

# HOW TO Return To Safety



*A guide to understanding nervous system  
states, dysregulation, and regulation*

BY JAN KRUEDER



# Introduction

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Many people spend years trying to change their behavior, manage their emotions, or “fix” themselves. They read books, learn tools, and understand their patterns intellectually, yet still find themselves reacting in the same ways under stress. Anxiety returns. Shutdown creeps back in. Old dynamics repeat.

This book exists to explain why.

Lasting change does not begin with behavior or even with insight. It begins with the nervous system. Until the nervous system experiences enough safety, it will continue to organize perception, emotion, and behavior around protection rather than growth.

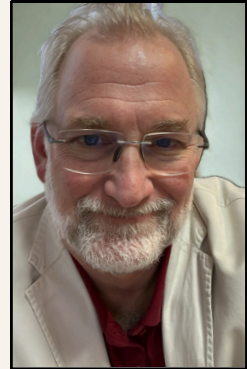
This guide offers a map. Not a map of personality or pathology, but a map of states. Once you understand these states and how you move between them, your reactions stop feeling random or personal. They start making sense. And from there, real change becomes possible.

“*From Survival to Safety: How Your Nervous System Shapes Experience and What Restores Regulation*”

How to Return to Safety - Understanding our Nervous System

# About Me

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I come from high-pressure leadership and professional environments where competence was rarely the issue. What I observed again and again was that chronic stress and survival states, not lack of ability, were driving burnout, reactivity, shutdown, and physical symptoms.

Today, I work as an executive and leadership coach, certified in Energy Leadership coaching and Pain Reprocessing Therapy. My approach integrates neuroscience, nervous system regulation, and somatic awareness. Rather than trying to fix behavior, we work with the underlying state that shapes it.

This work is not about pushing through or optimizing yourself. It is about restoring flexibility, choice, and safety in the body and mind. If this ebook resonated, it is likely because it speaks to something your nervous system already knows.

You are not broken.  
Your system has been protecting you.

*Jan Krueger*

How to Return to Safety - Understanding our Nervous System

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# 01 The nervous system's core task

The nervous system has one primary job: survival. Everything else is secondary.

From the moment you wake up until you fall asleep, your nervous system continuously scans for cues of safety and danger. This process happens largely outside conscious awareness. It is fast, automatic, and shaped by past experience far more than by logic.

When safety is detected, the system allows openness, connection, curiosity, and learning. When threat is detected, it shifts the entire organism toward protection. Muscles tense or collapse. Attention narrows or fragments. Certain brain regions activate while others go offline.

This is why the same situation can evoke very different responses in different people, and even in the same person on different days. Responses are not determined by the situation alone, but by the state of the nervous system at that moment.

Understanding this reframes human behavior. What we often label as overreaction, avoidance, aggression, or laziness is frequently a nervous system doing exactly what it evolved to do.



## Regulation and the safe and social state

At the center of nervous system regulation lies the state often described as safe and social. In this state, the ventral vagal system is active and integrated with the rest of the nervous system.

Physiologically, the body is neither braced for danger nor collapsed into conservation. Breathing is adaptive. Heart rate variability is high. Digestion, immune response, and hormonal balance are supported. The prefrontal cortex is available.

Psychologically, this allows for perspective, emotional nuance, and relational presence. Emotions can be felt without overwhelming the system. Thoughts can be evaluated rather than automatically believed. Other people feel accessible rather than threatening.

This state is not passive calm. It includes energy, play, excitement, and challenge. What defines it is flexibility. The nervous system can mobilize and settle again without getting stuck.

This is the state from which learning, healing, leadership, intimacy, and creativity naturally emerge.

### When your Nervous System feels Safe and Regulated:

- 1 The body has enough calm to relax and enough energy to engage, without tipping into tension or collapse
- 2 Emotions and sensations can be felt without becoming overwhelming or shutting down
- 3 Thinking, connection, and choice remain available, allowing flexible responses rather than automatic reactions

# 02

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## Healthy mobilization: alertness and engagement



*A regulated nervous system can move into action without entering survival.*

*The goal is not to stay calm, but to stay connected while energy rises.*

A regulated nervous system does not remain still. Life requires movement, action, and effort. When demands increase, the nervous system naturally raises activation.

