



CRED CONFERENCE 2022

MENTAL WELL-BEING & SELF-CARE

15th June 2022

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Outline of Talk

- Stress: features, sources and impact
- Befriending the nervous system & Polyvagal theory
BREAK
- Individual care: boundaries and capacities
 - 'completing the cycle' and co-regulation
Small groups (break out) discussion of ideas
- Systemic care: the 'between' of managing stress
 - frameworks of support and connection
Small groups (break out) discussion of ideas

Summing up and end (Q&A in afternoon)



All about balance...

Bodies know how to balance - do it naturally and continuously

Emotional 'bodies' do too.

Not separate – all one MIND-BODY system

Emotions have a sensory part (felt in the body) and a motor part (action/impulse)

Well-being is about BALANCE

Understanding our system and working WITH it rather than against it or despite it

What takes us out of balance & well-being (*'stress' situation*)

- Nervous systems wired for safety & strongly oriented to survival patterns: override everything else: 'better safe than sorry' minds
- 'unsafe' activates the nervous system into **protective systems** to try and return to safety as soon as possible
- being safe does not necessarily make us feel safe (or bodies in 'safe' state)
- We need the active experiencing of cues of safety for our nervous system to balance AND the absence of danger cues / removal of threat
- Threat cues can be INTERNAL (within ourselves)
EXTERNAL (outside/ our environment)
BETWEEN (us in relation to others)

'Threat' & the stress response

- can be now or past (but held in the body), conscious or unconscious, actual or perceived, short/acute or long-term and persistent
- perception is influenced by individual personality, previous experiences, mood, general health
- Impact on
 - **all organs of the BODY and their functioning**
 - **MIND and it's processing, storage and perception**
 - **communication between the two**

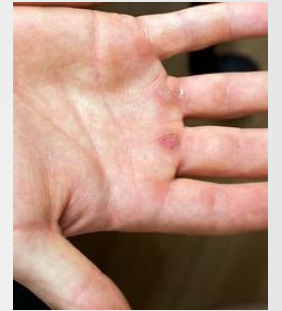
Physical, emotional & spiritual bodies (Dr Paul Brand*)

- Bodies indicate imbalance or strain by changes in their functioning
- We have multiple and highly specialised cells and organs, many with ADAPTIBILITY for their function
- all working together – UNITY & BELONGING to the whole
- all link with each other to achieve BALANCE & effective functioning
- 3 physical body systems that help us think about emotional well-being
 - Skin – body's frontline
 - Blood - transport system & life source
 - Bones – strength and structure

* See reference list

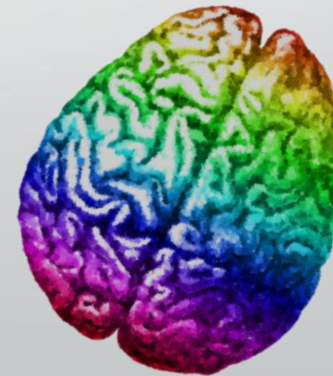
The Body's frontline: SKIN

- the organ of sensitivity
- sore when pressured too long in the same place
- appearance and feel show need to relieve pressure
- sensitivity indicates 'too much'
- **Hypersensitivity** is the body's way of protecting – alerts us to the need to redistribute the load
- Skin is **adaptable** – different sensitivity depending on function
- Organisations need adaptability & sensitivity:
 - **respect & respond to protective covers ('redness & blisters')**
 - **when to redistribute the load**



Recognising Protectors: Befriending the nervous system

- When we 'befriend' we spend time getting to know. Seek understanding. Welcome what we discover. Tune in.
- Befriending our own nervous systems (& protectors) brings opportunity for greater well-being and balance, through understanding
- The 'polyvagal theory' (PVT) is a helpful framework for understanding our **autonomic nervous system** and its branches
 - **Parasympathetic system (2 branches)**
 - **Sympathetic system**



