

# When Relationships Hurt

Emotional Regulation & Stabilisation in Pictures

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# WHAT REALLY GIVES US BETTER EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

## RELATIONSHIPS!



Our nervous system is regulated when we feel safe in our physical and social environment – we pay attention to minute cues all the time

Supportive  
Empathic  
Reciprocal  
Respectful  
Communication

Feeling heard  
Believed  
Understood  
Accepting  
Boundaries set



# ALL EMOTIONS ARE GOOD EMOTIONS

All our emotions are there to help us...

- Sadness – to process the past and signal the need for help from others
- Anxiety – to protect us from danger and predict danger in our future
- Anger – to escape from dangerous situations and problem solve
- Happy – to enjoy the past, present and future

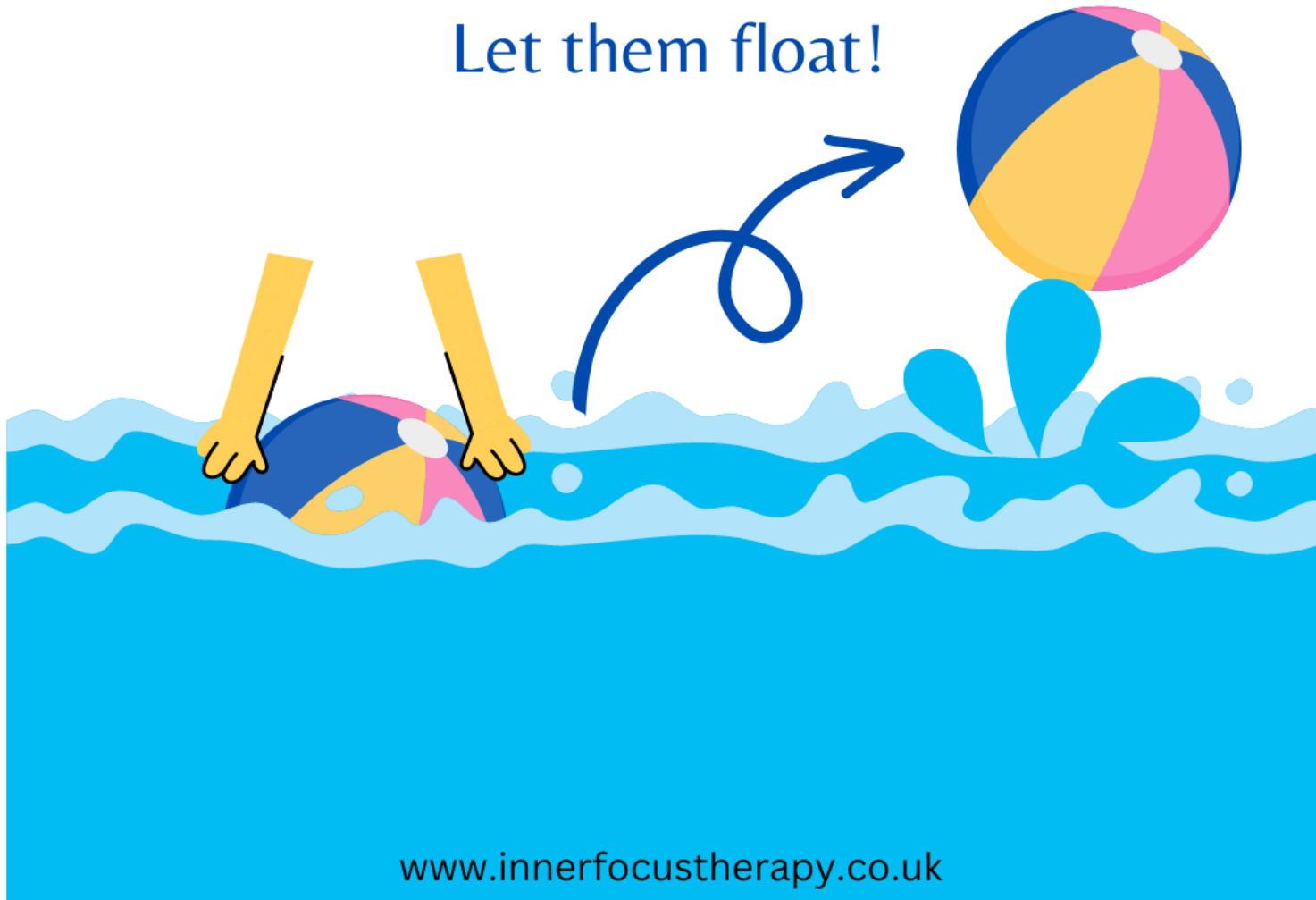
Try not to discount any of them, they all  
come and go.



