

nervous system + trauma- informed yoga 101



trauma informed
leadership

autonomic nervous system (ANS) responses

Three distinct states (Polyvagal Theory):

- Ventral vagal (safe/social)
- Sympathetic (mobilisation)
- Dorsal vagal (immobilisation)

Note: For later reference, this Polyvagal Theory video is excellent:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZdIQRxwT1l0

trauma responses: physiological and behavioural patterns

The autonomic nervous system responds to perceived threats through predictable patterns. These responses occur when someone moves outside their window of tolerance - the optimal zone where they can effectively integrate experiences and remain present.

- **Fight:** Might look like: aggression, irritability, and muscular tension. This sympathetic nervous system activation prepares the body for confrontation. In yoga, students might display rigid posture, clench their jaw, or express frustration with modifications. This can indicate a movement above the window of tolerance into hyperarousal.
- **Flight:** The sympathetic nervous system triggers hyperarousal and anxiety, which can create an overwhelming urge to escape. It might look like shallow breathing, restlessness, or difficulty maintaining shapes. Like fight, this response indicates activation beyond the upper threshold of the window of tolerance.

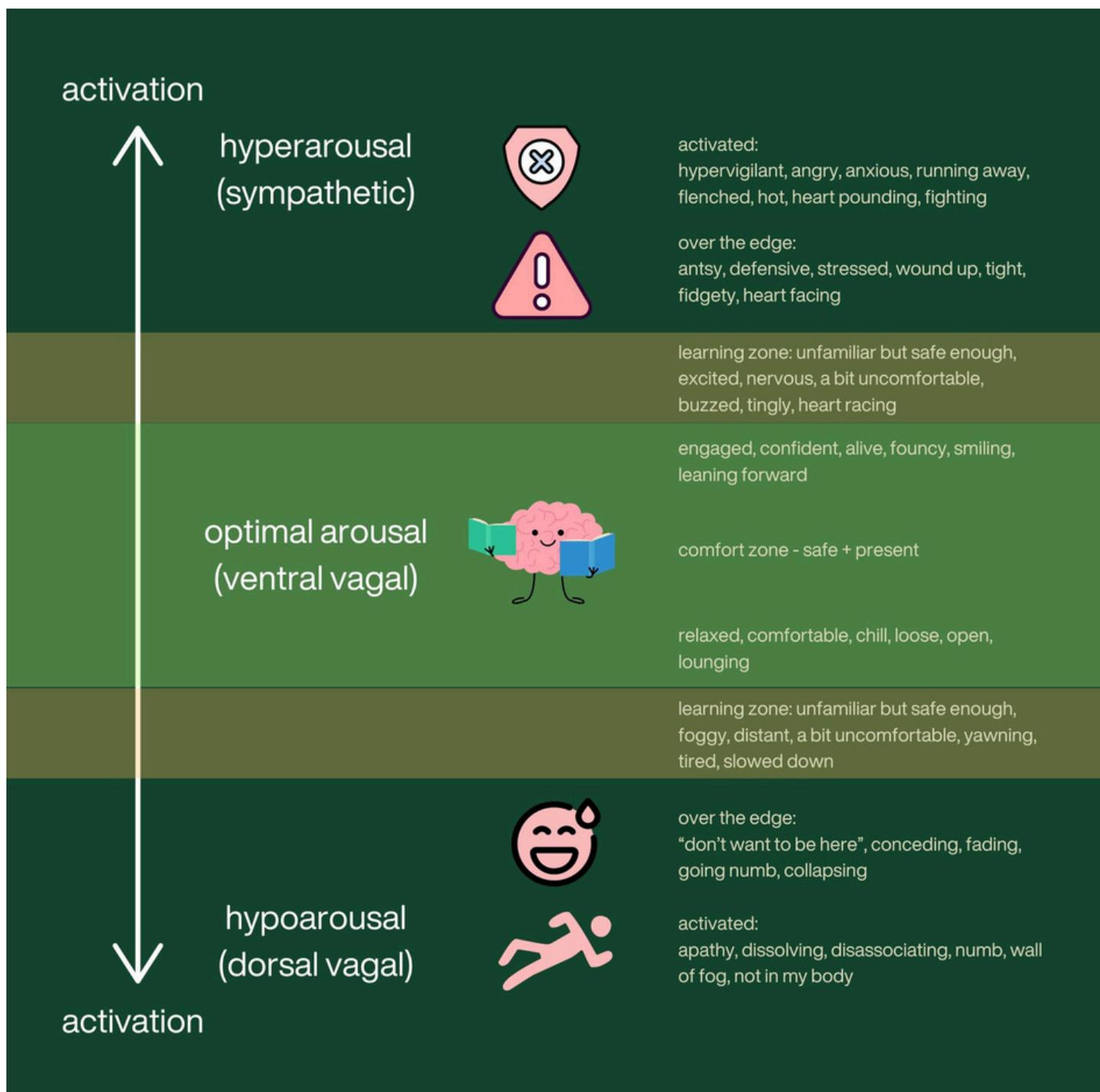
- **Freeze:** Freeze can look like dissociation, numbness, and disconnection from the body. People may appear present but report feeling "not there" or unable to sense body parts. Indicates movement below the window of tolerance. May tip into dorsal shutdown.
- **Fawn:** Might look like people-pleasing and boundary loss, this response often develops as a learned survival strategy. Students might override their body's signals to match instructions or ignore discomfort to appear "good" at yoga. Indicates disruption to both the social engagement system (ventral vagal) and healthy autonomic regulation.

