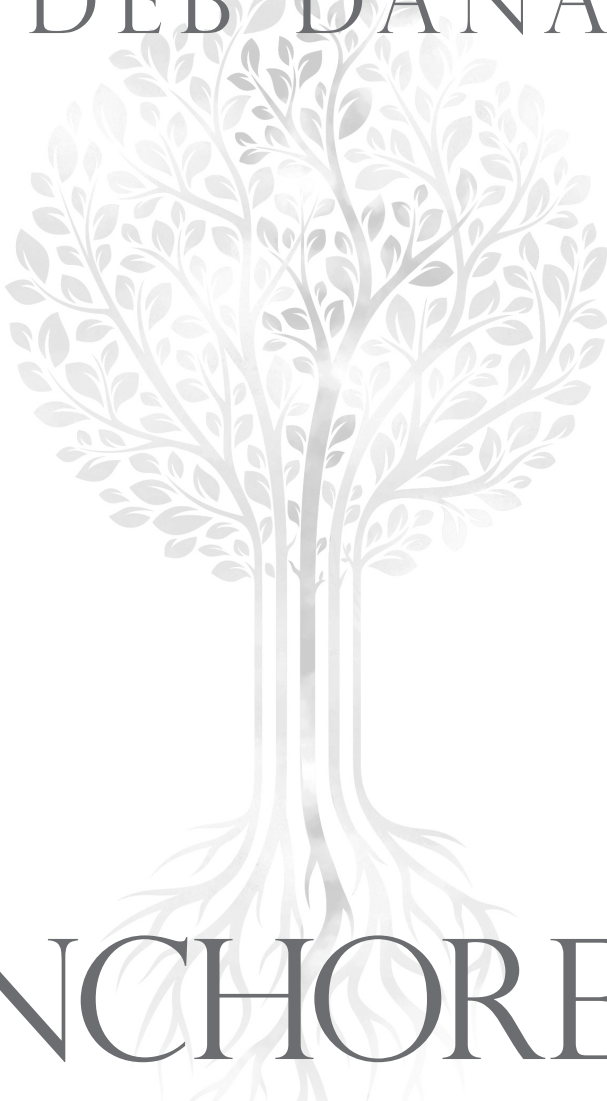


foreword by Stephen W. Porges, PhD

DEB DANA



ANCHORED

*How to Befriend Your Nervous System
Using Polyvagal Theory*

 **sounds true**
BOULDER, COLORADO

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INTRODUCTION

Polyvagal Theory is the science of feeling safe enough to fall in love with life and take the risks of living.

We are wired for connection. Our nervous systems are social structures that find balance and stability in relationship with others. Think about that for a moment. Our biology shapes the way we navigate living, loving, and working. And we now have a way to use this understanding in service of individual, family, community, and global well-being. This “way” is called Polyvagal Theory. Polyvagal Theory was first developed in the 1990s by Stephen Porges. It explains the science of connection, offering a map of the nervous system to guide our exploration as well as skills we can practice to strengthen our ability to anchor ourselves and each other in safety and regulation in the midst of challenges to our sense of equilibrium.

Since 2014, I have collaborated with Dr. Porges as a mentor, coauthor, colleague, and friend and have been actively translating the science of Polyvagal Theory into clinical application. With this book, I hope to translate Polyvagal Theory even further so that anyone can have access to its core concepts and experience its many benefits for living and navigating life with greater ease.

Even with this translation, there is some new terminology to learn. While words like *neuroception*, *hierarchy*, *ventral vagal*, *sympathetic*, and *dorsal vagal* may seem daunting at first, I’ll help you become fluent in the basic vocabulary and get comfortable in speaking the language of the nervous system. You’ll see in the chapters that follow that I sometimes substitute the words *safe*, *connected*, or *regulating* for *ventral vagal*; *mobilized* or *fight and flight* for *sympathetic*; and *disconnected*, *shut down*, or *collapsed* for *dorsal*. As you begin to befriend your nervous system, you’ll have the opportunity to find your own words.

The human autonomic nervous system evolved over many millennia and is based on a universal design that is a common denominator across human experience. Called *autonomic* as a reference to the autonomous, automatic way it functions, this system regulates internal organs and body processes including heartbeat, breath rhythms, blood pressure, digestion, and metabolism. The role of the autonomic nervous system is to store, conserve, and release energy to help us safely move through our daily lives.

