

The Neural Learning Zone

A close-up photograph of a hand with red-painted nails dripping water into a pool. The water is calm, reflecting the hand and the sunset sky. The background is a soft, hazy sunset with warm orange and yellow tones.

Safe Enough to Be Brave

A photograph of a hand holding a large, light-colored flower. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. The background is a soft, hazy sunset with warm orange and yellow tones.

Caffyn Jesse

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Getting Safe Enough to Be Brave....

Sacred Intimacy is the world's oldest profession. It's not Rocket Science. It is Neuroscience. That is, the sexual healing practices I teach are ancient, but the new language of neuroscience helps us understand how they work, and why. As you learn to discern the neural learning zone, you'll have a way to understand – and *feel* – how to proceed at the pace of trust. You will know how that pace will likely be very different, with each person.

Our whole nervous systems are continually changing, expanding function, learning and growing, or contracting, becoming inhibited, damaged, atrophied. Just as muscles grow when we work out and atrophy when we do not, brains and nervous systems keep on growing and evolving, through our lives, with enrichment and diverse stimulation

Safety is essential for learning to happen. And challenge is essential for learning to happen. If we stay stuck in habitual grooves where they *only* feel safe, our brains and neuroendocrine systems are not active, and our nervous systems atrophy.

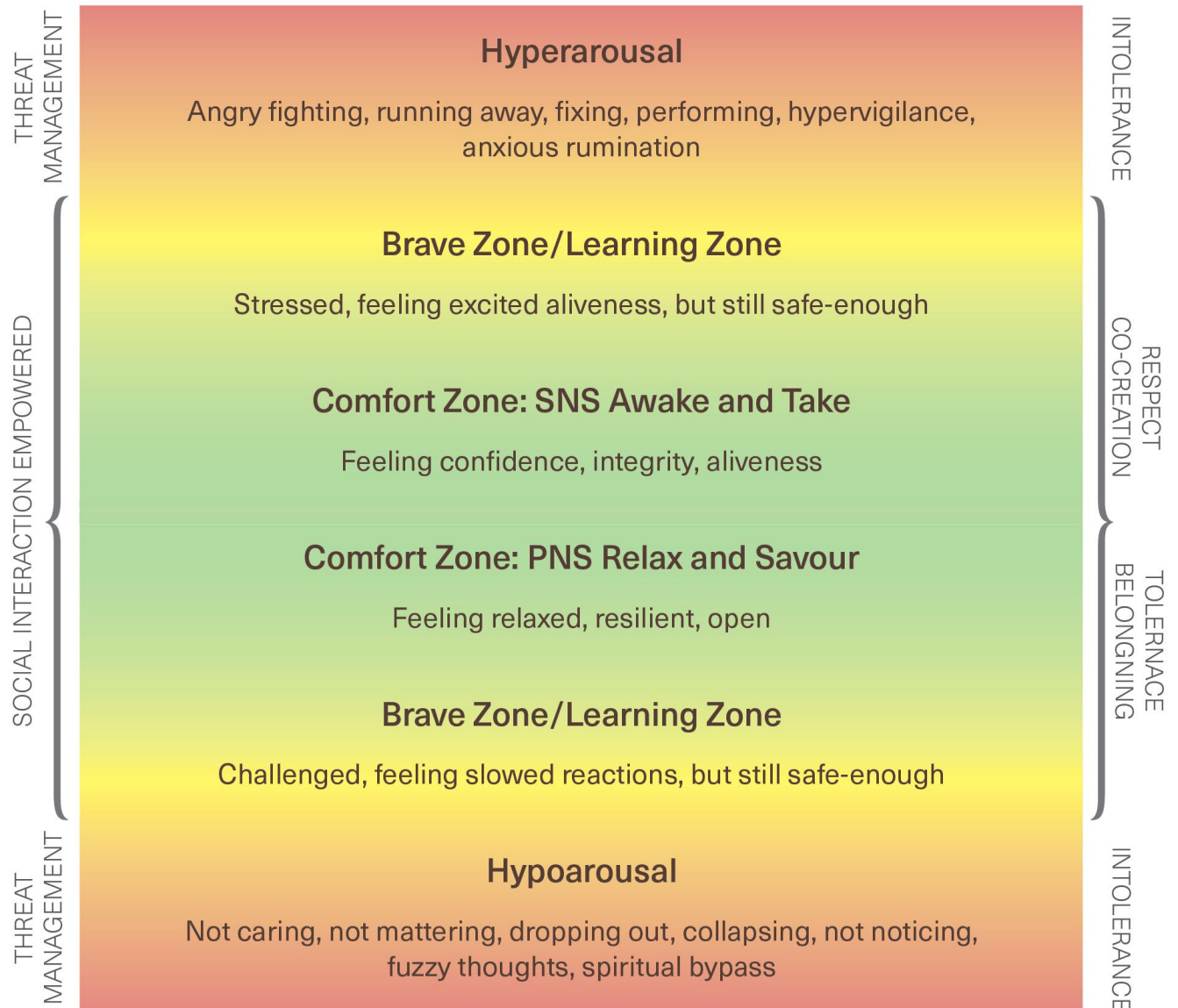
It is a biological principle (*hormesis*) that exposure to just-enough stress creates benefits, even though exposure to any more stress is harmful. We each can get familiar with that feeling of just-enough stress within ourselves. For learning, we need just-enough stress to create a *manageable* challenge, and that just-right stress will be very different for each person. With too much stress, the autonomic nervous system will mobilize as hyperarousal, or shut down into a hypoaroused state. With too little stress, we will stay stuck in our habits and experience nervous system atrophy.

