

Nervous System Regulation for Trauma Survivors

A Practical, Gentle Guide to Feeling Safe in Your Body Again

By

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WELCOME – YOU ARE SAFE HERE IN THIS MOMENT



If you are reading this, you may be carrying something heavy. You might feel anxious, on edge, numb, angry, tearful, exhausted — or all of these at once.

Your reactions make sense. Trauma changes the way the nervous system responds to the world. What you are experiencing is not weakness — it is your body doing its best to survive.

Your body is not working against you. It is trying to protect you. Even when the sensations feel confusing or overwhelming, they are often signals of a system that learned to stay alert in order to keep you safe.

This guide is meant to be a gentle companion. You do not need to “fix” yourself while reading it. You do not need to do every exercise. You do not need to push through.

Take what helps. Skip what does not. Pause whenever you need. If anything feels too much, it is okay to stop and come back later — or not at all.

Let's begin gently.

UNDERSTANDING YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Your nervous system is your built-in safety system. Its job is to scan for danger and guide your body toward survival. It is constantly asking one core question: **"Am I safe right now?"**

1. Fight response

Fight is the nervous system's way of protecting you through strength, resistance, or control. It can show up even when you are not in immediate danger.

- Irritability, anger, or sudden rage
- Tension in the jaw, shoulders, or fists
- Feeling defensive, argumentative, or easily "set off"
- A strong need to be in control

2. Flight response

Flight is the nervous system's way of protecting you through escape, movement, or constant doing. It often feels like rest is unsafe.

- Racing thoughts, restlessness, or feeling "wired"
- Overworking, overplanning, or staying constantly busy
- Difficulty sitting still or relaxing
- Avoiding certain places, people, or feelings

3. Freeze response

Freeze is the nervous system's way of protecting you through shutdown. When fight or flight feels impossible, the body may conserve energy and "go still."

- Feeling numb, blank, or disconnected
- Low energy, heaviness, or difficulty getting started
- Brain fog or trouble concentrating
- A sense of "I can't" even when you want to

4. Fawn response

Fawn is the nervous system's way of protecting you through appeasing. It can develop when safety depended on keeping others calm or pleased.

- People-pleasing or difficulty saying no
- Over-apologising or taking responsibility for others' feelings
- Fear of conflict or abandonment
- Losing touch with your own needs

These responses are not "wrong." They are intelligent adaptations to threat — especially when the threat was ongoing, unpredictable, or relational.

These are not personality traits. They are survival responses.

Your body is remembering something your mind is no longer fully aware of. Regulation is about helping your system learn that the danger is not happening right now.

WHAT DYSREGULATION FEELS LIKE

When the nervous system is dysregulated, it can feel like you are either too activated (anxious, restless, overwhelmed) or too shut down (numb, exhausted, disconnected). Sometimes it swings between both.

Anxiety or panic — a racing heart, tight chest, shaky hands, nausea, or a sense that something terrible is about to happen, even when you cannot name why.

Emotional numbness or shutdown — feeling flat, distant, or unable to access emotion; struggling to care about things you normally value.

Irritability or sudden anger — snapping quickly, feeling "on edge," or reacting strongly to small triggers because your system is already overloaded.

Overthinking and fear spirals — replaying conversations, scanning for danger, imagining worst-case scenarios, or feeling unable to switch your mind off.

Dissociation — feeling unreal, spaced out, detached from your body, or like you are watching life from a distance.

Sleep disruption and fatigue — difficulty falling asleep, waking often, nightmares, or feeling exhausted even after rest.

These experiences can be frightening and isolating. They can also make you doubt yourself.

They are not personal flaws. They are survival patterns. With support and practice, your nervous system can learn new pathways.

CORE PRINCIPLES OF REGULATION

Regulation is not about forcing yourself to “calm down.” It is about helping your body feel safe enough to come back into balance — little by little.

1. **Safety first** — choose tools that feel safe and doable. If an exercise increases distress, it is not the right one for that moment.
 2. **Small is powerful** — tiny shifts (one breath, one sensation, one supportive thought) can change your state.
 3. **Regulation is a skill** — it improves with repetition, not perfection.
 4. **Track, don't judge** — notice what is happening in your body without criticising it.
 5. **Work with the body** — trauma lives in the nervous system; body-based tools often help more than thinking alone.
 6. **Build capacity gradually** — you are widening your “window of tolerance” over time, not rushing to the finish line.
 7. **Connection regulates** — safe relationships, supportive voices, and co-regulation are powerful medicine.
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PRACTICAL REGULATION TOOLS

Below are practical tools you can try. You do not need to do them all. Choose one or two that feel most accessible, and repeat them often — especially when you are not in crisis — so your body learns the pathway.

GROUNDING TECHNIQUES

1. The 5-4-3-2-1 Method

When to use it: When you feel anxious, panicky, dissociated, or pulled into a fear spiral.

How to do it: Name 5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste (or one thing you like about this moment).

What it helps with: Bringing your attention back to the present and signalling to your brain that you are here, now.

2. Feet-on-the-floor grounding

When to use it: When you feel unsteady, overwhelmed, or “floaty.”

How to do it: Place both feet on the floor. Press down gently and notice the support beneath you. Slowly shift your weight from heel to toe. Say (out loud or silently): “The floor is holding me.”

What it helps with: Reconnecting to your body and creating a sense of stability and support.

BREATHING TECHNIQUES

3. Slow exhale breathing

When to use it: When you feel activated, tense, or unable to settle.

