



ZONE OF PRESENCE

Let your nervous system guide you into the warm grounded presence of your authentic self.

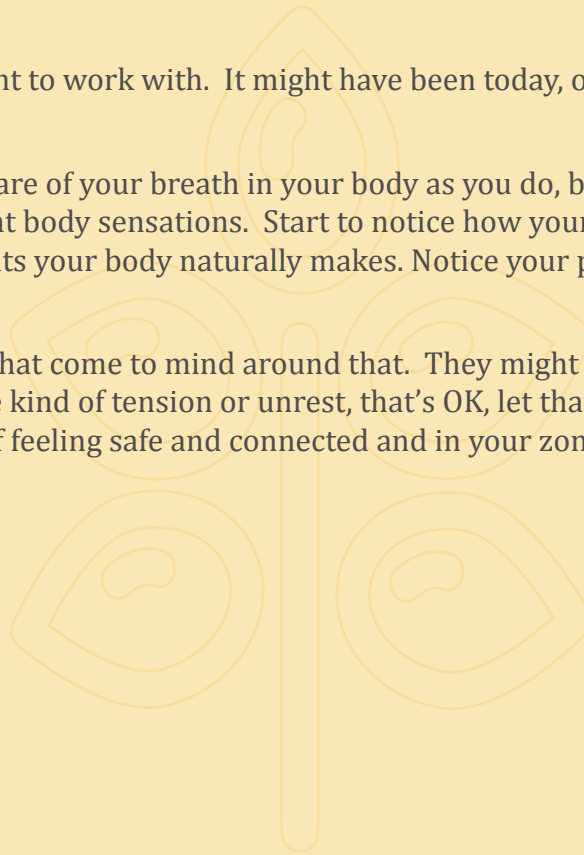
Invitation into presence ...

Remember a moment when you felt connected with the world around you, the people or the physical environment or the flow of activity. A moment where you felt really in your 'zone', really 'in yourself', bringing something that comes naturally to you, engaging with something that matters to you, really taking in the energy of a place or the sweetness of a moment.

Take your time until you recall an actual memory or moment to work with. It might have been today, or last week, it might have been a long time ago or it might be a mix of reality and imagination.

Take some time to sink into this memory, this image, be aware of your breath in your body as you do, be aware of your contact with the ground below and let your attention gently shift between the memory and your current body sensations. Start to notice how your body feels while this memory, this image is with you - notice the shape of your breath, any movements or adjustments your body naturally makes. Notice your posture and the tension or ease in your muscles and the sensations over your skin.

Find the feeling tone of the moment and notice any words that come to mind around that. They might be words like 'ease' or 'safe' or 'belonging' or 'whole' or 'warm' or 'flowing'. There might be also sensations of some kind of tension or unrest, that's OK, let that be there too and as much as you're able in this moment, bring your awareness back to the whole body experience of feeling safe and connected and in your zone experiencing something that matters to you.



Authentic self, connected life.

This is how we all want to live our lives, feeling like this, operating from this home base, connecting with others from this place and being able to stay in it or return to it through change and risk and threat. This is the place where ideas and creativity flow, where right action happens in the moment, where love and acceptance flow between people.

Underneath all our defenses and life plans and strategies, this is what we are seeking, to live and interact from this place, to feel and be felt, to influence and allow ourselves to be influenced.

So ... we live in bodies.

That is how we are designed to experience the world, to register the sensations that go with experience.

The interface between our senses, the way we actually experience everything in life and the higher cognitive part of us that observes, reflects and chooses the actions that create our world, is our nervous system.

It can tune itself to be an open place of wonder, sensing, taking in, being receptive and curious, stepping forward, sharing, declaring .. or it can be a tightly controlled, wound up fortress, a barrier of too much everything or empty nothingness.

It's a moving feast for all of us, continually reforming and reshaping itself. It's default settings got wired in a long time ago, but ..every .. single .. moment .. it's re-creating itself. The consciousness and presence we bring to each moment determines what comes next.

But the catch is, there may already be too much stored up, wound up energy of fear, terror, anxiety, grief or anger to safely just 'consciously experience it' in a moment of your choosing. So there are ways to go about doing this safely, that are paced, not just exposing yourself to what's there, but bringing something needed, little bit by tiny little bit, moment to moment.

