



Deb Dana: Befriending our nervous system

Active Pause® July 2020



Deb Dana, LCSW, specializes in treating complex traumatic stress and lectures internationally on the ways Polyvagal Theory informs clinical interactions with trauma survivors. She is the Coordinator of the Traumatic Stress Research Consortium in the Kinsey Institute at Indiana University and the developer of the Rhythm of Regulation clinical training series. She is trained in Internal Family Systems and Sensorimotor Psychotherapy and completed the Certificate Program in Traumatic Stress Studies at the Trauma Center. Deb is the author of *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy* (Norton, 2018), co-editor with Stephen Porges, of *Clinical Applications of the Polyvagal Theory* (Norton, 2018), and is currently writing *Polyvagal Exercises for Therapists and Clients* (forthcoming from Norton).

Serge Prengel is the editor of the Active Pause® project.

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: Hi, Deb.

Deb: How are you?

Serge: So, you have spent a lot of your work paying attention to how the nervous system affects us, how we respond to situations. You've done that within the framework of therapy. Now, let's pay attention to how this kind of learning could inspire us in the way we lead our lives.

Deb: Yes, thank you for this invitation to try and translate my clinical language into everyday, ordinary user-friendly language for what I've begun to start calling just curious human beings. Because in my trainings recently, I've had many people come who just want to know about their nervous system. They just want to figure out "what is this thing that's helping navigate my life." So, what I guess I would say in the beginning is that the nervous system is the foundation for all of us. It's where all of our experience begins. And so, I think it's helpful for everyone to understand this system that's driving them in certain ways through their daily, daily lives. It's not just something that we want to pay attention to in therapy. Actually, in the therapy that I do, what I'm trying to do is help people become active operators of their own nervous systems. So I think that's really what I'm hoping: That everybody will know enough about their own nervous system and how it works so that they can then be able to befriend it and engage with it in new ways.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. And so maybe an entry point there is to say that the nervous system is going to be responding very differently when we're in a situation where we're safe, versus when there is a sense of threat.

Deb: Yes. And you know, that perception of safety then allows us to do what you and I are doing right now: To communicate, to connect, even though it's across a screen to share this experience together and be in it together.

And then, a sense of danger moves us into a state of protection and we either feel some anxiety or we feel some anger. We want to get big and stand our ground and fight back. Or we're ready to run away and get out of here. Or the other response that our brilliantly creative biology brings to us is this place of just giving up, of: I don't care. Give up. Whatever.

So, yes, depending on how we're perceiving the world at any moment, our nervous system is going to bring one of those energies to life inside us. So, those are sort of the three building blocks of our system. Right. We're in that safe one. And then the one that energized. And then the one that collapses.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. And so, so what we're talking about specifically at this point is not just one nervous system that's a monolith, but actually different circuits that respond given the nature of the situation.

Deb: Exactly. Yes. And I liked that way of saying it, that there are these circuits that respond. And we could think in this way: Given the nature of the situation is, if we look at that through the lens of our nervous system, the nervous system is listening, so to speak, to the environment and to other people and even to what's happening inside our own body and then it is making a choice around those three circuits.

And sometimes that choice is not based on what is actually happening in this moment. It's based on prior experience or something that feels familiar to a prior experience.

So, we want to remember that the nervous system takes in all this information and then creates these patterns. And then, the patterns come to life. So, part of what we do as humans as we go through life is: We try to bring some awareness to those patterns so that we can then decide: Is that pattern serving me in this moment?

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. And it's interesting. When you talk about patterns... Earlier, you talked about the nervous system choosing a pattern... What's happening is emphatically not a cognitive choice, or even a conscious choice. This is something that reacts, it's a reaction.

Deb: Right. Yes. So, that wonderful cognitive thinking part of your brain does not come along for the ride with the nervous system. Right? So, the nervous system is acting below the level of the brain and out of our awareness, in micro moment to micro moment, making these subtle changes. And then, when needed, making things change. So, at the moment, I'm feeling a little more energized as we talk. And then when you talk, I get a little quiet so I can listen. And my nervous system is doing all that for me. I don't have to decide to do that. My nervous system is helping me do that. And, if something really big happened in this space that I'm sitting in, or on your end that I noticed, my nervous system would then make a big response to that.