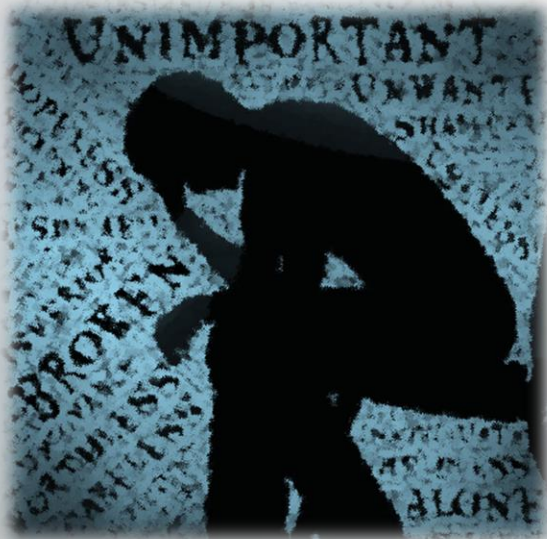
POLYVAGAL THEORY

Dr Stephen Porges, Dr Deb Dana (& others) *

- Vagus nerve ('the wanderer') from the brain stem (base of skull)
 - **downward** through the lungs, heart, diaphragm and stomach
 - **upward** connect with the nerves in neck, throat, eyes and ears.
- **Two pathways** – ventral vagal and dorsal vagal
- Ventral vagal responds to cues of safety and supports feelings of being safely engaged and socially connected
- Dorsal vagal responds to cues of (extreme) danger – it takes us out of connection, out of awareness, and into a protective state of collapse

* see reference list

Which branch is in control?



Dorsal vagal

Second line of defence - immobilised



Sympathetic

First line of defence - mobilised

- 4F's** *Fight* – attack the tiger or *Flight* – run from tiger
- Freeze* – hide from tiger
- Fawn* – convince tiger not to eat you

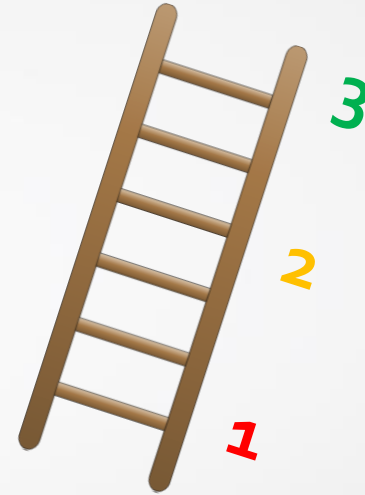


Ventral vagal

Connection & communication

Polyvagal Ladder

- Social engagement/safety (3)
- Fight/flight (activation) (2)
- Collapse/flop/shut down (immobilise) (1)



- Recognise step on the ladder
- Regulate or co-regulate into 'social engagement' & safety state
- State relates to which part of the nervous system is in control
- We can move between responses – like a ladder of safety/survival steps

Fight/flight

Fight/flight: hormones adrenaline and cortisol



ACTION: move quickly to protect: heart rate up, breathing short and shallow, scan for danger

MIND / BODY

- anxious or angry, rushed or hurried, hard to be still. Sense of unease
- overly attentive or sensitive to sounds & senses (danger cues override friendly)
- poor memory, hard to focus, hard to follow through & complete tasks
- environment feels more unsettled, chaotic, unfriendly or threatening
- more volatile, irritable
- more easily tired, yet hard to rest ('tired but wired')
- raised blood pressure, sleep problems, appetite change, headaches, stomach & digestion problems, increased vulnerability to illness

Down the ladder: Collapse/shut down (dorsal vagal)

Last resort: if trapped and 'action' doesn't work, move into **shutdown, collapse, and dissociation ('flop / forget')**

IMMOBILISATION - takes OUT OF CONNECTION and into protective state of collapse and numbing/disconnecting

MIND / BODY

- feelings of despair, feeling lost
- escape into not feeling, numbing out and distancing
- foggy, too tired to think or act, poor memory
- experience the world as empty, dark, hopeless, meaningless
- no energy, lethargy, low motivation
- slowed down, closed off, 'curled in' (hunched) – protective posture & behaviour
- longer term health issues include chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, stomach problems, low blood pressure



UP the ladder: Social Engagement / safety (ventral vagal)

Moving into CONNECTION with self and others
CHOICE of response. FLEXIBILITY and ADAPTABILITY



