



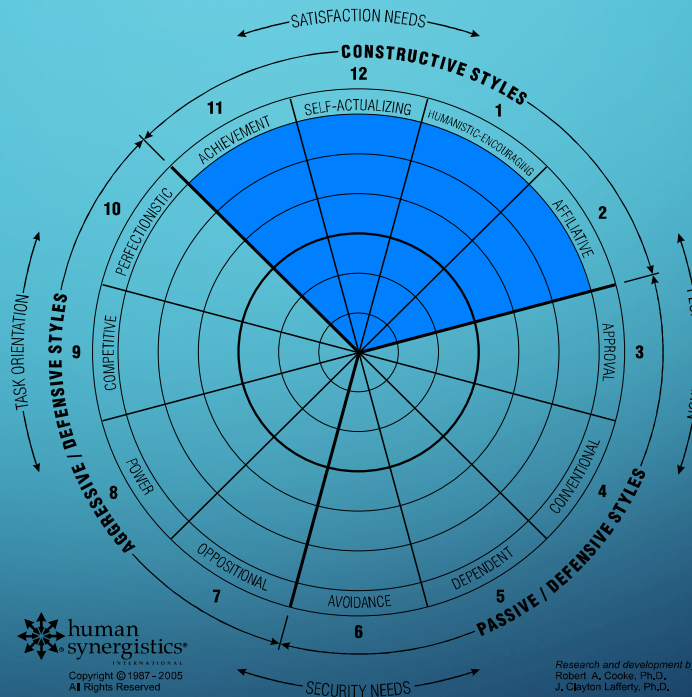
BirdsEye – Culture Leaders Network Webinar

The Transformational Power of Feeling Safe (Leadership & Culture)

Frank Gallant and Craig Kennedy



Constructive Leadership Styles Create Psychological Safety





Presence, Safety, and Attunement

The Human Core of Effective Leadership

Presence allows leaders to be grounded, focused, and emotionally available.

When leaders are truly present, they model mindfulness, reduce reactivity, and offer their teams a calm and reliable point of contact—especially during stress, change or uncertainty.



Presence

A Foundation of Effective Leadership and Culture

- **Enhances Trust and Psychological Safety:**

When leaders are fully present, team members feel seen, heard, and valued—creating the conditions for open dialogue, innovation, and risk-taking.

- **Strengthens Decision-Making and Emotional Regulation:**

Presence allows leaders to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively, especially under pressure or during conflict.

- **Fosters Connection and Relational Intelligence:**

Being present improves attunement to team dynamics, enabling more empathetic communication and supportive leadership.



Presence

A Foundation of Effective Leadership and Culture

- **Models Focus and Clarity in a Distracted World:**

Present leaders model mindfulness and intention, setting the tone for a more focused, purposeful, and grounded work environment.

- **Anchors Culture in Values, Not Noise:**

Presence helps leaders stay aligned with core values during change or stress, reinforcing consistency, integrity, and cultural coherence.



Presence, Safety, and Attunement

The Human Core of Effective Leadership

Psychological Safety, as grounded in Dr. Stephen Porges' Polyvagal Theory, is not just a cognitive experience but a biological state.

Leaders who create safe environments support nervous system regulation, allowing team members to shift from defensive modes (fight, flight, freeze) into states where they can learn, contribute, and take interpersonal or task risks without fear of punishment or humiliation.

Safety Defined

Feeling Safe and Making Change

**Stephen Porges
on Polyvagal
Theory and
Coaching**



According to Dr. Stephen Porges, safety is a neurophysiological state in which the nervous system detects cues of calm and connection, allowing for social engagement, trust, and co-regulation.

It is not just the absence of threat, but the presence of signals that invite openness, rest, and relational connection.

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Safety is a Neurobiological State

According to Dr. Stephen Porges, safety is a neurobiological state that enables the human nervous system—especially the ventral vagal branch of the parasympathetic nervous system—to shift out of defense and into connection. True safety is not simply the absence of threat, but the presence of cues that signal trust, warmth, predictability, and social acceptance.

These cues—such as gentle vocal tones, facial expressiveness, eye contact, and regulated body language—communicate to the autonomic nervous system that it is safe to let down protective responses like fight, flight, or shutdown.

In this state, the body and brain become available for co-regulation, learning, collaboration, empathy, and healing.



Safety is a Neurobiological State

Porges emphasizes that safety is felt before it is thought—it is subconsciously detected through what he calls “neuroception,” the body’s automatic scanning for danger or safety.

When people feel safe, they are biologically more capable of engaging socially, expressing vulnerability, and contributing constructively to relationships and teams.

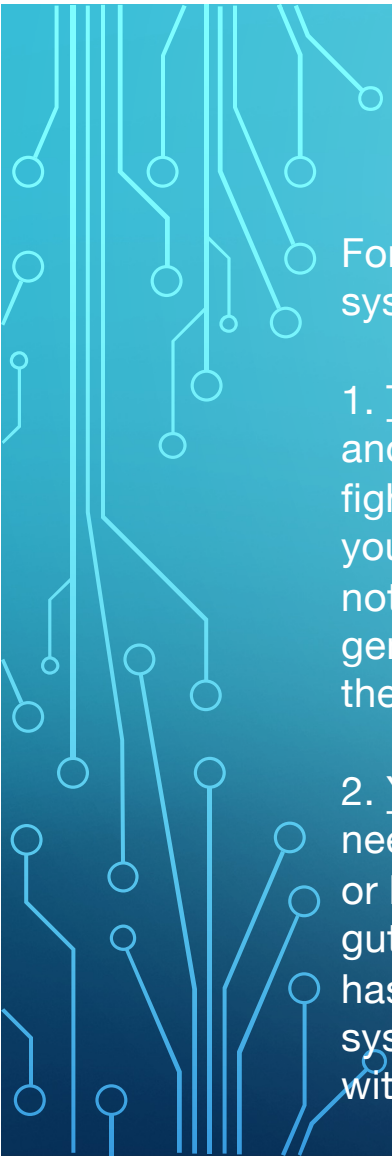
In workplaces, especially in leadership and cultural change, creating environments of felt safety is essential to reduce defensiveness, increase openness, and enable sustained collaboration and innovation.



Safety Defined via the Polyvagal Theory

Feeling safe is dependent on three conditions:

1. The autonomic nervous system cannot be in a state that supports defence.
2. The social engagement system needs to be activated to down regulate sympathetic activation and functionally contain the sympathetic nervous system and the dorsal vagal circuit within the optimal range (homeostasis) that would support health, growth, and restoration; and
3. To detect cues of safety (e.g. prosodic vocalizations, positive facial expressions and gestures) via neuroception.



What's Need to Feel Safe

For people to feel safe, two things have to happen at the level of the autonomic nervous system.

1. The sympathetic nervous system, which is a flight or fight division should be present and enabled. Enabled doesn't mean active. A guard at the door doesn't have to be fighting with anybody. It just has to be there and be ready to fight if needed. For safety, you have to have a flight or fight system that is prepared, but not one that's paranoid, not one that perceives threats everywhere, not one that magnifies threats. One that can genuinely recognize the threat and act to keep you safe in the face of that threat. That's the job of the ANS, in that sense.

2. Your parasympathetic nervous system, which keeps you in a state of relaxation, also needs to be active. It keeps you breathing in a healthy way, rather than hyperventilating or having shallow breathing. It coordinates your breath with your heart. It relaxes your guts so they are not in a knot, and keeps your muscles in a state of relaxation. There has to be a balance between the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems. Within the body, lack of safety is experienced when there is an imbalance within these two systems.



Psychological Safety

Regulates the Nervous System for Connection:

Psychological safety cues the ventral vagal system, helping people shift from defense to openness, enabling connection, collaboration, and creativity.

