



## Got Glimmer?

Movies do more than just tell a story. Some IMMERSE or plunge you into intense, sensory experiences meant to leave a lasting impression while others rely on emotional story lines with meaningful themes. One such movie is *THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS* which is based on the life of CHRIS GARDNER, a man struggling with homelessness while raising his son as a single parent. It's a powerful and at times painful journey to watch, but the message is clear. Your focus can determine your reality.

Spell:        RELY                    SENSORY                    THEMES

What movie was mentioned? THE PURSUIT OF HAPPYNESS  
To leave a lasting impression, this movie relies on \_\_\_\_\_ story lines and meaningful themes. EMOTIONAL

Who's life is this movie based upon? CHRIS GARDNER

What does immerse mean?

What specific challenge did Chris Gardner face in his life?

Name a movie that relies on intense, sensory experiences meant to leave a lasting impression.

We've all heard APHORISMS (pithy observations that contain a general truth) like these and about the power of positive thinking which can seem trite or CLICHÉ and overused thanks to the complexities in our daily lives. But one ADAGE which seems to hold relevance is that things are not always as they appear to be, including catchy little sayings! More now than ever, we need to reset our expectations about what we can and cannot control during these UNPRECEDENTED times. And thankfully each and every one of us comes already equipped with an AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM ready to help us answer the call!

Spell:        DAILY                    POWER                    THINKING

We've all heard about the power of \_\_\_\_\_ thinking. POSITIVE

What other word was used for trite? CLICHÉ

In your words, describe what an aphorism is?

What's another adage or saying that you've heard before?

What is meant by "unprecedented times?"

Each of us comes already equipped with an \_\_\_\_\_ to help us answer the call. AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM



## **The Autonomic Ladder**

DEB DANA, a therapist working with trauma, collaborated with DR. PORGES and helped translate his POLYVAGAL THEORY into a more practical everyday understanding. Introduced in 1994, Dr. Porges identified a hierarchy of autonomic nervous system (ANS) responses that developed as a result of human evolutionary development. The AUTONOMIC LADDER is a representation of these neural defensive processes that automatically come online in an attempt to protect us.

Who did Deb Dana collaborate with? DR PORGES

What is the name of Dr. Porges theory? POLYVAGAL THEORY

What year did Dr. Porges introduce it? 1994

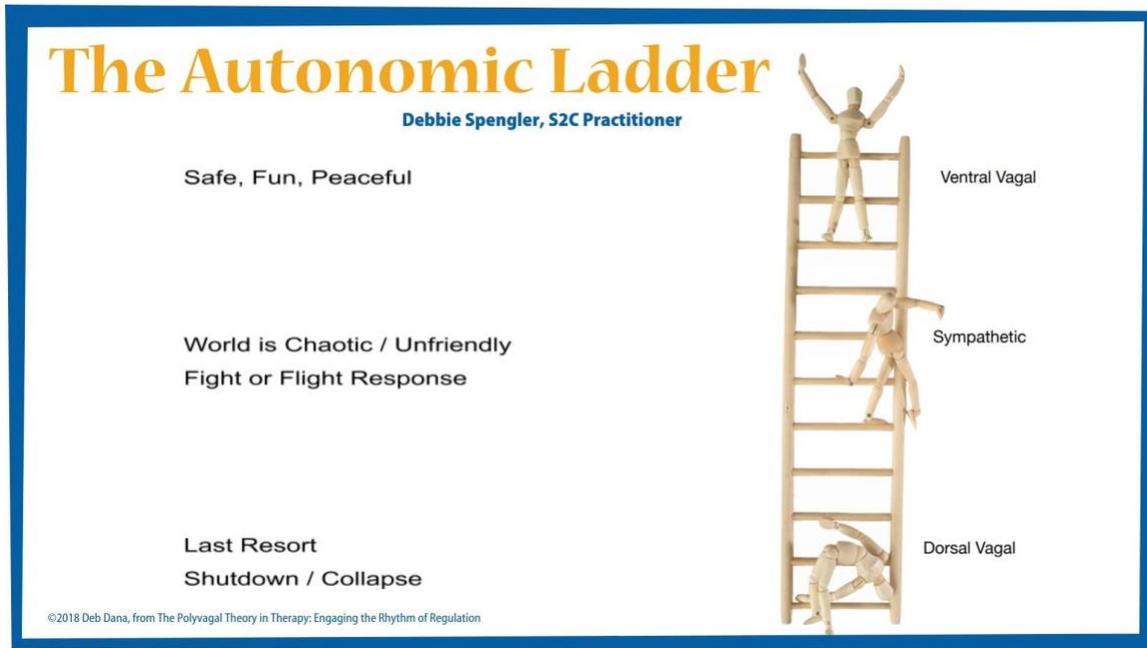
What is the acronym for the autonomic nervous system? ANS

In your own words what is the autonomic ladder?

