THRIVE EMERGE

JANGLED NERVES AND OVERWHELMING FEELINGS: FINDING CALM IN THE NEURODIVERGENT JOURNEY WITH POLYVAGAL THEORY AND DBT

Raising a neurodivergent child to adulthood can be a long, arduous road. And feeling overwhelmed and stressed – whether you are the kid or the parent – is an unavoidable part of the journey.

But if we are to get through with some level of sanity, we need to find ways to better regulate our jangled nerves.

Let's begin by setting the stage of how the neurodivergent child shows up in the family and in life generally. This will give us an overall framework for how to best tackle the challenges of self-regulation.

PARENTING THE NEURODIVERGENT CHILD

As parents of these children – ASD, ADHD/ Executive Dysfunction – we have probably noticed from early on that our kids experience and react to the world differently than we might expect. Signs of how their unique brains function pop up from the start and continue throughout childhood. Here's a partial list:

- Harder to settle themselves, including sleep
- More reactive to sensory stimuli
- Struggling to control impulses and outbursts
- Easily overwhelmed, overly emotional
- Behavior that disrupts the family
- More rigid, less flexible with changes in routine
- Challenges with social interactions
- Problems managing attention and focus

Briefly stated, these kids experience themselves – and we experience them as well – as highly dysregulated in the cognitive, emotional and behavioral realms. Because of this dysregulation, they struggle to lay a solid foundation for successful functioning in school, on the job, with peers and in the family.

And as parents, we are troubled by the significant demands on our emotions and energy needed to keep our kids on track and adapting to the world as successfully as possible. I have described to *my own youngest daughter* who has ADHD with significant emotional dysregulation that she was a "*prickly" kid* to raise: gentle and tender deep down, but with a lot of tough pokey experiences keeping me – and perhaps herself – from her true heart.

And as hard this was for me, the struggle for her was even more painful. Indeed, these kids can spend decades trying to find that beautiful core, that essence that is their emotional home, that spark of the divine that is theirs to shape into a fulfilling life.

The journey is a long one – for child and parent alike – marked in equal measure by painful setbacks and small successes. If we are to get through with grace and compassion, we are called, as members of neurodivergent families, to *find those deep, calming places that live inside our nervous systems*. With *patience and practice*, we can *build our skills* for accessing this internal regulation that will get us through the most difficult of days and allow us to remain resilient for the work ahead.

POLYVAGAL THEORY AND OUR NERVOUS SYSTEMS

Two powerful sets of psychological tools are at our disposal for building a foundation of emotional flexibility and strength:

- *Polyvagal Theory* – to help us understand the source of dysregulation and the path to calm; and
- Dialectical Behavioral Theory *(DBT)* – to offer the concrete tools and techniques that bring the nervous system into better regulation.

Polyvagal Theory is rooted in the idea that our nervous system regulates itself by *balancing our need for calm,* growth, restoration and social connection on the one hand; and the demands of the external world to *activate and mobilize* for survival on the other hand. This balancing function is carried out by the *autonomic nervous system*, a specialized part of our overall nervous system that tends to the "automatic" functions of the body such as breathing, heart rate and digestion.

The Polyvagal System lies within the autonomic nervous system and functions as the *governor of the overall emotional, cognitive and physiological tone of the body*. The Polyvagal System is itself a part of the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) – think calm, peaceful. The PNS has a reciprocal relationship with the sympathetic branch – think energy, focus and dealing with threats or demands from the outside world. The Polyvagal branch has the job of "talking" to the sympathetic branch so it can best balance the body's complementary needs of restoration and activation.