How to do it: Inhale gently through the nose for a count of 3–4. Exhale slowly for a count of 5–7 (longer exhale than inhale). Repeat for 1–3 minutes.

What it helps with: Activating the body’s calming system by lengthening the exhale.

4. The physiological sigh

When to use it: When you feel sudden stress, tightness, or panic rising.

How to do it: Take a normal inhale, then add a second small “top-up” inhale. Exhale slowly and fully through the mouth. Repeat 2–5 times.

What it helps with: Releasing carbon dioxide and quickly reducing physiological stress.

BODY-BASED TOOLS

5. Gentle shaking or movement release

When to use it: When you feel stuck, restless, or full of adrenaline.

How to do it: Stand (or sit) and gently shake out your hands, arms, shoulders, and legs for 30–60 seconds. Then pause and notice any changes in your breath or body temperature.

What it helps with: Discharging activation and helping the body complete a stress response.

6. Orienting exercise

When to use it: When you feel unsafe, hypervigilant, or “back there” in a memory.

How to do it: Slowly turn your head and let your eyes scan the room. Name a few neutral or pleasant details (colours, shapes, objects). Let your gaze land on something that feels calming.

What it helps with: Updating the nervous system with present-day safety cues.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION TOOLS

7. Naming what you feel

When to use it: When emotions feel confusing, intense, or hard to identify.

How to do it: Try: “Right now I notice...” and name 1–3 emotions or sensations (e.g., “tight chest,” “sadness,” “fear,” “numbness”). If you cannot name it, you can say: “Something is here.”

What it helps with: Creating space between you and the feeling, and reducing overwhelm.

8. Reframing the experience

When to use it: When shame, self-blame, or harsh inner criticism shows up.

How to do it: Replace “What’s wrong with me?” with “What happened to me?” or “What is my nervous system trying to do for me right now?”

What it helps with: Reducing shame and increasing self-compassion — which supports regulation.

SOOTHING PRACTICES

9. Self-holding technique

When to use it: When you feel alone, overwhelmed, or emotionally raw.

How to do it: Place one hand on your chest and one on your belly (or cross your arms and hold your upper arms). Apply gentle pressure. Notice warmth and contact. Breathe slowly for 30-90 seconds.

What it helps with: Offering your body a cue of comfort and containment.

10. Sensory comfort practices

When to use it: When you need gentle soothing without “talking yourself out of it.”

How to do it: Choose one sensory support: a warm drink, a weighted blanket, soft clothing, calming music, a scented lotion, a warm shower, or sitting in sunlight. Focus on one pleasant sensation for 20-60 seconds.

What it helps with: Bringing the nervous system toward safety through the senses.

WHEN NOTHING WORKS

There may be moments when none of the tools help. You might feel flooded, shut down, or like you are failing at healing.

In those moments, the most regulating thing may be to reduce demands. Drink water. Eat something simple. Sit or lie down. Let your body be exactly as it is.

If you can, reach for safe connection: a trusted person, a therapist, a support line, or even a grounding voice note you have saved for yourself.

We regulate best in connection.

HOW THERAPY HELPS THE NERVOUS SYSTEM HEAL

Trauma can teach the nervous system that the world is unsafe and that you must manage everything alone. Therapy offers something different: a consistent, supportive relationship where your system can learn new experiences.

Over time, therapy can help your body learn: That it is possible to be with another person and still feel safe.

Some trauma-informed approaches include:

EMDR — supports the brain and body to process traumatic memories so they feel less present and less activating.

Somatic therapy — works with body sensations, movement, and nervous system cues to support regulation and release.

Trauma-informed talk therapy — helps you make meaning of what happened, build coping skills, and develop safer inner narratives at a pace your system can tolerate.

What early therapy can feel like:

- Relief mixed with fear or uncertainty
- Feeling more emotional as your system begins to thaw
- Not knowing what to say, or worrying you are “doing it wrong”
- Learning to notice your body’s signals in a new way

All of this can be normal. A trauma-informed therapist will help you go at a pace that supports safety and choice.

A MESSAGE OF HOPE

Healing is possible — and it is rarely a straight line. Some days you may feel steady, and other days you may feel like you are back at the beginning.

This does not mean you are failing. It often means your nervous system is learning, practising, and recalibrating.

With time, support, and gentle repetition, many people find they can feel more present, more connected, and more at home in their bodies — coming back to themselves in a way that feels real and sustainable.

FINAL NOTE

If you would like support with trauma recovery and nervous system regulation, you do not have to do this alone. Reaching out can be a powerful first step — and you deserve care that is gentle, respectful, and paced for your system.

Esther Mensah Counselling and Psychotherapy

Just one gentle moment at a time.

About Esther Mensah

I am a Registered Social Worker and Psychotherapist with both a Bachelor and Master of Social Work from King's University College at Western University. I completed an advanced clinical internship at Family Service Thames Valley and have over 20 years of experience supporting individuals, couples, parents, and families.

I am deeply committed to the people I work with and bring empathy, warmth, and respect to every therapeutic relationship.

I offer a compassionate, non-judgmental space where individuals and couples can slow down, feel genuinely heard, and explore what lies beneath the surface. Together, we identify emotional and attachment patterns, gently address trauma, and work toward meeting unmet needs — supporting healing, personal growth, and stronger, more connected relationships.

I'm trained in a range of evidence-based approaches, including Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), the Gottman Method, Adult Attachment Focused Therapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT).

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