

‘We can reshape our nervous system’



Do you ever have a flight or fight response on assignment? **Ali Hetherington** unpacks the potential of Polyvagal Theory to help us identify triggers and reduce the intensity of our reactions

Are there situations where you instantly feel comfortable and relaxed and others where you become on edge, nervous and uncomfortable? You may not be able to put a finger on exactly why this is. Our nervous system is constantly taking in information from the world around us, through facial expressions and body language for example, helping us to assess if we are safe or in danger. This all takes place in our subconscious, yet shapes how we feel and think about any given situation and how we respond to the people we meet.

When our nervous system detects no cues of danger, we feel safe, connected, open to others and grounded. We feel a natural curiosity, happiness, and even playfulness. The immediate response to cues of danger activates the sympathetic nervous system

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‘Physiological responses include an increase in heart rate, shallow breathing, a need to go to the toilet and sweating’

and prompts the ‘fight or flight’ response. Our bodies then release cortisol, adrenaline and other hormones to help us either retreat or fight.

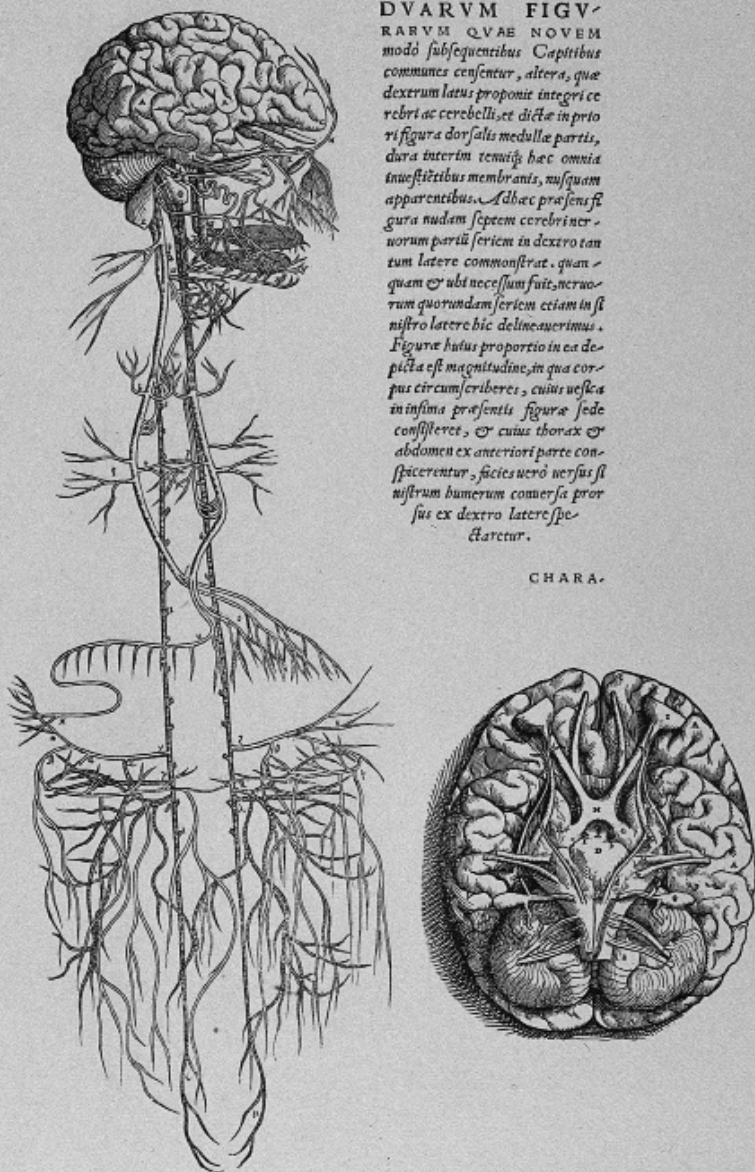
Smoke alarms and symptoms

There are times when we need to act to save ourselves. If we’re caught in a fire, our nervous system floods our body with cortisol to mobilise us to seek safety. Our threat system, however, can also be activated when there is no actual danger; it acts like a smoke alarm that is set off even when we have just burnt the toast, yet we experience the same physiological responses. These include an increase in heart rate, shallow breathing, a need to go to the toilet and sweating. What activates this depends on our individual triggers. In a work context, this could range from interpreting at a prestigious event, to simply asking for a break, for others.

