

Riding the wave: Helping clients live in sustainable nervous system functioning

We live in an ocean of waves — light waves, sound waves, the radio waves on which our devices interface. Our bodies also fluctuate in wavelike ways. The autonomic nervous system offers daily highs and lows — periods of activity and rest. When we are in touch with our bodies, we notice periods in which the world intrigues us, and we venture out to engage with people and things. After a bit, we feel the need to refuel and rest. After resting and digesting, we feel the next wave of interest to get back to our projects.

Counselors work with far more than just the mind and brain. All counseling constantly impacts the body — and the body affects our thoughts and the nature of our emotions. One place to begin understanding this relationship is with a more nuanced look at the autonomic nervous system. Counselors can use the metaphor of ocean waves to help clients train to achieve more sustainable nervous system functioning. The wave metaphor resonates with us because it fits aspects of modern reality.

In our high-tech world, we feel the waves more intensely than ever before. The sights and sounds of technology operate at the same pace 24/7. Night can feel very similar to day. Sleep can be difficult, and then we feel tired during the day.

We no longer feel like we are out beyond the breakers — out in the ocean’s rolling swells and troughs of day-to-day autonomic functioning. We instead feel like we are in the fast breakers that possess the power to toss us against the shore. Despite our efforts to keep our rafts out lazily dancing in the rolling waves, our fast-paced world threatens to suck us toward the breaking point. We can feel pulled into waves that flip our rafts and drag us across the sand.

Take a look at the photos below and on the following page. They depict two different types of wavelike experiences. Note the sensations in your body as you look at the two photos.

As you look at the image of the crashing wave below (Figure 1), do the sensations in your body match the red line of the figure next to the photo?

Now look at the image of rippling waves on page 17 (Figure 2). Do the sensations in your body match the rolling ups and downs of the figure beside the photo? Perhaps you feel a sense of confidence that you can roll with the activities of your day?

All of us face crisis at some point. It might be an automobile accident, a serious illness, the loss of a loved one or any variety of possible traumas. Less significant situations can also feel like powerful crises. Think of a school deadline that is essential to obtaining a passing grade or a promotion that produces such anxiety that you cannot think straight.

How does one muster enough willpower, strength and resilience to ride challenging waves? What actually constitutes success? We would like to help our clients smooth out their lives and live in the rolling waves where they can feel the messages of their bodies calling them to rest and refuel.

Let’s look to football for a moment. Some quarterbacks appear better able than others to cope with “crisis” (Tom

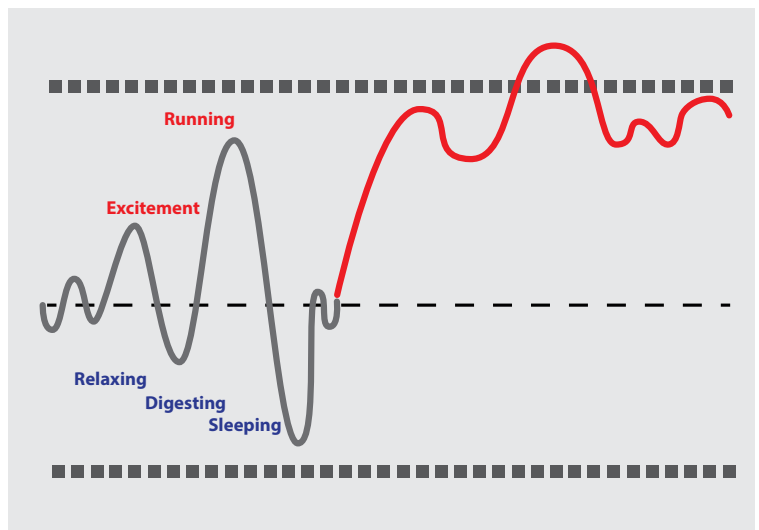


Figure 1: The crisis wave

Brady of the New England Patriots might serve as a popular example). In the last two minutes of a game and with their team behind, these quarterbacks are able to keep their wits about them and consistently pull their team together for the win. What might be going on in their bodies that provides for this success? Have they discovered a kind of functioning that keeps them in the swells and away from the breaking point?

