

Polyvagal Informed Therapy for Eating Disorder Recovery

How learning the language of your
nervous system can transform your
recovery

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Introduction

When I began my work in eating disorder therapy, most of the recommended interventions were based on behaviors and exposure therapy. Supporting clients in overcoming anxiety and exposing them to food has been a mainstay in evidence-based practice. The more I worked with clients the more I noticed that, although these interventions were critical, a piece of the puzzle was missing. My clients had exposed themselves to all their fear foods, challenged all their distorted thoughts, and confronted all their feelings. Yet, a significant portion of them still felt overwhelming anxiety when eating, could not get comfortable in their bodies, or were constantly preoccupied with the fear of gaining weight. Some feared intimacy, hated changing their clothes, or avoided looking at themselves in the mirror. Others never reclaimed a good relationship with food and always felt like they were “going through the motions” of eating. I was at a loss as to what to do.



When I attended one of Deb Dana's seminars on Polyvagal Informed Practice, that puzzle piece finally dropped into place. Despite all the interventions, I hadn't helped my clients restore and regulate their nervous systems. It inspired me to learn more about ways nervous systems affect eating disorders and vice versa. I was finally able to tell my clients that their avoidance and anxiety was their body's way of protecting them. In this guide, I seek to introduce clients to the work of Stephen Porges and Deb Dana in a way that is specific to eating disorder recovery. I have found that many people benefit from these practices, but have not heard of them or do not know what they entail. If the information in this guide is helpful, I hope it will be a springboard for further Polyvagal work.

In my opinion, there are two critical things for all Polyvagal therapists to understand. The first is that all nervous systems can return to regulation with the right environment and tools. The second is that it is not the therapist's job to manipulate or control the nervous system. Everyone's nervous system speaks its own language, and you alone can learn the language of your unique nervous system. The job of the therapist is to give you the tools to interpret what your body is trying to tell you, and to support your nervous system's natural healing.

Disclaimer

This guide is for informational purposes only. It is not intended to diagnose or treat any medical or mental health condition. Readers should consult with their treatment team to determine the best treatment for their individual needs.

If you begin reading this guide and feel a discomfort that becomes intolerable or feels unsafe, you should stop. A Polyvagal-informed therapist can help assess your needs and meet you where you are.



Who is this Guide For?

While everyone can benefit from Polyvagal techniques, different people need different levels of support as they engage in the work. This guide is intended for people who:

- Can tune in and notice sensations in their bodies without feeling overwhelmed
- Feel well supported by friends, family, and/or a treatment team
- Are not actively experiencing a traumatic situation
- Are interested and comfortable in exploring therapies that aren't evidence based. While many people have been helped by Polyvagal Informed Therapy, it is not an evidence-based theory. It relies on the individual experiences of the client, rather than a set of outcomes that can be predicted across a data set.



The Nervous System and Eating Disorders



The nervous system controls and facilitates communication between our body's systems. Improved medical testing and imaging abilities have made the connections between these systems clearer and have shown how a breakdown in one system begins to affect others. The nervous system, specifically the autonomic nervous system, regulates our response to stress and danger. When stress overwhelms our ability to cope, the entire body is affected. People living under constant stress or with unresolved trauma can experience breakdowns in their endocrine health (hormones), cardiovascular (heart) and pulmonary (lung) health, as well as their immune system.

Stress also affects digestive health. When your body is focused on managing and coping with stress, it has a harder time regulating digestion. Often when people are stressed, they begin to notice changes in their hunger cues. Some people begin eating more to self-regulate and fuel the additional energy needed to manage the nervous system. Others find they are less hungry or feel nauseous.

We also live in a culture that upholds many myths of diet culture. We perceive large bodies negatively and small bodies positively. We assign moral weight to food choices, and often shame people when their bodies get bigger. It is very easy to begin to regard weight gain as an unsafe activity. When entering recovery, the nervous system will often be triggered. It is helpful to learn how to re-regulate the nervous system to improve success in treatment

Understanding Nervous System States



According to Stephen Porges's work in Polyvagal Theory, our nervous system has three states: ventral vagal, sympathetic, and dorsal vagal.

Ventral vagal: This is the state of feeling calm, connected, and at peace. When the nervous system is in ventral vagal, people often report feeling safe, supported, and cared for. They might report feeling empowered to take control of their situations and believe change and growth is possible.

Sympathetic: The sympathetic nervous system is the state of “fight or flee”. It is an active response to stress, a signal from the body to find safety. People in sympathetic often report feeling agitated or anxious. You may also feel overwhelmed. In a regulated nervous system, sympathetic can also feel like excitement and eagerness to complete a task.

Dorsal vagal: The dorsal state is a state of withdrawal and stillness. When a person is unable to respond to their sympathetic state by fighting or fleeing, the dorsal state intervenes. People in dorsal vagal often report feeling tired or avoidant. You may feel stuck, unmotivated, or hopeless. In regulated systems, dorsal vagal may feel like a need to sleep, rest, or “turn off” and recover.

Nervous System States and Digestion



Everyone has moments where their nervous systems are disrupted due to normal day-to-day stress, illness, or changes in routine. In these cases, eating patterns can be disrupted. In some cases, this problem is more chronic. When the nervous system is taxed, the body's intuitive eating abilities are compromised. For example, if stress has been prolonged, the body may have entered the dorsal vagal state. In this state, the body may struggle to digest and hunger cues may be dulled. In some cases, hunger cues are more active. Different bodies are affected differently by nervous system states. Increasing awareness of how your body is affected by your nervous system can help you understand how to cope. Pay attention to the sensations in your body as you answer the questions on the following pages.