If you work with me one-on-one or through one of my programs you'll understand more about this, what it can look like, what's your best way, what keeps it safe, how to truly hear the wisdom from within that wants so much to be seen, heard, felt.

This 'Zone of Presence' program is a starting point, a way to tune in and begin to be more aware of the delicate architecture of your nervous system and the bridge of experiencing it offers between your inner and outer worlds and the different layers of you.

Your brain and nervous system

Sensory, somatic and feeling data goes up; perspective, strategies and choices act down.

The power is in making the dance between feed upwards and choices downwards more conscious and connected.

As humans, your brain, body and nervous system have two modes that organize the way you interact within yourself and with the world around you. You are either feeling safe and in that your natural instincts to reach out are intact – to seek food, shelter, love and support, to explore your environment and to influence the world around you – to bring something of your own special sauce to your interactions and creations.

OR, you feel unsafe and go into a protective defense of some sort – to try to fight against the threatening thing, to get away from it or if all else fails, to shut yourself down and minimize damage caused by exposure to this threatening thing.

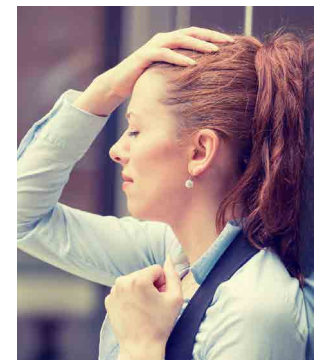
The mode you are in depends on the level of safety sensed by your body. Being seen and warmly accepted by other humans is intrinsic to being safe. Only in this mode can you optimally access your smart mind, your pre-frontal cortex (PFC) and use it to make and activate considered decisions in line with your personal goals or values or environmental needs.

Much of the knowledge base we are all tapping into to help live a more healthy, authentic and connected life is based on the assumption that we have strong capacity to use our PFC in a rational, top-down, considered way, regardless of what is happening in the body and nervous system.

The truth is the opposite. We need to get much, much better at listening to our bodies and tracking our nervous system responding, moment to moment, in order to work with it, not push against it.

Only then can we work effectively with the decisions and choices of the PFC.

Coming into presence, embodying your authentic self and relating with the world from this place, requires an intimate dance of

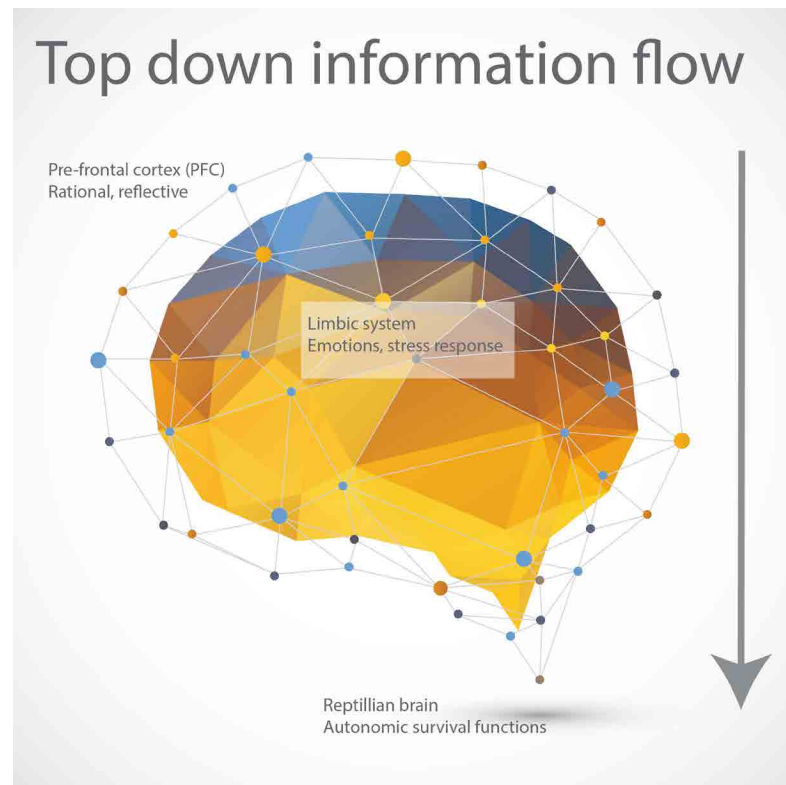


messages joining, from your body and senses up through the emotional and stress response centre of your limbic system and into the higher levels of your brain and then from the higher brain, back down deep into your body and senses.

