
The Polyvagal Theory & Contemplative Practices

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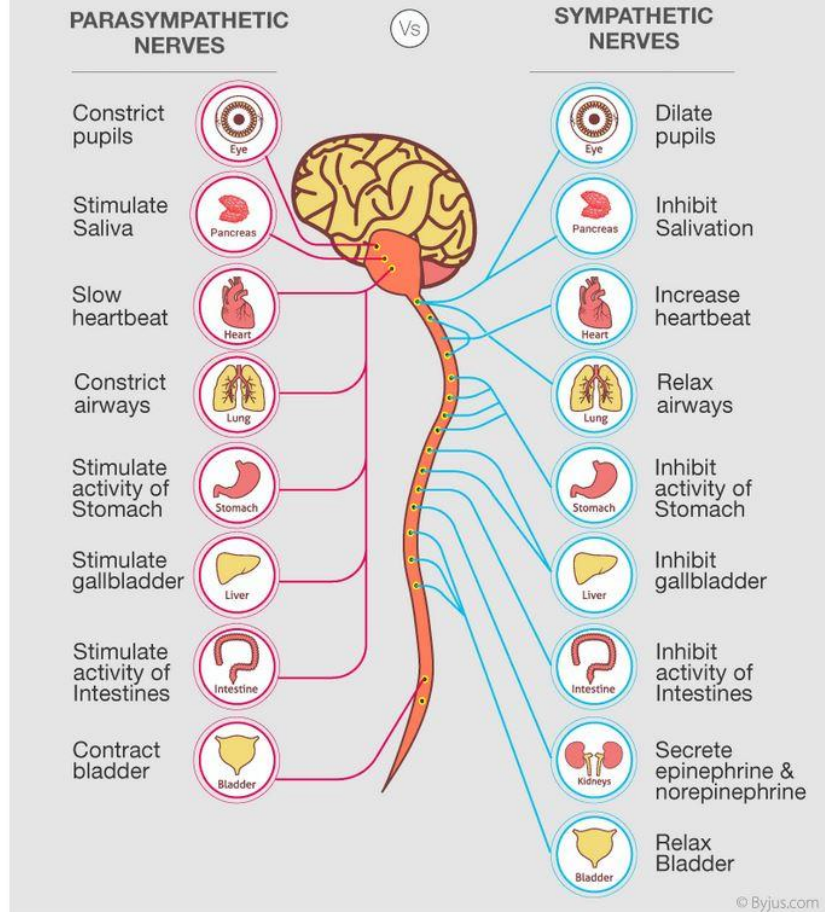
Sympathetic Nervous System:

- Responsible for activating responses to danger and stress
- Sharpens our focus
- Activates “Fight or Flight” responses

Parasympathetic Nervous System:

- Initiates “Freeze” responses when body is unable to accomplish safety through Fight or Flight
- Responsible for activating bodily responses that allow for rest, digestion, and connection
- Home to the “Vagus Nerve”

DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SYMPATHETIC AND PARASYMPATHETIC



The Vagus Nerve

“The Wanderer”

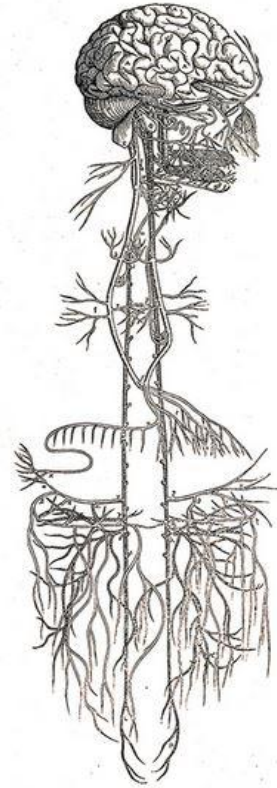
Dorsal Vagal:

- Responds to cues of extreme danger
- Initiates dissociation, freeze, numbing
- Originates in the brain stem, includes the stomach, liver, spleen kidneys, small intestines, etc.

