Navigating Stress: Applying Polyvagal Theory for Resilience in the Legal Profession

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Objectives

- **Polyvagal Theory Fundamentals**: Understanding the three key branches—ventral vagal, sympathetic, and dorsal vagal—and their roles in stress, safety, and social engagement.
- **Stress and the Legal Profession**: Examining the unique stressors lawyers face and how these activate different branches of the autonomic nervous system, affecting decision-making, focus, and interpersonal interactions.
- **Practical Applications**: Learn actionable strategies based on Polyvagal Theory to enhance resilience, including mindfulness practices, breath work, and grounding techniques that promote a state of calm and readiness.
- **Building Resilience**: Integrating these practices into daily routines to improve mental clarity, reduce anxiety, and foster connections with peers and clients.

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OUR MISSION

is to promote well-being and resilience in the legal community, improve lives, nurture competence, and elevate the standing of the legal profession.

Understanding the nervous system

- Our nervous system acts as our body's surveillance system
- It is a complex structure that gathers information from all over our body and coordinates activity.
- There are two main parts of the nervous system: the central nervous system (CNS) consisting of the brain and spinal cord and the peripheral nervous system (PNS) which consists of all of the nerves outside of our brain and spinal cord.

Understanding the nervous system

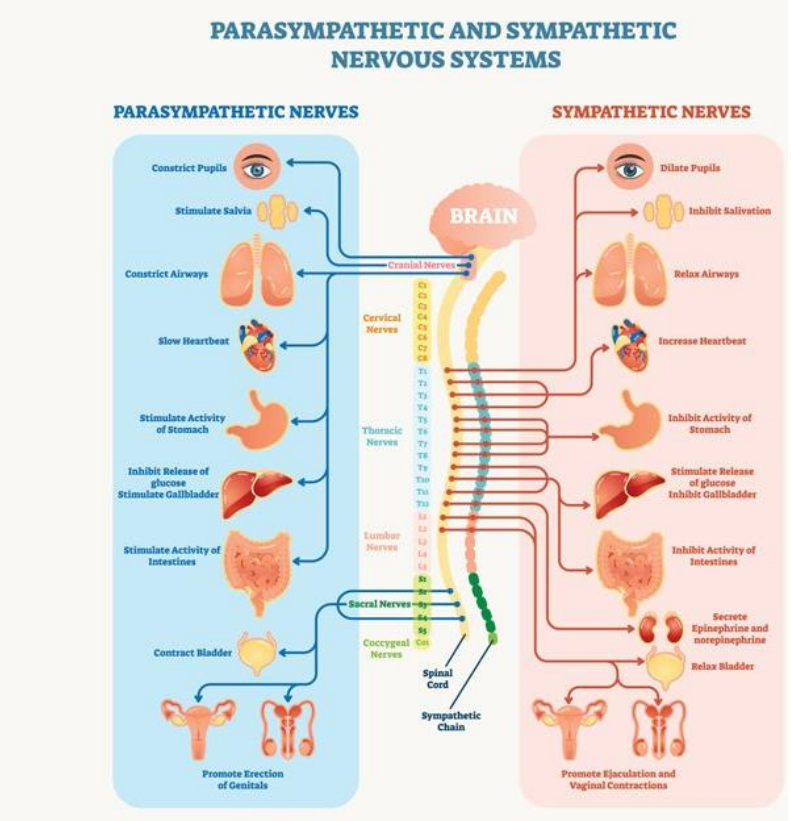
The PNS can be categorized into two distinct systems:

Somatic nervous system (voluntary): This system allows our muscles and brains to communicate with each other. The somatic system helps our brain and spinal cord to send signals to our muscles to help them move, as well as sends information from the body back to the brain and spinal cord.

Autonomic nervous system (involuntary): This is the system that controls the glands and internal organs, such as the heart, lungs, and digestive system. This system runs the important parts of our body without us having to intentionally think about them. For example, we can breathe without having to think about taking a breath each time.

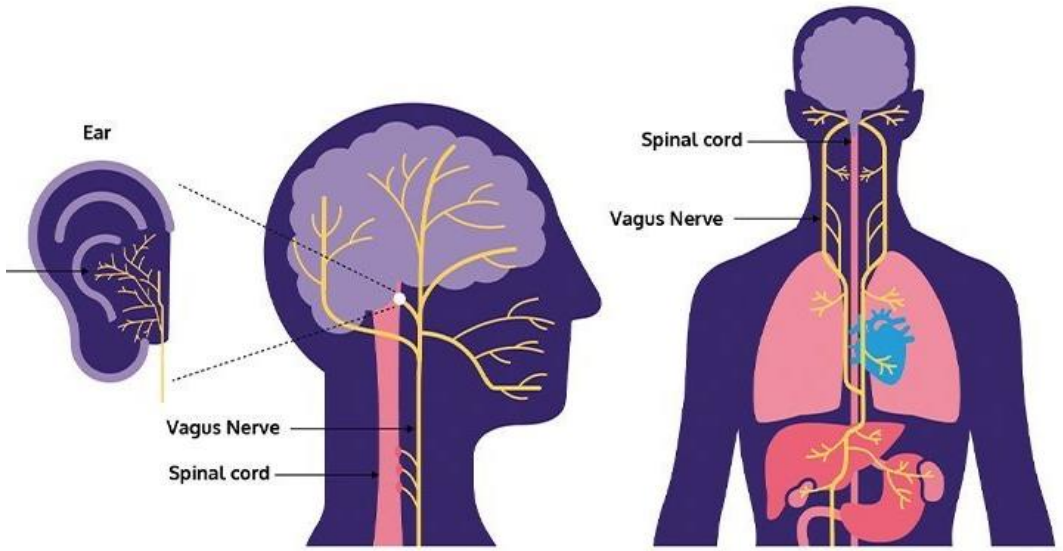
Understanding the autonomic nervous system

- Sympathetic nervous system. This system arouses our bodies to respond by mobilizing us to move.
- Parasympathetic nervous system. This system is involved in calming our bodies and conserving energy by slowing our heart rate, regulating our digestion, and lowering our blood pressure.