Enables Co-Regulation:

Leaders who foster safety help others regulate their own emotional states. This co-regulation builds relational trust and team resilience under pressure.

Reduces Threat Perception:

In unsafe environments, the brain prioritizes survival over learning or innovation. Safety down-regulates fear responses, allowing for risk-taking and authentic engagement.



Psychological Safety

Supports Social Engagement and Voice:

Safety activates the body's "social engagement system," encouraging speaking up, empathy, and listening—the building blocks of inclusive and constructive cultures.

Reinforces Leadership Presence and Attunement:

A psychologically safe environment enhances a leader's ability to attune to others' cues, adapt responses, and lead with both compassion and clarity.



Presence, Safety, and Attunement

The Human Core of Effective Leadership

Attunement is a leader's ability to sense and respond to the emotional and relational needs of others.

Attuned leaders listen deeply, pick up on subtle nonverbal cues, and adapt their communication to meet people where they are.

This builds deep trust and nurtures inclusive, responsive team cultures.



Attunement

The Missing Link Between Culture and Compassion

Attunement is the ability to sense and respond appropriately to others' emotions, needs, and energy — essentially, emotional synchrony in action.

To recognize nonverbal cues, shifts in tone, and underlying emotions.

Using engagement questions that invite depth, intimacy and connection (e.g., “What’s not being said?” or “What feels hard right now?”).

Building reflection and emotional check-in time into staff routines.



Attunement

Builds Deep Trust and Relational Safety:

Attuned leaders notice emotional shifts and nonverbal cues, helping team members feel seen, understood, and respected—essential for psychological safety.

Strengthens Communication and Conflict Resolution:

By tuning into others' needs and emotional states, leaders can respond rather than react, leading to more empathetic, timely, and effective conversations.

Enables Inclusive and Adaptive Leadership:

Attunement allows leaders to adjust their approach based on individual and cultural differences, fostering a sense of belonging and equity.



Attunement

Supports Well-Being and Emotional Regulation:

Leaders who are attuned model calm and compassion, helping teams co-regulate during stress or uncertainty—key for resilience and engagement.

Anchors Constructive Culture Through Presence:

Attunement reinforces a culture of listening, responsiveness, and connection, aligning behavior with values and strengthening collective purpose.



Presence, Safety, and Attunement

When all three are present:

- Teams engage more honestly and creatively – allowing them to focus on goals / outcomes.
- People recover more quickly from conflict.
- Organizational values become felt, not just stated.
- Change efforts gain traction because people feel safe, seen, and supported.

Together, these three elements form the neurobiological and emotional foundation for high-performance, compassion-based leadership and the conditions for meaningful cultural transformation (constructive attitudes, values and beliefs + behaviours)



Co-Creation of Safety

Is it possible to create absolute safety for everybody?

Over time it might be. There is a problem theoretically with the question of safety, which is simply that we are all shaped very much by all of our experiences.

If from an early age, you experienced yourself being **connected and protected**, it will be easier for you to feel safe in most circumstances.

If from an early age, you experienced yourself as **being assaulted**, it will be very difficult for you to feel safe in certain circumstance.

