The Nervous System Reset

Heal trauma, resolve chronic stress & pain,
& regulate your emotions with the power
of the vagus nerve

JESSICA MAGUIRE



MACMILLAN
Pan Macmillan Australia

For Ivy and Sam

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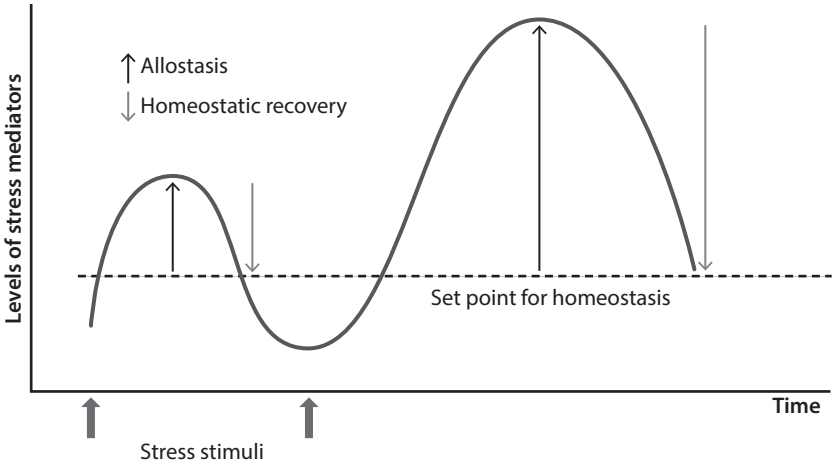
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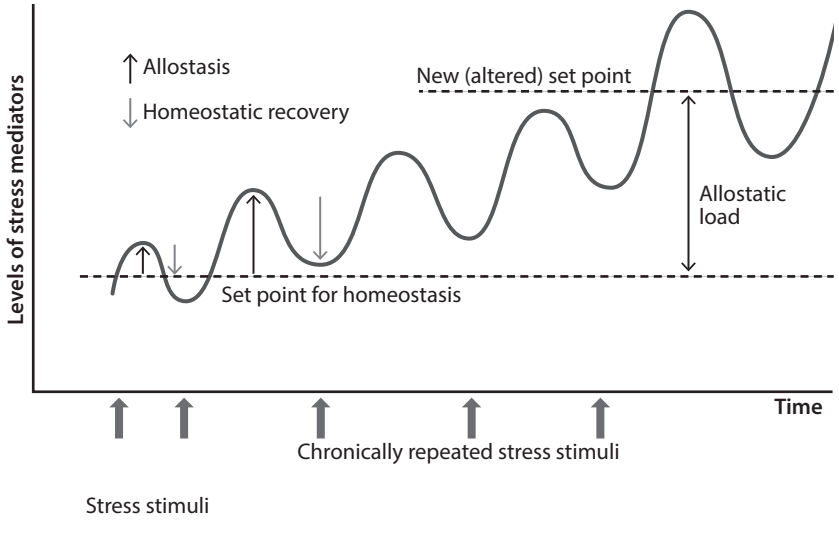
INTRODUCTION

I think I know why you're here

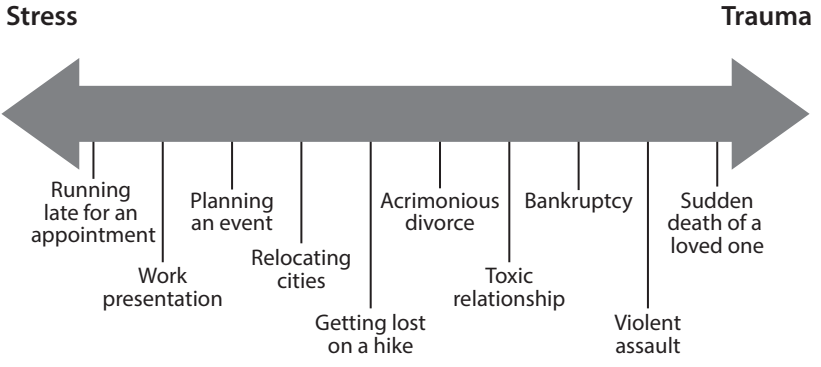
The process of allostasis



The effect of allostatic load



Stress and trauma scale



The iceberg of nervous system dysregulation

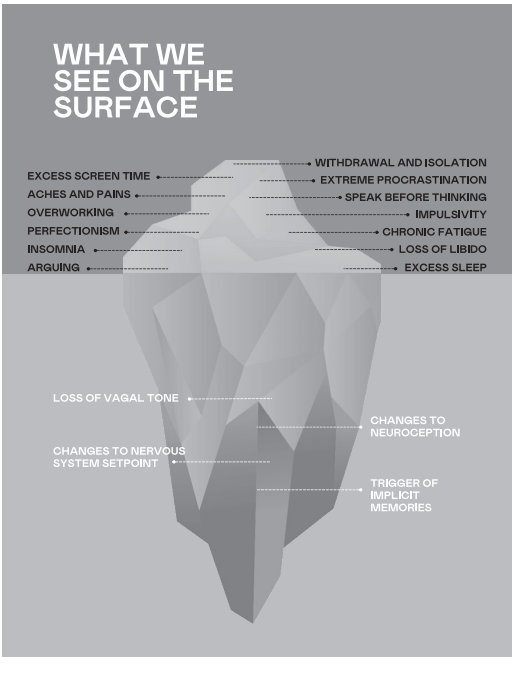
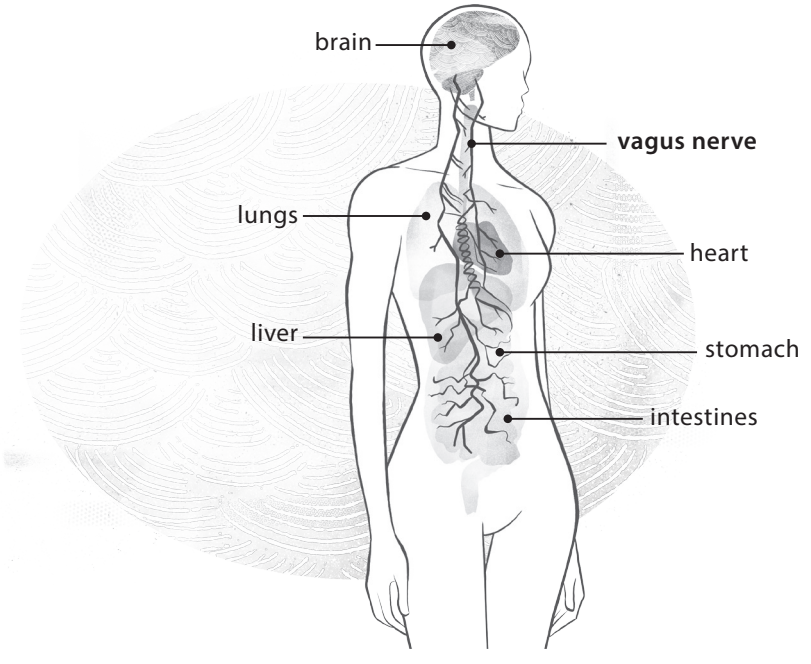


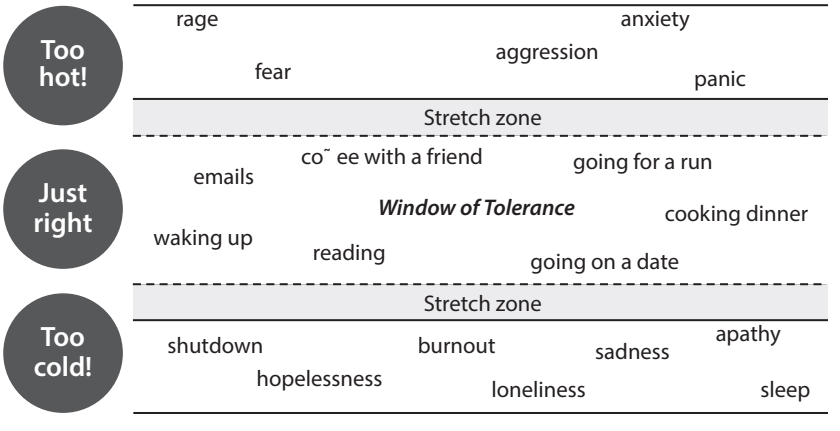
Image of vagus nerve in body



1

The nervous system states

The window of tolerance



Nervous System State	Brain–Body System Detects Threat	Brain–Body System Detects Safety
Just right Ventral Vagal	**First line of defence** Looking around for danger and people to recruit to help. Talking, negotiating and cooperating with others until the threat is over.	**Safe and social** Bonding and attachment. Emotions feeling manageable.
Too hot Sympathetic	**Second line of defence** Mobilising energy for fig t or flig t.	Mobilising energy to face challenges and meet demands. (See Play on page 55.)
Too cold Dorsal Vagal	**Third line of defence** Immobilising energy, and freezing or shutdown.	Sleep, deep relaxation and recovery functions for organs and systems. (See Stillness on page 56.)



