

Safety as Treatment: Applying the Principles of Polyvagal Theory to Energy Medicine Practice



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When we help our clients feel safe in a session, we are supporting the pathway that their nervous system uses to find their way back to a felt sense of safety. Each time they experience that pathway, it becomes more clear and accessible.

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A new client told me about her history of abuse and trauma. Despite years of therapy and inner healing work, she still suffered from anxiety and problems with intimacy. Her overly-erect posture with stiff shoulders, quick movements, and brisk speech pointed to someone who spent a lot of time in the Fight/Flight survival state.

As she finished speaking, I looked at her and said "It sounds like you haven't felt safe in a long time." This simple statement of acknowledgement brought tears to her eyes. In an instant she understood what had been missing. With this recognition we could begin the process of reminding her body what it feels like to feel safe.

WHY IS SAFETY SO IMPORTANT?

"If you want to improve the world, start by making people feel safer." Dr. Stephen Porges

Knowing that you are safe is not always the same thing as feeling safe. You can know that there is no immediate threat to your life as you sit in a familiar room at home and, at the same time, your body may be responding as if there is something dangerous nearby. You know there's no tiger, yet you feel tense and anxious.

When you experience a felt sense of safety in your

body, your autonomic nervous system directs its energy toward healing and regeneration. When you experience a felt sense of threat (real or imagined) your nervous system directs energy away from healing and into its defensive strategies.

Both trauma and chronic stress can lead to experiencing an ongoing feeling of being unsafe resulting in defensive states such as Fight/Flight or Shutdown/Freeze. If this isn't addressed, the body will begin to show signs of dis-ease and imbalance. An excellent demonstration of this is the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, a long-term collaborative study by Kaiser-Permanente and the CDC that clearly shows a very significant causal link between early trauma and future health outcomes. (<https://acestoohigh.com/research/>)

When we help our clients feel safe in a session, we are supporting the pathway that their nervous system uses to find their way back to a felt sense of safety. Each time they experience that pathway, it becomes more clear and accessible. It also allows the work we are doing in session to be most effective.

THE SCIENCE OF SAFETY

In humans and other mammals, the autonomic nervous system has evolved survival strategies that

operate involuntarily and follow a specific hierarchy based on the situation at hand and our past history.

The autonomic nervous system manages functions such as heart rate, breath, and digestion and is comprised of two branches: sympathetic and parasympathetic. These are commonly referred to as Fight/Flight and Rest and Digest. However, more recent science has expanded our understanding of the parasympathetic branch.

The culmination of decades of research by Dr. Stephen Porges, Polyvagal Theory identifies three distinct nervous system states that are recruited in varying degrees to help us survive potential threats. We refer to these as Social Engagement, Fight/Flight, and Shutdown/Freeze. The Fight/Flight response is managed by the sympathetic nervous system; the other two states are controlled by separate branches of the vagus nerve (cranial nerve X).

The hierarchy of response begins with the Social Engagement system, which allows us to identify cues of safety and cues of threat. If the nervous system detects a threat, Fight/Flight is activated, which allows us to mobilize to face or run away from that threat. If the nervous system detects an overwhelming threat, it moves into the Shutdown/Freeze response, which is characterized by immobilization. These responses are biological and involuntary; the nervous system decides what response to mount in a given situation. The autonomic nervous system detects cues of safety and threat through subconscious awareness of the environment and employs the Social Engagement system to do so. In particular, it pays attention to other people for indications of their nervous system state so it can determine whether they can be safely approached. This includes cues such as micromovements of the muscles around the eyes, tone of voice, and posture.

We can use this understanding to intentionally convey cues of safety to our clients.

HOW WE ALREADY SUPPORT SAFETY

As Energy Medicine Practitioners, we are in an optimal position to make people feel safe. Much of what is intrinsic to our work already promotes

feelings of safety - things like creating a quiet, **sacred** treatment space, making sure as practitioners that we are **grounded and centered**, and being an **empathetic witness** for our clients.

Sacred Space: Depending on the setting we work in, most of us try to create a warm, welcoming, and peaceful treatment space. We know intuitively that things like low lighting, soft music, and beautiful, sacred objects create an environment conducive to relaxation and healing. But, on a physiological level, why is that? Those elements give our nervous system the cues of safety it craves.

Grounding and Centering: We know that the state of our energy system affects the state of our client's energy system. We call this attunement or resonance. In Polyvagal terms, this is our nervous systems communicating and aligning with each other - which is called co-regulation. When we come into a session from a grounded and centered place, this is the same as being in a Social Engagement nervous system state. If we are anchored there, our client's nervous system will co-regulate with ours and help to bring them into the Social Engagement state as well. We already know this energetically, but it is physiological as well!

Empathetic Witness:

"Trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathic witness." Peter Levine

Perhaps one of the greatest gifts we give our clients is to be a witness to their experience. As said above, trauma is what we hold in the absence of an empathetic witness. Not being heard, not being believed, or feeling alone, is a major contributor to trauma. How healing does it feel when someone listens to your experience without trying to fix it, positive-think-it, or question it? To just hear, "of course you feel that way." Some people have never heard that until they walk through our door.

A FRAMEWORK FOR INTENTIONALLY CREATING MORE SAFETY

"Safety is the treatment." Dr. Stephen Porges

Deb Dana, author and leading Polyvagal-informed



therapist, offers a helpful framework for how to create more physiological safety in your client sessions:

Context, Choice and Connection.