MIND / BODY

- feels safe and engaged, relaxed
- can tune in to conversations and tune out distracting noises
- breathing fully and heart rate regulated
- can see the “big picture” and connect to the world
- world experienced as safe, peaceful, enjoyable, hopeful
- curiosity, playfulness, creativity, compassion are ‘active’
- productive, energised, able to take care of self and balance needs
- healthy heart, regulated blood pressure
- healthy immune system (reduced vulnerability to illness)
- good digestion, quality sleep, and an **overall sense of well-being**



BREAK



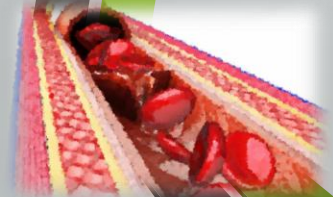
INDIVIDUAL CARE

'SELF' & MANAGING BOUNDARIES



The body's Life's source: Blood

- vital pipeline links every living cell: supplies with nutrients and takes away refuse
- gets our attention when we lose it! When it seeps away, life falters. Like a grape branch disconnected from the vine becomes withered & dry (then dies)
- **cannot sustain healthy emotional life without REPLENISHING nourishment and CLEANSING the after-effects of difficult or distressing events**
- if close off blood supply (e.g. arm tourniquet) and move the limb, forcing the muscles to keep working, it hurts. Not getting nutrients flowing in and the waste products (metabolites) taken away. They **accumulate** in the cells
- blood moves back in & soothing relief floods muscles - cleansing power of blood.



Clearing, refreshing, replenishing



- **active and intentional** – restoration (different from rest)
- We need
 - **nutrient sources** – as well as rest, things that ‘restore’ us; e.g. nature, stillness, quiet, friends and sharing, prayer, fun & playful, creativity
 - **activities and connections that cleanse** – take away ‘waste products’ of challenging, difficult, distressing events; e.g. anger, fear, self-sufficiency, pride, sadness, feeling helpless
- **Importance of**
 - **sharing and trust**
 - **connection with self and others**

REST and ACTIVITY cycles



- built to alternate work & rest
- REST makes stronger, more persistent and more productive
- after depleting activity, stopping using a part of you that's worn out, damaged or inflamed, gives a chance for **renewal and repair** and recharges fatigued parts
- RESTING BRAIN is necessary, for processing – is not doing nothing. Body and brain are an invisible workplace for life preserving tasks, whilst we sleep
- Walking away from a task is recruiting ALL your brains processes, including capabilities that don't involve your effortful attention. **We require things our brain does on its own during sleep to make us fully functional while we're awake.**
- Learning is not complete without sleep. Emotions are not complete without sleep. ***If we feel guilty about rest or sleep, we sabotage it's best function (stress hormone interference)***

Compassionate self-enquiry

- caring for yourself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation
- willingness to feel what you feel
- spend time to notice & name: what do I need?
- courage of authenticity (true to ourselves)
- importance of connection: humans are not built to do big things alone, but TOGETHER. Yet many of us were taught to mask or hide our uncomfortable emotions, even from ourselves
- INDIVIDUAL boundaries and needs, know and respect our own (& then others). Autonomy
- move between connection and autonomy



Connection and trust

- when you feel 'not enough' or in struggle – you need to connect with others
- SADNESS is a communication and signal. To CONNECT. We find our way through sadness most efficiently when we have someone to be alongside, to remind “I’m right here”; you are not alone
- ANGER / RAGE – may have been learned to fear it, as it’s power can be used to injure or hurt. It’s all about how you use it.
- Get noisy, release the energy, share it (**with permission**) with someone you trust
- Anger and GRIEF need release



Co-regulation: the foundation for self-regulation

We are inextricably linked...one nervous system to another...



