

Applying polyvagal theory to relationship-based therapeutic care

Purpose

Relationship-based practice is at the core of effective therapeutic care. Key to understanding how to build effective relationships with young people who have experienced trauma is to understand how the consequence of trauma is experienced in their bodies and expressed through their emotions and behaviour. This understanding equips us to be better able to offer relationships that are attuned to their needs. This practice tool uses polyvagal theory as a way of understanding how best to use your relationship with a young person to understand and meet their needs for safety, support and regulation.

This tool can be used as a summary for reflection or provided to care team members and those who are also supporting the child or young person. It seeks to summarise the experience of states of social engagement, mobilisation and immobilisation. It outlines how children and young people might present in each state, what might be happening for them and provides a starting point for using your relationship to respond to their needs.

Audience

This resource can be used with all of those caring for or supporting children and young people in care. Equally, it could also be used as a discussion point with the child or young person to help them to understand these different states, and to perhaps add the unique experiences and responses of that child or young person.

What you could do



- Print and display this tool in your office as a reminder of Polyvagal Theory and its application in practice.



- Provide this tool to those within a child or young person's care team or broader relational network to support their understanding of their presentation and some beginning points for responding.



- Expand the 'I need you to....' section for each state with your own ideas of ways of responding that best meet the child or young person's needs.



- Discuss the content of this tool with the child or young person and add in additional ideas based on their own unique story.

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	I am showing you....	On the inside.....	I need you to....
 <p>Social engagement</p>	<p>Feeling safe, staying in relationship, connection oriented</p> <p>You might say I am:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making eye contact • Listening • Engaging in play and exploration 	<p>I am feeling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safe, Calm, Happy, Sad, Annoyed, Reflective, Playful, Curious <p>My body says:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approach others • Sit still • Breathe deeply 	<p>Help me to stay engaged</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play and have fun with me • Role model positive relationships • Set boundaries and natural consequences • Use reflective and problem solving skills so I can learn them too • Notice and acknowledge my strengths and my skills
 <p>Mobilisation</p>	<p>Fight, flight, active freeze, action oriented</p> <p>You might say I am:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aggressive • Loud • Fighting • Running away • Hyperactive 	<p>I am feeling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxious, Frightened, Lonely, Hurt, Confused, Overwhelmed <p>My body says:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run away • I'm hot • I can't sit still • I need to move 	<p>Help me to down regulate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep me safe • Co-regulate – be safe, attuned and responsive to me • Use movement – big then smaller, jumping, hanging, swinging, climbing, star jumps • Create a safe space near you where I can retreat to until I calm down • Model deep breathing • Repair our relationship – 'we are ok and our relationship is strong'
 <p>Immobilisation</p>	<p>Withdrawal, collapse, submission, dissociation, avoidant oriented</p> <p>You might say I am:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawn • Avoiding contact • Distant • Compliant • Hiding 	<p>I am feeling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disconnected, Unfocused, Flat, Withdrawn, I'm disappearing <p>My body says:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid others • I'm not in my body • I want to hide • Curl up in a ball 	<p>Help me to up regulate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-regulate – be safe, attuned and responsive with me • Tell me I am safe and demonstrate it with your actions, gestures and tone of voice • Help me to orient to the room we are in by looking for specific things like something green, something on the roof or something on the floor • Help me to feel my body by noticing different parts, such as my feet on the floor and my bottom on the chair • Repair our relationship – 'we are ok and our relationship is strong'