Context refers to the environment. Where am I and what is happening around me? Creating sacred space, as we already discussed, is an example of context. We also provide context for a client by informing them of what is going to happen and why. If we have our clients sign an “Informed Consent” form, we are promoting a feeling of safety by giving them context. We tell them our qualifications, what to expect in the session, what to expect from us as a practitioner, and what their rights are as clients. We can provide further context by explaining our energy assessment, and the purpose of any practices we suggest and how they work.

Choice, of course, means giving our clients choices during the session which provides a sense of control over their experience. This might look like allowing them to choose where to sit, whether to use an eye pillow or not, or to give permission to touch or not. This also includes allowing them to set their own goals for treatment, which might not always be what we think they “should” be.

We can also ask if our client is comfortable with the environment. For example, if you’re using music in session, you might ask if they “like” it rather than if the music is “ok”. (We want it to be a positive, not just a tolerated, experience!)

Explicitly giving them permission to change their mind about any of their choices at any time supports further safety.

Connection is perhaps what we, as Energy Medicine Practitioners, are best at providing. When we greet our client with a smile, make eye contact, and use our body language and voice to convey welcome, we are signaling safety and connection. When we are a witness to our clients experience and story without judgment, we are providing connection. When we enter the sacred space of our client’s energy system with a heart-centered intention of love and healing, we are connecting on one of the deepest levels possible.

SUPPORTING A FELT SENSE OF SAFETY OUTSIDE OF SESSIONS

Embodied Scanning is the practice we teach almost every client to support a felt sense of safety in day to day life. And, in actuality, it’s not really a practice. It is how we are supposed to function, but most of us don’t.

It is important to understand WHY it works, because the practice itself is deceptively simple. We find clients are much more likely to do it if they understand how and why it works (when we provide some **context** for them).

At this moment, you are probably not consciously worried about being attacked by a wild animal. You likely know in your mind that there is nothing immediately threatening your safety. Your nervous system, however, needs sensory information in order to determine your safety and it wants to know that you are paying attention. When we spend a lot of time staring at screens, for example, we aren’t giving the nervous system what it wants in order to feel safe.

Embodied Scanning involves, first, feeling yourself in your body. “Here I am.” Secondly, use your eyes to look around and let your nervous system know that you are paying attention and are safe. Slowly scan, with a sense of curiosity and playfulness, taking in cues of safety. This is important because some of us are used to being tuned in to cues of danger most of the time.

Embodied Scanning emphasizes curiosity and playfulness, which are qualities of the Social Engagement state. Some ways to do that are to look for a certain color, shapes, the edges of things, things you find pleasing to look at, etc. It is also important to look all around you, including up above you, behind you and under things like desks and tables. You don’t need to physically move around, just be sure to take in your entire surroundings. Take note of how you were feeling before the practice and again after.

This should only take a couple of minutes, so it is easy for most people to fit into their day. It is meant to be incorporated as a way of functioning in daily life. Perhaps find a cue to remind you to do it throughout the day, such as going to the restroom, or getting up

from your computer to stretch.

We encourage you to try this practice for yourself and see what your experience with it is. We have included a transcript for you to use to guide clients through the practice. We are also including a guided audio link that you are welcome to use and share with clients.

<https://www.healingthroughthevagusnerve.com/our-favorite-nervous-system-regulation-practice>

As heart-centered practitioners, offering sacred space and attuned presence for our clients is essential to the work and supports their felt sense of safety. We can intentionally bring cues of safety into all aspects of our approach with clients, as well as support their ability to find safety outside of sessions, in order to facilitate even deeper healing.

EMBODIED SCANNING PRACTICE TRANSCRIPT

To begin, I invite you to find a comfortable seat and bring your attention inward. Let's start with the breath - bringing your awareness to that movement of the breath in your body. Noticing where that movement is without needing to change anything, just having that awareness and connection.

Then also noticing your contact with the chair, finding that connection with the earth underneath you with the support there and bringing attention down to the bottoms of your feet. Also noticing where your hands and arms are, where they are in space.


Now, in the spirit of curiosity and playfulness, bring your awareness to the environment that you're in, using your eyes to slowly look around the space that you're in, letting your eyes pause and rest on things that catch your attention. Being aware of color, textures, the edges of things, and in particular noticing the doorway of the room that you're in, noticing that edge where the wall meets the door. Also noticing if there's a window in the room and looking out beyond the window, what is outside there?

Take some time to look up and see what is above you and then engage the core muscles in your body to look behind you. So, not just turning your head but twisting at the waist to look behind you. What is behind you?

And then turning the other direction to look behind you. If there's a table in the room, you might want to look underneath that table. What's there?


One way to bring in that playful energy is to look for colors, textures or shapes. How many things can you find in the room that are round or rectangular? Or where can you find some red, for example. Then bring your attention again inward, bringing that awareness to your body and where it is and what you're feeling in your body. And if you can, hold that awareness of what's happening internally as you continue to scan the space around you, you might notice that things start to shift a bit in your body. You might notice changes in your posture and muscle tone in your body. Just take that awareness in. Then bring your attention back to your breath and take a nice breath to complete. And that is Embodied Scanning.

A few things that I want you to remember with this. It is very important that you are doing this from a place of curiosity and playfulness. These are features of that social engagement state, that state of rest, where healing happens, where we feel safe. So we want to encourage that.

And it's important to pay attention to what you're looking at. It's easy to quickly scan over a space without actually seeing what's there. So taking in and really noticing what's there. If you can do that and also maintain that awareness of your body and what's happening in your body, then you're doing it right. And it may take some practice to get to that point. 

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