I anticipate that I will feel nervous before interpreting a performance and more so if other interpreters are present. My cue for danger here is that I may be perceived as ‘not good enough’, while another interpreter may not

**DVARVM FIGV-
RARVM QVAE NOVEN**
modo subsequentijs Capitibus
communes censentur, altera, quae
dexterum latus proponit integri ce-
rebrri ac cerebelli, et dictae in prio-
ri figura dorsalis medullae partis,
dura interim tenuiq; haec omnia
inuestitibus membranjs, nusquam
apparentibus. Adhaec praesens fi-
gura nudam speciem cerebri ner-
vorum partu seriem in dextro tan-
tum latere demonstrat, quam
quam & ubi necessum fuit, nervo-
rum quorundam seriem etiam in si-
nistro latere hic delineaverimus.
Figurae huius proportio in ea de-
picta est magnitudine, in qua cor-
pus circumsciberet, cuius vesica
in infima praesentis figura sede
constiteret, & cuius thorax &
abdomen ex anteriori parte con-
spicerentur, sicutis vero nervus si-
nistrum humerum comersa pro-
sus ex dextro latere spe-
ctaretur.

CHARA.



The brain, in right profile with the glossopharyngeal and vagus nerves and, to the right, a view of the base of the brain (Photolithograph, 1940, after a woodcut, 1543)

have the same cue of danger and feel confident and calm undertaking such bookings. Our threat system can also be activated when we have taken on too much, for example when we are working long hours with limited downtime. We may feel constantly 'on' and find it difficult to switch off, which may affect our sleep, eating and ability to relax.

Everybody's nervous system is different as it is shaped by our life experience, and how it is shaped then becomes the foundation for how we experience the world. Our nervous system is attuned to situations that signified danger in the past and it will continue to be activated even though there is no actual danger present.

When my threat system is activated, how I see the world and the stories I tell myself are different from when I feel safe. If I am nervous about working with a particular co-worker, I may tell myself that they will judge me and feel defensive and this could impact how I approach co-working. It is very likely that my co-worker, and certainly their nervous system, would pick this up. Their threat system may also be activated and, as this is unconscious, they will create their own narrative about what is happening.

If, on the other hand, I recognise these feelings are my own and reassure myself that my co-worker hasn't actually done, or said, anything to indicate that they are likely to judge me, the stories I will tell myself are different. I will have taken steps to calm my threat system and I may then be able to approach the day, and my co-worker, feeling more open, communicative and confident.

Polyvagal Theory

A useful framework to understand what I've described above is Stephen Porges's Polyvagal Theory, which has deepened our understanding of the autonomic nervous system and how

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'The vagus is a cranial nerve that forms the primary component of the parasympathetic nervous system'

our sense of safety or danger can impact our behaviour. Polyvagal Theory takes its name from the vagus, a cranial nerve that forms the primary component of the parasympathetic nervous system, known as the wandering nerve as a result of its path from the brain stem to our frontal cortex, face, eyes, ears, chest, heart, lungs and down into our abdomen and digestive system.

Clinician and author Deb Dana has made the theory accessible to non-clinicians, using the analogy of a ladder to describe our nervous system's three physiological states.