Theorize why you think Deb Dana chose a ladder as a representation and what it may imply?

VAKT: Watch this video (4.10 minutes) of Dr. Porges explaining Polyvagal Theory. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ec3AUMDjtKQ>





Starting at the top of the ladder is the VENTRAL VAGAL PATHWAY. Otherwise known as our SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM, it is considered to be the newest neural system in terms of evolutionary development. According to Dana, in the ventral vagal state we are CALM, breathing evenly, and able to tune into conversations and tune out distracting noises as we connect to the world and those around us. It is a place of hopefulness and resource, although it is not without problems.

What is the name of the neural pathway at the top of the ladder? VENTRAL VAGAL PATHWAY

This pathway is also known as what? SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT SYSTEM

In this pathway we are able to tune into conversations and tune out distracting \_\_\_\_\_? NOISES

Describe an experience that one might have in this state?

Name an anatomical structure involved in our breathing processes?

In terms of evolutionary development, why do you think the newer social engagement system would have developed after more primitive defensive neural systems?



But in this state, we have the ability to acknowledge distress and EXPLORE OPTIONS, to reach out for support, and develop reasonable responses.<sup>2</sup> Think about how much we rely on our ability to COMMUNICATE here! It's our autonomic nervous system's job to help keep us SAFE which it does through a process called NEUROCEPTION. When something triggers a neuroception of danger, the SYMPATHETIC branch of the ANS activates and down the ladder we move into the defensive state of action or escape. FIGHT or FLIGHT lives here. Our heart rate speeds up, and our breathing becomes short and shallow. (Ever notice holding your breath when you're feeling tense?)

What is the job of our autonomic nervous system?

Our ANS keeps us safe through a process known as \_\_\_\_\_.  
NEUROCEPTION

Which branch of the ANS activates when danger is triggered?  
SYMPATHETIC

The ANS's defensive state of 'action or escape' is also known commonly as \_\_\_\_\_.  
FIGHT OR FLIGHT

Describe one physical result of being in a defensive state?

Describe a situation that might cause a person to move down the Autonomic Ladder into fight or flight?

But yet even during sympathetic activation we're still feeling hopeful that our efforts will give us enough space to take a breath and climb back up the ladder to the place of safety and connection. This step down on the autonomic ladder can also be considered a step BACKWARD on the EVOLUTIONARY timeline of neural development. And as fear continues to creep in, the message our nervous system receives is that: "No one can be trusted. The world is dangerous, and I need to protect myself."<sup>3</sup> When we feel hopeless and action doesn't work, we fall all the way down to the very bottom rungs of the ladder into our oldest, most PRIMITIVE neural pathway- the DORSAL VAGAL pathway. This is the path of LAST RESORT. The "primitive vagus takes us into neural shutdown, collapse, and dissociation." From the perspective of the evolutionary timeline, our mind and body has moved us into a type of conservation mode.<sup>4</sup>

When we're feeling hopeful, what are we able to do with regard to the autonomic ladder?



A step down on the autonomic ladder is akin to a step backward on what timeline? EVOLUTIONARY

What's one message that our nervous system might receive?

Name the oldest most primitive neural pathway. DORSAL VAGAL

The Dorsal Vagal pathway is a path of last \_\_\_\_\_. RESORT

What does primitive mean?

In your own words, describe what being in a conservation mode might look like to an outside observer?

