EMPOWER & THRIVE COUNSELING

Understanding Trauma & Your Nervous System

A gentle guide to recognizing trauma responses, finding steadiness, and building your personal regulation plan.

> A starting point, not a test: Trauma responses are ways the mind and body try to protect us. You do not need to share your story or revisit painful memories to use this guide.

What is trauma?

Trauma can result from an experience or series of experiences that feels overwhelming, threatening, or deeply distressing. Its effects vary from person to person. What matters is not whether an experience "counts," but how it has affected you.

How trauma may show up

Some people notice heightened alertness, worry, irritability, or difficulty relaxing. Others experience numbness, disconnection, exhaustion, trouble concentrating, changes in sleep, or challenges with trust and relationships. These experiences can have many causes; this guide cannot determine whether they are trauma-related.

Your nervous system is trying to protect you

When the brain senses danger, the body may prepare for action or shift into a protective shutdown. These reactions can happen even when the current situation is relatively safe. Noticing the response with curiosity—rather than judgment—can be a helpful first step.

> Gentle reminder: You can pause, skip any exercise, or return later. Choose what feels manageable today.

Recognizing Your Responses

Common protective patterns

Fight: Feeling defensive, irritable, or ready to push back.

Flight: Feeling restless, driven to escape, overwork, or stay busy.

Freeze: Feeling stuck, unable to act, or mentally blank.

Fawn: Trying to keep others happy or avoid conflict to feel safer.

These labels are simplified ways to describe patterns—not diagnoses or fixed personality types. You may notice more than one response.

Understanding your window of tolerance

Your “window of tolerance” is a way to describe the range in which you can generally think, feel, and respond without becoming overwhelmed. Stress can move you above that range (anxious, activated, on edge) or below it (numb, foggy, shut down). Your window can change with sleep, support, health, and circumstances.

> Above the window: Racing thoughts, tension, panic, urgency.
> Within the window: More able to notice feelings, make choices, and connect.
> Below the window: Numbness, disconnection, heaviness, difficulty responding.

Notice without forcing

You might gently ask: “What is happening in my body right now?” or “What would help me feel a little more supported?” There is no need to identify a trigger perfectly.

A note about triggers

A trigger can be a reminder—such as a sound, tone of voice, place, sensation, or situation—that brings up a strong response. Identifying patterns may help you prepare and choose support, but you do not need to intentionally expose yourself to distressing reminders on your own.

Grounding & Regulation Tools

Try one gentle option. If it increases distress, stop and choose something else. You can keep your eyes open, move, or skip body-focused exercises.

Orient to the present

Look around and name three neutral objects. Notice where you are and remind yourself of the current date or a familiar detail about the room.

Find a point of support

Feel your feet against the floor or your back against a chair. If body awareness is uncomfortable, focus instead on the chair's color or texture.

Use an everyday sensory anchor

Hold a cool glass of water, listen to a familiar song, or notice the scent of tea. Choose something neutral or comforting.

Allow gentle movement

Stretch your hands, take a brief walk, or slowly change positions if that feels helpful and accessible.

Connect with someone safe

Text a trusted person, sit near someone supportive, or ask for company without having to explain everything.

> What about breathing exercises? Slow breathing can help some people, but it can feel uncomfortable or activating for others. It is optional—not a requirement for calming down.

Afterward, check in

Did anything shift, even slightly? A small increase in comfort or choice is enough. If not, that does not mean you did anything wrong.

When to seek additional support

Consider working with a trauma-informed mental health professional if symptoms interfere with daily life, relationships, sleep, or your sense of safety. If you are in immediate danger, call 911. For emotional crisis support in the U.S., call or text 988.

My Personal Regulation Plan

This worksheet is optional. Write only what feels safe and useful. You can leave any section blank.

1. Early signs I may be feeling activated or shut down

2. Situations or sensations I want to be mindful of (no details required)

3. Grounding or comfort strategies I would like to try

4. People, places, or resources that help me feel supported

5. A kind reminder I can offer myself when things feel difficult

My next small step: _____

This guide offers general education and is not a substitute for individualized mental health care. If an exercise feels overwhelming, pause and consider reaching out to a qualified professional.