

Your Nervous System Regulation Guide

Simple, evidence-based tools for when your system is overwhelmed — and you need to come back to yourself.

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A note before you begin

These tools work — but not because they're tricks or hacks. They work because they speak the language your nervous system actually understands: breath, sensation, movement, and the present moment.

When you're dysregulated — anxious, shut down, overwhelmed, or spinning — your thinking brain goes partially offline. That's why telling yourself to 'calm down' or 'think rationally' rarely works. These techniques bypass the thinking mind and go directly to the nervous system, signaling safety at the level where the alarm is actually sounding.

Use these when you feel activated, flooded, numb, or disconnected. They're not a substitute for therapy — but they're a bridge back to yourself until you get there.

WHEN YOU'RE HYPERACTIVATED (anxious, panicky, overwhelmed, flooded)

Extended Exhale Breathing

The exhale activates your parasympathetic nervous system — the brake pedal. A longer exhale than inhale directly slows your heart rate.

How: Inhale for 4 counts. Exhale for 6–8 counts. Repeat for 2–3 minutes. If counting feels hard, just make sure your exhale is longer than your inhale.

Physiological Sigh

The fastest known way to reduce acute stress. Double inhale through the nose (sniff in, then sniff again to fully inflate lungs), then one long slow exhale through the mouth.

How: Inhale through nose. Sniff again to top off lungs. Exhale slowly and completely through mouth. Two or three of these is often enough.

Orienting

When we're anxious, our attention narrows to the threat. Orienting reverses this by gently scanning the environment — signaling to the nervous system that you are present, and safe.

How: Slowly look around the room. Let your eyes rest on each thing you see. Name five things out loud or in your head. Notice colors, textures, light. Let your gaze be soft rather than searching.

Cold Water

Cold water on the face or wrists activates the dive reflex, which slows the heart rate and triggers a parasympathetic response almost immediately.

How: Run cold water over your wrists for 30 seconds. Or splash cold water on your face. Or hold an ice cube briefly. Notice the shift in your body.

Grounding Through the Senses (5-4-3-2-1)

Brings attention into the present moment and out of threat-scanning mode.

How: Notice 5 things you can see. 4 things you can touch (and actually touch them). 3 things you can hear. 2 things you can smell. 1 thing you can taste.

WHEN YOU'RE HYPOACTIVATED (numb, shut down, frozen, disconnected)

Movement and Shaking

Shutdown is the nervous system pressing the emergency brake. Movement — especially rhythmic or shaking movement — helps discharge the frozen energy and bring the system back online.

How: Shake your hands, arms, and legs for 30–60 seconds. Alternatively, walk briskly, jump lightly, or do anything that creates rhythm in the body. Even gentle rocking works.

Bilateral Stimulation

Alternating left-right stimulation activates both hemispheres of the brain and can help shift a frozen or dissociated state.

How: Tap alternately on your knees — left, right, left, right — in a steady slow rhythm. Or cross your arms and tap alternately on your upper arms (the 'butterfly hug'). Continue for 1–2 minutes.

Temperature

Warmth can help bring you back into your body when you're feeling numb or shut down.

How: Hold a warm cup of tea or coffee. Take a warm shower. Put your hands under warm water. Notice the sensation and allow it to bring you back into your body.

Orienting to Safety

Slowly look around the room and consciously notice that you are safe right now. This sounds simple — and it is. It also works.

How: Look slowly around the space you're in. Say to yourself (or out loud): 'I am in [location]. It is [date/time]. I am safe right now.' Let your eyes soften and your breath slow.

FOR EVERYDAY REGULATION

The STOP Practice

A simple pause practice from mindfulness — useful as a daily reset.

S — Stop what you're doing. T — Take a breath. O — Observe what's happening in your body, mind, and emotions. P — Proceed with awareness.

Self-Compassion Touch

Physical self-compassion activates the same soothing system as receiving comfort from another person.

How: Place one hand on your heart. Take a breath. Say something kind to yourself — even just 'this is hard right now' or 'I'm doing my best.' Notice what happens.

Vagal Toning

The vagus nerve runs from your brain to your gut and regulates your parasympathetic system. You can tone it through humming, singing, or gargling.

How: Hum a tune for 2–3 minutes. Or gargle with water for 30 seconds. Or sing — even quietly. The vibration in your throat stimulates the vagus nerve directly.

A reminder

These tools are most effective when practiced when you're calm — so your nervous system learns them before it needs them. If you find that dysregulation is frequent, intense, or difficult to shift on your own, that's important information. It may mean there's something underneath worth exploring with a therapist.

Book a free 15-minute consultation at ziv-vosberg.clientsecure.me

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