



*Syracuse Integrative Psychiatry*

Comprehensive care. Transformative outcomes.

ANXIETY DEEP DIVE SERIES • PART 1

# Befriending the Nervous System

## UNDERSTANDING THE SIGNAL

### Beyond "Calm Down"

We often treat anxiety as a mistake—a glitch in the system that needs to be fixed, silenced, or medicated away. We tell ourselves to "just calm down," and when we can't, we feel broken.

But your nervous system is not broken. It is **protective**. It is an ancient, sophisticated surveillance system designed for one thing: your survival. The racing heart, the shallow breath, the tension in your shoulders—these are not symptoms of illness; they are preparations for action.

This worksheet introduces the **Polyvagal Theory** perspective: viewing your anxiety not as a pathology, but as a state of physiological mobilization.

### The Three States of the Nervous System

Your autonomic nervous system moves between three primary states, like a ladder you climb up and down throughout the day:

- **Ventral Vagal (Safe & Social):** You feel grounded, curious, and connected. Your heart rate is regulated, and you can engage with others. This is the "rest and digest" state.
- **Sympathetic (Mobilization/Fight or Flight):** You detect danger. Your body floods with adrenaline. You feel anxious, angry, or driven. This is the state of action.
- **Dorsal Vagal (Immobilization/Freeze):** The threat feels overwhelming or inescapable. You shut down, dissociate, or feel numb/depressed. This is the emergency brake.

Anxiety lives in the **Sympathetic** state. It is energy looking for a place to go.

## Mapping Your Ladder

Reflect on your last week. Can you identify moments when you were in each state?

**1. Ventral Vagal (Safe):** When did you feel most grounded or connected?

**2. Sympathetic (Anxious/Mobilized):** What triggered your shift into "fight or flight"? What did it feel like physically?

**3. Dorsal Vagal (Shutdown):** Did you experience any moments of checking out, numbness, or collapse?

## Befriending, Not Fighting

The goal of this series is not to eliminate anxiety forever—that would be dangerous, as you would lose your ability to detect threat. The goal is to **befriend** your nervous system so you can navigate these states with flexibility rather than getting stuck in them.

When you feel anxiety rising, instead of saying "Stop it," try saying: "**Thank you for trying to protect me. I see you. I am safe right now.**"

