

Using new nervous system science to help clients with their digital dating experiences

Not much guidance currently exists for counselors who want to help clients with the rapidly changing overlap of technology and romance. This complex combination creates a highly electric mix that can fire up our nervous systems, thrilling us to the point of anxiety and chilling us to the point of depression.

Our expanded understanding of nervous system functioning illuminates a more nuanced interplay of systems than we were aware of previously. Recent research explores the relational aspects of nervous system functioning and, although further research needs to be done, current understandings suggest a map that counselors can consult to help clients with their technology use, their romantic relationships and the ways that technology and romance combine. Therapists are seeing new types of dating dances, ranging from the ways that texting changes romantic communication to the ease with which technology facilitates connections between those who are merely looking to “hook up.”

Counselors can use nervous system knowledge to help clients navigate these evolving matchmaking methods. Sexuality deserves privacy, but if clients sense that counselors don't understand the digital dating phenomenon, they may feel the need to keep their experiences secret. Clients may even feel ashamed about their interests, and shame can feed addictive tendencies. When counselors understand their clients' digital dating explorations, what is new can be sorted

from what is age-old, and counselors can find ways to use tried-and-true techniques with the new material.

Effects of technology on the body

Our bodies are designed to react to sensation. Just like other mammals, we pay close attention to sudden movements and sounds that might alert us to the arrival of a predator. The lights and sounds of our devices signal our bodies in similar ways. We become alert to these cues from our environment in addition to paying close attention to cues passed from one individual to the next through social media. Technology offers new ways to stay connected to networks of people, but social media feeds that are often full of dramatized debates can leave us wondering whose signals we should trust.

With technology's constantly available sensation, information and potential for interaction, if we are not good at managing how we take in stimulation, we can easily become overwhelmed and lose presence. We can learn to pull a certain amount of our aliveness out of our bodies to send an avatar of ourselves into potentially dangerous situations.

Technology creates different options for controlling the interactions within our relationships. With texting, we can space out our comments over longer periods of time than is generally accepted in phone conversations or in person. We can take in words alone when texting, with no vocal inflection other than what we imagine based on hieroglyphic emojis. If we choose a traditional phone call, we are opting to

tune in specifically to vocal patterning, eliminating the face-to-face interaction that many phones now offer as an option.

When we engage in face-to-face interactions over a device, we have more of the verbal and nonverbal communication elements but not all of them. With a screen between us, we cannot touch each other. With distance communication, we lose the animal opportunity to smell, so we cannot *sniff out a situation*, but we do have the power — literally *in our hands* and *at our fingertips* — to control many interactive elements.

Usually, when we feel safe, we do not need constant engagement with others. We trust that we can take a break from the stimulation of connection to process that stimulation and rest. However, the constant flow of information that technology offers can stir in our bodies fears of disconnection from the group, like when animals sleep lightly because they detect a predator roaming in the vicinity. The predator may move on, so it is not yet time to flee — but that time could come later in the night, so everyone *sleeps with one eye open*. Should the alarm sound, bodies are ready to shoot into fight-or-flight. This state, provided by the sympathetic nervous system, creates bursts of speed, reaction without thought and energy that can exhaust the system until the body has ample time to recover.

Social engagement system biology

For some time, we have known that our nervous system is affected by both sympathetic responses and

parasympathetic responses. Sympathetic responses activate; parasympathetic responses calm. With the new science, we now recognize that the sympathetic nervous system offers us a type of day-to-day activation in addition to the active state we call fight-or-flight. This day-to-day activation can easily be regulated by one part of the parasympathetic system, giving us flexible and sustainable energy. This day-to-day active state is part of what scientist Stephen Porges calls our social engagement system.

Our fight-or-flight response is difficult to regulate and interferes with rational thought because it is designed for those treacherous situations when a quick reflexive reaction is desirable. Because the fight-or-flight response exhausts our bodies for a substantial period of time, it is preferable that we stay in the day-to-day active state that allows us to maintain our executive functioning.

Porges determined that the vagus nerve, which controls the parasympathetic nervous system, affects our overall activation in three different ways. Two of those ways are part of the social engagement system:

- ❖ The ventral (front) vagal branch of the vagus nerve provides nuanced regulation of the day-to-day type of sympathetic activation.
- ❖ The dorsal (rear) branch of the vagus nerve creates rest and digestion when there is a sense of safety.

Shutdown

The third way the parasympathetic nervous system affects activation is when we sense life-threatening danger and the dorsal branch of the vagus nerve shuts the body down. When we sense danger but there is no clear predator to fight or way to flee quickly, we shut down. Ultimately, shutdown makes death less painful.

Opossums use shutdown to fool predators into abandoning the chase. In humans, shutdown can cause fainting, which allows a kind of body reset that preserves brain functioning. It also creates the state we call dissociation. We recognize that lack of embodiment in mindless scrolling on our phones, binge-watching shows, binge-playing of games and binge-seeking of sex not satisfied by orgasm.

