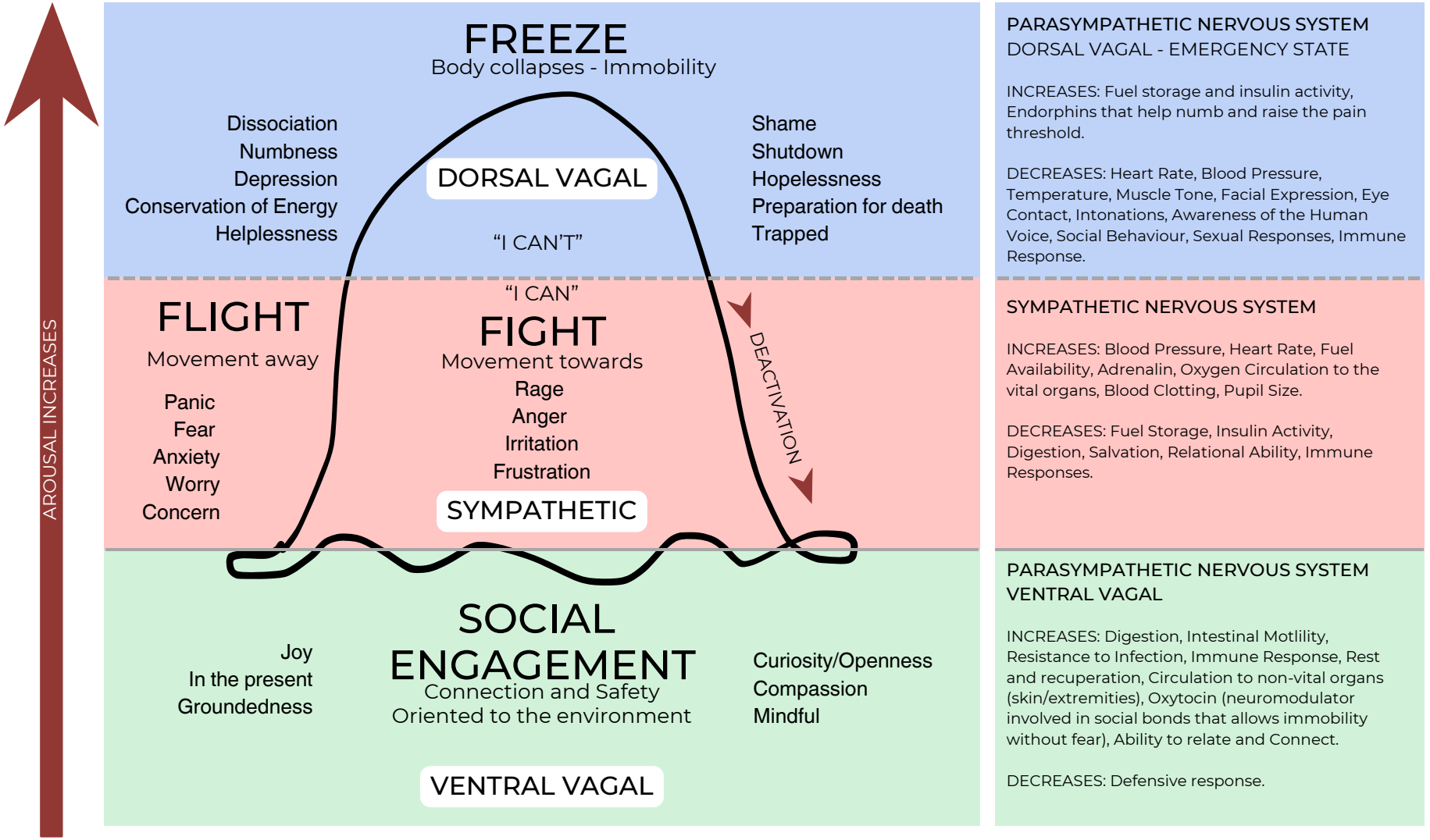
Polyvagal Theory

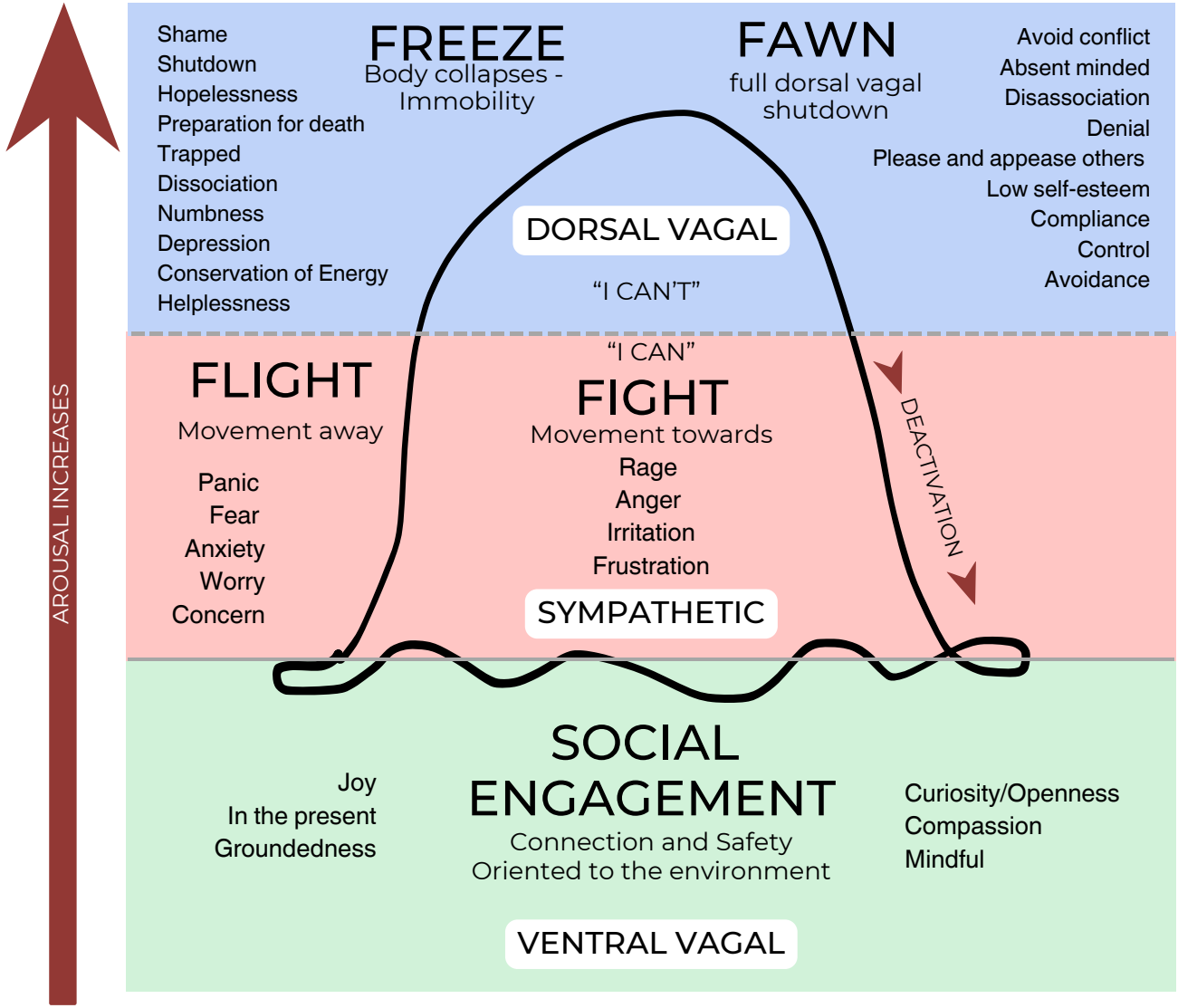
ORIGINAL MODEL



Adapted by Ruby Jo Walker from: Cheryl Sanders, SteveHoskinson, Steven Porges and Peter Levine

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ADAPTED MODEL



PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM
DORSAL VAGAL - EMERGENCY STATE

INCREASES: Fuel storage and insulin activity, Endorphins that help numb and raise the pain threshold.

DECREASES: Heart Rate, Blood Pressure, Temperature, Muscle Tone, Facial Expression, Eye Contact, Intonations, Awareness of the Human Voice, Social Behaviour, Sexual Responses, Immune Response.

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

INCREASES: Blood Pressure, Heart Rate, Fuel Availability, Adrenalin, Oxygen Circulation to the vital organs, Blood Clotting, Pupil Size.

DECREASES: Fuel Storage, Insulin Activity, Digestion, Salvation, Relational Ability, Immune Responses.

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM
VENTRAL VAGAL

INCREASES: Digestion, Intestinal Motlility, Resistance to Infection, Immune Response, Rest and recuperation, Circulation to non-vital organs (skin/extremities), Oxytocin (neuromodulator involved in social bonds that allows immobility without fear), Ability to relate and Connect.

DECREASES: Defensive response.

Adapted by Charlie Mitchell for FWM 2025 from: Cheryl Sanders, SteveHoskinson, Steven Porges and Peter Levine

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WAYS TO REGULATE YOUR BODY USING YOUR BREATH

One of the simplest, quickest and most effective ways of regulating our nervous system is through our breath. The way we are breathing is something we can learn to have more control over and when we practice it when we are calm, it can help us to calm when we are feeling stressed or under pressure.

We can try using these techniques when we are in crisis, but if we build a few into our daily routine we will be able to calm our body quicker when we need it. It's like going to the gym. You can't go once and expect to be fit. You need to build your muscles. Breathing involves lots of muscles and the more you practice the more you will be able to relax when you need it.

