

Nervous System Regulation: Your Sensory Toolkit

5–15 minute practices for anxiety, overthinking, overwhelm, shutdown, and getting stuck

What This Toolkit Is For

Your nervous system is always asking:

“Am I safe?”

“Is this a threat?”

When your system senses threat, it may move into survival responses such as:

- **Fight / Flight** → anxiety, urgency, racing thoughts, irritability, overexplaining, defensiveness, impulsive coping, overfunctioning
- **Freeze / Shutdown** → numbness, exhaustion, disconnection, “checking out,” low motivation, withdrawing, hopelessness
- **Fawn** → overaccommodating, people-pleasing, difficulty slowing down, abandoning your own needs

When your system senses safety, you are more likely to feel:

- calm
- clear
- connected
- confident
- present
- more like yourself

The goal is **not** to feel calm all the time. That is not realistic.

The goal is to **notice what state you are in** and use tools that help guide your system back toward greater balance, flexibility, and connection.

The Three Main Nervous System States

1. Ventral Vagal (Safe & Connected)

You may feel:

- calm
- present
- engaged
- flexible
- connected to yourself and others

2. Sympathetic (Fight / Flight)

You may feel:

- anxious
- restless
- wired
- keyed up
- overwhelmed
- urgent or reactive

3. Dorsal Vagal (Freeze / Shutdown)

You may feel:

- numb
- foggy
- exhausted
- disconnected
- emotionally flat
- stuck or shut down

How to Tell What State You're In

If You're in Hyperactivation (Fight / Flight)

Your body may feel like the accelerator is stuck **"on."**

You may notice:

- racing heart

- shallow or rapid breathing
- muscle tension
- clenched jaw
- shaky hands
- feeling wired, restless, or on edge
- irritability
- racing thoughts
- difficulty focusing
- feeling overwhelmed or flooded
- snapping at others
- trouble sleeping

These are cues to try a downregulating practice.

If You're in Hypoactivation (Freeze / Shutdown)

Your body may feel like the brake is stuck “on.”

You may notice:

- numbness or fogginess
- feeling checked out
- heavy limbs
- deep exhaustion
- difficulty thinking clearly
- difficulty starting tasks
- disconnection from self or others
- not feeling much emotionally
- “who cares?” or hopeless thoughts
- feeling stuck or collapsed

These are cues to try an upregulating practice.

How to Use This Toolkit

1. Notice your state first.

Ask yourself:

- Am I too activated?
- Or not activated enough?

2. Choose one sense + one technique.

A small sensory shift can be enough to change your state.

3. **Try it for 5–15 minutes.**
Some practices work quickly; others work best with repetition.
 4. **Focus on the body first.**
These tools work by shifting physiology first — **body to brain**, not just brain to body.
 5. **Use them both in the moment and proactively.**
These strategies are not only for moments of distress. Practicing them regularly can help your nervous system become more resilient over time.
-

UPREGULATING

For when you feel low, numb, stuck, shut down, disconnected, or mentally fatigued

These practices help bring your system **back online** with more energy, engagement, and presence.

Sight

1. Visual Scanning: “Find 10 Colors”

What to do:

Look around slowly and identify 10 different colors, shapes, or visual details. You can also name objects out loud or watch movement outside.

Why it helps:

This activates the orienting response and shifts attention out of internal rumination. It helps re-engage the nervous system with the present environment in a safe, curious way.

Hearing

2. Rhythmic Music with Movement

What to do:

Play upbeat music and tap, sway, march, walk, or gently move to the beat. If it helps, sing along.

Why it helps:

Rhythm and predictable sound patterns can increase engagement and mobilize energy in a

controlled way. Music plus movement helps the nervous system shift from collapse toward healthy activation.

Smell

3. Energizing Scents

Examples: peppermint, citrus, eucalyptus, rosemary

What to do:

Take 5–10 intentional inhales through your nose and notice the scent clearly.

Why it helps:

Strong scents can increase alertness, stimulate the limbic system, and interrupt shutdown or fogginess.

Taste

4. Stimulating Taste

Examples: mint gum, lemon water, ginger, sour candy, crunchy fruit, ice chips

What to do:

Slowly focus on the taste and sensation while consuming it.

Why it helps:

Strong, novel, or intense tastes help interrupt mental looping and bring more sensory awareness online.

Touch

5. Brisk Temperature Shift

What to do:

Splash cool water on your face, hold wrists under cool water for 1–2 minutes, use a cool cloth on your cheeks, or end a shower with 1–2 minutes of cool (not cold) water.

Why it helps:

Mild cooling increases alertness, body awareness, and engagement without overwhelming the system.

+ Bonus Body-Based Practice

6. Short Burst Movement

Examples: jumping jacks, brisk walking, stretching, stair climbing, paced walking

What to do:

Try 2–5 minutes of moderate movement.

Why it helps:

Intentional movement increases energy, completes stress cycles, and helps shift the system out of freeze or collapse.

DOWNREGULATING

For when you feel anxious, overthinking, overwhelmed, keyed up, or “on edge”

These practices help calm and settle an overactivated nervous system.

Sight

7. Soft Gaze / Horizon Viewing

What to do:

Sit and gently look at a wide, distant view without straining. You can also reduce visual input by closing your eyes or using **palming**: rub your hands together and place them gently over closed eyes for about 60 seconds.

Why it helps:

A broad visual field helps reduce hypervigilance and signals safety to the nervous system. Less visual intensity can help the body settle.

Hearing

8. Slow, Repetitive Sounds

Examples: nature sounds, white noise, rain sounds, steady instrumental music

What to do:

Listen with full attention to simple, predictable sound.

Why it helps:

Consistent auditory input reduces reactivity and supports a calmer nervous system state.

