

# The physiology of safety

Stephen Porges and Eugene Ellis discuss polyvagal therapy as an intervention for transgenerational trauma

**T**here's a saying that you should never meet your heroes, but when Eugene Ellis, renowned body psychotherapist and author who specialises in the transformative power of conversation, got the chance to talk at length with Stephen Porges, the creator of polyvagal theory, it was a meeting of minds. Here, Eugene shares a snapshot of his conversational co-creation with Stephen that covered healing from transgenerational trauma, the physiology of trust and knowing when we have enough.

**Eugene:** We met briefly at the Polyvagal Institute's 2004 International Gathering conference this June in Potsdam, Germany, where I was invited to speak on

racial identity and social justice beyond words. It's good to see you again. I want to touch on intergenerational trauma with you, but shall we start by sharing our experiences of the conference?

**Stephen:** The whole idea was to create a platform for people to share ideas related to the principles embedded in polyvagal theory and to see what that community would generate. The theory is really a structure – a strategy of how to literally interpret your behaviour and feelings within the world. And it's open-ended – you can see people using it in education, business, coaching, and not just in mental health but actually in physical health as well. So, for me, I basically have a grin because I like to see people take ideas and really develop them. And it's been really quite amazing.

**Eugene:** For me, it was a real pleasure to be there. I went with my wife who's also a therapist and relatively new to these ideas. I've spoken a little to her about polyvagal theory but she really came away feeling like, wow, I want to use this theory in my practice. I have to say that our bodies and nervous systems were really well attended to during the conference. I came away feeling quite a lot of hope.

## Community

**Stephen:** What I'm trying to say with the theory is what would spontaneously emerge from our community if people felt safe enough to be who they are? What would come out? What would be the brilliance? What would be the problem-solving? So much of our energy, if you want to use that term, and our resources are about protection. Yes, we all have this detection system that tries to keep us alive. Our body wants to trust but there's a paradox here because if you are unable to trust, then all the gifts of feeling safe are just not available to you.

**Eugene:** I definitely felt that community feeling. It really came across. From my perspective, much of Western culture privileges thought, and the idea of attending to the body as a source of knowledge is almost seen as primitive.

The conference turned that around on its head and really privileged the body, which is where the hope came from.

**Stephen:** I'm remembering my classes in philosophy and English empiricism and the dialectic between the European synthetic philosophy of Kant and Descartes as opposed to the English empiricists, where you had to experience it for it to be real. What we have ended up with in our world is a firm belief that we are an intentional organism. We control our behaviour, and when our thoughts go astray we blame them on someone else – 'you got me anxious; you triggered me'. And so we don't understand the role that our underlying physiology, primarily our brainstem and the organs below our neck, do in terms of keeping us alive and reacting to threat – and when we react to threat, that's number one. There is no intellectual internal dialogue. If there were, when people get depressed or anxious you could help them by just saying, what do you have to be anxious about? What do you have to be depressed about? But we know what that does – that it not only doesn't work, it makes the person experiencing it feel even worse. Instead, we can say, look, I understand your body is triggered into a state of threat, and that's what it is to be a human. We can be aware of that, we can learn to manage that, we can experience it, and we can respect it. This is not part of traditional training in mental health. It's not part of traditional training in medicine.

**Eugene:** For sure, mental health and medicine would definitely be enhanced by these perspectives. I'd like to talk with you now about your new book, *Polyvagal Perspectives: interventions, practices, and strategies*. What motivated you to put this collection of papers together?

**Stephen:** In a sense, the new book is really a series of updated statements on the polyvagal theory based on several pillars. The first four chapters talk about the pillars on which polyvagal theory sits and give it its foundation. It's about the physiology, the principles of the polyvagal theory, and also the misrepresentations of the polyvagal theory. Those who have criticised it are not criticising the theory. They're criticising their misinterpretation of the theory, which has been misquoted and then built into a straw man argument. These papers meet some of these misrepresentations and add to the literature that I had not really written about before, like the health benefits of the dorsal vagus that is often recruited in defence but when recruited in safety is really a very healthy and healing system.

The first pillar is neurophysiology. The second pillar focuses on sociality. What is the theory really telling us? It's telling us the history of social mammals is really based on a physiology of trust. Business is based on trust, everything is based on trust, our civilisation is based on trust, and there's a biology of trust.

The third pillar is the focus on safety. It's not optional – it's obligatory. We need to feel safe. It's not merely a casual, subjective report of a feeling, like 'I feel safe' or 'I don't feel safe'. The client, the patient, the friend, the child, the spouse – is their autonomic nervous system supporting homeostasis, or has it moved into a state of threat? When it's in a state of threat, the body's not safe, and everything builds on that.

