Your nervous system

The part of you that keeps you alive, what it is asking for, and how to give it the conditions it needs.

So many of us endure our bodies.
This is a small guide to understanding yours.

A PLACE TO START

Plain language, based on research, with every source named. The last pages show where to continue. Written by someone who is not a medical professional, for anyone tired of being told to just relax.

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Start anywhere

There is no right order. Go to the page you need today, and print only that page if you like. Every page stands on its own. On a phone, tap any line or box to type.

> If you only have energy for one page today: **Two-minute resets**, page 12.

People use different words for themselves. I use the ones most people have told researchers they prefer, and yours are welcome here.

UNDERSTAND

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ONE

What it is

Your nervous system is your brain and spinal cord, the command centre, and the branching nerves that reach your skin, muscles, and organs. It carries messages both ways, day and night.

One part runs without you thinking about it: your heartbeat, breathing, and digestion. This is the **autonomic** nervous system. It has two branches that work like an accelerator and a brake.

	THE ACCELERATOR *getting you ready*	THE BRAKE *rest, digest, repair*
HEART	beats faster	slows down
BREATH	quicker, higher in the chest	slower, deeper
MUSCLES	tense, ready	soften
DIGESTION	pauses	starts again
ATTENTION	narrows to the threat	widens
ENERGY	spent	stored, repaired

Both are always running. Health is not having the brake on all the time. It is being able to move between the two, and to come back to rest after effort.

Your body is not working against you. It is working very hard for you.

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TWO

When your body senses a threat

An old and brilliant system, built for short bursts.

1. ### Your brain senses danger
   Often below your awareness: a tone of voice, a loud room, a hard email, hunger, a hormone dip.

2. ### The alarm sounds
   Adrenaline in seconds: faster heart and breath. Cortisol soon after, to keep you going.

3. ### Your body acts
   Everything not needed to survive, such as digestion, waits.

4. ### The danger passes, and you rest
   The brake comes on. This is how the cycle is meant to finish.

Fight or flight

Revved up. Racing heart, restless, snappy, on alert.

Freeze or shut down

When it is too much. Numb, foggy, heavy, cannot start. Your body protecting you, not laziness.

WHEN THE ALARM DOES NOT SWITCH OFF

When stress goes on for weeks or months, step four never comes. Doctors call this chronic stress, and it wears on body and mind. It is why exhaustion can feel physical: because it is.

Rest is not a reward for finishing. It is the other half of the cycle.

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THREE

Your window

The psychiatrist Dan Siegel calls it the *window of tolerance*: the range in which your nervous system can take in what is happening and respond, without being overwhelmed or shutting down.

ABOVE YOUR WINDOW · TOO MUCH

Your window

You can think, feel, and stay connected.
Hard things are still hard, and you can meet them.

BELOW YOUR WINDOW · TOO LITTLE

Above: racing thoughts, panic, anger, overwhelm, cannot settle.

Below: numb, foggy, flat, withdrawn, exhausted, far away.

Everyone moves in and out of their window. Poor sleep, ongoing stress, grief, illness, and too much noise all make the window narrower, so smaller things tip you out. The kind news is that the window can widen again, slowly, with the right conditions.

WHEN I AM ABOVE MY WINDOW, I NOTICE

WHEN I AM BELOW MY WINDOW, I NOTICE

WHEN I AM IN MY WINDOW, I CAN

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FOUR

Mapping your states

Most of us move between three broad states during a day. Your early clues are your own. Fill in the last column with yours.

State	Body	Mind	What I do	My clues
Settled in your window	Steady breath, soft shoulders, warm hands	Clear, curious, patient	Reply easily, cope with changed plans	
Wired fight or flight	Tight jaw, shallow breath, racing heart, hot	Racing thoughts, irritability, dread, harsh self-talk	Snap, overwork, scroll late at night	
Flat freeze or shutdown	Heavy limbs, cold, suddenly exhausted	Fog, blanks, numb, trapped	Stare at the screen, avoid calls, want a dark room	

Notice your amber clues, a clenched jaw, a sudden snap, as a gentle signal to pause, rather than waiting for the crash.

MY FIRST AMBER CLUE

Some writers describe these states using polyvagal terms. This guide uses plain words, because the biology behind those terms is still debated.

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FIVE

Why the alarm sounds sooner for some of us

If your system tips into wired or flat more easily than other people's, there are reasons. They are not failings.

Neurodivergent minds

Many autistic people and people with ADHD experience sound, light, and social demands more intensely. Ordinary places can tip the alarm long before others notice anything.

Hormones

Oestrogen and progesterone affect calming brain chemicals. In perimenopause, many women notice waves of anxiety or a racing heart with nothing obviously wrong.

Burnout and grief

Long stress or loss can teach the body to stay on guard, so it takes less to tip it over.

A quicker alarm is not weakness. It is a system that has learned to protect you.

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SIX

What it can feel like

Your nervous system speaks in sensations before it speaks in thoughts. Tick what you recognise. This is not a test and it diagnoses nothing. It is a way to start listening.

