



UNDERSTANDING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

A Gentle Introduction to Polyvagal
Theory & the Safe & Sound Protocol

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WELCOME

Hi there! I'm really glad you're here.

I created this guide as a gentle introduction to how the nervous system works and why so many people find themselves feeling stuck in stress, overwhelm, or shutdown, often without fully understanding why.

When the nervous system feels safe, the body has more capacity for calm, connection, focus, and resilience; when it doesn't, even everyday demands can feel heavy or unmanageable.

My hope is that this short guide helps you better understand what may be happening in your nervous system and how supportive, paced approaches, including the Safe & Sound Protocol (SSP), can help create the conditions for greater regulation and ease over time.

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THE NERVOUS SYSTEM, SIMPLY EXPLAINED

The Autonomic Nervous System: A Brief Overview

The autonomic nervous system is the part of the nervous system that works automatically, without conscious effort, to keep us safe and alive.

It is often described as having two main branches:

The ***sympathetic nervous system*** supports mobilization.

It prepares the body for action when something feels threatening, activating responses commonly known as fight or flight.

The ***parasympathetic nervous system*** supports rest, recovery, and restoration.

It helps slow the body down, supporting digestion, repair, and a sense of calm.

Within the parasympathetic system, the ***ventral vagus nerve*** plays an important role in feelings of safety, connection, and social engagement. When this system is active, the body has more capacity to feel grounded, connected, and at ease, often referred to as the green zone (see below).

These systems are not opposites or enemies. They are designed to work together, shifting in response to what the nervous system perceives as safe or unsafe.

What is Polyvagal Theory?

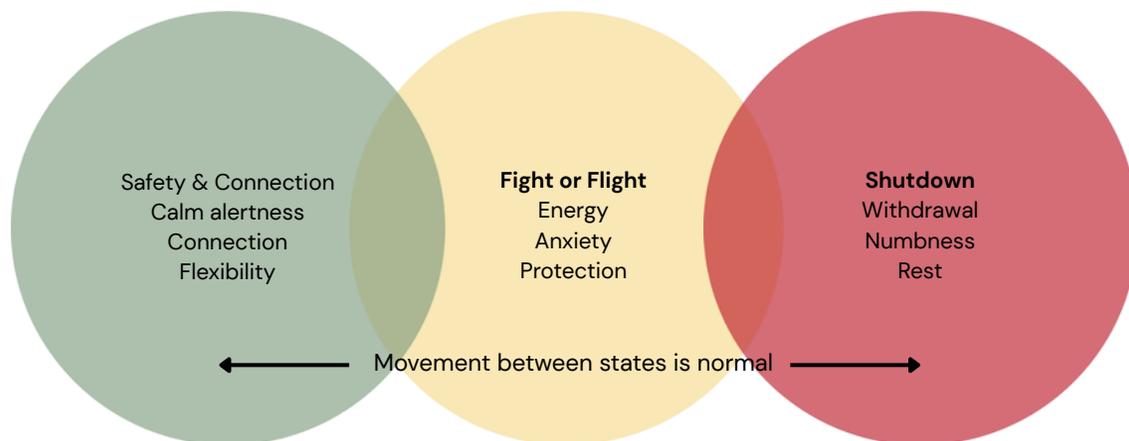
Polyvagal Theory is a framework developed by Dr. Stephen Porges that helps explain how the nervous system responds to cues of safety and danger.

Rather than viewing the nervous system as simply “on” or “off,” Polyvagal Theory describes how we move through different states, including states of safety, mobilization (fight or flight), and shutdown, based on what the nervous system perceives in the environment.

These responses are not conscious choices or character flaws. They are automatic, protective patterns shaped by experience.

This framework helps us understand why stress responses can persist even when life looks “fine” on the outside, and why supporting the nervous system, rather than pushing it, is often key to regulation and healing.

Your Nervous System States: A simplified view inspired by Polyvagal Theory



Each state serves a protective purpose.

The autonomic nervous system helps regulate how we respond to the world, shifting automatically between states of activation and rest in response to what feels safe or unsafe.

You may hear these states described using colours:

● The Green Zone – Safety & Connection

In this state, the nervous system feels safe enough to:

- rest and digest
- connect with others
- think clearly
- respond flexibly to stress

This doesn't mean feeling calm all the time, it means having capacity. **SAFE ZONE.**

● The Yellow Zone – Fight or Flight

When the nervous system detects threat (real or perceived), it may shift into:

- anxiety
- tension
- irritability
- hypervigilance
- racing thoughts

This is not a failure, it's a protective response. **ALARM ZONE**

● The Red Zone – Shutdown or Collapse

If stress or threat feels overwhelming or prolonged, the nervous system may move into:

- numbness
- withdrawal
- exhaustion
- disconnection
- "checking out"

This, too, is protective. The nervous system is doing its best to cope. **SHUTDOWN**

The Goal Is Not to Stay “Green”

A regulated nervous system isn't one that stays calm all the time.

A healthy nervous system is one that can:

- move between states
- recover more easily
- return to safety when stress passes

Many people struggle not because they ever leave the green zone — but because they feel stuck in yellow or red.

Why Nervous Systems Get Stuck

Nervous system dysregulation often develops over time and may be influenced by:

- chronic stress
- trauma (big or small, recent or long ago)
- repeated high-alert environments
- hormonal transitions (such as perimenopause or menopause)
- sensory sensitivity or neurodivergence

When the nervous system has learned that the world is unsafe, it may stay on high alert — even when danger has passed.

This is adaptation, not weakness.

A Bottom-Up Approach to Regulation

Many approaches to wellbeing focus on “top-down” strategies — thinking differently, reframing thoughts, or pushing through discomfort.

While these can be helpful, they don't always reach the nervous system directly. A bottom-up approach works with the body first, supporting the nervous system's felt sense of safety.

This is where the Safe & Sound Protocol fits.

How the Safe & Sound Protocol (SSP) Works

The Safe & Sound Protocol is a listening-based intervention developed to support nervous system regulation and social engagement.

SSP uses specially filtered music designed to gently stimulate the nervous system through sound, supporting access to the green zone — the state associated with safety and connection.

Importantly:

- SSP does not force regulation
- It does not push or override the nervous system
- It works gradually, at an individual pace

Many people experience SSP as helping the nervous system “remember” what safety feels like.

Why Pacing and Support Matter

Because SSP works directly with the nervous system, how it is delivered matters. Reactions during SSP are not signs of failure — they are information.

Support and pacing help to:

- notice nervous system responses
- slow down or pause when needed
- integrate changes gently
- reduce overwhelm

This is why SSP is most effective when it is supported, paced, and responsive, rather than rushed.

A Final Note

The Safe & Sound Protocol is not a medical treatment and does not guarantee specific outcomes.

It is best understood as a supportive nervous system intervention, often used alongside other forms of care.

If you're curious about SSP, the next step is not to push forward — it's to determine whether this approach is a good fit for you right now.

Learn More

You can learn more about how the Safe & Sound Protocol is offered at Safe & Calm — including where to start — by visiting the [Services page](#).

If you're curious about whether this approach might be supportive for you, I'd love to help you explore next steps. You're welcome to connect or reach out by email: lindsay@safeandcalm.ca