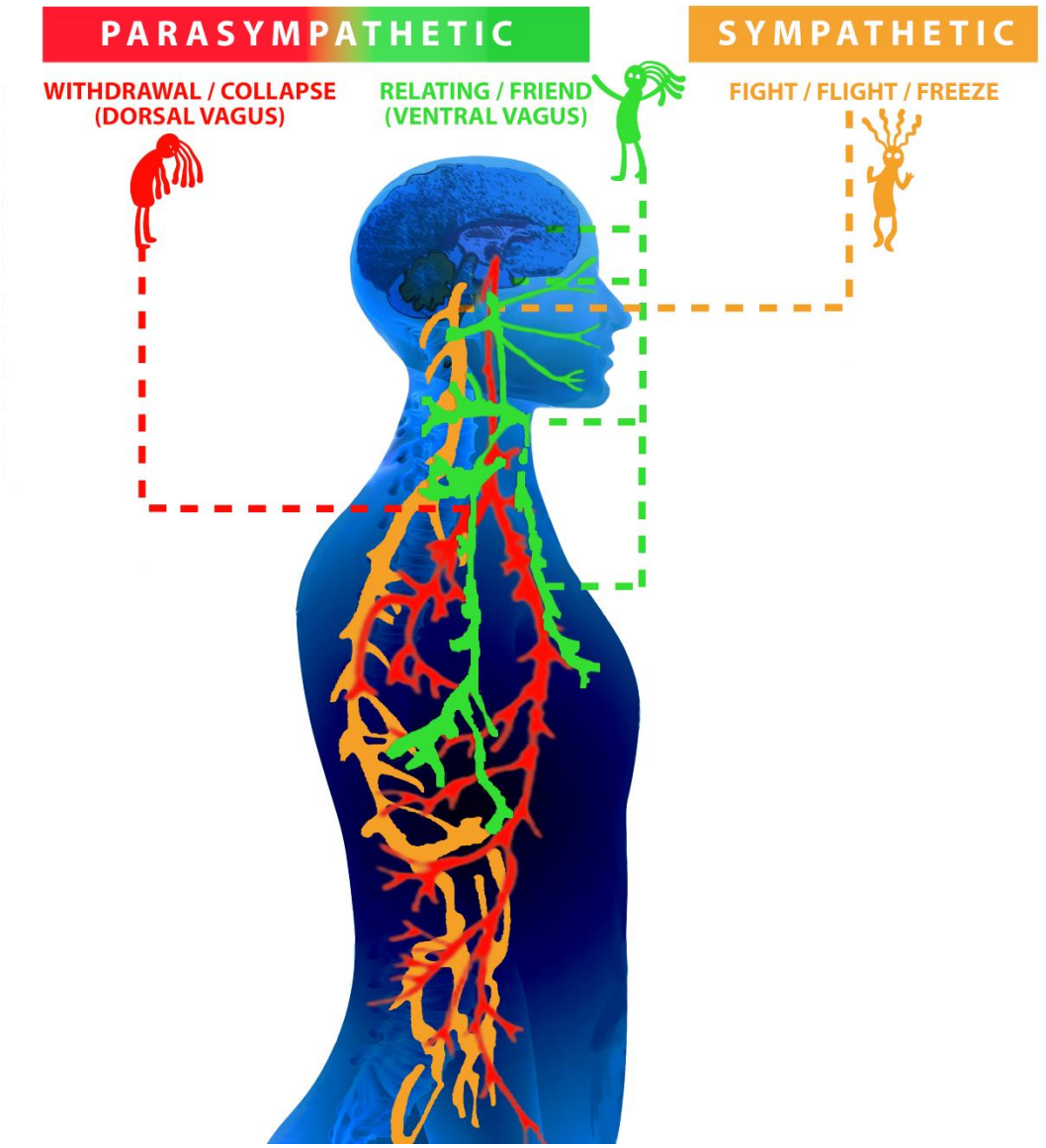
What is the Vagas nerve?

- The vagus nerve is the main parasympathetic nerve in our body. It controls involuntary function of our heart rate, digestion, and immune system. It helps keep these areas functioning normally and calmly.
- 20% of vagas nerve fibers are the ones that regulate the heart, lungs, digestion, glands, inflammation by providing information from the brain DOWN to the organs (efferent nerves)
- 80% of vagas nerve fibers carry interoceptive messages from the body up to the brain BOTTOM-UP (afferent nerves)



Understanding the autonomic nervous system: What is the vagas nerve?

- It is the 10th cranial nerve, meaning it starts in the brain and makes its way down to different parts of our body and organs.
- There are two sides to this vagus nerve, the dorsal (back) and the ventral (front).
- Researcher and psychologist Stephen Porges became interested in the vagas nerve and introduced a new way of understanding our nervous system, The polyvagal theory.



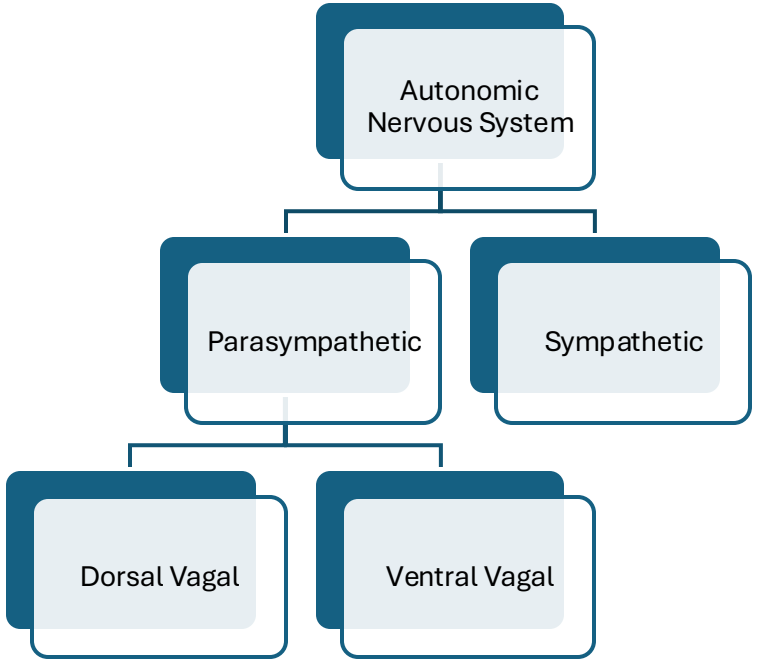
What is the polyvagal theory?