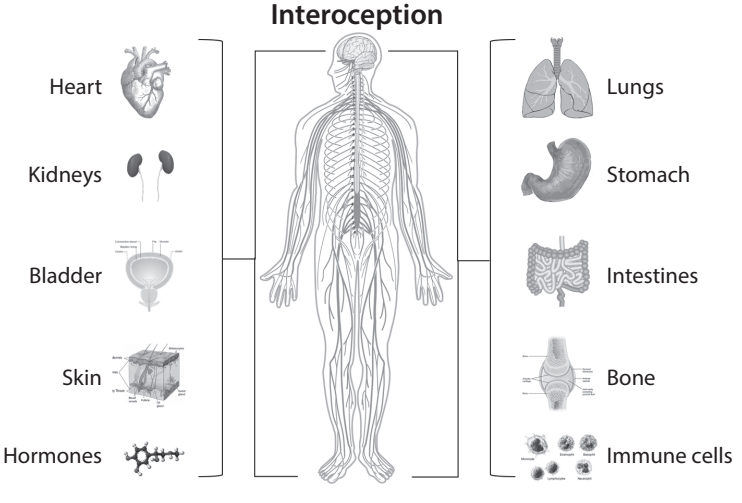
Part One

Foundation and framework

2

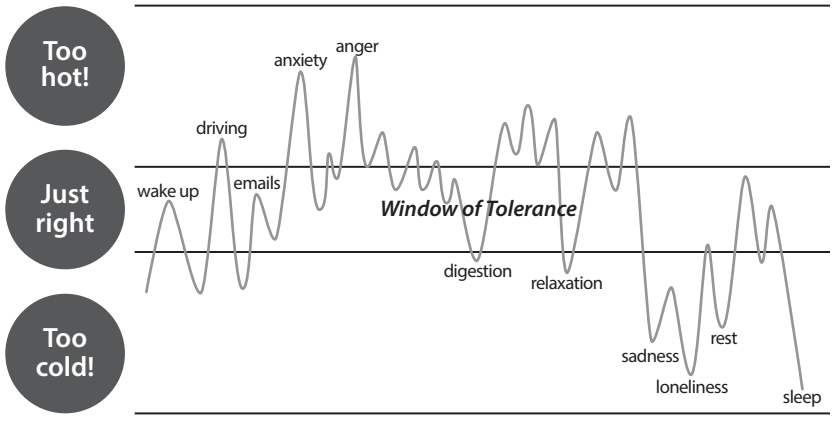
Our four fact-finding networks

Interoception and body systems

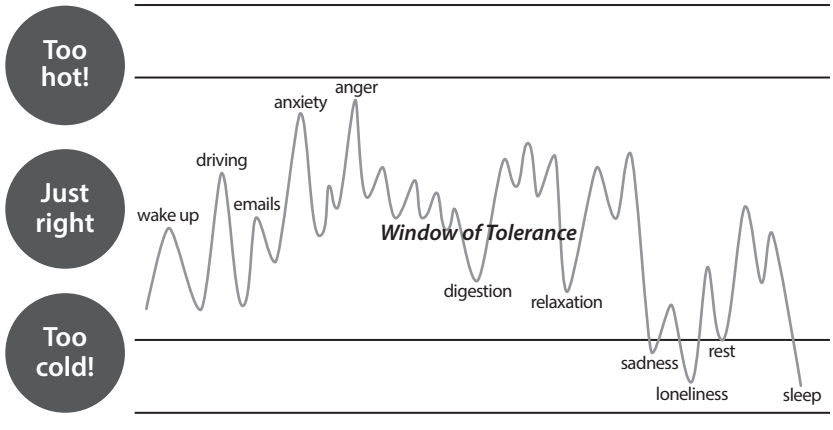


Window of tolerance: Narrow vs wide

Narrow

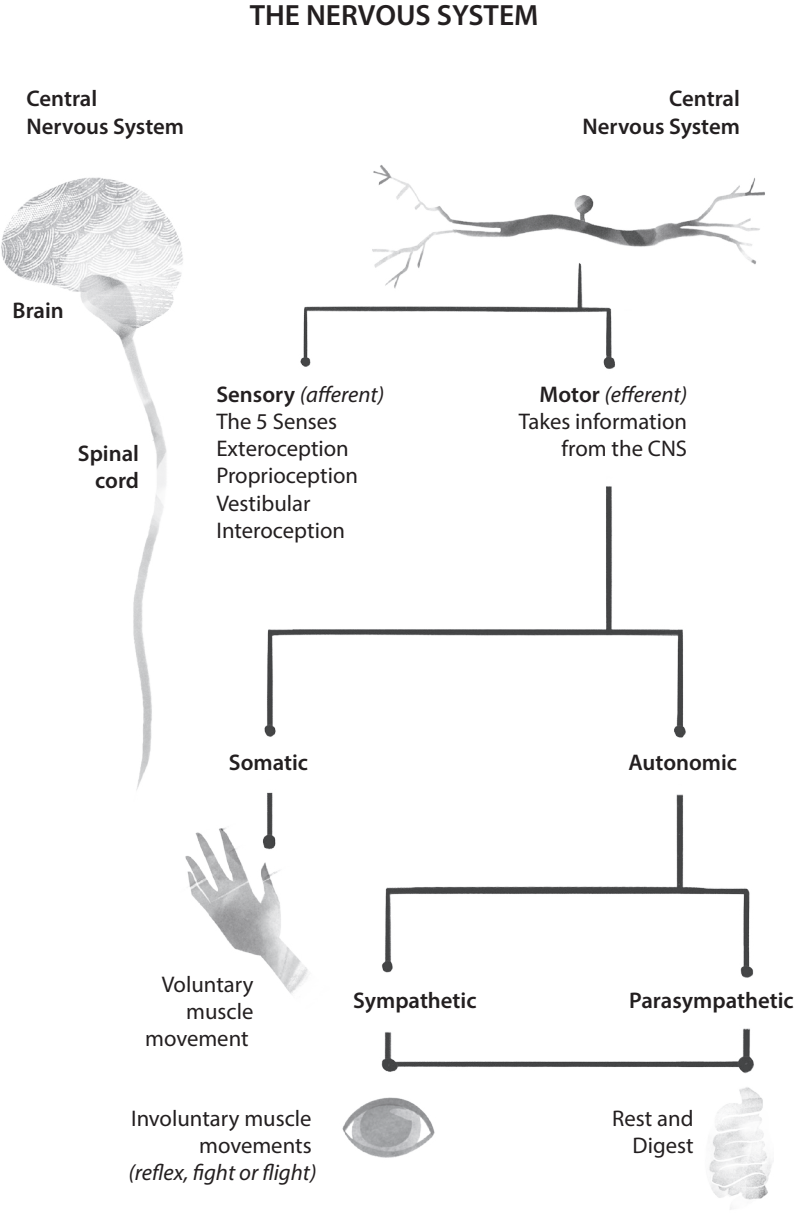


Wide



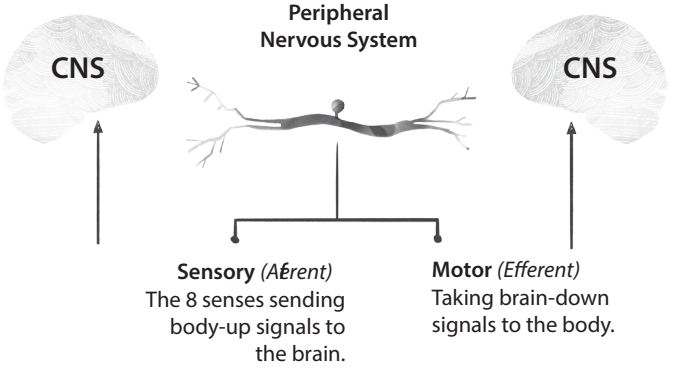
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The human nervous system



4

The peripheral nervous system and the vagus nerve



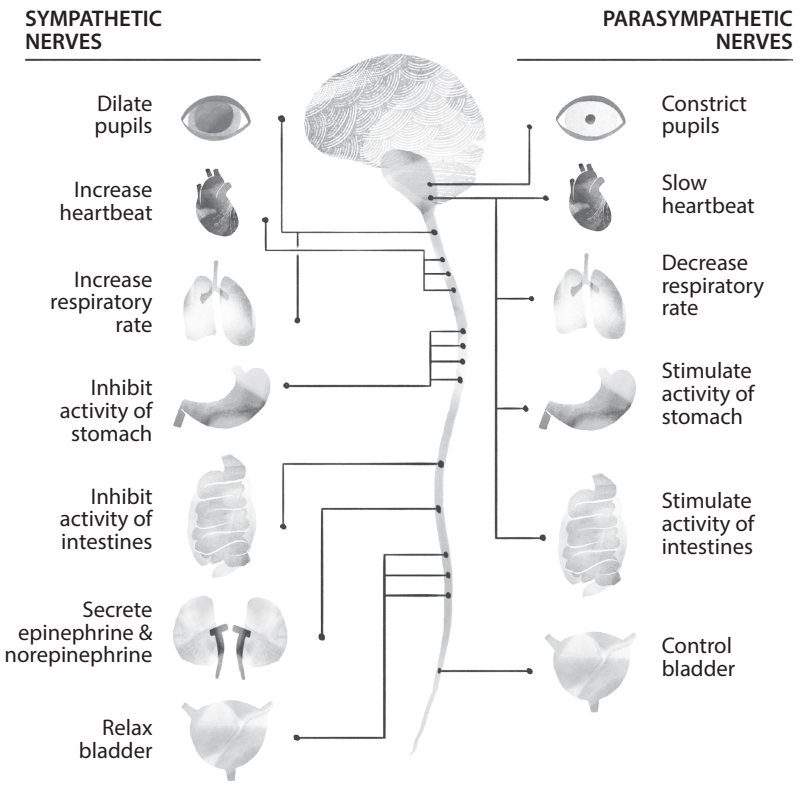


Exercise: Experience your peripheral nervous system

What better way to learn about this branch of your peripheral nervous system than to experience it in action? Let's start by bringing your attention to your hands, then expand to other parts of the body as you consider these questions:

- What does this book or tablet feel like? Is it warm or cool? Heavy or light?
- What can you sense on your skin – the material of your clothing or the pressure of the chair against your back?
- What's the temperature like in this room?
- Is there a breeze?
- What can you smell?
- What sounds can you hear?
- Without looking, can you notice where your feet are in relation to your body?
- How are you holding your head?
- Are your shoulders and neck tense or relaxed?
- Are you sitting up straight or are you slumped over?
- How is your breathing?
- Are you hungry, thirsty, tired or restless? Do you need to go to the bathroom, perhaps?

Bodily responses in the sympathetic and parasympathetic state



Exercise: Reflect on the past few days

Let's take a moment to think about interoception right now. Look at the image on page 101 and think back about the last couple of days, or even week. Have you noticed yourself experiencing any of the sensations listed? If so, can you recall what was going on for you in those moments? Being able to recognise these changes, either in the moment or after the fact, can give you clues as to which system you're engaging with during those times.

Bearing those responses in mind, the next time you notice a dry mouth, churning stomach, tightness in your chest or a restriction of breath, see if you can pinpoint which nervous system – sympathetic or parasympathetic – is driving those sensations, and try to identify the event or feeling that activated that system. Knowing the events that trigger these types of responses will help you learn to face that particular trigger while staying within your stretch zone (those areas at the edge of your window of tolerance; see page 31), or give yourself space after the event to come back to a regulated state.

If, for example, riding in a crowded commuter train in the morning raises your heartbeat and makes you feel anxious and sweaty, you'll know from the diagram on page 101 that your commute is activating your sympathetic nervous system. Since this happens on a regular basis, it's worth training your body not to perceive this event as threatening by finding ways to make your train journey more pleasant so you can stay within your window of tolerance.

To do that, you might try focusing on early signs of tension as soon as you feel them begin to take hold, either on your way

to the train or while you're on it. If you notice that your fists are clenched, actively relax them and wiggle your finger . If your jaw is tight, try opening and closing your mouth to help it relax. Are you standing rigidly against the door? Does shifting your weight from one foot to the other help? Activating your interoceptive and peripheral nervous systems through this body awareness and voluntary movement engages the vagus nerve and can help you shift back within your window of tolerance.

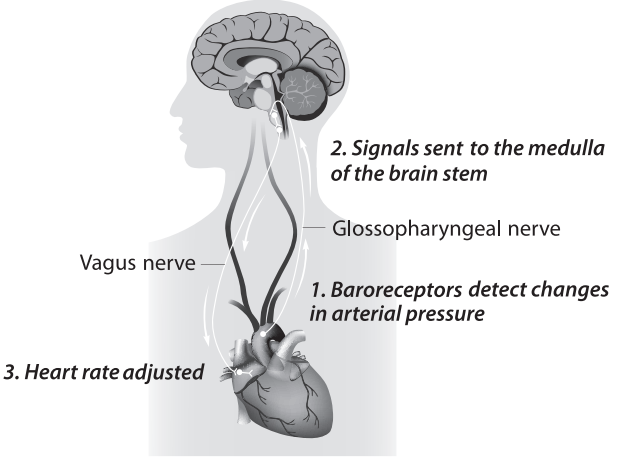
If it's the crowds of people that bother you, perhaps you can change seats, stand for a while or move to a carriage where you won't feel as stuck or trapped. If not, perhaps you could give yourself permission to get off at the next stop and take a few minutes' break before getting back on again. Any of these things will reassure your nervous system that you have choice or agency in the matter, and the nervous system loves choice.

If these 'in the moment' tactics don't work, consider how you might be able to experience fewer instances of this particular stressor. Could you leave the house 30 minutes earlier to avoid the rush? If not, then look for ways to bring your body back to regulation as quickly as possible after each commute. You could, for example, get off the train one stop early and walk to your destination to give your body and brain time to discharge stress activation and come back to balance.

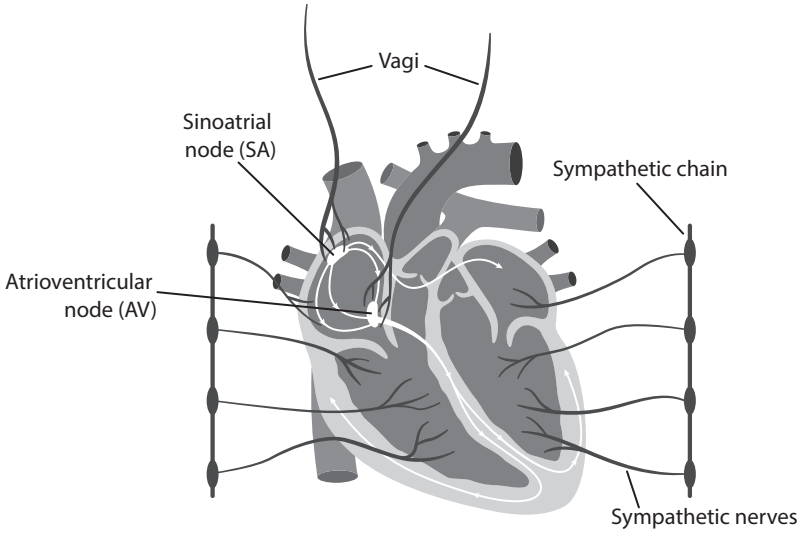
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The body-up, brain-down loop

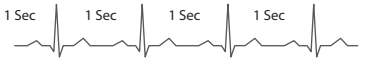
Baroreceptors



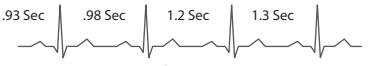
The sinoatrial node and vagus nerve



Heart rate variability



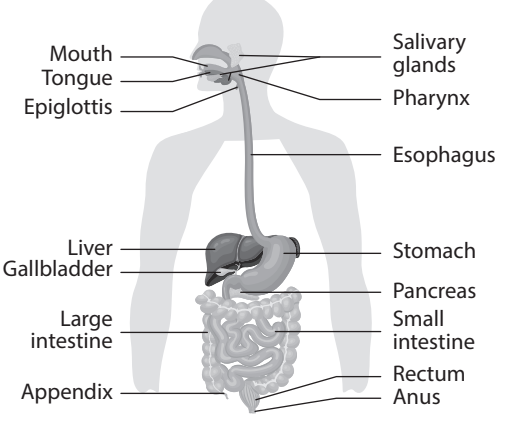
Low HRV



High HRV

Low HRV	High HRV
'Fight or ¯igh t'	High vagal tone
Easily exhausted	Improved performance
Low adaptability	High adaptability
Decreased cognition	Improved cognition

Human digestive system



Exercise: The gut-brain axis and dysregulation

In your notebook or journal, refle t on the following questions. Your responses may indicate physiological changes that are symptomatic of an extended period of dysregulation.