For each of us, it is important to continually assess the limits of our personal ‘learning zone,’ where we may be uncomfortable, but not unsafe. We can aim to work carefully within these limits, while challenging ourselves to continually expand them.

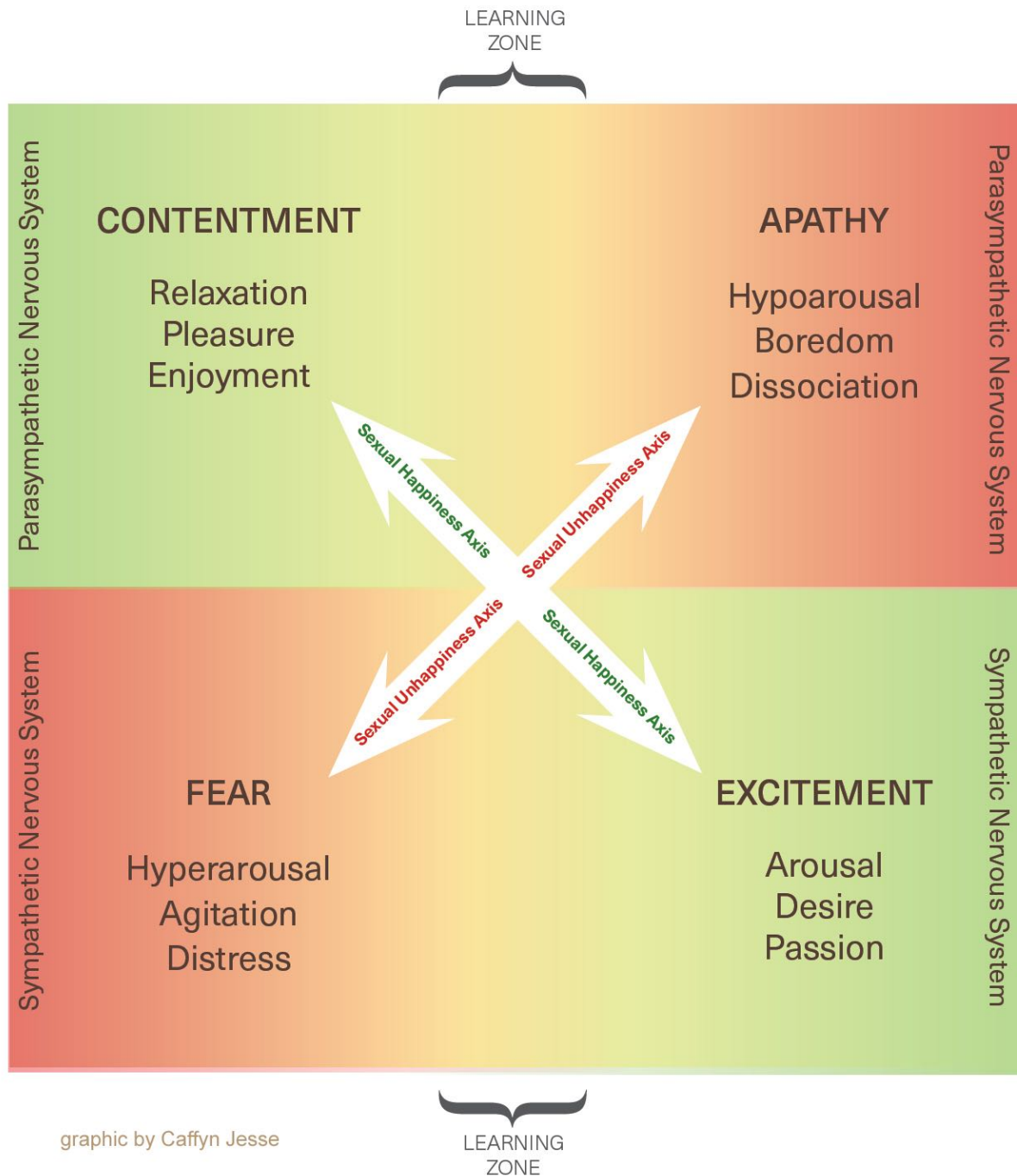
Before and during any exercise, keep checking in with yourself. Do you need more safety and holding in this moment, or more challenge? Do you want to expand your capacity for excitement, engagement and aliveness? Or would it be better to work on building up your capacity for relaxation and detachment? *Go as slowly as you need to go, and keep tracking your feelings from moment-to-moment.* If you find you’ve gone too far or too fast, get the support you need to come back into your personal learning zone.

We can learn to savour relaxed pleasures, challenging ourselves to expand capacities for easeful contentment – without slipping over into boredom or apathy (expanding capacity of the parasympathetic nervous system). We can learn to savour more excitement, challenging ourselves to feel more passion and arousal without slipping over into distress and fear (expanding capacity of the sympathetic nervous system). If we push ourselves too hard, it can be painful and retraumatizing. If we fail to push into our discomfort at all, we stay stuck, and patterns and habits feel compulsory and limiting.

Neural Comfort Zone, Brave Zone and Danger Zone Diagram



Sexual Happiness and Unhappiness and the Nervous System Diagram



Get Activated and Get Easeful

Can you learn to explore high-intensity experiences in ways that are enlivening instead of frightening, at the pace that's right for you? If we experience sexuality and intimacy that is too much too fast, or too little too long, our nervous systems can get hypervigilant. We might feel stuck on high alert. We get activated easily, and find ourselves avoiding experiences that are new, challenging, fearful or forceful.

Practice feeling into activation of the upregulation your autonomic nervous system with activities that feel exciting – but in a controlled way. Pick the level of nervous system arousal that feels right for you. In our learning zone we'll often feel uncomfortable, but not unsafe.

You can activate your nervous system by imagining an activity, or actually doing an activity. Try both, knowing you can change your mind at any moment! Notice where and how excitement slips into anxiety. Notice if breathing into your anxiety transforms it.