We can diagram this hierarchy as follows:

Central Nervous System > Autonomic Nervous System > *Sympathetic Branch* + *Parasympathetic Branch / Polyvagal System*

POLYVAGAL THEORY AND CO-REGULATION

The Polyvagal System is the *conductor that orchestrates the dance* between the sympathetic and parasympathetic branch — choosing between readiness for action vs settling within oneself. *Settling within allows for growth and restoration*, an *important part* of which is *connecting with others in a mutually beneficial exchange that we call "co-regulation."*

Co-regulation allows the brain (and body) to rest, restore its energy and restructure itself (= learn), so it *develops new pathways that make it a more resilient organism for taking on life's daily demands.*

Let's spend a moment on co-regulation. To do this, I want you to call to mind the *earliest days of your child's life*, as you held them gently in your arms, looking into their eyes, cooing softly, feeding them, rocking them, feeling the warmth of their skin on yours and the pressure of their bodies against your chest and heart.

This was their earliest experience of co-regulation – two human beings, locked in an emotional and sensory embrace that calmed you as the parent and – this is the very important part – *began to train their nervous system how to self-regulate*, to quiet a sense of upset, to move from overwhelm to settled, from responding to threat to growth and restoration.

CO-REGULATION SHAPES OUR BRAIN AND OUR BEHAVIORS

It is this process of *co-regulation* – started at birth and repeated countless times daily throughout their development – that literally *shapes the physical structure of their brains*, pruning nerve cells as we might lovingly prune a tree that we were tending.

And in that shaping of the physical organ of the brain, our developmental processes create a *structure with the capacity to regulate the flow of internal and external data – social data, sensory data, emotional data, thoughts, feelings from the body, memories, impulses.*

The result was a brain that could ultimately make decisions that were adaptive, rational, and informed by our hearts and our minds. This *shaping through co-regulation allowed us to manage the tremendous data load of our nervous systems so we could be functional, fulfilled players in the world of demands*, events and possibilities for growth.

Co-regulation plays a key role in moving the babe in arms through the developmental challenges of childhood to the stage where they can take on life with energy, spirit, motivation, confidence, direction and meaning. It is the necessary back and forth of co-regulation – the continuous string of interactions with caregivers, sibs, teachers, peers and the world at large – that shapes the dysregulated, immature nervous system into a functional, fulfilled adult.

NEURODIVERGENT BRAINS: TOO MUCH DATA

But what does this have to do with the neurodivergent child? The *success of co-regulation* depends upon the *capacity of the immature nervous system to utilize the many social exchanges it encounters* to shape and reshape itself into an organ that can effectively self-regulate, successfully control a massive data flow, to produce either adaptive action or internal calm as dictated by the demands of the external and internal environments.

But the challenges encountered by the *neurodivergent brain – challenges with too much sensation, too much feeling, too many thoughts surging unregulated into conscious awareness – hijacks the brain into chronically elevated sympathetic tone* in which the person reacts to the *world not as if it were a safe platform for growth but as a constant threat* that needs to be defended against.

In this state, the *brain is unable to undergo the appropriate learning* that lies at the foundation of self-regulation, and the *child remains over the years a poorly regulated organism* trying to adapt – many times with great struggles and limited successes – to the demands of school, friendship, family life and jobs.

This is a life marked by outbursts, anxiety, depression and failures large and small, with hard won successes that might be too small to build a sense of self, a sense of confidence, a sense of motivation and even a will to go on.

NEURODIVERGENT YOUNG ADULTS: NOT READY FOR ADULTHOOD

And as we watch this child who has grown to the threshold of their adult life, we see an individual asked to jump off the cliff of childhood but without the wings to fly. *Social skills, study skills, emotional skills remain rudimentary compared to peers* and the transition to independence becomes a long, grueling task.

Those of us who have raised our children through this difficult developmental journey know all too well the sense of loss, disruption and even despair that comes from a nervous system denied the full, incredible gift of co-regulation. We know all too well the *repeated, many times abortive efforts to find a sense of calm in this challenging path* – for both caregiver and child. We know all too well the effort required to just go on, much less mount a sense of hope, grace and compassion. Over years, the family and child grow weary and skeptical.

As parents and kids, we desperately long for the skills that will lead us all to a sense of peace and calm, realistic that these will not make everything better but might just perhaps provide some respite from the storm, provide just enough hope that we can remain fully committed to the task of raising our wonderful, unique child.