- Do you tend to notice feelings of satiety and hunger easily, or is it difficul
- Do you often go for large periods of time without eating and not realise it?
- Do you often feel drawn to calorie-rich foods?
- If you're feeling stressed, do you gravitate toward a specifi type of food?
- Do you ever experience racing thoughts in response to gut pain or sickness that drive dysregulation?
- When gut sensations arise, do you notice an autonomic response: for example, fear and worry, along with ruminating thoughts about what you ate? Or do you feel shutdown, hopelessness and thoughts like *This will never get better*?
- Do you struggle with IBS, IBD or other gut disorders?
- Do you find that you frequently experience constipation or diarrhoea? Or have they occurred only at specific times in your life?
- Do you experience frequent gut pain? Bloating?
- Do you recognise any patterns between your symptoms and your nervous system thermostat?



Exercise: Visualise your fascia

To strengthen your understanding of the connection between fascia and ongoing pain, clench a fist while you read this passage. Picture every muscle in your fingers and arms tightening, which occurs (unconsciously) when our nervous system switches into the sympathetic state of fig t-or-flig t and there's more 'bracing'. This is what happens to our fascia when we're on guard and ready to take on a threat or fle . It's easy to see how this type of tightening throughout your entire body for months or even years could cause pain and other issues.

Let's try something different. Let your hand go completely limp and visualise this limpness extending to every muscle in your body. Everything from your shoulders to your jaw slackens completely. Essentially, this is what happens to fascia when you're in that cold dorsal vagal state. Now think about how difficul it would be to go about your daily life – run errands, meet friends, pick up kids from school – while experiencing this flop y and collapsed dorsal vagal state.



Exercise: Tune in to your bodily signals

First make note of the preparations detailed above.

1. Start the exercise by noticing the sensations associated with your eyes, particularly the small muscles in and around them. Try to tap in to your bodily signals. Are your eyes emitting a tingling sensation? Do they feel tense? Take note of any sensations.
2. Slowly turn your attention to your mouth. What sensations do you feel on your lips? Your tongue? From there, move your attention to your jaw. Is it relaxed or tense? If you're finding it hard to tune in to any bodily signals, try opening and closing your mouth a few times to increase the sensory input.
3. Bring your attention to your throat, and try to remain curious about any sensations you notice.
4. Continue working your way slowly down your body, and direct your attention further inward as you go. Even the smallest of feelings or sensations are worth noting. This practice is all about focusing on the key areas of the body–brain loop, so as you go about this, imagine you're walking step by step through your internal system.
5. As you travel further inward, notice sensations between your breastbone (i.e. sternum, which joins your ribs in your chest), your spine, and your ribs – one by one. See if you can notice the beats of your heart. Pausing to spend some time here. If you can't notice the beats you might just notice sensations in the area of the heart.

   Then let your attention shift outwards to the chest once again, and to the shoulders and ribs, this time also noticing the muscles and fascia. Do you feel any stiffnes , b racing o r tension? Do you feel collapsed and heavy like it's hard to hold your head up? Note whether it's easy to connect with these areas of the body, or if you feel detached or numb from any of them.

   Your mind may drift off into stories about what each sensation means, or you may just notice that you have a general sense of feeling several emotions. Slow down a little and see if

you can sift through those thoughts and emotions and identify any of them or notice the bodily signals linked to them. It may feel uncomfortable to focus on this area so intently, but stay here if you can, noticing how any of the signals shift and change.

6. Allow your focus to travel downwards, under the diaphragm. Is it easy for you to connect to bodily signals here or do they feel distant, vague or fuzzy?
7. When you reach the stomach, notice sensations. Are they easy and clear to notice or is this area numb? I invite you to place a hand right on top of your belly. As you breathe, relax into the palm of your hand, feeling the warmth of your skin against your hand. Does touching this part of your body help you connect to the bodily signals in this area?

   Again, you may notice a mix of sensations or emotions in your body. Is it possible to bring interoceptive selective attention to just the bodily signals in your gut? Thoughts and emotions might arise too – that's perfectly okay. See if you can let those fade into the background while you continue giving selective attention to your bodily signals.

   Anchor your attention to your belly and imagine that the warmth of your hand represents a sense of calmness and ease that's spreading below the skin of your belly. Picture that warmth and steadiness travelling through your digestive tract. Bring selective attention to any feelings of warmth, calmness and ease. As you do, you're deliberately sending body-up signals to your brain.

   Again, thoughts, stories or emotions may arise, but continue directing your attention to the interoceptive signals of your belly, including the warmth, ease and calmness emanating from your hand. Stay here and notice how your nervous system may shift or change.
8. When you're ready, slowly raise your eyes and bring yourself back to the room.

6

The social engagement system and co-regulation



Exercise: Routes to co-regulation

In this exercise you'll be looking for your existing means of co-regulation and how you might develop more. Take out your notebook or journal and write down your responses to the following questions.

Who helps you feel a sense of belonging?

This might be a friend, relative, coach, teacher, librarian, barista, hairdresser, health professional, shop owner, mentor, classmate, gym class member, workmate or team mate.

If you don't feel you belong or don't have many connections, how can you cultivate those things?

- Reach out to new people at work to join you for lunch.
- Volunteer in your community (e.g. at an animal shelter or hospital).
- Sign up for a community art class.

When you feel like isolating and withdrawing from people, how could you make it easier to interact with other people?

- Visit a park or beach where people are.
- Go to a shopping centre.
- Work in a busy cafe or library.

Our nervous system state and co-regulation

Scenario 1

	Neuroception of safety	Neuroception of threat
Nervous system states	Jane (just right) + Her mother (just right)	Jane (just right) + Her mother (too hot)
First impressions	Jane's mother greets her at the cafe with wide-open arms and a smile. As Jane talks about her week, her mother tilts her head and listens, and nods at Jane's stories. Both Jane and her mother have their social engagement system online and it primes them for attachment.	When Jane arrives at the cafe her mother seems quite angry. She doesn't greet Jane and remains seated while avoiding eye contact. Once Jane is seated, her mother yells at her – angry that Jane missed her birthday last week.
Result	Jane neurocepts cues of safety from her mother (smiling, head tilt, listening) that allow her to anchor in the just-right state and enjoy her mother's company. They share stories and laughter, and Jane leaves the cafe feeling calm and centred. In this state, Jane has access to oxytocin and feels a warm sense of connection and belonging.	Because Jane's nervous system is calm and she's in that just-right state, she knows she can employ the social engagement system by speaking calmly while making eye contact with her mother. She nods as her mother explains why she's so upset. While apologising, Jane reaches for her mother's hand and holds it. By the end of the catch-up, her mother has calmed down and is no longer angry.
Relationship dynamics	The healthy dynamic between them showcases the high reciprocity in their relationship. There's back and forth in communication, equal attention and care given to each person and, consequently, a mutual positive reshaping of each other's nervous system.	Through reciprocity, warmth and accessing her own social engagement system, Jane was able to coax her mother's nervous system towards regulation. This isn't always possible.

