

# **Polyvagal Problem Solving for Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder**

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## **Polyvagal Theory and Psychotherapy**

Polyvagal Theory was developed by Dr Stephen Porges PhD in 1994 as a method of understanding the relationship between individual heart rate variability and the Autonomic Nervous System. In recent years the field of psychotherapy has had great interest in Polyvagal Theory as Polyvagal Theory has been able to provide plausible neurophysiological explanations for several of the experiences described by individuals who have experienced trauma. This is particularly true with individuals who have a history of repeated abuse or repeated traumatic incidences causing Complex Posttraumatic Disorder. This interest has led to numerous psychotherapeutic interventions assisting people with self-regulation, relational management and an articulation of the subjective experiences of danger and safety.

One of Polyvagal Theory's applications to therapy is the evaluation and problem solving of both the safety and danger in life events. This is done by listing both the safety and danger in specific settings while considering three things. These are the quality of social connectedness, the details of the social context and the related individual body reactions the situation creates. Polyvagal Theory assumes, of course, that there are both dangerous and safe situations, but that people will have emotional, physical, cognitive and relational hardship if their perception of those safe or dangerous situations is inaccurate.

## **Polyvagal Theory and the Perception of Safety and Danger**

It is important that people approach relationships and daily tasks with an accurate assessment of both the safety and the danger involved in those settings. In some cases, people who have a history of abuse, neglect or trauma will misread situations and inaccurately see a situation either as more dangerous than it is or safer than it is. Exaggerating danger might be shown by being easily offended, having difficulty accepting criticism or having irrational fears like phobias, generalized anxiety or panic. Also, people might misread situations as being safer than what they are. This happens when people stay in abusive relationships, voluntarily frequent threatening environments or allow verbal, physical or emotional boundary violations.

## The Polyvagal Exercise for Safety and Danger Recognition

### The Recognition of Danger

The first step in this Polyvagal exercise is to recognize danger. To do this, imagine or recall an event in the past, present or future that causes some level of negative emotional reactivity such as anxiety, terror, anger, confusion or sadness. With this event or future picture, address the three topics below and list your responses by first evaluating the sense of danger or threat the memory or event causes. Use the stated questions as a guide.

**1. Polyvagal Body Language** – Polyvagal Theory highlights the importance of the evaluation of other peoples' body language and what it says about their level of social connectedness to both you and others. First, see the picture or memory and begin to evaluate the people in the picture and ask these questions. Is the person(s) looking at you and visually engaged? Do they have an angry or warm look in their eyes and around their eyes and forehead? Do they seem to be working to listen to you including the subtle changes in your voice tone and volume? Does the direction of their body and head reflect an interest in you and a desire to be engaged? Does their body, head and eyes indicate an active yet subtle reciprocity to your level of engagement with them? Does the movement of their mouth or the tone of their voice indicate a predictable, safe and appropriate response to your behavior? List your answers.

**2. Context** - Second, again imagine or recall the picture and think about the context of the situation considering time, location, patterns and repeated behaviors. Reflect on these questions. Does this situation happen often or is it a rare or one-time occurrence? Does this situation fit a pattern of behavior by the individual(s) that makes you think they might repeat dangerous or threatening behavior to you? Look at the other people in the picture. Are they reacting with fear or with comfort? Are the other people in the picture supportive of you or are they supportive or aligned with the possibly dangerous person(s)? Does this individual remind you of someone in your past who was abusive, threatening or dangerous? List your answers.

**3. Body Sensations** - Third, while seeing the picture or memory and then evaluating all your answers, address these questions. What do I feel in my body? Where do I feel reactivity to this picture in my body? Evaluate its location and intensity then try to name what emotion is causing the body

reaction. Then ask these questions. Is this a positive or negative emotion? Do I feel safe or in danger? List your answers.

### **The Recognition of Safety**

The second part of this Polyvagal exercise is to recognize safety. Polyvagal Theory is the study of the physical experience of safety and danger. Included in this experience is the concept of Ventral Vagal State. Ventral Vagal State is a physical, emotional and cognitive experience facilitated by a set of nerves in the upper part of the body connecting the brain to the heart, neck, face, mouth, eyes and ears. The Ventral Vagal State is responsible for detecting, accepting, evaluating and reciprocating states of social safety. Also, it regulates the other defensive states known as fight, flight or freeze which are activated in situations that are dangerous or perceived to be dangerous. Being in a safe situation and then actively looking for and seeing safety will activate the Ventral Vagal State. The activation of the Ventral Vagal State will then facilitate self-regulation and eliminate unnecessary defensive thoughts, feelings and behaviors.

Return to the imagined picture or memory and reread all the questions in the topics of Polyvagal body language, context and body sensations. This time, instead of listing cues of danger, list cues of safety.

### **Polyvagal Problem Solving**

Evaluating all the information you have listed about danger and safety recognition, ask yourself this question. Do I see this memory or event as being safer or more dangerous than it is? If you see it as more **dangerous** than it is, begin to evaluate and list what you can do to notice more safety and then decrease your perception of danger. Ask yourself the following questions. Can I connect with others in the picture who seem safe? Can I question the validity of seeing something as dangerous when it is safe? Can I test myself to not react to my perception of danger and observe how the event plays itself out? Also, actively think about and notice the cues of safety you listed and notice their validity. Use relaxation methods to calm your body reactions. Diminishing the perception of danger and nurturing the reality of safety will increase your Ventral Vagal State and facilitate the feelings of trust needed for connection. It also will diminish fight, flight or freeze behaviors that create conflict, confusion, self-questioning and disconnection.

If you see the situation as **safer** than it is and didn't initially see the danger, it will be necessary to problem solve how to make the situation less dangerous. Use your list of noticed dangers as a starting point. Simply listing possible or existing dangers can assist in noticing the actual danger in the situation. Also, this list of

danger might allow you to make sense of why your body was detecting danger while your thoughts were disconnected from the danger. Consider decreasing the danger by asking these questions and making changes. Do I need to leave the situation or set other physical, emotional or communicative boundaries to increase my personal safety? Can I effectively influence the threatening or dangerous individual to calm them enough, so I feel safe?

### **Make It Automatic**

Polyvagal Problem Solving is a powerful method of self-regulation and relational management for those with Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Using this exercise frequently will assist you in fine tuning your recognition and reactions to the daily events around you and provide you with a method of physical, emotional and relational welling being and safety. The goal is to get to the point of being able to do the exercise automatically in real life settings.

### **Resources**

The Pocket Guide to Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe by Stephen Porges (2017)

The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy by Deb Dana (2018)

The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment Communication and Self-Regulation by Stephen Porges PhD (2011)

Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on The Mind, Body and Society by Bessel Vander Klok, Alexander Mc Farlane, and Lars Weisaeth (2007)

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**Also see Dwarshuis' webpage at <http://www.jeffdwarshuis.com/> for related clinical information.**