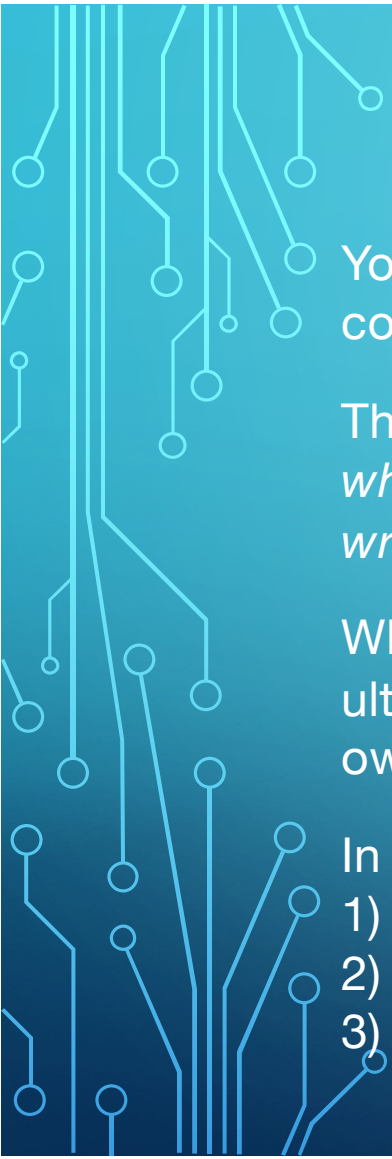


Your Brain Is Wired To See Danger

The brain can get confused and sometimes people will perceive safety when there isn't any. Their sensors just didn't pick up on the danger. At other times, some people will see danger when there also isn't any, because that's how they're programmed. For those people, it is really difficult to create 100% safety.

All we can do is to remove whatever blocks to the other person's safety that we are introducing. I can take responsibility for whatever I do or don't do to create safety in any situation.

What I cannot do is to make you feel absolutely safe. That can't be done by anybody else. But that still means that there is a responsibility, a necessary one, and a welcome one, on the part of those leading or being in a group, to do what we can, so that you and everyone else can experience safety. That is on us.



Your Brain Is Wired To See Danger

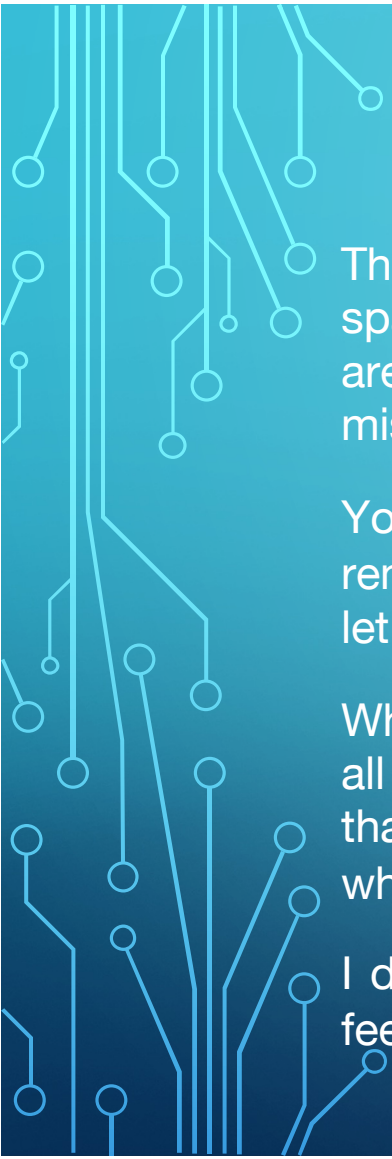
You have an opportunity to explore when you don't feel safe, where that comes from, how you can ask for help with it and what you do with that.

The spiritual teacher Ramana Maharshi once said, that *“If your feet hurt when you are walking outdoors, there are two things you can do. You can wrap the whole world in burlap, or you can get a pair of shoes.”*

What he meant by that is, that the protection, the safety, has to ultimately come from within. You have to develop the capacity to be your own safety. That is part of the work here, to find your own safety within.

In other words, to get your pair of shoes:

- 1) you understand what triggers you;
- 2) you see the situation objectively;
- 3) you have the inner strength to handle a challenge.



