
Fluid Attachment: Awakening Social Engagement

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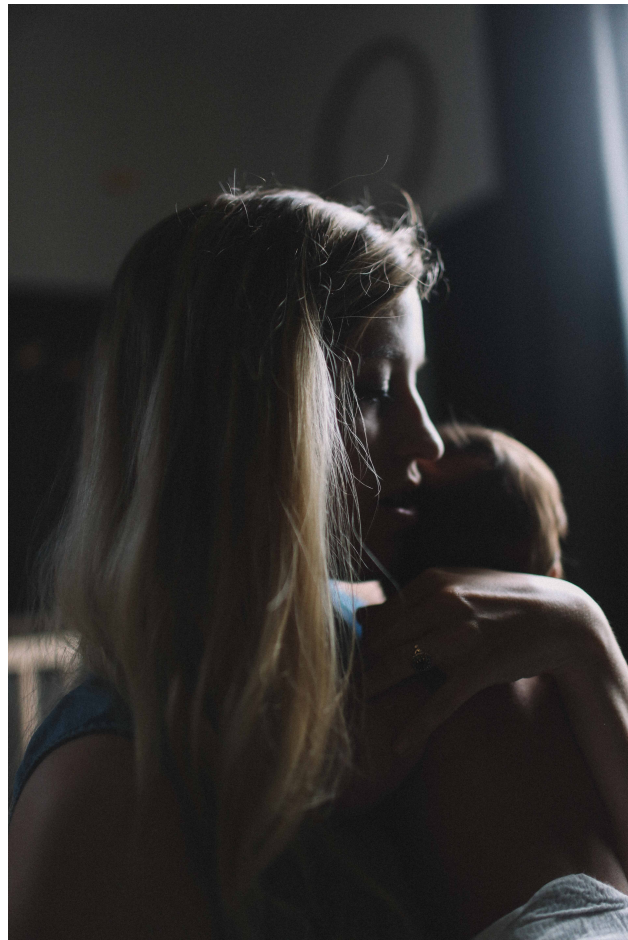
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Introduction

The social engagement nervous system is a term from the work of Stephen Porges, university scientist and professor of Psychiatry whose polyvagal theory has changed the face of psychotherapy and trauma work in recent years. Attachment refers to the connection we feel with those close to us in our lives. Babies and children thrive when they feel safe in relationship with a caregiver and want to stay close to that person. Attachment behavior involves seeking to be and stay in close proximity to the object of our attachment. Our social engagement system enables attachment, involving all the muscles of facial expression, hearing, speaking, sucking and related emotions.

I teach a workshop called *Fluid Attachment: Awakening the Social Engagement System with Continuum*. This article explains how the subtle inquiry of Continuum into our fluid nature using breaths, sounds, movement and mindful awareness can strengthen our ability to rest in relational attachment.



New and Old Nervous Systems

Most of us learned in school about the autonomic nervous system. We learned about its two parts: the sympathetic and parasympathetic, and that these two must be in balance for health. Adequate sympathetic tone enables us to be alert and awake during the day. The parasympathetic system calms us down to sleep at night, grow and repair our tissues, and digest our food. Under threat, our sympathetic system helps us to fight or flee. Our parasympathetic system is responsible for “playing dead” – the freeze response.

Porges noted a third, evolutionarily newer nervous system missed by this description. He pointed out that the Vagus nerve, commonly associated with the parasympathetic nervous system, has different parts. Hence the term “polyvagal,” poly meaning many.



Stephen Porges, PhD

The parasympathetic nervous system is associated with fibers of the Vagus nerve emerging from the dorsal motor nucleus (nerve center) in the brain stem. It travels down through the neck to innervate all major organs of the body. Vagus means wanderer. It is a wondering nerve, covering an immense amount of territory.

Porges emphasizes another part of the Vagus nerve, the ventral vagus. Ventral means in front, and it is in front of the dorsal (back) Vagus. The ventral Vagus nerve fibers emerge from a different nucleus in the brain stem, the nucleus ambiguus. It is actually like a different nerve with different functions.

The ventral Vagus nerve is situated near and associated with other cranial nerves involved in facial expressions, hearing, speaking, looking, and sucking, all essential aspects of social engagement. The ventral Vagus nerve, also essential to social engagement, travels down through the neck, like the dorsal Vagus (parasympathetic), supplying the organs above the diaphragm, the heart and lungs. It regulates our heartbeat and breathing. Furthermore, Porges noted that the ventral Vagus, unlike the dorsal Vagus, is myelinated, or covered

with an insulating fatty sheath, which enables it to convey messages very quickly. This makes it possible for us to quickly shift our hearts and breath as we interact with others. We can shift moods and experience empathy as we alter our own physiology in relationship with others.