When you try to suppress a ball under  
water it never stays down!

Neither does trying to suppress your  
emotions!

Let them float!



# ACCEPTING DISTRESS

Firstly, what acceptance isn't... it's not having to like the distress, wallowing in it, or accepting this is what it'll always be.

What it is... an acceptance that it is normal as a human-being to feel all emotions and that they come and go, usually there with an intention to aid our survival.

It is a change to how we pay attention to the emotion – allow the feelings to be there without trying to judge them, change them or get rid of them. Just allow them to pass whilst being compassionate to yourself.



# NEUROPLASTICITY

Our brains can re-wire new connections between the billions of neurons we are born with.

This means we can truly recover from difficult, painful or traumatic experiences.

We have more choices available to us now so we can choose a different future.

Search for new opportunities, enjoyable experiences, places and people of safety, calming and soothing practice and looking for things to be grateful for.



# Polyvagal Theory

Our Autonomic Nervous System, activates different states to promote survival:

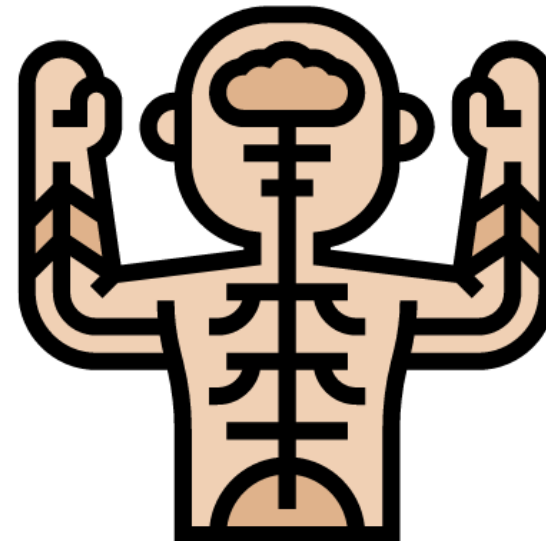
Sympathetic Nervous System - 'fight or flight'

Parasympathetic Nervous System (Dorsal) - 'freeze'

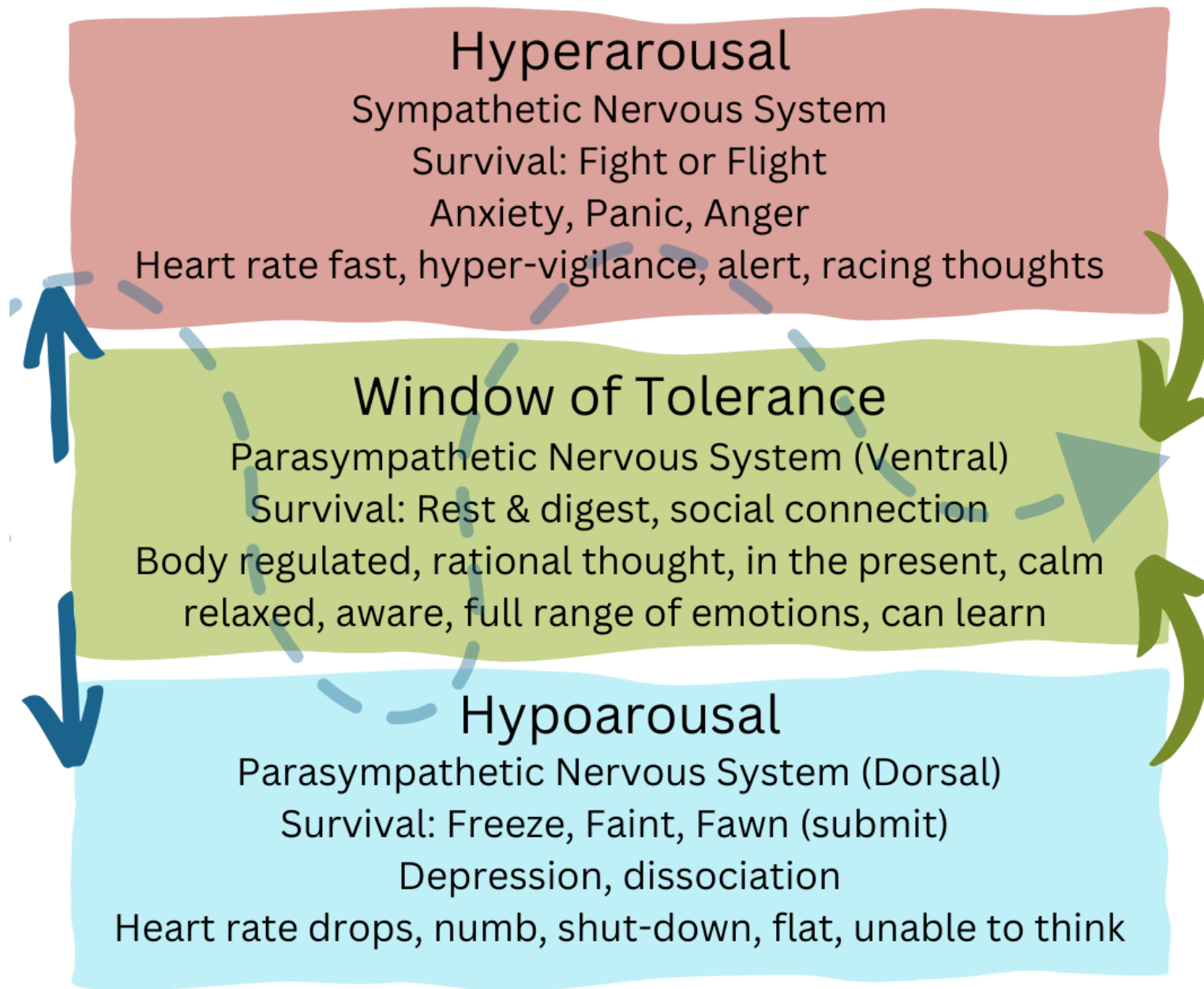
Parasympathetic Nervous System (Ventral) - 'rest & digest'