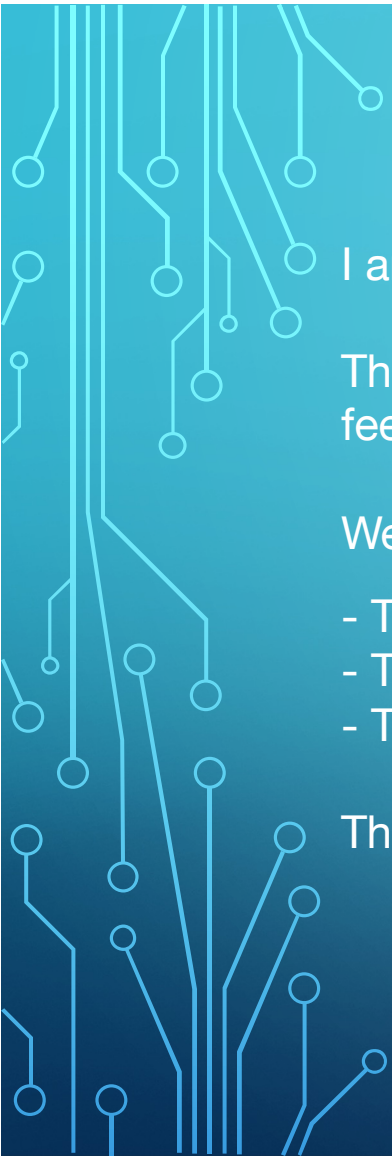
Your Brain Is Wired To See Danger

This is a two-sided process where one part is about what we can do to create a space of optimal safety, without which the work cannot possibly happen. We are also asking you to look at yourself and to get help if the sense of safety is missing in you.

You get that help by talking about it openly with someone who will listen. Or remove yourself from the situation and take care of yourself. In other words, let's co-create the safety. This is what I'm inviting you to do.

When somebody says "*I don't feel safe*," and that's all they say, they are putting all their responsibility on the other person. It may be a legitimate perception, but that's not enough. Then you have to ask yourself, when you don't feel safe, what do you feel?

I don't feel safe is not a feeling. You can't feel something that isn't there. The feeling is fear, right? Own it!



Your Brain Is Wired To See Danger

I am afraid. '*I don't feel safe,*' really is a trip you're laying on another person.

The accurate way to say it is '*What do I actually feel?*' Legitimately you might feel afraid. OK, good, you feel afraid.

Well then, what is the underlying aspect of the core emotion of fear?

- The fear is that you'll attack me.
- The fear is that you'll laugh at me, and I'm going to feel bad.
- The fear is that you'll criticize me. That you'll reject me. Ridicule me.

Those are the fears. Those fears may be totally legitimate.



Your Brain Is Wired To See Danger

When Steven Porges talks about safety, he says that we have these receptors in our temporal lobe, that tell us whether we are safe or not.

But don't confuse '*don't feel safe*' with a feeling. Look at the word don't.

It expresses what you don't feel. It doesn't express what you do feel.

For the purposes of this process, isn't it more pristine and more accurate to talk about what you do feel?

I feel fear. I have anxiety, and so on. That's very specific. Now there is something to talk about.



Recognize the State of Your Autonomic Nervous System

When you understand the state of your own nervous system, you can recognize when and how to bring yourself back into balance, to effectively cope with what is going on around you. The autonomic nervous system is divided into two branches, sympathetic and parasympathetic.

- The sympathetic nervous system prepares us for action, defence, or fight/flight.
- The parasympathetic nervous system is composed of neurons that begin in the brain and go to their target organs to facilitate relaxation and digestion. These are known as the cranial nerves. The most important of the cranial nerves is the vagus nerve, which is responsible for 75% of parasympathetic stimulation.

The vagus nerve has two components, each with its own evolutionary history and function, known as the dorsal vagus, and the ventral vagus.



Recognize the State of Your Autonomic Nervous System

When you are in the ventral vagus or constructive mindset states, there are corresponding emotional states: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, acceptance, gentleness, cooperation, clarity, curiosity, confidence

This facilitates...

Felt sense of safety, homeostasis connection, cooperation calmness, peace, co-regulation, self-regulation, play, freedom, fun, friendship regulates heart rate variability through connection to the heart's pacemaker.

Supports a flexible response to daily living and events – you can reflect and respond rather than react.



Work To Increase

Eye contact

Vocal prosody – pitch, pacing, rhythm, emotional texture

Facial expression

One's ability to listen

Decreases or slows:

Heart rate

Arousal or activation

Somatic Experience:

What do you notice in your body when you imagine this ventral vagal state?