Our world and much of our western philosophy is geared towards control of the mind over the body and senses.

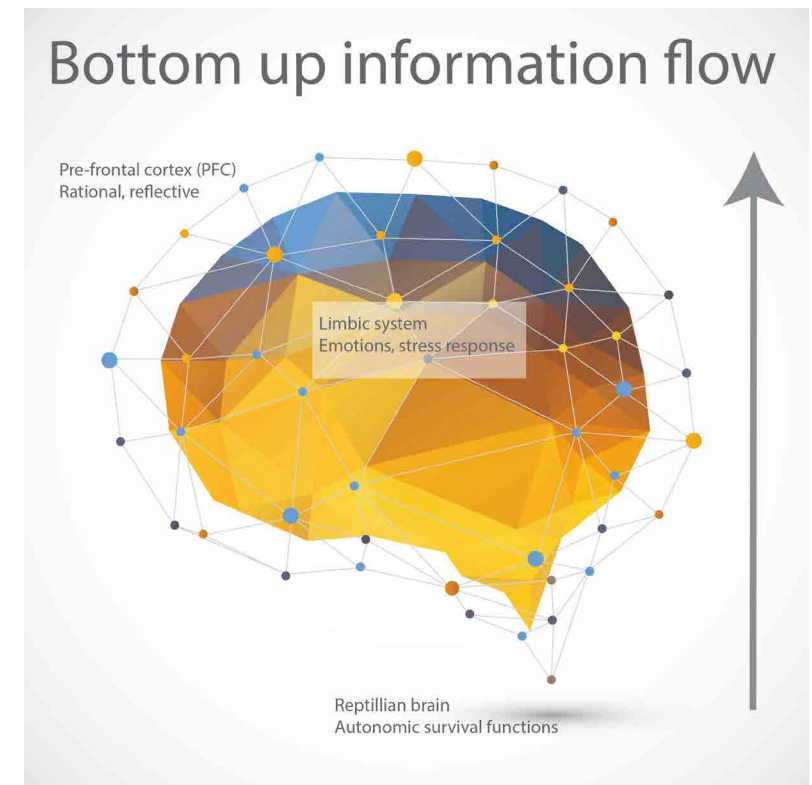
We need to get better at perceiving the upwards path and dancing this dance, moment to moment. Awareness of sensory and somatic data moving up into our higher brain to enrich and inform our experience and choices, as well as clear seeing direction, perspective and choice moving down from the PFC to the middle and lower brain areas that activate movement and sensory experience. Initially perhaps, we are slow and awkward. In time, as we make room for the dance, it brings its own wisdom, its moment to moment ebb and flow, directing our lives and the way we connect and create in them.

Top down information flow



**the intimate
dance of bottom
up and top down
information flow**

Bottom up information flow



How your nervous system manages your life

Your nervous system controls, regulates and communicates everything you ever experience, everything you ever learn, do, choose, say, feel or think.

Nerve cells are communicator cells. They utilize chemicals and electricity to convey information all around your brain and body. Your nervous system is always at work – initiating this, slowing that, balancing out something else. You have nerve cells or neurons in your brain and throughout your body, connected to all brain and body functions.

They organize themselves in different ways to achieve different goals. Part of your nervous system operates within your conscious control (like when you choose to move your arm) and part of it takes care of business automatically, traditionally without your conscious awareness (like when you breathe).

Making its unconscious functions conscious

This is the part of the nervous system we need to get much better at listening to, understanding and working with. When you bring it more and more online with your conscious awareness and control, you can be more at choice about when, where and how your fight, flight and freeze defenses kick in. As you work with this autonomic part of your nervous system, bringing its functioning more and more into your conscious awareness, you can access really important information for your own healing and strengthening in self and identity. You can manage perceived threats internally and externally more effectively – noticing them sooner, applying targeted practices to settle and soothe and spending more time in the ‘open, explore and connect’ mode and less time in ‘shut down and protect’ mode.