Activating our Vagus Nerve can restore a state of calm, allow us to become socially connected, compassionate and enables us to think clearer.

Our vagus nerve reaches from our brain, through to our ears, throat, lungs, heart, stomach, intestines to our colon (as well as some other organs on the way), so we can activate it from various parts using 'Bottom-Up' Processes.



# Window of Tolerance





# STABILISATION

## Top-Down Therapy

Begins with how the mind is interpreting information

Grounding, positive imagery, STOP technique, container technique, spot the difference



## Bottom-Up Therapy

Begins with what we feel from the body's sensations

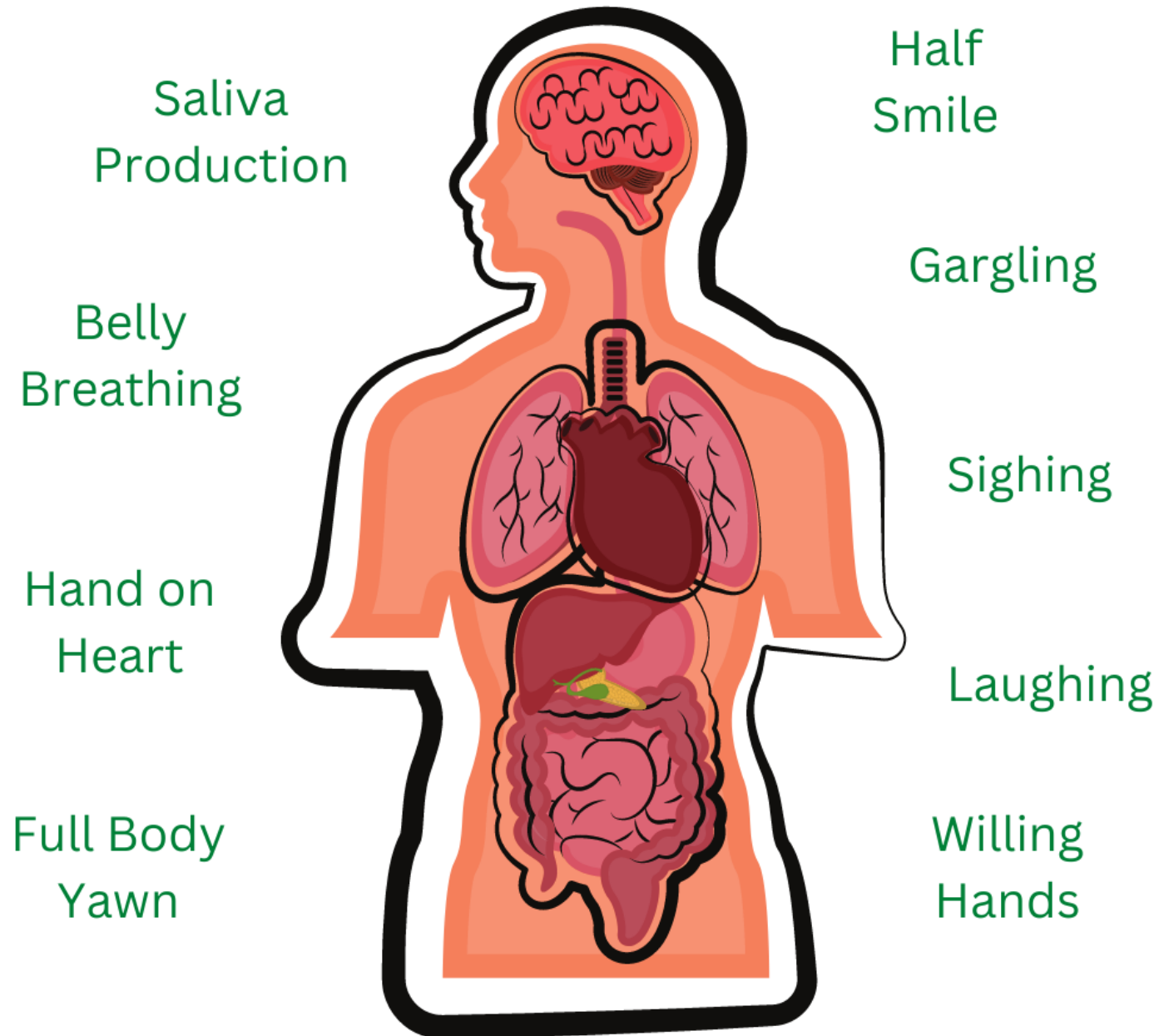
Body work, butterfly hug, hand on heart, meditation, yoga, sighing, yawning