Nervous system functioning

Our perceptual senses (smell, sight, hearing, touch, taste) bring us to the immediate situation. Sensory information then gets passed on to the autonomic nervous system and its two parts, the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS).

The SNS activates the body. Daily, in the rolling swells, the SNS secretes small amounts of a neurotransmitter called noradrenaline and varying amounts of cortisol — more in the morning and declining throughout the day. In crisis, when the swells break, the SNS delivers additional noradrenaline plus the more powerful adrenaline and needed cortisol. This provides more blood pressure and a faster heartbeat than would be needed on a typical daily basis.

When we sense life-threatening danger, we want this reaction that we call fight-or-flight to create superhuman functioning that allows us either to fight or to flee. However, using fight-or-flight for activation on a daily basis is unsustainable, leading to dysfunction and

disease. For daily living, we want to ride the routine waves of highs and lows that are provided naturally by the autonomic nervous system.

Is the quarterback who keeps his cool able to stay in day-to-day noradrenaline activation and out of the adrenaline/cortisol reaction we call fight-or-flight? Is it possible to train our bodies to maintain day-to-day functioning during an intense activity that is only a game?

The existential therapy theorist Viktor Frankl suggested that the meaning we assign to things has powerful effects on our state of being. Might it be possible for humans to maintain a perspective that allows our SNS to stay in day-to-day activation and stay out of what some call our stress response?

There is a great deal being said about the negative effects of stress. Unfortunately, some writers and presenters are creating confusion. As we learn more nuanced information about the role of the PNS, it is being hailed while the SNS gets disparaged as a mechanism of nonthinking anger or full retreat.

The role of the vagus nerve and social engagement

In 2009, scientist Stephen Porges explored the nuanced nervous system functioning that occurs when we sense safety and how it differs from what occurs when we face life-threatening danger. He called the functioning that happens when we feel safe our *social engagement system functioning*.

Allen Ivey (a counseling educator and co-author of this article) identified the importance of empathetic connection many years ago in the development of basic counseling skills. Porges' ideas around the role of a sense of safety in our nervous system functioning resonates with counselors because of our examination of the empathetic relationship. We know that feeling heard and understood is key to counseling's effectiveness.

As counselors provide an atmosphere of safety, clients are able to reach out and explore issues more calmly and securely. This client experience can train greater amounts of day-to-day sympathetic use and less fight-or-flight, leading to what John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth named and described as *positive attachment*.

Porges points to the myelinated (sheathed or coated) ventral (front) branch of the vagus nerve as the part of the body that creates social engagement system functioning, enabling our bodily and mental feelings of safety. According to Porges, the myelinated ventral branch of the vagus nerve creates nuanced regulation of activation.

Counseling has a long history of focus on relational engagement. Therefore, counselors might be confused by Porges' term, *social engagement system*, especially when family systems theories define systems as interactions between people. Porges is instead identifying an internal biological system of functioning that is part of our autonomic nervous system. When we sense safety, the myelinated ventral branch of the vagus nerve works

