

## **UNLOCKING MENTAL WELLNESS: EMBRACING POLYVAGAL THEORY IN INTEGRATIVE PSYCHIATRY**

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As an integrative psychiatrist I believe that health, wellness, and illness involve the mind, the body, and the mindbody connection. Spirituality, which is about the soul, God or higher power, and a sense of purpose, is the context in which the three parts of us exist.

One of the greatest healthcare discoveries during the last 30 years is Polyvagal Theory, which is the science of how our autonomic nervous system keeps us safe. Polyvagal Theory can enhance psychotherapy practices and contribute to overall well-being. The three parts of our autonomic nervous system are sympathetic nervous system fight-or-flight, dorsal vagus nerve collapse, and ventral vagus nerve social engagement. Collapse is also known as “freeze” and “shutdown.” I will use the word “collapse” in this article.

In 2004, I heard about the work of Dr. Peter Levine, author of “Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma.” I studied his work and quickly began using some of his trauma techniques. Five years ago, I began studying and using Polyvagal Theory, which was discovered by Dr. Stephen Porges. Polyvagal Theory is about how a sense of safety is essential to our mental and physical health. Our safety is regulated by our autonomic nervous system.

Sympathetic fight-or-flight mobilizes us when there is perceived or real danger. Whether the danger is a charging lion or an angry boss, our autonomic nervous system responds to both as being dangerous. Fight-or-flight, a heightened energy state, guides us to fight for our life or run for our life. In fight-or-flight our energy and blood flow move toward our extremities so that we are prepared to fight or run. That energy and blood flow moves away from our internal organs, away from the digestive tract and immune system. In chronic stress less energy is going towards those internal organs. Even our hearing changes during fight-flight. We become tuned to very low tones and very high tones, but not the mid-range...which is the human voice. If you are stuck in fight-flight, you are waiting for the next threatening situation to arise. You see and hear danger. For human beings, danger is a constant. The news is nonstop danger so almost everyone has too much fight-or-flight, which leaves us anxious and in a constant state of stress.

Sometimes a situation can overwhelm our ability to fight or flee. Let's say that a caveman had wandered deep into a cave. Suddenly he sees and hears a huge cave bear. The caveman is too small to fight and too far away from the entrance to escape. His autonomic nervous system instantly shifts into dorsal vagus nerve activity, throwing him into a state of collapse which is an immobilized state. The dorsal vagus nerve is the back part of the vagus nerve. Collapse is a very low energy state in which a person or animal can feel disconnected, immobilized, and numb. What is the survival advantage of collapse? First of all, a predator will not attack a dead animal. In collapse an animal looks dead. Second, if the predator grabs its prey in its jaws, the numbing effect of collapse will make the pain less severe. If a person believes that she is in a hopeless situation, her autonomic nervous system makes the decision to save her life by switching to collapse. The hopeless person feels as if she lives in a room with no windows, no doors, and no escape. Fight-flight is a response to danger, while dorsal vagus collapse is a response to a real or perceived life-threatening situation.

Our autonomic nervous system constantly responds to external and internal stimuli and makes unconscious decisions to protect us. Let's say you're driving on the freeway, when

suddenly, a car cuts in front of you. You immediately take evasive action to avoid a wreck, but it was not a conscious decision. If you had to use your thinking brain, it could take you 10 seconds to come to a reasonable decision. Your autonomic nervous system, which reacts very quickly, made all the “decisions” to avoid that car wreck.

The third part of our autonomic nervous system involves the ventral vagus nerve which is involved in social engagement, connection, and safety. The ventral vagus nerve is the front part of the vagus nerve. We are social creatures. It is not enough for us to be ruggedly independent people who are great at taking care of ourselves. We live in families, friendships, and communities. We need social interaction in order to be happy and healthy. When we are in ventral vagus activity, we feel safe, connected, and socially engaged. We are open to learning new ideas.

As an integrative psychiatrist my work uses natural, non-drug approaches. I began using tools to reset the autonomic nervous system 20 years ago. Using these techniques, I can help people reduce stress and anxiety by at least 50% in 10 minutes. Panic attacks are caused entirely by too much fight-flight physiology. Most anxiety is caused by too much fight-or-flight. People who worry a lot, are constantly picturing negative outcomes. They are stuck in fight-flight. Many depressed people have too much dorsal vagus collapse activity.

In my first session with a patient I teach techniques that will balance their autonomic nervous system. An anxious or stressed person then becomes calmer. A depressed person with too much collapse becomes less depressed. Given the right tools, that depressed person can quickly move from hopeless to hopeful. I order nutritional lab work so that I can diagnose and treat the body part of the mindbody connection. I order neurotransmitter tests and their precursors which are amino acids. That will help me map out and treat brain chemistry. In addition, I teach a specific meditation technique that will help the mind part of the mindbody connection.

By embracing Polyvagal Theory within integrative psychiatry, we embark on a journey toward deeper understanding, compassionate healing, and the realization of the profound connection between mind, body, mindbody connection, and spirit