Box breathing:

- Breathe in to the count of four
- Hold to the count of four
- Breathe out to the count of four
- Hold to the count of four
- Repeat as required

Breathing while tracing your hand:

- Put the index finger of your right hand on the place where your wrist meets your palm
- As you breathe in, slowly trace a line up your thumb to the top of your thumb
- As you breathe out, slowly trace a line down your thumb to your palm
- As you breathe in, slowly trace a line up your index finger to the top of your finger
- As you breathe out, slowly trace a line down your finger to your palm
- As you breathe in, slowly trace a line up your middle finger to the top of your finger
- As you breathe out, slowly trace a line down your finger to your palm
- As you breathe in, slowly trace a line up your ring finger to the top of your finger
- As you breathe out, slowly trace a line down your finger to your palm
- As you breathe in, slowly trace a line up your little finger to the top of your finger
- As you breathe out, slowly trace a line down your finger to your palm
- Repeat with the other hand

Polyvagal Theory

Relaxing your diaphragm:

- Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly
- Breathe in deeply down into your belly and down into your hips, gently rolling your shoulders up, back and down as you do so
- Notice how the hand on your belly moves slightly outwards as your belly fills with air
- Breathe out gently allowing the air to naturally leave your body
- Hold your breath gently for a moment and notice the tension around your diaphragm
- Notice the moment when your diaphragm relaxes and breath naturally fills your lungs
- Noice if you feel any tension in any areas of your body
- Allow the tension to melt as your diaphragm relaxes

Breathing away tension:

- Do a body scan and notice any areas of tension in your body
- As you breathe in imagine your breath travelling to that part of your body
- Hold for a moment
- Feel the tension release as you breathe out
- Repeat in any areas that feel tense until your body is relaxed

Breathing while walking:

- Walk at a relaxed and gentle pace
- Breathe in while you take 4 steps
- Pause your breathing while you take 2 steps
- Breathe out while you take 4 steps
- Pause your breathing while you take 2 steps
- Adjust the number of breaths and number of steps so that you get into a relaxed rhythm

Polyvagal Theory

Alternate nostril breathing:

- Place the thumb of your right hand over your right nostril and breathe in through your left nostril
- Pause for a moment
- Release your thumb and place your ring finger from your right hand over your left nostril
- Breathe out through your right nostril
- Pause for a moment
- Keeping your ring finger over your left nostril, breathe in through your right nostril
- Pause for a moment
- Place the thumb of your right hand over your right nostril and breathe out through your left nostril
- Pause for a moment
- Keeping the thumb of your right hand over your right nostril and breathe in through your left nostril
- Pause for a moment
- Release your thumb and place your ring finger from your right hand over your left nostril
- Breathe out through your right nostril
- Pause for a moment
- Keeping your ring finger over your left nostril, breathe in through your right nostril
- Pause for a moment
- Place the thumb of your right hand over your right nostril and breathe out through your left nostril
- Repeat as required

Resonant breathing:

- Breath in to the count of 5
- Breathe out to the count of 5
- This enables you to take about 6 breaths per minute which naturally calms your system

Humming breath:

- Gentle place your fingers in your ears
- Breathe in gently
- As you breathe out make a loud humming noise
- Repeat as required

Polyvagal Theory

WAYS TO REGULATE YOUR BODY USING MOVEMENT

Moving our bodies is one of the three ways of shifting our emotional state, according to the Emotional Triad (Robbins, 2024). The other two ways are shifting our language and our focus. Here we will explore simple movements that ca help you to regulate and calm your nervous system.

Shift position:

- If you are sat down, try standing up
- If you are standing up, try lying down
- If you are lying down, try sitting up

Body scan:

- Start by putting your feet flat on the floor
- Notice any tension in your calves or thighs
- If you find any tension, tighten the muscle for a moment and then allow it to relax, feeling the tension melt away
- Work your way up through your body, noticing tension in your hips, back and stomach
- Sit or stand a little straighter
- Roll your shoulders back and down
- Relax your jaw and forehead
- Lift your head a little higher and create a straight line from the top of your head, down through your shoulders and down to your hips
- Breathe deeply into your lungs which now have more capacity for more air as a result of you opening your rib cage
- Notice how you feel now

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Hand massage:

- Use a little moisturiser or oil
- Gently use one hand to massage the other
- Be gentle and tender with your massage, as you would with a treasured friend
- Use your thumb to massage your palm
- Use gentle circular motions on your joints and knuckles
- Notice the patterns on your skin
- Look through the eyes of love at your hands as you massage

Stretch/shake/soothe (with thanks to Jo McAndrews):

- Be aware of what your body can and cannot do
- This is a gentle and soothing activity and should not be forced
- Whether you are sat or stood, stretch your arms out left and right
- Reach your arms up over your head
- Stretch your arms down by your sides
- Stretch in other ways that feel good
- Start to shake your body gently
- Perhaps start at your toes and allow the shake to rise up through your body
- Or perhaps the shake starts at your head and works its way down
- Allow your arms and legs to shake as well
- Shake in other ways that feel good
- Soothe your body by giving yourself a big hug
- Wrap your arms around yourself and gently stroke your arms or body
- Unwrap your arms and put the other arm on top this time
- Gently stroke your arms and legs, allowing your body to relax as you do