- ☐ A racing or pounding heart
- ☐ Shallow breath, or holding my breath
- ☐ A tight jaw, shoulders, or chest
- ☐ An upset stomach, or no appetite
- ☐ Wired but tired, cannot fall asleep
- ☐ Snapping at people I love
- ☐ Sounds, light, or touch feel too much
- ☐ Cannot find words, or lose my train of thought
- ☐ Numb, flat, or far away
- ☐ Heavy limbs, cannot get started
- ☐ Forgetting to eat, drink, or go to the toilet
- ☐ Crying more easily, or not at all
- ☐ Every small task feels enormous
- ☐ Other: _____

WHEN I NOTICE THESE MOST · TIME OF DAY, PLACE, PEOPLE

WHAT USUALLY COMES JUST BEFORE

Many of these can also have other causes, so if something is new, severe, or worrying you, please see a doctor. Chest pain, or sudden changes in how you feel, need care straight away.

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SEVEN

Listening inside

Interoception is the sense of what is happening inside you: heartbeat, breath, hunger, thirst, temperature, needing the toilet, and the body side of feelings.

People sense these differently. Research suggests many autistic people and people with ADHD do, although the studies do not all agree. If your signals arrive late or quietly, you are not careless. You are learning to hear them sooner.

A signal inside	What it might be asking for
Cold hands, a clenched jaw	*a pause, warmth, a breath*
A headache in the afternoon	*water, food, a screen break*
Restless legs, cannot sit	*movement*
Close to tears over something small	*rest, or a kind person*
Suddenly irritable	*food, or less noise*

These are only examples. Your body's language is your own.

MY BODY'S EARLIEST SIGNALS, THE WHISPER BEFORE THE SHOUT

WHAT THEY USUALLY MEAN I NEED

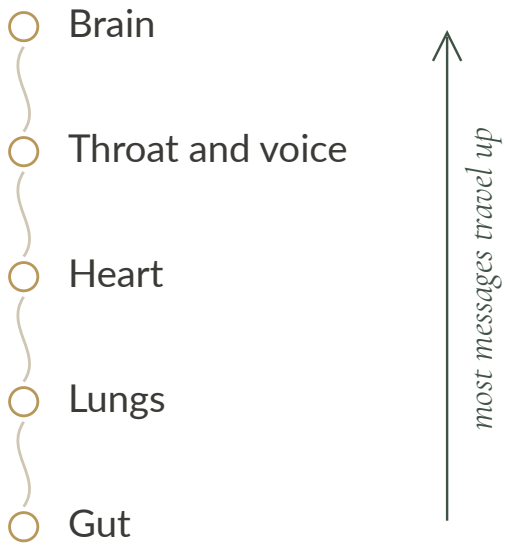
Your body has been talking all along.

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EIGHT

The wandering nerve

The **vagus nerve** is the longest nerve that starts in the brain. Its name means "wandering". It is the main nerve of the brake.



It wanders from your brainstem, past your throat, to your heart, lungs, and gut.

Most of its fibres carry messages *up*: your body telling your brain how things are.

So the way you breathe, move, and rest is information your brain is listening to.

You may have heard of polyvagal theory. Many therapists find its map useful, and scientists still debate its biology. This guide keeps to the simpler picture that is well established.

Your body speaks first. Your brain is listening.

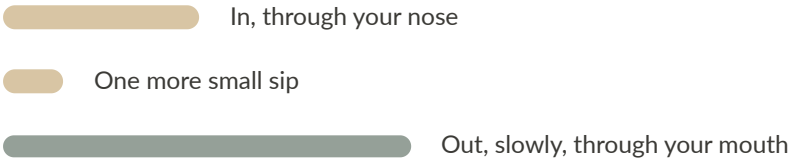
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NINE

Your breath, the brake you can reach

Breathing is the one automatic system you can also steer. A long, slow breath out is one of the most direct ways to press the brake.

A cyclic sigh



The breath out is longer than the breath in. Repeat for a minute, or up to five. Even one or two can help.

THE STUDY · STANFORD, 2023

WHO	About a hundred adults
WHAT	One of three breathing exercises, or mindfulness meditation
HOW LONG	Five minutes a day, for a month
WHAT THEY FOUND	All helped. The cyclic sigh lifted mood the most, and slowed resting breathing.

If a breathing exercise makes you dizzy or more anxious, stop, and breathe normally. Nothing here is a treatment.

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TEN

Two-minute resets

Wired and flat are opposite states, so they need opposite resets. You cannot think your way calm. You send safety signals from the body up.

If you feel wired

1. **A long breath out.** In for four, out for six to eight, or the cyclic sigh on page 11.
2. **Cool water.** On your wrists or face. Cold on the face can slow the heart.
3. **Push and shake.** Press your palms into a wall for fifteen seconds, then shake out your arms.

If you feel flat

1. **Look around.** Slowly turn your head. Name three ordinary things you can see.
2. **Warmth and pressure.** A warm mug, a heavy blanket, feet pressed into the floor.
3. **Tiny movements.** Wiggle your toes, roll your ankles. Do not force big energy.

