

Deb Dana, LCSW

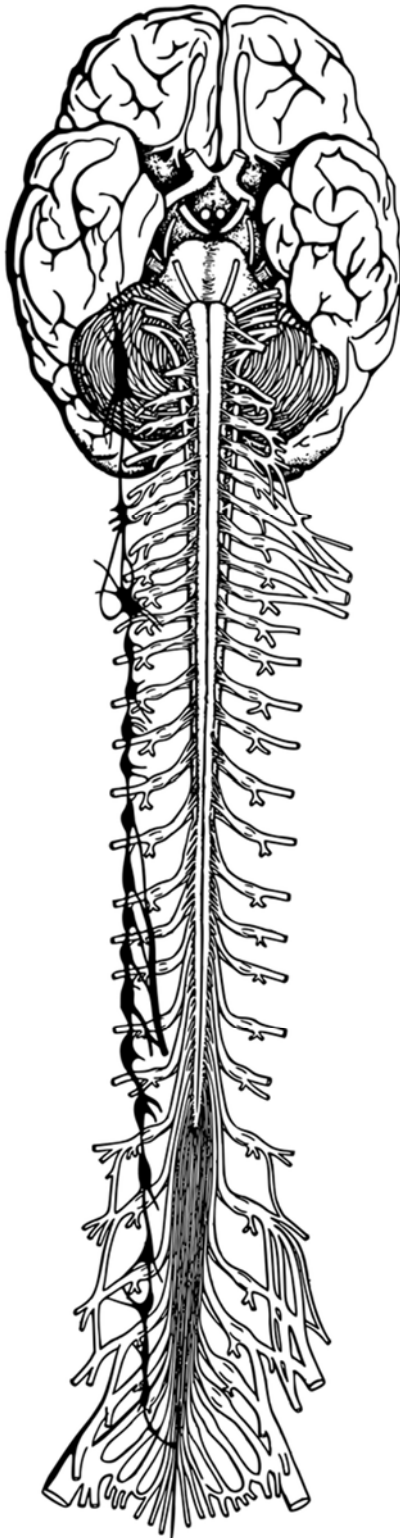


Courtney Rolfe, LCPC

Reviewed by Nancy Eichhorn, Ph.D.

# “The autonomic nervous system is at the heart of our lived experience.”

(Dana & Rolfe, 2024, pg. 54)



Imagine a moment of nothingness. See yourself setting your phone to ‘do not disturb’, putting your computer in sleep mode, and popping out the ear pods.

Heck, why not just move away from your workstation and head outside? Perhaps sit in the sunshine. Or find a comfortable spot in the shade.

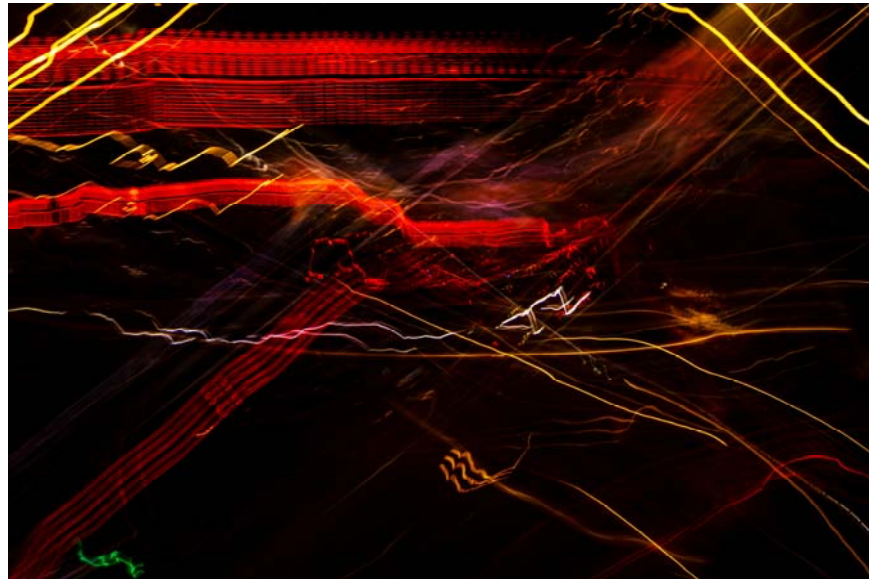
Disconnect from external distractions and quiet your internal chatter. Let silence float through you.