Go for a walk:

- Perhaps it is to the end of the garden
- Perhaps it is to the end of your road
- A change of scenery can help get a different perspective

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Journalling (with thanks to Julia Cameron, known as morning pages):

- The physical act of writing with a pen and paper can help to regulate pour nervous system
- Take 3 pages of paper and a pen
- Write a stream of consciousness
- Allow whatever wants to be written to get on to the paper – do not censor any of it
- If you are not sure what to write, write 'I'm not sure what to write' until something else emerges
- There is no need to read the pages – just allow the process to help you process

Creative project:

- Doing something with our hands can be very soothing
- Knitting, sewing, drawing, painting, clay, play doh
- What helps you to feel calm in your body?

Try something new – some of these are natural for neurodivergent people as they can be stims

- Pacing up and down
- Rocking
- Jumping
- Tapping
- Drumming
- Twirling
- Dancing
- Singing
- Humming
- Laughing
- Listening to music

Polyvagal Theory

COREGULATING WITH A SAFE PERSON

Our nervous systems will naturally synchronise with other people's nervous systems, both face to face and online. This has been scientifically proven in many studies. You can also prove it to yourself by noticing how differently you feel around certain people. How your nervous system may calm when you are in certain environments or with certain people, and it may feel heightened with others.

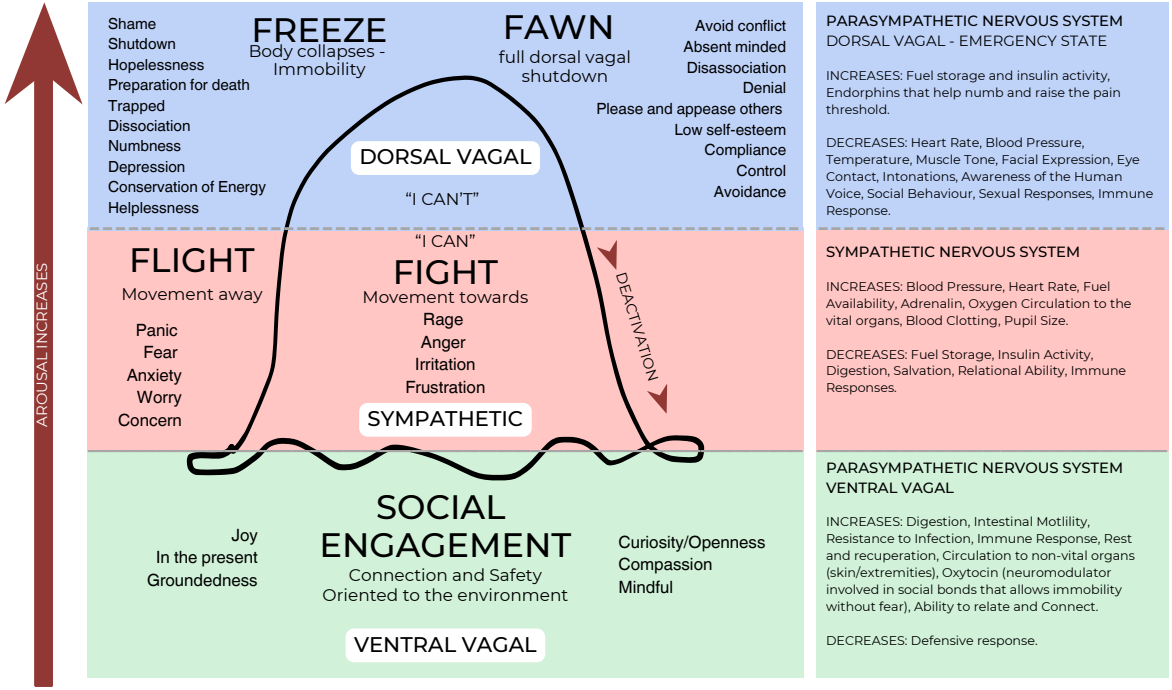
We are built to live in community. We are designed to support each other. Please give yourself permission to regulate with another person. It is not a weakness. It is a way to build strength.

Find safe people that you can regulate your nervous system with:

- Ideally this will be a close friend, family member or colleague
- This is not always possible, so it is a good idea to seek out other people who may be supportive
- This could be a professional such as a counsellor or coach
- Explore environments where groups of people gather naturally, such as libraries or cafes
- Are there places you feel yourself relax and other places that you feel more tense in?
- Be aware of these sensations of relaxation and tension in your body
- Create a place to support your nervous system on a regular basis and when you are having a more challenging time
- Discuss your plan with the person / people who are going to help you

Polyvagal Theory

SAFE DESTRUCTION WORKSHEET



When our nervous system is in FIGHT mode, there is a lot of energy involved. It can be helpful for this energy to go somewhere that does not cause yourself or anyone else any harm.