But even here, in the deepest parts of our neural defenses, our autonomic nervous system has developed an ADAPTIVE FLEXIBILITY to not only move us downward into our defensive mode, but back upwards as well! This shift between defensive systems and social engagement depends on the PROCESSING of sensory information that the nervous system receives from both the environment and even our "VISCERA" or internal organs- There's a reason for the saying, I have a "gut feeling."<sup>5</sup> And so even at the bottom rung of the ladder, if we can begin to experience safety, our defense systems will automatically start to SHUT DOWN so to speak. Our heart rate will begin to decrease, and we will start to experience a calming.<sup>6</sup>

Even in the deepest parts of our neural defenses, our ANS has developed an adaptive \_\_\_\_\_ to move us downward into our defensive mode, and back upwards as well. FLEXIBILITY

This shift between defensive systems and social engagement depends on the \_\_\_\_\_ of sensory information. PROCESSING

What are our internal organs also called? VISCERA

When we start to experience safety, what happens to our defense systems?

Describe a situation in which you experienced a "gut feeling."

## Triggers and Glimmers

So how can having a better understanding of our autonomic nervous system help us, especially during times when expectations cannot possibly be met or when something is completely out of our control? We are meant to FLUCTUATE in our regulatory and emotional states. And Deb Dana

Question Type Key

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KNOWN – SEMI-OPEN – PRIOR KNOWLEDGE – MATH – OPEN – VAKT



developed a concept to help us bring ATTENTION to the key moments of “REGULATION and DEFENSIVE NEURAL ACTIVATION.” TRIGGERS and GLIMMERS are the actual events that move us up and down the autonomic ladder.

What does it mean to fluctuate?

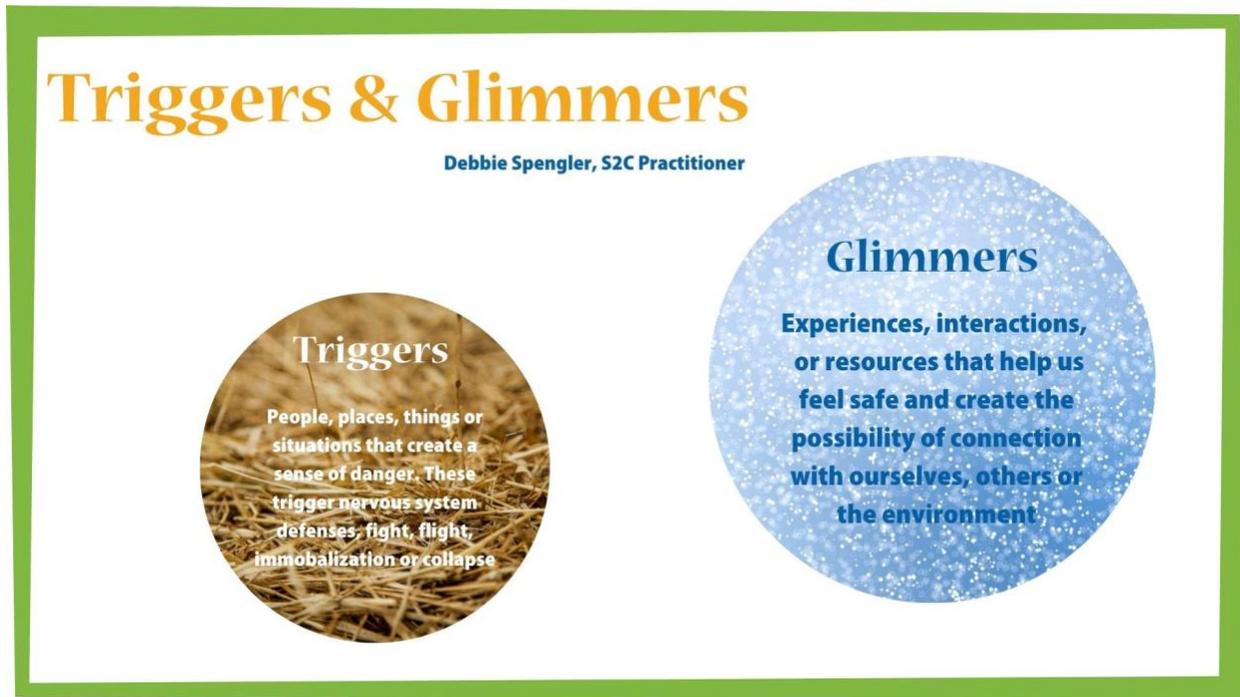
We are meant to fluctuate between our regulatory and \_\_\_\_\_ states.

