

3-Part Brain State Model

When we understand how our brain and body connect and communicate, it empowers us with practical skills we need to manage our thoughts, feelings and actions. I used color to indicate which parts of the brain are accessible in each state.

The 1st part of our brain to evolve is the brain stem, or our survival brain. It is responsible for many vital functions of life, such as breathing, blood pressure, heart rate, and sleep. It functions unconsciously and the only question it asks is “am I safe?” The only way to soothe a survival state is through the creation of safety.

The next part of our brain to evolve is the limbic system, or our emotional brain. The limbic system predominantly controls appropriate responses to stimuli with social, emotional, or motivation, which includes innate behaviors such as mating, aggression, and defense. The only question this part of our brain asks is “Am I Loved and Cared For?” The only way to soothe an upset emotional state is through connection.

When we are operating within our window of tolerance we have access to our executive brain and the prefrontal lobes. This part of our brain is responsible for our ability to be patient, creative, empathetic, self-reflect and problem solve. In this part of our brain we are asking “what can I learn from this?”

When we are operating outside of our window of tolerance, the executive functioning parts of our brain are inaccessible. Being aware and understanding where our brain-body states are can give us the opportunity to pause, shift our state and make choices and decisions that are aligned with what we value.

Brain Stem Survival



The Survival State represents the primal brain and asks the question, “Am I safe?” The only way to soothe the Survival State is through the creation of Safety.

Limbic System Emotional



This Brain State represents mid-level functionality and asks the question, “Am I loved?” The only way to soothe an upset emotional state is through Connection.

Prefrontal Lobes Executive



The Executive State represents the optimal state for problem-solving and learning. This Brain State asks the question, “What can I learn from this?”

Autonomic Nervous System States

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE - I CAN

PARASYMPATHETIC - VENTRAL VAGAL BRANCH

SAFE & SOCIALLY ENGAGED - LEARNING STATE

Can think and feel simultaneously • Ability to self & co-regulate • Capacity for self –reflection,
Perspective taking • Patience • Empathy • Compassion • Connection • Curiosity
Wonder • Imagination • Awe • Rest & digest • Mindful, embodied presense of authentic self



Dysregulation - Mobilized



HYPERAROUSAL - I MUST

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM - SURVIVAL STATE

TOO MUCH ENERGY - SEEKING SAFETY VIA ACTION

Fight Response

- Explosive/unpresictable temper
- Taunts/mocks/shames
- My way or the highway tendency
- Yells, slams doors, aggressive
- Easily reactive
- Protects self at all cost
- Often feels shameful/remorseful post outburst
- Rigidity

Flight Response

- Chronic Rushing or always going
- Feels uncomfortable or panic when still
- Energy spent micro-managing people and situations
- Has history of abruptly ending relationships, phobic of commitment
- Feels trapped easily
- Makes plans to avoid downtime
- Throws themselves into work/acheivement
- Often presents as anxiety or panic attacks

Fawn Response/Masking

- People pleasing
- Going along with anothers beliefs, perspectives and values without connecting to your own
- Dissociating (leaving the body) "spacing out"
- Lets other people make decisions
- Avoids situations that could lead to conflict
- Fears saying "no"
- Overly polite and agreeable
- Hyper aware of other peoples emotions and needs while not knowing or meeting their own



Dysregulation - Immobilized



HYPOAROUSAL - I CAN'T

PARASYMPATHETIC - DORSAL VAGAL BRANCH - SURVIVAL STATE - LACK OF ENERGY

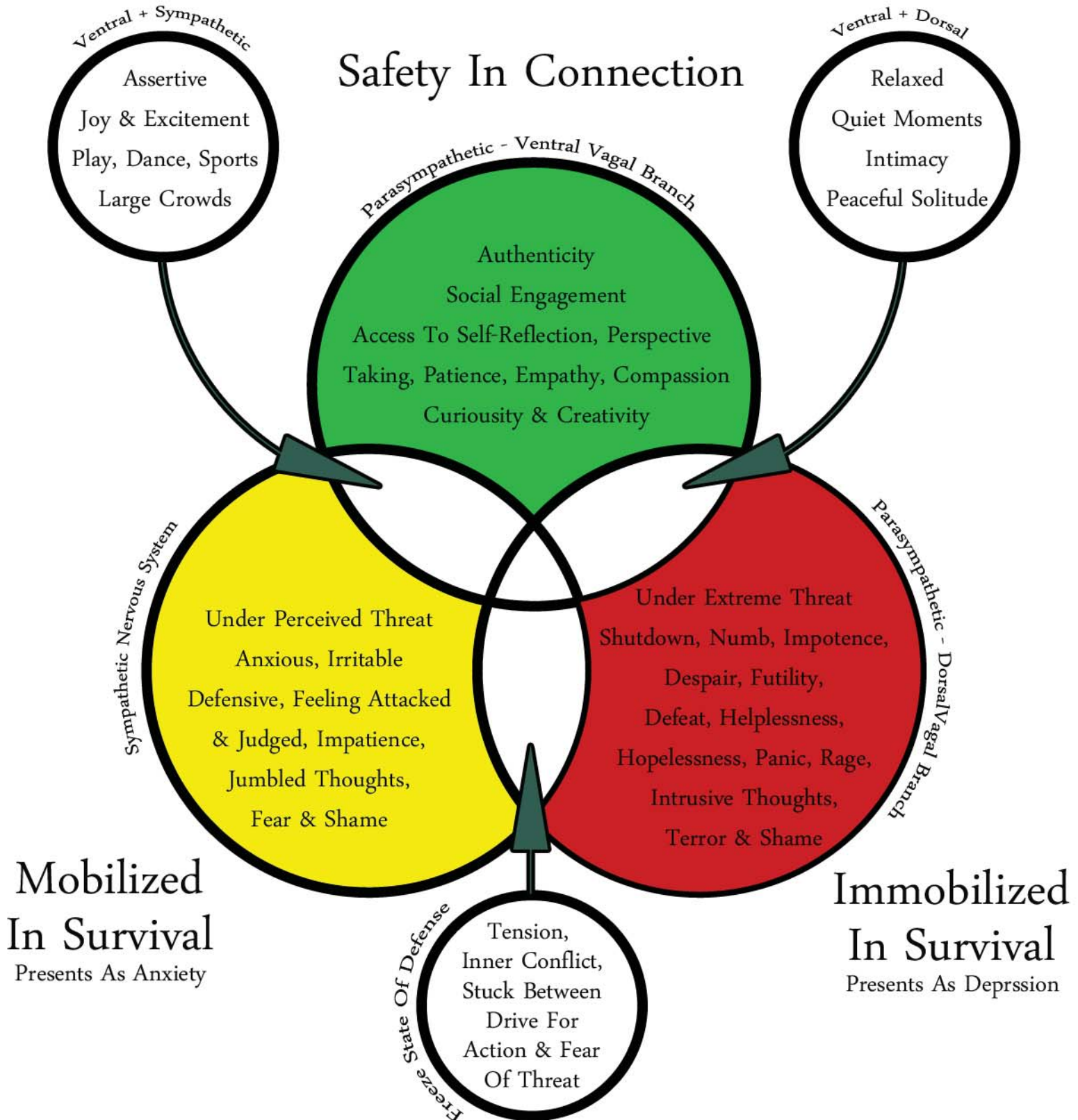
FREEZE - IMMOBILIZED - SEEKING SAFETY VIA DISCONNECTION

Feeling completely numb • Shutdown (silence & avoidance) • Hiding out from the world
Procrastination & inability to make even small decisions • Confusion over what is real or unreal
(or actually happening) • Often confused/misdiagnosed as depression

Autonomic Nervous System

3 Circuits, 6 States

Safety In Connection



Typical State Responses

Ventral Branch - Window of Tolerance - Safe & Authentically Engaged - Executive Brain

- We feel anchored and connected to ourselves and others.
- We are more open to learning, curiosity, and collaborating.
- We have more compassion for ourselves and others.
- We feel confident and self-assured.

Sympathetic Branch - Hyperarousal - Seeking Safety Via Action - Emotional Brain

Fight

- Temper that is explosive & unpredictable
- Taunts, mocks, insults, shames
- My way or the highway ignoring others perspectives
- Yells, slams doors, screams, becomes aggressive
- Easily reactive with big emotions
- Always feel as though they are being threatened, will self protect at any cost
- Often feels shameful/remorseful post outburst

Flight

- Chronic rushing or always going
- Feels uncomfortable (or even panic) when still
- Energy spent micromanaging people & situations around them
- Has a history of abruptly ending relationships or phobic of commitment
- Feels trapped easily
- Makes plans to avoid downtime or throws themselves into work/achievement
- Often presents as anxiety or panic attacks

Fawn

- People-pleasing
- Going along with others perspective, beliefs, or values without connecting to your own
- Dissociating (leaving the body) "spacing out"
- Lets other people make decisions
- Avoids any situation that could lead to conflict
- Fears saying no
- Overly polite and agreeable
- Hyper aware of other peoples emotions & needs while betraying their own

Dorsal Branch - Hypoarousal - Seeking Safety Via Disconnection - Survival Brain

- Feeling completely numb, life is "pointless"
- Shutdown (silent treatment, complete avoidance)
- Hiding out from the world
- Procrastination or inability to make even small decisions
- Endless social media scrolling/binge watching TV
- Confusion over what's real or unreal (or actually happening)
- Often presents as depression

Responding Rather Than Reacting

Eighty percent of nerve fibers transmit information from the body to the brain, while only twenty percent send signals from the brain to the body. This highlights the importance of identifying our current nervous system state in order to respond thoughtfully, rather than react impulsively.

The first step in living an embodied, mindful life is learning to notice, name, resource, and regulate our sensations and emotions. This process empowers us to have greater choices and agency over survival stress responses. With consistent commitment and practice, we can attune to our internal states, maintaining self-connection during moments of activation or shutdown.

Polyvagal theory teaches us that nervous system regulation doesn't mean achieving a constant state of calm, but rather cultivating an ongoing sense of connection. Every day, we naturally shift between different nervous system states. Regulation, therefore, is about fostering the flexibility and awareness to recognize and respond to these shifts without becoming stuck in activation or collapse.

Building autonomic flexibility is a core component of this process. Autonomic flexibility refers to our nervous system's ability to move fluidly between different states—ventral vagal (safety and social engagement), sympathetic (mobilization), and dorsal vagal (shutdown or immobilization)—based on the demands of the environment. By increasing our capacity to identify these shifts and respond accordingly, we gain more options in how we manage stress and navigate life's challenges. Instead of being overwhelmed or frozen by survival responses, we develop the ability to pause, self-regulate, and choose actions that promote our well-being.

This kind of flexibility allows us to experience a wider range of emotional states while staying anchored in self-awareness and connection. Over time, this builds resilience and strengthens our capacity for co-regulation with others, further enhancing our sense of safety and belonging. Through regular practice of polyvagal-informed techniques, such as breathwork, grounding, and mindful movement, we cultivate the ability to recover from stress more quickly and create a more adaptive and balanced brain-body system. This, in turn, lays the foundation for a more meaningful and fulfilling life.

Sympathetic Branch - Hyperarousal - Creating More Connection

Fight

- Assertiveness
- Boundaries
- Courage
- Determination
- Leadership

Flight

- Disengagement
- Healthy Retreat
- Industriousness
- Know How
- Perseverance

Fawn

- Love & Service
- Compromise
- Listening
- Fairness
- Peacemaking

Dorsal Branch - Hypoarousal - Creating More Safety

Freeze

- Acute Awareness
- Mindfulness
- Poised Readiness
- Peace
- Presence

Understanding & Embracing Shame

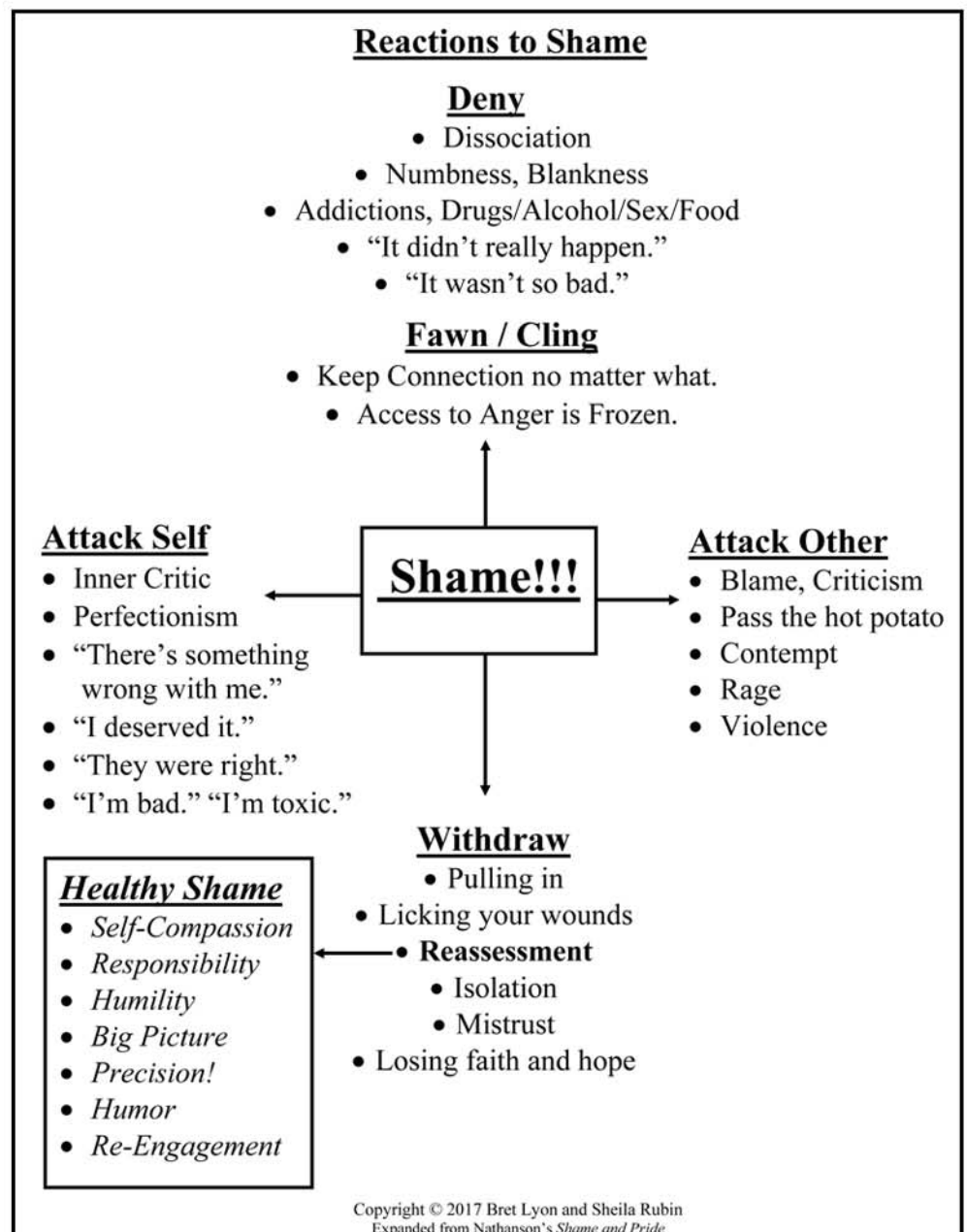
Shame is a powerful emotion that creates a freeze response in both the brain and body, blocking awareness of other emotions. When shame binds with emotions like anger, grief, or fear, it prevents them from being fully felt and processed. Emotions are meant to move through us, but shame stops this natural flow, leaving us stuck in states of confusion, disconnection, and emotional suppression. This stasis leads to a loss of vitality, distorts our perceptions, and blocks access to higher cognitive functions.

Untangling shame from primary emotions allows these emotions to complete their natural cycle, enabling us to live fully and authentically. In a culture where shame often binds with pleasure, many of us seek addictive behaviors to compensate for the lack of joy. Addiction, whether to substances, relationships, or activities, keeps us disconnected from our authentic selves. The antidote to addiction is reconnection—processing emotions allows us to access our wise mind, where emotion and reason coexist in balance. Shame also interferes with healthy anger. While anger is a natural response to injustice, providing energy for change and boundary-setting, shame suppresses it, making us feel unsafe to express this vital emotion. Similarly, shame bound with grief prevents the healing process, freezing us in a state of unresolved loss.

