

Somatic Resourcing and Grounding Strategies

HYPERAROUSAL

High-activation/energy state, commonly described as being “activated”, “anxious”, “panicked”, “losing/lost it”. Nervous system that is dominant in this state: Sympathetic Nervous System
Survival defenses/responses activated: “fight”, “flight”, and “freeze”

Common somatic (body) reactions/sensations in this state are:

- Increased heart rate
- Shallow breath
- Tension/tightness in neck, chest, shoulders, face and arms
- Restlessness and/or agitation in legs
- Increased body temperature; perspiration; sweaty palms
- Dry mouth
- Change in sensory input: changes to sounds, vision (narrow/tunnel vision)
- Nausea; digestive changes; frequent and/or urgent bowel movements
- Feeling intense emotions such as: overwhelmed, panic, terror, rage

Also experienced in this state: racing thoughts, dizziness, and disconnection from time, body, or input

Somatic Resources to **decrease activation** in the body, using the body & the 5-senses:

In order to decrease the dominance/activation of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), we must engage in practices that activate the Parasympathetic Nervous System, by letting our brain know through our body that we are not in danger, which in turn, reinstates the balance in our nervous system.

Breathing: connecting to our breath is something we always have access to. When we can bring our mindful attention to our breath, noticing its rhythm, and intentionally trying to slow it down and lengthen the breath, our nervous system calms. There are several “exercises” you can do to develop breath as a resource to you:

- Inhale to a count of 5, exhaling to a count of 7 – 10. The exhale is what activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which is what is responsible for relaxation and calmness
- “Box breathing”: <https://www.healthline.com/health/box-breathing>
- Visualization of breath as a colour/ribbon/energy moving through nostrils, throat, chest, lungs, stomach, legs, toes; repeat the opposite direction starting with toes
- Place one hand on heart/chest, and one hand on your belly, and notice the rise and fall of your chest and belly on each inhale/exhale.

Shift posture by elongating spine, dropping shoulders, and open chest up and forward, allowing the diaphragm to have spaciousness and lungs to have more room to expand and take in full breath. Typically when we are activated, our upper bodies are tight and pulled in, constraining our lungs and preventing them from accessing their full capacity, making us feel more anxious when we can’t get a full breath in/out. This subtle shift in our posture can make a significant difference, especially when followed with intentional, mindful breathing.

Yoga is a meditative movement practice that helps people connect to their body and breath. Leading trauma experts and researchers see yoga as a requirement for healing of trauma, as a way to connect to

the body, notice cues, and to experience breath as a resource. There are many different types of yoga styles and practices that you can do in studio, or at home for via YouTube. Experiment with various types to see what your body prefers. You might notice the style of yoga you need is dependent on your body's level of activation

Head below your heart: lowering our head below our heart physiologically activates our parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), Try poses such as: child's pose, downward facing dog, and forward bend (either standing or sitting)

Have a bath or a shower with warm water

Smell a calming scent, such as lavender oil or another comforting smell; slow down and notice

Feel the boundaries of your body by using your hands to make contact with edges of body; e.g. giving self a hug, squeezing your upper arms with your hands

Use a **weighted blanket** to lay under

Grounding through the feet: place your feet on a hard surface. Notice where your feet make contact with the foot; notice the temperature, texture, and firmness against your feet. Can you sense into your baby toe, the outside edges of your feet? Play with pressing firmly into the ground, and notice how your shins, calves and thighs participate.

Touch a texture or object that feels comforting, soothing, or that brings your attention into the here-and-now. Describe the texture, colour, scent, temperature and weight. For example: a soft blanket, a stuffy, a pet, a stone/rock, etc.

Bring yourself into **connection** & co-regulate: hug a loved one (someone who is safe and comforting to you) or a beloved pet; call a safe and supportive person;

Listen to soothing sounds: ocean or nature sounds, calming music, a loved one's voice

Expend energy by using your body physically: running on the spot; jumping jacks; pushing against the wall – activating all muscles, noticing muscles from feet up through hands; tensing muscles and then release (repeat as many times as necessary); going for a walk or jog.

