

In-the-Moment Regulation Skills

Although we can't consciously control whether our nervous system moves into hyperarousal or hypoarousal, that doesn't mean we're at the mercy of these states. Many of the exercises below work by engaging the parasympathetic nervous system, the body's built-in system for returning to a steadier state after activation. These exercises can offer immediate relief in the moment, but their effects don't stop there. Practiced over time, they act as repeated cues of safety to the nervous system, gradually teaching it to return to balance. This kind of repeated practice can widen your window of tolerance over time, meaning your system may become less reactive and better able to recover when you face stressful events in the future.

These exercises are organized by how they work, not just what state they help with. Breathing exercises are grouped on their own, since paced or controlled breathing can feel activating rather than calming for some people, especially those with a trauma history. If that's true for you, it's fine to skip that section entirely and start with the body-based, sensory, or imagery groups instead.

Not every exercise will work for every person or every moment. Treat this as a menu to experiment with rather than a checklist to complete.

Breath-Based

Centering

Best for: Both states

Place one hand over your heart and rest your other hand on your belly. Lengthen your spine. Take several slow, full breaths, filling your lower belly with air as you inhale and letting it rise. Notice the fullness in your body, then let your belly sink naturally as you exhale. Notice the feeling of your hand rising and falling with your breath. Repeat for 5 to 10 breaths.

Rounded Breath

Best for: Hyperarousal

Inhale a breath. At the top of the inhale, imagine a rounded quality rather than a hard stop, and let the inhale roll smoothly into the exhale.

Notice where the breath seems to move: front, back, or side to side. Repeat 5 to 10 times.

4-Count (Box) Breathing

Best for: Hyperarousal

Inhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, exhale for 4 counts, hold for 4 counts, then repeat.

Sometimes called box or window breathing, since you can picture tracing the sides of a square as you breathe.

Buteyko Breathing

Best for: Hyperarousal, racing mind

- Take a small breath in through your nose.
- Let the breath out.
- Hold your nose closed for 5 seconds to pause your breath.
- When you feel the urge to breathe, release and inhale.
- Breathe normally for 10 seconds, then repeat the sequence.

This allows carbon dioxide to gently accumulate, which can ease the urge to breathe quickly and support a calmer state over time.

Psychological Sigh

Best for: Hyperarousal, fast-acting

Take two quick inhales through your nose: one breath in to a sense of fullness, then a shorter second inhale on top of it, without exhaling in between.

Follow with one long, slow exhale through your mouth.

Repeat for 1 to 3 rounds.

The double inhale re-opens collapsed air sacs in the lungs and helps offload carbon dioxide efficiently, which can shift the body toward calm within a breath or two, often faster than other breathing exercises.

Imagery-Based

Moving Thoughts

Best for: Hyperarousal, racing thoughts

In your mind, picture your thoughts passing by like leaves floating on a stream or clouds moving across the sky.

As each thought appears, place it on a leaf or cloud (or on a moving conveyor belt) and let it drift past: there goes that thought, and that one.

Containment

Best for: Both states

Containment is a way to temporarily set aside bothersome feelings, thoughts, or images until you're ready to explore them, a boundary around an experience rather than suppression.

Suppression pushes feelings away without acknowledging them. Containment acknowledges them ("I know you're there, I'll come back to you") and sets a plan for when you will.

This can be imagined, picturing a box or chest you place the feeling into, or physical, writing it down and placing it in an actual container.

Positive Imagery

Best for: Both states

Safe Place Visualization: close your eyes and imagine a place where you feel completely safe and at ease, real or imagined. Notice details: what you see, hear, smell, and feel. Spend a few minutes there.

Progressive Relaxation Visualization: imagine a wave of relaxation moving through your body from your toes to your head, each part becoming heavy, warm, and relaxed as the wave passes.

Guided Nature Visualization: imagine yourself somewhere calming in nature, a forest, beach, or garden. Use all your senses: the sound of waves, the smell of flowers, the warmth of the sun.

Compassionate Other

Best for: Both states, especially useful when self-directed compassion feels hard to access

Close your eyes, or soften your gaze, and imagine a being who embodies warmth, wisdom, strength, and unconditional acceptance toward you. This figure can be a real person, a spiritual figure, an animal, or entirely imagined; what matters is that they feel genuinely caring, not critical. Picture the details: their presence, their voice, the way they look at you. Imagine this

figure sitting with you now, aware of what you're going through, and responding with patience and care rather than judgment. Notice what they might say to you or simply imagine their calm presence beside you. Let yourself receive that warmth, even briefly.

Body-Based

Grounding and Alignment

Best for: Both states

Stand in a relaxed position and bring attention to your feet on the floor. Shift weight across the front, back, and sides of your feet, bending your knees and moving gently up and down.

Notice how your body stacks vertically: ankles under legs, legs under pelvis, pelvis under torso, torso under head.