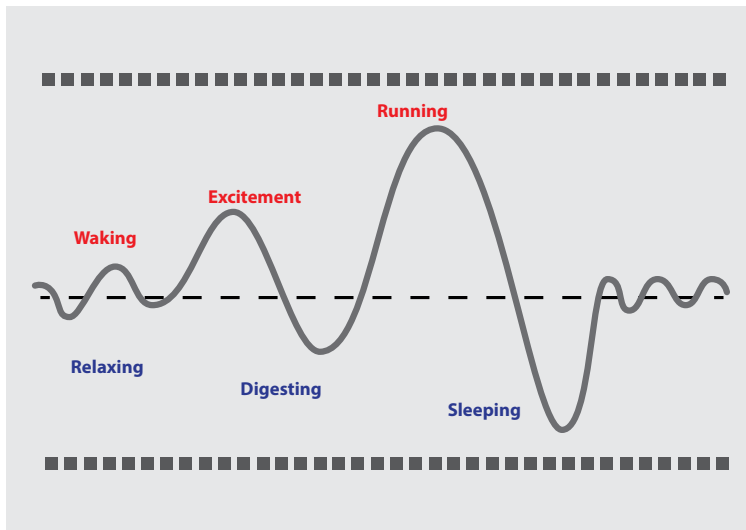


Figure 2: The autonomic nervous system's daily waves

with the day-to-day SNS to create activity and with the unmyelinated dorsal vagal branch to support digestion and rest that is replenishing.

Porges chose the name social engagement system for the internal biological system that is part of the autonomic nervous system for two reasons:

1) The myelinated ventral vagal nerve controls the body parts we use for communicating, including our ears, eyes, facial muscles, the muscles used to turn our heads and the muscles used in vocal patterning.

2) Myelinated ventral vagal nerve functioning is first trained in relationship with our primary caregivers.

Attending to ourselves

If we have experiences that train myelinated ventral vagal functioning early in our lives, as adults we can control our nervous system functioning through our relationship with ourselves, in a variety of ways that counselors recognize. For instance, we use our inner parent/adult to manage our inner child (in the words of transactional analysis), use our “core self” to manage our “parts” (in internal family systems terms) and focus on the meaning we assign to things (as existential theorists say). If this training did not occur early in life, the attending behavior of the microskills system — focusing on signals from body language, voice quality and facial expressions — offers reparative experiences.

Through training, we can develop a greater ability to tolerate the swells. For an example, let’s return to football. The quarterbacks who are able to keep their wits about them — to think under pressure and encourage teamwork — have trained their myelinated ventral vagal nerve functioning. These athletes can sense that the “crisis” in a football game — namely, their team being behind in the final two minutes — is not life-threatening, and therefore they display expert physical ability, which is still under control. Meanwhile, the athletes on the other team may “lose it,” metaphorically and physically. When they become ruled by out-of-control fight-or-flight, it is likely to lead to errors and the loss of the game.

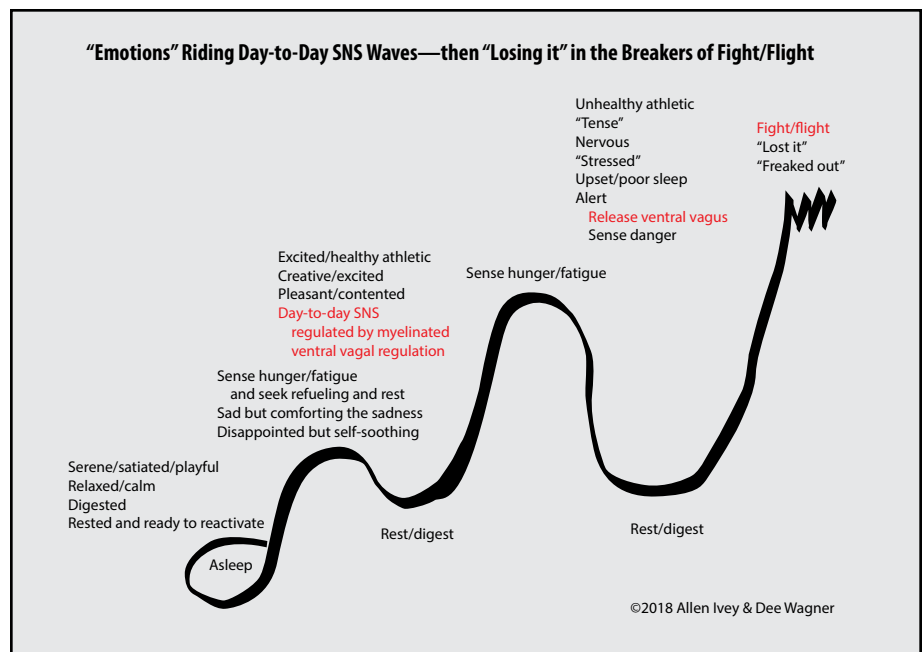


Figure 3: This image provides a picture of emotions as they relate to the sensations of day-to-day SNS regulated by the myelinated branch of the vagus and then moving into fight-or-flight.