In our culture, where emotional control is prioritized, the grief-shame bind is common, leading to suppressed mourning and prolonged suffering.

Fear and shame work together to create immobility. Fear is designed to protect us from harm, but when it is bound with shame, the freeze response is amplified, trapping us in a cycle of paralysis. Often, societal expectations lead us to suppress fear, reinforcing this fear-shame bind and contributing to anxiety.

However, not all shame is toxic. Healthy shame helps us recognize our limits, reassess our actions, and maintain social harmony. It reminds us of our need for connection and belonging. The key is to distinguish between toxic shame, which isolates and freezes us, and healthy shame, which invites reflection and growth, allowing us to function within the boundaries of society while maintaining a sense of self-worth.



Nervous System Mapping

As humans, we have and will continue to experience all of these states. We may be in a joyful, mindful state and then all of a sudden due to a trigger, be in a really frustrated, possibly angry state, worried about what may happen to then feeling completely shut down. This is the human experience. We are going to naturally shift through the states. However, if our vagus nerve isn't functioning optimally, we can more easily become stuck and sometimes even adapted to living in a survival state.

The goal of nervous system regulation is to help us respond appropriately to life, to go into survival states for a short period, and then return back to your state of social engagement. To truly enjoy life, we need to have nervous system flexibility so we can more easily bounce back to our window of tolerance. It can start with mapping your own nervous system.

Identify States

This is a practice where you identify the common feelings, stories and behaviors you experience in the different nervous system states. Nervous system mapping is a way to check in with yourself, and with practice, you will be able to identify where you are in your nervous system and how to regulate it.

VENTRAL VAGAL BRANCH - SAFE & SOCIALLY ENGAGED

Feelings: _____

Sensation: _____

Story: _____

SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM - SEEKING SAFETY VIA ACTION