Evolving Responses

Porges further noted that these three aspects of our autonomic nervous system: the parasympathetic, sympathetic and social engagement, developed at different times in evolution. The parasympathetic relates to the trunk of the body and is present in simpler creatures without limbs. Even unicellular organisms respond to environmental threat by immobilizing, withdrawing or contracting away from the threat – a typical parasympathetic response.



As creatures developed more mobility with legs, they also developed a sympathetic nervous system. This enabled them to mobilize, to fight or flee, when threatened. Reptiles are excellent representatives of this state.

Mammals, and especially primates, developed a social engagement system. Their young needed protection for an extended period after birth. Nature arranged for this protection. Baby mammals are born with their social engagement system online, although it is not fully mature at birth. Consider a newborn baby gazing into mom's eyes, suckling at her breast, or crying for her when separated. These are all aspects of the social engagement system. Mothers, and to some extent fathers and other caregivers, are also equipped for holding and protecting the little one. New moms also gaze into their newborns' eyes. They want to see and hold and touch their baby as soon as possible. All of us are affected by the cuteness of babies. Their big eyes and tiny features draw us in. If our social engagement system is online, we are more likely to want to hold and coo to a baby than to hurt or eat it!

Our social engagement system is our birthright, but it can be turned off.

Trauma Responses

While we are all designed to be socially engaging with our families and community as we arrive, our social attempts to engage as little ones are not always met. When infants feel threatened, unsafe or insecure, their first response involves the social engagement system. They will look for mom or caregiver, cry for her if she is not there, and settle with her soothing responses. If mom is not available, however, little ones change their response. Their cry becomes more intense. Have you ever heard a baby's cry shift from a soft beckoning kind of sound to a more urgent, even angry shrieking? This is characteristic of the shift from social engagement to sympathetic fight-flight nervous system.

In a sympathetic state, muscles are tensed in the arms, legs and jaws, heart rate and breathing increase, directing blood to the big muscles in the extremities needed to fight or flee. Babies, however, are too small and weak to fight or to run away. They may try, with their little arms and legs being flung around in the air, their previously cute little faces turning red and hot. It becomes more difficult to ignore a baby crying this way. If little ones needs are met through this kind of sympathetic reaction, and they feel safe, they can then begin to settle back into a more relaxed state and the social engagement system can come back online. If they are never responded to with social engagement, however, and only get required attention when they scream, this may become a pattern. They learn



that this is the way to get their needs met. Social engaging becomes less available over time, as it is not rewarded.

Furthermore, individuals in a social engagement state are sensitive to their own feelings and those of others. It may be too emotionally painful to stay so aware if they are not being met at a basic level of being.

Unfortunately, some little ones are not attended to even when they scream and pound their little fists. Consider the babies of my generation who were all separated from their

anesthetized mothers upon being pulled out by forceps, and taken care of in a newborn nursery. On top of the many other shocks of being born in this violent, non-relational way, babies in the nursery could cry their hearts out without being picked up and cuddled. They were taken to their mothers for breastfeeding according to a schedule, rather than their needs. Busy nurses might be heartbroken hearing babies cry, but might not have time to soothe each one in a room full of newborns.

Little ones have also endured mysterious parenting advice encouraging parents to let their children cry it out. These little ones become exhausted in their sympathetic mode of screaming and eventually become quiet. They often become known as good babies who seldom make a peep and never disturb anyone. These little ones have usually flipped out of sympathetic mode into a parasympathetic freeze state. They are not quiet because they are being good. They are quiet because they are no longer really there. They are in a dissociated state of withdrawal.



For relatively weak, small animals, like humans, being attacked by a saber-toothed tiger and unable protect themselves, this parasympathetic withdrawal is a kindness of nature. In

dissociation, there is less presence, less sensation. If I am going to be eaten by a tiger, I would prefer to not feel its teeth sinking into my skin. I appreciate nature making this option available to me, although freeze is not a conscious choice. When little ones need to resort to this mode of defense, however, there is a tendency to continue responding to stressful situations in this way throughout life. This is also true for people who have experienced overwhelming trauma at later times in their lives. We can become stuck in fight-flight or freeze ways of responding to stress, long after the appropriateness of these reactions has passed.

Defense vs. Safety



When we are locked in these older defensive modes of coping, our social engagement system is less available. This system can be seen as an immobilization system associated with trust and safety. To access it, we must feel safe. To feel safe, we must perceive our current reality, rather than responding to the present circumstances as if they were the same as in the past. To come into present time requires paying attention to what is now. This is where mindfulness practices are

extremely helpful in rewiring our brains.

