

Understanding Your Body's Alarm System: Hypervigilance

What is Hypervigilance?

Think of your nervous system as a highly sophisticated personal security system. Its main job is to keep you safe. For most people, this system is on "normal alert." It only sends out major alarms for clear and present dangers, like a car swerving into your lane.

Hypervigilance is when this security system gets stuck on "**high alert.**" It's constantly scanning your environment (people, tones of voice, situations) for potential threats, even when you're physically safe. It's like having a smoke alarm that goes off not just for fire, but also for burnt toast, steam from a shower, or even dust. It's exhausting, but it happens for a very good reason.

Why Does It Happen? The Role of Early Attachment Trauma

This isn't a character flaw or something you chose. It's your body's adaptive survival strategy, learned from past experiences—often rooted in **early attachment trauma.**

1. Attachment Wires Your Nervous System

- **Infancy/Childhood:** Your earliest relationships with caregivers teach your nervous system what to expect from the world.
- **Secure Attachment:** Consistent care teaches safety → Nervous system regulates easily.
- **Insecure/Unsafe Attachment:** Neglect, criticism, or unpredictability teach danger → Nervous system stays hyperalert to survive.

2. How Trauma Shapes Hypervigilance

- **Emotional Neglect:** If your emotions were dismissed ("Stop crying!"), you learned to suppress your needs while scanning for others' moods.
- **Conditional Love:** Love that was tied to performance ("I only praise you when you succeed") teaches you to constantly monitor your worth.

- **Enmeshment:** If caregivers treated you as an extension of themselves, you may have learned to prioritize their needs over your own safety.

3. The Body Remembers

- **Neurobiology:** Trauma lives in the body (van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*). Your amygdala (threat detector) becomes overactive, while your prefrontal cortex (logical regulator) struggles to intervene.
- **Triggers Feel Like Reliving the Past:** A raised voice isn't just a raised voice—it's a neural flashback to childhood helplessness.

How to Identify It: Common Signs & Symptoms

You might experience this in your body, your thoughts, and your behaviours:

Physical Signs

- Constant muscle tension (especially in shoulders/neck)
- Being easily startled
- Feeling "on edge" or restless
- Chronic fatigue (from being constantly wired)
- Sleep problems (hypervigilance doesn't clock out at bedtime)

Mental Signs

- Your mind is always "on," scanning and analysing:
 - Difficulty concentrating because you're monitoring everything else
 - Assuming the worst in ambiguous situations ("My friend is late because I annoyed them")
 - Racing thoughts about what could go wrong

Behavioural Signs

- Difficulty relaxing or sitting still
- Needing to control environments or outcomes

- Over-preparing for situations
 - Irritability or snapping easily (misinterpreted as anger, but often fear)
 - People-pleasing or fawning to pre-empt perceived threats
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What Usually Triggers It?

Triggers are often reminders of past situations where you felt unsafe, helpless, or judged. Common triggers include:

- **Perceived Rejection or Criticism:** A partner needing space, a slightly off-hand comment, an unanswered text
 - **Unpredictability:** Sudden changes in plans, not knowing how someone will react
 - **Conflict or Raised Voices:** Any intensity of emotion can feel threatening
 - **Feelings of Being "Trapped":** Situations where you feel you can't leave or don't have a choice
 - **Specific Sensory Cues:** A tone of voice, a facial expression, or a type of location that subconsciously reminds you of a past stressful environment
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The Goal Isn't to Shut the Alarm Off, But to Recalibrate It

The work in therapy is not to blame this protective part of you, but to thank it for trying to keep you safe. Together, we can help your nervous system learn that you are safer now than you were then. We can practice new ways to soothe the alarm, check the facts of a situation, and gradually teach your body that it can stand down.

Healing Steps

1. **Acknowledge the Protector:** "Thank you for trying to keep me safe. We're okay now."
2. **Somatic Practices:** Grounding techniques (e.g., weighted blankets, cold water splash) to regulate the nervous system.

3. **Reparenting:** Give your inner child the safety it craved (e.g., "You're safe now. I've got you.>").
 4. **Gradual Exposure:** Slowly introduce triggers in a safe context to retrain the alarm system.
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Key Takeaway:

Hypervigilance is not your fault—it's your body's loyal, overworked protector. Healing begins when we gently teach it that the war is over, and it can finally stand down.

When you notice the alarm blaring, try whispering:

"I hear you. We're safe now. You can rest."