

Coming Back to Safe

A companion guide to understanding your body's states of safety and threat

THREE STATES YOUR BODY MOVES THROUGH

1 Safe & Connected

Calm, curious, able to think clearly and be with others. The body's natural home base.

2 Mobilised

Fight or flight. Alert, tense, ready to act — the body preparing to meet a threat.

3 Shut Down

Freeze or collapse. Numb, foggy, distant — the body's last line of defence.

You don't choose which state you're in. But you can learn to recognise it, and find your way back.

A word about the title

Your nervous system is always trying to bring you back to safety — that is its job, even when it doesn't feel that way. This guide is about learning its language, so you can work with it rather than against it.

Welcome

This is a companion to *From Feeling to Need* and *Untangling Shame*. Both guides touch on what the body does under stress. This one stays with the body a little longer, because so much of how we feel, think, and connect with others depends on which state our nervous system is in — often before we've consciously noticed anything at all.

Your nervous system is constantly scanning for cues of safety or danger, mostly outside of awareness. When it detects danger — real or not — it shifts your whole body into a different state to protect you. That shift is not a decision. It's a reflex, inherited from a very long evolutionary history, and it happens whether the "danger" is a genuine threat or simply something that resembles one from the past.

This guide will help you recognise which state you're in, understand what each one is trying to do for you, and build a personal map for finding your way back to safety.

This is not weakness

Shifting states under stress is a universal feature of the nervous system, not a personal failing.

This is not a choice

You don't decide to become anxious or numb. The body moves there faster than conscious thought.

This is not permanent

States shift. What feels like "who I am" is often just where your nervous system has settled for now.

This is practice, not persuasion

Recognising a state doesn't instantly change it. Building familiarity with your own patterns takes repetition.

How it links with the other guides

Shame and difficult feelings often arrive already tangled up with a nervous system state. Before asking "what does this feeling need?", it can help to ask "which state is my body in right now?" — the answer often changes what kind of support will actually help.

The Pattern — Safety Is Detected, Not Decided

Your nervous system is constantly running a background check on your surroundings — is this safe, is this dangerous, is this life-threatening? This process happens beneath conscious awareness, using cues like tone of voice, facial expression, and posture. It is not the same as noticing something and thinking about it; it happens first, and much faster.

When that background check detects danger, the body moves through a predictable sequence — newest system first. It tries connection and calm first. If that doesn't resolve things, it mobilises for fight or flight. If that doesn't work either, or isn't possible, it shuts down as a last resort.

State	What it's for	What it feels like
Safe & connected	Social engagement, rest, digestion, connection, clear thinking	Calm, curious, grounded, able to be with others
Mobilised	Meeting a threat head-on — fight or flight	Tense, anxious, irritable, wired, unable to settle
Shut down	Protection when fight or flight isn't possible	Numb, foggy, distant, heavy, hard to think or speak

The distinction matters

None of these states is a character trait. They are the body's best guess, made in a fraction of a second, about what this moment requires. Knowing this can turn self-criticism ("why can't I just calm down?") into curiosity ("what is my body responding to right now?").

STEP 1

Notice Which State You're In

You can't work with a state you haven't first noticed you're in.

Each state has its own physical signature. Learning to recognise these signs — in your own body, in your own words — is the foundation everything else builds on.

State	Common signs
Safe & connected	Easy breathing, relaxed shoulders, warmth in the face, able to make eye contact and listen
Mobilised	Racing heart, tight chest or jaw, restlessness, racing thoughts, urge to move or leave
Shut down	Heaviness, slowed thinking, flat voice, disconnection from the body, wanting to disappear

Notice without accusation

Try: "My nervous system has moved into a protective state." This names what's happening without treating it as a flaw to fix immediately.

Map Your Triggers and Glimmers

A trigger tips you out of safety. A glimmer brings you back toward it.

Triggers are cues — sounds, situations, tones of voice, even memories — that your nervous system reads as danger, moving you into mobilisation or shutdown. Glimmers are the opposite: small cues that signal safety, gently inviting your system back toward connection. Both are highly personal, and worth getting curious about.