Regarding the Ventral Vagal System Constructive Thinking

With whom do you experience safety and connection, and what enhances that?

What gets in the way of you experiencing safety and connection with others?

What do you believe about the world when you are in this state of safety and connection?

What behaviours show up in you when you experience safety and connection with others?



Regarding the Ventral Vagal System Constructive Thinking

The world is...

What do you believe about yourself when you are in this state?

I am ...

What helps you to maintain an experience of safety and connection within yourself?

What gets in the way of you experiencing safety and connection within yourself?

What practices or lifestyle habits enhance your experience of safety and connection within yourself?



Regarding the Sympathetic System (Fight – Aggressive or Flight - Passive)

When and with whom do you want to flee?

When and with whom do you want to fight?

What behaviours show up in you when you want to flee or fight?

What do you believe about the world when you are in this state?
The world is ...

What do you believe about yourself when you are in this state?
I am ...



Regarding the Dorsal Vagal System Shutdown / Freeze

Is the experience of dorsal vagal collapse familiar?

When does this disconnection happen for you?

What behaviours show up in you when your dorsal vagal system is activated?

What do you believe about the world when you are in this state?
The world is ...

What do you believe about yourself when you are in this state?
I am ...



Closing Journal Exercise

In a journal, record the times this week when you are in Ventral Vagal mode, Sympathetic mode and Dorsal Vagal mode.

Notice the cues or triggers for each, and what causes a shift from one mode to another.

After completing this exercise, how might you integrate what you have learned into your life or work in a practical way?

Is there a daily practice, action or perspective you can carry forward?

If so, what is it?



Which constructive mindset practices do you want to start with to help facilitate a greater sense of safety?

1.

2.

3.



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The Importance of the Presence, Safety and Attunement for Leadership & Culture

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Appendix: A: Co-regulation Defined

Co-regulation is the biological and relational process through which two or more nervous systems connect to create a sense of safety, calm, and emotional balance. It is a foundational human need and the primary way individuals learn to regulate stress and emotion.

According to Dr. Porges, co-regulation occurs through the “social engagement system”—facial expression, vocal tone, eye contact, posture, and presence. These cues, when perceived as safe, activate the ventral vagal pathway of the autonomic nervous system, allowing people to move out of defense (fight, flight, freeze) and into connection and cooperation.

In leadership and workplaces, co-regulation means that leaders’ nervous systems directly influence the emotional state of those around them. A calm, attuned leader helps team members feel safe and stay regulated.



Appendix: A: Self-Regulation Defined

Self-regulation is the capacity of an individual to manage their physiological and emotional state, particularly under stress, without becoming overwhelmed or reactive.

In Polyvagal Theory, self-regulation depends on the functioning of the vagus nerve, especially the ventral vagal complex, which helps the body return to a state of calm after a stress response. However, Porges notes that effective self-regulation is often learned through repeated experiences of co-regulation—especially in early relationships or safe environments.

Thus, self-regulation is not just a personal skill; it is a relationally developed capacity, supported by environments that promote connection, presence, and safety.



Appendix: B: Neuroception Defined

Neuroception is the process through which the nervous system evaluates risk without requiring conscious awareness. This automatic process involves brain areas that evaluate cues of safety, danger, and life threat. Once these are detected via neuroception, physiological state automatically shifts to optimize survival. Although we are usually not aware of cues that trigger neuroception, we tend to be aware of the physiological shift (i.e. interception).

Sometimes we experience this as feelings in our gut or heart or as an intuition that the context is dangerous. Alternatively, the system also triggers physiological states that support trust, social engagement behaviours, and the building of strong relationships.

Neuroception is not always accurate. Faulty neuroception might detect risk when there is no risk or identify cues of safety when there is a risk.