In this alert state, attention sharpens. Energy increases. The body prepares to respond. You may notice subtle fidgeting, focused intensity, or a sense of urgency. Importantly, the ventral vagal system still modulates this activation.

This is the zone of productive stress. It supports concentration, problem-solving, performance, and learning. Many people mistake this state for anxiety or dysregulation and attempt to suppress it. In reality, it is a sign of a system working well. The issue is not activation itself, but the loss of flexibility when activation continues to rise without resolution.

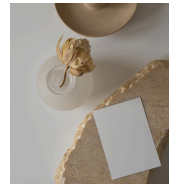
## Readiness without tension

Safe mobilization feels like sitting on a chair with both feet on the ground. Your body is upright and engaged, yet supported. There is tone in the muscles, but no bracing. You could stand up at any moment, but you do not have to.



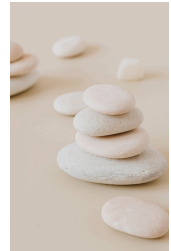
## Focused engagement

Safe mobilization can also feel like sitting at a calm, uncluttered desk with a single note in front of you. Attention is directed, not scattered. The mind knows what it is focusing on, and what it is not.



## Dynamic balance

Safe mobilization is not static. It is a living balance, like a small stack of stones resting on one another. Each stone carries weight, yet the whole structure remains stable because the forces are aligned. In the nervous system, this reflects the ongoing micro-adjustments between activation and regulation. Energy rises, the ventral vagal system modulates it, and the system stays coherent.



*Safe mobilization is the ability to be supported, focused, and balanced while energy is present. When the nervous system is regulated, readiness feels grounded, focus feels calm, and balance holds under movement.*



# 03

## Rising distress and attachment-driven activation

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*Distress begins not when danger appears, but when safety feels uncertain. When connection feels at risk, the nervous system does not seek logic. It seeks reassurance.*

## It's not about drama, but to restore safety

When uncertainty, emotional complexity, or relational threat increases, the nervous system may move into a state of heightened distress. Emotional intensity rises. The need for reassurance, clarity, or connection becomes stronger.

At this stage, thinking becomes more reactive. The mind may loop, catastrophize, or fixate. The prefrontal cortex is still partially available, but its influence is weakening. The body carries more tension.

Sleep, digestion, or emotional regulation may begin to suffer.

This state often emerges in relational contexts. Moments of misattunement, conflict, or perceived rejection can activate attachment-related survival responses. The system is not just reacting to the present moment, but to past experiences encoded as threat.

With appropriate support, this state can still return to regulation. Without it, activation continues to escalate.

### When safety becomes uncertain, activation becomes relational

- ✓ Emotional intensity rises as the nervous system seeks reassurance and connection
- ✓ Thinking becomes more reactive as prefrontal regulation weakens
- ✓ Support and co-regulation can still restore safety before survival responses take over

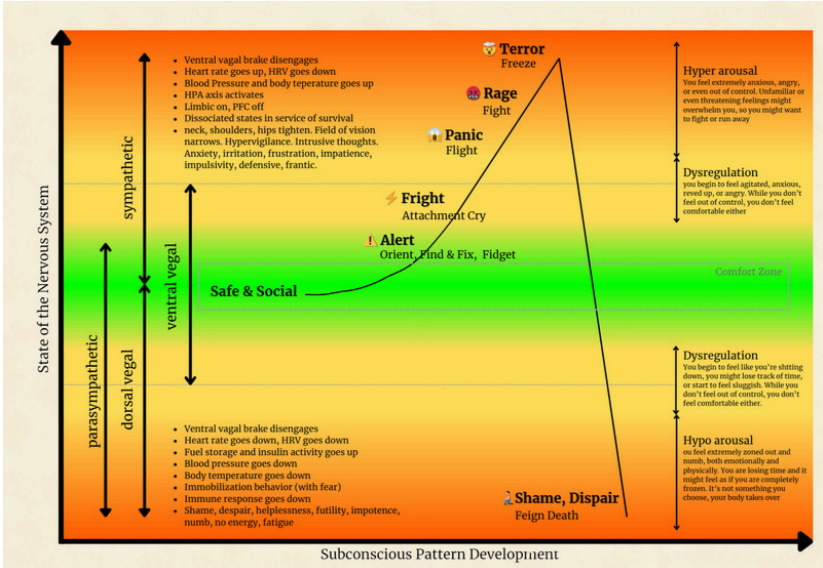
# 04 Fight and flight: sympathetic survival

When threat is perceived as immediate or unavoidable, the sympathetic nervous system takes over. The ventral vagal brake disengages. Survival becomes the organizing principle.

