

The three nervous system states

Social engagement

Safety – connection - learning



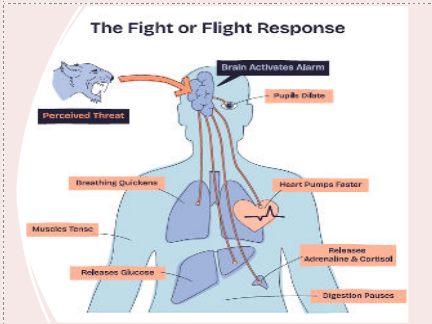
Curious • Connected • Flexible
Learning is possible
Reflect and respond, not react

You see: eye contact, expressive face,
melodic voice, open body, deeper
breathing

Safety = connection, not absence of
threat

Fight or flight

Sympathetic — activation



Anxious • Reactive • Rushing
No learning happens • Narrowed
judgment • Reads as defensiveness,
lack of confidence

You see: tension, fidgeting, rapid
speech, arguing, faster breathing,
clenched jaw, anger, panic

Freeze / shutdown

Parasympathetic — collapse



Numb • Collapsed • Withdrawn
No learning happens •
Can be misread as incompetence,
laziness, dishonesty

You see: blank stare, flat expression,
difficulty speaking, withdrawal,
stillness

Body's last-resort protection

*These states are rarely pure — we move through them constantly, often in blends.
The goal is flexibility — the capacity to move between states and return to social engagement.*

Nine self-regulation tools

1. Interoception

Pause. Notice breath, heart,
belly, mental pace.

10 seconds. Anywhere.

2. Physiological sigh

Two inhales through nose—one deep, then
a shorter top-up.
Long exhale through mouth.

Even 1-3 repetitions shift your state.

Fastest calming technique.

3. Extended exhale

Inhale 4 counts, exhale 6–8.
Hands on belly.
Diaphragm stimulates the vagus
nerve that prompts relaxation.

4. Alternate nostril

Overstimulated? Left nostril.
Understimulated? Right.
Alternate the two for balance.

5. Slow neck turns or neck rolls

Stimulates baroreceptors in carotid artery.
Slowly turn to the right → hold for a breath
→ turn to the left
Repeat 3-4 times.

6. Ear massage

Massage inner curve of the ear or
press and release tragus (small flat
in front of the ear canal).
Activates parasympathetic response.

7. Humming

Vagus nerve is connected to vocal cords
and larynx. Vibration from humming
stimulates the vagus.
Even 60 seconds allows for a reset.
Speaking and singing work too.

8. Relaxing the eyes

Soften muscles around eyes.
Let eyeballs rest heavy.
Or gentle massage of the eyes.
30–60 seconds.

9. Connection/co-regulation

Eye contact. Genuine exchange.
Activates social engagement system,
reduces sympathetic activity,
releases oxytocin.
Isolation keeps the nervous system
in defence.