EMOTIONAL

Deb Dana developed a concept to help us bring our \_\_\_\_\_ to the key moments of regulation and defensive neural activation. ATTENTION

What are the actual events that move us up and down the autonomic ladder? TRIGGERS AND GLIMMERS

VAKT: Look at the graphic below. Which circle do your eyes go to first?



We must PRACTICE bringing our attention to what is happening inside our bodies, in the environment, and in our relationships that set these autonomic state shifts in motion. Triggers can be brought about in any number of ways: through an interaction or because of DISAPPOINTMENTS. And don't forget about FEAR and ANXIETY, such as worrying about the future. These are huge triggers! But in contrast, the



ventral vagal system (top of the ladder) guides our experience of glimmers. The neuroception of SAFETY creates the possibility of relaxing so we can be open and available to experiences, interactions, or resources that calm us and help us feel secure.<sup>7</sup>

What must \_\_\_\_\_ bringing our attention to what is happening inside our bodies. PRACTICE

Name an experience that can bring about a trigger?

The neuroception of \_\_\_\_\_ creates the possibility of relaxing. SAFETY

What happens when we are able to relax?

Describe a situation that might bring about the neuroception of safety.

## **Personal Profile Map**

Deb Dana called neuroception and the related autonomic nervous system states a “WORDLESS EXPERIENCE” and so she created the “PERSONAL PROFILE MAP” to help us identify the events that coincide with each ANS state. Triggers are typically the most ACCESSIBLE & easiest for people to identify. That is because they tend to produce in us very NOTICEABLE thoughts and physiological reactions.<sup>8</sup> When a trigger is identified, we want to bring our attention to how our body responds, the physical reactions, and behaviors. It may not seem like we are doing much when we identify our triggers, but it is a clear way to begin to move ourselves out of what Deb Dana calls, the “self-critical story” of “what has happened to me” and into a curiosity about “how I respond.”

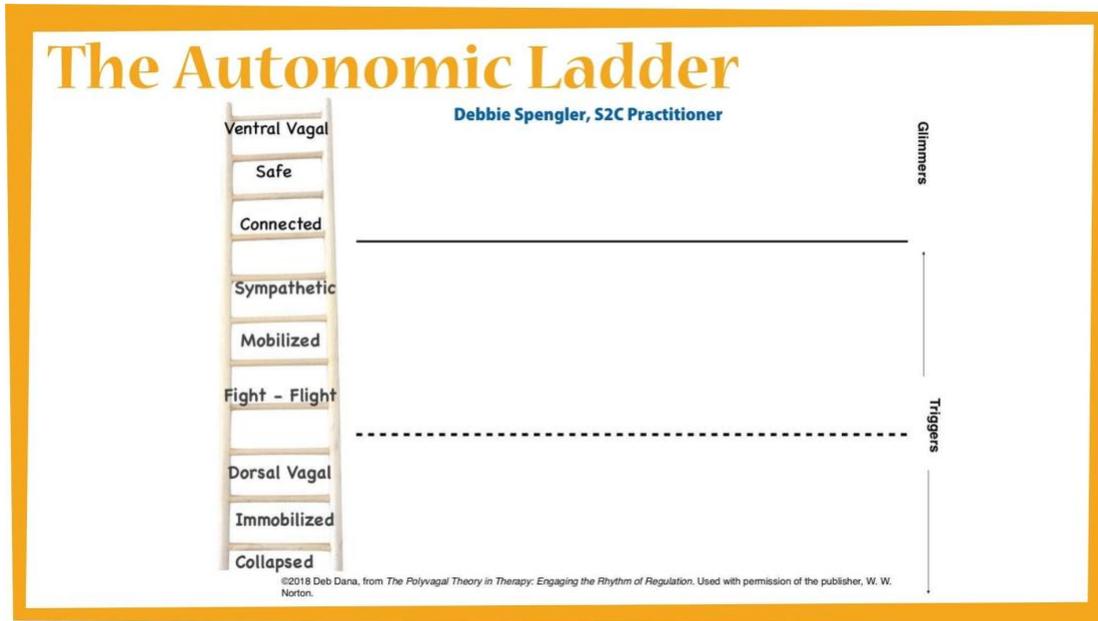
Deb Dana call neuroception and the related autonomic nervous states a \_\_\_\_\_? WORDLESS EXPERIENCE

What is the purpose of the “PERSONAL PROFILE MAP?”