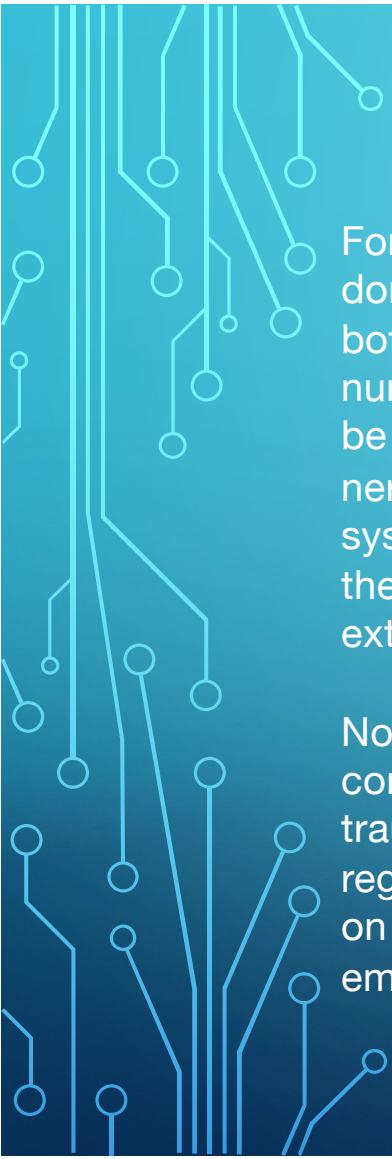
Appendix: B: Interception Defined

Is the process describing both conscious feeling in unconscious monitoring of bodily processes by the nervous system. Interception, similar to other sensory systems has four components:

1. Sensors located in internal organs to evaluate internal conditions;
2. Sensory pathways conveying information from the organs to the brain;
3. Brain structures to interpret sensory information and to regulate the organs response to the changing internal conditions; and
4. Motor pathways to communicate information from the brain to the organs in to change the state of the organs.

In Polyvagal Theory interception is the process providing the signal to the brain of changes in physiological state. In context in which there are cues of risk for safety, interception would occur after the process of neuroception.

Interception may result in a conscious awareness of a bodily response. In contrast, neuroception occurs outside conscious awareness.

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Appendix C: Safety in Balance

For the balance to be there, and for the parasympathetic nervous system (relax) to be dominant when it needs to be, there have to be two connections. Trauma undermines both those connections. The first connection is for the infant to be well connected to the nurturing environment. When this is present, the parasympathetic nervous system can be active and do its job of repair and restoration. That's the job of the parasympathetic nervous system. When that connection is not there, then the sympathetic nervous system gets too active and there is no internal safety; there is no internal goodness; there is no internal sweetness. It gets overwhelmed by fear. There has to be that external connection to the nurturing environment.

Now, there has to be an internal connection as well, to the self. To the self just means connected to their bodies. Infants are naturally connected to their bodies, but when a trauma occurs, this connection can be lost, and then there is lack of safety. For you to regain that safety, connect to yourself through the body. Pay attention to what's going on in the body in the present moment. Develop the capacity to hold yourself and the emotional states that arise within you.



Appendix C: Safety, Social Engagement and Learning

Learning, or you might say growth, only happens in what Stephen Porges, the author of Polyvagal Theory, calls the state of social engagement.

Social engagement involves different nerves, different nuclei in the brain, different brain centers, different muscles. Social engagement activates different processes inside the body such as deeper and calmer breathing and a heartbeat that is coordinated with the breath.

Social engagement means you move your neck towards the other person, and engage your eyes.

Once you are in social engagement mode, you listen to the modulation and tone of voice of the other person and pay attention to body language.

You have to be in social engagement mode if you want the people you are with to be in social engagement mode. Notice the direction of their gaze – they are usually engaged when they are looking towards you.

Dr. Porges says that in the temporal lobe, there are sensors which gauge safety. Unless these sensors read safety, the individual is not going to immerse themselves, or experience the social engagement mode.