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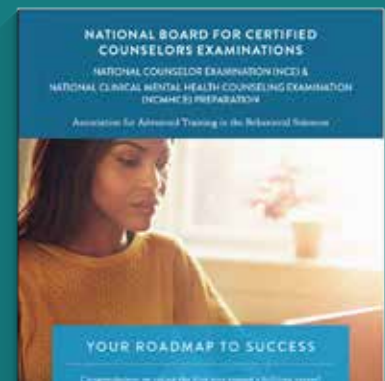


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Longtime trauma expert Peter Levine, who wrote *Waking the Tiger* and *Trauma and Memory*, among many other books, helps us understand that our bodies are wired to come out of shutdown by going into fight-or-flight. If an opossum sees a path for escape from a predator that has been distracted by its feigning, it needs the burst of speed that fight-or-flight provides.

Like opossums, we startle out of shutdown. We awaken ourselves suddenly from technological fogs, freaked out by what we may have missed. If the feeling that sent us into our mindless scrolling returns to overwhelm us, we are likely to drift back into shutdown with more scrolling or maybe mindless eating. We can repeat this bouncing back-and-forth between fight-or-flight startles and shutdown fogs over and over again, particularly if we do not understand what is happening in our nervous system functioning.

When we understand that social engagement system responses come out of a separate way of functioning than do those responses designed for life-threatening danger, we can learn to expect the fight-or-flight response that startles us awake from shutdown. Recognizing the pattern, we can find ways to ground anxious fight-or-flight energy into effective actions such as mowing the lawn, sweeping the floor or pushing into a downward-facing dog yoga pose.

Nervous system functioning and attachment styles

The idea of attachment styles comes from the work of developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth, who recognized that we all fall into two general categories when it comes to how we do relationships. We tend to have either what she called a secure attachment style or an insecure attachment style. In the late 1980s, Cindy Hazan and Phillip Shaver studied Ainsworth's attachment styles as they relate to romantic relationships. Although Ainsworth's names for types of insecure attachment styles have evolved over the years, most adult attachment theorists now focus on two insecure attachment styles — anxious insecure and avoidant insecure.

The 21st-century attachment research of Mario Mikulincer, Phillip Shaver and others suggests that people with secure attachment styles are likely to have more maturely functioning social engagement systems than do those individuals with insecure attachment styles. The frantic behavior observed among people with anxious attachment styles suggests that they flip quickly into fight-or-flight. The distancing behavior observed in those with avoidant attachment styles suggests some version of shutdown because self-reliant coping strategies are designed to sidestep activation experienced during interaction with others.

Those with avoidant attachment styles usually can find relief in the control

of sensation afforded by technological communication. However, until technological etiquette becomes more clearly defined, we can all experience sudden panicky fear that we have violated some unfamiliar protocol. Those with anxious attachment styles either become frenzied or freeze, whereas those with avoidant attachment styles sink into more and more dissociative behaviors.

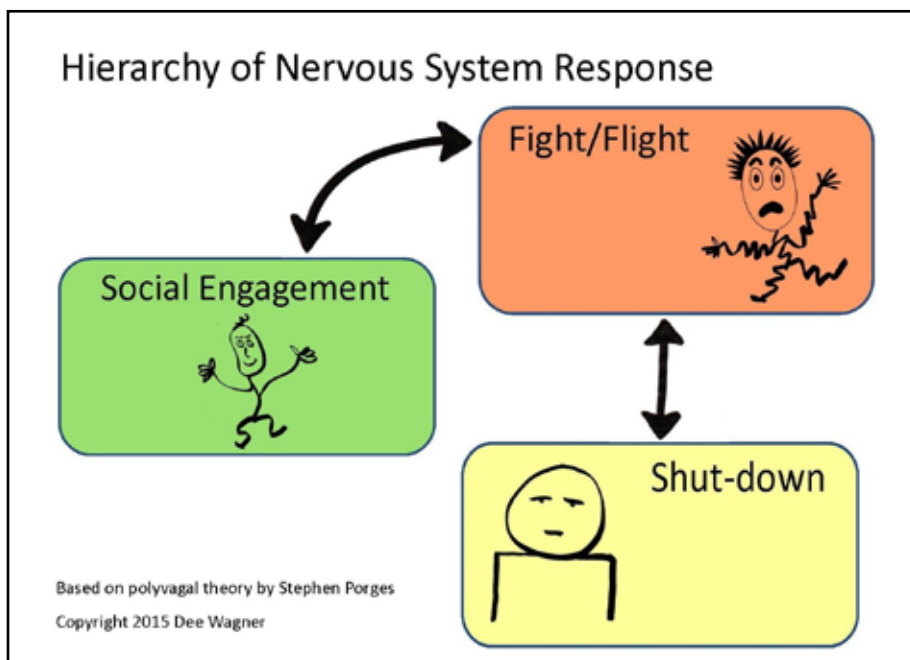
To summarize, in our relationships with people (and with our devices):

- ❖ Those with secure attachment styles connect without feeling overwhelmed and disconnect without feeling distressed.
- ❖ Those with anxious insecure attachment styles swing into distress easily when connecting and disconnecting.
- ❖ Those with avoidant attachment styles appear invulnerable to the stimulation of connection but actually feel so very distressed by the stimulation of connection that they train themselves not to be present.

