

Returning to Safety & Self: A Nervous System–Informed Worksheet

Goal: To notice what is happening, understand what part of you is activated, identify what you *need*, and choose a tool that helps you return to **ventral vagal / Self energy** (calm, connected, clear).

STEP 1: Notice the Trigger or Situation

("What just happened?")

Prompt:

- What is the current situation, interaction, thought, or memory that set this off?
- Stick to observable facts first (who, what, where).

Write:

Example:

"My partner didn't text back for hours after I shared something vulnerable."

Why this works

- Naming the **context** activates the prefrontal cortex, which helps slow down automatic nervous system responses.
 - Differentiating *the event* from *your reaction* reduces shame and increases Self-leadership (IFS).
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STEP 2: Notice the Emotion(s) and Body Sensations

("What am I feeling, emotionally and physically?")

Prompt:

- What emotions are present? (e.g., fear, anger, sadness, shame, numbness)
- Where do you feel this in your body?
- What is the **quality** of the sensation (tight, heavy, buzzing, collapsed, heat, pressure)?

Write:

Emotions: _____

Body sensations & location: _____

Example:

Emotions: anxiety, sadness

Body: tight chest, shallow breath, buzzing in stomach

Why this works

- In Polyvagal Theory, emotion and sensation indicate **nervous system state**, not personal failure.
- Tracking sensations builds **interoceptive awareness**, which is essential for regulation.
- In IFS, sensations often signal a **part**, not your core Self.

STEP 3: Identify the Nervous System State / Part

("What state or part is showing up?")

Check what fits best **right now** (more than one may apply):

- **Sympathetic (fight/flight)** – anxious, angry, urgent, defensive
- **Dorsal vagal (collapse/freeze)** – numb, disconnected, hopeless, shut down
- **Ventral vagal / Self energy** – calm, curious, connected, grounded

IFS lens:

- Which part of me is activated? (e.g., anxious part, protective part, ashamed part)
- How old does this part feel?

Write:

State/Part: _____

Example:

"An anxious attachment part that feels very young."

Why this works

- Naming state reduces **over-identification** ("I *am* anxious" → "a part of me is anxious").
 - Polyvagal mapping normalizes responses as **adaptive survival strategies**.
 - Self-energy increases when parts feel seen and named.
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STEP 4: Identify the Emotional or Relational Need

("What does this part actually need?")

Common needs include:

- Safety / reassurance
- Connection / responsiveness
- Validation / being understood
- Autonomy / boundaries
- Rest / slowing down
- Expression / release
- Orientation to the present

Prompt:

- If this part could speak, what would it ask for?
- Is this an **internal need**, an **interpersonal need**, or both?

Write:

The need right now is: _____

Example:

"Reassurance that I matter and haven't been abandoned."

Why this works

- Attachment theory shows distress often comes from **unmet needs**, not “overreaction.”
 - Needs clarity prevents misdirected coping (e.g., self-criticism instead of comfort).
 - In IFS, meeting a need reduces the burden on protective parts.
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STEP 5: Do I Need to Up-Regulate or Down-Regulate?

(“What helps me return to safety and connection?”)

Ask:

- Am I **revved up** and overwhelmed? → **Down-regulate**
- Am I **collapsed, numb, or withdrawn**? → **Up-regulate**

Check one:

- **Down-regulate** (slow, soothe, contain)
- **Up-regulate** (energize, orient, mobilize)

Example:

“I’m anxious and spinning → down-regulation.”

Why this works

- Polyvagal Theory emphasizes **state-specific intervention**.
 - Trying to “calm down” when collapsed, or “get motivated” when overwhelmed, often backfires.
 - Matching the tool to the state builds nervous system trust.
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STEP 6: Choose an Appropriate Tool

(“What supports this need in this state?”)

If you need DOWN-REGULATION (sympathetic/anxious)

Possible tools:

- Slow exhale breathing (longer exhale than inhale)
- Hand on heart or weighted pressure

- IFS: talking to the anxious part with reassurance
- Self-soothing (warm drink, blanket, music)
- Orienting to present safety (“I’m here, it’s 2026, I’m safe.”)

Example tool:

“Place a hand on my chest and tell the anxious part:
‘I know you’re scared. I’m here with you now.’”

Why it works

- Long exhale activates the **ventral vagal brake**.
 - Co-regulation with Self energy mirrors secure attachment.
 - Parts settle when they feel attuned to, not pushed away.
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If you need UP-REGULATION (dorsal/numb)

Possible tools:

- Gentle movement (stretching, walking)
- Temperature contrast (cool water on face)
- Naming objects/colors in the room
- Reaching out to safe connection
- Short activating breath (within tolerance)

Example tool:

“Stand up, stretch arms overhead, name five things I can see.”

Why it works

- Dorsal states need **safe mobilization**, not more stillness.
 - Movement and orientation signal safety without overwhelm.
 - Brings energy back online so Self can lead again.
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If the need is Relational or Boundaries-Based

Possible tools:

- Secure communication (clear, non-blaming)
- Delaying contact until regulated
- Clarifying an internal vs external need

- Boundary setting

Example tool:

"Once regulated, send a message:

'When I didn't hear back, I felt anxious. A quick check-in would help.'"

Why it works

- Attachment repair requires **regulated presence**, not protest or withdrawal.
 - Boundaries protect nervous system bandwidth.
 - Clear communication reduces chronic threat activation.
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STEP 7: Reflect and Integrate

("What shifted?")

Prompt:

- What changed in my body, emotions, or thoughts?
- What did this part learn?
- What helped most?

Write:

Example:

"My chest softened and I felt more grounded. The anxious part felt less alone."

Why this works

- Integration strengthens neural pathways for future regulation.
 - Reflection builds Self-to-part trust over time.
 - Reinforces that regulation is **learnable**, not random.
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Closing Reframe for Clients

"This reaction was not a flaw—it was a protective response.

When I meet it with understanding and the right support, my system knows how to return to safety."