# Bottom-Up Approaches



# Polyvagal Theory - Bottom Up Processes



# Self Soothing Box

When we feel lonely, sad, overwhelmed, anxious, suicidal, upset we could use a box of things that make us feel good. Make one in advance and when you need it, have it somewhere handy.

Some ideas:



*Positive words*



# Soothing Grounding

Say kind statements, as if you were talking to a friend or small child

Say coping statements – “I can handle this; this feeling will pass”

Think of favourites – season, colour, food

Plan a safe treat for yourself, such as a nice meal, or a warm bath

Picture people you care about and look at photographs of them



Think of things you are looking forward to in the next week



DO THIS WHEN YOU FEEL ANXIOUS

# Butterfly Hug

Cross your palms over your shoulders

Inhale and exhale slowly

Close your eyes and stay focus

Clap your palms slowly like the wings of a butterfly

Repeat until you feel more relaxed

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# belly breathing

Place one hand on your upper chest

Place your other hand on your tummy just above your belly button

Breathe in slowly through your nose

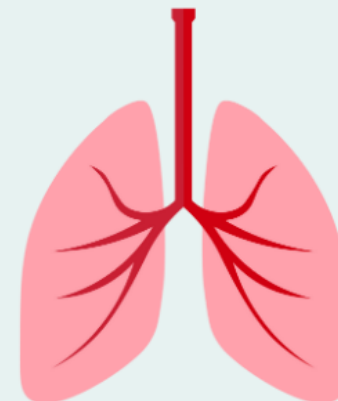
You should feel your belly rise and the hand on your chest should stay still

Breathe out through your mouth

Let your belly relax

Exhale slowly through slightly pursed lips

Repeat a few times until you feel calmer





# Music



Music can help you shift your emotional state – upbeat music can help your brain produce our “happy hormones” such as dopamine and serotonin. Calming music helps relax the body and mind.

Our vagal nerve, which activates our “rest and digest” calm system, passes through our vocal cords and inner ear, so vibrations, humming and singing along, helps produce a calming effect.





# Full body yawn

Yawning or stretching disturbs our body's threat response and forces our calm 'rest & digest' system to act, this restores our body to a resting state.

- Stretch your body with arms stretching out behind you.
- Spread your fingers as far apart as they can comfortably go.
- Scrunch up the muscles of your face.
- Start to yawn on purpose.
- Bend your body to your left at your waist, and stretch out your right hip, leg, foot and toes.
- Repeat on the other side.
- Keep yawning as you stretch.