Polyvagal theory has significantly impacted psychology by providing a detailed understanding of the nervous system's role in emotional regulation, social connection, and trauma response.

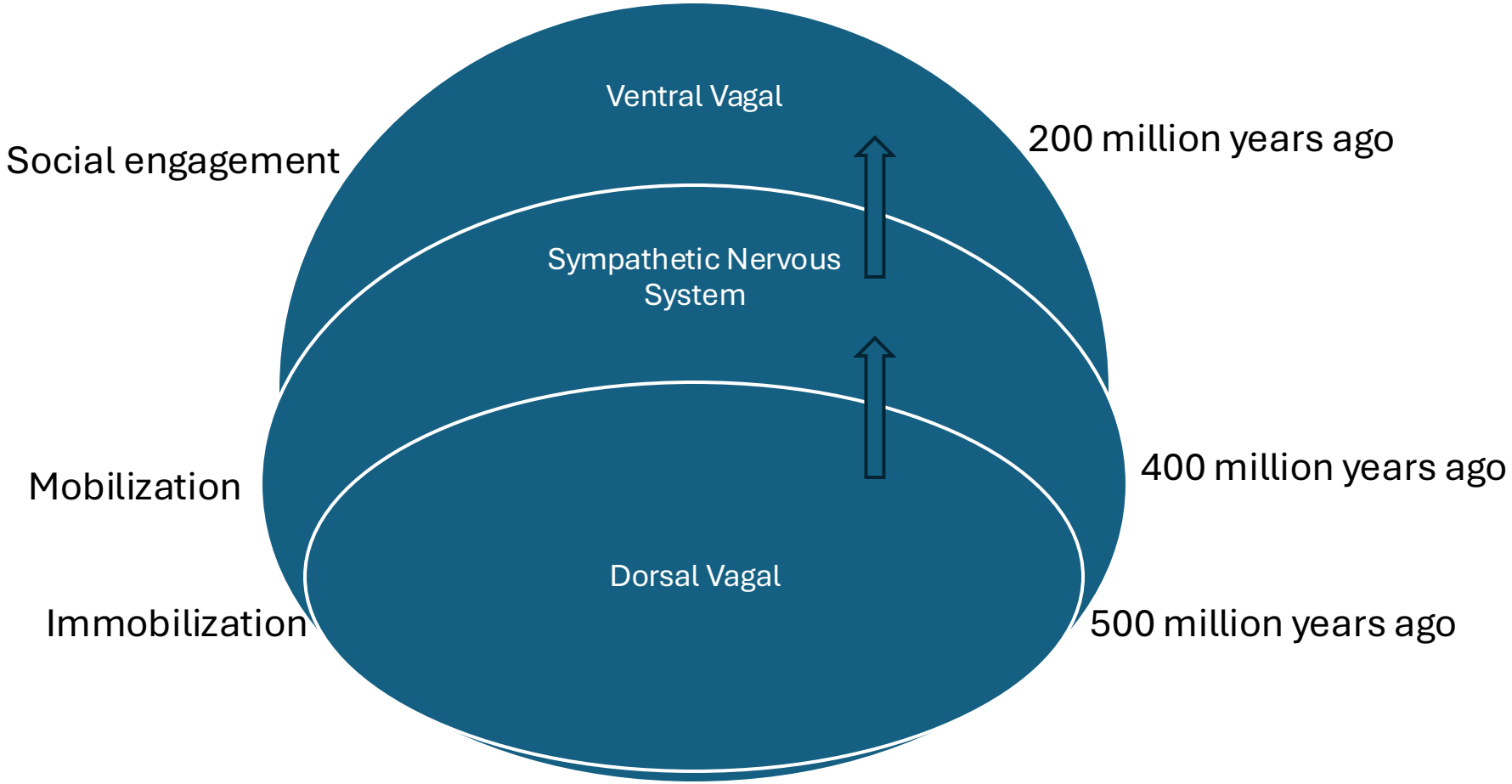
This has led to a more holistic approach to therapy that considers the physiological aspects of a person's experience, particularly when addressing trauma and anxiety, with a focus on strategies to promote a sense of safety and connection through the vagus nerve.

What is the Polyvagal theory?

- Focuses on how humans have a biological need for connection and wired-in survival responses.
- The three evolutionary stages involved in the development of our autonomic nervous system.