The fourth pillar is really kind of fun and about how the theory basically dovetails into all forms of human experience. There are interviews, a short chapter on autism, and a chapter on Ehlers-Danlos syndrome. I take the theory to answer, or at least try to question, some of the assumptions in



**'What would happen if you created a community in which people felt safe enough to be who they are? What would come out? What would be the brilliance?'** Stephen Porges

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various other forms of health-related areas, but there's also a chapter on business, so we can start seeing the applications there as well.

In relation to the title, *Polyvagal Perspectives*, I wanted to reframe the theory not as a theory but as a perspective and to see it more as a strategy of approaching problems, as opposed to, let's say, a more pedantic type of theoretical perspective.

### Studying trauma

**Eugene:** Yes, the book is broad in its application but it's fairly straightforward to read. It's quite scientific in places but I think it needs that, and overall it does very well to orientate us and help us make what I see as a paradigm shift around how we see the human experience. One of the questions you have in your book is an invitation to think about what studying trauma has taught us. I would say that studying trauma and the polyvagal theory, in particular, has fundamentally changed how I am in the world with other people. There were three words in relation to this that were part of an article I read about something completely different but related, about being citizens rather than consumers. These were humility, responsibility and solidarity. Humility, in that we're not wholly responsible for the way we are and what we do. Not everything we do is under our control. With responsibility we always want the other person to change, and if they do we'll be fine. For me, trauma theory really points towards responsibility for our own responses. With solidarity we all have a nervous system, and they all operate pretty much the same way. We all have collective historical conditioning that acts on us out of awareness, and that creates a kind of solidarity you know, because no one escapes the discomfort. We're all trying to work towards a sense of safety.

**Stephen:** Well, there is one escape, through numbness, since they no longer acknowledge their humanity.

**Eugene:** Yes, of course.

**Stephen:** Some people basically buy into the idea of, 'I can control this', and

then they pay the price, both mentally and physically. I blend the word self-compassion with the word humility. If you disengage me I'm going to have a visceral reaction, so I won't be angry at myself. I would have reacted, but I know why I reacted. I'm not mad at you either – it's just my body is doing what bodies do.

Coming back to what you learned studying trauma – I fell into the world of trauma through my relationships and friendships with people who were the pioneers, including Bessel van der Kolk, Peter Levine and Pat Ogden. They invited me to give talks about my theory and my work because they saw how it was related to the trauma experience. But what I learned from being at those meetings, and as I listened to many trauma survivors, my real take home was that traumatised individuals as a group taught me what they had lost. What they lost was the ability to feel safe in another person's arms. I would generalise that to another significant mammal because some are able to relate to their dogs or horses or cats. The element that their bodies needed was to feel safe with another person and they have not given up that dream. That, to me, was the most important thing that I learned. That this desire, this quest to feel safe with another, is so wired into our nervous system, into our DNA – that felt very important to highlight and let people know that this is the goal in life.

**Eugene:** Thank you, that's a wonderful place to bring us to. I wanted to maybe dig into this idea of intergenerational trauma and maybe start off by saying that in the black and brown communities I work with there's a really strong buy-in to this idea of healing from intergenerational trauma, or historical/collective trauma, as a group and also as individuals. They perceive their

main struggle as historical as well as individual, and the link to intergenerational trauma is clear in their minds. They can see what's going on in front of them in terms of their communities and also their relationships with other communities. You say in your new book that awareness of bodily states is something we in the West have messed up in our culture, and perhaps being taught to sit still and pay attention might be part of that.

There is also the capitalist – for want of a better word – ethic of unrestrained accumulation that undermines the value of states of calm. Being calm is not really valued that much. Is there value for the majority in the West to see part of their healing as intergenerational as well as individual?

**Stephen:** First of all, I tend not to use intergenerational as I want to be respectful of the processes taking place. I use the term transgenerational. This is because when we go to intergenerational it can almost become a blaming of an experience.

**Eugene:** Can you say more about that?

**Stephen:** I would basically say intergenerational is identifying more temporally proximal experience, and transgenerational is basically assuming and accepting the fact that we're a traumatised species, and if we go deep we'll find events. The problem is that we misinterpret success. This talks to your point about Western culture. Western culture is all about accumulation. It's not about being a transformed human being who is calm, benevolent, gracious, generous or who experiences gratitude. It's saying that we're successful when we accumulate. Now, this is really the paradoxical conundrum because you don't become a transformed

human being by becoming a billionaire – that's not how it works. Your nervous system needs to have experiences.