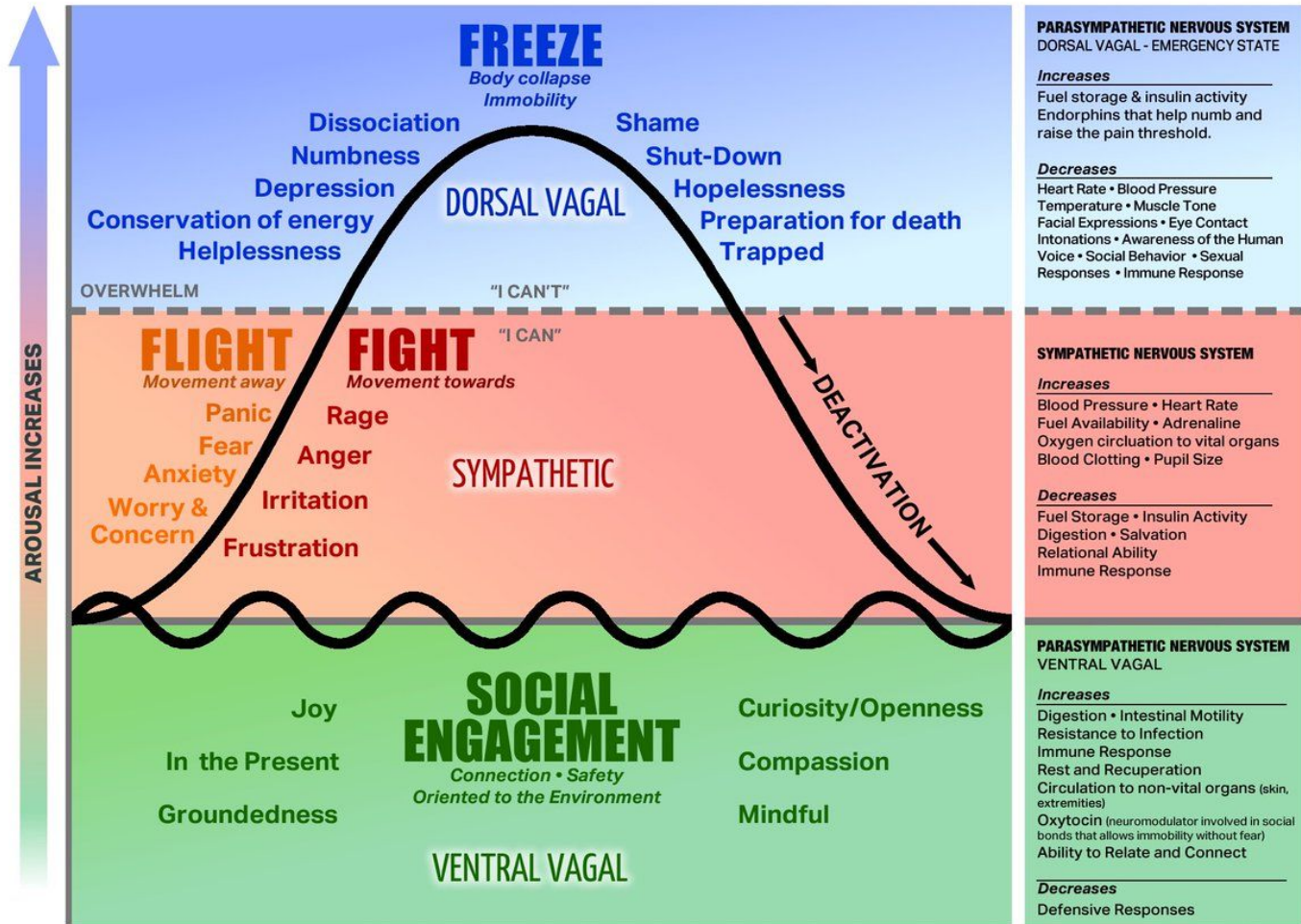
Ventral Vagal:

- Promotes “safe and social” state
- Newest from an evolutionary standpoint
- Originates in brain stem, includes the heart, neck and facial muscles