In this state, the nervous system prioritizes action over accuracy. Heart rate and blood pressure increase, breathing becomes shallow and rapid, and stress hormones flood the system. Attention narrows toward potential danger, while non-essential functions such as digestion, immune response, and nuanced social perception are downregulated.

Physiologically, stress hormones flood the system. Heart rate and blood pressure rise. Muscles tense. Vision narrows. The limbic system drives behavior while the prefrontal cortex goes largely offline.





Fight and flight are two expressions of the same survival energy. In fight, energy moves outward. The body prepares to confront, control, or push back. This can show up as anger, irritability, defensiveness, or an urgent need to be right. In flight, energy moves away. The body prepares to escape, avoid, or withdraw from the perceived threat. Anxiety, panic, restlessness, or compulsive busyness are common expressions.

Because reasoning capacity is reduced, attempts to resolve conflict or make complex decisions in this state often escalate rather than settle the situation. Regulation does not begin with insight here. It begins with reducing threat and restoring a felt sense of safety in the body.

Cognitively, the prefrontal cortex is largely offline. This is why perspective-taking, empathy, and long-term planning become difficult. The nervous system is not malfunctioning. It is doing exactly what it evolved to do when danger is sensed. Understanding this shifts the question from “Why am I acting like this?” to “What does my nervous system believe it needs to survive right now?”

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# 05

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## Freeze and the high-arousal shutdown



*When action no longer feels safe, the nervous system chooses stillness. Freeze is not the absence of energy, but energy trapped without a way out.*

When fighting or fleeing does not feel possible, the nervous system may enter a freeze response. This state combines intense internal activation with external immobility.

Internally, the system is overwhelmed. Stress chemistry remains high. Externally, the person may feel stuck, unable to speak, think, or act. Dissociation is common. Time may feel distorted or unreal.

Freeze is often misunderstood as passivity or indifference. In reality, it is a last-resort survival strategy when action feels too dangerous or futile.

Regulation from this state requires patience and gentleness. Forcing movement, insight, or emotional processing often deepens the freeze rather than resolving it.

# 06

## Dorsal vagal shutdown and collapse

When threat feels prolonged or inescapable, the nervous system may drop into a low-energy survival state. This is often referred to as dorsal vagal shutdown.

Energy collapses. Heart rate and blood pressure decrease. The body conserves resources. Psychologically, this may feel like numbness, emptiness, shame, hopelessness, or profound fatigue.

This state is not rest. It is survival through withdrawal. Motivation disappears not because someone does not care, but because the system is prioritizing conservation over engagement.

Because arousal is low, this state is often misinterpreted as depression, apathy, or lack of will. While there may be overlap, the nervous system logic is protective, not pathological.





# 07

## Why dysregulation persists

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*The nervous system does not need convincing. It needs evidence of safety. It is not about a problem, but protection.*

