



UNWIRED

Nervous System Basics

Hi, my name is Hannah. My passion for this work comes from a lifetime of learning how to navigate a rocky childhood and transform that experience into a map—one you can return to as a guiding light through the storms of life, both big and small.

WHAT IS THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM AND ITS JOB?

The autonomic nervous system is part of the larger nervous system, which includes the brain, spinal cord, and peripheral nerves. Its job is to regulate automatic functions in the body—things like heart rate, digestion, breathing, blood pressure, pupil dilation, body temperature, and the stress response. Most of this happens outside of conscious awareness, yet it influences how safe, connected, energized, or overwhelmed you feel from moment to moment.

A healthy nervous system is not one that is calm and grounded all the time. A healthy nervous system is one that is adaptive, able to move in and out of different states, and gradually widen its window of tolerance—its capacity to meet the stresses of life without tipping so quickly into overwhelm or shutdown.

What many people call nervous system “dysregulation” is often not the body failing. It is the body adapting. These responses developed to help protect and survive, even when they now show up in ways that feel confusing, exhausting, or hard to control.

THE DIFFERENT STATES OF THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

Ventral vagal / grounded and connected

This is the state of feeling present, safe, steady, and able to connect. You may notice more ease in your body, more flexibility in your thinking, and more capacity to respond instead of react.

Often feels like:

- Calm but alert
- More open, social, and connected
- Able to breathe more fully
- Able to think clearly and respond with choice
- Feeling settled, steady, or at home in your body

Sympathetic / fight or flight

This is the mobilized survival state. It often appears as urgency, anxiety, irritability, pressure, hypervigilance, or the sense that something needs to happen right now.

Often feels like:

- Racing heart or shallow breath
- Tight chest or tense muscles
- Restlessness, agitation, or feeling keyed up
- Spiraling thoughts or worst-case thinking
- Anger, frustration, panic, or urgency

Dorsal vagal / shutdown or collapse

This is the state many people experience as numbness, heaviness, disconnection, or not having access to energy. It can feel like wanting to disappear, shut down, or pull away from everything.

Often feels like:

- Heavy body or low energy
- Numb, foggy, flat, or distant
- Wanting to isolate or disappear
- Hard to think, speak, or take action
- Feeling hopeless, collapsed, or checked out

Mixed states

Nervous system states do not always fit into neat boxes. Many people experience combinations, where more than one survival pattern is happening at the same time.

Freeze / high activation with no outlet

This can feel like being stuck between wanting to act and being unable to move. There may be high energy in the body, but it does not feel available in a clear or organized way.

Often feels like:

- Wanting to run but feeling frozen
- Panic and paralysis at the same time
- Feeling trapped, overwhelmed, or stuck
- Buzzing energy with shutdown underneath it

Fawn / connection used for safety

This can show up as automatically people-pleasing, over-accommodating, or abandoning your needs in order to maintain connection, avoid conflict, or stay safe.

Often feels like:

- Saying yes when your body means no
- Prioritizing others to avoid tension
- Fear of disappointing people
- Losing touch with your preferences or boundaries

INTEROCEPTION AND AWARENESS

The first step is awareness. You need to be able to notice when you are moving in and out of different nervous system states. You do this through interoception, which is the skill of becoming internally aware of what is happening in your body—sensations, signals, and physiology. The more this skill is practiced, the more clearly patterns can be recognized before they take over.

Many people notice triggers first through their bodies—a rush of heat, a tight chest, a knot in the stomach, a sudden headache, or feeling spaced out. These body signals are often the earliest signs that the nervous system has registered something as stressful or unsafe, even before the mind has named what happened.

GETTING CURIOUS ABOUT YOUR PATTERNS

Awareness does not have to begin with knowing exactly why something happened. It can begin with noticing what changes in your body, what patterns repeat, and what tends to happen next. This approach keeps the work gentle and supportive instead of pushing for perfect insight right away.

THE FOUR TYPES OF TRIGGERS

As you move through this practice, you may begin tracking the kinds of triggers that appear most often. Over time, this can help reveal patterns in what happened, how your body responded, and which nervous system state it brought you into.

Situational triggers

- Being late to an appointment or work
- Getting a difficult email or text
- Loud arguments happening nearby
- Deadlines, tests, or performance reviews
- Big life changes such as moves, a new job, a breakup, or illness
- Financial stress, bills, or unexpected expenses
- Driving in traffic or bad weather
- Walking into crowded spaces such as stores, gyms, or events

Relational triggers

- Feeling criticized or corrected
- Being misunderstood or not believed
- Conflict with a partner, friend, family member, or coworker
- Feeling left out, ignored, rejected, or dismissed
- Someone raising their voice, using a harsh tone, or seeming disappointed
- Being asked for too much when already overwhelmed
- Feeling responsible for another person's emotions
- Being around someone unpredictable, angry, controlling, or emotionally unavailable