This means more capacity for a meaningful life and contribution, for love, for feeling the richness in the environment and relationships around you and for health and vitality in your physical body.

Your nervous system has two modes



Open, explore and connect



Shut down and protect

Fight, flight and freeze – nature's way of keeping us safe

Fight, flight and freeze are names for survival responses in the body that activate to keep us safe, when we encounter a perceived threat. The threat could be an oncoming car that you didn't notice or an unhappy expression on your boss's face. We are mammals and as such are social animals, we are designed to soothe ourselves and manage stress, by having each other's backs. Under threat, if we have a relatively healthy nervous system, secure attachment style and a safe environment, that is the first thing we will try, we will reach out to the tribe. If that fails, we will turn to another defense.

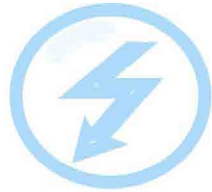
Fight and flight are activating responses, they pump adrenaline into the nervous system and put it on high alert. This initiates a series of physiological responses, such as an increased heart rate, faster breathing, directing blood flow into your muscles, shutting down functions that aren't essential to survival in that moment, such as your immune and digestive systems. All of this prepares your body to act quickly and effectively to fight an enemy if that seems possible and makes sense or to try to 'flee', to run and escape the threatening situation.

It's designed to be a short term fix, but modern life sees us all there all too often – with extra stress and often less access to the social soothing mechanism of being accepted and supported by 'the tribe'.

If this happens too often, too intensely, over too long a period of time, it will start to affect the way your nervous system operates.

Likewise, if the perceived threat presents as overwhelming or inescapable and you can't effectively mount a fight or flight response, your very clever nervous system has another trick up its sleeve and will shut the activity down – this is called the 'freeze' response. It's a form of dissociation, where we separate out from the threatening or overwhelming thoughts, feelings or environmental stressors. This response is controlled automatically by the vagus nerve and puts a brake on the fight or flight activation by slowing down your heart rate. It immobilizes you, conserving resources and creating an impression of 'feigning dead', hopefully encouraging a predator to pass you over.

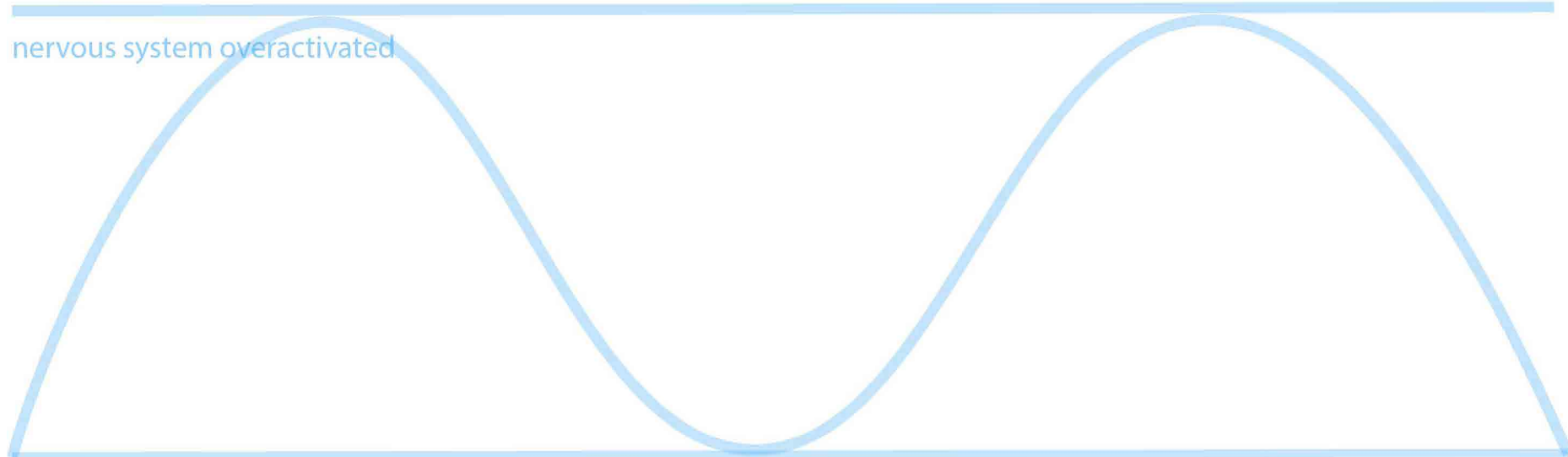
It might seem like someone in a freeze response is calm, but in reality all the energetic charge that could have supported a fight or flight response remains, locked, shut-down inside, not easily observable to the outside world. Someone utilizing a freeze response may come across as rigid or 'concrete'. They may also come across as vague or flat or distant, zoned out or slow, 'one step removed'. It's a highly adaptive response in certain situations, but no way to have to live your life on an ongoing basis.



