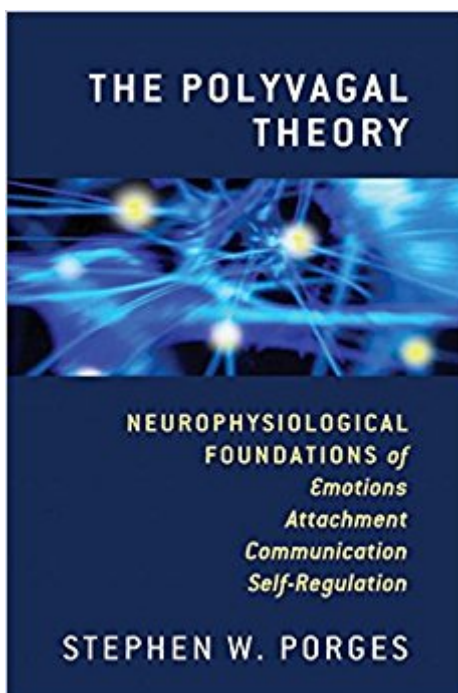


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The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations Of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, And Self-regulation (Norton Series On Interpersonal Neurobiology)



Synopsis

A collection of groundbreaking research by a leading figure in neuroscience. This book compiles, for the first time, Stephen W. Porges's decades of research. A leading expert in developmental psychophysiology and developmental behavioral neuroscience, Porges is the mind behind the groundbreaking Polyvagal Theory, which has startling implications for the treatment of anxiety, depression, trauma, and autism. Adopted by clinicians around the world, the Polyvagal Theory has provided exciting new insights into the way our autonomic nervous system unconsciously mediates social engagement, trust, and intimacy.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I am merely a psychology-degree wielding 24 year old with a natural curiosity for anything that influences behavior. This theory, developed by Steven Porges over 40 years of research, is one of the most comprehensive examinations of the influence of the vagus nerves on the physiological and psychological functioning of humans. The theory hinges on the idea that there are three components of the autonomic nervous system (ANS): the reptilian unmyelinated vagus branch, the sympathetic nervous system, and the myelinated neomammalian vagus branch. These branches, in order, correlate to different behavioral responses. The unmyelinated controls homeostatic functions as well as the "freeze" response. As such it develops first, in utero. The sympathetic nervous system, through the spinal cord, controls fight/flight responses by activating the

pituitary-adrenal-hypothalamic axis. Finally, exclusive to mammals is the myelinated vagus which acts primarily to control the heart rate via connections to the sinoatrial node of the heart. These components of the ANS act in phylogenetic order, so the myelinated vagus inhibits functioning of the sympathetic nervous system, which inhibits the unmyelinated vagus. The focal point of Porges' book is that the development of the myelinated vagus, originating in nuclei called the nucleus ambiguus, is crucial to inhibiting the fight/flight/freeze responses in response to environmental stimuli. The assessing of risk in the environment, which he calls neuroception, is regulated unconsciously and the myelinated vagus helps to resist primal behavioral responses. The strength of the myelinated vagus can be measured using respiratory sinus arrhythmia (RSA), which is an indication of beat-to-beat heart rate variability.

Porges has made some very significant discoveries on the nature of emotion, the nervous system, and its significance for physical and mental health as well as a general understanding of human behavior: why we are the way we are. This book collects some of the most significant papers he's written on the topics, all on the basis of what he has come to call the "polyvagal theory". For decades the understanding of the autonomic nervous system and its relation to stress has been overly simplistic. It has ignored the very large role of visceral feedback on brain processes and the hierarchical nature of our response to the environment, whether it is safe or threatening. The book is quite academic and uses scientific jargon, so be prepared for that. It can be quite dry and repetitive, given that the various chapters were written as essays and include a lot of necessary "background" material. That said, the repetition is great for learning what might otherwise be confusing and difficult topics. If you don't have any previous training in psychology, this is a great help. And the information is paradigm-changing in its importance. Summing up just a few of the basics of the polyvagal theory, Porges bases his analysis on an in-depth study of the evolution of the nervous system from the simplest invertebrates to mammalian life and humans in particular. This approach brings with it some important insights. For one, our nervous system is constantly assessing the environment, whether it is safe or not. This process happens without our conscious awareness. Ordinarily, if the environment is safe, we predominantly use our newest "hardware", so to speak. We are socially engaging, communicative. We share, love, nurture, support, play.

The real role of the autonomic nervous system in human functioning has been neglected far too long. Perhaps that is because our culture likes to think everything that is important is subject to the will while the autonomic nervous system is not. But authors like Antonio Damasio and Porges are

starting to correct that bias. This book is a compilation of papers, slightly revised, that Porges wrote over the years with graduate students. As such there is some repetition as the polyvagal 'basics' are explained over and over. However, each time, it is explained slightly differently, resulting in a highly nuanced explanation of this crucial concept. Therapists and other clinicians working with movement, body-based, and experiential therapies have long understood that chronic human emotional suffering involved some type of chronic shift of the balance of the autonomic nervous system toward the sympathetic. However, using the old two-part oppositional model of the autonomic nervous system (sympathetic versus parasympathetic) was not satisfying. This was in part because some physical manifestations of distress were parasympathetically mediated: asthma, ulcers, enuresis, irritable bowel disease, freezing reactions, etc.. This seemed to overturn the simplistic idea "parasympathetic good, sympathetic bad". But actually the manifestations listed above stem from a 'dorsal vagal' reaction. Now as Porges shows, "ventral vagal good, sympathetic worse, dorsal vagal worst" Now intuition and physiological models are back in line. The intuition of clinicians was always correct, the 'science' had to catch up.

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