Training more effective nervous system functioning

Social engagement system functioning is trained through peek-a-boo-type interactions that ideally begin in infancy. First, we connect with someone important. Then, we lose sight of this person, which puts us on the edge of shooting into fight-or-flight. If we tolerate the separation and find ourselves playfully reconnected before we shoot into fight-or-flight, we learn to maintain social engagement system functioning during times of uncertainty, hence broadening our window of distress tolerance. When the interaction feels playful, we can learn to manage greater amounts of time in that place of uncertainty because we sense that all will be well eventually.

Technology offers an abundance of options for romantic connections that can feel very empowering. With the internet, we can find possible romantic partners with amazingly few keystrokes. We can imagine that it is possible to order up the partner of our dreams by creating an online dating profile that describes what we seek. When we make snap judgments by swiping pictures of potential candidates right or left on the basis of looks alone, the movement itself gives us a sense of power.



Because we can feel like we have more control than we do, digital peek-a-boo can trip us up. When we connect with a potential partner and that partner disappears (or the partner has been perceived to disappear), we are likely to react like the infants in Edward Tronick's still-face experiments if we have an insecure attachment style.


In the late 1970s, Tronick conducted a series of experiments in which he would have a baby and its mother connect. Then the mother would assume flat affect, or go still-faced. The results showed that after a period of increasingly distressed attempts to call their mothers back into connection, the babies would shut down. The babies would get calm. Their eyes would wander listlessly around the room without connecting to any particular visual stimulus.

Today, we might sense some nagging similarity between the wandering eye movement of a baby in the still-face experiments and the channel surfing of a couch potato. There is potential for connection in both people, but fight-or-flight must be processed before it is possible to find social engagement. As counselors recognize the difference between social engagement system biology and the reactions designed for life-threatening danger — fight-or-flight and shutdown — we become capable of helping clients use their digital dating to train more mature nervous system functioning.

How do we help clients use their digital dating experiences to train nervous system functioning? By breaking down digital dating interactions into baby steps — pun intended.

Mindfulness moments

When counselors express knowledgeable interest in clients' digital dating, clients risk sharing details of their experiences. As clients share, counselors can look for



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the anxiousness of fight-or-flight and the dissociative avoidance of shutdown. We can normalize the role that technology plays in activating our nervous systems.

Our clients can begin to notice how they become disembodied and overwhelmed. When clients recognize shutdown and the startle of fight-or-flight that is wired into them when they wake up from

shutdown, they are much less likely to find themselves lost in mindless behaviors. We can then guide our clients to find embodiment that is manageable by helping them become more mindful during small, interactive segments of digital dating experiences. For instance, a counselor might ask and observe:

- ❖ As you search for a picture of yourself to post, what do you find yourself thinking?
- ❖ What happened in your body when you didn't see a response in your inbox?
- ❖ As you described signing up for that site, it looked like you stopped breathing.
- ❖ You're talking about quite a few encounters with quite a few people, but I don't see you having many feelings about any of it. Are you having trouble staying present?
- ❖ Might there be a way to help yourself feel more playful about these text exchanges?
- ❖ Is there any way that when those people don't do what they say they are going to do, that you could see that as good information?

We can also demonstrate awareness of energetic dances within the counseling relationship, both in person and during any technological communication. As clients recognize these energetic dances, they can transfer that mindfulness to their romantic encounters, even when those relationships are electrified by technology.

No quick fix

When we feel fight-or-flight sensations, our inner animals look for the fastest escape from danger — a quick fix. Fight-

or-flight exists in us for life-threatening situations in which a predator is clearly present to fight or to flee. These days, however, the dangers are unclear. Most solutions to dangerous problems require lengthy, nuanced navigation. For these scenarios, we are better served by the nervous system functioning that is sustainable — our social engagement systems.

Technology creates a web of connections that could help us feel socially engaged, but the bells, whistles and newly forming social protocol can stir so much ineffective fight-or-flight response that we sink quickly into shutdown. We may take advantage of digital dating options to seek sexual connections, but if we are disembodied, the sex can take on addictive patterns that trade short-term ease for long-term anxiety.

Counselors can use the new nervous system information to help clients recognize what is happening in their bodies and to help them become more mindful — and, eventually, more present — in their actions. By using all of the romantic connection opportunities now available through technology, counselors can also help clients train their nervous system functioning to be more effective. ❖

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