



Regulating the Nervous System

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Live Well With Chronic Illness



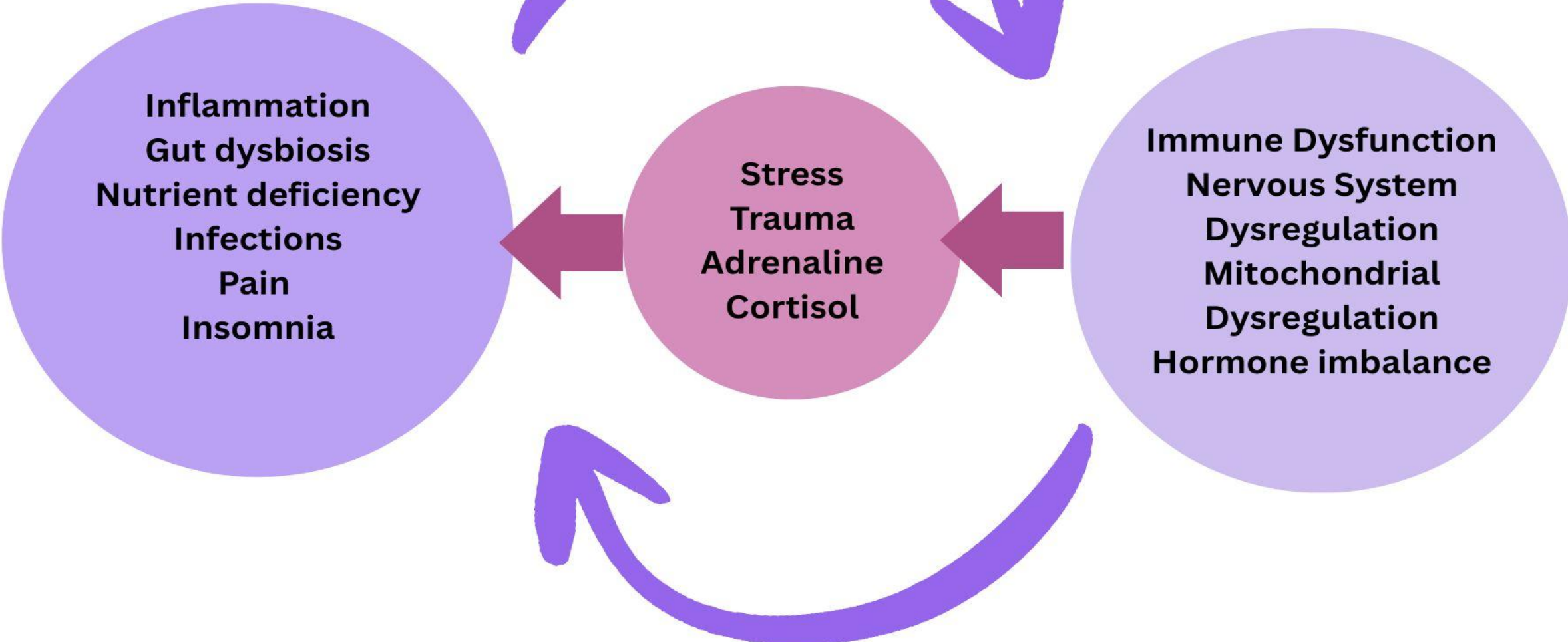
Look After Yourself



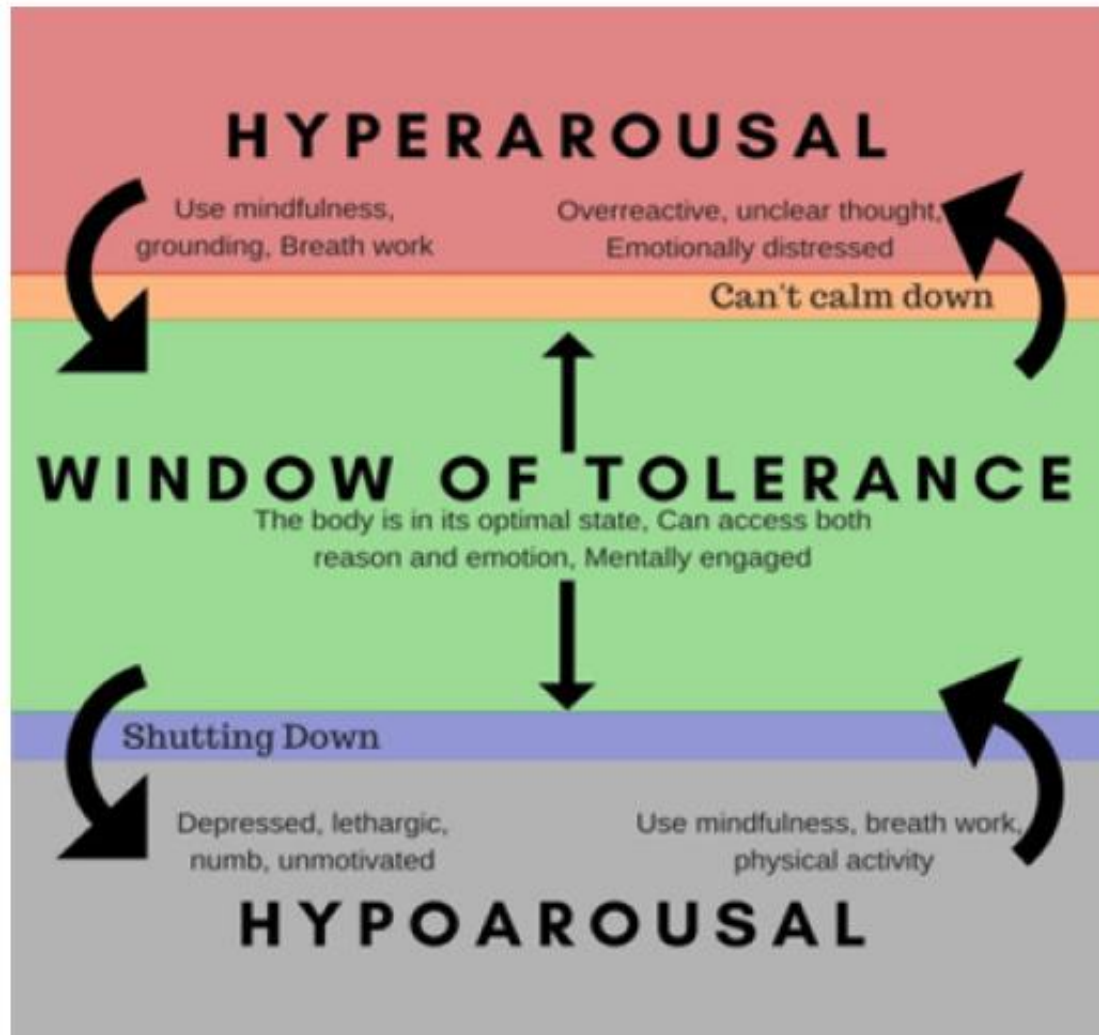
- You are responsible for your wellbeing.
- Be kind to yourselves and take from this talk what is helpful, and leave the rest. If you have pain or illness – please be gentle with yourself.
- Practices are optional
- If you are experiencing mental health challenges, speak to your therapist or GP to discuss whether Mindfulness is right for you.
- I'm not medically qualified, I can't diagnose or treat any illness.
- This talk is not a substitute for medical care, and you should seek appropriate medical care for your condition.



The Chronic Illness Trap



The Window of Tolerance



Acknowledgment: Dan Siegel's Window of Tolerance - Mindsight

- Wide window of tolerance
- We can 'cope' with life
- We feel calm, regulated
- We are functioning optimally
- Flexibility - move between nervous system states if we need to, but easily return to a regulated state in the middle
- We feel SAFE



Hyperarousal

Can't Calm Down

Window of Tolerance

Shutting Down

Hypoarousal

When we are unwell

Window of Tolerance Shrinks

No bandwidth

Life feels overwhelming

We get stuck in hyper or hypo
arousal

