

Polyvagal Theory

Polyvagal Theory developed by:

Dr. Stephen Porges. It is a neurobiological theory that explains how the vagus nerve plays a key role in regulating our physiological and emotional responses to stress and social interactions. According to the theory, the vagus nerve has two branches, the ventral vagal and dorsal vagal pathways, which regulate different emotional and physiological states.

The **ventral vagal** pathway is responsible for promoting rest, digestion, and healing in the body.

Associated with feelings of:



Safety



Social
Engagement



Emotional
Regulation

The **dorsal vagal** pathway is responsible for triggering the body's "freeze, shutdown, and dissociation" response.

Associated with feelings of:



Fear



Anxiety



Disconnection

The core components of the Polyvagal Theory

The vagus nerve:

The theory emphasizes the importance of the vagus nerve in regulating physiological and emotional responses to stress and social interactions.

The hierarchy of the nervous system:

The theory proposes that the nervous system has a hierarchy of responses to stress, with different levels of activation depending on the degree of perceived threat.

Neuroception: The theory suggests that the nervous system is constantly monitoring the environment for cues of safety or danger, even below the level of conscious awareness.

Co-regulation: The theory highlights the importance of social engagement and co-regulation in promoting feelings of safety and regulating physiological and emotional responses.

Treatment Approach: Methods, Techniques and Coping Skills

The Polyvagal Theory suggests that mental health conditions like anxiety, depression, and trauma may cause dysregulated vagal responses, leading to chronic activation of the dorsal vagal pathway and disconnection from oneself and others. Clinicians can use interventions to regulate the nervous system and promote safety, social connection, and emotional regulation.

Mindfulness practices such as meditation, breathing exercises, and body scans

Talk therapies: providing a safe and supportive space for individuals to explore their thoughts and feelings

Somatic practices like yoga, dance, and other body-based interventions.

Interventions that focus on **attachment and interpersonal relationships**, such as family therapy and group therapy

Body-centered psychotherapies like somatic experiencing and sensorimotor psychotherapy