HYPOAROUSAL

Low activation/low-energy state, commonly described as depression, numbness, disconnected, dissociation, unreachable.

Nervous system that is dominant in this state: Parasympathetic Nervous System

Survival defenses/responses activated: "Collapse"/"Feigned death"

Common somatic (body) reactions/sensations in this state are:

- Slowed heart rate
- Weakness in muscles
- Low energy, fatigue
- Rounded posture, shoulders rolling inward

- Heavy feeling in the body
- Lack of typical access to sensation in the body; feel less physical pain
- Low motivation, desire to isolate
- Sleeping more
- Feelings of sadness, hopelessness, apathy, suicidality

Somatic Resources to **increase activation** in the body:

In order to decrease the dominance of the Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS), we must engage in practices that **activate** the Sympathetic Nervous System, by letting our brain know through our body that we are not in danger, which in turn, reinstates the balance in our nervous system. When our PNS is dominant, this can feel like a sticky place for people. When in this state, it is hard to find energy and motivation; therefore, the focus should be on small things you can do that will bring energy back to the body. Focus on starting small – wiggling of toes – and then building on that to engage your whole body.

Connect to sensations in your body, and **increase energy** to areas with small movements and tension: notice your toes and fingers as you wiggle them, tense and release muscles in your shoulders, fists, face.

Stand up: we tend to lay down and curl up when in this state. The simple movement (though undoubtedly difficult in this state) of standing up increases blood flow to the body.

Breath: Unlike what we would do when we are activated by slowing the breath down, in this state, we want to increase the pace of the breath, still breathing deeply, but making the inhale longer, and the exhale shorter. This type of breath invigorates the body and gets blood flowing, creating energy.

Splash cold water on your face: Cold water on the face triggers the mammalian diving reflex. Of the various effects, the thing that wakes you up is that it causes your blood to be squeezed back into your core body and brain, away from the skin and limbs. This boosts the oxygen available to you, and raises your blood pressure, which is usually low when we are hypo-aroused (i.e. in a low-energy state).

Drink a warm beverage, such as tea. The act of making a tea in itself can help people distract by connecting to the present. When drinking the warm beverage, activate mindfulness by noticing the warmth as it moves through mouth, throat, chest and stomach. Notice the warmth of the mug against your palms.

Listen to energizing and uplifting music: Listening to music you like (key word here), accesses the pleasure and reward centres in our brains, helping release the neurotransmitter called dopamine. Dopamine allows us to feel good and experience joy.

Physical movement: If you can access a little more energy, perhaps after you have done of the few exercises above, you can engage in something a little more vigorous such as, going for a walk, 10 jumping jacks, jogging on the spot, lifting light weights, skip rope

Get outside: Not only does it require physical movement of your body to get outside, but changing your environment to sit on a balcony, porch, or in a backyard, also provides us with fresh air, sunlight (Vitamin D), and sounds that we can pay attention to. We often underestimate the power of fresh air and sunshine on our moods.

Practice **Qigong**: Qigong is ancient Chinese practice of holistic healing. The word means, “to cultivate or practice or work with your vital energy or life force (Chi)”. The practice of Qigong is to work with your own Chi to build it up and make it stronger, to live a longer, healthier life. There are several hundreds of methods of Qigong, for various ailments and intentions. The benefits of Qigong are: increased energy, reduce pain, reduce stress, lift mood, helps to improve sleep quality, slowing down of aging process, and help heal old injuries. This practice is easy, and benefits are felt if practiced daily. See links to Qigong videos below.

Self-Care & Self-Nurturing:

The above strategies are useful when we are in a temporarily activated, or under-activated, state, to respond to what is happening in our bodies immediately, in order to shift our activation level. These experiences will happen despite our best efforts, but having the tools to intervene/respond will minimize the length of time we stay in a particular state, and in turn, will increase our confidence in ourselves to manage.