Category	What to look for	Example
A trigger	A cue that reliably tips you toward mobilisation or shutdown	A sharp tone of voice, being interrupted, sudden silence
A glimmer	A cue that reliably nudges you toward safety and connection	A familiar voice, a pet's presence, a particular piece of music

Questions for gentle exploration

- "What are the two or three cues that most reliably tip me out of feeling safe?"
- "What are the small, ordinary things that reliably bring me back?"
- "Could I build a short list of glimmers I can reach for on purpose?"

No single origin is required

Triggers often trace back to earlier experiences where a similar cue really did signal danger. You don't need to identify the origin to start noticing the pattern now.

STEP 3

Use the Ladder to Find Your Way Back

You don't have to leap from shutdown straight to calm. You can move one rung at a time.

NOTICE

"Where am I on the ladder right now?"

→

LOCATE

Where in the body is this state showing up?

→

NAME

"My nervous system is [mobilised / shut down]."

→

GROUND

One small, physical anchor — feet, breath, temperature.

→

RECONNECT

One small step back toward safety — not the whole way at once.

A short practice

"I notice my body has moved into a protective state. This is not a failure — it's my nervous system doing its job as it understands it. What is one small, physical thing that might help it feel a little safer right now?"

Story follows state

The thoughts and stories that arrive alongside a protective state are shaped by that state — a mobilised or shut-down nervous system tends to produce more catastrophic or hopeless thinking. This doesn't mean the thoughts are false, but it's worth checking them again once you're closer to safety.

STEP 4

Widen the Window

The "window of tolerance" is the range of arousal within which you can stay present, think clearly, and connect. It can be widened with practice.

Outside this window, in either direction, thinking clearly and connecting with others becomes much harder. The window isn't fixed — it can be widened gradually, through repeated, manageable experiences of returning to safety after stress.

WIDENING THE WINDOW

Grounding

Simple, repeatable anchors — breath, feet, temperature, sound — that pull attention back to the present body.

Pacing

Working with manageable amounts of stress at a time, rather than pushing through until overwhelm takes over.

Widening
the window
of tolerance

Repetition

Practising the return to safety again and again — the nervous system learns through repeated experience, not through insight alone.

Approach	A question to try
Grounding	"What is one thing I can feel, right now, in this room?"
Pacing	"Is this a stretch I can manage, or is it tipping me out of my window?"
Repetition	"What has helped me find my way back before?"

STEP 5

Borrow Someone Else's Calm

Nervous systems regulate each other. A calm, safe presence can help yours find its way back faster than working alone.

NOTICE

You're outside your window and struggling to self-soothe.



CHOOSE

Someone whose presence genuinely feels steady, not draining.



BE NEAR

Physical or vocal presence — you don't need to explain everything.



LET IT WORK

Give the co-regulation time — it isn't instant.



REFLECT

What shifted? What made it easier or harder to receive?

Experiments to choose from

- Sit near someone calm without needing to talk about what's happening.
- Ask someone trusted for a specific, small form of steadying company — a call, a walk, a shared meal.
- Notice a pet, a voice, or a piece of music that reliably brings your system toward calm.

Consent and safety matter

Co-regulation only helps when the other person's presence is genuinely steadying. Being near someone anxious, volatile, or unsafe can pull your system further from safety, not closer. Choose carefully, and bring the rest to counselling.

STEP 6

Build Your Personal Map

A map you've built yourself is far more useful in the moment than a generic list.

- 1 **List your personal signs** for each state — the exact words and sensations that show up for you.
- 2 **List your known triggers** — the cues that reliably tip you out of safety.
- 3 **List your known glimmers** — the small, ordinary things that reliably bring you back.
- 4 **List your grounding anchors** — sensory, physical, or relational tools that have worked before.
- 5 **List your safe people** — who genuinely helps you co-regulate, not just who's available.
- 6 **Keep it somewhere accessible** — a note on your phone, a card in your bag — for moments when thinking clearly is hard.