Within this pause, breathe, turn your focus inward, and listen. When words ramble through, focus on the space between the thoughts.

Listen.

Your body will speak to you. Its language pulsates through your being, an energetic movement that guides you deeper inward. Tuning into times of connection with ourselves supports a sense of safety in the present moment; we are peaceful and calm; we can reach out and connect without fear. We resonate within so we can expand outward and be part of whatever else may be. Life is well lived.

Now, looking at this pause from a polyvagal perspective (academic vocabulary alert), with enough safety, our ventral vagal energies ebb and flow, changing how we experience the world and guiding us toward connection and ease. If danger triggers our dorsal vagal energy, we may become immobilized and collapse. If our sympathetic nervous system’s flight or fight response is triggered, our energy will mobilize us for self-defense.



Going back to our pause for a moment of reflection. Can you feel the energy guiding your experience? Can you tune into what state (ventral, dorsal, sympathetic) is directing your thoughts? Behaviors? Sensations? What is happening at the present moment in your autonomic nervous system?

Beneath our “level of conscious awareness, our nervous system directs our movement toward and away from people, places, and experiences” (Dana & Rolfe, 2024, pg. 56). And this guidance is critical to our health and well-being. But we aren’t born knowing how to do it.

Deb Dana, LCSW, and Courtney Rolfe, LCPC joined forces to write “Polyvagal Prompts: Finding Connection and Joy Through Guided Explorations.” They know we don’t innately know how to self-regulate our physiological and psychological states—we learn by co-regulating with attuned caregivers. But that doesn’t always happen. So, as adults, we can learn by reading books, attending workshops, and paying for psychotherapy.

### **A look back before going forward: polyvagal theory and psychotherapy**

I first ‘met’ Dr Porges—creator of polyvagal theory—when I was a graduate student and assigned to read his new book, “The Polyvagal Theory” (Norton, 2011). Fortunately, I worked with teachers and classmates to translate and apply the research into usable points for clinical work. Porges’ hypotheses and subsequent research results changed our understanding of how physiological and psychological states shape our thoughts, emotions, perceptions, behaviors, and bodily experiences. Polyvagal theory changed our beliefs about the autonomic nervous system’s role in human social behavior.

But his work was mired in academia. Clinicians wanted a deeper understanding of his work but written in a user-friendly way. In response, Dr Porges wrote, “The Pocket Guide to the Polyvagal Theory: The Transformative Power of Feeling Safe” (Norton, 2017). I was fortunate to read and review his book and talk with him about his work. He wanted/wants clinicians in multiple fields to access his knowledge for clinical use. He offers that he creates ideas and then clinicians put them into action.

Porges credits Deb Dana, LCSW, with putting polyvagal theory concepts into clinical practice. They teamed up to co-author “Clinical Applications of the Polyvagal Theory” (Norton, 2018), and founded The Polyvagal Institute, with two other colleagues. Dana’s intimate understanding of Porges’s work enables her to write about health and well-being through a polyvagal lens, translating “polyvagal theory into a language and application that are both understandable and accessible . . . ” (Dana & Rolfe, 2024, pg. 189).

Dana has published five books thus far supporting clinicians working from a polyvagal perspective. Her newest book, co-authored with Courtney Rolfe, LCPC, entitled “Polyvagal Prompts: Finding Connection and Joy Through Guided Explorations” shifts the autonomic nervous system from a scientific vantage to a layperson’s tool to explore how their ANS impacts their daily lives. Prompts are provided with space for readers to write their responses in the book itself. Readers are invited to step into a biological stance with a sense of wonder and curiosity and consider why they think, feel, and act like they do.

Self-awareness and self-regulation skills have the potential to deepen by playing with the prompts. Readers see first-hand how safety provides and at times co-regulation supports connection with others, which is essential for our health and well-being.

### **Prompts and Journal Writing**

Each prompt follows the same layout: there’s a quote about our autonomic nervous system and how it plays out in our lives, then a brief discussion of what it means. Then there’s the invitation—the prompt—for readers to contemplate and write about. The materials are thought-provoking and even if you don’t write your response, you might find your mind mulling the concepts over throughout the day.

### **Small Details**

The authors note in the introduction that readers who are not familiar with polyvagal theory might benefit by reading *A Beginner’s Guide to Polyvagal Theory* (pg. 171) and the Glossary (pg. 177) first. Considering myself fairly well immersed in all things polyvagal albeit technically not as confidently clinically, I went to page 171 first.