fight



flight



freeze



How the level of safety and consistent attuned care in your early life affected the way your nervous system grew itself, the functions it prioritises.

Too much ongoing stress can upset the homeostasis, the balancing act of the nervous system. Staying centred in a changeable, insecure world without enough social support is one thing if you started life with a stable base. Many of us are too quick to assume we had this, not wanting to think ill of parents or caregivers who did their best, or assuming only those who went through horrific trauma have a 'right' to have been impacted by the environment in their early years.

The thing is, your nervous system is not a fixed box of wires and gears that arrives all intact when you are born. Only the very basics of it are available as a starting point when an infant is born. The complex nervous system you have, that governs everything you think, feel, do and experience, forms itself based on the kinds of responses that were most adaptive in your early environment.

To the extent that your parents and caregivers were present and attuned and empathic, noticing and responding appropriately to your feelings and social and survival needs, your nervous system will form itself in this image. It will assume the world is a safe place and prioritise fun things like learning and connecting with your environment – the natural world and the people and experiences around you.

However, certain things can get in the way of this process, even for the most loving and well-meaning parent. For example, a parent who is managing overwhelming stress in their own life, will be less present and available for attuned connecting with the infant. Have a think about the context your parents were in when they were raising you – for example, a parent managing anxiety or depression or alcohol dependence or simply not feeling loved and supported in their own key relationships will be less effective with tuning in and consistently (not perfectly, but predictably and consistently) meeting the needs of their child.

If your early environment was unpredictable, if your Mum wasn't able to effectively soothe you, if Dad was absent, if there was too much fighting or chaos or if there was lack of warm connection, your nervous system will have evolved to prioritise seeking out and managing threat. This is where hypervigilant and anxious behaviours come from – the need to scan and monitor an unpredictable and sometimes threatening environment to take action in the form of fight, flight or freeze.

When this happens during childhood and adolescence, it shapes the way the whole nervous system grows and the functions it prioritises – often resulting in a process that goes quickly to activating adrenaline under stress and taking longer to calm and settle when the perceived threat passes. In fact, many people live their lives without a real sense that the perceived threat has passed and are unconsciously on guard for what could happen at any moment.

Because these defenses work to a certain degree, we often do not notice we are even in them. They become habitual and in time take their toll on our health and wellbeing, our relationships and capacity for a rich and fulfilling life.





Integration is key

After a lifetime of study and work in the field of psychology and interest in many and varied forms of personal and spiritual growth, it was understanding the role of the nervous system in the big picture of our lives, that helped many things fall into place for me.

We are physical beings who experience life through a physical body. Everything that happens, happens through the body. It's easy to over identify with our mental or spiritual life or to use the mind to try and control the experience of the body. There's way more power in learning to listen well to the body, to the rich networks of information it has available for us. For too many years psychology has, in my view, over-emphasized research and understanding the mind and how to control it, at the expense of a truly integrative picture of how human beings work.

This top-down cognitive emphasis can leave many people feeling disheartened, ashamed, even despairing when the processes don't work for them or don't sustain and the challenges of a dysregulated nervous system continue to disrupt a life.

We are seeking to make unconscious body processes conscious.

To listen.

To get smart and informed about what's needed.

And to bring a little of what's needed, right here, right now, in this present moment.

Your Zone of Presence

Here is an important diagram. It shows the movement of your nervous system as it activates and deactivates throughout the day. This is what nervous systems are designed to do - to initiate or modulate actions in the body and to support communication of messages throughout the mind and body.