Why are triggers typically the easiest for people to identify?

Triggers tend to produce in us very noticeable \_\_\_\_\_ and physiological \_\_\_\_\_? THOUGHTS / REACTIONS

VAKT: Look at the graphic below. Look at the part of the ladder where we are open to glimmers. Now think about triggers and look to that part of the ladder. Point to it.



Glimmers are oftentimes the most CHALLENGING part of this exercise for people to recognize because the autonomic responses felt during a glimmering moment are nuanced and SUBTLE. This is because the cues of safety that then allow us to perceive glimmers are often sensed in “MICRO-MOMENTS” of ventral vagal activation. CONSCIOUS attention is needed in these moments to catch them and may be experienced as feeling peaceful, having a general feeling of regulation, and a sense of “I’m handling things.” Again, we want to bring our attention to how our body responds and note the physical reactions and behaviors that accompany it.

Why is recognizing glimmers a challenge for people?

What other word was used for nuanced? SUBTLE

Cues of safety that allow us to perceive glimmers are often sensed in what kind of moments? MICRO MOMENTS

We want to bring our attention to how our body responds and note the \_\_\_\_\_ reactions and behaviors that accompany it. PHYSICAL

Micro moments give a general feeling of regulation and a sense of “I’m handling things.” What other thoughts might someone have during a micro moment?

Glimmers can help calm a nervous system that is in survival mode and bring a return of autonomic regulation. By REGULARLY bringing attention to these small moments, we can begin to create a buildup or “CRITICAL

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MASS” that moves our system towards a tipping point. Multiple micro-moments may become significant enough to create an AUTONOMIC SHIFT.<sup>10</sup> And it must be said here, that bringing attention to glimmers is not negating or minimizing the suffering we experience with triggers. A STRENGTHS-BASED perspective reminds us that well-being is not simply the absence of problems, it is also about the presence of strengths.

Glimmers can help calm a nervous system that is in what kind of mode?  
SURVIVAL MODE

What term was used to refer to a “buildup?” CRITICAL MASS

In terms of our ANS, what is it we hope to achieve by creating multiple micro moments?

What perspective reminds us of that well-being is not simply the absence of problems? STRENGTH BASED PERSPECTIVE

In your own words, describe what having a strength-based perspective might look like.

*“The greatest thing then, in all education, is to make our nervous system our ally as opposed to our enemy.”*



*-William James*



## Co-regulation

In a way, we are all in a pursuit of happiness and like Chris Gardner, we recognize that well-being goes beyond the lack of challenges. We must arm ourselves with a strength’s-based perspective as our guide because we know that strength and RESILIENCE goes well beyond witty aphorisms! When we gain AWARENESS of our glimmers and triggers, we EMPOWER and REGULATE ourselves. We give off cues of safety to those around us so that their autonomic nervous system can begin to reap the benefits. This is CO-REGULATION and it starts within us so that we can then be ready to support those who need us the most.

In a way, we are all in a pursuit of \_\_\_\_\_. HAPPINESS

What does resilience mean?

When we gain \_\_\_\_\_ of our glimmers and triggers, we empower and \_\_\_\_\_ ourselves. AWARENESS / REGULATE

In your own words, describe what it means when you hear the phrase “...co-regulation starts within us.”

So get to know your own nervous system, BEFRIEND it! Bring your attention to its INNATE or natural WISDOM. And encourage others to begin to trust that their own nervous system, regardless of the challenges, is working for them too! When we create a sense of PREDICTABILITY within ourselves, we may no longer feel that we are simply at the mercy of the Fates or Covid for that matter! And just remember, that when life throws %\$@#! at you, cover it in glimmer!

What does the author recommend we do with regards to our own nervous system?

What other word was used to mean “natural” INNATE

The author implies that our nervous systems has a natural \_\_\_\_\_? WISDOM

What does it mean to be “at the mercy of the fates?”

### **Creative Writing Prompt:**

Talk about whether or not Deb Dana’s theory about bringing attention to triggers or glimmers has any value for the average person or for yourself for that matter.



Describe a situation in which you were available to spot a “glimmer.”



*Debbie Spengler finds many of her Glimmers when she’s supporting spellers during an S2C session, when beating her family at the board game Clue, & during early morning walks with her dog Luna!*

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