Scenario 2

	Neuroception of safety	Neuroception of threat
Nervous system states	Jane (blended play state) + Her mother (just right)	Jane (blended play state) + Her mother (too hot)
First impressions	Jane runs up to her mother in the cafe and blurts out her news. The two of them hug and even jump a little, waving their hands in excitement. Jane's mum squeals with joy and can't contain her smile.	Jane runs up to her mother in the cafe and blurts out her news. To her surprise, her mother becomes incredibly angry that Jane didn't share this news with her earlier in the week. Her voice is steely and monotone, and as she crosses her arms across her chest, she accuses Jane of being deceitful.
Result	Jane neurocepts cues of safety from her mother (smiling, warmth, movement and excitement), and because she's in the play state which is the sympathetic nervous system state – mobilised, and full of energy and joyful movement – it's kept in check, blending with the ventral vagal energy.	Jane's mirror neurons 'mirror' her mother's reactions before she has time to process what's happening. Jane feels reactive, and instead of feeling connected, she feels the need to protect herself. In this activated state, it's too hard for Jane to calm down enough to access her social engagement system.
Relationship dynamics	Jane was already in the state of play from her excitement about her news and her mother joined her in this state.	Jane already had more mobilising sympathetic energy and her mother's reaction felt threatening and so she shifted into fig t or flig t.

Scenario 3

	Neuroception of safety	Neuroception of threat
Nervous system states	Jane (too cold) + Her mother (just right)	Jane (too cold) + Her mother (too cold)
First impressions	When Jane meets her mother, they sit and talk about their weeks. Jane's mother, usually always a calming presence in her life, notes that she must be extremely tired from all those social engagements. Her mother strokes Jane's hair, makes a lot of eye contact, squeezes her hand and rubs her back.	As they sit down at a table, Jane notices that her mother seems unhappy. Her arms are crossed and she's avoiding eye contact with Jane. After a few minutes of awkward silence, her mother says she's upset that Jane hasn't called her all week and she's been feeling lonely. She accuses Jane of being 'too busy' and not caring about her.
Result	Jane goes home feeling tired yet relaxed, and in need of a long nap. In her cold dorsal vagal state, Jane was able to neurocept safety from her mum's energy and body language. Consequently, she shifts towards regulating herself. Though she's not fully back within her window of tolerance by the end of their catch-up, Jane has shifted closer towards it and entered the blended state of 'stillness' that's associated with rest and repair. As a result, Jane feels good but sleepy.	Jane neurocepts a threat in her mother's body language and disappointed tone, and since she's already in the energy-conserving dorsal vagal state, this 'threat' causes her to spiral into shame – pushing Jane further into that colder state. She feels vulnerable, and as she shuts down emotionally, she loses access to her social engagement system. Consequently, almost all communication is lost. Her posture shifts, and she spends the rest of their catch-up slumped in a chair with her eyes downcast. She tries listening to her mother but cannot respond.
Relationship dynamics	Jane's mother's touch and connection brought her out of the shame and feeling of not belonging that can come from the dorsal vagal state.	Jane was already feeling isolated and rejected, and this, on top of her mother, spirals her further into a feeling of being disconnected with herself and others.



Part Two

Resetting your nervous system

7

Start where you are: Mapping your nervous system states

So much information about the nervous system states and the way we fluctuate between them is abstract and academic. And while knowledge is great, we've already established that it's not enough to create meaningful change. For that, we need to apply what we *know* to our daily reality. The only way to reset our nervous system, widen our window of tolerance and come home to our centre is through experiential learning. In other words, we have to *feel* what it's like to be within each state, and also what it feels like to come home to our set point. This is what will help us establish a baseline and build autonomic awareness of our internal nervous system functions. We call this process 'mapping the states'.

The first step in this process involves using interoceptive skills to interpret what's going on inside you and which state you're in. I'm sure you know how good it feels when someone understands how you feel and where you're coming from. Well, you can offer that same feeling of comfort and belonging to yourself by tuning in to what's going on inside of you.

Exercise: Find your window of tolerance

Take out your notebook or journal and work through the following nine steps. Alternatively, use my worksheet at www.jessicamaguire.com/mapping.

1. Create an outline for the three states

On a blank piece of paper, draw three wide rows – the middle row should be the widest. This middle row represents your window of tolerance, so label this section 'Just right'. The upper row should be labelled 'Too hot' and the bottom row 'Too cold'. As you work through the exercises on the following pages, write down everything you feel and notice in each state. Any changes in bodily sensations, emotions, posture, gestures, movements and thoughts are worth noting. If internal stories come up while you're in a certain state, write those down too. Each piece of information forms part of your unique nervous system roadmap.

2.Actively embody your just-right state

Since you're currently reading (or listening to an audiobook) and likely sitting still, you're hopefully already within your window of tolerance and feeling calm, relaxed and at ease. If not, let's try to get into that state now. First, find a comfortable position – lie down or sit in a way you find relaxing. Next, visualise a time when you felt a strong sense of safety, trust and connection – to yourself, to others or to the environment around you. Picture this scenario in as much detail as possible for a couple of minutes to give your body time to settle into this environment. If nothing comes to mind, use one of these prompts to recall an image in detail:

- a walk with a friend or loved one
- a conversation in which you really felt seen and heard
- a hike through the forest, a day at the beach, floating in a lake, or a visit to place where you felt a deep sense of connection
- completing a project that made you feel connected to your sense of self.

3. Reflect on your physical sensations



Now, allow your focus to shift from imagining that scenario, to your body. Start at one end of your body and take a mental inventory of how your body responds to being in this just-right state. Consider these questions:

- Are your breaths full and easy?
- Is your heartbeat slow or fast?
- What is your jaw doing?

3. Reflect on your physical sensations

Now, allow your focus to shift from imagining that scenario, to your body. Start at one end of your body and take a mental inventory of how your body responds to being in this just-right state. Consider these questions:

- Are your breaths full and easy?
- Is your heartbeat slow or fast?
- What is your jaw doing?

4. Reflect on your emotions

Give yourself time to identify anything you're experiencing, then write that down in the widest row of your piece of paper. Some people describe feeling:

- connected
- warm
- spacious
- expansive
- secure
- safe
- calm.

5. auge your energy

Notice if your body's energy feels more mobilised or immobilised. This could be subtle:

- nervousness
- mild irritation
- a 'daydream' fog
- sleepiness.

Or it could be compelling:

- anxious
- agitated
- hypervigilant
- collapsed
- exhausted
- apathetic.

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- sleepiness.

Or it could be compelling:

- anxious
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- hypervigilant
- collapsed
- exhausted
- apathetic.

6. Examine your posture

- Is your posture open or closed? If your arms are folded and your knees are touching or thigh muscles are tense, see you if you can let your hands relax into your lap. Then, let your body be supported by the chair your sitting in.
- Are your shoulders soft or tense? If you notice tension, can you lift your shoulders slowly up then, even slower, let them lower, focusing on the kinaesthetic information of that slow softening. You might visualise ice melting into water.
- Is your spine bracing or slumped? If you notice bracing, let yourself rotate side to side before relaxing your spine against the chair. If you're slumped, see if you can move into a posture where you're both alert and relaxed. Rolling up a small towel and placing it under the 'sitting bone' at the back of the pelvis will help the spine to line up. The position of your shoulders and spine is especially important for the breath, which also impacts the nervous system.

7. Go deeper

Exaggerate any of the subtle bodily changes you just noticed so you can *feel* what it's like to shift into your just-right state even further. If you noticed that your jaw softened, loosen it more. If your shoulders are down, can you relax them a touch more? If you felt a sense of arriving in your body when you adjusted your spine, continue to notice this. All of these 'body-up' messages are signalling to the survival brain that things are safe and well, this will help you continue to shift towards regulation.

8. Observe your thoughts

You may find it helpful to reimagine yourself in the situation or

scenario where you felt a sense of safety and connection. As you go deeper into this, spend a minute or two observing your thoughts and writing them down. Answer the following questions if you're not sure where to start.

- Are your thoughts manageable and not overwhelming?
- Are they slowing down?
- Are they becoming more expansive and optimistic?
- Have any worries or stories around shame started to dissipate?
- If you felt foggy and dissociated from the present moment are your thoughts now becoming clearer?

 9. Drop a pin in this location

Now that you're within your window of tolerance and operating from a calm, sociable place, write down on a separate page how you're feeling emotionally and physically. Take note of your breathing and heart rate, and articulate as best as you can how being calm and centred feels for you. Label this description 'Centring resource', and add to it as you gather more information in the future.

Throughout the day, try to notice the sensations you feel when you're inside this window, and work on your capacity to notice and name your various sensations with specifici y. If you notice a warm feeling when you share a smile with your barista or say hi to your neighbour, note that down. If chatting to someone in your office elicits a sense of connection or belonging, make a note of that and use that information to help inch you back to your set point next time you feel lonely.