You can also practice feeling the downregulation of your nervous system. What feels easeful and peaceful, and when does that slip over into feeling boring or dissociative? When our nervous system needs an exit from distress, we have a neural capacity to “check out.” We can escape or bypass present reality. “Checking out” can be a life-saving strategy that lets us endure the unendurable. It can also become a well-worn neural groove that keeps us from enjoying peace, and savouring satisfaction.

Flattened feeling, persistent worries, fatigue, and loss of interest are some of the signs that we have slipped outside our learning zone into our danger zone. Try choosing safe-enough places where you *want* to rest, and just feel glad about what is. Bravely notice what serenity feels like in your body. Just notice when you “check out,” and see if breathing into your present-moment experience gives you more choice. Notice when you can change your mind, and try it.

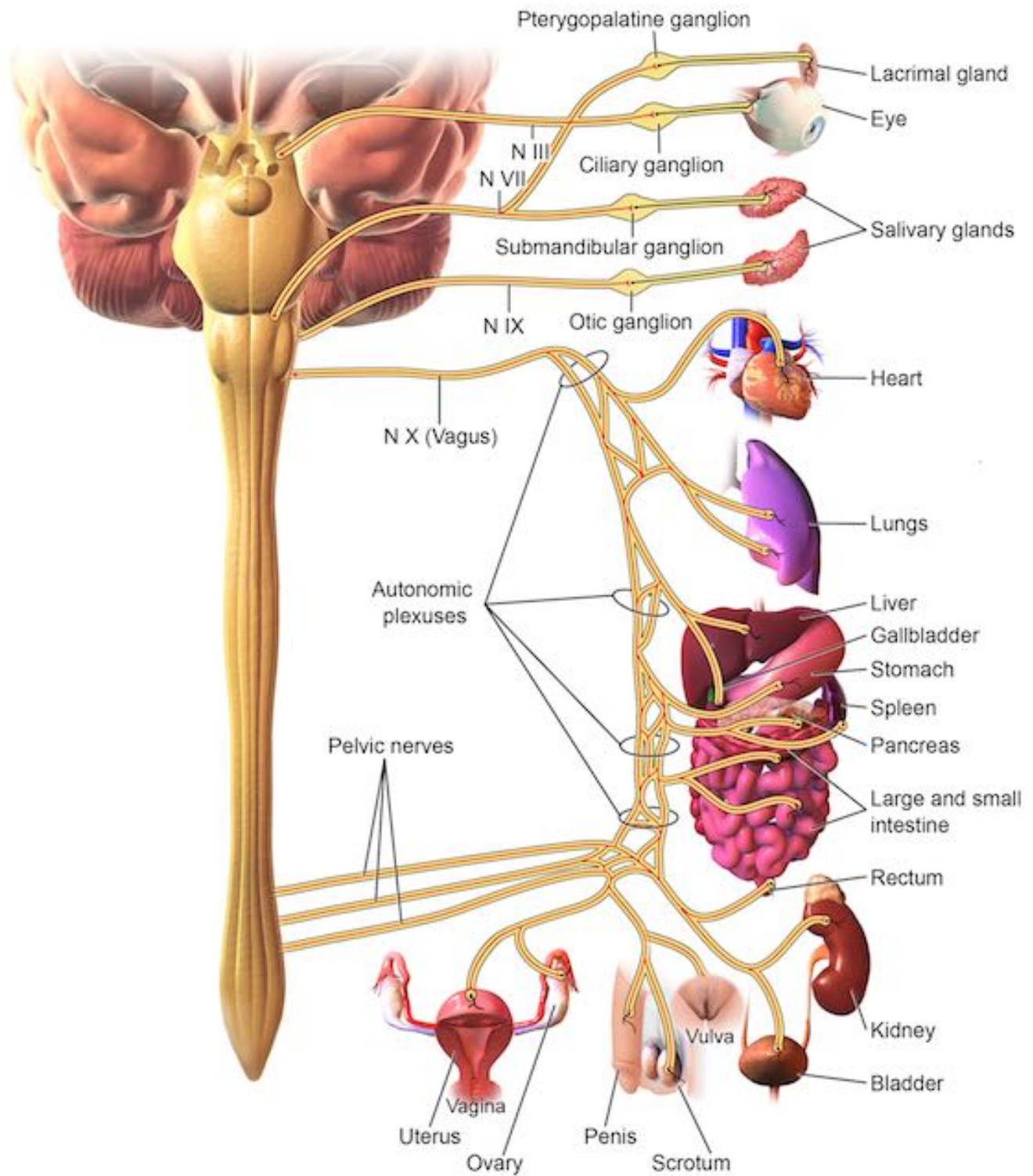
Parasympathetic innervation

drawing by Blausen.com staff, Blausen gallery 2014 with edits by Caffyn Jesse

Parasympathetic nerves stimulate the autonomic functions that happen when we are relaxed and at ease, including sexual arousal, engorgement, salivation, tears and digestion. Parasympathetic hyperactivation associated with stress can trigger a ‘vasovagal response’ where blood pressure and heart rate drop, potentially causing a host of dissociative effects, including lightheadedness, nausea, confusion, an impaired ability to speak, and even loss of consciousness.

Note that the vagus nerve exits the brainstem above the spinal cord and wanders through the body, innervating the all the organs of the abdomen. There it joins with pelvic nerves that innervate the genitals (research has shown that one way for people with complete spinal cord transection to enjoy orgasms is through internal stimulation of the vagus nerve). The vagus nerve communicates with the facial cranial nerve, and the accessory nerve that innervates neck and shoulders. It controls the muscles of the larynx (speech). The auricular branch of the vagus nerve supplies sensations to parts of the ears and auditory canal.

Innervation is bilateral, right and left sides differ (only one side is shown in this schematic drawing).