Co-regulation

Self-regulation



Co-regulation, self-regulation and safety

- Co-regulation - at the heart of positive relationships
- When opportunities to connect are missing, we carry the distress in our nervous system
- Co-regulation is a requirement for feeling safe (Porges 2012) – our physiology is regulated in **connection to one another**
- We suffer when our biological need for connection is unmet – and our suffering leads to autonomic responses

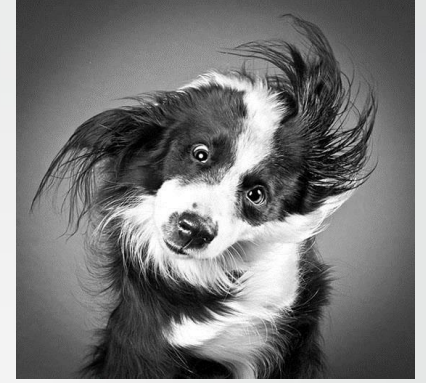
Co-regulation: regulators

- Tuning in (e.g. head tilt – communication of connection and welcome)
- Giving and receiving – heartfelt listening and responding
- Felt in our bodies – caring and being cared for
- Feeling / being understood, seen, known
- Soothing sounds, tone of voice (warm, gentle)
- Trust and belonging – shared experience, play, laughter



Completing the cycle (of stress)

- stress activation has a beginning (trigger), a middle (response) and an end
- END: the **re-balance and switch off** step, once safety has come
- completing the cycle & RELEASING the energy
- need ACTIVE CUES to safety
- social engagement: belonging, community, trust, warmth
- breathing – slowing the rate, deep 'belly' breathing
- vocalising, singing, swallowing (larynx, pharynx)
- movement & open body posture





BREAK OUT ROOMS

(small group discussion)



SYSTEMIC CARE

THE 'BETWEEN' OF MANAGING
STRESS AND CREATING WELL-BEING

Unity & responsiveness

Human body has a wisdom to regulate itself & seeks the most favourable conditions for best balance

- corrects imbalances in fluids and salts, mobilises itself to heal, deploys resources to maintain a dependable internal environment
- cells constantly call out their needs and the body responds to each need
- Unity is the foundation of bodily life; a sense of belonging (e.g. every heart cell obeys in tempo to sustain life) and the body unites its many cells to serve the whole

Importance of CONNECTION (balanced with autonomy)

Contact with another person is a basic biological need

Nourishes us in body

- regulates heart rate and respiration rates
- influences emotional activation in our brains
- boosts immune response to injuries and wounds

ALSO true that the lifelong development of autonomy (ability to act alone, sense of independence and having resources) is built in naturally

humans are built to move to and fro: connection to autonomy and back again – function 'together' and as individual with 'together'

The Body's support structure – Bones



- Bones (skeleton): dependable frame – strong to support
- A system (organisation) need a framework – rules & guidelines for relationships and activity; founded on trust and cooperation
- Bones - support, protection, aid movement, a reservoir for minerals
- Bone is alive – living cells at work within it
 - building and repairing – lay down new material (fracture or strengthen where there is pressure)
 - break down bone tissue – take up and absorb the debris and redistribute (calcium). Maintenance, repair, and remodeling
- Bones strengthen with use and nutrients

Well being in organisations – managing the stressors

- Dealing with stressors you can control: planful problem solving
 - identify SPECIFIC problems & action you can take now or very soon
 - Dealing with stressors you can't control: acknowledge them
 - identify the worth and opportunity in the situation
 - strength, resources, resilience arise from challenge and effort (just as physical body - exercise and challenge builds strength)
 - celebrate the direction you're going not the outcome
- "I rarely end up where I was intending to go, but often I end up somewhere that I needed to be" (Dirk Gently)*
- DISTINGUISH attainable from unattainable.
 - What are the benefits and costs of continuing / stopping a project

For thought....

- What brings UNITY and sense of BELONGING to your team
- What systems do you have for being RESPONSIVE to need
- How can you encourage and DIVERSITY & SPECIALITY (strengthens the whole)
- How do you recognise SENSITIVITY & need for re-balance, re-distribution of pressure
- What are your ways of encouraging COMMUNICATION
- How well do you balance CONNECTION with AUTONOMY
- What is your SUPPORT structure – the strong, dependable framework for relationships
- Consider what ACTIVE process of monitoring for fragile areas – and bringing in the nutrients to strengthen
- What are your RELEASE and cleanse systems
- What strengthens you as an organisation? Brings in fresh energy



BREAK OUT ROOMS

(small group discussion)

Reference list

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