Environmental triggers

- Bright lights or fluorescent lighting
- Loud noises, sirens, barking dogs, or construction sounds
- Cluttered or chaotic spaces
- Certain smells, sounds, songs, seasons, or weather patterns
- Crowded rooms or places with too much stimulation
- Feeling trapped in a room, car, office, or social setting
- Being too hot, too cold, physically uncomfortable, or sleep-deprived

Internal triggers

- Self-criticism or looping thoughts
- Worst-case scenario thinking
- Memories or flashbacks from past experiences
- Strong emotions like shame, anger, grief, or jealousy
- Feeling out of control, powerless, or not good enough
- A sense that something bad is about to happen even when nothing obvious is wrong

COPING MECHANISMS YOU MIGHT NOTICE

Sometimes it is easier to notice what happens behaviorally before the trigger becomes clear. These are common coping mechanisms that can show up when your nervous system has moved out of a grounded state.

Coping mechanisms that look like flight

- Staying busy nonstop so there is no stillness
- Overworking, over-scheduling, or taking on extra tasks
- Scrolling endlessly on a phone or jumping between apps
- Leaving situations early or avoiding them altogether
- Constantly changing plans, jobs, or projects to avoid discomfort
- Keeping your mind occupied at all times with productivity, podcasts, or noise

Coping mechanisms that look like fight

- Becoming reactive, defensive, or argumentative
- Snapping at others or feeling easily irritated
- Trying to control the environment or other people
- Feeling critical, blaming, or easily frustrated
- Pushing harder instead of pausing

Coping mechanisms that look like freeze or shutdown

- Going numb or zoning out
- Procrastinating, avoiding, or becoming stuck
- Sleeping excessively or feeling unable to start
- Dissociating, spacing out, or feeling far away
- Pulling away from connection or responsibilities

Coping mechanisms that look like fawn

- People-pleasing automatically
- Saying yes when there is a desire to say no
- Over-explaining, over-apologizing, or trying to keep everyone comfortable
- Prioritizing others while disconnecting from your own needs
- Reading the room constantly to stay safe

Numbing behaviors

- Overeating or under-eating
- Using sugar, food, alcohol, shopping, or screens to avoid feeling
- Binge-watching or checking out for long stretches
- Using constant distraction to avoid slowing down

Behaviors that may look healthy but are still avoidant

- Over-exercising to outrun feelings
- Over-cleaning, over-organizing, or over-helping others
- Spiritual bypassing such as “everything happens for a reason” or “just be positive”
- Going straight into problem-solving instead of feeling first
- Focusing on helping everyone else so there is no need to look at your own experience

Reflection Invitation

If I'm not sure what triggered me, what do I tend to do when I'm no longer grounded?

REGULATION AND CO-REGULATION TOOLS

Regulation is your nervous system's ability to come back toward steadiness and safety after stress, instead of getting stuck in survival states like fight, flight, or shutdown. You need regulation because it helps you return to presence, connection, and choice, rather than being run by automatic patterns. In this work, you are intentionally activating your somatic nervous system so you can notice what is happening in your body, build awareness of your internal state, and practice guiding yourself back toward safety. Over time, this strengthens your capacity, resilience, and trust in yourself.

Regulation tools

- Orienting: slowly looking around the room and naming what you see, hear, and feel
- Grounding through the senses: holding something warm or cool, noticing texture, using a calming scent
- Soothing breath: lengthening your exhale, box breathing, 4–7–8 breathing, gentle sighs
- Humming, singing, chanting, or toning
- Gentle movement: shaking out your limbs, swaying, bouncing, or dancing
- Stretching and yoga: child's pose, forward fold, cat-cow, legs up the wall
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Self-touch and pressure: hand on heart, self-hug, weighted blanket
- Temperature support: cool water on your face or wrists, warm bath or shower
- Visual anchors: looking at nature, art, or a comforting photo
- Journaling or a quick brain dump
- Glimmers: noticing small cues of safety, ease, or joy and lingering with them
- Drinking water or eating a supportive snack
- Taking short pauses between tasks to reset
- Rhythm: rocking, tapping, or walking at a steady pace
- Creative play: drawing, coloring, music, or crafting
- Boundaries: stepping away, saying no, reducing stimulation

Co-regulation tools

- Being with a safe, grounded person
- Soft eye contact with someone you trust
- A calm conversation where you feel heard and understood
- Safe, consensual touch: a hug, holding hands, a hand on your back
- Sitting quietly with someone who feels safe
- Matching your breath with another person
- Walking, stretching, or practicing yoga together
- Working with a therapist, coach, or practitioner
- Spending time with animals
- Singing, humming, chanting, or listening to calming music together
- Laughing with someone
- Being in nature with another person
- Spending time in a supportive community or group space
- Hearing kind, validating words from someone you trust
- Quiet co-working or body doubling
- Creating a co-regulation plan with a partner or friend