By creating this plan in advance you are giving yourself the opportunity to decide how to respond when your fight mode is activated.

Please see grounding, breath and movement worksheets for ideas.

Safe destruction and energy release ideas include:

- Punch bag
- Punching a pillow
- Ripping up pieces of paper – several sheets can be more satisfying
- Breaking unwanted crockery (can be bought second hand from charity shops)
- Digging in the garden
- Going for a run
- Making a fire and burning statements about your rage, anger or frustration

Polyvagal Theory

There are different stages to fight, flight, freeze and fawn modes.

Before: There can very subtle warning signs we are approaching fight. Perhaps we are discussing a topic that may remind us of a difficult situation in the past. Perhaps the environment makes us feel unsafe. At this time, we can take actions to support ourselves, even if we still go into full fight mode. Please note: we don't always get warning signs. Sometimes a particular combination of experiences comes together and we don't realise how we are going to respond. However, the more we learn about ourselves, the more we can put things in place to support our instinctive responses.

Warning sign before I fight is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

During: At this point the main aim is to keep yourself and people around you safe. This may be redirecting your anger outwards towards an object, rather than externally to other people or internally at yourself. There will be a tiny thing you can do to support yourself.

Warning sign I am in fight is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

After: We can feel all kinds of physical sensations and emotions after coming out of fight. Our muscles can ache from the tension and from the release of adrenalin that pumped through our limbs. We may still carry anger, frustration or resentment. We may not fully remember what we have said or done when fight mode was fully activated as we were not fully connected with our logical brain. We may feel upset, sad or lonely. We can want to cocoon, isolate or withdraw, especially if we are feeling any shame as a result of our actions. This is all common. Sharing with a trusted friend or support at this time can be really helpful in minimising the impact of the shame.

Sign I am coming out of fight is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

Polyvagal Theory

When I am regulated: We often think that once the fight has passed we can just carry on our daily lives as if nothing has happened. We might even treat ourselves to something now that we are feeling better. However, we are not always using healthy behaviours to support ourselves at this time. What will help our fight response a great deal is knowing how to support yourself when you are not in fight. These practices will give you more resilience for the times when fight takes over.

Sign I am releasing energy in a healthy way is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

Sometimes there are specific things that help with fight in particular, at any stage of the process. Here is an opportunity to explore what those specifics are:

I will get grounded by: .....

The breathing I find most helpful is: .....

The movement my body needs is: .....

The safe destruction and energy release my body needs is: .....

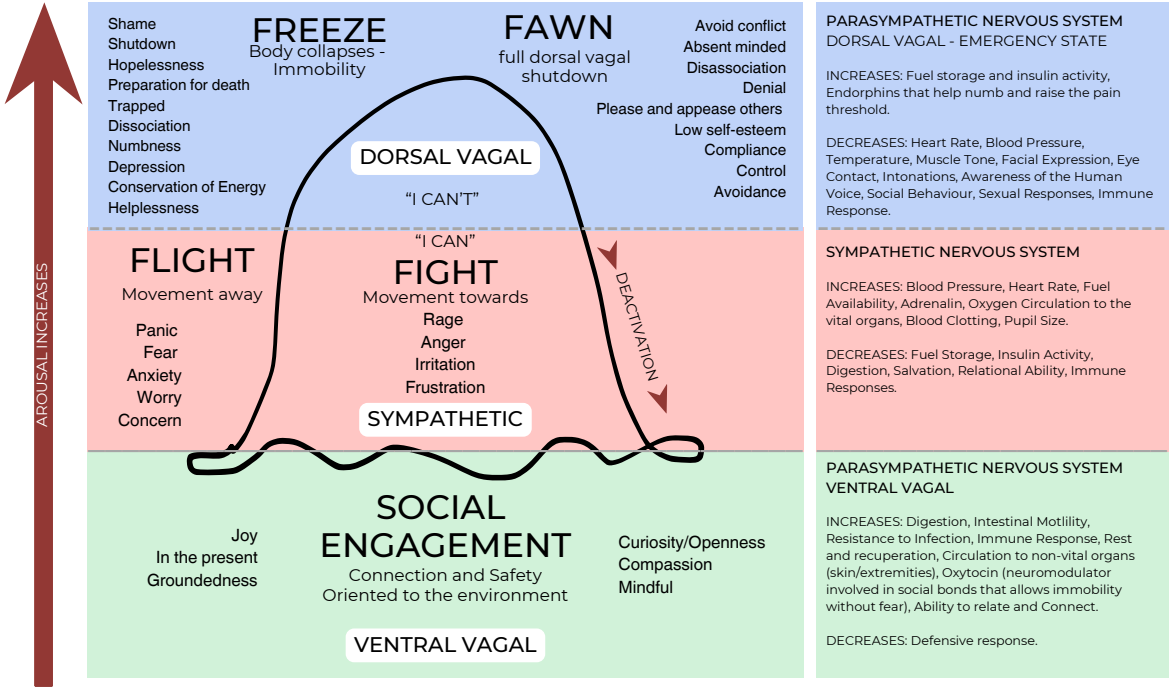
The person I can coregulate with is: .....