Earlier, I described how we may feel safe and connected in some situations; this is when we are at the top of the ladder. As soon as our nervous system detects any cues of danger, we move into the first of our defensive states, our sympathetic nervous system. The third state – collapse – is at the bottom of the ladder; the way of protecting us when we have been in sympathetic for too long. For example, after a particularly challenging assignment, I may feel physically and mentally exhausted, my body will know what it needs to do to protect itself and I may spend the evening in front of the TV with a takeaway and go to bed early – this is an example of 'collapse'.

Not everyone will have the luxury of doing this, for example those with young children or other caring responsibilities. However, recognising when we feel this way and finding ways to rest and recharge, even briefly, will benefit our mental and physical well-being.

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POLYVAGAL THEORY

We might think that the aim is to remain at the top of the ladder, but this is unrealistic. Without being aware of it, we go up and down numerous times in a day and this is the norm. A resilient system is one that is flexible, where we can bring ourselves back up the ladder. The aim is to not be stuck in the lower rungs.

In the example above, after a good night's sleep I am more likely to wake up feeling refreshed. If, however, I continue to push myself and ignore the signs that I need to rest and recharge, I am more likely to drop down the ladder more quickly and possibly get stuck at the bottom, where I'm more at risk of developing burnout.

Reshaping our nervous system

Our nervous system has been shaped by experience, and the good news is we have the potential to reshape it. By noticing our individual bodily sensations, emotions and thoughts in each of the three states, we can start to understand what helps us move up the ladder and this will be different for each of us. Although we will always go up and down the ladder, this awareness means we can avoid becoming stuck in one of the two defensive states and develop more flexibility, which means that we are likely to move into them less frequently, for less time and that the intensity is reduced when we are there.

Seeing ourselves through the polyvagal lens encourages us to be compassionate towards ourselves rather than self-critical and

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judgemental. Identifying triggers can really help us to move away from the shame that comes with thinking that there is something wrong with us and encourages us to shift our focus from 'who I am' to 'how I respond'. When our threat system is activated, it alerts us to the fact that we don't feel safe. Becoming aware of when we are triggered makes us able to bring ourselves back up the ladder to safety and connection.

I was introduced to Polyvagal Theory by my supervisor and have found it invaluable in gaining a deeper understanding of who I am and it has enabled me to notice my triggers before they take hold. This allows me to be more in the present and to be more compassionate towards others by recognising when their threat system might be being activated. This led me to undertake training on the theory and applications of Polyvagal Theory and I have found it to be an incredibly useful lens through which to explore issues within supervision both indirectly, by noticing and naming states, and more explicitly by supporting supervisees to map their own nervous systems.

Here are some ideas, based on Polyvagal Theory, of how to regulate your nervous system:

▲ **Breathe:** The breath is one of the few processes that the autonomic nervous system does that are also under our conscious control and doing some simple

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'Identifying triggers can really help us to move away from shame'

breathing exercises can help regulate the nervous system. Activities such as swimming and singing are also known to be effective.

▲ **Self-soothe:** Foster a nurturing, rather than critical, voice when you feel activated, for example telling yourself 'I'm ok', 'I've got this' or 'I am safe'.

▲ **Body awareness:** Notice your bodily responses. Are your shoulders tense, is your breath shallow, your jaw tight? Relaxing areas of tension gives cues of safety to our nervous system, which can change how we feel.

▲ **Connection:** Connect with someone you trust and feel safe with or alternatively with a pet, or nature.

▲ **Professional supervision:** This is an ideal space to explore our responses to situations and the people we work with. If you are not already in supervision, you can find a full list of language professionals who are qualified supervisors here. www.labyrinth supervision.com

Deb Dana has created some wonderful resources for deepening understanding of Polyvagal Theory and, if you are interested in learning more, I have included information below.



REFERENCES:

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Dana, Deb (2023). *Rhythm of Regulation. A Polyvagal Perspective on How to be Human*, available at <https://www.rhythmofregulation.com/>

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Befriending Your Nervous System – One-hour interview with Deb Dana by Sounds True founder Tami Simons, June 29, 2020 (subtitles available) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TpxyzZx_rw