I'm going to be very personal about this because the academic world is not any different than business because it's all about an accumulation – whether you call it publications or grant money, status or whatever, you accumulate. But the real question for me as a human being is, when is enough, enough? When are status or financial resources enough to enable me to be who I am? And this became clear to me as I 'aged' out of traditional academia, having been very successful. I did what I was supposed to do, I got awards, I was president of this and that, I got grants, I ran big labs. I didn't even think there was a choice because I always felt you had to really succeed to leverage that success to do something worthwhile because the world itself was so aggressively critical of novel ideas or new information, it's really regressed into this more pedantic way of success and wisdom.

So I basically said I have enough, and now I can become more creative and more accessible without becoming vulnerable. And I think that is the real transition point when we start talking about intergenerational and transgenerational trauma – and that is, are we safe enough to become accessible? When we become accessible we then embrace the rest of the world. When we're in states of chronic vulnerability, which is what marginalised populations feel, they can't be safe enough to be the creative and, let's say, brilliant problem-solving, loving, compassionate individuals that they could become. I see this as such a loss of humanity's resources.

In the back of my mind, you know, there's a pragmatic point here. Even if you're pragmatic, you want the species to express itself because it's for the benefit of everyone. And when you see that – if you step back and look at what the world does, and you watch news channels and streaming services – you know it's all about power and it's about resources. And really, when you talk to individuals, even in war-torn places, they just want to 'be'. They just want to be safe, and they want to have relationships and they want to have children.

Following the theme of our discussion on intergenerational trauma, we need to realise that our culture is really creating this because it's defining success or acceptance based on attributes that are not really qualities of the human being, whether we call it financial resources, skin colour, religious affiliation, nationality – all these things are used to evaluate people when they have nothing to do with the person. So if we have that in our evaluation template, it means that, by default, individuals are going to be marginalised, independent of who they are. In my own personal journey I always wanted to be who I was, not based on my ethnicity, or my parents' resources. I wanted to be accepted for who I was or who I am, and that's a privilege in our society, but it should be how we are all treated.

### Creativity

**Eugene:** Several of the speakers at the conference talked about 'the promotion of fear' in our society. In my mind, I was thinking, what if someone takes polyvagal theory and finds a way of promoting even more fear because they've got the mechanisms now?

**Stephen:** I know what you're saying because I've already been hit with some of that. They say that the theory gives predators the code book to 'play' and in a way, predators always have that. But the other part is our nervous system does a reasonably good job in detecting truthful engagements versus fake ones, and with many of the people whom predators have abused, they'll tell you how they felt something in their gut, but they overrode those visceral feelings by saying, oh, this seemed reasonable to me. Our body really evaluates. We might use the term gullible, but that's different. The issue is, how do you feel viscerally? And I think the way of dealing with all this is really greater bodily wisdom, bodily understanding and bodily respect, and not saying that intuition and gut feeling don't count.

**Eugene:** Yes, trust the gut.

**Stephen:** I would say trust but understand what you're trusting. I have friends who say

they won't work with anyone they don't feel good with. But if you're responding to another person's anxiety, you might want to be more tolerant. If you're responding to a person's sense of manipulation of you, well, that's different. So the issue is not to dispel the bodily feeling but to kind of explore it and understand it. I think that is the true or the best answer to that question.

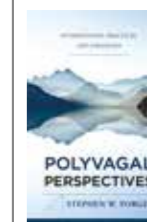
**Eugene:** Where is polyvagal theory going that you're excited about?

**Stephen:** Well, I would say it's going into the schools. It's going into the workplace. It even went into the Olympics apparently – I got some feedback on that recently. It's stretching out in different ways. You know, I am here as a passenger, watching where it's going. I'm not telling it where to go. Where I'm taking it is I'm trying to create toolkits that can be useful in calming the body, enhancing sleep and creating interventions that help us regulate state, which is extremely important in therapeutic, educational and workplace environments. So that's where I'm going with it. It's out there to enable people to express their creativity.

**Eugene:** You're definitely an inspiration in terms of using your power in a way that makes people feel safe. Thank you for talking with me. ●

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Eugene Ellis (Accred)** is an integrative arts psychotherapist, author and founder of the Black, African and Asian Therapy Network (BAATN), the UK's largest independent organisation that specialises in working with Black and Asian clients. His latest book, *Transforming Race Conversations: a healing guide for us all*, is published by Norton.



**Dr Stephen Porges** is Distinguished University Scientist at Indiana University where he is the founding director of the Traumatic Stress Research Consortium. He is the founder of polyvagal theory and has published widely. His latest book, *Polyvagal Perspectives: interventions, practices, and strategies*, is published by Norton.

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