

Trauma-Sensitive Practices to Soothe Hypervigilance

Hypervigilance is the nervous system’s loyal—but exhausted—guardian. It learned to stay on high alert to protect you, and now needs gentle, consistent proof that it’s safe to relax. These practices are designed to help you **slowly recalibrate your alarm system** without overwhelming it. They prioritise choice, sensory grounding, and nervous system regulation.

Guiding Principles for Trauma-Sensitive Practice

1. **You Are in Charge:**

- Nothing is mandatory. If a practice feels triggering, *pause or change it*. Your safety comes first.

2. **Start Small:**

- Even 30 seconds of grounding is a victory.

3. **Focus on the Body, Not the Story:**

- We’re calming the nervous system, not analysing the past (yet).
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Grounding Practices: For When You Feel “Too Wired”

1. The 5-4-3-2-1 Sensory Grounding

• **Name aloud or in your mind:**

- **5** things you can **see** (e.g., a lamp, a crack in the wall, a cup)
- **4** things you can **touch** (e.g., the texture of your shirt, the floor under your feet)
- **3** things you can **hear** (e.g., a fan humming, birds outside)
- **2** things you can **smell** (e.g., coffee, fresh air)
- **1** thing you can **taste** (e.g., sip of water, mint)

- *Why it helps:* Redirects the brain from scanning for threats to noticing the neutral or safe present.

2. Weighted Support

- Place a weighted blanket, heavy pillow, or even a backpack filled with books on your lap or shoulders.
- *Why it helps:* Deep pressure calms the nervous system (releases dopamine and serotonin).

3. Orienting to Safety

- Slowly turn your head and name **3 safe objects** in the room (e.g., a closed door, a window, a familiar photo).
- Whisper: “I am in [your location]. It is [current date/time]. I am safe here.”
- *Why it helps:* Teaches the brain to differentiate *then* (past danger) from *now* (present safety).

Calming the Body: For When You Feel Overwhelmed

4. Temperature Shift

- Hold an ice cube or splash cold water on your wrists/face.
- Alternatively, hold a warm tea cup against your chest.
- *Why it helps:* Temperature changes interrupt panic signals and activate the parasympathetic nervous system.

5. Sigh Exhale

- Inhale slowly through your nose, then exhale through your mouth with a long, audible sigh (like letting go of a heavy weight).
- Repeat 2–3 times.
- *Why it helps:* Longer exhales than inhales signal safety to the vagus nerve (the body’s brake pedal).

6. “Relaxing” Touch

- Cross your arms and gently rub your upper arms from shoulders to elbows.
 - Use slow, rhythmic strokes.
 - *Why it helps:* Self-soothing touch releases oxytocin and reduces amygdala activation.
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Building Nervous System Resilience: Daily Practices

7. Window of Tolerance Tracking

- **Notice your zone:**
 - **Too low** (numb, disconnected) → Try gentle movement (stretching, walking).
 - **Too high** (anxious, triggered) → Try grounding (ice, breathing).
 - **Just right** (calm, present) → Savour this feeling.
- *Why it helps:* Builds awareness of your triggers and regulation tools.

8. Resource Anchoring

- Identify a “safe haven” memory (e.g., petting a dog, being in nature).
- Close your eyes and vividly recall the sensory details—sights, sounds, feelings.
- Place a hand on your heart as you do this.
- *Why it helps:* Teaches the brain to access feelings of safety on demand.

9. Pendulation (Swinging Between States)

- Notice a place in your body that feels tense or scared.
 - Then, notice a place that feels neutral or calm (e.g., your fingertips, your feet).
 - Gently “pendulate” your attention between the two.
 - *Why it helps:* Builds tolerance for discomfort while anchoring in safety.
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When You're Really Struggling: Crisis Plan

1. **Name it:** “This is hypervigilance. It’s my protector trying to help.”
 2. **Get physical:** Shake your arms and legs (like a animal releasing tension).
 3. **Get external:** Call a safe person and say, “I just need you to sit with me silently.”
 4. **Distract:** Put on a boring podcast or count backwards from 100.
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What to Avoid

- **Forced breathing:** If deep breaths feel scary, try sighing or humming instead.
 - **Closing eyes:** If it feels unsafe, keep eyes open and soften your gaze.
 - **Pushing through discomfort:** Stop if you feel dissociation, nausea, or panic.
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Key Takeaway:

You are not broken—you are adapted. These practices aren’t about “fixing” yourself but about gently inviting your nervous system to update its software: *“The threat has passed. We can rest now.”*

Script for Hard Moments:

“Thank you, body, for trying to protect me. I know you’re working hard. We’re okay right now. We can slow down.”