

## HOW TO DEAL WITH YOUR DAILY UPS AND DOWNS: THE FOUR R'S OF RESTORING CONNECTION

From the perspective of the *Polyvagal Theory*, whenever we have a strong reaction to something, it is our autonomic nervous system trying to protect us from a perceived threat. We can sense it in ourselves and others as “being defensive”, and it can manifest as becoming withdrawn (dorsal vagal state) or openly combative (sympathetic state). What do we do about it? How do we climb out of those states and return back to feeling safe, connected, receptive and social? Deb Dana in her book “The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy” outlines the four R’s that help restore connection.



### 1. Recognize the autonomic state

When you are having a strong reaction to something, the first step is to acknowledge that you are having a physiological response to a trigger. That response is highly individual: “Autonomic patterns are built over time. The autonomic nervous system is shaped through experience. In response to experiences of connection and challenge, we develop a personal neural profile with habitual patterns of action. Recognizing these responses and seeing the patterns of activation is the first step in polyvagal-informed practices.”(1) If you are able to simply observe your physiological reaction (increased heartbeat, feeling of heat, sweaty hands, tense muscles, etc.) without lashing out, you move it from the realm of neuroception (physiological detection of a threat) to actual perception (consciously acknowledging your unease).

### 2. Respect the adaptive survival response

“Through a polyvagal lens, we understand that actions are automatic and adaptive, generated by the autonomic nervous system well below the level of conscious awareness. This is not the brain making a cognitive choice. These are autonomic energies moving in patterns of protection. And with this new awareness, the door opens to compassion.”(1) When you (or your loved one, friend, student, etc.) flip out, this simply means that your autonomic nervous system is doing its job of protection. Instead of fighting it, the best course of action is to respect it for its diligence, and maybe even express some gratitude for it, as in “Wow, thank you for defending me.”

### 3. Regulate or co-regulate into the peaceful state of connection

Once the acute physiological response has passed, you can work on bringing yourself up to the social, peaceful state. To be able to do that, you would usually need three things: internal abilities, environmental safety and social support.

- Cultivating *internal abilities* means developing reflective self-consciousness about your reactions and a bag of tricks that reliably make you feel better. This bag of tricks can include doing a yoga practice, going for a walk, singing along to a favorite song, cuddling with your dog, and so on. Different tricks will be more appropriate for different states. For example, if you are feeling angry, it might be better to release that energy by doing something more active, and when you are feeling withdrawn or depleted, it may be better to snuggle with your dog. Different things work for different people. You need to know what works for you.
- Creating *environmental safety* means creating a comfortable environment where you feel safe and at ease. Sometimes it is as obvious as moving away from a potentially violent situation, and other times it can be much more subtle. How comfortable do you feel in your office, in your car, in your home? Are you surrounded by people and objects that feel nourishing or draining? Sounds, smells, other people's energy, temperature – they all contribute to the sense of safety in your environment. It helps to analyze how you feel in spaces where you spend most of your time and make corrections, if necessary.
- Seeking *social support* means cultivating positive relationships through work alliances, enduring friendships, intimate partnerships. We are wired to connect. "When opportunities for connection are missing, we carry the distress in our nervous system. Our loneliness brings us pain."<sup>(1)</sup> We rely on other people to help us regulate our emotional states on the level of physiology. Those relationships need to be reciprocal, with equal give-and-take over time, otherwise they become draining.

### 4. Re-story, or re-frame

"Humans are driven to want to understand the "why" of behaviors. We attribute motivation and intent and assign blame."<sup>(1)</sup> We create stories about why we feel the way we feel, and why we do what we do. These stories can keep us in a constant defensive state, or they can help us feel safe and receptive. Ultimately, it's about convincing our automatic nervous system that it's OK to let the defenses down. Once you change your narrative, you can move out of the defensive state and become able to reconnect and trust other people again.

To summarize, in dealing with our daily ups and downs, it is useful to recognize that autonomic response is constantly being activated as a defense mechanism. If we recognize this visceral response, we move from "being in" to "being with" our experience. Bringing awareness to our automatic responses allows us to observe them, embrace them for their protective power, and open a door to possibility of deeper inquiry into our reactions. Once we become curious and introspective about our own reactions, we move into ventral vagal state, where exploration, self-inquiry and open-mindedness are possible.

#### Resource

1. Deb Dana "The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy"