

Trauma-Informed Relationships

Biblical Basis

1. God cares about hurting people.
 - *Psalm 34:18 - The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*
 - *2 Corinthians 1: 4-5 He comforts us in all our affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ our comfort overflows.*
2. Our bodies, including our brains and nervous system are designed with purpose.
 - *Psalm 139:13 -14 For it was you who created my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I will praise you because I have been fearfully and wonderfully made."*
 - *Colossians 1:16 For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... all things were created through Him and for Him.*
3. Healing is possible, even in a fallen world.
 - *2 Corinthians 4:16 - So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.*
 - *Romans 12:2 - Do not be conformed to this world,^[c] but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.^[d]*
 - *Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.*

Relationship Principles

Principle #1: Good, healthy relationship principles are universal.

We sometimes learn responses that help us survive in extreme situations but do not work for the rest of life. For example, some people respond to trauma by being overly controlling of other people. That strategy may have kept them cope in the past, but it won't work for the rest of their relationships. In our efforts to pursue healthy relationship, we need to be sure that we are practicing responses that are appropriate for all relationships.

For example, all relationships require trust from each individual. This applies to relationships between a husband and wife, between friends, between a teacher and a student and between a person and a horse. Mutual trust will look different in each of those relationships, but it must exist in all of them to have a healthy, beneficial relationship.

Principle #2: All behavior is communication.

Our minds and our bodies are connected. Whether or not we intend it, our behavior communicates something about what's going on inside of us. It indicates what we think, what we value and what we have experienced. When challenging behaviors arise with humans or horses, we must remember that if we could see into that individual's heart and mind, their responses would make sense. It is our job to be observant and curious when we come against difficult behaviors so that we can help that individual make healthy choices.

This also means that there is never a time when we are not working on relationship. Any time two individuals interact there is the potential to influence the relationship for good or bad.

Principle #3: Healthy relationship is a balance of pressure and peace.

Whether it's a horse or a human, we are all designed to seek peace and are all eased by the release of pressure. When we perceive pressure in our lives, we do something to release it. Sometimes this happens in good, healthy ways and sometimes in unhealthy ones. With too much pressure, we become overwhelmed. With too much peace, we are not motivated to change.

We can learn healthy ways to seek peace if we are intentional and logical in our use of pressure. In the simplest terms: When we make an appropriate request and are ignored, we increase pressure. When we ask and get resistance, we maintain pressure. When we make a request and get cooperation, we release pressure and allow peace.

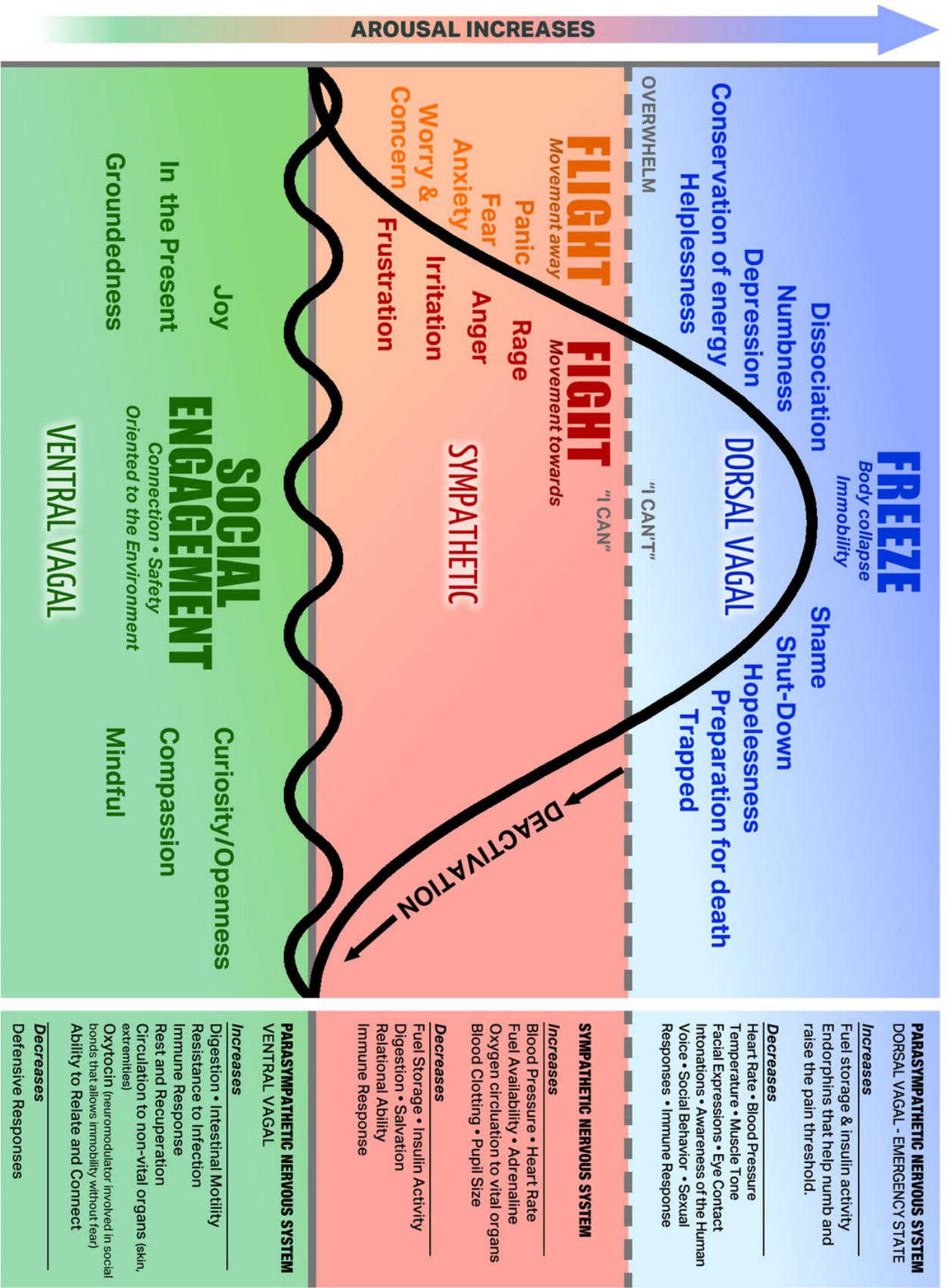
Our Nervous System

Our autonomic nervous system has 3 main states. The calm, happy state that most of us prefer we call social engagement (ventral vagal). An activated nervous system that is upset, scared or angry is our fight/flight response (sympathetic activation). When our nervous system is numb, stuck or shut down, we call that a freeze response (dorsal vagal). None of these states are bad in and of themselves. They each have a specific situation in which they are appropriate. They can also be activated at different levels at the same time.

All our experiences shape how we respond to the world, how we relate to others and how we view ourselves. Our brains and bodies change based on experience. When that experience is negative, we sometimes call it trauma. Trauma is a term that gets thrown around a lot with different definitions. A simple way to understand it is that trauma is an experience or set of experiences that alters our nervous system's ability to cope and function in a healthy way. Some of the changes that trauma causes are:

- Fight/flight or freeze response is activated at inappropriate times (example: a sound, sight or smell reminds someone of a past trauma and they panic)
- Trouble concentrating/learning new things (fight/flight/freeze states make it difficult for the brain to process information)
- Hypervigilance (being on high alert)
- Sleep disturbances
- Headaches, stomach pain, fatigue
- Compromised immune response (auto-immune disease is more common in people with trauma in childhood)
- Memory problems (PTSD is being discussed as a memory disorder, not just an anxiety disorder)
- Relationship problems





Adapted by Rudy Jo Walker from: Cheryl Sanders, Steve Hoskinson, Steven Porges and Peter Levine

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM
DORSAL VAGAL - EMERGENCY STATE

Increases
Fuel storage & insulin activity
Endorphins that help numb and raise the pain threshold.

Decreases
Heart Rate • Blood Pressure
Temperature • Muscle Tone
Facial Expressions • Eye Contact
Intonations • Awareness of the Human Voice • Social Behavior • Sexual Responses • Immune Response

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

Increases
Blood Pressure • Heart Rate
Fuel Availability • Adrenaline
Oxygen circulation to vital organs
Blood Clotting • Pupil Size

Decreases
Fuel Storage • Insulin Activity
Digestion • Salvation
Relational Ability
Immune Response

PARASYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM
VENTRAL VAGAL

Increases
Digestion • Intestinal Motility
Resistance to Infection
Immune Response
Rest and Recuperation
Circulation to non-vital organs (skin, extremities)
Oxytocin (neuromodulator involved in social bonds that allows immobility without fear)
Ability to Relate and Connect

Decreases
Defensive Responses

Hierarchy of the Brain

	What It Does	How to "Talk" to It
Brain Stem	~All the unconscious functions in your body (temperature, heart rate, breathing)	~Passive sensory input (5 senses, breathing)
Midbrain	~Movement, coordination, arousal, sleep & appetite	~Active input (Physical activity, eating/drinking, naps)
Limbic System	~Emotions, memory, connection, bonding	~Relationships, engaging with others (people or animals)
Neo-Cortex	~Concrete & abstract thought, problem-solving, decision-making	~Cognitive interactions, learning, thinking

Regulation Strategies

"Regulation" is the ability to move flexibly between different nervous system states in response to external and internal stressors. There are two methods of regulation. One is called "top-down" regulation. This means that we are using the higher areas of our brains to control and even override the lower areas of our brains. Very simply, we are using our thoughts to control our minds and bodies. The other method is "bottom-up" regulation. This means that we use strategies, usually involving our bodies, to "talk" to the lower areas of the brain first to help us feel better and respond in better ways. When we regulate by ourselves, we call it self-regulation and when we regulate with someone's help, it's called co-regulation.

Any activity that helps us be more aware of what's going on inside and more in control of our emotions is a regulation activity. Activities that have patterned sensory input or rhythmic movement help us regulate. Some of these kinds of things we do every day like kneading bread, rocking a baby, walking or being around animals. Regulation strategies are practices that help us be more aware of our bodies and more "present". Being present simply means that your mind and body are in the same place. If your body is at the dinner table, but your mind is thinking about a hard conversation you had at work, you are not present.

Here are some other regulation strategies that you can try:

1. The 5 Senses Check-in- Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste
2. S.I.F.T.
 - S- Sensations (things you can feel in or around your body)
 - I- Images (pictures or memories that come to your mind)
 - F- Feelings (emotions that you're feeling)
 - T- Thoughts (questions or internal comments you're saying to yourself)
3. Follow Your Breath
 - Notice your inhale come in your nose, down your throat, into your chest and down to your belly.
 - Notice your exhale go up from your belly, up your chest, up your throat & out your nostrils.
 - Picture the air moving through those areas of your body. Repeat 3(or more) times.
4. Double inhale – Take a deep breathe in through your nose and hold for a moment. Then take in a little more air. Hold for another moment, then slowly exhale through your mouth.
5. Active Listening Prayer- "Active listening" is a skill to engage in conversation with our whole focus instead of allowing unrelated thoughts to come in. We spend a lot of time in prayer talking to God by giving thanks

and asking for help, but how often do we just listen? Sit in a quiet place and try to clear your mind of all thoughts or questions. If your mind wanders, bring it back by focusing on a few deep breathes or your check in with your 5 senses.

6. Name it to Tame it – Simply say out loud the thought or emotion or body sensation that you’re experiencing in the moment. So many of our negative feelings keep us trapped because we try to avoid or hide them.

Pressure Logic

Making requests is how we initiate and grow relationships. These requests start off simple. Saying “hello” is a request. Reaching out for a handshake is a request. As the relationships develop and deepen, the requests become more subtle and more intimate. We start asking things (usually not out loud) like, “Can I trust you?” or “If you see me be emotional will you stick around?”

The term “pressure” often sounds bad to us, but pressure itself isn’t good or bad. It’s simply the motivation we experience to do something or change something. For example, my hands being wet is pressure for me to look for a towel. My eyes feeling heavy is pressure for me to go to sleep. When we make a request, that request has some pressure to it as well. Sometimes that pressure is very small, sometimes there’s more. From a Biblical perspective, God uses pressure to make requests of people also. He makes requests and uses pressure to direct us, to guide us, to convict us and, ultimately, to teach us how to be more in line with His will.

When we want to make a request, we should start with the smallest amount of pressure possible. If the response we get is cooperation, we release pressure immediately. Cooperation does not simply mean obeying our instructions. True cooperation means that we found an answer to the request that’s good for both of us. In real cooperation, there is no tension; rather there is relaxation, connection, and responsiveness. When we ask something are ignored, we increase pressure. Ignoring means that there was no effort or changes made to respond to our request.

When we ask for something and get resistance, we maintain pressure. Resistance sounds negative and we often picture it as arguing. Resistance means that the answer we got only works for one of us or that the answer isn’t complete yet. In this case, maintaining pressure is the best option. If we increase pressure for arguing, we turn our relationship into a power struggle.

In all of our requests, our first priority is connection. As we make requests and experience pressure, we are not seeking to control others, we should seek connection. The only person we can and should try to control is ourselves.

Communication Strategies

It’s often easier to understand maintaining, increasing or releasing pressure with a horse because the language that we use to talk to them is entirely body language. We physically see the use of pressure play out in front of us as well as experiencing it in our nervous system. With people, we also maintain, increase and release pressure through body language, but we often use words, tone of voice and behavioral consequences as well. Here are some strategies that can help us be more thoughtful in the pressure of our communication.

Talking Stick Breathing

A “talking stick” is a way of preventing people from interrupting or talking over each other in a conversation. You have a physical object and whoever is holding the object may speak. The object would need to be handed to the next person before they begin speaking.

It is sometimes helpful to do this in a group conversation using our breathing. After one person is finished speaking, everyone in the group pauses to take one deep breath before the next person speaks. This slows the conversation down and gives everyone a chance to think more clearly.

1. Observation – What you have seen/heard

“I am seeing.../I am noticing.../I am hearing...”

Ex. *“I noticed that for all of our dinner time tonight, you were looking down at your lap.”*

2. Inference – Give several options as to why that might be happening (one can be silly)

“That makes me think...”

Ex. *“That makes me think that maybe you’re bored or maybe you’re worried about something or maybe your neck is sore and you can’t lift your head up .”*

3. Clarification – Ask them to explain, to clear things up for you

“Am I on track with any of that? /Am I missing something?/Help me understand...”

Ex. *“Am I right about one of my guesses or is there something else happening that I missed?”*

W.I.I.N. a Confrontation

W.I.I.N. is a strategy for confronting or challenging behavior in that is damaging a relationship. This method is meant to be a way to connect, and problem-solve conflict in a way that builds and deepens relationship. We aim to address the problem with curiosity rather than judgement.

1. **When you...** Name one instance of a specific behavior that is a concern

Ex: *When you rolled your eyes at my question yesterday...*

2. **It made me feel...** Describe the feelings and thoughts that you experienced at that time

Ex: *When you rolled your eyes at my question yesterday, it made me feel hurt and angry, like I was really stupid.*

3. **I am concerned...** Say what you are afraid will happen in the relationship if the behavior continues

Ex: *When you rolled your eyes at my question yesterday, it made me feel hurt and angry. I’m afraid that if that keeps happening, I will be too afraid to ask questions in the future. I won’t be able to trust you and we won’t be able to communicate well.*

4. **Next time....** Ask them to alter their response next time

Ex: *When you laughed at my question yesterday, it made me feel hurt and angry. I’m afraid that if that keeps happening, I’m afraid that if that keeps happening, I will be too afraid to ask questions in the future. I won’t be able to trust you and we won’t be able to communicate well. Next time, could you answer my question with a little patience, even if it seems dumb to you?*