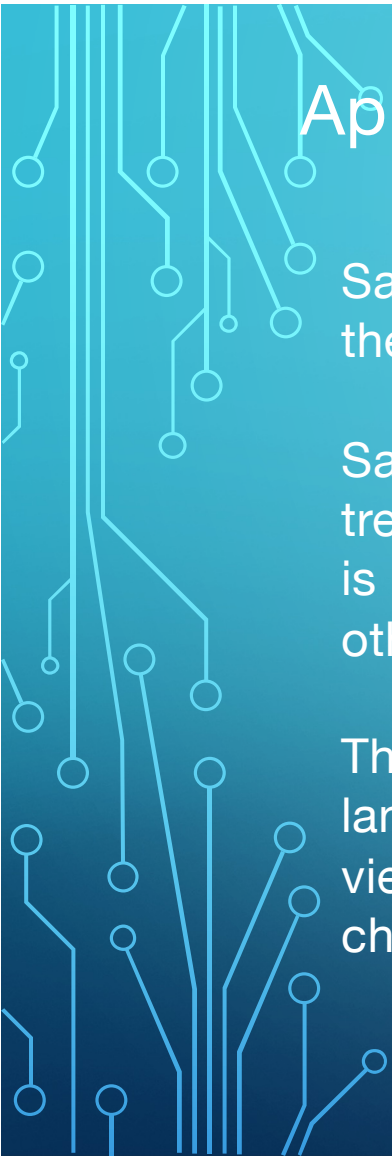
Appendix C: Safety, Social Engagement and Learning

While trying to help someone you might get too focused on what you want to get across, and lose the attunement with the other person. You may be doing this purely out of good intention, but since the transaction happens at least as much on the energetic level as on the verbal one, there's an incongruence. *"I'm trying to help you, but I'm not really connected with you"*.

Anything that we manifest, or do, that undermines the connection will reduce that person's safety, and their capacity to be in a social engagement mode. It will make your interaction less effective.

Safety is a baseline and has to be there, all the way through. Safety does not come from the removal of a threat. We can be in a perfectly safe environment and know that we are in a perfectly safe environment. But our nervous system may not know it because earlier negative life experience or trauma puts the nervous system into a permanent defensive mode or at least in a recurrent defensive mode where people are scanning for danger too often.

The lack of a threat doesn't make an infant feel safe. For the infant to feel safe, he or she needs to be held by the parent. Held not just physically, but emotionally. It is in that safety that healthy development takes place. It is that lack of safety, that lack of being held emotionally, that underlies the source of all trauma, and virtually all pathology.

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Appendix C: Safety, Social Engagement and Learning

Safety is when you can move people out of their defensive mode into their social engagement mode and that has to do with connection.

Safety is much more than just no threat. In our society there is tremendous lack of safety not because there is threat but because there is a loss of connection. That loss of connection with oneself and with others makes people afraid.

The nervous system shows up very clearly in the voice and body language. Someone may be present intellectually but from the point of view of their physiology and their nervous system, they may be a scared child in that moment. We all get that way.



Appendix D: Ventral Vagal State (Constructive)

Core Beliefs and Behaviours:

With whom do you experience safety and connection, and what enhances that?

What gets in the way of you experiencing safety and connection?

What behaviours show up in you when you experience safety and connection with others?

What do you believe about the world when you are in this state of safety and connection? The world is ...

What do you believe about yourself when you are in this state? I am ...



Appendix D: Sympathetic State (Fight & Flight)

Core Beliefs and Behaviours:

When and with whom do you want to flee?

When and with whom do you want to fight?

What behaviours show up in you when you want to flee or fight?

What do you believe about the world when you are in this state?
The world is ...

What do you believe about yourself when you are in this state?
I am ...



Appendix D: Dorsal Vagal (Shut Down)

Core Beliefs and Behaviours:

Is the experience of dorsal vagal collapse familiar?

When does this disconnection happen for you?

What behaviours show up in you when your dorsal vagal system is activated?

What do you believe about the world when you are in this state?
The world is ...

What do you believe about yourself when you are in this state?
I am ...