Serge: As you're, as you're talking, I've just noticed the gestures. You made some gestures that are like closing in. You just had a gesture like that. So, it's interesting. What we're relating is that the nervous system is not just an abstraction, is not just some kind of computer language that's giving directions, but it's related to the way our body itself is manifesting this.

Deb: Yeah. Yes, absolutely. So if we think about, a sudden shock, or a sudden, unpredictable something happened, we might do this sort of "Ah," or we might do this collapse. Either one is available to our nervous system. And again, we don't get to choose which we do. Right? The nervous system makes the choice for us. So sometimes we will fight or run away. And, other times, we will do that sort of collapse: disappear, become invisible.

Serge: I want to highlight, again, something that... As you're talking about this, your whole body is expressing it. And so, for instance, at some point, when you were talking about the surprise, you had the body language of it, including the eyes opening up, the torso coming up... And so, there's a whole. It's a whole organism response.

Deb: Exactly. Exactly. And when you think about the coming up like that, and the shoulders going up, the eyes open... That is that part of that circuit in your nervous system that mobilizes you in that way and gets you ready. It's a system of action taking, and you could feel it when it happens. And then the other one, the system of disappearing: Even as I talk about it, you can feel it, right? And I can feel the bit of collapse and I get quiet and...

Serge: Yeah. And the tone of your voice... and so, so you're demonstrating, when we're talking about it, that whole-body, whole-organism reaction to the event. Having the kind of energy to face the event, either in fighting or running away... Or the defeat, and the collapse that comes with it.

Deb: Right. Which is also a very creative, biological response. We don't preference one of those for the others. We want to make sure we say that the fight or flight or the collapse... One is not better than the other. They're just different, and the nervous system makes the choice, so to speak, about the one that it feels is going to serve our survival in this moment.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So, this is not something that we look at like a theater critic and say, "Right. Played well," or a sports reviewer...

Deb: Right. Yes. That's our brain that wants to do that. We humans want to make meaning and find motivation, and all of that, which is a lovely thing, you know, a lovely human thing to be able to do. However, when you're talking about the nervous system, the nervous system is simply taking an action in order to make sure you survive so that you can, then, make another choice.

Serge: Yeah. So, we've talked about the two systems that are involved in threat. There's that fight / flight system that mobilizes energy. When that doesn't work, that collapse. And there's also, of course, a part of the nervous system when we are safe enough so that these are challenges as opposed to threats.

Deb: Exactly. Exactly. Yes. That's a great way to put it. And that's this lovely social engagement system that comes online, that allows us to be connected and talk together, and feel as if we're seeing and hearing and being with each other. That system also allows us to be with ourselves in that way, to really feel embodied and connected and safely here. And it allows us to move through the world, to connect with the world in that way, and connect with spirit. So that third circuit, that one of connection and safety, brings real richness to our everyday experience.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. And so, this is something that's possible when there is some degree of safety. As you point out this social engagement is connection with others, connection with the challenges in the world, and connection with oneself...

Deb: Yeah. Yeah. And it's this lovely circuit of safety... You know, we even call it that, the safety circuit. It is the newest part of our human nervous system. And so, I think, I really believe that the nervous system has this inherent longing to be there. And I call it our home. It's our nervous system

home in this place of safety and connection. And then, we get, we get pulled away from our home. But when you think about it as home: Your nervous system knows how to find the way back home. So, I'd like us to understand that there's an inherent wisdom inside. So, even when we get pulled to the system of mobilization or the system of collapse, there's a wisdom in that for the nervous system. And then, when the challenge is over, when the threat is resolved, the nervous system knows how to find his way back to safety and connection.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So, this is certainly not a recommendation to try and lead our lives from some preconceived notion of what we should be. But, navigating, recognizing the wisdom of the nervous system and dancing with it, adapting to it.

Deb: Yeah, it's a lovely way of saying it. Dancing thing with it, nice. I call it befriending. We befriend our nervous system. And the lovely thing about making a friend is that you don't just make a friend in one moment. Right? You make a friend, you begin a friendship, you work at that friendship, you deepen the friendship, you stay in that friendship.

And that's really what we need to do with our nervous system. We don't just say, "Oh, that's how it works, and then, okay." We really go be with it, befriend it. We know that it's in a dance with us. It's a lovely way to think about it. And then, at the moment, your nervous system and my nervous system are dancing together. So that's that connection that happens.