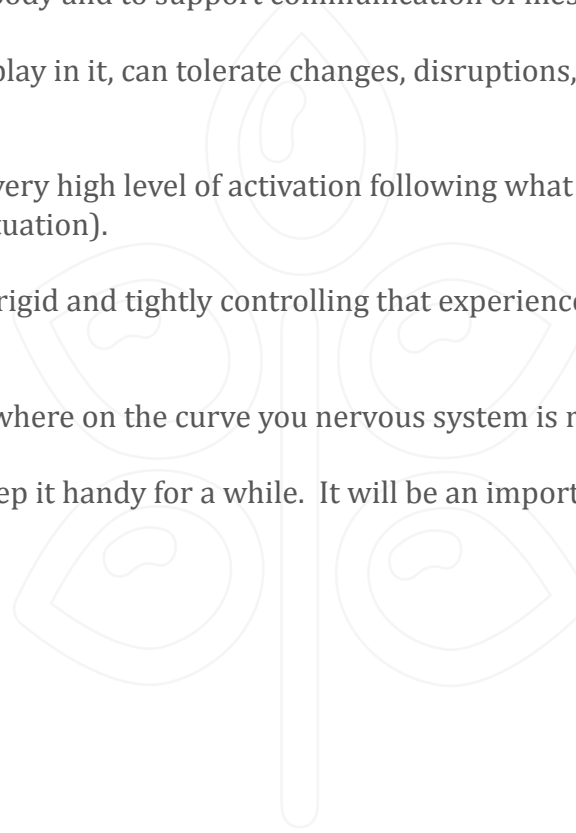
A resilient nervous system has a good amount of flex and play in it, can tolerate changes, disruptions, stimulation, messages of potential threat and modulate itself accordingly.

A hyper-sensitised nervous system might respond with a very high level of activation following what would seem to be a relatively minor stimulus (in this situation, the body is responding to stored memory of a past situation).

Sometimes a nervous system protects itself by being very rigid and tightly controlling that experiences it exposes itself to, the band of possible or acceptable activity becoming very fixed and narrow.

Take a moment and make a mark on this page to indicate where on the curve your nervous system is right now. (The B&W page is for you to print out).

I'm going to suggest you print a copy out if you can and keep it handy for a while. It will be an important tool for tracking and getting to know your nervous system more effectively.



Hyperactivation (too much)

Nervous system activation

ZONE OF PRESENCE

Hypoactivation (not

Anxious
Edgy
Restless
Manic
Hostile

Present
Manageable
Available to life
Connected within
and without
Resilient
Flow

Flat
Shut down
Depressed
Dissociated
Zoned out
Numb
Frozen



Hyperactivation (too much)

Anxious
Edgy
Restless
Manic
Hostile

Nervous system activation

social engagement

ZONE OF PRESENCE

Present
Manageable
Available to life
Connected within
and without
Resilient
Flow

Hypoactivation (not enough)



Flat
Shut down
Depressed
Dissociated
Zoned out
Numb
Frozen

One week challenge

I'm going to keep this short and sweet with a One Week Challenge for greater nervous system awareness.

Every day for one week, I'd like you to keep the daily reference chart with you and make a note about what sends your nervous system into high activation and what soothes it.



