

THE PERSONAL PROFILE MAP

The Autonomic Ladder

Let's translate our basic knowledge of the autonomic nervous system into everyday understanding by imagining the autonomic nervous system as a ladder. How do our experiences change as we move down and back up the ladder?



The Top of the Ladder

What would it feel like to be safe and warm? Arms strong but gentle. Snuggle close, joined by tears and laughter. Free to share, to stay, to leave...

Safety and connection are guided by the evolutionarily newest part of the autonomic nervous system. Our social engagement system is active in the ventral vagal pathway of the parasympathetic branch. In this state, our heart rate is regulated and our breath is full. We take in the faces of friends, tune in to conversations, and tune out distracting noises. We see the big picture and connect to the world and the people in it. I might describe myself as happy, active,

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interested and the world as safe, fun, and peaceful. From this ventral vagal place at the top of the autonomic ladder, I am connected to myself and can reach out to others. Some of the daily living experiences in this state include being organized, following through with plans, taking care of myself, taking time to play, doing things with others, feeling productive at work, and having a general feeling of regulation and a sense of management. Health benefits include a healthy heart, regulated blood pressure, a strong immune system decreasing my vulnerability to illness, good digestion, quality sleep and overall sense of well-being.

Moving Down the Ladder

Fear is whispering to me and I feel the power of its message. Move, take action, escape. No one can be trusted. No place is safe...

The sympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system activates when we feel a stirring of unease and a neuroception of danger. We go into action. Fight and flight happen here. In this state, our heart rate speeds up; our breath is short and shallow. We scan our environment looking for danger- we are on the move. I might describe myself as anxious or angry and feel the rush of adrenaline that makes it hard for me to be still. I listen for sounds of danger and don't hear the sounds of friendly voices. The world may feel dangerous, chaotic, and unfriendly. From this place of sympathetic mobilization- a step down the autonomic ladder and backward on the evolutionary timeline, I may believe, "The world is a dangerous place and I need to protect myself from harm." Some of the daily living problems can be anxiety, panic attacks, anger, inability to focus or follow through, and distress in relationships. Health consequences include heart disease; high blood pressure; high cholesterol; sleep problems; memory impairment; headache; chronic neck, shoulder, and back tension; and increased vulnerability to illness.

The Bottom of the Ladder

I'm far away in a dark and forbidding place. I make no sound. I am small and silent and barely breathing. Alone, where no one will ever find me...

Our oldest pathway of response, the dorsal vagal pathway of the parasympathetic branch, is the path of last resort. When all else fails, when we are trapped and action taking doesn't work, the dorsal vagus takes us into shutdown, collapse, and dissociation. Here at the very bottom of the autonomic ladder, I am alone with my despair and escape into not knowing, not feeling, almost a sense of not being. I might describe myself as hopeless, abandoned, foggy, too tired to think or act and the world as empty, dead, and dark. From this earliest place on the evolutionary timeline, where my mind and body have moved into conservation mode, I may believe, "I am lost and no one will ever find me." Some of the daily living problems can be dissociation, memory issues, depression, loneliness, and no energy for the tasks of daily life. Health consequences of this state can include chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, digestive issues, low blood pressure, and respiratory problems.

***Where am I?
Completing Your Personal Profile Map***

Ventral Vagal		
Safe		
Social	The world is ... I am ...	
Sympathetic		
Mobilized		
Fight-Flight	The world is ... I am ...	
Dorsal Vagal		
Immobilized	The world is ... I am ...	
Collapsed		

The Personal Profile Map Template

The Personal Profile Map is a good place to begin. This map helps you safely connect to, and get to know, your experiences in your two survival states and in the state of regulation. This mapping process invites you to first dip a toe in sympathetic and dorsal survival to begin to get to know those states and not be overwhelmed by them as is often our experience. Then you dive into exploring the energy of ventral safety and connection. While this map can be done in pen or pencil, there is an added benefit to using color. You can use colored markers or pens to fill in the sections. If you don't want to work in color but are curious about the colors your nervous system would choose, consider a color for each state and mark the choice in the margin.

In this mapping exercise, travel the predictable pathway down the hierarchy and first map sympathetic survival, then move to dorsal survival, and finish by mapping the ventral state of

regulation. Since our nervous systems respond to mapping our states, we want to end the experience in ventral.