- Dr. Stephen Porges, 1994



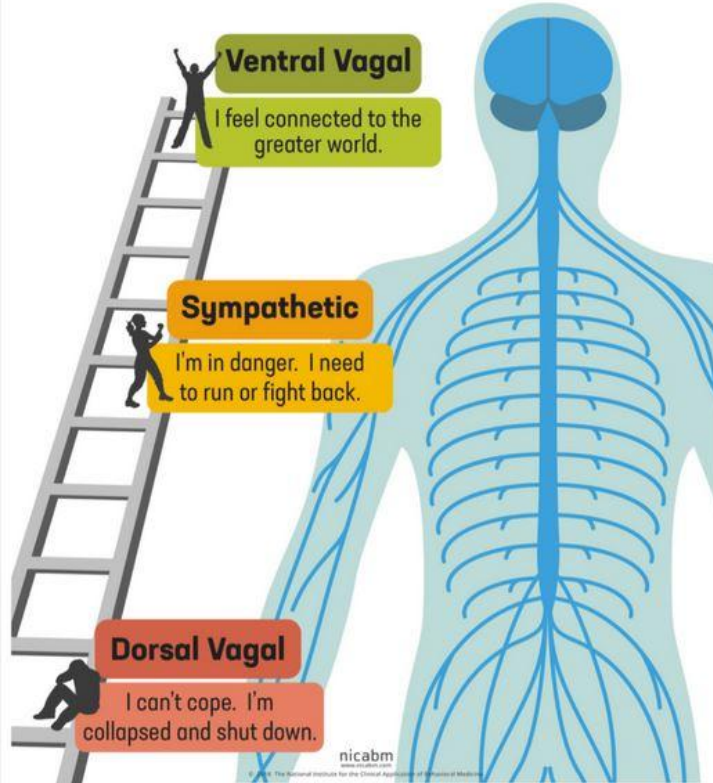
The Vagus Nerve and its Branches



Polyvagal Theory: The Autonomic Ladder

Understanding the Nervous System

Adapted from Deb Dana, LCSW



The polyvagal ladder, adapted by Deb Dana. Source: NICABM.

Personal Reflection

- Where are you on the ladder?
- Where have you been over the course of the pandemic?
- What have you done to bring yourself comfort during this time?
- What have you discovered is unhelpful or ineffective at keeping you on the top rung?

A Note on Trauma...

Trauma is the body's response to an event, a series of events, or an on-going circumstance that is experienced by the individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting effects on how the individual relates to the world. Impacts our wellbeing similar to experiences of scarcity and toxic stress. *credit to Resmaa Menakem

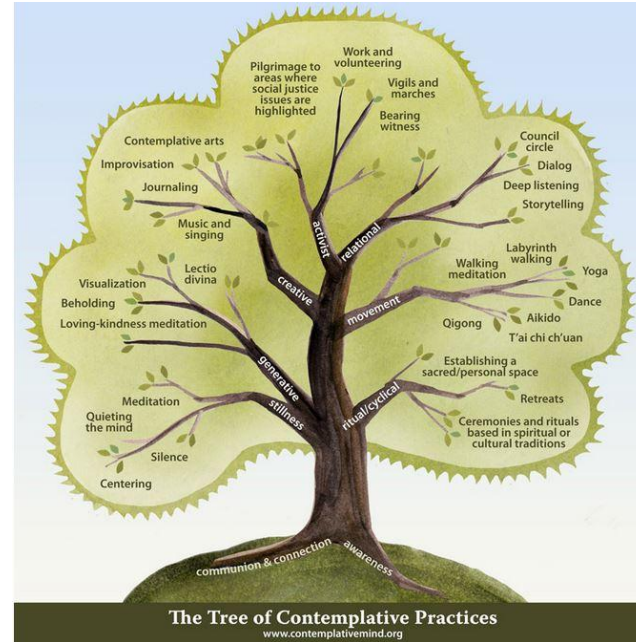
Neuroception describes how the autonomic nervous system scans for cues of safety, danger, and life threat w/o conscious thought. This process informs the stories we tell ourselves about the world that shape our daily lives. - Dr. Porges, 1994

- 80% of the vagus nerve fibers communicate from the body to the brain
- 20% of the vagus nerve fibers communicate from the brain to the body

Contemplative Practices Informed by the PV Theory

Are...

- An element of a trauma-informed approach
- Experienced collectively and individually
- An offering
- Rooted in your own connection to your nervous system



Are Not...

- Diagnostic, Therapy

Contemplative Practice Resources

- [Mindfulness Moment Curriculum](#) for PSU Instructors
- [The Virtual Mind Spa](#)
- [Mindful Meanderings](#) Podcast
- ["The Hill We Climb"](#) by Amanda Gorman