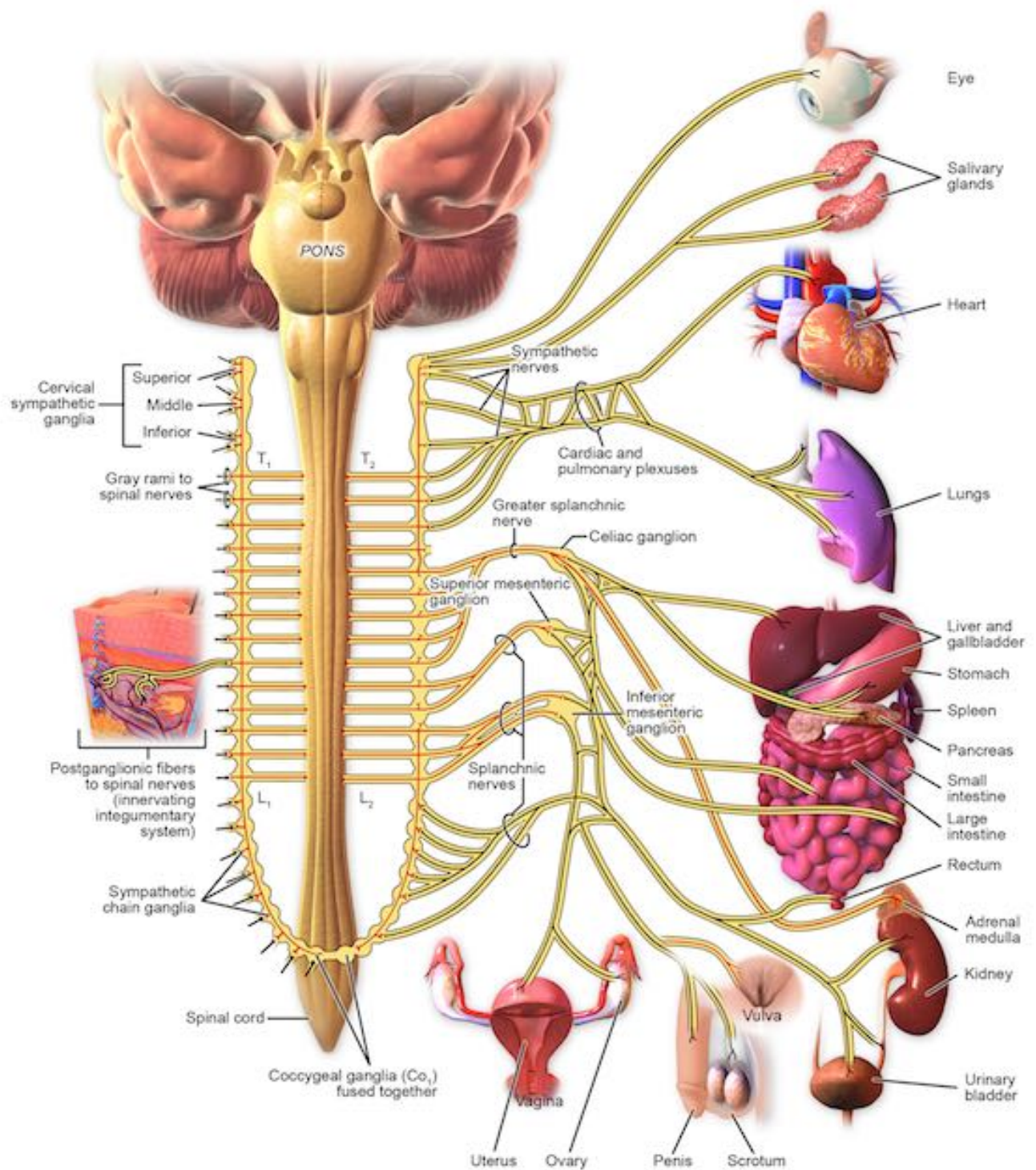


Sympathetic innervation

drawing by Blausen.com staff, Blausen gallery 2014 with edits by Caffyn Jesse

The sympathetic nerves stimulate the autonomic functions that happen when we are excited and alert. Our senses become sharper and muscle tension increases as our bodies become ready for action. Heart speeds up. Breath quickens. Digestion slows. Arousal, including sexual arousal, can be part of the sympathetic response, but engorgement of erectile tissue happens less readily. Goose bumps and sweating can be activated.

Innervation is bilateral, right and left sides differ (only one side is shown in this schematic drawing).



Vagal Fitness

Heartbeats speed up, every time we breathe in. They slow down, every time we breathe out. The difference between the frequency of our heartbeat on the inbreath and our heartbeat on the outbreath is known as heart rate variability (HRV). HRV is reduced by worry and stress; it can be eliminated by trauma. With somatic healing and well-being, it increases. Measures of HRV predict all kinds of good things, including more relational happiness and erotic joy.

The vagus nerve is the primary nerve of the parasympathetic branch of the autonomic nervous system. It exits the spinal column in the neck, and innervates the bronchi, the shoulders, and all the organs of our abdomens into the genitals. Branches of it go up into our heads and connect with facial nerves. It monitors and guides how our whole bodies respond to the environment. By bringing attention to the vagus nerve, we can begin to notice all the ways these areas of our bodies respond to whatever is going on within and around us, without our conscious choosing. We notice when we are experiencing sensations we associate with stress and danger, ease and excitement. Our biochemistry, thought patterns and physiology all are shaped by what's been hard for us. Shoulders hunch, brow furrows, digestion slows or speeds up, pelvic floors clench, breath gets small.

We want to honour the wise ways of bodies, and never force change. We always move at the pace of trust. But when we want to, we can use simple movement, breathing and connection practices, alone and together, to "speak back" into our autonomic nervous systems. As we improve our "Vagal Fitness", and increase our HRV, we have more choices.