THRIVE EMERGE

SETTING REALISTIC EXPECTATIONS FOR HEALING: POLYVAGAL THEORY AND DBT

Treatments rooted in both Polyvagal Theory and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy provide foundational skills for regulating the nervous systems of parent and child alike. Although these are topics for another day – and involve skill building that requires the support of mental health professionals – let's touch on how DBT formulates the stages of emotional stabilization and growth. This can help us *set realistic expectations* regarding the timeline for stabilizing the dysregulated, neurodivergent child and their family.

DBT describes several stages of emotional stabilization, the first two of which are most relevant for our purposes here. *In the first stage*, the young adult engages with the therapist while still very much *small "t" traumatized* from the neurodivergent experiences of childhood. *Coping patterns* at this stage include being in a *heightened state of anxiety, with poor emotional regulation and utilizing numbing and avoidance to deal with the constant overwhelm generated by daily life demands.*

During this stage, we might experience in ourselves or observe in others panic attacks, overreaction to triggering life challenges, and the need to emotionally escape our distress — including the urges to self-harm or kill oneself. This *distress is often so constant and disruptive that the normal activities of adult life – working, going to school, consistent self care and forming healthy co-regulating relationships with others – is nearly impossible to achieve.* The *individual is paralyzed by their overwhelming emotions and struggles* to function competently as an adult.

The *goal of treatment* in this stage is to gather the *skills* necessary to develop a level of *emotional stabilization* that will allow the person to slowly and in very limited ways take on some of the demands of adult life. Regarding realistic expectations, ***developing the capacity for adequate self-regulation can take many months***. And *during this time, the individual's focus should be working their emotional program, and not getting back to school or starting a job.*

THE CHALLENGE FOR PARENTS

Here's the challenge for parents, however: unless we ourselves have stood in the shoes of a highly dysregulated person, it is *difficult to understand just how debilitating poor emotional regulation can be*. And it is vital that parents keep in mind that this is the *mental equivalent of having a severe pneumonia or recovering from an extensive surgery* – no one expects you to be functional when you are that sick. You take a break from life until you have gradually regained the capacity to return to your normal daily life.

For our neurodivergent kids, "normal daily life" might itself be a fairly low level of functioning vis-a-vis peers. This is a measure of how long they have struggled with their trauma and how few skills that they have had to effectively manage it. This suggests again that *emotional rehabilitation, if you will, will be a very gradual, slow process*. *Gains* in emotional self regulation and functionality will be *incremental*, and parents will have to find ways to be patient and realistic with the almost glacial progress that characterizes this stage.

SELF-REGULATION CAN BE LEARNED

The good news is that *emotional self-regulation is rooted in a set of concrete skills that can be practiced and acquired over time*. In other words, *our kids will begin to get better* and will eventually enter the second stage of emotional growth in which they can process the underlying psychological issues that have led to a pattern of "life interfering behaviors". They may *begin to transition back to work or school in limited ways* – taking 1 or 2 classes or getting a part time job.

Please be clear: this does not indicate that the young adult is ready to be highly functional, only that they *have the self-regulation skills needed to practice emotional stability in the setting of a limited number of demands.* Many times, we see parents — eager to see their kids "all better" and understandably tired of what may have become a very difficult, protracted journey to independence— wanting to rush this stage. And therapy fatigue is a factor as well: good, specialized mental health care is not inexpensive and parents have an obligation to carefully distribute limited resources to the family.

Be that as it may, even if *the intensity of treatment can be stepped down a bit at this stage*, it *should not be eliminated completely*. The risk of losing hard won psychological and life skill gains is very real, and young adults and parents alike don't need yet another failure.

BE PATIENT: OUR KIDS CAN HEAL

Perhaps there is in all this advice a relatively simple moral: *be patient, carefully plan your resources*, and you will see your *young adult take very gratifying steps towards a more responsible and independent adult life. Our neurodivergent kids are willing to work hard on themselves because they are eager to gain a level of pride, self-acceptance and stability that will allow them to live fulfilling lives on their own unique terms.*