AUSTIN DIGESTIVE HEALTH

Personalized solutions for complex digestive conditions

Polyvagal Practices for a Nervous System Reset

When your nervous system has spent too long preparing for danger, rest can feel surprisingly difficult.

You may know intellectually that you are safe, yet your body still feels tense. Your mind keeps scanning. Your stomach feels unsettled. You have trouble sleeping. A text message can make your heart race. A small disagreement can feel much bigger than it should.

This is one reason nervous system regulation has become such an important part of conversations about stress, trauma, and whole-person health.

Polyvagal-informed practices offer one useful way of thinking about this process.

The goal is not to force yourself to calm down.

The goal is to give your nervous system repeated experiences that communicate:

I am here. I am safe enough in this moment. I do not have to remain on high alert.

What Is Polyvagal Theory?

Polyvagal Theory was developed by neuroscientist Stephen Porges as a framework for understanding how the autonomic nervous system responds to safety, danger, and social connection.

It places particular emphasis on the vagus nerve and proposes that our nervous system continuously evaluates the environment for signals of safety and threat.

You may hear this automatic process called **neuroception**.

Unlike conscious perception, neuroception is not something we deliberately think through.

Your body may react before your thinking brain has had time to say:

“Everything is okay.”

This is why someone can logically know that a situation is safe while simultaneously experiencing a racing heart, tight chest, stomach discomfort, trembling, or an urge to escape.

Polyvagal Theory remains an evolving framework, and some of its specific anatomical and evolutionary claims continue to be debated. Still, its broader emphasis on autonomic regulation, social connection, bodily awareness, and perceived safety has influenced trauma-informed care and mind-body approaches.

Your Nervous System Is Designed to Change States

Your autonomic nervous system is constantly adjusting.

Sometimes we need energy and mobilization.

Sometimes we need stillness and restoration.

Sometimes we need connection.

A healthy nervous system is not one that remains calm all the time.

It is one that can **move between states and return toward regulation when the threat has passed.**

That distinction matters.

The goal isn't:

Never get activated.

The goal is:

Become more able to notice activation, respond to it, and eventually return.

Why Chronic Stress Can Make Regulation Harder

When stressful experiences happen repeatedly, the nervous system may become increasingly prepared for the next problem.

You may begin noticing:

- hypervigilance
- difficulty relaxing
- irritability
- racing thoughts
- sleep disruption
- digestive symptoms
- muscle tension
- feeling easily startled
- emotional numbness
- exhaustion after periods of intense stress
- difficulty concentrating
- constantly anticipating what might happen next

These experiences are not necessarily evidence that something is wrong with you.

They may reflect a nervous system doing exactly what nervous systems are designed to do:

adapt to what they repeatedly experience.

The problem occurs when protection becomes the body's default setting even when immediate danger is no longer present.

That is where regulation practices can help.

Polyvagal-Informed Practices for Regulation

There is no single technique that works for everyone.

Think of these practices as **signals you can experiment with**, rather than commands you give your body.

1. Slow Your Breathing

Breathing is unusual because it is both automatic and something we can consciously influence.

Slow, comfortable breathing—particularly when the exhale is unhurried—can influence autonomic activity and heart-rate variability.

Research has found that voluntary slow breathing can increase measures of vagally mediated heart-rate variability, suggesting increased parasympathetic influence on the heart.

Try:

Inhale gently for 4 seconds.

Exhale comfortably for 5–6 seconds.

Repeat for one to three minutes.

The goal is not the exact numbers.

The goal is comfortable, slower breathing.

If deliberate deep breathing makes you dizzy or anxious, return to normal breathing. Regulation practices should not become another thing you force yourself to endure.

2. Orient to the Present

When the nervous system is anticipating danger, attention often narrows.

Try deliberately looking around your environment.

Slowly identify:

5 things you can see.

4 things you can physically feel.

3 things you can hear.

Then notice:

Where am I right now?

This practice can help shift attention from anticipated danger toward current sensory information.

You aren't telling yourself:

"Nothing bad could ever happen."

You are asking:

"What is actually happening right now?"

That distinction is powerful.

3. Let Your Eyes Find Something Pleasant

Safety does not always have to arrive through reasoning.

Sometimes it arrives through sensory experience.

Look for something your nervous system genuinely enjoys noticing:

Sunlight moving through trees.

A favorite blanket.

A sleeping pet.

A candle.

Artwork.

Flowers.

Your child's photograph.

Stay with it for several seconds longer than you normally would.

Instead of immediately moving on, allow your body to register:

This feels good.

Small moments of safety matter.

4. Use Gentle Movement

Activation creates energy.

Sometimes trying to become perfectly still when you are highly activated can feel uncomfortable.

Movement may be the more appropriate first step.

Try:

- walking
- stretching
- shaking out your hands
- rolling your shoulders
- gentle yoga
- dancing
- slowly moving outside
- light exercise

The question isn't:

"What exercise should I do?"

Instead ask:

"What kind of movement would feel supportive to my body right now?"