Practices for Vagal Fitness

Mindful breathing

Making weird faces

Singing

Chanting, toning, making funny noises

Listening

Shoulder awareness, movements and breath for releasing the harness

4 Diaphragms: Throat, Chest, Pelvis, Feet

Belly Breath

Pelvic awareness: movements and breath for releasing the pelvic clench

Savouring

Laughter

Gratitude

Mindful pooping

Anal Breath

Tail Space: activating the tail

Massage

Self touch including both gentle caresses and tapping, slapping

Slow sex

Quickies

and many more.....

A Self-assessment Tool for Tracking the Neural Learning Zone

You can use this worksheet to support you in noticing the difference between being uncomfortable and unsafe. Tracking the neural learning zone, and experimenting with getting brave, at the pace of trust, we build capacity for more courageous engagement, and deepening intimacy.

Making Brave Space for Embodied Transformation

A Self-assessment Tool for Tracking the Neural Learning Zone

Circle the number along each continuum that feels resonant. Add them together to take a measure of your courage and capacity, just for today.

Neural Danger Zone		Neural Learning Zone		Neural Dead Zone
Shame and Blame Fear Disconnection <i>No learning is possible</i>	Scared <--> Brave < _ + _ + _ + _ + _ > = ____/30 (30 is Bravest)	Brave Learning Courage Connection <i>Learning is wanted and empowered</i>	Brave <--> Stuck < _ + _ + _ + _ + _ > = ____/ (30 is Bravest)	Security and Comfort Safety <i>No learning is happening</i>
Relationship as Threat Management Connection for reassurance. Reaching out to fix or escalate conflict	1 2 3 4 5	Exciting Intimacies Co-creation Friendship Challenge Support	5 4 3 2 1	Safe Relationships People in defined roles. No challenge or deep intimacy
Safety-Driven What do I need to do to get by?	1 2 3 4 5	Values-Driven Committed Courageous	5 4 3 2 1	Accepting I'm okay, you're okay
Reactive Overwhelmed Hypervigilant or dissociated	1 2 3 4 5	Responsible Conscious self-shaping	5 4 3 2 1	Calm Managed environment, safety shape
Evasive Deny mistakes, or pathologize them (shame)	1 2 3 4 5	Fallible Humble and accountable Seeking repair	5 4 3 2 1	Competent No mistakes Nothing new is attempted
Hidden Armoured, enraged, shutting down or leaving town	1 2 3 4 5	Knowable Vulnerable sharing of limits and longings	5 4 3 2 1	Nice Shared self conforms to personal and cultural scripts
Insatiable Too big to begin Too important to stop	1 2 3 4 5	Satisfiable Excited desire for manageable achievement Savour and rest	5 4 3 2 1	Satisfied Contentment with no or low desire and arousal

by Caffyn Jesse



Caffyn Jesse

This booklet is part of an extensive curriculum on the Art and Science of Sacred Intimacy, offered by Caffyn at www.IntimacyEducator.com

Caffyn's early-life inspiration was drawn from Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, whose writings modelled and encouraged trust in the power of the erotic, the magic of queerness, and the longing to touch and be touched at the soul level. The structure and content of the Sacred Intimacy work and erotic massage rituals are based on teachings from Joseph Kramer, Barbara Carellas, Annie Sprinkle and Betty Martin. For many years Caffyn taught and evolved curriculum with Corinne Diachuk and Dr. Liam captain Snowdon; together they founded the Institute for the Study of Somatic Sex Education. Mehdi Darvish Yaha was an early student of Intimacy Education who returned to assist and co-create. Katie Spataro, Christiane Pelmas, and Kai Cheng Thom have contributed mightily to Caffyn's understandings of sacred intimacy. Many other colleagues and students have been important influences. Teaching Intimacy Education with Dee Larsen in Ireland has been especially joyful. Caffyn is still learning and evolving this program.