Another important area to focus on is self-care and self-nurturing. These two areas help us expand our “Window of Tolerance” (i.e. capacity to tolerate distress) by equipping us with what our body, mind and spiritual aspects of ourselves need. If our basic needs are unmet, our capacity to tolerate external and internal input and distress will be significantly diminished. A common example that illustrates this is one we can all relate to, a time when you were long overdue for a meal and a loved one asks you to talk. When we are starving, depleted of nutrients we would either reject the invitation all together, or respond to their feelings, concerns and requests from a place of irritation, anger, frustration or annoyance.

Words of acknowledgement: For some, especially those who have experienced abuse or neglect, taking care of one’s Self and nurturing oneself can be very challenging, as this practice is foreign and potentially unsafe feeling. Despite this, but maybe with support, it is important to expand capacity for self-care and self-nurturing, as a way of healing.

Below, the difference between “Self-Care” and “Self-Nurturing” is explained:

Self-Care is defined as “the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one’s own health and well-being”, and that it is “any human regulatory function which is under individual control, deliberate and self-initiated” (source: Oxford Dictionary & Wikipedia). Self-Care is the practice of meeting our basic needs, as well as incorporating additional strategies to take care of ourselves and improve wellbeing:

- Meeting basic needs:
 - Food: adequate nutritional intake and eating regular meals;
 - Sleep: Resting when the body needs it, and sleeping 6-8 hours per night;
 - Addressing physical health concerns (attending practitioner appointments to respond to these concerns)
 - Taking medication regularly, if prescribed to you
 - Exercise and movement
 - Shelter/safe housing
- Socializing with friends; connection with others
- Meditation
- Yoga practice
- Creative pursuits: dance, painting, photography, drawing
- Exercise

- Attending therapy; commitment to building relationship with yourself
- Taking your lunch break
- Setting boundaries in relationships
- Listening and responding to your needs; developing awareness of your needs
- Journaling
- Make time for relaxation
- Engage in a sport
- Talk to a supportive friend
- Having sex (with self, or with a safe person)

Self-Nurturing is about seeking and engaging in fun, play, and pleasure in healthy ways, without excess. These activities offer us the nourishment that comes with connecting to fun, play and pleasure – something we are all deserving of. Secondary to this, creating space to experience fun, play and pleasure allows us to experience positive, pleasant feelings and give us a break from the things that stress and overwhelm us; when we fill ourselves up with good things, we have more capacity to tolerate the unpleasant.

Some examples of self-nurturing are:

- Taking a class/pursuing a hobby
- Socializing with friends
- Playing a sport
- Listening to music; playing an instrument; going to a concert
- Dancing
- Engaging in art: going to an art gallery, painting, drawing, building, photography, writing
- Playing board games
- Learning a new skill
- Travel
- Volunteering
- Gardening
- Reading
- Cooking or baking
- Playing with a pet
- Having sex (with self or with safe other)
- Spiritual pursuits
- Religious services
- Playing with children
- Taking a relaxing bath (versus a bath where intention is hygiene)
- Watching a movie
- Have a picnic outside; sit in the sunshine
- Get a massage
- Doing a puzzle

Additional Resources:

- Breathing resources: <https://greatist.com/happiness/breathing-exercises-relax#5.-4-7-8-Breathing-or-relaxing-breath>
- Tree of Life Guided Meditation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvRzicUllvc>
- Podcasts: “Magic Lessons with Elizabeth Gilbert”; “Unlocking Us with Brene Brown”; “10 Percent Happier with Dan Harris”
- Instagram accounts (themes: feminist, trauma-informed, political, healing):
@the.holistic.psychologist @the_queer_counselor @thebodyisnotanapology @thenapministry
@_the_open_space_
- Guided Meditation Apps: “Stop Breath Think”, “Calm”, “Headspace”

- **Qigong Resources:**

Qigong for Uplifting Mood and Energy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUXO6MmBRD8>

Daily Qigong Routine – Easy and Effective: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y88zYo0YIOo>

Qigong for Depression: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BnmrvNBK6D0>

YouTube Channel: Qigong for Vitality: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCo5XtIYVGLImR1pl7Fpf_pQ

Qigong for Beginners: What is Qigong? https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0mITKt21_8

- **Benefits of Music on the Brain:**

This Is Your Brain on Music – How Music Benefits the Brain (animated):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZJ8BfEu-P8>