The information was succinct and educational—a beginner’s primer. As a newcomer to polyvagal theory itself regardless of clinical use, a reader has the potential to learn the necessary background—the basics—so that the quotes and brief discussions make sense.



The authors shared a visual image of a ladder to explain the three rungs of the autonomic nervous system that they are working with. The top represents safety and connection, which are guided by our social engagement system, aka the ventral vagal pathway of the parasympathetic branch—the newest pathway. When in this state, we tend to feel happy, see the world as safe, and reach out to others. Some of our daily experiences in this state include self-care and taking time to play and hang out with others. There’s a feeling of productivity and a sense of self-management.

The authors’ choice to add feelings, behaviors, and health consequences helps readers to contextualize the state, making the concept concrete, and thus easier to understand.

The middle rung represents the sympathetic nervous system—our fight-or-flight response. Physiological changes we might experience in this state include heart rate and breathing patterns. We may be vigilant, scanning our surroundings for danger. The world may feel unsafe, perhaps chaotic; we need to protect ourselves. Physically speaking, daily living here may include panic attacks, anger, and anxiety. Health consequences can include headaches, chronic neck, shoulder, and back pain, weight gain, and more.

The bottom rung is our oldest pathway, the dorsal vagal pathway of the parasympathetic nervous system. This is considered the last chance option: when all else fails, people may shut down, collapse, or dissociate (leave their bodies behind as their energy floats elsewhere). Here we may feel despair, left alone to our own devices without any hope of salvation. We are doomed. Daily living problems might include depression, memory issues, and lack of energy. Health issues can range from chronic fatigue to digestion issues, low blood pressure, and weight gain.

Dana and Rolfe also included a description of a house to explain how the three pathways work together—a systems approach. To note: the same information as a downloadable PDF is available on Dana’s website (Retrieved on 04.09.2024 from <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/651a8a6a53de4c0b644fc077/>





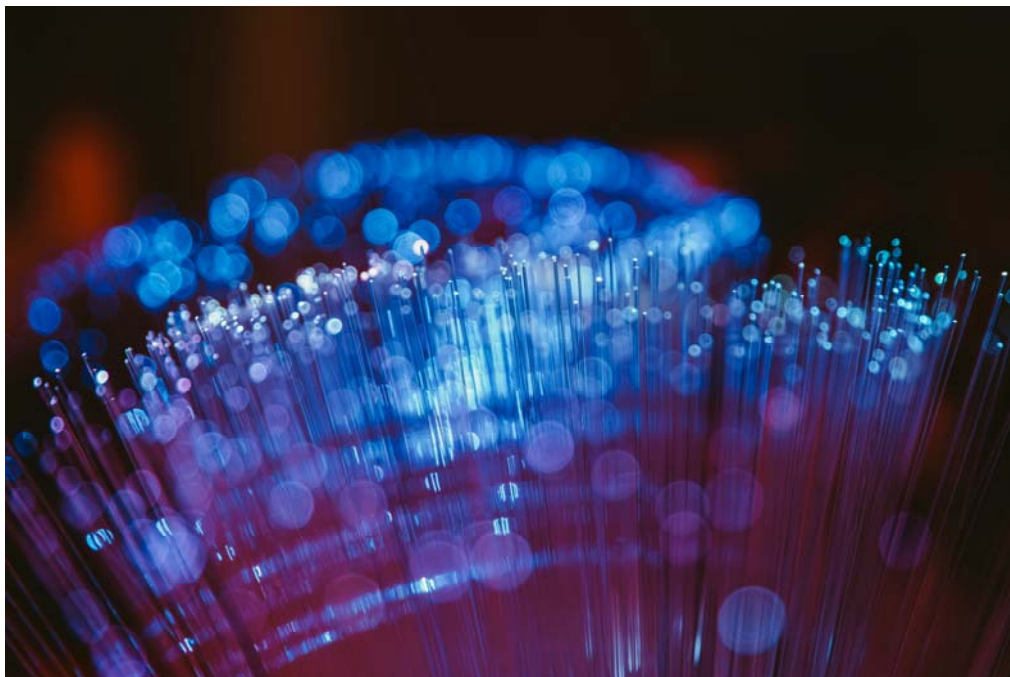
The Glossary details seven foundational terms for the prompts. The words might sound familiar yet it's useful to understand the authors' perspective. They discuss hierarchy referencing the three rungs of the ladder offered in the Beginners Guide and neuroception as coined/defined by Porges. The term 'Savor' surprised me. Readers are directed to "connect with, and deepen, the moments of ventral vagal regulation that inevitably emerge as we move through the day" (pg. 179). Savor is divided into three steps: Attend, Appreciate, and Amplify. Flipping through the prompts, Savor is offered yet it's not defined in the same detail as in the Glossary. I think it makes more sense knowing the three steps—glossing over it in the prompts shortchanges the significance of the act of savoring.