Serge: And so, with that a concept of befriending the nervous system, comes the idea of bringing our curiosity to noticing how it works to pay attention to it. And to use these three circuits that we talked about... To be more curious about how they manifest in our lives so that we can better know our "friend" better.

Deb: Yes. Exactly. And I love what you said, curiosity, to be curious about... Because curiosity is only available to us if we have a bit of that safety and connection alive in our system. If some of that energy is active in our system, then we can be curious. But when we get pulled into that mobilized fight or flight, or the shutdown collapse, we also lose access to curiosity. So it's important to begin to build these pathways to friendship, when we can feel enough safety and connection to bring curiosity to: "Huh, what happens when I go to this fight or flight place? What are some of the things that trigger that? What happens when I go into that collapse? That's interesting." We can be interested and curious when we go to, and be with, and don't get hijacked, by one of those states.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So, curiosity is a specific attribute of that mindful social engagement circuit. And there is also some kind of bi-directional effect, to the extent that, when we're able to start having some curiosity, then we can grow the mindful part. And not drown into the reactivity or the collapse, but have a little bit more of a handle on it

Deb: yeah. I like how you put that as well. I call it having a summary, an anchor in that place of safety, connection and curiosity. And, as long as we know that we are anchored there or tethered to that place, we can then go be with the other places because we have this. This way, we know the pathway, we're either connected to it....

You know, I sometimes imagine a true rope that is in that place, and then I go wander off and find my way home. Somebody said it's like Hansel and Gretel leaving breadcrumbs. I like that. I like the rope. I'm tying a rope and then I'm going off, and I'm coming back.

Serge: What I like about the idea of the tether, or an anchor, is that there is a place that is stable and that you have a... It's not even an imaginary connection. You have that rope tying you there. So, at any time you can feel it and if you really need... So, even just feeling it, it reminds you that it exists.

Deb: Exactly. And bringing it alive in imagery is really a helpful thing. Because once you have this image of, "Ooh, there's the rope" and you give it color, give it form, give it texture, all of that... Then, when you feel, "Oh, I'm losing my grip" or "I'm being pulled into that place of drowning" and one of those other two states, you can go, "Oh, but I have a rope." And you bring it alive in your system response by reminding you of some of that energy, with just really helpful.

Serge: Yeah, I love that. I love that image. So, that sense of, we're in that area of... we're using the circumstances of everyday life to explore, to befriend the nervous system, our friend, and its different states. At times, we're going to be pulled into the more difficult parts, into the fight / flight into, into the collapse. But at any time, we keep remembering that we have that rope attached. And tugging it, being able to pull back a little more, and we're remembering we have that.

Deb: Right. And as soon as we remember we have it, then a little bit more of it comes alive. It's a fascinating sort of loop that we start doing. We remember that we have it and then we have a little more, then we have a little more, and a little more. And, once you've done that a few times, your system begins to remember, on its own, in a stronger way. So, the more you bring that image to life and use it, the stronger that pathway becomes.

And so then, I find that, "Oh, I don't need to remember so often, my system just remembers it's attached to that" and I can go have more capacity to be curious about those other states.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. And so, the other states... exploring these, maybe... Does it help to, again, re-describe what the physical experience of each of these states is.?

Deb: Sure. Yeah. So let's start with the physical experience, and the story that comes from each of these states, because it's not only your physiology. Your brain makes up a story that is coming from that state. So, let's start with that place of safety and connection where we're going to tie our rope, and feel what that's like in the body. It's sort of a sense of organization, of integration, a feeling in my body, of feeling my place in the world. Breath is easy. Heart rate is fairly regulated. My thoughts are ones about being safe in the world, or safe enough to move through the world. I can be curious. I have access to lots of options, and problem-solving, and playfulness, and all of those things. So this place of being anchored in safety and connection is really a place of opportunity. And the story is one of safety and connection.

Serge: I like that piece, because, as you're describing it this way, the image that comes to mind is the image of a little kid holding the parent's hand. We talked about being connected to the anchor or that rope, the connection to the anchor... And so, the image of the kid holding the parent's hand goes with the idea of the anchor. It is related to the notion of connection. And connection and safety go hand in hand.

