



Nervous System Regulation

Practical tools for grounding, calming, and reconnecting with your body

When we feel stressed, anxious, overwhelmed, shut down, or emotionally activated, our nervous system may shift into a protective state. You might notice a racing heart, tight muscles, rapid thoughts, restlessness, numbness, disconnection, irritability, or an urge to escape.

Regulation does not mean making uncomfortable emotions disappear. It means helping your body feel safe and supported enough to stay present with what is happening.

Different strategies work for different people. Think of these practices as experiments: notice what helps your system feel **even 5–10% more settled, present, or supported.**

1. Slow Your Breathing

Slow, comfortable breathing can influence the autonomic nervous system and may help reduce physiological arousal.

Longer Exhale Breathing

Try:

Inhale gently for 4 seconds
Exhale slowly for 6 seconds

Continue for 1–5 minutes.

Do not force yourself to take unusually deep breaths. Think **slow and comfortable** rather than “take a huge breath.”

Easy-Paced Breathing

If counting feels stressful, simply allow your breathing to become:

slower • softer • easier

Notice the air entering and leaving your body without trying to breathe perfectly.



Box Breathing

Try: **Inhale 4 → Hold 4 → Exhale 4 → Hold 4**

Repeat for several rounds.

If breath holding increases anxiety, skip the holds and use a gentle inhale followed by a slightly longer exhale.

2. Orient to the Present

When the nervous system detects threat, attention can become narrowly focused on danger.

Orienting means deliberately noticing the environment around you.

Slowly look around the room.

Without rushing, notice:

- Where am I?
- What tells me that I am here, right now?
- What objects or colors catch my attention?
- Where are the doors and windows?
- Is there anything pleasant, neutral, interesting, or comforting to look at?

Allow your eyes and head to move naturally.

Then remind yourself:

“I am here, in this room, in this moment.”

3. The 5–4–3–2–1 Grounding Exercise

Use your senses to reconnect with your present surroundings.

Notice:

5 things you can see

4 things you can feel or touch

3 things you can hear



2 things you can smell

1 thing you can taste

There is no need to rush. The goal is not simply to finish the list—it is to actually **experience what you are noticing**.

4. Feel Your Support

Notice where your body is being supported right now.

Feel:

- Your feet against the floor
- Your legs against the chair
- Your back against the seat
- Your hands resting somewhere
- The surface underneath you

Experiment with gently pressing your feet into the floor.

Notice the pressure.

Then release.

Ask yourself:

“Can I allow the floor or chair to hold a little more of my weight?”

5. Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Stress often creates muscular tension without us realizing it.

Choose one muscle group at a time.

Gently tense the muscles for about **5 seconds**, then release them for **10–15 seconds**.

Try moving through:

Hands → arms → shoulders → face → abdomen → legs → feet



Pay attention to the difference between:

Tension → Release

Avoid strongly tensing areas that are painful or injured.

6. Notice Sensations Without Trying to Change Them

Bring your attention gently toward your body.

Instead of asking:

“What is wrong?”

Try asking:

“What am I noticing in my body right now?”

You might notice:

warmth • coolness • tightness • pressure • heaviness • tingling • movement • openness • tension •
softness • numbness

See if you can describe the sensation without immediately interpreting it.

For example:

Instead of **“I feel anxious,”** you might notice:

“There is tightness across my chest and warmth in my face.”

Then become curious:

Does it have a location? A shape? A temperature? Does it stay the same or change?

You do not need to force yourself deeper into an uncomfortable sensation.

7. Move Between Discomfort and Neutrality

If focusing directly on an uncomfortable sensation becomes overwhelming, shift your attention.



First notice the difficult sensation briefly.

Then find somewhere in your body that feels:

neutral • comfortable • steady • less activated

Maybe your hands feel warm.

Maybe your feet feel supported.

Maybe your back feels comfortable against the chair.

Spend several moments there.

Then, if it feels manageable, briefly notice the difficult sensation again.

Move gently between the two.

You are not required to stay focused on discomfort in order to heal.

8. Use Rhythmic Movement

Gentle repetitive movement can help some people discharge activation and reconnect with their bodies.

Experiment with:

- Walking
- Slowly rocking
- Swaying
- Stretching
- Rolling your shoulders
- Shaking out your hands
- Gently moving your arms or legs
- Yoga or other comfortable movement

Rather than asking, **“Am I doing this correctly?”**

Try asking:

“What movement does my body seem to want right now?”

Keep movements within a comfortable and safe range.



9. Use Temperature and Sensory Input

Strong but safe sensory information can help redirect attention toward the present moment.

Try:

- Holding a cool or warm drink
- Washing your hands with cool water
- Holding a textured object
- Wrapping yourself in a blanket
- Stepping outside and noticing the temperature
- Smelling a familiar calming scent
- Listening closely to music or environmental sounds

Pause and actually notice the sensation rather than using it mechanically.

10. Use Your Voice

Sound creates vibration and naturally changes the rhythm of breathing.

Experiment with:

- Humming
- Singing
- Quietly repeating a calming phrase
- Reading something aloud
- Slowly extending an “mmm” sound on the exhale

Notice the vibration in your chest, throat, face, or lips.

You do not need to produce a particular sound or stimulate a specific nerve. Simply notice whether using your voice feels regulating.

11. Name What Is Happening

Sometimes regulation begins with understanding the experience rather than fighting it.

Try saying:

“My nervous system is activated right now.”



“I notice my body preparing for something.”

“This feeling is uncomfortable, and I can stay curious about it.”

“I don't have to solve everything in this moment.”

“What does my system need right now?”

Naming an experience can create a little space between **having an emotion** and **being consumed by the emotion**.

12. Try a Butterfly Hug

Cross your arms over your chest so each hand rests near the opposite shoulder or upper arm.

Slowly alternate gentle taps:

Left → Right → Left → Right

Continue at a comfortable pace while noticing your breathing and surroundings.

If alternating stimulation feels uncomfortable or increases distress, stop and choose another grounding strategy.

When You Feel Anxious or Highly Activated

Your body may need help **settling**.

Experiment with:

Longer exhale breathing → grounding through your feet → orienting to the room → progressive muscle relaxation → slow rhythmic movement

Think:

SLOW • GROUND • ORIENT

When You Feel Numb, Shut Down, or Disconnected



Your system may respond better to gentle **activation** than further relaxation.

Experiment with:

Standing up → stretching → walking → looking around the room → noticing temperature → upbeat music → gently shaking your arms and legs → connecting with another person

Think:

MOVE • SENSE • CONNECT

A 60-Second Regulation Practice

When you don't have much time:

1. ORIENT

Look around and notice three things in your environment.

2. GROUND

Feel your feet against the floor.

3. EXHALE

Take several comfortable breaths with a slightly longer exhale.

4. NOTICE

Ask: "What am I noticing in my body?"

5. CHOOSE

Ask: "What would help my system feel 5% more supported right now?"

Build Your Personal Regulation Menu

There is no single nervous-system technique that works for everyone.

When I feel anxious or overwhelmed, I can try:

When I feel numb, disconnected, or shut down, I can try:



Things that help me feel safe or grounded:

People I can connect with:

Signs that I am becoming more regulated:

Remember

Regulation is not the absence of emotion.

The goal is not to become calm all the time.

The goal is to develop greater flexibility—the ability to experience emotions, notice what is happening inside you, respond to what you need, and gradually return to a state in which you feel present and able to choose your next step.

If focusing on your breath or body increases panic, dissociation, traumatic memories, dizziness, or distress, stop the exercise and return your attention to the external environment. Regulation practices can be modified with the support of a qualified healthcare or mental health professional.