self-regulate and reestablish feelings of calm and connection.
- Become more self-aware and mindful.

POLYVAGAL THEORY: A TOOL FOR UNDERSTANDING

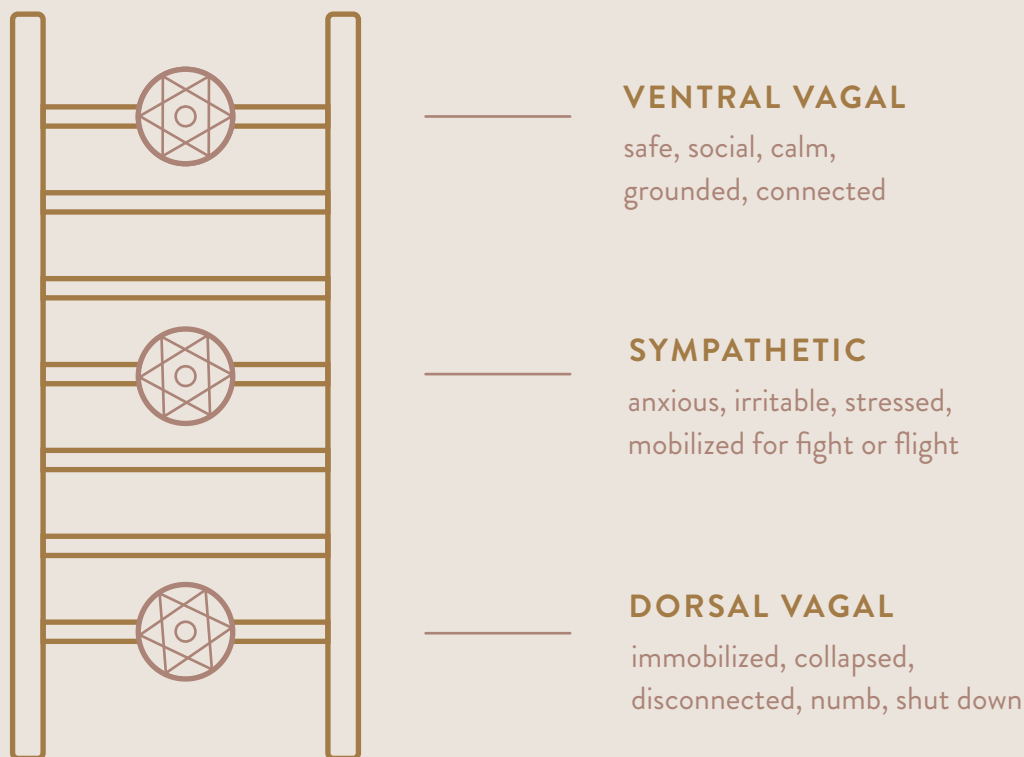
First introduced by Stephen Porges in 1994, polyvagal theory is based on Dr. Porges' research on the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve contributes to the autonomic nervous system – the part of your nervous system that's involved in *involuntary* responses. The vagus is the longest and most complex of the nerves that emanate from the brain. It runs all the way from your brainstem to your abdomen, and it transmits information from the surface of your brain to your tissues and most of your organs. It's responsible for the regulation of critical processes like heart rate, respiratory rate, digestion and other important bodily functions that you can't voluntarily control. Importantly, the vagus nerve is also involved in returning your body to a state of calm and rest after it's been activated.



Your autonomic nervous system is designed to help you survive in dangerous situations and thrive in safe ones. Polyvagal theory suggests there are three pathways of information in your body that contribute to your survival: the ventral branch of your vagus nerve, your sympathetic nervous system, and the dorsal branch of your vagus nerve. The theory helps explain how your nervous system reacts when your brain perceives danger or safety, and in turn, how you feel and act. It shows how your responses are often involuntary – a result of what your nervous system evolved to do in response to your environment.

The theory explains that your evolutionarily “older” mammalian brain structures are in charge of your primitive defensive systems. It provides ideas for how you can use your evolutionarily “newer” brain structures to repattern your responses and build capacities for self-regulation.

In other words, it can help you understand why you do what you do, and how you can change it.



THE POLYVAGAL LADDER AND THE STATE OF YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

While you're probably familiar with the concept of "fight or flight" as a response to danger, and you may have heard of its counterpart "rest and digest" as a response to safety, polyvagal theory suggests there are actually three nervous system states, and that it's natural for us to always be moving between them in response to the world around us.

You probably know from experience how you can feel calm and open in one moment, then progress quickly through a state of frustration, anger or fear, and then into a state of total shutdown or hopelessness in response to a "trigger" in your life. It might be in reaction to something your partner says, a work challenge or a truly life-threatening situation. When the trigger in your environment is removed or "deactivated," and your nervous system does its job, the process eventually reverses itself to bring you back to a state of calm, clear-headedness.

Understanding the role your autonomic nervous system plays in this process can help you identify your state in the moment, better understand your triggers, and learn how to repattern your responses and return to a state of regulation.