Another word within the scope of Savor was Glimmer. This was new for me regarding polyvagal theory. I had read the word Glimmer in the Acknowledgement section after Deb Dana's name with no explanation, so I went to her website and learned that "Glimmers are micro-moments of regulation that foster feelings of well-being" (Retrieved 04.14.2024 from <https://www.rhythmofregulation.com/glimmers>). Cool. The creative use of the word Glimmer draws attention to small yet critical moments to support the experiential.

Searching the text specifically for prompts related to Glimmers, I found a lengthy discussion on page 42:

"Glimmers gently yet significantly shape our systems toward well-being. Once we learn to look for glimmers, we find they are all around us and we begin to look for more.

"Glimmers are not limited to out-of-the-extraordinary experiences. They can be found in predictable places, including our everyday spaces and daily routines. Sometimes glimmers become such a regular part of our daily activities that we forget that they are in fact glimmers."



## Summary

"Polyvagal Prompts: Finding Connection and Joy through Guided Explorations" offers a creative path for readers to play with their autonomic nervous system. Reading the prompts offers readers the chance to sense where they are and learn ways to shift from uncomfortable states to places of calm, peace, and well-being. As a tool for clinicians, the prompts can be used to support session work—they are not written to be used in any particular order/sequence. I look forward to playing more, myself.

**Norton Mental Health's YouTube Channel** offers an hour long conversation with Deb Dana and Courtney Rolfe (facilitated by Kevin Olsen) as they discuss their collaboration and takeaways from the new book, "Polyvagal Prompts: Finding Connection and Joy Through Guided Explorations," published by W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. The link will take you there:

[https://www.youtube.com/live/YubVFYuA7nE?si=CyVsP1fpZ\\_7QlwyF](https://www.youtube.com/live/YubVFYuA7nE?si=CyVsP1fpZ_7QlwyF)

## About the Authors From Norton Mental Health:

**Deb Dana, LCSW**, is a clinician, consultant, and speaker specializing in complex trauma. She is the leading translator of Dr. Stephen's Polyvagal Theory for both clinical and general audiences, and the best-selling author of "Polyvagal Practices, Polyvagal Card Deck, The Polyvagal Flip Chart, Polyvagal Exercises for Safety and Connection, The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy," and co-editor with Dr. Stephen Porges of "Clinical Applications of The Polyvagal Theory." She trains therapists around the world in how to bring a Polyvagal approach into their clinical practice, and also works with agencies and larger systems to explore how to incorporate a Polyvagal perspective. She is also a founding member of The Polyvagal Institute, a consultant to Khiron Clinics, and an advisor to Unyte. Visit her website at [rhythmofregulation.com](http://rhythmofregulation.com).

**Courtney Rolfe, LCPC**, is a licensed psychotherapist, speaker, and trainer passionate about bringing Polyvagal Theory to clinicians and wellness professionals across the globe. A leading expert in the Polyvagal Theory, Courtney's passion lies in supporting and teaching clinicians, helping individuals and communities heal, and in living the model of navigating the world with a regulated nervous system. Courtney maintains a private practice based in Chicago, Illinois, in addition to being a speaker and trainer. Courtney offers individual and group consultation for helping professionals, supporting healers and helpers bring the wisdom of the nervous system into their work. Learn more at [modernmindandheart.com](http://modernmindandheart.com).

## Photo Credits

Gordon Johnson from Pixabay, Autonomic Nervous System

Wrong Tog, From Unsplash, Energetic Flow

Open Clipart-Vectors from Pixabay, Axon brain cell

Armand Khoury from Unsplash, Ladder

Sander Weeteling from Unsplash, Glimmer