WORKSHEET · POLYVAGAL THEORY

Mapping your nervous system

Getting to know your states of safety, fight or flight, and shutdown, and noticing the glimmers that help

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Polyvagal theory, developed by Stephen Porges (2011), describes how our nervous system is constantly scanning for safety and danger, often below our awareness. The therapist Deb Dana (2018) translated the theory into practical tools for everyday life. Like any map, it simplifies something complex, and researchers continue to debate parts of the theory. Many people still find it a kind and useful way of understanding their reactions.

Safe and connected

Calm, curious, open, able to connect with others and enjoy things (“ventral vagal”)

Fight or flight

Mobilised for danger: anxious, irritable, restless, racing thoughts (“sympathetic”)

Shutdown

Conserving energy: numb, hopeless, foggy, withdrawn, collapsed (“dorsal vagal”)

We all move between these states every day. None of them is “bad”: each one is our body’s way of trying to keep us safe. The aim is not to stay in one state, but to notice where we are, and to find our way back towards safety and connection more easily.

My map

For each state, think of a recent time you were in it. What did it feel like in your body? What were you thinking, and what did you tend to do? How did the world seem?

Safe and connected: for me this looks like...

Fight or flight: for me this looks like...

Shutdown: for me this looks like...

Finding my way back

What moves me out of safety and connection? (These are sometimes called triggers or cues of danger.)

What helps me move back towards safety and connection? (A person, a place, a sound, a movement, a memory…)

Glimmers

Deb Dana (2018) uses the word “glimmers” for small, everyday moments that bring a sense of safety, ease or connection: sunlight on a wall, a friendly voice, a cup of tea, a dog’s greeting. Noticing them, even briefly, can gently shape the nervous system over time. Try writing down one glimmer each day for a week.

Day 1

Day 2

Day 3

Day 4

Day 5

Day 6

Day 7

Go gently. This worksheet is for self-reflection and is not a substitute for therapy. If you find yourself stuck in fight or flight or shutdown for long periods, it can help to explore this with a therapist.

If you are struggling right now: Samaritans 116 123 (free, any time) · Pieta 1800 247 247 or text HELP to 51444 · text HELLO to 50808 · emergency 112 or 999.

Dana, D. (2018). *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation.* W. W. Norton.

Porges, S. W. (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation.* W. W. Norton.

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