THE VENTRAL VAGAL STATE

This state is characterized by a general sense of calm, clear thinking, and of feeling safe, social and engaged.

CHARACTERISTICS

- A sense of calm and control
- Access to self-compassion and understanding
- Clear thinking and common sense
- The idea of rejection isn't threatening
- An ability to find solutions for feeling bad, distressed or overwhelmed
- Physical safety and ease in your body
- Relaxed muscles in your body and around your eyes
- Normal digestion
- Openness to relationships and sexual arousal
- A desire to be with friends or a partner
- Comfort with being alone
- A sense that life is filled with possibilities

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES:

When you can think about an ongoing struggle with your partner and you're able to have some hope for things to shift. You see the whole person and not just the parts you don't like.

When you can process work stress and use connection and resources to help you manage it, or you can access inner motivation to look for another job.



THE SYMPATHETIC STATE

In this state, you can move from alertness or activation through agitation, anxiousness and the fight or flight response due to overwhelm or stress, or perceived threat or danger.

CHARACTERISTICS

- Feelings of alertness, anxiousness, or alarm
- Feelings of anger, shame, fear or disgust
- Racing thoughts
- Difficulty observing yourself
- Misreading cues and making up “stories” about what you perceive
- Feeling like an outsider
- An increasingly limited ability to connect with yourself and others
- A desire to self-protect
- Tense muscles in your body and around your eyes
- Given to crying easily
- Easily defensive
- Digestion issues

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES:

When you’re starting to be hard on yourself about small things – things you didn’t care about the day before or even liked about yourself.

When you can’t find anything to wear, or you just don’t feel like going out.

When you start to feel an intense panic to “fix” yourself. You might overbook your life and strive for perfection, which seems achievable from this state.



THE DORSAL VAGAL STATE

This state is one of collapse, numbness or total shutdown, physically, mentally and emotionally.

CHARACTERISTICS

- Feelings of fear or terror
- Being withdrawn or shut down
- Feeling distant or numb
- Foggy thoughts or a blank mind
- In the extreme, a loss of bodily functions and bowel control
- A desire to escape
- Rigid muscles in the body and eyes
- Dissociation and a disconnection from self
- A sense your body is disappearing
- A feeling of invisibility
- No sense of hope
- An inability to connect with others

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES:

When you feel like any little thing in your life is too much. Even picking up something small feels like it requires too much physical exertion.

When you feel like disappearing, but even that feels too hard.

When connection feels like a threat. If a friend reaches out to you, you might not pick up the phone or you might experience feelings of hopelessness.



REFLECT ON THE STATES OF YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Think of a current struggle in your life – something that’s been challenging for you off and on, so that you have some perspective on the range of your responses. Spend the next few days thinking about the polyvagal chart and pay attention to the different autonomic states you find yourself in throughout the day. Keep a journal by your side and give yourself time to write down your experiences about these three states. Begin to consider how the state of your nervous system changes how you perceive the world, and how you’re triggered to move from one state to another. You might begin to see how having a difficult conversation, addressing a challenge or moving through uncertainty is easier when you’re in a ventral vagal state.

REAL-LIFE EXAMPLES:

Wanting or needing to quit your job or ask for more money, but finding yourself unable to do it because you become overwhelmed with feelings of guilt, fear, anger or shame.

Having “mixed feelings” for the person you’re dating and not being able to decide how to move forward in your relationship.

Struggling with a friendship and how to ask your friend for what you need.

When you have personal information about your different nervous system states, you have a powerful tool. You can begin to use it to inform how to intervene *with yourself* to shift back to a ventral vagal state of connection with yourself and others, so you can address challenges and uncertainty.

If you’re noticing a lot of sympathetic arousal, it might be time to set a boundary with someone in your life or discharge some cortisol. You can reduce or dump stress by going for a run, lifting weights, dancing, journaling or meditating. Do what works best for you.

If you’re often in dorsal vagal shutdown, a weighted blanket, hot bath, cold shower, massage, rocking back and forth, humming or chanting can help your brainstem. Find things that help produce a calming sensation in your body.

And if you’re noticing a lot of ventral vagal energy, it’s a great time to be social and hang out with friends, your partner, or on your own. This is the place we would all like to be in all the time, so enjoy!



ABOUT MY PRACTICE

I believe that understanding how your brain actually works can help you understand why you're struggling. When you know why your brain does what it does, you can take steps to create change for the better.

As a licensed clinical therapist in Austin, TX, I provide relational therapy rooted in neuroscience to help my clients experience greater personal freedom and fulfillment through a renewed relationship with themselves and others. I've been a licensed professional counselor since 2015. My specialized training includes Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), internal family systems training, interpersonal neurobiology (IPNB) and Relational Life Therapy training with the Relational Life Institute.

If you're seeking individual or group therapy, I offer a complimentary 10-minute consultation session to help us find out if we're a good fit.



WORK WITH ME