This system works in predictable ways, and this shared experience brings us together. Looking through the lens of the nervous system, we understand that we are all trying to anchor in the state of safety that supports connection to self, to others, to the world, and to spirit and provides the energy we need to navigate our days. When the inner workings of our biology are a mystery, we feel as if we're at the mercy of unknown, unexplainable, and unpredictable experiences. Once we know how our nervous system works, we can work with it. As we learn the art of befriending our nervous system, we learn to become active operators of this essential system.

A regulated nervous system is fundamental to the process of navigating the world with a sense of safety and ease. We all encounter problems over the course of a day. Some are more easily managed than others, but no matter where an experience lands on the continuum of mild to traumatic, understanding how the nervous system works is the path to finding the way back to regulation. When we learn to befriend the nervous system, track states, and anchor in autonomic safety, the inevitable challenges that we all face as we go through our days aren't quite so formidable. If we put a problem aside and turn our attention toward learning how to shape our systems in the direction of safety and connection, we can return to the problem and see it in a new way. Anchored in a regulated system, options appear and possibilities emerge.

How to Use This Book

Our stories about who we are and how we see the world begin in our bodies. Before the brain can assemble thoughts and language, the nervous system initiates a response that moves us toward an experience and

into connection, takes us into the mobilizing protection of fight and flight, or rescues us through shutdown and disconnection.

How do we begin to befriend this system? How do we learn to tune in and turn toward the important information our nervous system holds and use this information to be active authors of our personal stories? Mindfully meeting the autonomic nervous system begins with understanding the way this system works and creating skill in following the moment-to-moment flow between action, withdrawal, and connection. With that awareness we can bring in practices to gently shape the system in new ways and enjoy the sense of ease that comes from living with a nervous system that responds with flexibility to the ordinary—and sometimes extraordinary—challenges we meet each day.

The chapters in this book offer small steps that help you befriend your nervous system. The experiential practices build from one chapter to the next in an order designed to keep the process from feeling overwhelming. Each chapter offers practices, labeled “explorations,” to bring the theory portion into an embodied experience. After you’ve completed the book, you can go back and re-read chapters and return to the explorations. They are offered so you can experiment as you go and then come back to the ones that help you feel a sense of well-being and make them part of an ongoing practice. Many of the explorations include a suggestion to document what you find and want to remember. I chose the word *document* to invite the use of both words and images. At times you may find that a single word or several bullet points help you hold on to the new information, while at other times you may decide a longer piece of writing or illustrations and color may be how you want to record what is important. Each invitation to document is an invitation to choose how you want to remember and revisit what you discovered.

Throughout the chapters of the book, you’ll learn about the basic principles of Polyvagal Theory and then bring the science into everyday application with explorations that bring the theory alive. My hope is that when you’ve finished the book, you’ll move through the world in a new way and experience the powerful benefits that come with finding your personal pathways to calm and connection.

Anchored

This process of befriending the nervous system is an ongoing journey of discovery. I have been exploring this territory for a long time and have wisdom and expertise to share. And just like you I'm still challenged by daily experiences and find myself in moments of messiness, moments when I lose my anchor in my state of what is known as "ventral vagal safety and regulation." When that happens, I need to remember what I know and put it back into practice.

The title of this book, *Anchored*, is a word you'll hear repeated throughout the chapters. I grew up around the water, understanding how anchors are essential to staying safe in response to changing conditions. An anchor digs into the ocean floor with enough line between it and the boat to hold the boat safely in one place but with enough leeway to move in response to changes in the sea and wind. Safety comes with a firmly embedded anchor and the right amount of line. When we are anchored, we have a sense of being safely held so we can venture out without becoming adrift. We are connected to a state of regulation and have room to explore the world around us.

When I offered my first clinical training, I told the participants they were being welcomed into the polyvagal family that was emerging from my collaboration with Dr. Porges. That polyvagal family has grown into a global polyvagal community, but the feeling is still very much one of family. As you begin this book, I'm extending an invitation to join this growing polyvagal family and find a new language of human connection.

1

A Quick Look at the Principles and Elements of Polyvagal Theory

The beauty of a living thing is not the atoms that go
into it, but the way those atoms are put together.