Imagine being lifted gently from the top of your head, and gravity pulling gently at the base of your spine. Alternate between this lengthened feeling and letting your spine soften, expanding on the inhale and settling on the exhale.

Walking Exercise

Best for: Both states

Bring your full attention to your body as you walk, out of your head and into sensation.

Notice how your feet contact the ground, how they roll, and the movement in your knees, hips, and shoulders.

Experiment with your pace or the way you push off with your feet, noticing how the sensations shift.

Whole Body Muscle Tensing and Relaxing

Best for: Both states

- Take a deep breath in through your mouth, filling your lungs.
- Hold your breath.
- While holding, tense the muscles throughout your body as much as you safely can: face, hands, shoulders, stomach, legs.
- Hold the tension for 5 to 10 seconds.
- Release everything at once, letting the tension go, and slowly let your breath out.

Variation: with more time, try this as a progressive muscle relaxation, tensing and releasing one muscle group at a time from your toes upward.

Somatic Tracking

Best for: Both states

Notice an uncomfortable sensation in your body: the tightness in your chest, a flutter in your stomach, tension in your throat.

Stay curious rather than trying to fix it. Is it constant or does it shift? Does it have edges? What happens if you simply watch it for a few moments?

See if you can let it be there without pushing it away.

Temperature Shift

Best for: Hyperarousal

A brief change in temperature, splashing cool water on your face, holding a cold glass, or stepping into cooler air, can trigger the body's natural calming reflex and bring physiological arousal down quickly.

Useful when hyperarousal feels intense and you need fast, physical relief.

Butterfly Hug / Bilateral Tapping

Best for: Both states

Cross your arms over your chest, hands resting on opposite shoulders or upper arms.

Alternate gently tapping one hand, then the other, in a slow rhythm, like a heartbeat.

This bilateral movement can have a self-soothing, settling effect for both hyperarousal and hypoarousal.

Sensory-Based

5-4-3-2-1

Best for: Hypoarousal

As soon as you notice symptoms of hypoarousal, identify in your environment:

- 5 things you can see. Name them.
- 4 things you can feel. Name them.
- 3 things you can hear. Name them.
- 2 things you can smell. Name them.
- 1 thing you can taste, or your favorite thing to taste if nothing is available.

Some versions ask you to name one thing you like about yourself as the final step. The goal is to shift your mind's focus outward, which can slow your heart rate and ease anxiety.

Orientating Exercise

Best for: Both states

This exercise signals to your nervous system that your environment is safe.

- Take a breath and let your body settle or simply pause if breath focus feels activating.
- Slowly look around your environment, turning your head and eyes, pausing on different objects.
- Notice details, shapes, colors, textures, and name them silently or out loud: "I see a green plant, a soft blue blanket, a square window with light."
- Notice any shifts in your breath, heart rate, or muscle tension as you do this.

Cognitive-Based

STOP-Blocking

Best for: Hyperarousal, spiraling thoughts

- Stop: interrupt your thoughts with the internal command "Stop!" or by picturing a stop sign. Pause whatever you're doing.
- Take a breath: notice your breathing for a moment. Breathe in gently through your nose, letting your belly expand, then exhale slowly through pursed lips.
- Observe: notice what you're saying to yourself and how it's making you feel. Do a quick scan of your body.

- Proceed: mindfully consider how you'd like to respond. Choose one small thing to focus on and take it one step at a time.

Includes a brief breathing step. If breath focus feels activating, shorten or skip it and move straight to Observe.

Naming the Story

Best for: Both states

When you notice a recurring theme in your thoughts, like worries about work or home, acknowledge it and silently name it: "There's my not-good-enough story," "This is my work worry," "Dwelling on the past," "Doubting myself story."

Even simply saying "There's my brain thinking, thanks brain" can reduce the pull of the thought.

Brain Dumping

Best for: Hyperarousal, racing or intrusive thoughts

- Find a quiet, comfortable space where you won't be disturbed.
- Take a few slow breaths to settle, optional, skip if breath focus feels activating.
- Set a timer for 5 to 10 minutes and write down everything that comes to mind, worries, fears, sensations, without filtering or worrying about grammar.
- When the timer ends, take a moment to notice anything that stands out.

RAINN

Best for: Both states, self-compassion focused

- Recognize: notice what's happening right now, naming it simply, for example "anxiety" or "shutting down."
- Allow: let the experience be there as it is, without needing to fix or push it away.
- Investigate: bring a curious, gentle attention to it. Where do you feel it in your body? What does it need?
- Non-judgement: see what is happening as a neutral passing event rather than a reflection of your character or identity or something permanent. This involves removing any particular ties to difficult feelings/sensations as wrong, bad, or negative.
- Nurture: offer yourself some form of care in response, a kind phrase, a hand on your heart, or simply acknowledging that this is hard.

Adapted from Tara Brach's RAIN practice.