

POLYVAGAL THEORY

An introductory presentation by Megan Cooper, MSW, LCSWA

Role of nervous system in psychotherapeutic treatments

- + Since the early 1970s, the nervous system has been studied as a major contributor of behavioral and psychological issues.
- + Polyvagal Theory began to form in the 1990s when researcher and professor Stephen Porges, PhD, made profound discoveries about the human nervous system.





Stephen Porges, PhD

"In 1994, he proposed the Polyvagal Theory, a theory that links the evolution of mammalian autonomic nervous system to social behavior and emphasizes the importance of physiological state in the expression of behavioral problems and psychiatric disorders. The theory is leading to innovative treatments based on insights into the mechanisms mediating symptoms observed in several behavioral, psychiatric, and physical disorders."

What is the main idea behind Polyvagal Theory?

There are two main parts to the central nervous system:

Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) = activating, fight/flight response

Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS) = calming, relaxation response

We have now learned that the PNS has two subdivisions:

Dorsal Vagal Nervous System (DVNS) = "shut down" response, paralyzed behaviors, survival-oriented

Ventral Vagal Nervous System (VVNS) = safety, connection, engaged with others and the environment, leads to self-regulation



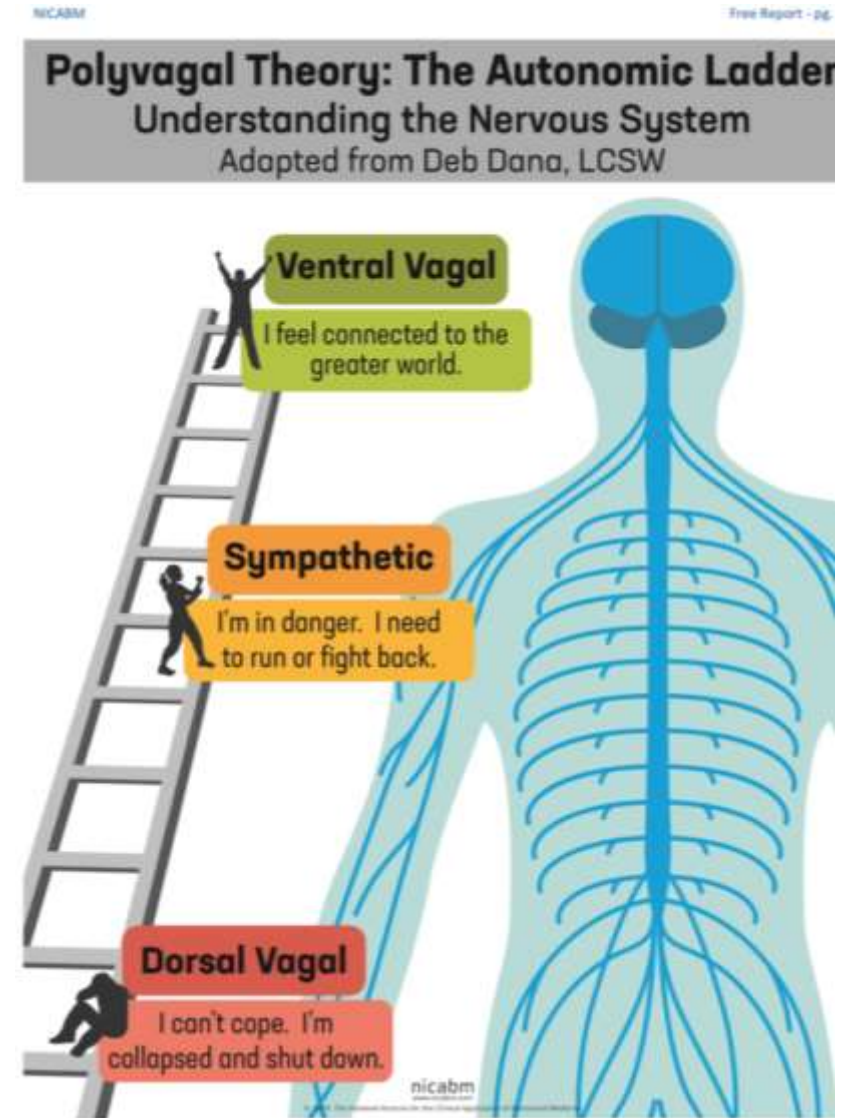
Deb Dana, LCSW

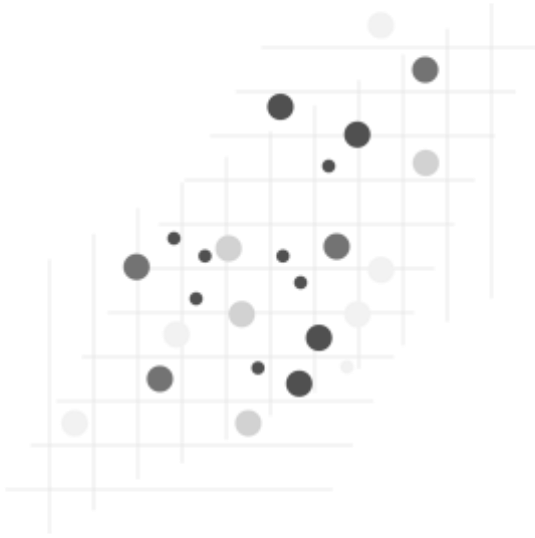
Deb Dana worked with Stephen Porges to make the Polyvagal Theory accessible to clinicians through pairing his theory with other trauma-informed somatic interventions.

"[...] the autonomic nervous system, which is what polyvagal theory is describing, is at the heart of our lived experience. It is where everything begins. So, a polyvagal informed approach to therapy simply means that you are understanding how this basic biology works and how to make it work with you, and with your client in whatever kind of therapy model you're using."

Clinical application of Polyvagal Theory

Teach	Teach client to identify the parts of their nervous system and its impact on their experiences
Safety	Help client to access ventral vagal system as a "safe space" and starting point
Control	Develop "ventral vagal brake" as a way of accessing other areas of nervous system in a controlled way
Exposure	Begin exposure to other parts of nervous system. Show clients they can access these parts without jeopardizing their safety or becoming "stuck" in them.
Healing	Reframe lived experiences as adaptive, develop curiosity and appreciation for them, identify personal strengths, reduce avoidance behaviors, engage in healing process.