Taking these tiny steps towards regulation can have lasting positive effects on your nervous system. The more skilled you become at noticing and then identifying how your body functions in your just-right state, the easier it will be to find your way back to it when you spend too long in the hot or cold state.

Exercise: Find your too hot state

1. Actively embody your too hot state

Assuming you're not already in this too hot state, let's try to embody that now. Bring to mind a time when you noticed that this hotter side of you had been activated. Start with something that made you feel anxious but not overwhelmed. It won't serve you here to pick something traumatic – we're just looking to start with something that we can work with to get to know this state. Perhaps you recently found yourself defending a person or topic you feel passionate about, or maybe you experienced a stressful situation that made you feel angry or argumentative.

Once you've got something in mind, spend a few minutes recalling this memory in as much detail as possible so you can put yourself back in that moment. If nothing comes to mind, think of any upcoming events or situations. Whatever you choose, put yourself in that scenario and embody the feelings it brings as much as possible.

2. Reflect on your physical sensations

Scan your body to find out how it's responding to this perceived stress. Write anything you notice in the top row of map you drew up earlier, above the notes you made for your just-right state. Use the following questions as prompts and write down anything you're noticing:

- Is your jaw clenched?
- Is your brow furrowed?
- Are you squeezing your eyes shut?
- Has your heart rate increased?
- Do you notice heat or a constriction in your chest?

- Do you feel a clenching in your torso?
- How is your breath?
- Is there tightness in your hips and legs?
- Are you experiencing a sense of urgency that's making it hard to sit still?

3. Reflect on your emotions

Now, spend a few moments noticing the emotions arising within you. Dig into whatever it is you're feeling and get as specific as possible when naming your emotion(s). Write your observations in the top row of your piece of paper. Which of these emotions are most prevalent now that you've entered this state?

- Irritation.
- Nervousness.
- Agitation.
- Anxiousness.
- Fear.
- Anger.
- Rage.
- Spite.
- Rebelliousness.
- Malice.

It's common to try to push strong emotions like these away, but see if you can allow them to just be. The point here isn't to make you more uncomfortable, it's to make you more resilient. Developing our ability to not turn away from unpleasant stimuli helps us improve our survival brain's functioning during stress arousal and intense emotions. Noticing these signals early on is how you then can take steps to change things in your life.

Remember, we also want to do this in a trauma-informed way. When you need to stop, it's wise to listen to your body.

4. Gauge your energy

In the sympathetic nervous system state our energy is mobilised. Ask yourself if any of these describe the activation in your nervous system:

- tightly wound up
- hyperactive
- overstimulated
- agitated
- unable to sit still
- fidge y.

5. Examine your posture

Sometimes when fig t or flig t takes over we're not aware of the refl xive changes our body makes. Notice how you are holding yourself and consider these questions:

- Are you tense?
- Are you pacing around the room or do you feel like it?
- Does your neck feel stiff
- Are your shoulders lifted?
- Do you notice bracing in your rib cage?
- Are your hands balled into fists
- Is your stomach constricted?

6. Go deeper

Now I want you to lean in to and exaggerate some of the physical reactions you've noticed. Give in to what your body is urging you to do and whatever position or posture you're already

holding. Go further. Exaggerate the change in posture so you can strengthen your brain–body connection: clench your jaw harder, tense your shoulders, make fists with your hands, stand up or hug yourself tighter.

Close your eyes or soften your gaze and look down. As you do, focus your mind on the stressful situation you're imagining and consider the following questions:

- Do you have an urge to fig t or express anger?
- Do you want to run away or towards something?
- What is it that your body is wanting to do to express what's happening?

Some physical reactions will be more obvious than others, but even subtle changes are worth writing down. As you bring your attention to these sensations, I invite you to put your hand on the area where they're occurring. The sensation of touch can help increase interoceptive awareness of sensations by drawing our attention to that area even more.

7. Observe your thoughts

Still picturing this stressful scenario, refle t on the details.

- Who are you with?
- What are you doing?

Pause on the exact moment you find most challenging. You might even name what that is aloud or whisper it to yourself.

- 'What am I believing?'
- 'What stories am I telling about myself? Do I believe them?'
- 'When I'm believing this thought or narrative, what changes do I notice in my body?'

8. Drop a pin in this location

Once you finish examining your thoughts, grab your notebook or journal and on a fresh page near your centring resource list write a few sentences articulating what being in this too hot state feels like for you. Add to this paragraph and to your map when new situations carry you into this state. The more detail you can add to your map, the better. After completing this mapping exercise you may find it useful to go for a fast walk to discharge some of the mobilising energy that you brought into your nervous system with this activity. Something that gets your heart rate up for 10 minutes can be enough – your neuroendocrine system hormones have just encouraged the release of glucose for energy. It can be helpful to burn some of it off so you return to regulation. As we'll soon discover, movement is one of the most effective body-up regulating resources.

Map your too cold state

Now, it's time to map your too cold dorsal vagal state. You may discover this is a frequent state for you, so it's important to know what it feels like.

Exercise: Find your too cold state

1. Actively embody your too cold state

In order to experience your too cold state, recall a time, perhaps recently, when you felt helpless and hopeless. It could be a time

that brought up some shame and a feeling of being alone and disconnected from others. Whether this experience was related to work, family or something else entirely, I invite you to sink into this moment and fully immerse yourself in that memory. Again, I don't want you to pick anything traumatic such as a death or an injury. You're just looking for an experience that was mildly painful so you can drop yourself into this state and understand it.

If you need some help thinking of a scenario, here are examples of experiences that might cause us to move into the dorsal vagal state:

- A friend didn't return your call.
- You weren't invited to a social outing.
- You were reprimanded at work.
- You had a fig t with your partner that left you feeling alone.
- The bank declined a loan you desperately needed.

Once you've chosen your memory, picture it playing again like a movie in your mind. Close your eyes, visualise the experience in detail, and pause for a moment.

2. Reflect on your physical sensations

Once you've assessed the physical sensations in your body, notice what urges it has.

- Does your body want you to collapse through the spine?
- Do you want to drop your head?
- Do you want to lie down?

3. Reflect on your emotions

Once in the moment, consider what the emotions and the sensations you're experiencing are giving rise to. Do your best to notice them, and try to be as specific as possibl . You might feel:

- numb
- blue
- lonely
- shame
- disconnected
- hollow
- hopeless.

4. Gauge your energy

In the sympathetic nervous system state, our energy is immobilised. This could be just the dorsal vagal 'collapse' energy, or it might be freeze – predominantly a dorsal vagal state, but there could also be sympathetic activation. Ask yourself if any of these describe the activation in your nervous system:

- collapsed
- exhausted
- stuck
- frozen
- in cement.

5. Observe your posture

- How are you holding yourself?
- Are you slumped in a chair or lying down?
- Do you feel heavy and that you can't hold yourself up?
- Do your shoulders sag?

6. Go deeper into this state

Lean in to whatever position you're holding and exaggerate some of the physical reactions you've noticed. Give in to what your body is urging you to do and exaggerate the change in posture so you

can strengthen your brain–body connection. Let your head drop, your spine collapse, your face go blank. If you're sitting down, you might even let yourself lie down on a couch or bed.

Close your eyes or soften your gaze and look down. As you do, focus even more on the stressful situation in your mind and consider the following questions:

- Do you have an urge to move into helplessness or give up?
- Do you notice any feelings of shame?

7. Observe your thoughts

Finally, consider the thoughts and stories that are running through your mind as you're in this state. Do the stories and thoughts you're telling about yourself revolve around:

- hopelessness and apathy
- failure and lack of belonging
- loneliness and isolation
- shame?

You might even name what that is aloud or whisper it to yourself.

- 'What am I believing?'
- 'What stories am I telling about myself? Do I believe them?'
- 'When I'm believing this thought or narrative, what changes do I notice in my body?'

8. Drop a pin in this location

Now that you've considered your thoughts and feelings, it's time to map this state. While in this state:

- How did your body respond?
- How did your posture shift?
- What were your thoughts and stories like?

Take as long as you need and write everything down, no matter how subtle or insignificant you think the sensation or thought might be. Even things like a sense of disconnection from your surroundings or the vague feeling that you might float away are crucial to note, because survival states take us out of the present moment.