Take a moment now to notice your breath, how fast or slow it is, where you sense it in your body, what its movement is like in your chest, and where else in your body you notice it. What happens with your sense of being present as you do this simple exploration?

Coming into awareness of present time sensations can rouse the social nervous system. Porges has also found that the social nervous system can be brought back online by stimulating its gateways. For example, when incommunicative autistic children listen to certain kinds of music, designed to stimulate the little muscles of the middle ear, they begin to communicate. Similarly, we can awaken the little muscles of our faces, tongues, and throats by making tiny intentional micro-movements in Continuum. We also awaken our ears, throats, and tongues in Continuum by voicing unusual sounds and listening to their subtle vibrations. Another portal to the social engagement system is the heart.

The Heart and Social Engagement

Our hearts are an inherent aspect of the social engagement system. *Take a moment just now to consider someone you love, who loves you, who you care deeply about. It could be someone from the past if you don't have someone in your life like that right now. It could also be a dog, cat or other pet or animal that you love. As you think about this being, let yourself be aware of your heart. What do you notice there? What are the sensations like? Chances are, you notice something. If you have completely positive feelings about this person, you may sense some warmth, softening, expansion or "warm, fuzzy" feelings in your heart area. If you are missing that person, you will probably also be sensing something in your heart. In this case, it may feel achy, contracted, harder or colder.*

Our hearts are intrinsically linked with our feelings, thoughts, interactions and perceptions in relationship to others in our lives. When we are in love, we glow. When grieving the loss of a dear one, our stress levels increase. We have less resilience and feel less resourced to deal with everyday life stresses. The heart produces hormones and communicates to the brain in ways that profoundly affect our immunity, health and sense of well-being. Oxytocin, for example, is produced by the heart, as well as the brain. This "love hormone" supports birth, bonding and attachment, and is important for breast-feeding, as well as love making. When the newborn baby sucks on mother's breast, the rush of maternal oxytocin stimulates birth of the placenta, essential to completion of the birth process and the mother's health. If it is not delivered, the mother can bleed to death. The oxytocin in both mom and baby produces the good feelings that make them want to be together. They fall in love.



Secure attachment involves these good feelings. A securely attached child feels safe and is able to rest in the social engagement system. With insecure attachment, there is a sense of potential danger. The child does not feel consistently protected by the caregiver. In that

children depend on their caregivers for survival, their defensive nervous systems are appropriately stimulated when they are not securely attached. Insecurely attached children (and adults) tend to react to novel or questionable situations with fight-flight or freeze responses, rather than the social cooperation and curiosity characteristic of the social engagement system.

Fluid Attachment and Continuum

The practice of Continuum fosters an attitude of curiosity and presence. In teaching Continuum, I am frequently delighted to witness movers' faces and eyes soften. The large muscles involved in the sympathetic nervous system reaction relax and spread, and those who have looked pale and dissociated often brighten with more color in their faces. These are all signs of softening of defensive systems and awakening of the social nervous system. As Emilie Conrad, founder of Continuum, notes, Continuum softens the inhibitors. We are enabled to return to a more natural, essential state of being. As part of this, our social nervous system can awaken.

In Continuum, we often experience ourselves settling into soft, fluid states where we feel our hearts open and warm. I often feel as if I have fallen in love with everyone at my workshops! I have never experienced anything as powerful as Continuum for opening the heart.

Within the loving, nurturing field of the group in a Continuum class, we often find old patterns of relating and attachment begin to emerge, along with their associated somatic patterns. With the mindful intention of being present with what arises with acceptance and even curiosity, these old patterns can be met in Continuum in a way they were not when we were little. With our present time orientation and our open hearts, we can perceive tendencies to withdraw, isolate, criticize, judge or attack. We can observe these tendencies in ourselves and others with loving kindness, recognizing them as remnants of our history, no longer necessary in our current situation.

I tend to see Continuum as a somatic mindfulness practice. Mindfulness, an aspect of traditional Buddhist practice, has now been incorporated into therapeutic techniques. Mindfulness involves observing thoughts, sensations, breath, and feeling states as they arise and pass away with an intention to be aware of rather than becoming or identifying with our experience. A further intention is to practice compassion or kindness in relation to what we observe.

In Buddhist or mindfulness terms, we can let go of our attachments to our history and be more present with what is. In terms of attachment theory, I see us as being more fluid and resilient in relation to our historical relational patterns.

Instead of meeting those dangerous caregivers from when we were little, we can begin to perceive them for who they are. And we can begin to be more of who we are.



As our hearts come online, our present context, and What remains is our heart, socially cooperative safety and begin to rest and with other humans, earth and

we perceive the safety of begin to let go of the past. essential presence, love, being. And here, we can find grow in harmonious resonance cosmos.

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Thank you.