

Ventral Vagal Anchors



By Eve Menezes Cunningham

Much as I loved learning how to anchor positive states when I did my initial NLP training back in 2005, it took training in a variety of therapies to realise the richness of working with the full emotional landscape.

At the time, I didn't understand that my trauma history meant I was doing well to be able to override the default self-loathing even temporarily while doing anchoring exercises such as working with the Circle of Excellence.

Stephen Porges' work around Polyvagal Theory has been hugely influential on the whole field of trauma therapy. It looks at the ways in which we can embody a sense of safety.

If I had known about it then, I could have bridged the gap between how I felt when working really hard on feeling better with crystals, self-coaching, NLP, EFT and yoga and how awful I so often felt when not actively monitoring and improving my self-talk.

Deb Dana's work with ventral anchors offers a way in which all of us can practise enhancing our ventral vagal wellbeing. Working with ventral vagal anchors isn't just for trauma survivors.

What on earth is ventral vagal wellbeing?

You may be familiar with the autonomic nervous system (ANS) – the magical way in which our body somehow manages to perform many complex functions, from regulating temperature to breathing and keeping the heart beating, without our having to somehow remember *how* to do these things.

The real beauty of it is that although we don't need to be conscious of how it works in order to stay alive, a little knowledge means we can become more mindful of

When we're in a ventral vagal state, we feel connected to ourselves and to the world at large.

what's happening and, where appropriate, regulate. That is, feel better.

This can be something as simple as noticing when we're breathing shallowly. 80% of the signals between body and brain go up via the vagus nerve so it's much faster to use our breath or posture or movement to send signals of safety up to the brain and then down throughout the whole system by attempting to change our state through thought alone.

When we notice we're breathing shallowly, we can recognise that this means we're sending stress signals to the brain and whole system. Deepening the breath and slightly lengthening the exhalation can activate the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system, bringing a sense of calm and ease.

Similarly, if we're hunched over our laptop or phone, our body interprets it as if we are making ourselves small or hiding from predators; it sends stress signals up via the vagus, making us feel even more tense. Lengthening through the spine and allowing our shoulders to relax down the back as we look up sends signals of safety and even confidence up to the brain and back down through the whole system.

Normally, when we talk about the parasympathetic branch of the nervous system, we think 'rest / digest' Relaxation Response rather than 'fight / flight' Stress Response.

But the dorsal part of it – the part that, when excessively stressed or traumatised leads to collapse rather than us being able

to fight or flee – has an impact too. We share this part of the nervous system with our reptilian ancestors.

The ventral pathways are more evolved. Only mammals share the ventral pathways and they develop over the first year or two of a baby's life if that baby is fortunate enough to have enough safety.

Just as ventral vagal activity is linked to maturation (in evolutionary terms and within the body), the expansive 'both / and' approach to life it offers is a sign of maturity that people stuck in the 'either / or' of sympathetic or dorsal arousal can't fathom.

Vagal tone and ventral vagal activity can be measured through Heart Rate Variability. This makes sense when we think about research from the HeartMath Institute showing that positive emotions like awe, joy, love, hope and pride not only boost the natural performance-enhancing hormone DHEA but also prevent cortisol, connected with stress, being built for up to a few hours.

This ventral vagal state – allowing us to feel such positive emotions – is at the top of the hierarchy. When we're in it, we feel connected to ourselves and to the world at large. We can acknowledge painful realities AND move forward.

Create your own ventral vagal anchors

Deb Dana has been developing Stephen Porges' work in a way that's accessible for clinicians for years. This exercise is adapted from her book, *Polyvagal*

The more we do to increase our capacity to take this more expansive, 'both / and' approach to life, the better we can navigate the unique challenges of 2021.



Exercises for Safety and Connection (Norton, 2020).

1 Make yourself comfortable – Sit comfortably or lie down, spine lengthened comfortably. Allow the feet and other parts of the body that are in contact with the ground or whatever you're on to feel supported.

2 Think of a time you felt safe, happy and at ease. Expansive. In touch with your whole emotional landscape, your ventral vagal pathways delightfully active. This may be something you remember or you may be imagining it*. You know from your NLP how to use all your senses (VAKOG) to make this memory as vivid as possible. Make notes. The more thorough you are at this stage, the easier you'll find it to integrate.

3 Think about who you feel safe and welcome around. This may include loved ones as well as pets and even trees. It might also include authors, fictional characters, historical or famous people – list everyone. Notice how you feel, right now, as you think about them.

4 Think about what you already do that helps activate your ventral vagal pathways. You know from your NLP that anchors can be created but are so much more powerful when they occur more organically. Even if you can only think of – or imagine – micromoments, list them all.

5 Think about where you feel safest and most welcome. List local places and reflect on other places you've lived, visited or imagined. While in lockdown, you may have developed a stronger link to some on your daily walk – and thank

goodness our imaginations allow us to travel, too.

6 Think about when you feel that ventral vagal energy of ease and wellbeing. Again, list everything you can think of. This isn't a one-off exercise. You can build on it for the rest of your life.

7 Create reminders of all your ventral vagal anchors. These might be lists that you keep visible for you, a note on your wall, art work, photos of places, people, a mood box or your whole home. Marie Kondo encourages us to keep what sparks joy. Notice what sparks that sense of safety, ease and wellbeing, too.

* Please don't worry if you need to imagine it. In an ideal world, you're bubbling with memories and feelings of things you can connect with even more frequently than you already do to enhance their benefits. If you need to imagine some or even all of the answers, that's absolutely fine. You can build on the things you imagine that bring you a sense of wellbeing, ease and safety. I used

to have an imaginary image of myself floating way out at sea (further than I allow myself to swim in the actual sea) before I could even contemplate actually feeling safe and at ease anywhere. That gave me enough to build on and over the years, I've had an enormous amount of healing and have built quite an extensive mental library of actual ventral vagal activity memories.

A note about loss

Sometimes, we temporarily or permanently lose our trusty ventral vagal anchors. An unwanted move, break up, bereavement or public health restrictions due to a global pandemic might make certain ventral vagal anchors feel far away. Grief is natural. At certain times, reflecting on someone who's usually a ventral vagal anchor might trigger your stress response.

By working with all the kinds of anchors (and again, your NLP supports your capacity to do this), you'll be better equipped to tide yourself over while these anchors are temporarily unavailable.

You can also congratulate yourself for having that both / and ventral vagal viewpoint, recognising that much as you might love _____, you can also feel stressed out with them.

In a 2020 interview on *The Late Late Show*, Bruce Springsteen told Ryan Tubridy that being able to hold two conflicting thoughts – in his case, loving America while being critical of elements of America – is a sign of maturity. The more we do to increase our capacity to take this more expansive, 'both / and' approach to life, the better we can navigate whatever challenges we might face. ■



Eve Menezes Cunningham is the author of *365 Ways to Feel Better: Self-care Ideas for Embodied Wellbeing*. You can find out about her NLP, therapies, coaching and supervision as well as access free resources at selfcarecoaching.net