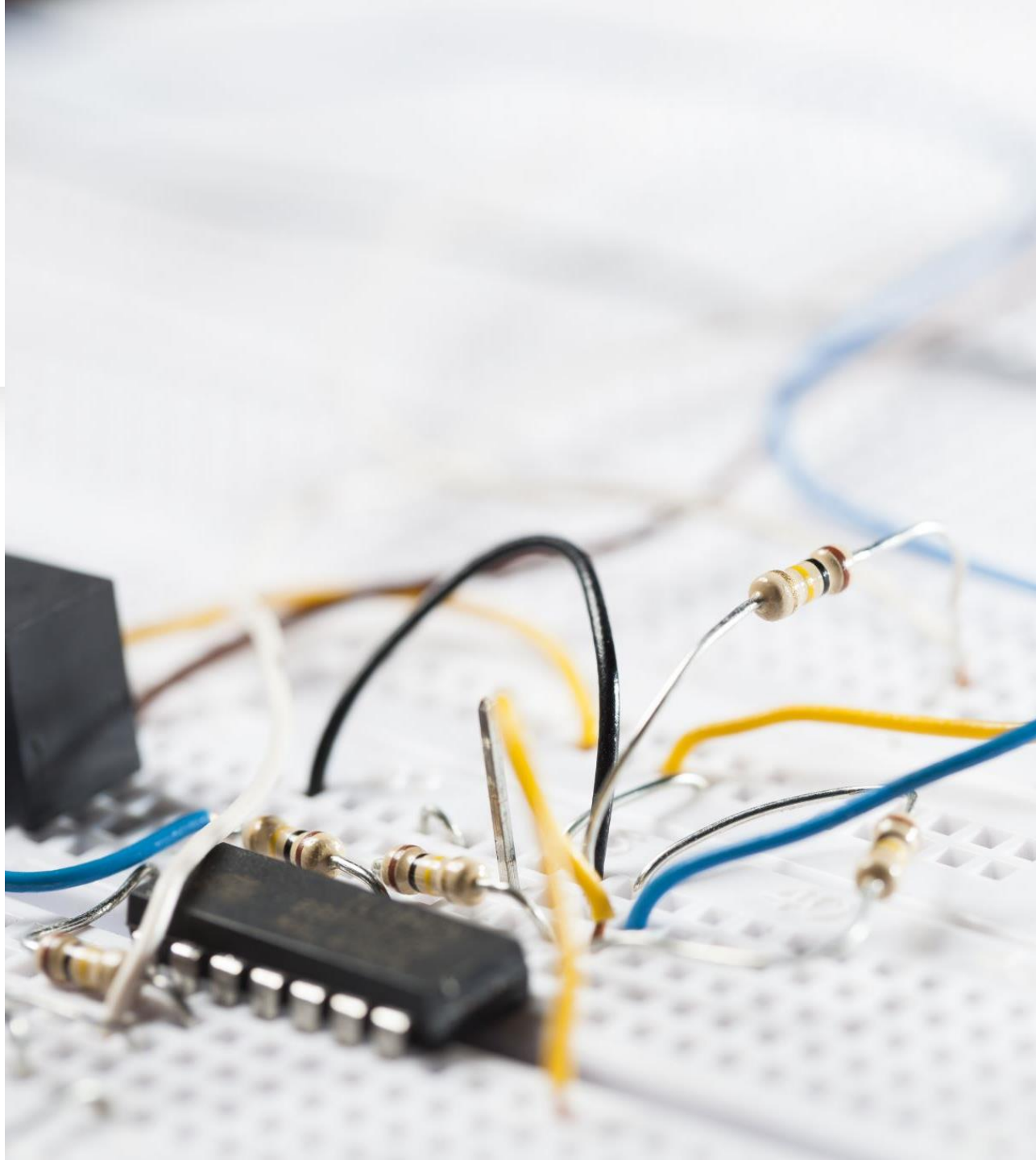


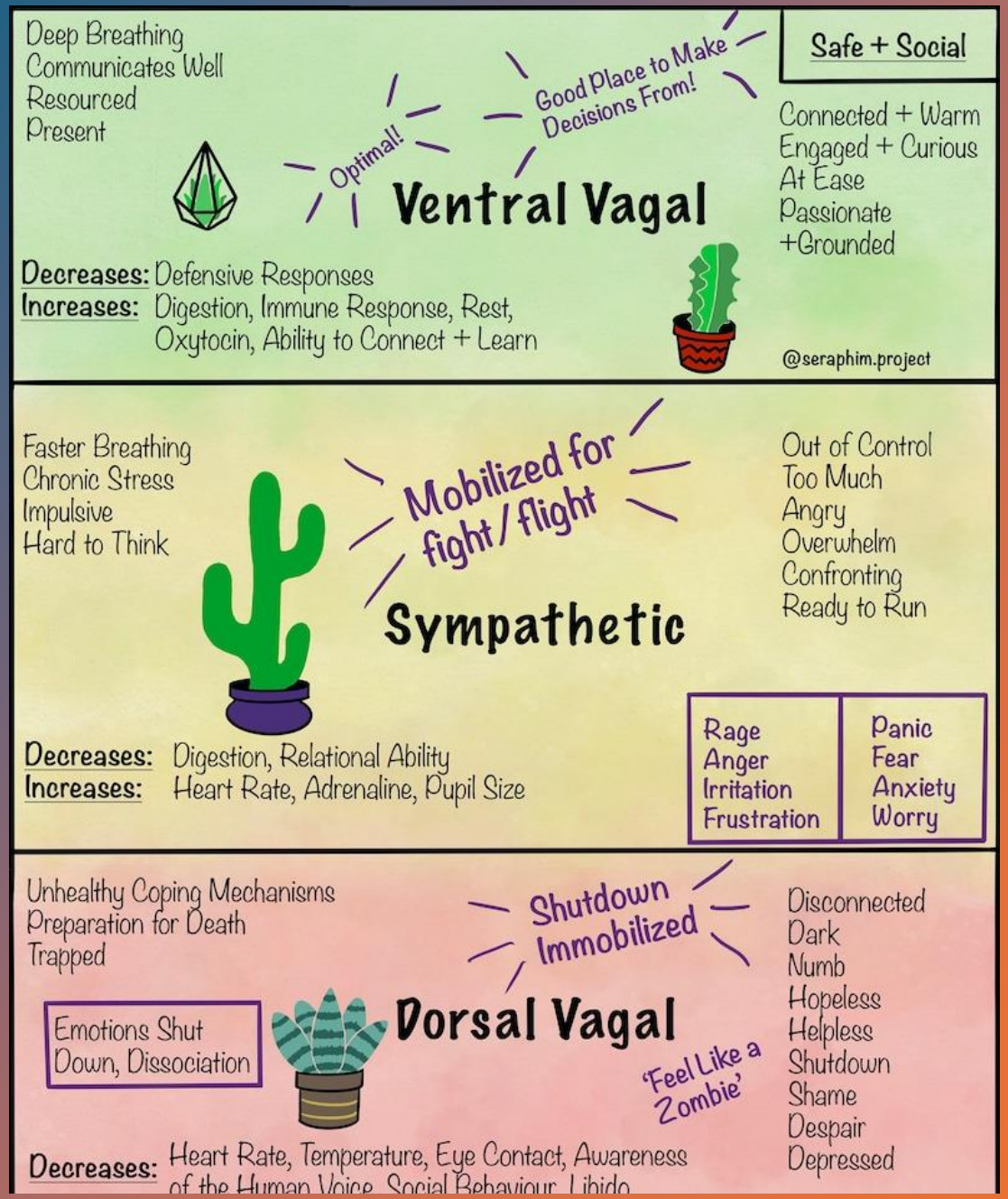
Nested Evolutionary Relation of Three Pathways



Neuroception: Internal surveillance system

- In polyvagal theory, Dr. Porges describes the process in which our neural circuits read cues of danger in our environment as *neuroception*. "In this moment, am I safe or in danger?"
- Through this process of neuroception, we are experiencing the world in a way in which we are involuntarily scanning situations and people to determine if they are safe or dangerous.
- What is important about this concept of neuroception is that our responses to stress are often happening prior to the higher brain centers becoming aware of what is going on.
- Whether we feel safe or feel threatened is a perception that often happens outside of our conscious awareness, yet our bodies are responding and bringing the energy needed to manage the situation effectively.