Lower the demands too: less noise, dimmer light, and rest without guilt until energy returns.

If you have a heart, breathing, or circulation condition, check with your doctor before trying cold water or breathing exercises.

THE RESET THAT WORKS BEST FOR ME

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ELEVEN

Small habits through the day

You do not need an extra hour. Thirty seconds, woven into what you already do, adds up.

When	An idea	Mine
Morning	Water, and a minute of daylight at a window, before your phone.	
Doorways	Before you walk in, three slow breaths out, and drop your shoulders.	
On the way	Hum or sing. It slows and lengthens your breath out.	
Evening	Lamps instead of overhead lights. A few minutes lying with your legs up.	

GLIMMERS

The therapist Deb Dana calls them glimmers: small everyday moments that feel safe. Sun through trees, a warm mug, a dog on your lap. Noticing them helps you find your way back.

MY GLIMMERS THIS WEEK

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TWELVE

The conditions your nervous system needs

You cannot think your way out of a nervous system state. You can change the conditions around it. Small and repeated is better than big and rare.

Sleep and rhythm

Waking at a similar time, and daylight soon after, steadies your body clock.

Breath

A long breath out, a few times a day, before you need it.

Movement

Walking, stretching, shaking out. Movement lets the alarm finish its job.

Food and water

Regular meals and drinks. A hungry body reads the world as more dangerous.

Nature

Time among trees is linked to lower cortisol in research. The studies are small, and the effect is gentle.

People

Calm nervous systems help to settle each other. A steady voice, a kind face, a hand.

Less noise

Fewer sounds, lights, tabs, and demands. Sensory load adds up.

Rest, early

Rest before you are empty, not after. Little and often.

For daylight and rhythm, there is also *The circadian rhythm*, free on my site.

You are not trying to never be stressed. You are making it easier to come home.

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THIRTEEN

My conditions

Fill in what is true for you. Return to it when you are in your window, not in the middle of a hard day.

WHAT SETTLES ME

WHAT DRAINS ME

THREE THINGS THAT SETTLE ME IN UNDER TWO MINUTES

MY PLAN FOR A HARD DAY

When I notice	I will	I will ask

> FOR EXAMPLE
>
> When I notice my jaw clenching at my desk, I will step outside for five slow breaths. I will ask my manager for written notes after meetings.

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FOURTEEN

Asking for what your nervous system needs

Understanding turns "I can't cope" into something people can act on: what happens, and what helps. You are allowed to ask for the conditions you need.

At work

A quieter place. Breaks without explaining. Notice of changes. Instructions in writing.

With a doctor

Bring your filled-in pages: what you notice, since when, and what you can no longer do.

At home

Tell the people you live with your early signals, and the one thing that helps most when they see them.

With yourself

Treat your signals as information, not failure. Plan rest the way you would plan a meeting.

> THREE SENTENCES
>
> "When the office is loud, I lose my train of thought and I am exhausted by lunchtime. Working in the quiet room in the mornings helps me focus. Could I book it three mornings a week?"

WHAT HAPPENS, WHAT HELPS, AND WHAT I AM ASKING FOR

For more, there is *Advocating for yourself*, free on my site, with pages for doctors, work, insurers, family, and school.

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FIFTEEN

Where to continue

This guide is a place to start. Here is where to go next.

TO READ MORE

Your national health service's website, and the Cleveland Clinic Health Library, both written in plain language. From me, free: *Advocating for yourself*, *The circadian rhythm*, *Your brain*, *Burnout*, and *Neurodiversity*.

TO FIND SUPPORT WHERE YOU LIVE · WORDS TO SEARCH, ADDING WHERE YOU LIVE

What you are looking for	Words to search
Someone to talk to	*talking therapy near me · counsellor [your town] · stress support group*
Help with your body	*[your doctor's surgery or clinic] · physiotherapist breathing · sleep clinic referral*
Sensory needs	*occupational therapist sensory adults · quiet hours [your supermarket]*
At work	*employee assistance programme · occupational health · reasonable adjustments stress*
Nature and movement	*walking group [your area] · forest bathing [your area] · gentle yoga [your town]*
If you care for someone	*carers support [your area] · respite care [your area]*

WHAT I FOUND, AND WHO I WILL CONTACT FIRST

If you are struggling tonight and cannot wait, please do not sit with it alone. In Scotland, 111 reaches the NHS 24 Mental Health Hub at any hour, and Samaritans are on 116 123, free, day or night. In the United States and Canada, call or text 988. Anywhere else, findahelpline.com lists the lines that operate in your country. In an emergency, call your local emergency number.

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Where this comes from

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Why it is free

I have learned how little most of us were taught about how our bodies work. So we endure, instead of understanding, caring for ourselves, and asking for what we need. This guide is yours to keep, print, and hand to someone.

I am not a medical professional. This guide diagnoses nothing and is not medical advice. If something in your body worries you, please see a doctor.

Valerie McIntyre-Baird

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