CARL SAGAN,
COSMOS, EPISODE 5

In his work with premature babies during the 1970s and '80s, professor of psychiatry Stephen Porges rediscovered two vagal pathways in the nervous system that regulate the heart and provide a face-heart connection to communicate what is happening inside our bodies to other people. These discoveries helped define Polyvagal Theory, and we now have an easy way to understand and work with our autonomic nervous systems.

The autonomic nervous system could also be called the *automatic* nervous system since it takes care of our body's basic housekeeping responsibilities (i.e., breath, heart rate, digestion) without our needing to pay attention to them. The wonderful thing about this system is that it not only functions automatically with preprogrammed settings but, with Polyvagal Theory, it can also be adjusted. To do so, we have to understand the following three main principles:

1. Autonomic hierarchy: The system is organized around three building blocks that work in a certain order and come with preset pathways.

2. Neuroception: The system has a built-in surveillance system that watches for signs of safety and warnings about danger ahead.
3. Co-regulation: Having moments of safely connecting to others is a necessary ingredient for well-being.

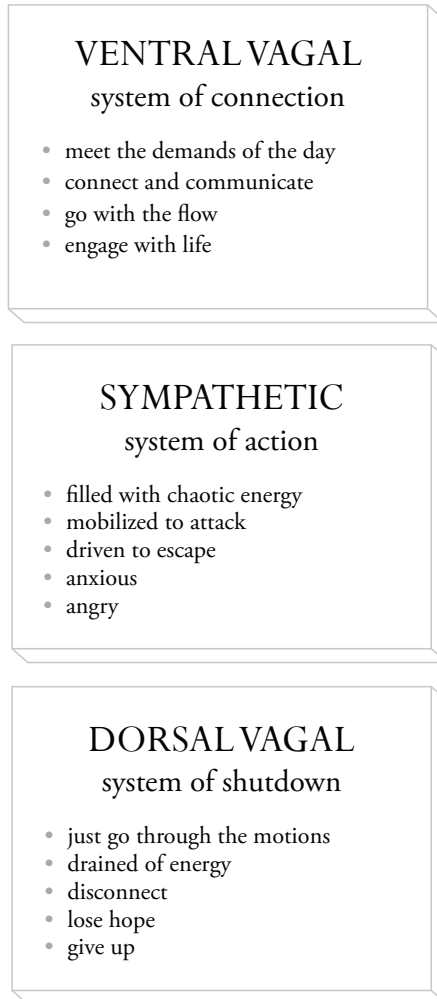


Image 1.1 Three building blocks and emergent qualities

Autonomic Hierarchy: The Building Blocks of Experience

Through the process of evolution, three building blocks came into being one after the other: dorsal vagal (shutdown) around 500 million years ago, sympathetic (activation) around 400 million years ago, and ventral vagal (connection) around 200 million years ago. This sequential order, called the autonomic hierarchy, is key to understanding how the nervous system anchors in regulation and reacts to challenges in daily living. Each of these building blocks works in a specific way, affecting our biology through connections inside the body and impacting our psychology by directing how we see, sense, and engage with the world.

The ventral vagal building block, the newest of the three, provides a pathway to health and well-being and the place where life feels manageable. We connect and communicate with others, and may join a group or be happy on our own. The common irritations of daily living don't feel so big and when our coffee spills or the commute is too slow, instead of getting angry or anxious, we're able to go with the flow.

Following the pattern of the hierarchy, when something happens that feels overwhelming, when too many things happen all at once, or when it seems like life is a series of never-ending challenges, we move down a step to the next building block and the action taking of the sympathetic pathway. This is commonly known as the place of fight and flight. When our to-do list doesn't ever seem to get smaller, there is never quite enough money to make ends meet, or it feels like our partner is always distracted, we lose our sense of being safe in the present moment and our ability to see a larger picture, and we react either by attacking or escaping.

If we continue to feel trapped in a cycle of endless challenges with no way out and no way to manage, we follow the hierarchy down to the final step to the first building block of the nervous system and the dorsal vagal feeling of collapse, shutdown, and disconnection. Here, the spilled coffee, the never-ending to-do list, and the partner who never seems to be present with us no longer matter. We begin to shut down and disconnect. We may still go through the motions, but with

no energy to care. We lose hope that anything will ever change. And because our nervous system follows a predictable sequence, moving from one building block to the next, in order to recover from this place of collapse, we need to find our way to some energy in the sympathetic system and continue on to the regulation of the ventral vagal state.