One action I can take right now is: .....

One action I can take regularly to support myself is: .....

Polyvagal Theory

REBUILDING CALM WORKSHEET



When our nervous system is in FLIGHT mode, the energy moves to our limbs so we can run away. It is often about our brain warning us of a threat from the past or the future, so they key is to get present.

By creating this plan in advance you are giving yourself the opportunity to decide how to respond when your flight mode is activated.

Please see grounding, breath and movement worksheets for ideas.

Rebuilding calm ideas include:

- Creating a regular breathwork practice
- Place feet flat on the floor and do a body scan
- Put your shoulders back and down
- Describe 3 things in the room in full detail
- Stretch/shake/soothe
- Walk into another room
- Coregulate with a friend or trusted supporter

Polyvagal Theory

There are different stages to fight, flight, freeze and fawn modes.

Before: There can very subtle warning signs we are approaching flight. Perhaps we are discussing a topic that may remind us of a difficult situation in the past. Perhaps the environment makes us feel unsafe. At this time, we can take actions to support ourselves, even if we still go into full flight mode. Please note: we don't always get warning signs. Sometimes a particular combination of experiences comes together and we don't realise how we are going to respond. However, the more we learn about ourselves, the more we can put things in place to support our instinctive responses.

Warning sign before I flight is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

During: While the urge to run may be really strong the main aim at this stage is to be present to what is, here and now. Fear is increase by our brain focusing on the past or the future, and right here, right now we do have options we can take to keep ourselves safe and nourished.

Warning sign I am in flight is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

After: We can feel all kinds of different emotions and physical sensations after coming out of flight. We can feel very groggy, out of sorts, almost like a hangover, exhausted, our muscles can ache from the tension and from the release of adrenalin that pumped through our limbs. We may not fully remember what we have said or done when flight mode was fully activated as we were not fully connected with our logical brain. We can want to cocoon, isolate or withdraw, especially if we are feeling any shame as a result of our actions. This is all common. Sharing with a trusted friend or support at this time can be really helpful in minimising the impact of the shame.

Sign I am coming out of flight is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

Polyvagal Theory

When I am regulated: We often think that once the flight has passed we can just carry on our daily lives as if nothing has happened. We might even treat ourselves to something now that we are feeling better. However, we are not always using healthy behaviours to support ourselves at this time. What will help our flight response a great deal is knowing how to support yourself when you are not in flight. These practices will give you more resilience for the times when flight takes over.

Sign I am calming down in a healthy way is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

Sometimes there are specific things that help with flight in particular, at any stage of the process. Here is an opportunity to explore what those specifics are:

I will get grounded by: .....

The breathing I find most helpful is: .....

The movement my body needs is: .....

To rebuild calm my body needs to: .....

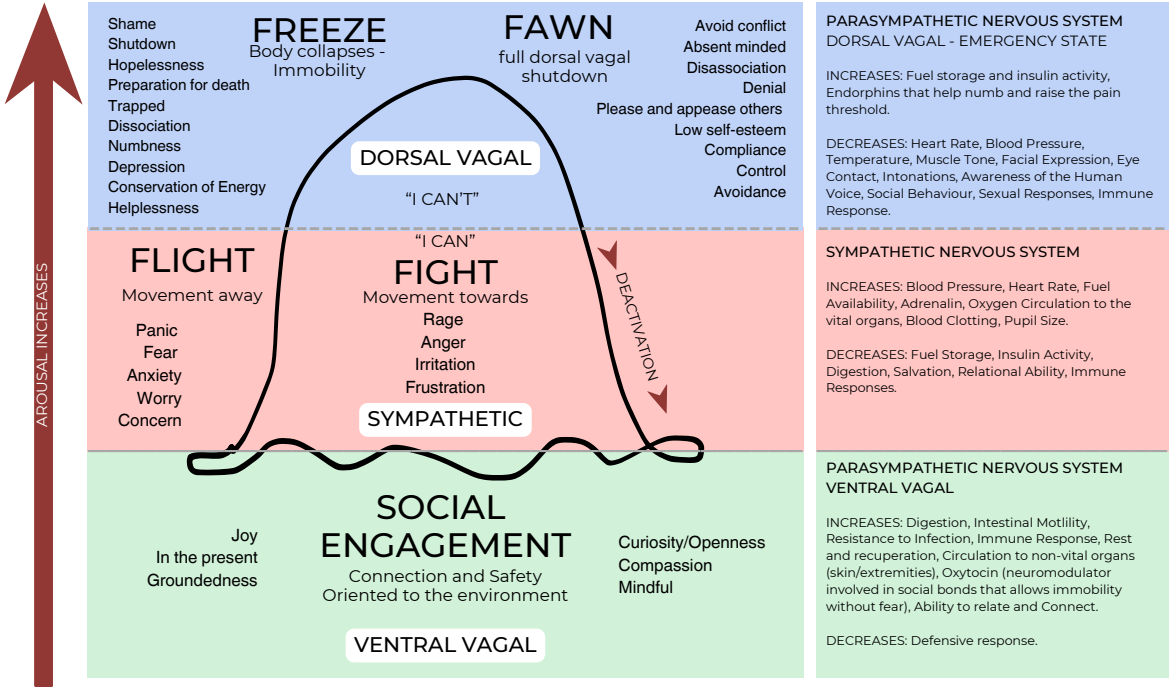
The person I can coregulate with is: .....

