

CLEARBRIDGE

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Purpose: This handout offers a simple map for understanding nervous system states, trauma and attachment responses, and Internal Family Systems (IFS) parts. These models work together to explain *why* we react the way we do—and how healing and regulation happen.

The Nervous System: Polyvagal Overview

Your autonomic nervous system shifts automatically to keep you safe. These states are not choices or character flaws—they are survival responses.

Sympathetic (Mobilization, ABOVE the Window of Tolerance)

Activated when safety feels uncertain.

- **Fight:** anger, aggression, control, confrontation
- **Flight:** anxiety, worry, urgency, avoidance
- **Fawn:** people-pleasing, appeasing, self-abandoning to stay safe

Ventral Vagal (Safe & Social, IN the Window of Tolerance)

- Felt sense: calm, connected, present, curious
- Capacity for relationships, creativity, reflection, play
- Flexible thinking and emotional balance

Note: This is the state associated with **Self energy** and **unburdened parts**

Dorsal Vagal (Immobilization, BELOW the Window of Tolerance)

Activated when escape feels impossible.

- **Freeze:** stuck, numb, disconnected, collapsed
 - **Flop/submission:** shutdown, hopelessness, giving up
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Trauma & Attachment Breach Responses

When safety, attunement, or protection were inconsistent or overwhelmed (developmentally or later in life), the nervous system learned survival patterns.

- Responses once **kept you alive or connected**
- Become automatic and intense under stress
- Can activate without present-day danger

These patterns live both in the **nervous system** and in **IFS parts**.

Internal Family Systems (IFS): Parts & Burdens

We all have parts. Problems arise not from parts—but from parts carrying **burdens**.

Exiles (Vulnerable Parts)

- Carry pain, fear, shame, grief • Often linked to trauma or attachment wounds
- **Burdened Exiles:** hold intense emotions (fear, pain, sadness, unlovable, worthless, unworthy) and beliefs ("I'm unsafe," "I'm unlovable")
- **Unburdened Exiles:** hold vitality, spontaneity, joy, tenderness

Protectors

Protect exiles from being overwhelmed again.

Managers (Proactive Protectors) • Plan, control, prevent, perfect, stay busy

Firefighters (Reactive Protectors) • Numb, distract, act impulsively, shut things down fast

- **Burdened Protectors:** extreme roles, rigid beliefs, costly behaviors
- **Unburdened Protectors:** healthy boundaries, discernment, motivation, care

Note: Protectors often correspond to **sympathetic or dorsal states** when burdened

Self Energy & Ventral Vagal State

Self is your natural core—not a part.

Self is characterized by the **9 Cs**: Calm • Curiosity • Compassion • Clarity • Confidence

• Courage • Creativity • Connection • Choice

- Self energy emerges most easily in **ventral vagal activation**
- From Self, parts feel safer and less extreme
- Healing happens *with* parts, not against them

Note: **Unburdened parts** naturally function from ventral vagal regulation

Window of Tolerance (WOT)

Your **Window of Tolerance** is the range where you can stay present without becoming overwhelmed or shut down.

- Above WOT → sympathetic activation
- Inside WOT → ventral regulation + Self access
- Below WOT → dorsal shutdown

Healing expands the WOT over time.

Strategies to Return to Ventral & Widen the WOT

IFS-Based Approaches

- **Unblending:** creating space between you (Self) and a part
- **Befriending protectors:** understanding fears instead of overriding them
- **Unburdening exiles:** releasing trauma-based emotions and beliefs • Increased access to the 9 Cs of Self

Nervous System Regulation & Grounding

- Slow orienting (look around, name colors/shapes) • Gentle breath (longer exhale) • Warmth, safe touch, supportive posture • Rhythm (walking, rocking, humming) • Co-regulation through safe connection

Note: Regulation supports Self access **and** Self access supports nervous system regulation

Key Reminder: There is nothing broken. Your system adapted intelligently but needs some help to return to its balanced state. With safety, curiosity, and support, it can learn new patterns.

This work is about restoring choice, connection, and compassion—inside and out.