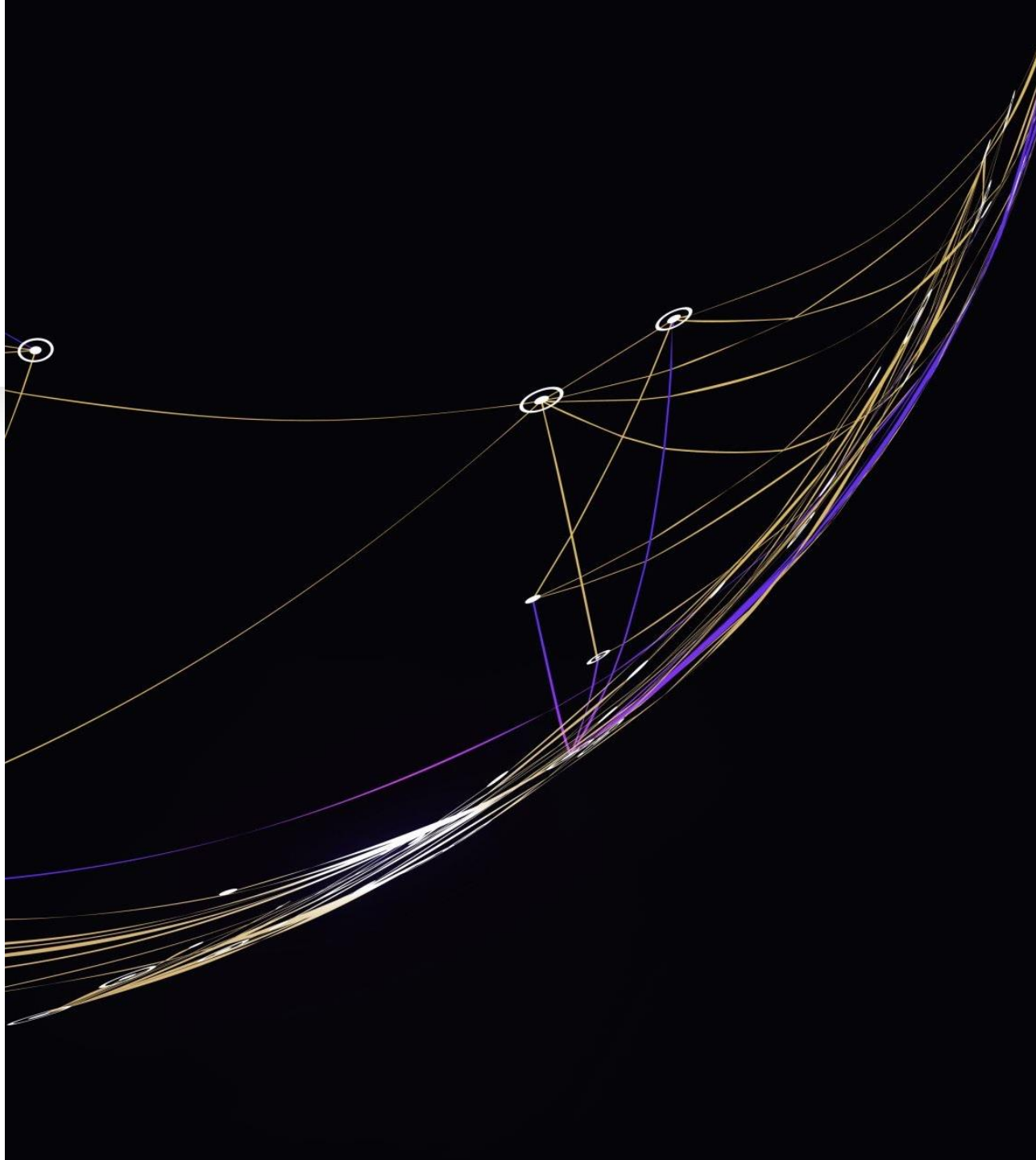


What is Neuroception?

- The vagus nerve is of particular interest around the process of neuroception. In the process of neuroception, both sides of our vagus nerve can be stimulated.
- The ventral side responds to cues of safety in our environment and interactions. It supports feelings of physical safety and safe emotional connection to others in our social environment.
- The dorsal side responds to cues of danger. It pulls us away from connection, out of awareness, and into a state of self-protection
- When there is a neuroceptive mismatch, it can lead to inability to calm defense systems or inability to active systems in a risky environment.

Emotions and polyvagal theory

- According to polyvagal theory, the two systems (dorsal vagal and ventral vagal) are in constant dialogue. When everything runs normally, there is a bidirectional flow of energy and information, and the two work in harmony (Bridges & Porges, 2015).
- However, when there is a problem and we feel threatened, that flow changes, and we engage our primary survival mechanism — *fight or flight* — and are primed for action (Bridges & Porges, 2015).
- The goal is not to always be in a state of ventral vagal regulation but to be able to flexibly navigate moving down and back up the hierarchy.



Emotions, Trauma, and Polyvagal theory

- Once a threat has passed, our bodies should go back to baseline but sometimes can remain in a state of perceived danger, with defenses engaged, and we experience prolonged stress and anxiety.
- When someone has experienced trauma, particularly in experiences where they were left immobilized, their ability to scan their environment for danger cues can become skewed.
- For those who have experienced trauma, a danger cue can move them directly to immobilization. As they come to associate numerous interpersonal cues as dangerous, such as a slight change of facial expression, a particular tone of voice, or certain types of body posturing, they may find themselves responding in a way that is familiar to them in an effort to prepare and protect themselves.

Stephen Porges

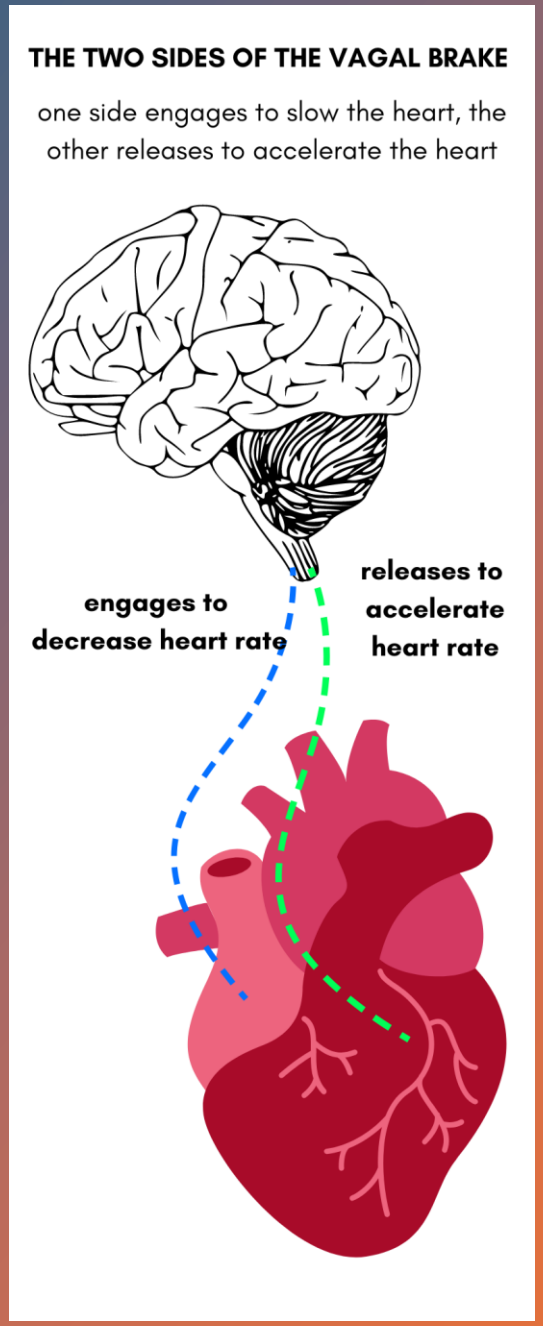
https://youtu.be/ec3AUMDjtKQ?si=MvBk1HurzmpQHcEF

Legal Professionals and prolonged stress

1. **Stress Management**: Lawyers often face high-pressure environments that can trigger immobilization or fight-or-flight responses. Understanding the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems helps lawyers develop strategies for maintaining calm and focus under stress.
2. **Emotional Regulation**: lawyers can learn techniques to better manage emotions, reduce anxiety, and improve decision-making.
3. **Enhanced Communication**: The ventral vagal state is associated with social engagement and communication. Lawyers can use this understanding to improve their interactions with clients, colleagues, and in court.
4. **Resilience Building**: Applying polyvagal-informed practices such as mindfulness, breathwork, and grounding exercises can help lawyers build resilience against the cumulative stress of their work.
5. **Polyvagal tools** are effective in helping help move clients through trying situations.

Tools for legal professionals

Polyvagal informed practices



Polyvagal tools to manage stress: The vagal brake

- Efficiently increases and decreases heart rate
- Brings mobilization without a move into a sympathetic fight and flight survival response
- Supports the ability to move between action and calm
- Access and utilize resources that tones the nervous system, activating the regulating pathways of the ventral vagal state, creating physical and psychological resilience.

Polyvagal tools to manage stress

- Breathing
- Mindfulness
- Somatic experiences

Breathing tools

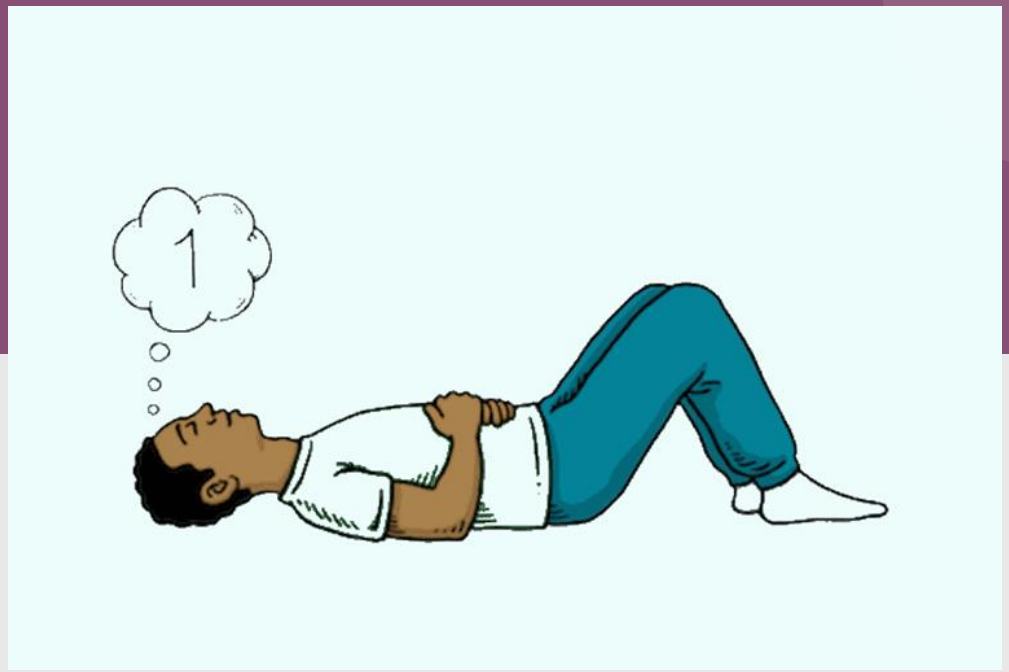
Breathing as the doorway

- Breathing has both a voluntary and involuntary component
- By changing our breathing pattern, we can change the information that is being sent to the brain via the vagal nerve
- The brain listens to the information from the vagal nerve and can lead to changes in our thoughts and emotions

Breathing – Using a breath map

Vagas Nerve	Breathing pattern
Ventral Vagal	Full, deep, easy, steady, slow, long, calming, filling, even
Sympathetic	Sharp, short, fast, loud, forced, irregular, fiery, gasping
Dorsal vagal	Shallow, silent, difficulty filling, weak, depleting.