# SALIVA



When you're anxious or stressed your mouth often dries because part of the stress emergency response is to shut off the digestive system.

When you start making saliva, you switch on the digestive system again & the relaxation response.

There are a couple of ways to produce saliva:

1. Rub your saliva glands – these are just under your jaw bone where it opens.
2. Gently bite several times on the sides of your tongue with your back molars.

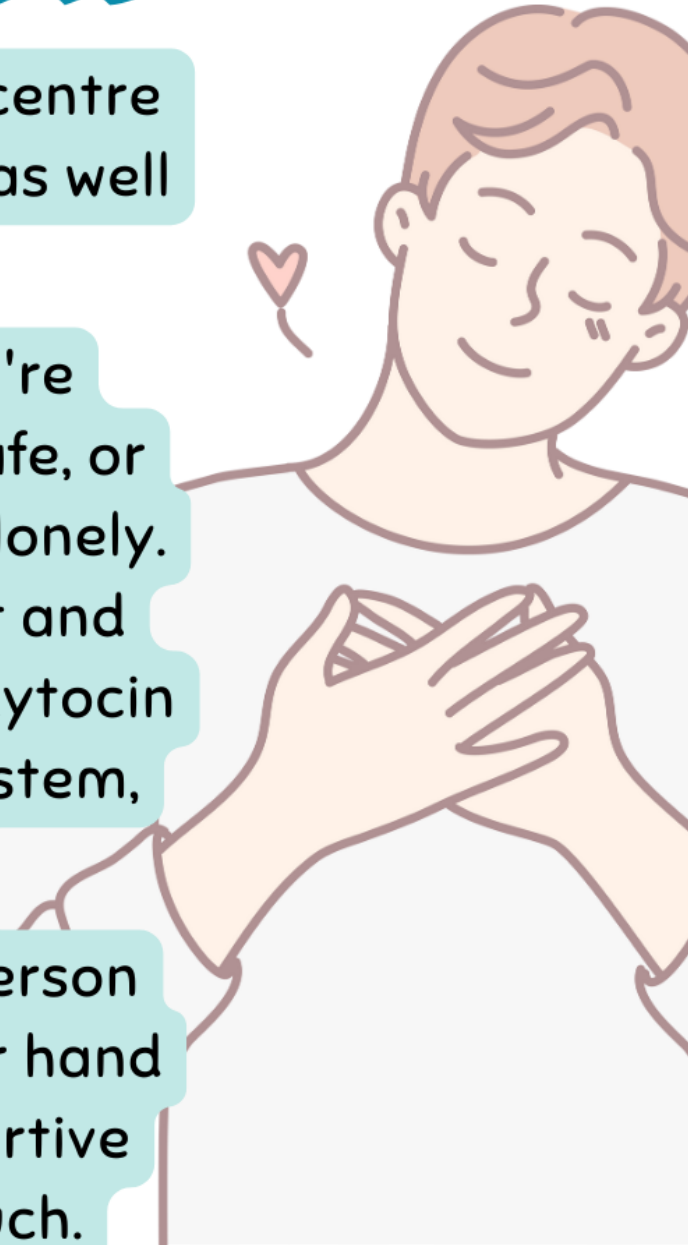


# hand on heart

Physical contact is at the centre of feeling safe and secure, as well as cared for.

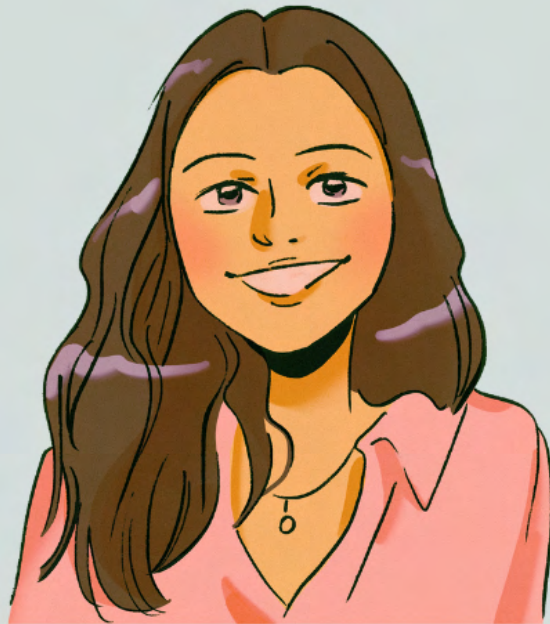
This can help when you're triggered and don't feel safe, or when you're feeling sad or lonely. It helps activate our "rest and digest" system, releases oxytocin and calms the nervous system, regulating stress.

