

Regulating the Nervous System for Grief Work

Sympathetic & parasympathetic balance, the vagus nerve, and practices that help

Grief work happens in the body, not only in conversation. Before someone can safely feel and process loss, their nervous system often needs help moving out of threat states and into a state of safety. This handout summarizes the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, the polyvagal framework, and practical breathwork, meditation, spiritual, and vagus-nerve practices that support that shift.

Two Branches, One System

Sympathetic Nervous System — “Fight, Flight, or Freeze”

Mobilizes the body for threat or action. Raises heart rate and blood pressure and diverts energy away from digestion. Necessary and protective — the body’s “gas pedal.” In grief, it is activated by acute loss, triggers, anniversaries, and sudden reminders.

Parasympathetic Nervous System — “Rest, Digest, and Connect”

Conserves energy and restores the body. Lowers heart rate and blood pressure and supports digestion and healing. The body’s “brake pedal,” returning the system to baseline. In grief, it is needed to feel safe enough to process, remember, and integrate loss.

Source: American Institute of Stress, Go From Fight-or-Flight to Rest-and-Digest; Simply Psychology, Sympathetic vs. Parasympathetic Nervous System.

Why Grief Work Needs the PNS

- Grief work happens in the body: processing loss means feeling it in a nervous system that can tolerate the feeling, not just talking about it from a safe intellectual distance.
- The “window of tolerance” (Dan Siegel) names the zone that makes this possible — inside it, a person can feel real grief while staying connected to themselves and others.
- Grief pushes people toward both edges of the window: hyperarousal (panic, agitation, anger) or hypoarousal (numbness, dissociation, collapse). Neither can do the deeper work of grief.
- Helping someone reach the PNS is not a detour from grief work — it is what makes grief work possible. A regulated body can stay present with pain long enough to move through it.

Source: Siegel, D. J. (1999). The Developing Mind. New York: Guilford Press.

The Polyvagal Ladder

Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory describes three hierarchical nervous-system states. The goal of regulation practices is to help a person move up the ladder toward ventral vagal safety, where grief work becomes possible.

1 — Ventral Vagal: Safety & Connection Calm, socially engaged, present. Grief can be felt and shared here — talking, crying, connecting, remembering.
2 — Sympathetic: Mobilization Anxious, agitated, can't sit still, irritable or angry. The threat response is active; grief work stalls.
3 — Dorsal Vagal: Shutdown Numb, frozen, dissociated, collapsed. The system has gone offline; the person may seem “not there.”

Source: Porges, S. W. (1994, 2011). *Polyvagal Theory*; *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience* (2025), clinical review.

Practices That Help People Regulate

Breathwork

- Physiological sigh — two inhales through the nose (the second short), then one long exhale through the mouth. A 2023 Stanford RCT found this pattern improved mood and lowered resting respiratory rate; 1–3 breaths can shift state in real time.
- Extended exhale — making the exhale longer than the inhale directly stimulates the vagus nerve and signals safety to the body.
- Box breathing — inhale 4, hold 4, exhale 4, hold 4. A simple, teachable pattern that slows heart rate and gives an anxious mind something concrete to follow.

Meditation & Mindfulness

- Heart Rhythm Meditation pairs slow, deep breath with attention on the heart; a 2024 study found effects approaching significance for HRV and vagal tone, with well-being gains for daily practice of 10+ minutes.
- Mindfulness meditation generally supports vagal activity and stress recovery, though effects vary by style — the slow-breathing component appears to matter most.
- Self-compassion and emotion-regulation training show better HRV recovery specifically after a stressful moment, directly relevant to grief triggers.

Spiritual Practices

- Prayer and contemplative prayer (centering prayer, lectio divina) are slow, repetitive, and often paired with breath — a spiritual discipline that is also, physiologically, a nervous-system practice.
- Singing, chanting, and hymns engage the same throat and vagal pathways as humming — worship and vagal regulation share a mechanism.
- Sabbath and rest rhythms offer a built-in cultural permission to stop mobilizing and let the body rest, a corporate practice of moving toward the PNS.
- These practices matter in grief work because they offer a doorway into regulation that fits a person's own faith and tradition, not only a clinical technique.

Vagus Nerve Hacks

- Cold exposure — splash cold water on the face or take a brief cold shower. Triggers the dive reflex; heart rate drops almost immediately. Use caution with heart conditions.
- Humming & singing — vibration in the throat (Bhramari “humming bee” breath) measurably raises heart rate variability and vagal tone.
- Gargling — vigorous gargling with room-temperature water for about 30 seconds, a few times a day, engages the same throat muscles as the vagus nerve.
- Slow exhale — exhaling longer than you inhale is one of the simplest, most direct, evidence-backed vagal activators available anywhere, anytime.
- Touch & co-regulation — a steady hand, a hug, or simply sitting with a calm, regulated person lets one nervous system borrow safety from another.

Effects of humming, singing, and gargling are real but subtle and short-lived — low risk, and better used as a repeatable daily habit than a one-time fix.

Questions for Reflection

- Which of these practices already exists in your own spiritual tradition, even if you didn't think of it as “nervous system regulation”?
- Where do you notice yourself moving into sympathetic activation or dorsal shutdown during hard conversations?
- What is one vagus-nerve practice you want to practice in your life this week?
- How might learning self-regulation change how you live your life?

References

American Institute of Stress. Go From Fight-or-Flight to Rest-and-Digest (overview).

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