Understanding these responses within Polyvagal Theory helps us recognise when participants need support in returning to a regulated state through choice, present moment experience, and predictable environments.

the Window of Tolerance

The Window of Tolerance below highlights the ventral vagal state - the optimal zone of social engagement where we feel regulated, safe and connected. This state allows us to effectively process experiences and emotions while staying in relationship with others.

The autonomic nervous system follows a hierarchical response pattern to perceived safety or threat:



trauma-informed practice continuum

unconsciously unaware

Common starting point for many people - we don't know what we don't know

consciously unaware

Recognition of trauma's existence without specific skills

trauma-aware

Understanding of trauma basics + power dynamics. Understanding of trauma-informed practice continuum + where we sit

trauma-informed

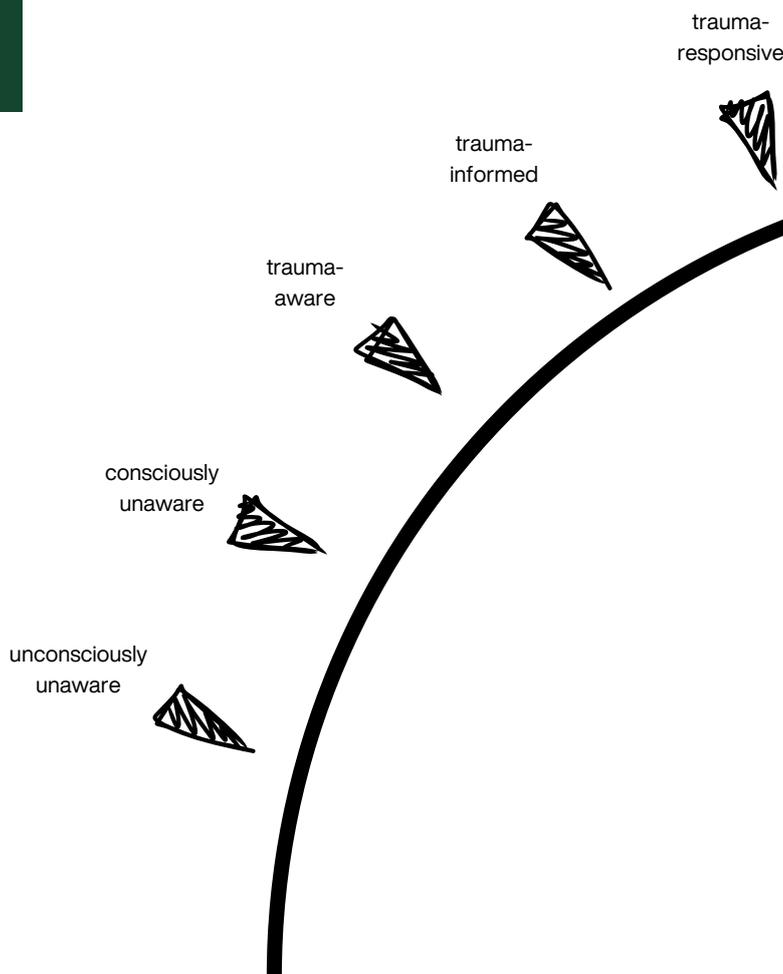
Reflective practice approach - moving beyond theory. It integrates core principles into every teaching choice while remaining responsive to individual and community needs. All trauma-informed principles are considered.