5. Use Your Voice

Humming, singing, chanting, reading aloud, or speaking gently can feel regulating for some people.

From a polyvagal perspective, vocalization is interesting because breathing, vocal muscles, hearing, and social engagement interact with autonomic regulation.

But you don't need to understand all of the physiology to experiment with it.

Hum.

Sing in the car.

Read something comforting aloud.

Talk to your dog.

Notice what happens in your body.

6. Seek Safe Connection

Humans regulate one another.

A calm conversation with someone you trust can sometimes shift your physiology more effectively than trying harder to calm yourself alone.

This is called **co-regulation**.

It might look like:

Calling a trusted friend.

Sitting beside someone you love.

Holding someone's hand.

Laughing together.

Being listened to without being corrected.

Spending time with a safe animal.

Healthy connection tells the nervous system something important:

I am not navigating this alone.

7. Use Temperature and Sensation

Sensory input can help bring attention back into the present.

Try:

- holding a warm mug
- taking a warm shower
- washing your face with cool water
- wrapping yourself in a blanket
- stepping outside into fresh air
- noticing the weight of your body against a chair

Then simply observe:

What sensation feels settling?

Not everyone finds the same sensory experiences comforting.

The goal is experimentation rather than prescription.

8. Create Predictability

Safety is not only relaxation.

It is also **predictability**.

A nervous system that has lived through chronic uncertainty may benefit enormously from knowing what happens next.

Simple routines can help:

Morning tea.

Regular meals.

A bedtime ritual.

Walking at the same time each day.

Preparing tomorrow's clothes the night before.

Writing down tomorrow's three priorities.

Predictability reduces the number of unknowns your brain must constantly evaluate.

9. Spend Time in Nature

Nature gives the nervous system a very different sensory environment than screens, traffic, conflict, or constant notifications.

You do not need to hike five miles.

Sit outside.

Walk barefoot through the yard.

Watch clouds.

Listen to birds.

Notice the wind.

Your task is not to accomplish anything.

Your task is simply to **notice where you are.**

10. Practice Self-Connection

This is where nervous system work connects beautifully with approaches like Nonviolent Communication and Internal Family Systems.

Instead of immediately asking:

"How do I stop feeling this?"

try asking:

What am I feeling?

What does my body notice?

What might I need right now?

What part of me feels threatened?

What is that part trying to protect?

This moves us away from fighting our nervous system and toward listening to it.

Sometimes regulation begins with being understood—even when the person doing the understanding is you.

A Simple 5-Minute Reset

When you notice yourself becoming activated, try this sequence.

Minute 1: Orient

Look around.

Notice where you are.

Name five things you see.

Minute 2: Breathe

Slow your breathing slightly.

Let the exhale become comfortable and unhurried.

Minute 3: Feel

Notice your feet on the floor.

Your back against the chair.

Your hands resting somewhere.

Minute 4: Ask

What am I feeling?

What do I need?

Minute 5: Choose

Ask:

What is one small thing that would support me right now?

Water?

Movement?

Food?

Quiet?

Connection?

A boundary?

Rest?

Information?

Then do that one thing if you can.

Regulation Is Not Suppression

This may be the most important distinction.

Nervous system regulation does not mean making uncomfortable emotions disappear.

Anger may contain information.

Fear may contain information.

Grief contains information.

Your body is not a machine that needs to be silenced every time it becomes uncomfortable.

Regulation allows you to experience an emotion **without being completely overtaken by it.**

There is a difference between:

“I cannot feel this.”

and

“I can feel this and remain here with myself.”

That is regulation.

What This Has to Do With Health

The nervous system does not operate separately from the rest of the body.

Autonomic activity interacts with:

- heart rate
- breathing
- digestion
- sleep
- pain perception
- immune signaling

- energy regulation
- attention
- emotional processing

That does not mean every physical symptom is caused by stress.

And it certainly does not mean someone can breathe or meditate their way out of every illness.

But chronic stress can influence multiple physiological systems, which is why nervous-system support can be a valuable part of a broader health strategy.

Slow breathing, for example, has substantial evidence for influencing heart-rate variability and autonomic regulation. More recent research suggests it may also improve subjective sleep outcomes, although objective sleep findings remain less certain.

This is the important middle ground:

The mind and body are not separate—but neither should every illness be reduced to the nervous system.

Nutrition matters.

Medical care matters.

Movement matters.

Sleep matters.

Relationships matter.

The nervous system matters.

They work together.

You Don’t Need to Become Calm

Perhaps the goal of nervous-system healing isn’t to become a permanently calm person.

Perhaps the goal is to develop enough internal safety that when life activates you, you know how to find your way back.

Not instantly.

Not perfectly.

But increasingly.

You notice sooner.

You understand yourself better.

You recover more quickly.

You stop judging your body’s protective responses.

And gradually, you begin giving your nervous system something it may not have experienced consistently before:

evidence of safety.

That is not a reset button.

It is a practice.

And practiced often enough, it can become a new way of relating to your body.