- Remember a time when you were pulled into the sympathetic survival energy of fight and flight, where you felt the rise of anger and anxiety. Let the memory come alive in your mind and body just enough so you feel the flavor of it and aren't flooded by it. Too much and you will be pulled into the chaotic energy of the state and out of the ability to get to know it.
- In the sympathetic section of the ladder map, describe what it is like here. What happens in your body? What do you do? What do you feel? What do you think and say? How is your sleep, relationship with food, and use of substances or compulsive behaviors impacted? As you finish the section, fill in the sentences "I am..." and "The world is..." These two sentences identify the core beliefs that are driving your experiences when you are in a state of sympathetic activation
- Now move to the dorsal survival state. While in the sympathetic state there is too much energy, the hallmark of the dorsal state is the lack of energy. Remember a time when you felt the energy drain from your system, and you took the first step into shut down. The dorsal experience is one of disconnection, feeling out of touch with the present moment, unseen, lost and alone. Mapping the dorsal state can easily activate collapse and disconnection. So let just enough in to your awareness that you can be with your dorsal survival state to begin to get to know it.
- Write what it feels like, looks like, and sounds like in this place. What happens in your body? What do you do? What do you feel? What do you think and say? How is your sleep, relationship with food, and use of substances or compulsive behaviors impacted? Fill in the sentences "I am ..." and "The world is..." to discover the core beliefs at work here.
- Finish by mapping the state of ventral regulation. If you're worried that you haven't spent a lot of time in ventral or maybe you think you really don't know that place of safety, you can be reassured that the memory of a micro-moment of ventral is enough to bring the state alive and map it. You don't need long stretches of ventral regulation to become familiar with what it's like there. One moment holds all the information needed to finish your map. You might remember a moment of feeling wonderful, or totally at peace, or joy-filled. You might remember a moment when you felt ok enough, happy enough, organized enough to make your way through the day. All you need is a micro-moment of what I call "ventral OKness." Find a moment, dive in, and bring the state fully alive.
- Write what happens here in this place of ventral regulation. What happens in your body? What do you do? What do you feel? What do you think and say? How is your

sleep, relationship with food, and use of substances or compulsive behaviors impacted? Fill in the sentences “I am...” and “The world is...” and discover the story from this place of regulation.

- While ventral, sympathetic and dorsal are important terms to know, these names are not necessarily welcoming and how we want to refer to our states. When you’ve finished mapping, take a moment to connect with each state and then use the boxes along the side of the map to name your states in a way that reflects your personal experience.

Now that you’ve completed your Personal Profile Map, put it where you can easily refer to it. Check in frequently to find your place on the map. Become a skilled state detector able to easily answer the question, “Where am I?” Notice where you are on your map. Name the state. Turn toward the experience and listen for a moment to what your nervous system wants you to know. “My sympathetic mobilization is telling me...” “My dorsal vagal state is letting me know...” My ventral vagal system is inviting me to...:

Mapping Your Regulated System

The diagram is a vertical ladder structure with three main sections. Each section has a label on the left, a central area with prompts, and a box on the right for personalization.

State	Prompts	Personalization Box
Ventral Vagal	The world is ... I am ...	
Sympathetic	The world is ... I am ...	
Dorsal Vagal	The world is ... I am ...	

Regulated Ladder Map Template

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In addition to understanding the way our nervous systems use survival energy, we want to get to know the everyday, regulating roles of our three states and what it's like to inhabit a regulated system. The Regulated Ladder Map is a good companion to the Personal Profile Map. Because you are mapping regulated states, you can work in any order you want. I like to travel up the hierarchy from dorsal to sympathetic to ventral, but let your nervous system be your guide.

- Feel the slow and steady beat of your dorsal system. Its regulating role is to bring nutrients to nourish you and offer you a place to rest and renew. Enter into that experience and notice what happens in your body what you think, feel and do. Write what you discover on your map. Finish by filling in the same sentences as you did on your Personal Profile Map: The world is..., I am...
- Moving up to the sympathetic system, feel the energizing, organized energy of regulated mobilization. In its everyday role, the sympathetic system is responsible for adjusting heart and breath rhythms and bringing you the energy you need to move through the day. Step into the energy of this system and explore the experience. Document what you discover about what happens in your body, what you think, feel, and do in this place. Finish by filling in the sentences: The world is... and I am...
- Come to the top of the hierarchy and the place of ventral safety and regulation. Continue the exploration you began when you filled out your Personal Profile Map. Look at the four pathways of connection – to yourself, others, the world, and Spirit – that are engaged and alive in this state. What happens in your body, what do you think, feel, and do? Finish by filling in the sentences: The world is..., and I am ...

Take a moment to look at your completed map. What did you discover? What are the details that are important to you? What do you appreciate about the ways your three states work to bring you well-being?