distressed, emotional, stressed and
anxious.

Physically overwhelmed

We do not feel safe

Building Resilience

When we talk about 'resilience' we mean a wide green band and flexibility

We mean 'feeling safe'

The wider our green band is, the more 'room' we have for 'input' – the stresses and strains of daily life and major life crises

When we are ill, our resilience goes down.

We struggle to cope with

- Physical stress – impact of environment magnified
- Emotional/mental stress – no bandwidth

Means our nervous system is easily overwhelmed (not weakness or personal failing)



<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0149763425001411>

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9811678/>

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Trauma

Trauma and difficult past experiences remain in our nervous systems

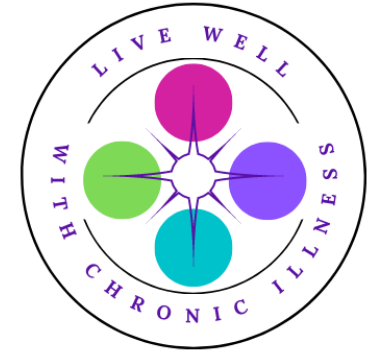
They add to the burden we are carrying

When we live with chronic illness, any previous trauma will reduce the bandwidth in our nervous system even further, and increase the nervous system dysregulation we experience

Working on resolving and releasing past trauma from the body is helpful

Note – this should be done in a safe way, and at the appropriate time. Doing it during a severe illness flare could result in overwhelm.

