

AATA Represented at ADTA National Conference: Fostering Connectivity as Clinicians and Professionals

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The energy was palpable at the 51st Annual American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) National Conference that was held October 20-23 in Bethesda, MD, just a few miles from the American Art Therapy Association's (AATA) national headquarters in Alexandria, VA.



From left: Jody Wager, MS, BC-DMT, ADTA President, Dr. Sue Carter, Dr. Stephen Porges, and Tally Tripp, MA, MSW, ATR-BC.

The theme of this year's conference "*Re Generation: Moving Pathways to Integration,*" reflects an important and shared vision for connectivity amongst all expressive arts therapists focused on promoting health and healing through creative and experiential processes. It was a great honor for this art therapist to be an invited Delegate representing the AATA at the ADTA conference.

I attended the inspiring "Professionals Day" featuring keynote addresses by world-renowned neuroscientist Dr. Stephen Porges and his wife, the behavioral neuroscientist, Dr. Sue Carter. Dr. Porges is well known for developing his Polyvagal Theory, which describes the important role of physiology, specifically implicating the vagus nerve, in mediating human connectivity and interaction. In her related talk, Dr. Carter discussed the role of the hormone oxytocin and the "biochemistry of love" also underlying the work we do as relationally focused therapists.



Conference attendees embodying their responses.

This research is especially relevant for those of us working with trauma, attachment and autism spectrum disorders, where interpersonal relating can be extremely challenging. Traditional verbal therapies primarily make use of “top-down” cognitive models that focus on words to describe or analyze feelings. However, our creative arts approaches invite working with the body and expressive processes through therapeutic engagement with art, music or movement activities, bypassing the reliance on words. These experiential approaches provide a unique access route to the physiology of the client, helping us to identify underlying triggers that cause a person to feel safe or unsafe. Dr. Porges states that, for healing to occur, a client needs to feel physically “safe” in the company of a therapist and learn to experience “immobilization without fear,” which may go against the survival-based defensive stance that develops through exposure to trauma or faulty attachment.

Dr. Porges’ Polyvagal Theory suggests that if clinicians are attentive to the physiological states of arousal within their clients, they will be better able to help co-regulate the autonomic response and facilitate a connected, engaged relationship. Doing so will increase emotional flexibility and resilience. He encouraged the dance therapy audience to use synchronous movement to build rapport, connection and what he called “rhythmic attunement” in session. “Be playful,” he urged, and “engage your clients with face to face contact when possible.”

Art therapists can also attune to their clients through physical engagement when introducing therapeutic art activities. Using Porges’ model, we might be increasingly mindful of how we select materials, how we provide directives, and how we process the session and art works. Indeed, a polyvagal- informed clinician can and should use an experiential, embodied approach in all creative arts therapies.



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