One action I can take right now is: .....

One action I can take regularly to support myself is: .....

Polyvagal Theory

WARMING BACK UP WORKSHEET



Ideas for trusting yourself include:

- Notice your breathing
- Get grounded with your feet flat on the floor
- Notice your bodily sensations and what they are telling you
- Make any small movement to stop full freeze setting in – stand up, walk to a different room, stretch
- Reach out to a trusted friend or support
- Coregulate with someone
- Be gentle with yourself

When our nervous system is in FREEZE mode, we are no longer trying to keep the whole of ourselves safe in the way we do with fight or flight. This is an attempt to hide so that we can safely emerge later. While we can become unresponsive, unable to speak, or take action. It is possible to notice the warning signs and take small actions that can support us before, during and after.

By creating this plan in advance you are giving yourself the opportunity to decide how to respond when your freeze mode is activated.

You can also use this approach to create a plan with your child, so that they have some strategies for how to respond when they are in freeze mode. Please see grounding, breath and movement worksheets for ideas.

Polyvagal Theory

There are different stages to fight, flight, freeze and fawn modes.

Before: There can very subtle warning signs we are approaching freeze. Perhaps we are discussing a topic that may remind us of a difficult situation in the past. Perhaps the environment makes us feel unsafe. At this time, we can take actions to support ourselves, even if we still go into full freeze mode. Please note: we don't always get warning signs. Sometimes a particular combination of experiences comes together and we don't realise how we are going to respond. However, the more we learn about ourselves, the more we can put things in place to support our instinctive responses.

Warning sign before I freeze is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

During: There may be very limited things we can actually do during freeze, because we are... well... frozen. At this point the main aim is to keep yourself safe and do whatever tiny thing you can do to support yourself.

Warning sign I am in freeze is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

After: We can feel all kinds of different emotions and physical sensations after coming out of freeze. We can feel very groggy, out of sorts, almost like a hangover, exhausted, our muscles can ache from the tension and from the release of adrenalin that pumped through our limbs. We may not fully remember what we have said or done when freeze mode was fully activated as we were not fully connected with our logical brain. We can want to cocoon, isolate or withdraw, especially if we are feeling any shame as a result of our actions. This is all common. Sharing with a trusted friend or support at this time can be really helpful in minimising the impact of the shame.

Sign I am coming out of freeze is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

Polyvagal Theory

When I am regulated: We often think that once the freeze has passed we can just carry on our daily lives as if nothing has happened. We might even treat ourselves to something now that we are feeling better. However, we are not always using healthy behaviours to support ourselves at this time. What will help our freeze response a great deal is knowing how to support yourself when you are not in freeze. These practices will give you more resilience for the times when freeze takes over.

Sign I am warming up in a healthy way is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

Sometimes there are specific things that help with flight in particular, at any stage of the process. Here is an opportunity to explore what those specifics are:

I will get grounded by: .....

The breathing I find most helpful is: .....

The movement my body needs is: .....

The way my body needs to warm up is: .....

