05 / Story follows state

When these autonomic state shifts occur (see 03), we create a story to explain why. It may sound something like this:

- “The teacher hates me. There’s no point in trying.”
- “I deserved it.”
- “I’m worthless and unlovable.”
- “I shouldn’t have been there.”
- “I must have wanted it because I didn’t say no.”

These stories are there to explain the world and attempt to make sense of what caused the autonomic state shift. However, these stories do not necessarily reflect reality - they serve the function of creating an explanation and possibly minimizing the overwhelming nature of the state shift.

Unfortunately, these narratives can add to the problem by keeping the survivor in their defensive autonomic state. The narrative can unintentionally act as a reinforcer. There’s the actual event that happens, the autonomic shift in response to the event and our perception of the event, then the narrative that the survivor creates to explain the state shift.

Our autonomic states also directly influence our thoughts throughout a normal day. These “stories” are not just in relation to traumatic events. In our state of safety, our thoughts will be more empathetic, understanding, validating and normalizing. In a flight/fight state, thoughts will be more anxious, catastrophizing, avoidant or aggressive. And in a shutdown state, thoughts will be pessimistic, lacking hope or belief, and devoid of purpose.

The phrase “story follows state” in relation to the Polyvagal Theory is from Deb Dana, LCSW.