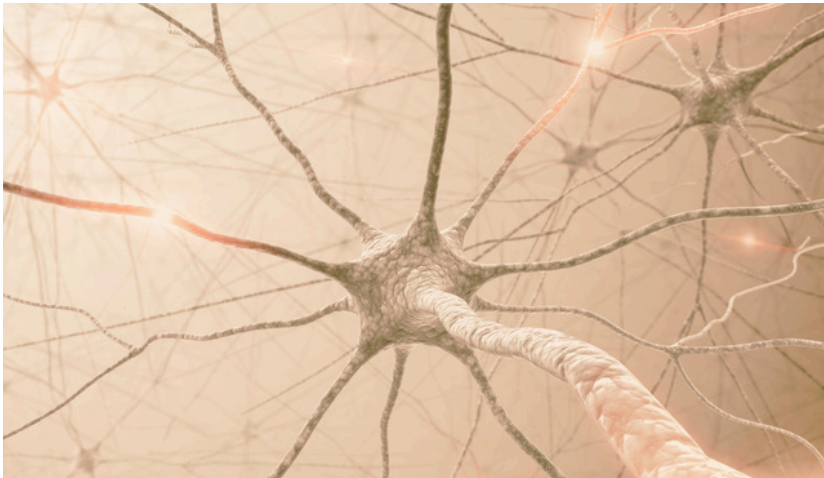
Dysregulation is not stubbornness.  
It is memory without words.

Dysregulation persists when the nervous system continues to perceive danger, even in the absence of real threat. This perception is shaped by past experience.

The nervous system does not respond to facts. It responds to meaning. If certain cues were once associated with danger, the system will continue to react until it learns otherwise.

Once dysregulated, access to choice is limited. This is why telling yourself to calm down, think differently, or respond better often fails. Those capacities depend on neural resources that are temporarily unavailable.

Lasting regulation requires new experiences of safety, not better arguments.



# 08

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## How regulation actually works

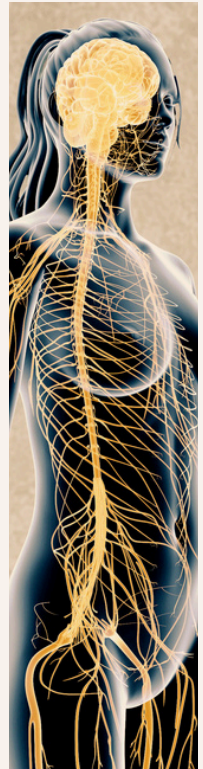
*Regulation is not achieved through suppression or control. It is restored through safety.*

Safety can be internal. Slow, rhythmic breathing. Grounding through sensation. Orientation to the present moment. Gentle movement.

Safety can also be relational. A calm voice. Attuned presence. Feeling seen without being fixed. One regulated nervous system can help another return to balance.

These bottom-up cues gradually bring the system back toward ventral vagal regulation. Over time, repeated returns to safety expand capacity. Triggers become less destabilizing. Recovery becomes faster.

This is how resilience is built. Not through toughness, but through flexibility.



# 10 Integration and flexibility

The goal is not to remain in the safe and social state at all times. That would be neither possible nor healthy. The goal is flexibility.

A healthy nervous system can move up into action and down into rest and return again. It can experience intensity without getting stuck in survival.

When we stop pathologizing states and start supporting regulation, behavior changes naturally. Not because it is forced, but because protection is no longer required in extreme ways.

Growth, from this perspective, is not about becoming better. It is about becoming safer inside your own body.



# From understanding to lived change

If this ebook resonated, you have already taken an important step. Understanding your nervous system changes how you relate to stress, emotions, and yourself. But insight alone rarely creates lasting change. The nervous system does not transform through reading. It transforms through experience.

This is where personalized coaching becomes powerful.

In my work, we take the principles you've just learned and apply them to your specific life context. Your relationships. Your leadership role. Your stress patterns. Your history. Together, we identify where your nervous system tends to leave regulation, what cues trigger those shifts, and how to restore safety in ways that actually work for you.

Rather than forcing strategies onto your system, we build capacity gradually. We work with your nervous system, not against it. This allows change to feel grounded, sustainable, and embodied, not effortful or performative.



# You do not have to do this alone. And you do not have to push yourself to heal.

If you are navigating chronic stress, emotional reactivity, shutdown, pain, or a sense of being stuck despite knowing better, you do not need more discipline or insight. You need a nervous system that feels safe enough to change.

I offer one-on-one coaching for individuals and leaders who want to move from understanding to integration. Sessions are tailored, trauma-aware, and grounded in neuroscience, somatic work, and nervous system regulation.



You are invited to book a free, no-pressure introductory conversation. It is a space to explore your situation, ask questions, and sense whether this work feels like the right next step.

[REGISTER NOW](#)

*Change happens where safety is found.*



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