Coherent or paced breathing

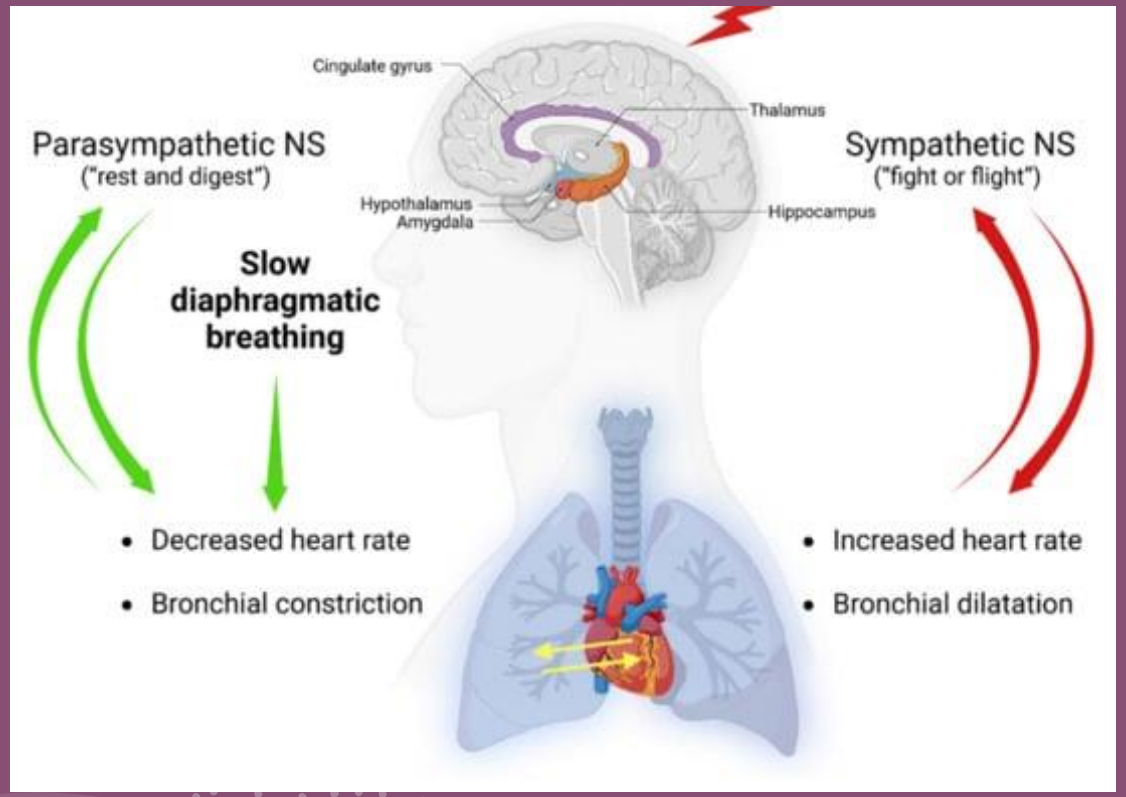


Paced breathing can help balance the autonomic nervous system which supports a sense of calmness, connectedness, and stress resiliency.

Coherent Breathing

- Equal inhalation and exhalation
- Three to six breaths per minute (a count of 4 for each inhale & each exhale)
- Gently in and out of the nose

Physical benefits of coherent breathing



- Decreased levels of stress hormones
- Optimizes heart rate variability (the variation in time intervals between heartbeats) which is an indicator of heart health
- Lower blood pressure
- Enhanced respiratory function (improved lung capacity; oxygenation of the blood)
- Improved immune function by reducing stress
- Improved sleep
- Decreased pain

Emotional benefits of coherent breathing

Soothe and Relax:

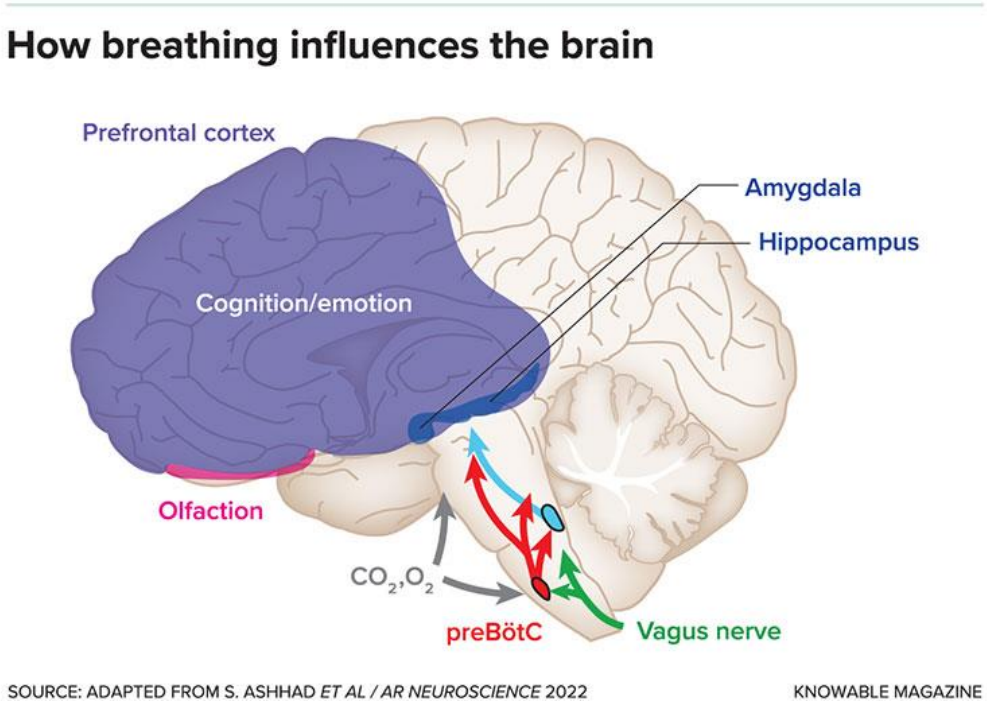
Slowed paced breathing reduce overactivity in the limbic system of the brain.

This can help with regulating emotions like anxiety and anger.

Cognitive benefits of coherent breathing

Increase alertness and focus

- Paced breathing helps to increase activity in the prefrontal cortex.
- This can help to increase alertness, attention, and focus



Relationship benefits of coherent breathing

- Coherent breathing engages the parasympathetic nervous system which helps us to connect and love.
- Coherent breathing allows us to co-regulate which strengthens bonds with other people

Cyclic Sighing

- A “cyclic sigh” consists of a double inhale through the nose followed by an extended exhale through the mouth.
- This breathing practice was found in a rigorous trial to reduce anxiety symptoms, lower heart rate, and improve positive mood.
- The double inhale puts gentle internal pressure on the vagus nerve.
- The long exhale activates the parasympathetic nervous system which is our body’s built-in system for calming our heart rate and soothing our bodies following a stressful experience.