When I feel disconnected, tired, or exhausted, I feel my body is



When I feel disconnected, tired, or exhausted, I notice my eating habits are



When I feel disconnected, tired, or exhausted, after eating I feel



When I feel anxious, overwhelmed, or stressed, I feel my body is

When I feel anxious, overwhelmed, or stressed, I notice my eating habits are

When I feel anxious, overwhelmed, or stressed, after eating I feel

When I feel calm, well connected to others, and safe, I feel my body is:



When I feel calm, well connected to others, and safe, I notice my eating habits are:




When I feel calm, well connected to others, and safe, after eating I feel



If answering these questions is hard, that's okay! It's normal. Working with a therapist trained in polyvagal techniques or other mindfulness practices can help you increase your awareness of how your nervous system affects you. It's also normal for answers to change over time as you gain increased awareness or your nervous system becomes more regulated.



Ventral Break



When you start eating disorder recovery, you are asked to make a lot of changes in your eating habits and the way you think about food. It is normal for this to feel scary! In addition, eating more and learning new ways to care for yourself can force you to connect with your body in new ways. Not everyone feels safe doing this at first, and that is also normal. This feeling of unsafety can activate and trigger nervous system response.

Fortunately, we can learn to help our nervous system feel safe. The ventral break is a natural part of our autonomic nervous system that helps us move between the ventral vagal state and sympathetic state. It allows us to access our sympathetic energy without becoming stuck in a stressful response. Our bodies need sympathetic energy to function, but too much is overwhelming. By exercising our ventral break, we can help our nervous system return to the ventral when the stress gets too much.

Step 1: Breathing. Our ventral break is controlled first and foremost by our breath. Breathing in opens our body to sympathetic energy while releasing the breath returns us to our ventral state. Practice taking deep breaths and notice the way your body relaxes when you exhale.

Step 2: Imagery can be a powerful tool to support and manage the nervous system. Deb Dana's exercise to activate the ventral break involves envisioning a metaphor – something that has a moving current of energy, can be controlled by you, and can be regulated by increasing or decreasing quantities. Examples are turning on and off a water tap, opening and closing a door, or starting and stopping a vehicle or bicycle.

Some people have a hard time with imagery at first. In these cases it can be helpful to use your body, like squeezing and releasing a fist, or shifting weight from one side to the other.

Step 3: Put steps one and two together. Breathe in deeply, and visualize opening your current, then exhale and close your current. For example, if you are using a tap, visualize letting the water run when you breathe in, and turning the water off when you exhale. If you are using a fist, release your fist on the inhale, and tighten it on the exhale[RH1] . Do this until you feel confident, and notice how your body changes between the inhale and the exhale.

Step 4: Introduce a stressor. Think of something in your life that is stressful, but not too stressful. It is best to start with a minor day-to-day stressor like completing an unpleasant task or running an errand. As you think about the task, notice any changes in your body. How does your heart react? Your breath? Your gut? Focus on these sensations. When you begin to feel uncomfortable, activate your ventral break by completing the exercise above. You may need to complete this a few times to feel relief.

Sensory Memory



Our nervous systems respond very well to memories of times when we were in the ventral vagal state. Our memories of times, places, and people who have made us feel calm can serve as “anchors” to this state.

Visualizing a memory can help someone regulate their nervous system when they feel anxious or overwhelmed. I often encourage clients to use these memories when they are engaging in triggering activities like shopping for clothes, eating fear foods, or starting a new phase in their treatment plan.

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Think of a time when you felt calm and peaceful. It does not need to be a long memory; it can be a small moment. Perhaps you were with a beloved pet, spending time with a friend, or somewhere in nature.

In this memory:

What did you see?

What did you smell?

What did you touch?

What did you hear?

What did you taste?

How does your body change as you remember this?

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Savoring



Our nervous systems move in and out of the three states throughout the day. Even people who feel continuously overwhelmed, anxious, or numb will often have moments in their ventral vagal state. Learning to identify and savor these experiences can help strengthen our ability to identify nervous system states and help the nervous system regulate.

Get a stopwatch and set it for 30 seconds. Return to your memory from the previous exercise, or perhaps pick a different one. When you feel calm, start the stopwatch and enjoy savoring this calm state for up to 30 seconds. If you find your thoughts pulling you away from this state, note how long you were able to savor the ventral experience. You can begin incorporating this savoring experience any time you feel ventral energy in your life.

Further Reading:

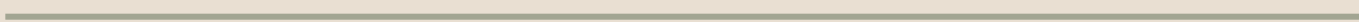
This guide was informed by the work of Stephen Porges and Deb Dana. The following books are recommended for further reading:

The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe (Norton Series on Interpersonal Neurobiology) by Stephen Porges.

Anchored: How to Befriend Your Nervous System Using Polyvagal Theory by Deborah Dana



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About the Author

Elizabeth Hammond is a therapist based in Providence, Rhode Island. Through telehealth, she is able to support clients in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, and Virginia. She is passionate about helping women and members of the LGBTQIA+ community heal from eating disorders by making peace with themselves and their past. If you would like to learn more about her services, you can visit her website at ehcounselingllc.com

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