

# Polyvagal Theory: Using the Autonomic Ladder to Work with Perfectionism

with Deb Dana, LCSW

a Free Report from NICABM

National Institute for the Clinical  
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*What's happening in the nervous system when a client is striving to be perfect?*

*For one practical way to break it down for clients, we might turn to Polyvagal Theory.*

*Below, Deb Dana, LCSW will walk us through a metaphor for the autonomic nervous system and explain how she applies the metaphor (and Polyvagal Theory) to her work with clients who are prone to perfectionism.*

*And finally, we've put together a way to visualize the ladder metaphor that might help you open up a conversation with your clients.*

**Ms. Dana:** One of the foundations of working through Polyvagal lens is the autonomic ladder, which is a sort of foundational metaphor for my work.

At the very top of the autonomic ladder in ventral vagal, we can see the world. We can see options. We feel connected to the greater world and life is good.

When we move back in the autonomic timeline and the autonomic hierarchy into sympathetic, we move down to the middle of the ladder. Our focus gets smaller. We can't see as far. We have fewer options.

Then finally at the very beginning of the autonomic timeline, the dorsal vagal responds. We're at the bottom of the ladder, just holding on. If we look to the top, the ventral vagal state seems so far away and in order to get there, we need to climb through some sympathetic mobilized energy.

**"The autonomic ladder has been a great way for clients to understand their different states."**

So this has been a great way for clients to understand their different states.

Working with clients who are addicted to perfection is interesting through the autonomic nervous system.

Perfectionism is often mapped into the sympathetic nervous system stage. The drive to do something perfectly is the nervous system working to keep a client out of a fear.

So often when we begin to map on the autonomic hierarchy, we find the thought that "I have to do this perfectly, because if I don't, then something very bad or dangerous will happen." That's an early shaping of the nervous system.

**"The drive to do something perfectly is the nervous system working to keep a client out of a fear."**

Often people feel "If I don't do it perfectly, I'll end up in a dorsal vagal despair and collapse, hopeless, disconnected state." Autonomically, dorsal vagal collapse, which is also where dissociation resides, is the hardest place to recover from. It's the most dangerous for our physical body because it shuts down all of our

systems into very, very slow heartbeat, not much breath, shuts your digestion down.

So what happens is this drivenness for perfection is often the nervous system attempting to keep the client out of the dorsal vagal shut down. When we begin to map perfectionism on the autonomic hierarchy, clients begin to get a sense that it's a survival response that is trying to keep them out of the more hopeless state.

“We can begin to help clients understand the difference between being driven and feeling fulfilled by doing something.”

It's still physiologically and psychologically not a state of well-being. We can begin to help clients understand the difference between being driven and feeling fulfilled by doing something.

One of the ways that I find this is easy to help clients understand this is by using physical space to move between those two states.

So in my office I may have them simply stand and it may simply be, "We're going to start in this perfectionist state, in the sympathetic nervous system. We are going to take it on and you're going to tell me the story from that state. Then, I'm simply going to have you take one giant step to the right.

Now you're in ventral vagal mood, and we're going to bring your ventral vagal system alive. We're going to work together through eye gaze, through voice, through breathing together. I'm going to hold you in this ventral vagal state and then I want you to tell me the story through your ventral vagal state."

And then we probably wander back and forth, move back, move forth, to really feel the difference in the body that these two states bring. Then as the client sits down, we can reflect on the action of whatever it is they're trying to do perfectly, and what it might feel like to do it from that ventral vagal state of feeling filled and nourished by it.

# Polyvagal Theory: The Autonomic Ladder

## Understanding the Nervous System

Adapted from Deb Dana, LCSW