Cyclic Sighing

You can do it in a meditative position, while walking, or almost any time or any place.

To begin, become aware of any tension you're holding in your face and soften through your brows, forehead, and jaw.

Inhale through your nose, filling your lungs most of the way full. Hold it briefly. Next, take a second, deeper breath to fully expand your lungs. Now, slowly exhale the breath as if breathing out of a straw until all of the air in your lungs is gone.

Repeat this process again, inhaling deeply, pausing, taking a second sip of air, and then releasing slowly out of your mouth so that your exhale is longer than your inhale.

Alternate nostril breathing

- Alternate nostril breathing, also known as Nadi Shodhana in yoga traditions, can help calm the nervous system.
- The rhythmic and controlled breathing pattern stimulates the vagus nerve, which in turn activates the parasympathetic nervous system.

Mindfulness

What is **Mindfulness**?

- “Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally“- Jon Kabat Zinn, 1990

- “Mindfulness consists of cultivating awareness of the mind and body and living in the here and now.”- Stahl and Goldstein, 2010

Mindfulness and polyvagal theory

Mindfulness and meditation can stimulate the vagus nerve and improve vagal tone (Fallis, 2017).

Ex: The Raisin Meditation
Use the touch, taste, smell, and sight of a raisin to encourage mindfulness and provide a meditative focus.

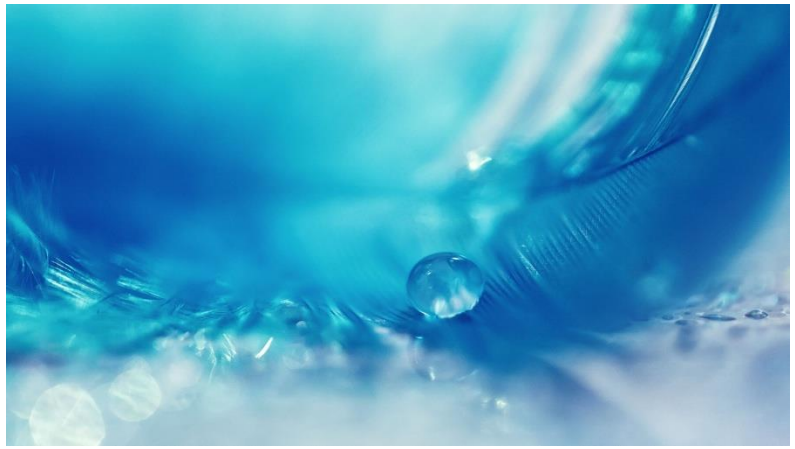
Ex: The Five Senses
5-4-3-2-1 uses the five senses to reach a mindful state.

Somatic Resources

Self-Supportive Touch

- A simple touch can be a powerful way to support yourself during times of suffering
- Comfort of touch is important part of nurturing
- Touch can trigger a cascade of positive hormones and neuroendocrine signals (oxytocin)
- Touch can support health and provide a sense of security in multiple body systems
- Butterfly hug

Cold water



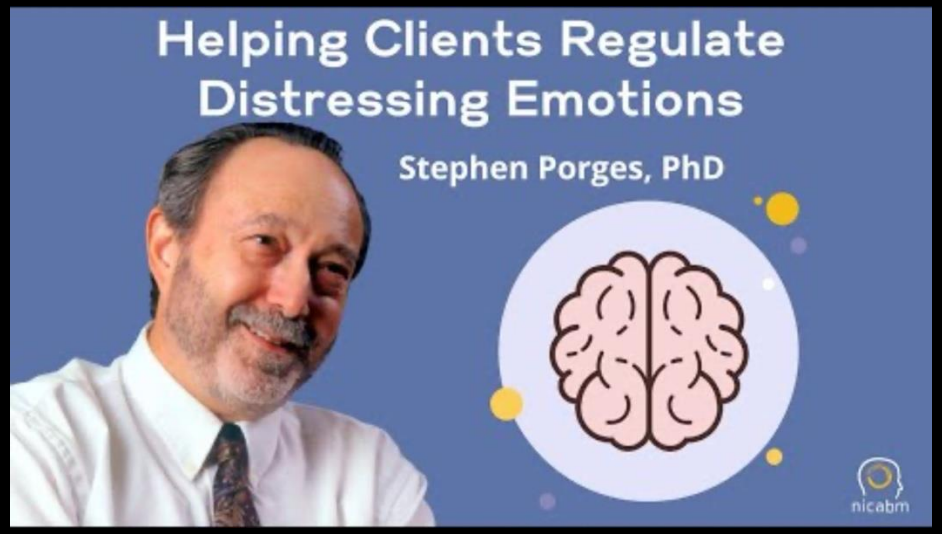
Use of nerve and immersion stimulates the Vagus nerve and activates the parasympathetic nervous system.

Practices:

Have a cold shower, fill a bowl with water and ice and dip for face in it or simply grab a bag of frozen peas out of the freezer and hold it on your face or the back of your neck.

Breath practices with movement

Shaking	Shaking – reduces stress, awakens, energizes, and enlivens the body
Tapping	Tapping – raises mood, connects us to our bodies



Stephen Porges

https://youtu.be/4Bnlwq2UxxA?si=w6CqthdKX3Jm_vgw

Resources for Polyvagal Supports

Videos:

1. https://youtu.be/ec3AUMDjtKQ

(Stephen Porges: what is the polyvagal system)

2. https://youtu.be/4Bnlwq2UxxA

(Stephen Porges: Helping Clients Regulate distressing emotions)

Books:

1. **"The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation" by Stephen W. Porges** - This foundational text delves deeply into the science behind the theory and its implications.
2. **"The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe" by Stephen W. Porges** - A more accessible version of the core tenets of Polyvagal Theory, offering practical insights.
3. **"Polyvagal Exercises for Safety and Connection" by Deb Dana** - This book provides practical exercises to apply Polyvagal Theory for enhancing safety and connection in therapy and everyday life.
4. **"The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation" by Deb Dana** - Focuses on applying the theory in therapeutic settings to help clients achieve emotional regulation.

Articles

https://positivepsychology.com/polyvagal-theory/

https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/integrative-neuroscience/articles/10.3389/fnint.2022.871227/full

THANK YOU

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