A good way to get the flavor of each of the three building blocks is by exploring two statements: “The world is . . .” and “I am . . .” Finding the words that describe how you view the world and your place in it brings awareness to the beliefs that are stored in each state. Start in dorsal, the building block at the bottom of the hierarchy, and feel into the experience of disconnection, collapse, and shutdown. Fill in the two sentences “The world is . . .” and “I am . . .” You might find the world is unwelcoming, dark, or empty, and you are untethered, abandoned, or lost. Move up one building block to the overwhelming sympathetic flood of energy and explore the same two sentences. Perhaps the world is chaotic, unmanageable, or terrifying, and, from this place of disorganization and chaos, you are out of control, dysregulated, or in danger. And now move up to the final building block and the state of ventral vagal safety and regulation. From here, how do you fill in the sentences “The world is . . .” and “I am . . .”? You might experience the world as welcoming, beautiful, and inviting of connection and feel okay, alive and well, and filled with possibility. Working in this way with the autonomic hierarchy, we begin to understand the different experiences each autonomic state creates. Reflecting on the two sentences “The world is . . .” and “I am . . .,” we see how dramatically our stories change as we move from one state, one building block, to another.

Neuroception: Your Internal Surveillance System

The second principle of Polyvagal Theory, the internal surveillance system, is defined by the wonderfully descriptive word *neuroception*. Stephen Porges created this word to illustrate how the nervous system (*neuro*) is aware (*ception*) of signs of safety and signals of danger. With a neuroception of safety, we move out into the world and into

connection. A neuroception of danger brings a move into sympathetic fight and flight, while a neuroception of life threat takes us into dorsal vagal collapse and shutdown.

Neuroception follows three streams of awareness: inside, outside, and between. Inside listening happens as neuroception attends to what's happening inside your body—your heartbeat, breath rhythms, and muscle action—and inside your organs, especially those involved with your digestion. Outside listening begins in your immediate environment (where you are physically located) and then expands out into the larger world to include neighborhoods, nations, and the global community. The third stream of awareness, listening between, is the way your nervous system communicates with other systems one-on-one or with a group of people. These three streams of embodied listening are always working, micro-moment to micro-moment, below the level of our conscious awareness. Running in the background, neuroception brings about the autonomic state changes that either invite us into connection with people, places, and experiences or move us away from connection and into the protection of fight, flight, or shutdown. Our story, and how we think, feel, and act, begins with neuroception. And while we can't work directly with neuroception, we can work with our body's response to it. When we bring perception to neuroception, we bring an otherwise nonconscious experience into awareness. We can work with our experience by taking the implicit experience of neuroception and explicitly noticing it and turning our attention toward the state that has come alive. As we keep traveling the pathway of awareness, we connect with feelings, beliefs, behaviors, and finally the story that takes us through our days. When we learn to attend to neuroception, we can begin to shape our stories in new ways.

Co-regulation: Wired for Connection

And finally, the third principle of Polyvagal Theory is the need for finding safe connection with others in the experience of co-regulation. Co-regulation, regulating with another, is an experience that is necessary

for survival. We come into the world unable to fend for ourselves and, for the first years of life, we need to be cared for by others. We are physically unable to regulate on our own and naturally turn toward the people around us to meet both our physical and emotional survival needs. As we grow, these experiences of co-regulation offer a foundation to explore regulating on our own.

Even as we learn to self-regulate, the need for co-regulation continues. This is both an essential ingredient for well-being and also a challenge to negotiate. In order to co-regulate, I have to feel safe with you, you have to feel safe with me, and we have to find a way to come into connection and regulate with each other. We turn to a friend to listen or look to a family member for help. We depend on certain people in our lives to show up with a regulated system when we are in need. While the world seems to be increasingly focused on self-regulation and independence, co-regulation is the foundation for safely navigating daily living. We

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carry the ongoing need to connect with others, and every day we long for and look for opportunities to co-regulate.

It is through these three principles—hierarchy, neuroception, and co-regulation—that we have a way to acknowledge the role biology has in shaping how we move through the world and a guide to engaging with our biology in ways that bring well-being.

Three Elements for Well-Being

The three principles of Polyvagal Theory—building blocks of the hierarchy, internal surveillance through neuroception, and regulating with others—are where we begin to understand and befriend our nervous system. Next we add the elements of well-being—context, choice, and connection—which help the nervous system anchor in safety and regulation. When these three elements are present, we more easily find