You don't need another person for this, you can place your hand over your heart for supportive self-compassionate touch.



# Half Smile

Half-smile uses our body to teach our brain that we're safe, which then regulates our whole system.



1. Relax the muscles in your face, from your forehead down to your jaw and chin.
2. Allow the corners of your mouth to turn up ever so slightly.
3. Adopt a peaceful facial expression.



# Willing hands

Willing Hands uses our body to teach our brain that we're safe, which then regulates our whole system.

Whether you are sitting, standing or lying down you can do this technique.

Place your hands with your palms up, fingers relaxed, as if you are receiving something.



# Gargling

Gargling stimulates the vagus nerve by activating the muscles in the back of the throat while exhaling slowly.

Get a glass of water and gargle for as long as you can manage.



# LAUGHING OUT LOUD

A full belly laugh stimulates the vagus nerve and is contagious!

This resets your system and tells our body and brain we're safe.

After all you can't laugh when you're in danger!



# SIGHING



A deep sigh is your body-brain's natural way to release tension and reset your nervous system.

Studies have shown that a deep sigh returns the autonomic nervous system from an over-activated sympathetic state to a more balanced parasympathetic state.

**Simply breathe out fully  
with a long exhale.**





# Top-Down Approaches



# Mental Grounding

Describe your environment in detail - use your senses

Say the alphabet, slowly

Read something out loud

Describe an everyday task in detail e.g. cooking a meal

Think of something recent which was funny

Play a categories game e.g. try to think of types of dogs



# 5,4,3,2,1 EXERCISE

look for **5** things you can see

listen for **4** things you can hear

touch **3** things you can find

smell **2** things you like

take **1** slow, deep breath



# Wise Mind



## Reasonable Mind

Cool, rational, task-focused. Ruled by facts, rather than values and feelings.

## Wise Mind

The inner wisdom within each person. Seeing the value in both reason and emotion.

## Emotion Mind

Hot, emotion-focused. Ruled by mood, feelings & urges, where reason is not important.



# STOP Skill

## Stop

Notice you've reacted to something, stop! Your emotions may lead you to act impulsively without thinking.

## Take a Step Back

Take a break, calm your body, remember you're in the present, it's not your past.

## Observe

What's going on inside your body and mind? Even if these feel true, are they facts? What's the current situation? What can you see and hear externally? What are others doing?

## Proceed Mindfully

Act with awareness in the here-and-now. Consider the situation, other people's feelings, the consequences of any actions. How can I resolve this situation which will make it better in the long-run?



When we're triggered, have a flashback, an intrusive image or memory from our past, we can feel like we're back there reliving it.



Spot the difference between then and now



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# NOTICE AND NAME

Emotions, negative thinking, and stressful experiences are hard for all of us to manage and deal with. Avoiding or obsessing about these can get us caught in unhelpful vicious cycles. Instead, Notice, Name & Nurture...

**Notice** – what am I noticing in my body, emotions, thoughts, urges?

**Name** – "I notice I'm feeling anxious" or "I notice I'm having an intrusive thought"

**Nurture** – focus on what you need until it passes.



# Positive Imagery

Visualise a positive memory or  
imagine a happy time.

What can you see, feel, hear, taste,  
smell, sense in your body?

Take time to enjoy this for at least  
30 seconds.



We can feel happy, strong or empowered when we think of something positive, whether it was in the past, present, imagining the future or even a fantasy. If you spend at least 30 seconds doing this, our brain will store this as a memory which you can draw on time and time again.





# The Anxiety Equation

What makes Anxiety worse? =  $\frac{\text{Over-estimating likelihood something bad will happen} \times \text{Over-estimating the awfulness of that bad thing (catastrophising)}}{\text{Under-estimating our ability to cope in the situation} + \text{Under-estimating other sources of help}}$

What makes Anxiety better? =  $\frac{\text{How likely is this to happen?} \times \text{What's the most realistic outcome?}}{\text{How have I coped in the past? What skills do I have to cope?} + \text{Is there anything else or anyone else who can help?}}$



# Sources

Disclaimer – I have been a therapist for many years and thus cannot reference where I have learned all theories and aspects that I have covered in this book, however, I have listed key texts and sites which have shaped my thinking.

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- <https://www.thewhitebook.info/blog/healing-from-trauma-coregulation>
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