Feelings: _____

Sensation: _____

Story: _____

DORSAL VAGAL BRANCH - SEEKING SAFETY VIA DISCONNECTION

Feelings: _____

Sensation: _____

Story: _____

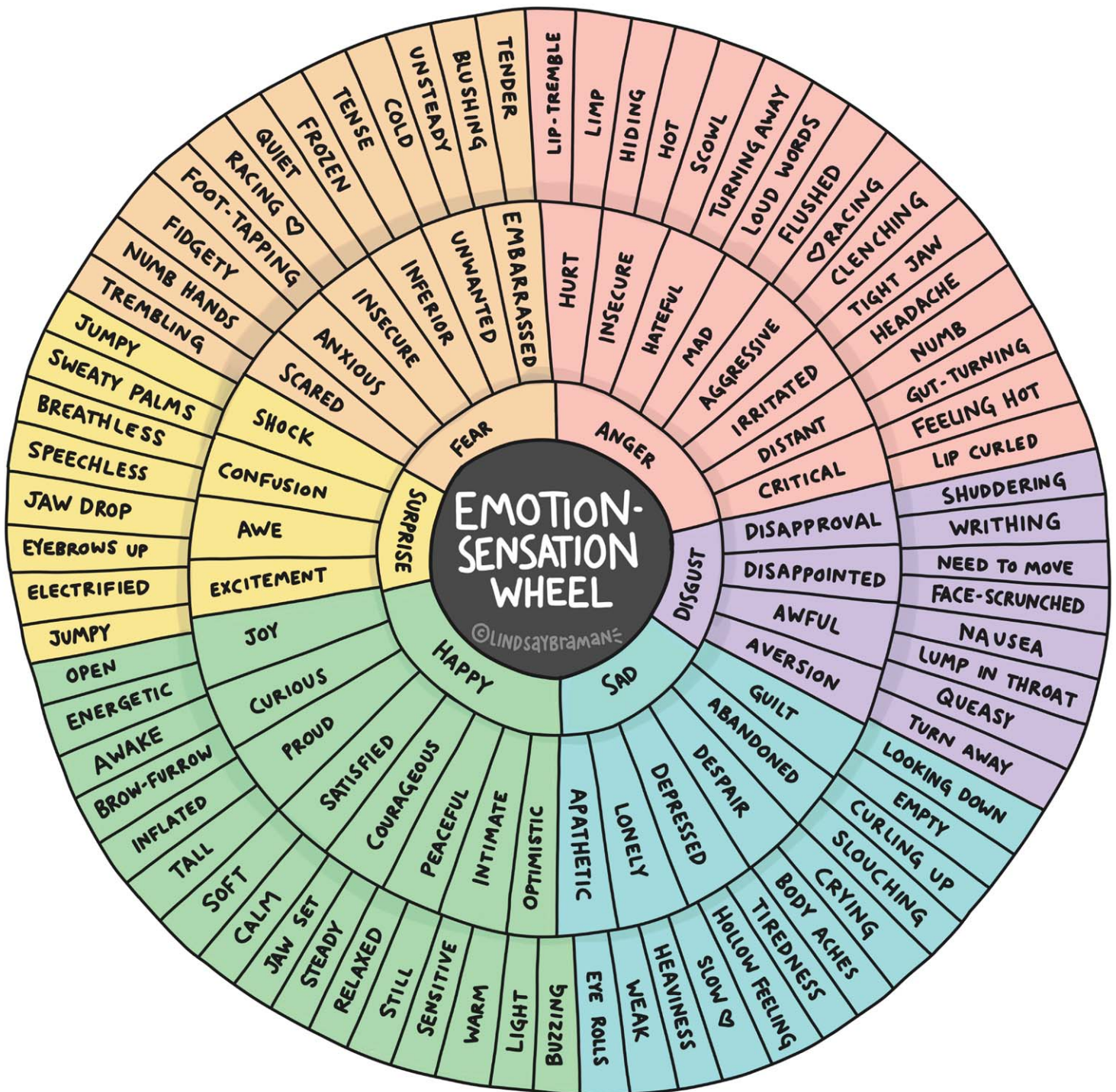
Regulating Resource Mapping

Resourcing is the practice of inviting our brain-mind-body system to mindfully attune to sensations of safety or goodness, however small they may be. The process of attending to a felt sense of “okayness,” begins the process of teaching our nervous system that it can experience stress, and then come back to a state of safety.

Take some time to identify what resources you in each nervous system state.

	Things I Can Do On My Own	Things I Can Do With Others
Ventral - Optimal Energy Engage, Prepare		
Feelings: _____		
Sensation: _____		
Story: _____		
Sympathetic Activation Pause, Seek Connection		
Feelings: _____		
Sensation: _____		
Story: _____		
Dorsal Activation Disengage, Seek Safety		
Feelings: _____		
Sensation: _____		
Story: _____		

By Kristin Neff



A FELT SENSE VOCABULARY LIST

Felt Sense Definition

The somatic experience of being in our body's sensory, energetic and emotional landscape; a relationship with our self as our body and our body as our self

Achy	Frozen	Shaky
Airy	Full	Sharp
Alive	Fuzzy	Shimmering
Bloated	Goose Bumpy	Shivery
Blocked	Gurgling	Shudder
Breathless	Hard	Silky
Brittle	Heavy	Smooth
Bubbly	Hollow	Soft
Burning	Hot	Sore
Buzzing	Icy	Spacious
Calm	Intense	Spasming
Chilled	Itchy	Spinning
Clammy	Jagged	Sticky
Clenched	Jittery	Still
Closed	Jumbly	Stretchy
Cold	Jumpy	Stringy
Congested	Knotted	Strong
Constricted	Light	Suffocating
Contracted	Limp	Sweaty
Cool	Loose	Tender
Cozy	Nauseous	Tense
Cramped	Numb	Thick
Damp	Open	Throbbing
Dense	Paralyzed	Tickly
Dizzy	Pounding	Tight
Dry	Pressure	Tingling
Dull	Prickly	Trembling
Elastic	Puffy	Twitchy
Electric	Pulled	Vibrating
Empty	Pulsing	Warm
Energized	Quaking	Weak
Expanding	Queasy	Wobbly
Faint	Quiet	
Flaccid	Quivering	
Fluid	Radiating	
Flushed	Ragged	
Fluttery	Raw	
Frantic	Releasing	
Free	Rolling	