Again, movement can be useful after mapping this state but you may choose gentle rocking, rhythmical movement to fully up-regulate yourself to the just-right state. You could try lying on your back and gently rocking your knees side to side. Then move into standing and let your weight shift from one foot to the other, rocking slowly.

Map your secondary states

Remember, we're not just dealing with the three primary states, we also spend a great deal of our lives between states, in what we call a secondary or blended state (see pages 55–57). Like those primary states, blended states are also highly individual, so getting to know how you feel when in each of them is equally important. As you work through each mapping exercise below, make notes in your notebook or diary of any feelings or physical sensations these secondary states arouse.



Exercise: Map your play state

When we're in this state, we may feel secure and happy. We could also feel excited, motivated, ready for action or in our fl w state. We're within our window of tolerance, but at the higher edge of it – with access to the energy of the hotter state.

To actively embody your play state, think of a time when you felt mobilised and full of positive energy? Bring this memory to mind and see if you can feel its influen e on your brain–body system.

- What bodily signals do you notice?
- What emotions do those sensations give rise to?
- Do you notice any changes to your thoughts, focus or clarity?

Make a note of your answers in your notebook or journal so that you can recognise your play state next time you encounter it.



Exercise: Map your stillness state

To actively embody your stillness state, think of a time when you felt the immobilising energy of that too cold state but also a sense of safety and connection. It could be a time when you were deeply relaxed, like at the end of a massage or yoga class, or when you were almost asleep or breastfeeding. It could even be as you lay close with someone. Bring this memory from your stillness state to mind and see if you can feel its influen e on your brain–body system.

- What bodily signals do you notice?
- What emotions do those sensations give rise to?
- Do you notice any changes to your thoughts, focus or clarity?

8

Choosing the right tools for the right job

Exercise: Break down your emotion regulators

If you're aware that you're using artificial regulators to cope with your life, this is a good time to become curious as to why. Use the worksheet below (or download a version at www.jessicamaguire.com/regulators) to help you work out when you reach for those crutches, how they help you in the moment and what needs might be driving your go-to coping mechanisms.

1. Identify a habit you use to artificially regulate your nervous system

This could, for example, be social media scrolling. Answer the following questions:

- Which nervous system state are you in?
- Can you notice the bodily signals, emotions, thoughts and urges of that state?
- How long or how often are you using this as a coping mechanism? Perhaps it's three, four or fi e hours a day.
- What triggers lead you to use this coping mechanism? Do certain people, environments, situations or emotions that cause you, say, to reach for your phone? You might notice, for example, that this happens at night time when you feel alone.

2. Examine the short-term benefits this artificial regulator provides

Answer the following questions to guide you through:

- Does it relieve or soothe your nervous system?
- Does it fill an emptiness

For example, using social media on your phone might deliver

a few benefit , such as helping you numb out from everything you need to do (artificially downregulating). If you're lonely, it might give you a connection to other people or a sense of belonging. Or it might be a distraction or bring some kind of excitement if you feel helpless or hopeless about your current work situation (artificially upregulating).

3. Identify your unmet need

This is where you can look below the surface and see what's going on in the bulk of the iceberg (see page 12). Your answers to this question will most likely link to whichever state you're in.

As you work through each of your top coping mechanisms, consider if there are other, more positive, actions you could take to meet your nervous system's true needs. For example, if you know that you use social media because it gives you a sense of connection (and it *can* sometimes bring a feeling of belonging), this suggests that you could be in that colder dorsal vagal state, and feeling lonely and disconnected. Could phoning a friend soothe that loneliness? Would listening to an interesting podcast and going to the park where there are other people in your community make you feel more connected than mindlessly scrolling? Do you need to schedule a walk with your friends?

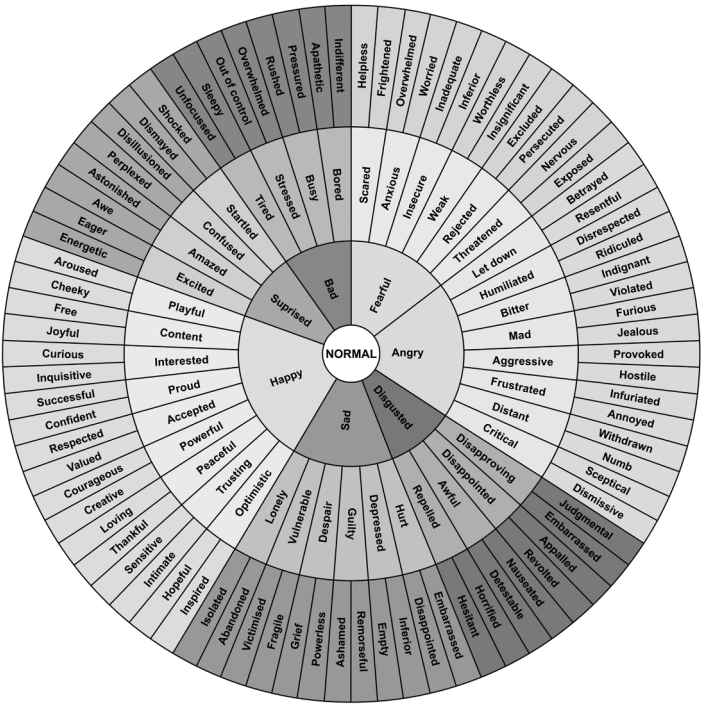
Perhaps social media gives you a jolt of excitement that counters feelings of boredom and emptiness. This, too, suggests that you might be in a colder state and would benefit from some other form of upregulating. A healthier way of meeting your need for fulfillme t and excitement might be swapping your phone for the pottery wheel in your garage so you can finally launch that side hustle you've been fantasising about. Or it could be using some gentle movement.

Alternatively, you might like using social media because it distracts you from the impossibly high standards you've set for yourself and helps you escape from your reality. A better way to shift yourself out of that hotter sympathetic nervous system state and regulate the tension your perfectionism is creating might involve delegating work to your teammates, helping your clients to have more realistic expectations, or talking to your boss about your demanding schedule.

To make a note of your discoveries with this exercise, you might draw up a table like the one below. Your unmet needs will tell you what your nervous system truly needs, and what part of your reality your artificial oping mechanism is preventing you from seeing.

Habit	**What short-term benefits does it provide**	**What's my unmet need?**	**Action**
Social media scrolling (3 hours on Saturdays)	1. I can numb out from everything I need to do.	The expectations I've set for myself at work are too high.	Review my deadlines, delegate, ask for help, lower my expectations.
	2. Connection to others, a sense of belonging.	Since I started working from home, I've been feeling lonely and isolated.	Phone an old friend for a catch-up.
	3. Excitement and distraction.	I'm unfulfilled in my work.	Research writing/ pottery/ business courses.

Emotion wheel





Exercise: Feel, *then* interpret

1. Describe how you're feeling

This exercise is one of my favourites for improving interoceptive accuracy. It's simple, yet very powerful – it may take practise to build this accuracy but just like any skill it's something you can learn.

First, I invite you to write in your notebook or journal how you're feeling *without* using words that describe emotions. Take your time and try to describe how you feel by referring to your internal bodily sensations.

For example, if you're feeling tired, instead of writing that word down, see if you can identify the parts of your body that are sending the signals that you're interpreting as tiredness. If your eyes feel droopy, your body feels heavy or you keep yawning, write those things down.

2. Identify your emotions

Once you've determined the specific signals your body is sending as information, read over your list and use those clues to steer you towards the emotions you are feeling. If your throat and chest feels tight and your hands feel clammy, what emotion do you typically associate with those feelings? Is that how you're feeling now?

Now, I'm going to ask you: *What emotion does this represent?*

To download a worksheet for this process visit www.jessicamaguire.com/emotionalgranularity.



Exercise: Tune in to your too hot state

1. Get comfortable

Begin in a comfortable seated position. You can choose to close your eyes or soften and lower your gaze to allow your attention to travel inward. Follow your breath down into your chest and let your attention settle there, in the space between your breastbone and your spine.

2. Become aware of the sensations in your chest

- What sensations do you notice in this area? Note them mentally or say them quietly to yourself.
- Does it feel easy or difficul to connect with your bodily signals here?

- Does the left side of your body feel the same as the right side?

3. Pay attention to those sensations

See if it's possible to pay attention to the sensations that feel neutral or comfortable and that are easy to connect with.

- Do these sensations move and change?
- Can you notice sensations just as they are – even if they are uncomfortable?