Brief, targeted therapy rather than long form, talking therapies.



Safety

The main feature of being in the 'green band' is that we feel safe

Our nervous system perceives safety, no threat, and allows us to remain calm and relaxed

When we live with illness (and/or trauma), it can become hard to find safety

Working on actively seeking safety enables our nervous system to 'stand down' and we can more easily find our way to the green state

How can we find safety?



Self-Compassion



Our Inner Critic activates our danger response – our nervous system perceives that as danger and threat

We can't feel safe when we are constantly under attack from within

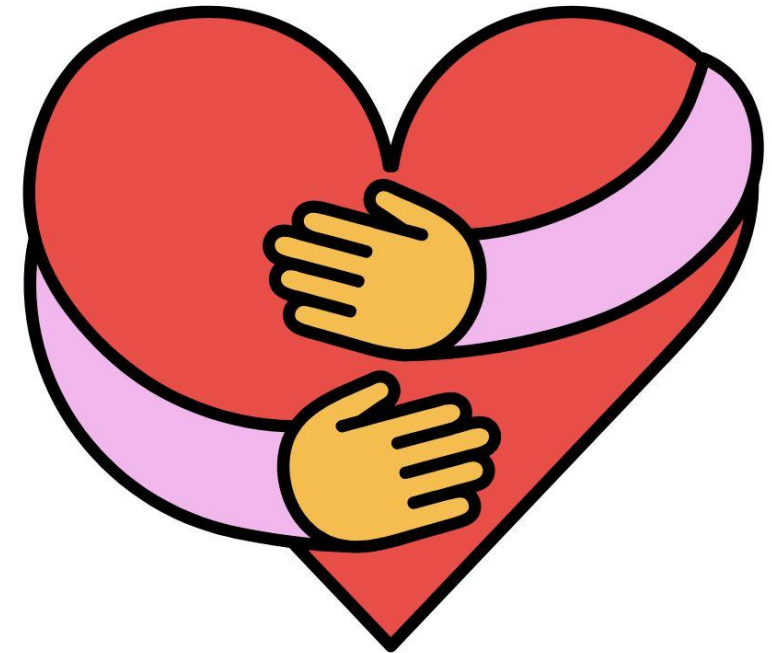
Practicing self-compassion downregulates the nervous system into the green zone, and switches off the Fight/Flight

Begin by thinking about how you would speak to a friend or loved-one

What would you say to them?

Say that to yourself

Give yourself the same kindness and forgiveness that you would to others.



Joy

We have a natural negativity bias

Our brains are ‘programmed’ to remember and ruminate on danger – that is a survival mechanism

This mental preoccupation with ‘bad things’ triggers our nervous system into danger – we can’t find safety when we are constantly thinking about threats

It makes it much harder to notice things that are good

By deliberately seeking out joy, pleasure, and fun, and spending time focusing our attention on those genuine sensations, it



Movement



Fast, agitated movement – activates the Fight or Flight

Slow, steady movements, in time with your breathing, activates the Rest and Digest

Slow, gentle movement practices like Qigong, Tai Chi, Yoga, walking

Help to regulate the nervous system.

Practice –

Slow walking

Moving at half-speed

Shaking



Breathing Exercises

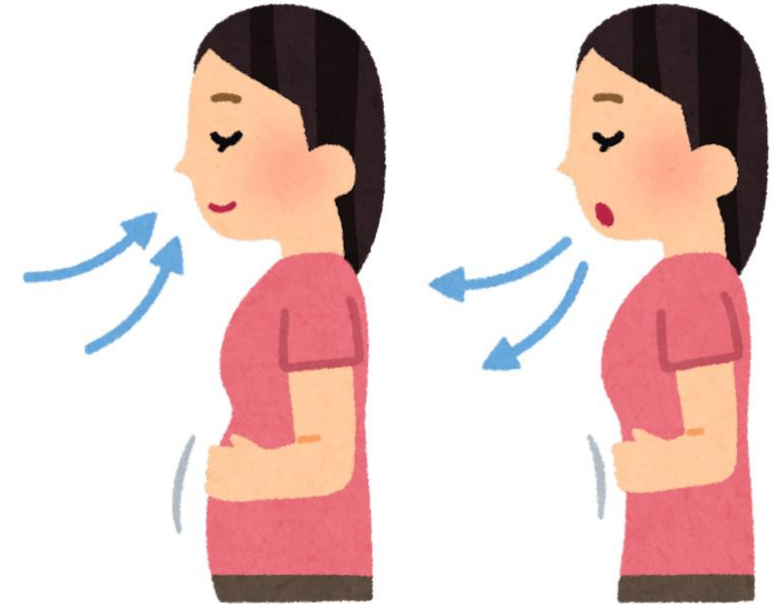


The vagus nerve uses our breathing pattern to determine whether we are safe or not

