

The Polyvagal Theory, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges, with clinical applications by Deb Dana, who coined the metaphor of the ANS hierarchical ladder, and, it is Deb that spoke of the idea of “glimmers” which is the idea that often, even during some of the most challenging times, we have the ability and capacity to notice things that bring AWE into our system, if only for a part of a second. Glimmers are experiences that resonate in their fullness, into your soulful rhythm, unique to you. The word glimmer offers a sense of hope.

which the ability to guide, coach, and move into different perspectives and goals, energies, confidence, pain, offers new insights into the evolution of the nervous system, from describing a Social Engagement System that is a human race adaptation, as two vital survival challenges were in our early ancestors, danger, and the need to protect, especially younger people, and a need to connect, find compassion and belonging in each other. It discusses how our Autonomic Nervous System responds to stress and how it impacts our feelings of safety and connection. The theory describes three primary states of the nervous system:

1. **Ventral Vagal State (Safe and Social State):** This state is associated with feelings of safety, connection, and social engagement.
 - a. The ventral vagal state is regulated by the ventral branch of the vagus nerves.
 - b. Other states, such as sympathetic arousal, may be combined to make a hybrid that is safe and social and fun, energetic, and any range in between.
 - c. Without ventral added, or if there is too much anxious sympathetic, this may turn into inattention, hyperactivity, and physical illness.
2. **Sympathetic State (Fight or Flight):** This state is activated when we *perceive* threat or danger.
 - a. It prepares the body for (often) defensive action.
 - b. Sympathetic activity in the freeze response: all energy goes to our brainstem and to remaining still. There is often shutdown awaiting as energy from the defense is overtaken by an instinct to faint with this “too much sympathetic activation” into a dorsal shutdown response.
3. **Dorsal Vagal State (Freeze into Collapse):** This is a more primitive state where the body shuts down in response to overwhelming threat, often when the fight or flight response is deemed ineffective. For example, it is an opossum playing dead.

Do Not be Confused here: Above are simply the evolutionary hierarchy as the vagus nerve evolved in a sequence from dorsal vagal nerve to the three explained and all they connect and add potential hybrid combinations of states. There are infinite multitudes of stress, calmness, capacity for us to move during our states, including mental flexibility and the ability to first co- and then self-regulate. So much of life is beyond our reflexive adaptive (for early life survival, or later Trauma) reactions. That’s because humans have a negativity bias, and are both more in tune with looking for negatives, including threats, pretty much from heartbeat to heartbeat. As we can settle down our system, move into more ventral vagal states and hybrids, we build more internal awareness, relational understanding, and an ability to be in a state of Self, with the ventral vagal energy onboard.

There are newly identified and Explained ways of receiving information, which follow:

1. Interoception -
2. Exteroception
3. Proprioception
4. Neuroception

POLYVAGAL TONING EXERCISES

To enhance "polyvagal tone" means to engage and strengthen our ability to effectively transition between states; particularly, it increases our capacity to return to the safe and social state after a stressor. Here are some exercises based on the Polyvagal Theory that can help:

1. **Deep Breathing:** Slow, deep breaths, especially with extended exhalation, can stimulate the ventral vagal nerves. This helps shift the body towards a state of calm. Diaphragmatic breathing, where you breathe from the belly, is especially effective.
2. **Vocal Engagement:** Singing, humming, or even gargling can **stimulate the vagus nerves** due to its connection to the vocal cords and the muscles at the back of the throat. [Straw video](#)
3. **Cold Exposure:** A brief **splash of cold water on your face, or a cold shower** can stimulate the vagus nerve and have a grounding effect.
4. **Connection:** Social engagement is at the heart of the Polyvagal Theory. Simply making eye contact, listening attentively, or having a meaningful conversation can shift the nervous system towards a safe and social state.
5. **Movement:** **Gentle activities** like yoga or tai chi, which **emphasize breath and movement**, can enhance vagal tone. Dancing, especially with others, is also beneficial.
6. **Mindfulness and Meditation:** Grounding exercises and mindfulness practices can help bring the body into the present moment and out of a state of hyperarousal or dissociation.
7. **Safe Physical Touch:** This could be a comforting hug, a hand on the shoulder, or a therapeutic touch, like a massage, which can help activate the body's social engagement system. Of course, please ask before any physical touch, even for family members.
8. **Listening to or Making Music:** Especially if it's soothing, and bringing us into a ventral vagal state, can also stimulate the body's social engagement system. [The SSP](#) is an example that we offer at Sensing Fields, LLC in which titrated music is filtered so that it opens our window of tolerance, creating safety (which feels completely unsafe sometimes when safety is new).
9. **Play:** Engage in playful activities, which can be both socially engaging and regulating. Playing games outdoors, board games, and even some video games.
10. **Laughter:** Genuine laughter and joy are excellent for engaging the ventral vagal system. Funny videos, jokes, and lighthearted fun help us build the capacity for joy and resilience.
11. **Nature Connection:** Spend time in nature. Nature is not only grounding because of the Earth's electromagnetic field; listening to the sounds of birds or water can be soothing and grounding. My clients tend to know me as someone who says "go hug a tree". I think it is more, touch a tree, notice the groves, the leaves, what kind of tree, and even bringing a sense of awe, wonder, and beginners mind, meaning approaching it as you have not seen it ever before (or as if you never have).

Remember, everyone is different, so it's essential to find what works best for you and **listen to your body**. Some people might find certain activities more grounding or regulating than others. It's also helpful to work with a therapist, coach or counselor familiar with the Polyvagal Theory if you're dealing with trauma or significant stressors.