A distinction to carry

"I can't always choose my state. I can build a map that helps me find my way back to safety a little faster each time."

Practice Page — When You Notice a Shift

Use this after noticing yourself move out of your window of tolerance.

What happened just before the shift?

Which state did I move into — mobilised, or shut down?

What did I notice in my body?

What story or thought arrived alongside the state?

What is one small, grounding step available to me right now?

What actually helped, even a little?

What would I bring to counselling?

A Week of Practice — Small Repetitions, Not a Test

Choose one practice only. The nervous system learns through repetition, not through understanding alone.

Day	A small experiment	What to notice
Day 1	Notice one shift in state and name it plainly: "My nervous system is mobilised."	The body sensation before any story arrives.
Day 2	Notice one trigger as it happens, without acting on it immediately.	What state it moves you toward, and how fast.
Day 3	Deliberately seek out one glimmer.	Whether your body responds, even slightly.
Day 4	Try one grounding anchor when you notice tension building.	How long it takes to feel a shift, however small.
Day 5	Spend ten minutes near someone whose presence feels steady.	What co-regulation feels like when you let it happen.
Day 6	Write down one thought that arrived during a protective state — then reread it once calmer.	Whether the thought looks different from inside safety.
Day 7	Review your personal map — add or adjust anything.	Progress may look like recognising the shift sooner, not preventing it.

Quick Reference — Five Questions for a Moment of Overwhelm

Keep this close for the moment a shift happens fast.

1. WHERE AM I?	Which state — safe, mobilised, or shut down?
2. WHAT'S HERE?	What am I noticing in my body, right now?
3. WHAT TRIGGERED THIS?	Is there a cue I can name, even roughly?
4. WHAT MIGHT HELP?	A grounding anchor, a glimmer, or a safe person nearby?
5. WHAT'S ONE SMALL STEP?	Not the whole way back to calm — just one rung.

Remember

Your nervous system isn't working against you. It's running a very old, very fast protective process — and it can be learned, worked with, and gradually widened.

Evidence & Notes — What Informed This Companion Guide

The language here is deliberately practical and non-diagnostic. It supports counselling; it does not replace individual formulation or clinical judgement.

Key learning from the research

The autonomic nervous system organises the body's response to safety and threat through a predictable hierarchy of states, moving from social engagement, to mobilisation, to shutdown, largely outside conscious control.

This detection process happens beneath conscious awareness, using cues from the environment, the body, and other people, and can be triggered by cues that resemble past danger even when no present threat exists.

The "window of tolerance" describes the zone of arousal within which a person can stay present and think flexibly; stress and trauma can narrow this window, and it can be gradually widened through repeated, manageable experiences of returning to regulation.

Regulation is not purely an individual task — nervous systems influence each other through co-regulation, and a calm, safe presence can help another person's system find its way back to safety.

Important limits

These states are protective, not pathological — even shutdown, uncomfortable as it feels, is the body attempting to protect you.

This model does not diagnose a particular condition or history. Explore your own patterns tentatively and collaboratively.

If shutdown or overwhelm is frequent, severe, or connected to an unsafe situation, safety planning comes first — the practices here support that work but don't replace it.

Sources — Further Reading

Selected research and professional sources used to shape this guide.

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- Dana, D. (2018). *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy: Engaging the Rhythm of Regulation*. New York: Norton.
- Siegel, D. J. (1999). *The Developing Mind: Toward a Neurobiology of Interpersonal Experience*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Corrigan, F. M., Fisher, J. J., & Nutt, D. J. (2011). Autonomic dysregulation and the Window of Tolerance model of the effects of complex emotional trauma. *Journal of Psychopharmacology*, 25(1), 17–25.
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Using this alongside the other companion guides

When a feeling or a moment of shame feels especially intense or hard to shift, let this guide help you ask which nervous system state you're in first. Sometimes the most useful next step isn't a question about meaning — it's a question about safety. Bring what you notice to counselling.