

POLYVAGAL LADDER

A practical metaphor for noticing states of connection and protection

AT A GLANCE



The ladder describes shifts between social engagement, mobilisation and shutdown. It can support awareness of nervous-system states, but it is not a diagnosis.

KEY IDEAS

CONNECTED

Present, flexible, socially engaged and able to think.

MOBILISED

Fight or flight energy: tension, urgency, anxiety or anger.

SHUT DOWN

Freeze or collapse: numbness, heaviness or disconnection.

MOVEMENT

States change in response to context, safety and support.

WHY IT MATTERS



Naming a state can reduce shame and guide regulation towards enough safety, connection and choice.

PUTTING THE IDEA INTO PRACTICE

1

ORIENT

Look around and notice present-day cues of safety.

2

BREATHE

Use a comfortable, unforced exhale.

3

MOVE

Choose gentle mobilisation or settling as needed.

4

CONNECT

Seek safe co-regulation, voice, rhythm or companionship.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

1

Where am I on the ladder?

2

What cues does my body notice?

3

What small shift could support safety?

Use this resource as a starting point for reflection, not as a test or diagnosis.

Different experiences, cultures and circumstances may require different understandings.