If, on the other hand, a sensation feels unpleasant, you can place one hand over the part it seems to be originating from. Imagine warmth and care travelling from your hand, inward to that vulnerable place inside you. Notice how these sensations change as you pay attention to them.

You may be tempted to get lost in thought with a story about what the sensations mean, but try not to get swept away by that. Can you allow the sensation to be and attend to it without attaching a story to it?

4. Note any changes

Do you notice a change in any of the sensations of activation you felt at the beginning of this exercise? If you're moving closer to your window of tolerance, you may notice your emotions feel less charged, and that your sensations are moving to different parts of your body or becoming different sensations altogether.

Other signs that stress is being discharged and the body is settling include:

- sighing or yawning
- changes in breathing
- bodily sensations in the belly, such as a comfortable gurgling
- muscle tension starting to soften

- thoughts quieting or slowing down
- heat shifting away from the chest
- perhaps even the need to laugh, cry, twist or shake.

5. Pay attention to your belly

Once you notice that the sensations you were feeling when activated have changed, shift your awareness to the belly region and notice the sensations between your belly button and your spine.

- What are they?
- Is it possible to name them?
- Can you notice the sensations just as they are, even if they're uncomfortable?

If a sensation feels unpleasant, place one hand on it and imagine warmth and care travelling from your hand, inward to the vulnerable place inside you. Notice how your sensations change as you pay attention to them.

You may be tempted to get lost in a story about what the sensations mean, but try not to do this. Can you stay connected to the present?



Exercise: Tune in to your too cold state ❄

1. Get comfortable

Begin in a comfortable seated position. You can choose to close your eyes or soften and lower your gaze to allow your attention to travel inward. If you find it hard to connect to your body, gently press your spine into the back of the chair to increase sensory input to your brain – this can help to turn the volume up to integrate important brain regions like the insula. If you still feel numb, make a loose fist and gently tap your chest. This biofeedback is useful if sensations are too small. Follow your breath down into your chest and let your attention land in the space between your breastbone and the spine.

2. Become aware of the sensations in your chest

- What sensations do you notice there?
- Does it feel easy or difficul to connect to bodily signals here?
- Does the left side of your body feel the same as the right side?

If you still feel numb or disconnected from this area of your body, add some gentle pressure with your spine against the back of the chair again. Gently tap on your chest with a loose fis .

3. Pay attention to those sensations

See if you can pay attention to sensations that feel neutral or comfortable and are easy to connect to.

- What sensations do you notice?
- Do the sensations move and change?
- Do you feel more connected to your body?

4. Note any changes

If you're starting to shift towards your window of tolerance, out of your cold state, you might notice that you can think clearly again. Here are some other signs that you're moving towards nervous system regulation:

- Your breath might become full or spacious, and feel satisfying or less empty and weak.
- You may feel sensations of warmth in your hands, feet, chest or jaw after feeling cold.
- Alternatively, since the dorsal vagal system conserves energy, you may feel your blood shift towards your extremities.
- You may become aware of your digestive system, with burping, comfortable stomach gurgling or increased motility.
- You could find ourself crying or laughing.

If your sensations feel unpleasant, such as shame or hopelessness, you can place a hand on where they seem to originate and imagine warmth and care travelling from your hand, inward to the vulnerable place inside you.

5. Note how your sensations change

Notice how your sensations change as you attend to them.

You may be tempted to disconnect from these sensations, or you may feel yourself become vague. But is it possible for you to allow the sensation to be just as it is, and tune in to it without a story, only with care? If you start to drift into the dorsal vagal state, you could stand up to upregulate your system.

6. Pay attention to your belly

Once the sensations in your chest have changed, can you shift your awareness down into your belly region?

- Can you notice any sensations between your belly button and your spine? If you feel numb or disconnected, you could lightly stroke the skin of your belly and then let your attention travel inward.
- What sensations are here?
- Is it possible to name them?
- Can you notice those sensations just as they are – even if they're uncomfortable?

If a sensation feels unpleasant, you can place a hand on it and imagine warmth and care travelling from your hand to the vulnerable place inside you.

Notice how sensations change as you attune to them. You may observe that the sensations that you identified from the dorsal vagal state begin to change as your sympathetic state kicks into action. You may notice more energy in your sensations, more movement or even different sensations. If you still feel vague or disconnected, you could gently press your feet into the floo .

If you shifted more to the middle of your window of tolerance, then you re-regulated your nervous system. You might experience this discharge of stress activation as your body settling, sighing or yawning. You may also notice your body twitching or shaking. Muscle tension in your body will start to soften. You may notice that you can think clearly again, as if a fog has lifted from between you and the room you're in.

Standing increases your heart rate and provides more proprioceptive and interoceptive information that will activate important brain regions that can go offlin when you dissociate from your body.

Light touch has been shown to activate a specialised group of skin receptors that communicate with the insula – this is a great intervention if you find it challen ing to connect to sensations.

If your dysregulation has increased, turn to Chapter 10 for exercises that can help.

9

Toolkit for shifting out of your too hot state

Choosing tools for the hot state 

What do I feel tuning in to my nervous system?	**What led me here?**	**What tools or strategies will shift me out of here?**
Anger, tension, heat. I can't sit still. My thoughts are going round and round.	I read the comments section on social media where someone argued with me.	Shaking 1:2 breathing Talking to a friend Setting limits on social media
Scared and anxious. I can't sit still. My thoughts are telling me I'm going to fail and things will fall apart.	I was given extra tasks at work and my child needs help with a project too. The house feels disorganised. I can't keep up.	Movement resources Music playlist Making a list of tasks and delegating
Heat and tension in my chest. My heart is beating fast. I feel a fear of rejection like I used to when my dad didn't show up.	Someone I've recently started dating hasn't texted me back.	Music playlist Touch exercise Calling a friend to go for a walk

Tool 1: Using posture to downregulate

1. Get into a seated kneeling position at the bottom of your mat with your buttocks resting on your heels.
2. Place the yoga block or stacked pillows in front of you near the top of the mat.
3.  Fold the blanket in half, and then half again. Place it against your stomach, under your rib cage and above your hips. (You may need to adjust the position as you go and how many folds you'll require as you add pressure.) Put your hands in front of you and slowly walk them forward – the blanket should add gentle pressure to your abdomen. If you need to widen your knees, feel free.
4.  Next, rest your forehead on your yoga block or two pillows, so the pressure is distributed over your brow bone. If this is uncomfortable or you have knee pain, you can rest your arms on a large therapy ball in front of you rather than lay your head on the block or pillows.

   You should feel firm pressure from the blanket on your abdominal region, but it shouldn't be painful (if it is, you can unfold the blanket a little so it's not as thick). You can

10

Toolkit for shifting out of your too cold state

Choosing tools for the cold state 

What do I feel tuning in to my nervous system?	What led me here?	What tools might help?
Helpless, collapsed. Strong urge to lie on the couch. Hopelessness. There's no use trying.	I opened the mail and there were several bills.	Gentle movement Music playlist Putting my feet in the ocean
I notice shame. I feel like a fog has descended between me and the room. I feel alone, disconnected, like I'm wrong or bad.	I saw my friends at an event on Instagram and I wasn't invited.	Interoception Calling another friend Going to a park where there are people Asking why you weren't invited.
I feel hopeless and criticised. I can't take action. I feel activation inside me that makes me scared. I feel a sense of doom, as if something's about to go wrong.	My boss sent me an email that pointed out something I fell short on.	Creating a playlist to bring you out of your cold state Crying

Exercise: Falling to sleep

To fall asleep, we need to move into the blended state of stillness (the combination of the dorsal vagal cool state and the ventral vagal just-right state; see page 56). This means winding back the sympathetic nervous system – and that's not always easy to do if we've had a stressful day. Rather than lying there tossing and turning, get up and do some gentle slow movement to discharge the stress activation.

1. Slowly circle your arms overhead and back down, breathing in as you raise them and exhaling as you lower them. Notice any signs of stress activation discharge, such as yawning, sighing or bodily relief. You may notice those looping thoughts finally stop.
2. Lie on your back with your knees bent: gently rock your knees to one side as you breathe in, then breath out as you return to centre. Repeat to the other side and continue for as long as feels beneficia .
3. Still lying on your back, straighten your legs and try to move to 1:2 breathing (see page 255) to encourage your nervous system to shift out of sympathetic activation. Aim to be closer to your window of tolerance before getting back into bed.

Endnotes

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