9. Humming or Vocal Toning

What to do:

Hum softly at a low, comfortable pitch for 1–2 minutes, or use sounds like “voo” or “om.” Notice the vibration in your throat and chest.

Why it helps:

Vocal vibration can stimulate calming pathways and support a parasympathetic settling response.

Smell

10. Calming Scents

Examples: lavender, rose, vanilla, chamomile, or any familiar comforting scent

What to do:

Inhale slowly and, if possible, pair the scent with slower breathing.

Why it helps:

Smell connects directly to emotional regulation centers in the brain and can quickly cue familiarity, soothing, and safety.

Taste

11. Warm, Grounding Beverage or Slow Soothing Taste

Examples: tea, warm water, chocolate slowly melting on the tongue

What to do:

Sip or taste slowly. Focus on warmth, texture, and flavor.

Why it helps:

Warmth and mindful taste can support slowing down, redirect attention away from overthinking, and activate calming pathways.

Touch

12. Deep Pressure

Examples: weighted blanket, self-hug, pillow pressure

What to do:

Apply steady, even pressure for several minutes.

Why it helps:

Deep pressure can help the body feel contained, grounded, and safe.

13. Slow Self-Havening or Bilateral Tapping

What to do:

Cross your arms over your chest and slowly tap left-right at a steady rhythm while breathing. Or slowly stroke your arms from shoulders to elbows in an even, soothing motion.

Why it helps:

Rhythmic touch and bilateral input can help calm the alarm response and support regulation.



Powerful Downregulation

14. Cold Face Immersion / Ice Pack on Face (10–30 seconds)

What to do:

Lean forward and apply something cold to your cheeks and around the eyes for a short period. If appropriate and available, a cold shower or cold plunge for 2 or more minutes can also create a strong downregulating effect.

Why it helps:

Cold stimulation to the face can rapidly slow the system down and may be especially helpful during acute spikes of anxiety or panic.



Breath Regulation

15. Extended Exhale Breathing

Example: inhale for 4, exhale for 6–8

What to do:

Continue for 5–10 minutes, or as long as it feels supportive.

Why it helps:

A longer exhale helps cue the body toward slowing, settling, and reducing sympathetic arousal.



Cognitive-Sensory Grounding

16. 5–4–3–2–1 Grounding

What to do:

Name:

- 5 things you see
- 4 things you feel
- 3 things you hear
- 2 things you smell
- 1 thing you taste

Why it helps:

This redirects attention away from spiraling thoughts and into present-moment sensory experience.

Somatic Settling

17. Slow Body Scan + Muscle Release

What to do:

Starting at your feet, slowly move your attention upward through your body and release tension where you notice it.

Why it helps:

This helps reduce anxiety-related muscle contraction and signals completion of tension or defensive states.

Quick Use Guide

If you feel anxious / overwhelmed

Try:

- **#8** Slow, repetitive sounds
- **#12** Deep pressure
- **#14** Cold face immersion / ice pack
- **#15** Extended exhale breathing

If you are overthinking

Try:

- **#1** Visual scanning / find 10 colors
- **#16** 5-4-3-2-1 grounding

If you feel low energy / stuck / shut down

Try:

- **#2** Rhythmic music with movement
- **#5** Brisk temperature shift
- **#6** Short burst movement

If you need urgent calming

Try:

- **#14** Cold face immersion / ice pack
This is often one of the fastest-acting options.
-

Why These Practices Work

These exercises support regulation by:

- **interrupting mental loops through sensory input**
- **shifting physiology first**
- **engaging the vagus nerve and calming pathways**
- **bringing attention back into the present moment**
- **supporting your system's sense of safety**

When the body senses more safety, it becomes easier to access:

- clarity
 - calm
 - connection
 - flexibility
 - self-trust
-

Why Regular Practice Matters

These tools are helpful **in the moment**, but they are also powerful when practiced **consistently over time**.

You do not have to wait until you are overwhelmed, panicked, shut down, or stuck to use them. In fact, practicing these strategies when you are relatively okay can help train your nervous system to respond differently in the future.

Our brains and bodies are **neuroplastic**, which means they are capable of change. With repetition, we can begin to **physiologically rewire** the pathways involved in stress and survival responses. Over time, this can help make activation:

- **less frequent**
- **less intense**

- **less distressing**
- **easier to recover from**

Repeated practice helps strengthen healthier, more supportive pathways while reducing reliance on old patterns that may be harmful, protective, or no longer useful. In other words, we can gradually build new pathways toward:

- calm
- grounding
- flexibility
- connection
- thoughtful response instead of automatic reaction

This is not about forcing yourself to “stay calm.”

It is about helping your nervous system learn, through experience, that there are **other options available** besides panic, shutdown, overfunctioning, or reactivity.

Each time you practice, you are not just coping — you are **teaching your system a new way**.

A Simple Way to Choose a Practice

Ask yourself:

Do I need to calm down?

If yes, choose a **downregulating** practice.

Do I need to wake up / come online?

If yes, choose an **upregulating** practice.

Then ask:

Which sense feels easiest right now?

- sight
- sound
- smell
- taste
- touch
- breath
- movement

Start there.

Final Reminder

Nervous system regulation is about **responding**, not perfection.

You do not need to do every strategy.

You do not need to “get it right.”

You only need to notice what is happening and try one small shift.

You do not need to be in a Zen-like state of 0 on the +10 to -10 scale!

The goal is to practice enough to be in your safe zone, around +5 to -5 so your body is being hijacked into Fight/Flight/Fawn/Freeze.

These practices can help in moments of distress, and they can also help create meaningful change over time. With awareness, repetition, and compassion, your nervous system can learn new pathways toward greater safety, steadiness, and resilience.

Awareness + small sensory shifts can create meaningful change.