Fight-or-flight confusion

Unfortunately, in their attempt to offer biologically based guidance for healthy management of modern-day life, even scientists have used the descriptor fight-or-flight as if it is the only type of activation in our SNS. That oversimplification can leave counselors without the information and skills needed to help clients train their bodies to ride the waves of activation that exist naturally as part of day-to-day autonomic functioning.

Because some people use fight-or-flight as their only source of activation, counselors can benefit from the knowledge that another type of SNS activation exists. When our clients use phrases such as “I lost it,” “I flipped my lid” or “I blew my top,” they are indicating some ability to sense when their bodies shoot off the chemical cocktail that creates fight-or-flight. Knowing about the possibility of the maturely trained day-to-day SNS, which can be quickly downregulated by the myelinated ventral branch of the vagus nerve, helps counselors guide their clients out of the breakers created by fight-or-flight and back into living in the autonomic highs and lows.

When we train our bodies to utilize day-to-day activation as our source of energy for daily tasks, we are more likely to, as the song goes, whistle while we

work. Fight-or-flight, on the other hand, disconnects executive functioning. In times of life-threatening danger, we want to be without thought — thus, the stories we occasionally hear of people single-handedly lifting cars off of trapped bodies. If we had our evaluative thinking engaged in such situations, we probably would talk ourselves out of trying to lift an object much heavier than we normally could lift. So, the fight-or-flight pattern has positive aspects that are necessary for survival of the species. However, fight-or-flight is not sustainable as a daily coping strategy.

Because fight-or-flight signals life-threatening danger, we can lose social consciousness. After our clients talk about losing their cool, they often admit to saying things that they regret to friends and family. We often hear confessions such as “I can’t believe I did that” or “I treated my colleague like dirt.” Fight-or-flight creates the opposite of team-building actions. It stirs what we often call dog-eat-dog behavior.

Counselors see variations of this pattern in clients with impulse-control issues. They are able to think clearly after the fact, but the damage has already been done. Figure 3 (above) provides a picture of emotions as they relate to the sensations of day-to-day SNS regulated by the myelinated branch of the vagus and then moving into fight-or-flight.

Using the wave metaphor with clients

When we train our ability to ride the day-to-day SNS to highly active levels that can be quickly downregulated by the myelinated ventral branch of the vagus, we can recognize when others are in dangerous nervous system functioning and protect against going into fight-or-flight ourselves.

When we operate out of active, empathetic attending skills, our bodies can cue us about our need to rest and refuel. We feel like we are in a cozy raft out on the ocean and away from the breakers. We sense the value of stopping external motion to internally digest all the sensations — sounds, smells, sights, tastes and feel — of the preceding more active period.

When riding the built-in waves of active and passive, we are in tune with our bodies — feeling hunger and fullness, the desire to use our muscles to move our bones and the urge to stretch. When we sense we are safe, we do not have to create activity. Activity creates itself. We have sustainable nervous system functioning.

Counselors can use the metaphor of riding ocean waves to help clients recognize when they are activating from day-to-day SNS that can be quickly downregulated by the myelinated ventral branch of the vagus. The waves of day-to-day activation, which are followed by periods of rest and refueling, do not break like waves at the shore. In fact, counselors can use the metaphor of breaking waves to help clients begin to recognize when their bodies have shot off the fight-or-flight cocktail.

We want to have empathy even (perhaps especially) when lives are at stake. When we train our bodies to ride the wave of day-to-day SNS to greater and greater heights without letting the wave break, we are able to keep our wits about us and maintain a sense of empathy for others. Remaining levelheaded and empathetic is key in social justice. It also creates grounding when engaging with social media. We can feel when it is time to move our bodies and, alternately, when it is time to sink into rest and refueling. Functioning becomes sustainable. ♦

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