Data for Polyvagal Theory

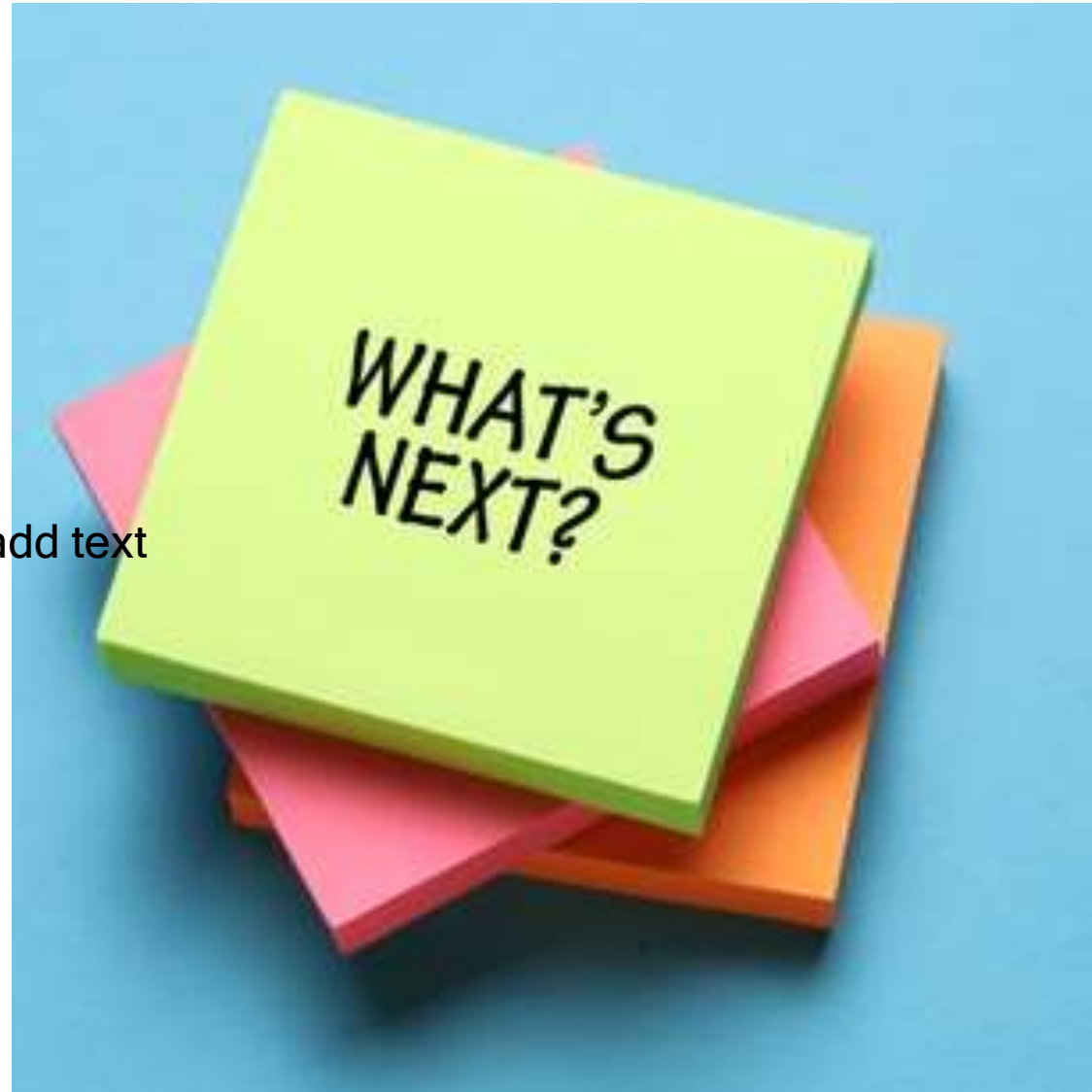
- + Primarily studied through monitoring *respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA)* as a measure of ventral vagus nerve activity via heart rate. Not yet a consensus on what patterns of heart rate connected to ventral vagus nerve reflect prosocial behaviors and development of empathy. Criticized for insufficient research to support its claims based on how recent of a model it is. HOWEVER...
- + **Group therapy:** supports its use in developing positive social engagement among members of therapy groups and in later forming healthy relationships to others
- + **BPD:** follows theory's prediction of healing via change in access to parts of nervous system according to hierarchy, suggests the same for other psychiatric disorders such as anxiety, depression, autism, and PTSD
- + **Emotion regulation in children:** rates of internalizing problems (IP), externalizing problems (EX), and behavioral self-regulation (SR) among children improve when applied in conjunction with parenting practices and consideration of home environment

The future of Polyvagal Theory

Applications for Polyvagal Theory in the future may include:

- + Trauma healing, exposure work, phobia treatment
- + Somatosensory work: movement therapy, people with ASD
- + Emotion regulation for children, resilience development
- + Parenting skills instruction
- + Attachment theory
- + Grief responses
- + GI disorders connected to psychosocial stressors
- + Heart conditions, stroke recovery

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Citations and resources

- + <https://www.stephenporges.com/bio>
- + <https://www.polyvagal institute.org/about-deb>
- + "Polyvagal Theory Informed Master Class" training provided by pesi.com and led by Deb Dana, © 2020
- + "Clinical Applications of the Polyvagal Theory: The Emergence of Polyvagal-Informed Theories," Stephen Porges and Deb Dana, © 2018

Citations and resources, cont.

- + <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2005.08.008>
- + <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207284.2016.1263544>
- + <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bandc.2006.05.007>
- + <https://doi.org/10.1002/dev.21852>
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