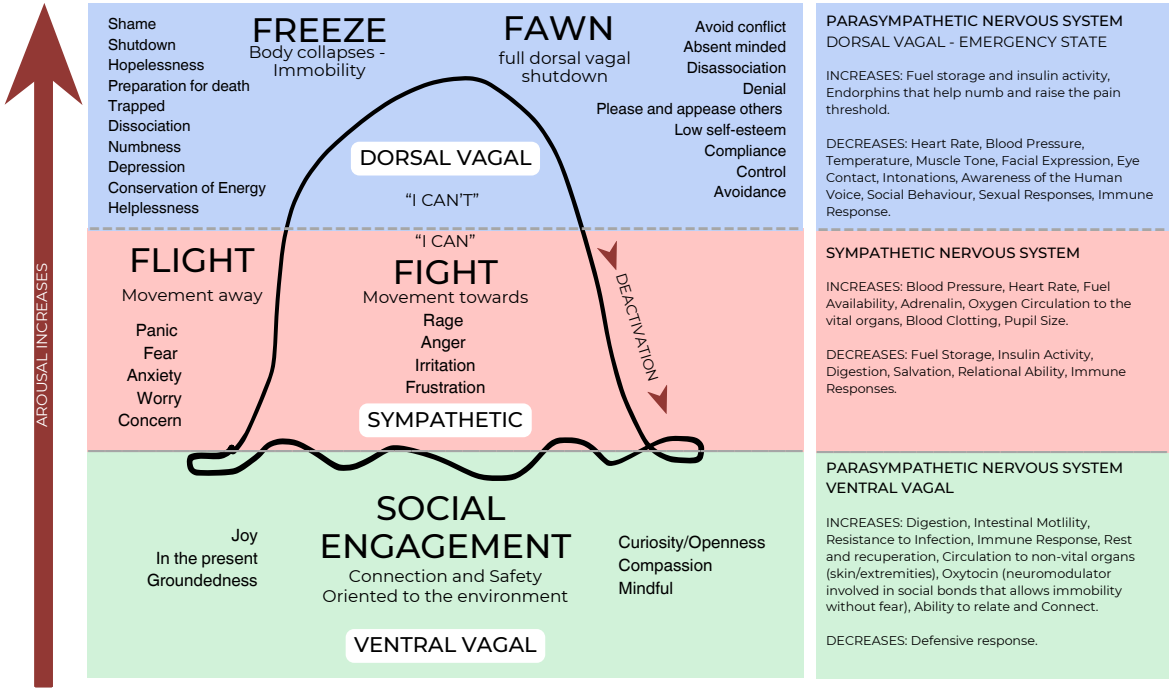
The person I can coregulate with is: .....

One action I can take right now is: .....

One action I can take regularly to support myself is: .....

Polyvagal Theory

TRUSTING MYSELF WORKSHEET



Ideas for trusting yourself include:

- Check in with your bodily sensations – what feels good and where do you feel tension?
- Take a small action to release some tension
- Practice learning how true yes and no feel in your body
- Start to honour those true yeses and no's with safe people
- Reach out to a friend for support
- Tell a trusted friend or support how you are feeling
- Notice what makes you smile
- Start doing more of the things that you love
- Explore resources and support at the https://codauk.org/

When our nervous system is in FAWN mode, we are no longer trying to keep the whole of ourselves safe in the way we do with fight or flight. This is of an attempt to hide so that we can safely emerge later. While we can become unresponsive, unable to speak, or take action, any action we do take prioritises the other person over ourselves. We are trying to buy our freedom by sacrificing the parts of ourselves that we think upset others. While it can be deeply engrained, it is possible to notice the warning signs and take small actions that can support us before, during and after.

By creating this plan in advance you are giving yourself the opportunity to decide how to respond when your fawn mode is activated.

You can also use this approach to create a plan with your child, so that they have some strategies for how to respond when they are in freeze mode.

Please see grounding, breath and movement worksheets for ideas.

Polyvagal Theory

There are different stages to fight, flight, freeze and fawn modes.

Before: There can very subtle warning signs we are approaching fawn. Perhaps we are discussing a topic that may remind us of a difficult situation in the past. Perhaps the environment makes us feel unsafe. Perhaps we notice how we are starting to prioritise the other person over ourselves. At this time, we can take actions to support ourselves, even if we still go into full fawn mode. Please note: we don't always get warning signs. Sometimes a particular combination of experiences comes together and we don't realise how we are going to respond. However, the more we learn about ourselves, the more we can put things in place to support our instinctive responses.

Warning sign before I fawn is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

During: There may be very limited things we can actually do during fawn, because may be in full people pleaser mode. Start to notice your priorities, your needs and what you are experiencing. It makes sense you would feel like this. You are important. You matter!

Warning sign I am in fawn is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

After: We can feel all kinds of different emotions and physical sensations after coming out of fawn. We can feel emotional, wounded, sore from feeling unable to fully protect ourselves. We may not fully remember what we have said or done when fawn mode was fully activated as we were not fully connected with our logical brain. We can want to cocoon, isolate or withdraw, especially if we are feeling any shame as a result of our actions. This is all common. Sharing with a trusted friend or support at this time can be really helpful in minimising the impact of the shame.

Sign I am coming out of fawn is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

Polyvagal Theory

When I am regulated: We often think that once the fawn has passed we can just carry on our daily lives as if nothing has happened. We might even treat ourselves to something now that we are feeling better. However, we are not always using healthy behaviours to support ourselves at this time. What will help our fawn response a great deal is knowing how to support yourself when you are not in fawn. These practices will give you more resilience for the times when fawn takes over.

Sign I am coming out of fawn in a healthy way is: .....

Action I can take when I notice this is: .....

Sometimes there are specific things that help with flight in particular, at any stage of the process. Here is an opportunity to explore what those specifics are:

I will get grounded by: .....

The breathing I find most helpful is: .....

The movement my body needs is: .....

The way my body needs to come out of fawn is: .....

The person I can coregulate with is: .....

One action I can take right now is: .....

One action I can take regularly to support myself is: .....