

## **THE SCIENCE OF SAFETY & CONNECTION: POLYVAGAL THEORY**

We all have a profound capacity to assess if individuals and situations are safe and worthy of connection. However, focusing on a theory that support this idea is helpful for intentionally practicing how we connect with others. Polyvagal Theory, is a theoretical approach that:

- Describes a process that occurs through our Autonomic Nervous System.
- Explains and simplifies the science of safety and connection.
- Gives language to our felt senses and the ability to articulate these feelings.

## **CONNECTION IS BASED ON SAFETY**

As a species, we are social beings and rely heavily on interactions to connect. To connect we must feel safe, and feelings of safety originate in our autonomic nervous system and through our experiences and environments. To coregulate and feel safe in our social environment the following happens:

- We view connection as a sign of safety and without connection our survival feels threatened.
- Our nervous system constantly scans our environments for cues of safety and danger.

## **THE ONSET OF COVID-19 FUNDAMENTALLY IMPACTED OUR ABILITY TO CONNECT WITH OTHERS**

The threat of contracting the virus and strategies for mitigating risks created a strain. The virus was deadly and spread through social contact, still, our innate survival has always depended on social connection. So what historically felt like a natural connection now felt unsafe as we were inundated with different messages to protect ourselves, resulting in social disconnection.

- Our frequency in social in-person connection was severely limited.
- The requirement to practice social distancing kept us from normative social interactions like warm embraces and touch.
- Wearing masks prevented us from connecting through facial expressions and sometimes in person conversations.

## **TERMS OF THE NEW NORMAL AND ITS IMPACT ON CONNECTION**

Due to the new safety protocols, many areas in life were gravely impacted and likely forever changed—this experience fundamentally altered how we connected with one another.

- Shelter in place, quarantine, social distancing, lockdown, mask wearing, and "6 feet apart" while these measures were necessary in preventing the spread of COVID-19, they also impeded our ability to socialize and connect.
- Mandatory isolation had tremendous influence on our autonomic nervous system.
- Disconnection for prolonged period has long term mental health implications, many of which we saw come to light such as: depression, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness.

## **IN HEALTHCARE**

The pandemic struck without much warning, and providers navigated the healthcare system with new obstacles and changes. Healthcare workers risked their well-being and that of their loved ones, to ensure public health safety. The face of healthcare changed, and providers altered connection practices with their patients to ensure a sense of medical safety.

- Providers navigated the pandemic with supply shortages in PPE and fears loomed over contracting the virus and bringing it home to loved ones.
- Protocol changes were often from leadership and public health experts.
- Ethical dilemmas were present: a decision of which patients would receive lifesaving treatment.
- Providers made major adjustments due to COVID-19: facilitated virtual calls so loved ones could say goodbye, increased overtime hours, and personal loss of loved ones and coworkers to COVID-19.

## **IN THE WORKFORCE**

In March 2020, millions of Americans found themselves forced from their offices to a life of remote work. This significantly reshaped the culture of work for many employed adults.

- Individuals were laid off, furloughed, and asked to pivot to online platforms like Zoom. These changes impacted how individuals connected at work.
- Workforce changes impacted modern-day parenting.
- By July 2020, 16.9 million Americans were unemployed. Employed Americans reported a lack of work life balance, increased responsibility at home as concerns over contracting the virus and bringing it home to children grew.

## **IN ACADEMIA**

School closures brought significant disruption to the educational experience. Students and teachers were forced to online platforms, losing the natural rhythm of attunement and social engagement that classroom settings foster.

- The pandemic expanded achievement gaps in education for historically disadvantaged students. Dropout rates increased for high schoolers. At the collegiate level, students were sent home to complete semesters online.
- Social norms in academia that created developmental benchmarks such as graduations, proms, sporting events, and art exhibitions were shifted online, creating a loss of engagement, and creating memories.

## **IN SOCIALIZATION**

To this day, the lingering effects of the pandemic continue to impact nearly everyone. As clinicians, we must be attuned to how it affected all of us, especially our clients.

- As demonstrated in this picture, the streets of Time Square were left totally vacant in March 2020.
- The pandemic asked us to behave in ways that felt biologically unnatural and ultimately created added distress on our autonomic nervous that systems.

- The impact of the pandemic created major losses and these experiences will be etched in our memories forever.

### **DISRUPTIONS TO CONNECTION AND THE LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS**

COVID-19 created a serious threat to connection and burdened our healthcare, academic, and labor systems. Clients we work with may still be grappling with the long-term impact of the pandemic. As clinicians, using a Polyvagal approach to your clients' needs may aid in their healing by:

- Assessing your clients' need for connection that was disrupted by the pandemic.
- Tools for clients begin to heal and reestablish ways to meet their needs.
- Healing from the emotional and mental health impacts of the pandemic.