Deb: Absolutely. That's beautiful. Yeah. And, as with the little kid and the parents, they go away and come back, and go and come back, and they find their way back to the parent and the hand, which is that same sense of... we find our way back to this place for ourselves.

Yeah. Yeah. So, if we remember that we can always find our way back there, and that rope is there for us, and we move into some of that energy of fight and flight... we can begin to feel what that

feels like in the body. Usually, you'll feel some energy rising. There's some sort of this that goes on, there's a flood of energy. It feels too much. It's hard to sit still. It's hard to stay focused. It's hard to, to think straight, because once you've left that place of safety and connection and gone to this place of fight / flight, your brain is slowing down, shutting down, not working in a way to support you. You can't problem solve in this place. You can simply act or react probably more in this place.

And the story here is one of danger. And so, rather than connection, which is a lovely part of the first state we were talking about, in this state, everybody seems to be dangerous to me. So you're no longer my friend, you're now in the category of enemy, or dangerous, or unfriendly. And so, the story's one of danger, and the world being a place that I have to fight my way through. It is not accepting. It is not an easy place to be. You can really feel that when we talk about it.

And then, that third state, the state of disappearing or collapsing has a very different physical manifestation. It's that place of "There's not enough energy in my system." When I collapse, I don't have the energy to connect. So, whereas in the first one, I like being with you and in the second one, you feel dangerous to me, in this third state you don't exist. I'm just floating on my own in the world and you don't exist. And I can't find my way and I'm lost and abandoned. And you can feel that in your body, that sort of emptiness. And you can feel the story is one of being abandoned and lost.

Serge: Yeah. And so, to put in the concept of connection or engagement... In the first one, obviously, there is a connection and the connection is positive, and there's a sense that the other is support. In the second one, the connection is that the other is a threat, but there's still energy because there is engagement. So, there is a threat, but there is the possibility to do something about it, either overcoming it or running away.

And, when that has not worked, then all is lost. And then, there is no more connection because, at that point, you're lost.

Deb: Right, right. Yes. Yes. That's a great way to put it. All is lost yeah. And you can feel it. When you say those words, can't you feel that coming alive in your body?

Serge: It's almost impossible to say it without feeling a sense of despair.

Deb: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah. So, let's come back to that first place, the place to safety and connection. And what would you say here to bring that alive? What would be your statement?

Serge: I find it easier to find the words from the parent figure to say, "It's going to be alright.", That sense of voicing the reassurance. So, in other words, it's not that there is no threat, but there is presence of reassurance.

Deb: Right. Right. We have resources in order to deal with whatever comes along. So it'll be okay. I like that: All is lost down there. It'll be okay here.

And what would your sympathetic be?

Serge: With a fight or flight, a sense? I'm not sure. I don't find words, but I find it an energy state. I find the energy that wants to come up. And so, if I follow that energy, some of the words that come are like: "Make my day." So that's obviously for the fight mode. It's interesting that it comes following the energy, as opposed to looking for words per se.

Deb: Yeah. Yeah. And that's your nervous system. That's your body showing you the way. That's what we get when we befriend the nervous system. It shows us the way, rather than the brain trying

to figure it out and come up with all this. When you follow the energy, when you follow your nervous system, then it takes you where you need to go. Absolutely.

Serge: So, that feels nice as a possible conclusion. Is that sense of that? What we've been talking about is that sense of how the nervous system shows us the way of how we are. Obviously, sometimes it's not appropriate for modern life, but at least, if we know that, then we can do something about it.

Deb: Right. And, I think I might even say that it's not needed in this moment, but the nervous system hasn't quite caught up to some of the changes that may have happened in my life. So it's working on a past template.

So, it may be that whatever's happening in this moment 10 years ago would have been a very dangerous thing for me. But, in this moment now, it's not. So, as we get to know our nervous system and befriend it, and it shows us the way, we also help it update and see the world that we're living in now.

Serge: Yeah. Yeah. So that latency effect of still reacting to the past, and giving it a chance to bring it to the moment.

Deb: It's a lovely way to put it, bring it to the moment, invite it into this moment. Yes.

Serge: Does it feel right to end here? Or is there something you might want to add?

Deb: This has been a really lovely dance. It's been lovely to explore with you, to find words that honor the nervous system in a way that feels... in everyday language. It felt very alive. So I thank you for that.

Serge: Thank you, Deb.

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