

## Polyvagal Exercises: Attending Exercises

### Autonomic Short Stories

Adding language to autonomic events is a way to become acquainted with states and state changes. The plots of your short stories illustrate a slice of an autonomic experience. This is a quick writing exercise designed to bring attention to a specific autonomic point in time and spend a moment getting to know it.

#### Steps

1. Use these five prompts to write your autonomic short story. Spend no more than a minute or so on each.
  - My autonomic state is...
  - My system is responding to...
  - My body wants to....
  - My brain makes up the story that...
  - When I review my short story, I notice....
2. When you feel a state change, take a couple of minutes to listen in and follow the five prompts.
3. When you want to appreciate where your autonomic nervous system has taken you, follow the prompts and write a short story.
4. Track how your stories change as your autonomic responses begin to reshape.

### Attending Over Time

Using increments of time to attend to state changes adds chronology to your understanding of how you move through daily experiences. You can feel stuck in a state of dysregulation or unable to hold onto a state of regulation. Attending over time, both in short and long intervals, invites you to see the ongoing ebb and flow of your autonomic nervous system and the ways it responds both in moment to moment shifts and in patterns over time.

#### Short Duration Attending Steps:

1. Decide on a 5-10 minute increment as your measure of time. Use the following series of prompts to check in three times over that span of time.
  - In this moment my autonomic state is....
  - And I am feeling...
  - Now my state is...
  - And I am feeling...
  - And now my state is...
  - And I am feeling...
2. Repeat this exercise a few times a day for several weeks.
3. Look for any patterns that emerge. When are the times you respond flexibly and when are the times you get stuck? Are any changes happening over the course of tracking.

### Long Duration Attending Steps:

1. Longer time periods offer an expanded, bird's eye view of your experience. Decide on a timeframe to use. You can experiment with doing the exercise in the morning, at the end of the day, or even once a week.
2. Answer the following 4 questions:
  - Where am I? The starting point is where you are right now. Begin with noticing your current state.
  - Where have I been? Reflect back a few hours and notice any state changes.
  - What does this mean for where I might be heading? Bring curiosity to the trajectory you have found.
  - What do I want to do now? Is this a path you want to follow or a pattern you want to interrupt?

### Savoring Snapshots

Savoring is to take a moment of ventral vagal regulation and the feeling of a sense of safety and experience a story of connection to self, to another, or to nature. Savoring is a quick practice whereby you capture a ventral vagal moment and hold it in your conscious attention for just a short time. Moments to savor happen throughout the course of the day. It just takes 20-30 seconds to savor to make changes in the brain and nervous system. This is an easy but powerful practice to do during the natural flow of the day.

### Steps

1. Look for ventral Vagal moments to savor, bringing it into conscious awareness. Place your full attention on it for 20-30 seconds. Start with micro-moments if this is challenging as each moment will help to shape your system.
2. Practice every day, starting with one moment and build from there.
3. Tie it with moments that are predictable like your morning coffee or a moment with a loved one.
4. Track your moments – start a savoring or joy journal.
5. Reflect at the end of the day and find moments you may have missed.
6. Share savoring moments with a friend.
7. Create a savoring creative project – a collage, a poem, a simple drawing.
8. Establish the habit – be on the lookout for small moments that bring you into the ventral vagal state, set a goal to see a certain number/day. Invite someone to join you.

### Attending in Nature

Nature is a powerful regulator of our nervous systems and provide plenty of opportunities through our senses to restore our systems. This exercise focuses your attention on fractals which are simple patterns that repeat over and over creating increasing complexity (the nautilus shell, a leaf, a pinecone, dandelions, ice crystals, clouds). Viewing fractals for just a few moments brings a regulating response.

## Steps

1. Attend to your natural environment and track your responses. Notices what environments bring you into the 3 states.
2. Visit the places that are regulating for you in person or through images.
3. Look for fractals throughout your day, stopping to take them in.
4. Find images that bring a strong response in you – either in nature or on the internet. Display these images (screen savor, phone, printed and framed image, etc.) to remind you and help you regulate during your day.