trauma-responsive

Goes beyond being trauma-informed to actively working with trauma resolution in trauma-focused settings.

At this level practitioners have:

- Advanced qualifications in trauma-specific therapeutic modalities
- Regular clinical/practice supervision and continued education
- Clear understanding of scope of practice and referral pathways



* Not all people, practices or modalities that work with trauma (eg 'trauma healers', yoga therapists, mental health professionals, including psychologists) are working in 'trauma-informed' ways.

If you're seeking support in navigating trauma and you're wanting to make sure that best-practice is being used, you might ask:

- What is your approach to 'trauma informed' practices?
- What training have you done in trauma-informed practice?
- What ongoing professional development do you do to keep your skills up to date?

recommended books

The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk explores how trauma impacts the body and brain, shaping emotions, health, and relationships.

Through research and personal stories, it offers insights into healing, empowering readers to understand and address trauma with compassion and informed strategies.

Heavy and academic but good.

Breath by James Nestor delves into the science and history of breathing, revealing its profound impact on physical and mental health.

I love this book!

Through research and personal experiments, Nestor offers practical techniques to enhance breath awareness, reduce stress, and he explains it all really well.

Embodied Healing (* essential reading for yoga facilitators IMO) by Jenn Turner explores the power of the body in trauma recovery.

By integrating somatic practices, mindfulness, and self-compassion, it provides a roadmap for reconnecting with the body's wisdom.

I love this book. It should be included in every yoga teacher training.



Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman is an absolutely foundational book that outlines the impact of trauma on individuals and societies.

It offers a compassionate framework for understanding recovery, emphasizing safety, remembrance, and reconnection as essential steps towards healing and reclaiming autonomy.

The Better Brain by Julia Rucklidge and Bonnie Kaplan explores how nutrition and lifestyle choices can positively impact mental health and cognitive function.

Drawing on *actual* research, it offers practical insights on how to nourish the brain, supporting emotional regulation, resilience and overall well-being.

Such a brilliant book - but fairly text-heavy.

A Practical Guide to Complex PTSD by Arielle Schwartz offers an accessible and empowering resource for people navigating life after trauma.

With a focus on practical tools and gentle self-care practices, she weaves psychological insight with relatable advice, like a broad 'map' or process.

people/accounts I like to follow

Dr. Gabor Maté (@gabormatemd): Dr. Maté offers insights into the connection between trauma, addiction, and mental health, advocating for compassionate healing and understanding.

Dr. Cathy Malchiodi (@cathy_malchiodi): Dr. Malchiodi specializes in trauma-informed art therapy, offering creative healing practices that support emotional expression and recovery.

CPTSD Foundation (@cptsdfoundation): The CPTSD Foundation provides resources, support, and education for individuals affected by complex PTSD, fostering healing and connection in the trauma recovery community.

Arielle Schwartz (@arielleschwartzboulder): Arielle shares trauma-informed practices, focusing on somatic therapy and mindfulness techniques to support healing and emotional well-being.

Prison Yoga Project (@prisonyogaproject): The Prison Yoga Project brings trauma-sensitive yoga and mindfulness to incarcerated individuals, promoting healing, empowerment, and emotional resilience within prison settings.