If we are breathing fast, shallow breaths with a long inhale, in our upper chest, the vagus nerve assumes we are in danger, and activates the Sympathetic, Fight or Flight

If we are breathing slow, deep breaths, with a long exhale, into our tummy (Diaphragmatic breathing), the vagus nerve sees that as a signal we are safe, and activates the 'Rest and Digest'

- 7/11 breathing
- Alternate nostril breathing
- Lotus Flower Breathing





Vagus Nerve Exercises

Certain tools stimulate the vagus nerve and help it to become more regulated

Some tools that can help are

- Massaging around your ears
- Squeezing the Tragus part of your ear (The triangle that sticks out)
- Pulling your ear lobes gently
- Humming
- Gargling

You may notice a spontaneous deep breath, sign, yawn – this is a sign your nervous system has switched into parasympathetic.

When we have MCAS or other chronic illness and our vagus nerve is very dysregulated, it's important to only do very, very gentle vagus nerve stimulation, and to only do a very little bit to begin with.



Staying Present

Thinking about the past or worrying about the future – activates the Fight or Flight state

Research shows that the more time we spend thinking about the past or future, the unhappier we are and the worse we feel.

Choosing to stay focused in the present moment is associated with better mental health, and better nervous system regulation

Be fully present and absorbed in what you are doing right now

Easier said than done – it takes practice to notice our minds wandering and bring them back.

Practice – Mindful doing. Each day, be fully present during a task – eating, drinking, showering, washing up. When your mind wanders, bring it back.



Choosing Helpful Thoughts

Our thoughts trigger our nervous system

Our nervous system can't tell the difference between what is real and what is just thoughts

If we think constantly about difficult, unhelpful things, our nervous system will respond by activating Fight or Flight or Freeze (red/grey)

It's not easy to avoid thinking about our illness, and sometimes it is necessary and productive

We need to get really good at differentiating between 'helpful' and 'unhelpful' thoughts

Recognising and interrupting the 'unhelpful' thoughts, and spending more time choosing helpful thoughts.



Awareness

Check-in with your nervous system state

Where are you on the diagram?

Are you in the green – centred, grounded, calm, relaxed, feeling sociable?

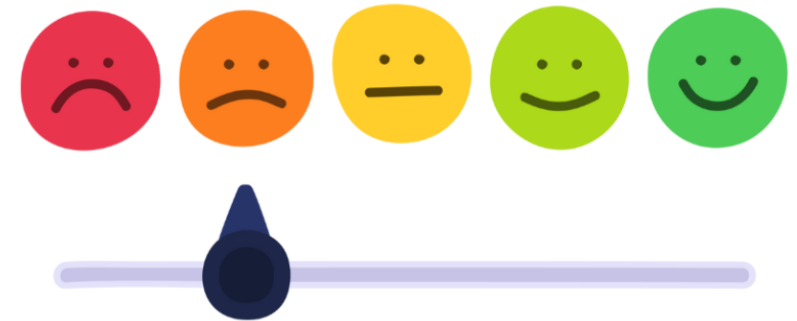
Are you in the red – angry, agitated, frightened, buzzing, high energy?

Are you in the grey – low, sad, depressed, fatigued, low energy?

Start checking-in regularly 3 times a day, just notice where you are

We can't change what we're not aware of – become aware of your current state.

No right or wrong – no judgment, no panic. Just observation.



STOP Practice

Notice we are ruminating, our thoughts are racing, our nervous system is dysregulated

The STOP Process

- Stop what you are doing – pause briefly
- Take a Breath – focus on your breathing for a few moments
- Observe – notice what’s happening in your body, notice your nervous system state
- Proceed – make a choice about how you want to proceed – what would be supportive for you now, what would be one helpful next step to support yourself.

Tip - In advance – set an intention for how you want to proceed, so that it’s available to you in the moment when it feels harder to make good choices.



Worksheet



When I notice my inner voice is being critical and unkind, I will.....

Every day, one thing I can do that makes me feel happy or brings me joy is.....

A breathing practice that I find helpful is

A slow movement practice I can do is.....

Each day, I will do one activity mindfully, focusing on being in the present moment

3 times a day I am going to check-in with myself in a non-judgemental way, and begin to notice where my nervous system is at.

When I notice myself ruminating or becoming anxious or panicking, I am going to practice the STOP Routine

When I practice my STOP Routine – what are 2 or 3 choices I can give myself for helpful, intentional ways to proceed? Write these down

now.....

