

Managing Ongoing Overwhelm and Exhaustion: Connect with your Autonomic Nervous System

January 2022, Part 1: Understanding Our Bodies' Habitual Patterns of Response

Because we live in a fallen world separated from God, we experience pain and danger. And our bodies are wired to protect ourselves from perceived danger and to learn a pattern of reactions over time in response to our experiences. As clients experience new waves of exhaustion and are overwhelmed as they are thrust back into survival mode, caregivers can help them become more aware of their bodies' habitual patterns of response.

This tool is based on the concepts of polyvagal theory, which was developed by Dr. Stephen Porges and adapted for more practical application by Deb Dana, an experienced clinician in the field of nervous system regulation. Polyvagal theory helps us understand how our body's nervous system involuntarily responds to cues of safety and danger. Our nervous system is constantly in surveillance mode, scanning for cues of safety and danger inside (within our own bodies), outside (in our surrounding environment), and in between (our own nervous system and the nervous system of others). These cues are communicated to our autonomic nervous system, which then responds by activating one of the following three states:

1. Parasympathetic ventral vagal - state of connection in response to cues of safety, the socially engaged state
2. Sympathetic - state of fight-flight in response to cues of danger, the mobilized state
3. Parasympathetic dorsal vagal - state of collapse/shutdown in response to cues of life-threat or overwhelm, the immobilized state

It is helpful to imagine these three nervous system states on a ladder (see the table in the instruction video), with the immobilized state at the bottom of the ladder and the socially engaged state at the top. Every person uniquely experiences a combination of body sensations, emotions and behavioral urges in each one of these three states. True to our God-inspired design as meaning makers, having made sense of our experiences in each nervous system state, we unconsciously hold different stories when we are in each state. The lower down we are on the ladder, the more likely the stories we tell ourselves will be negative.

You can use the table below to help your clients map out their own autonomic nervous system. This map will help them better understand the unique landscape of their involuntary threat/safety responses and identify the sensations, emotions, beliefs about self and reactive behaviors that drive them in each state. Please watch the video as our counselor Natasha explains the basics of the autonomic nervous system, why it is valuable for clients to understand it and how to use the tool. Next month, we will have a follow up tool that will teach you how to help clients move up the ladder towards the state of safety and connection. **Page 2 includes the map you can have the client fill out. Page 3 includes the instruction video**, with an outline and timestamps.

Autonomic Nervous System Map¹

	<i>This is the image that comes to mind...</i>	<i>I notice these sensations in my body...</i>	<i>I feel these emotions...</i>	<i>I see myself as...</i>	<i>I have the urge to...</i>
<p>When I feel safe and connected...</p> <p>Ventral Vagal: socially engaged</p>					
<p>When I feel threatened and want to fight or flee...</p> <p>Sympathetic: mobilized</p>					
<p>When I feel overwhelmed and want to shut down...</p> <p>Dorsal Vagal: immobilized</p>					

¹ *Adapted from Deb Dana's "Personal Profile Map". Dana, D. (2018) *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation*. New York: W.W. Norton

Video Instructions



Natasha Steenkamp, a Clinical Supervisor at Redeemer Counseling Services, walks you through the following steps in this video:

1. What is the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)? – [0:00](#)
2. Why is understanding the ANS important? – [1:55](#)
3. How do you use the ANS Map? – [7:35](#)