Mind Body Solutions (@mindbodysolutions): Mind Body Solutions offers adaptive yoga and somatic practices for individuals with physical disabilities, promoting healing and resilience through body awareness.

Sarah Ball (@sarahball.yoga.counselling): Sarah combines yoga, counselling, and trauma-informed practices to support individuals on their healing journey, fostering self-awareness and emotional resilience.

Frontline Yoga (@frontlineyoga): Frontline Yoga offers trauma-sensitive yoga for first responders and frontline workers, supporting their mental and physical health through mindfulness and movement.

The Centre for Trauma and Embodiment (@cfte): The Centre offers somatic and trauma-informed programs, integrating movement and therapy to help individuals heal and reconnect with their bodies.

Edwina Kempe (@edwinakempe): Edwina shares trauma-informed yoga and mindfulness practices that support emotional and physical healing, promoting self-compassion and resilience.

Katie Kurtz (@_katiekurtz): Katie advocates for the integration of trauma-sensitive yoga and mindfulness, focusing on self-regulation, body awareness, and compassionate healing.

Integrate Network (@integrate_network): Integrate Network offers community-driven resources for trauma-informed practice, supporting individuals and organisations in creating trauma-sensitive environments and practices.

The Body Talk Therapist (@thebodytalktherapist): This account explores the relationship between the body and mind, offering therapeutic practices that help individuals reconnect with their body's wisdom and heal from trauma.

more people I like to follow

Jessamyn Stanley

(@mynameisjessamyn): Jessamyn focuses on self-acceptance, body positivity, and inclusivity within the yoga community, promoting yoga as a practice for everyone.

Jivana Heyman (@accessibleyoga):

Jivana shares resources and teachings that make yoga accessible to all, focusing on inclusivity and adapting practices to meet diverse needs.

Susanna Barkataki (@susannabarkataki):

Susanna advocates for yoga that is rooted in cultural respect, inclusivity, and social justice, empowering individuals to embrace their authentic selves.

Accessible Chair Yoga

(@accessiblechairyoga): This account offers accessible yoga practices for people of all abilities, focusing on chair-based postures to enhance mobility, flexibility, and well-being.

Caz Pringle Bowden

(@cazpringlebowden): Caz offers neurodiversity-affirming yoga practices, supporting individuals with diverse neurological needs to feel seen, heard, and supported through movement.

Dan Harris (@danharris):

Dan Harris, founder of 10% Happier, blends mindfulness and emotional intelligence to help individuals integrate meditation and self-awareness into their daily lives for greater calm and clarity.

Sonny Jane Wise

(@livedexperienceeducator): Sonny shares lived experience-based insights on mental health, trauma, and healing, fostering understanding and empathy in educational and professional settings.

Mad Yoga Network

(@madyoganetwork): The Mad Yoga Network promotes yoga for mental health, focusing on self-care, resilience, and the intersection of mental health and yoga practices.

Holistic Life Foundation

(@holisticlifefoundation): Holistic Life Foundation offers mindfulness and wellness programs to underserved communities, prioritizing emotional healing and social justice.

The New Happy (@newhappyco):

The New Happy offers inspiration and tools for cultivating happiness and well-being, focusing on meaningful life practices and positive mental health strategies.

Stuff That Works (@stuffthatworks):

Stuff That Works is a crowdsourced platform that gathers real-world experiences on treatments for mental health and other conditions, providing broad perspectives on healing and wellness.

Rose Cartwright (@rosecartwright__):

Rose Cartwright is a writer and author of *The Maps We Carry*, exploring trauma, mental health, and the intersection of psychedelics, offering a nuanced perspective on healing and personal growth.

Thank you!



Website



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I believe that trauma-informed practice shouldn't be a luxury. That's why I split my work equally between supporting funded organisations and providing free resources to those who need them most. If you know of a small charity that might benefit get in touch.

I facilitate trauma-informed yoga, deliver workplace and movement learning, and provide trauma-informed leadership development through various channels.

Who I work with

- Yoga and movement facilitators
- Organisations ready for transformation
- People looking to develop their trauma-informed leadership practice
- Community groups, charities + volunteers.

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