

## **Trauma and The Poly Vagal Nerve**

Everyone knows that when we feel threatened we go into the fight/flight response. When we go into that state, we can't think clearly – all our energy goes into fighting or fleeing, not talking or reasoning. But we also have something called the vagus nerve, which has two pathways. One pathway, (think of this as the "human" vagus pathway – it's only been around since mammals evolved) uses our ability to connect to others and ask for help to calm us down. It connects to our face (facial expressions) head, neck and throat (scanning for help, talking, calling out), inner ears (hearing), and it calms the heart and lungs. The other pathway (which is called the dorsal vagus) only knows how to stop the flight/fight reaction by immobilising us (like a possum playing dead). You can't think too clearly when this vagus gets triggered either, you simply freeze, go numb, and hold your breath, literally "waiting to exhale." When this gets triggered it often feels like a sinking feeling in your gut.

Both the fight/flight and the immobilisation responses are automatic – outside of conscious awareness and control. The more often you were frightened when you were young, the more likely you will be to respond to fear by either fighting, fleeing, or freezing instead of looking to others for help, especially if you were frightened by the very people that were supposed to be taking care of you.

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The good news is that the “human” vagus can lift you out of the dorsal vagus (freeze) response and it can also calm down the fight/flight reaction – all just by enabling self soothing and social communication! The problem is, we have to learn to use the human vagus well – babies and young children learn it from their parents/caregivers comforting them and soothing them for many years. Children who didn’t get the right kind of comforting grow up with a less developed human vagus, and have to learn to develop it later on by becoming conscious of it and using it deliberately.

### Mindfulness

The activation scale we use is a way to mindfully monitor your activation level – hopefully before you go into “hyper-activation” (fight/flight) or “hypo-activation” (freeze). When the fight/flight or dorsal vagus takes over, you aren’t able to stay in the “therapeutic window” because therapy requires being able to think clearly and relate socially. For this reason, it is important to learn to be “mindful” of your bodily sensations and activation levels. If and when you do notice yourself (or I notice you) going into a fight/flight or freeze reaction, we will need to stop talking and instead use mindfulness to get your human vagus and “thinking brain” back online. Mindfulness simply means being aware of your feelings, thoughts, and sensations in the present without judging them, but only naming and accepting them. I will help with this and we will work together to help teach your human vagus to become more functional."

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