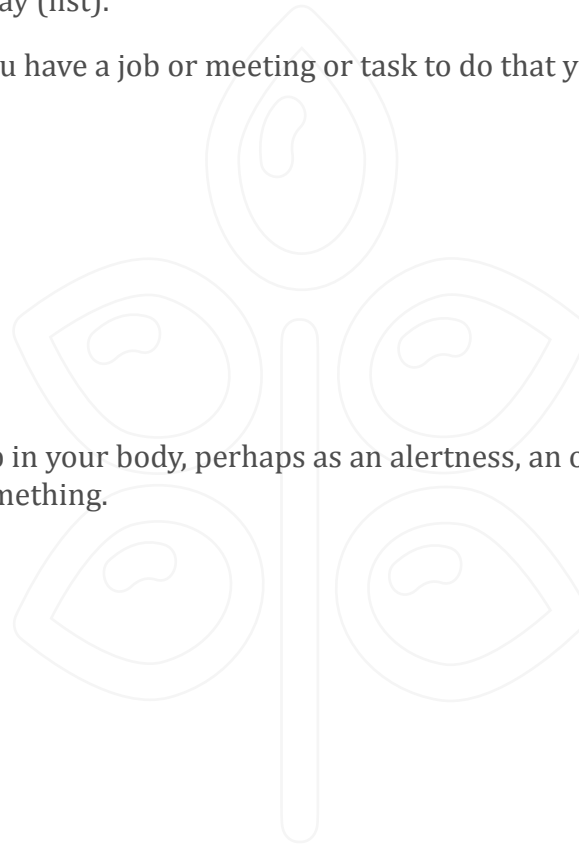
PART A. ACTIVATION

1. Positive activation.

Things that activated my nervous system in a good way today (list).

(eg. looking forward to a coffee with a friend, knowing you have a job or meeting or task to do that you care about, listening to your favourite dance track).

As you recall the positive activation, notice how it shows up in your body, perhaps as an alertness, an openness, as a straighter spine, as a more complete breath, as having energy available or a readiness to move towards something.



2. Over-activation.

Things that over-activated my nervous system today (list).

(eg. a misunderstanding with a friend, a stressful situation at work, too many demands from too many people, feeling left out or put down or not valued).

Which defense I went into (fight or flight) and how that showed up in my body.

Fight can look like irritated, argumentative, pushing through, power over, preparing for battle. It can feel hot, contracted, angry, anxious, high energy, edgy, worked up).

Flight shows up as some form of avoidance – avoiding saying what you really mean by being overly nice or not bringing up a situation that matters to you, not returning that phone call, avoiding someone's gaze, letting yourself be distracted. It can feel, restless, hard to sit down, not fully present, fast movement or the need to move.

Both fight and flight usually bring some increased heart rate, muscle tension, faster more shallow breathing and sometimes digestive type symptoms like butterflies in the stomach.

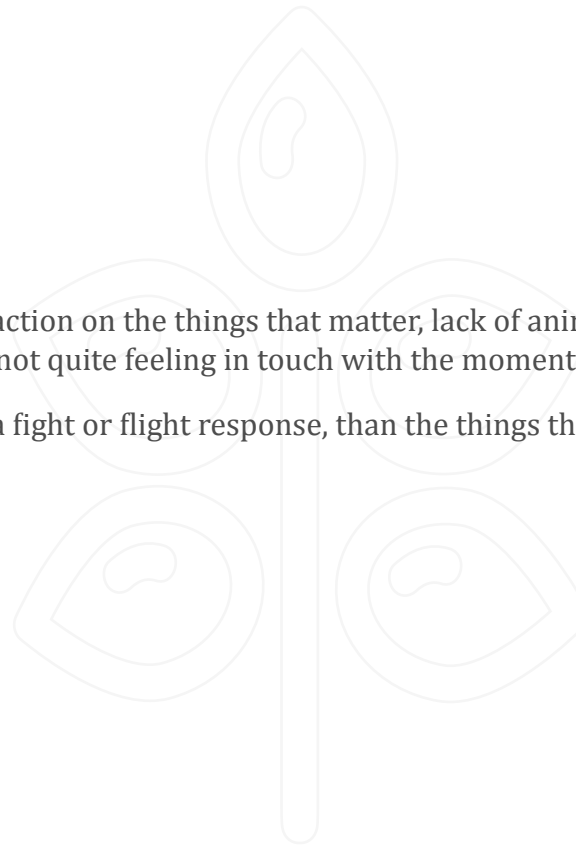
3. Shut down.

Things that saw me shut down (freeze).

How that showed up in my body.

Freeze can look like zoned out, stuck and just not taking action on the things that matter, lack of animation in face and body. It can feel cooler, like the energy has left you, more distant, a slower mind, one-step removed, not quite feeling in touch with the moment or like things are 'real' just now.

It might be easier to notice the things that send you into a fight or flight response, than the things that activate a freeze response or mild state of dissociation. Lean in close and see what you can notice.



4. Social engagement responding

It might be that when the over-activation showed up in your nervous system today you were able to respond in an open and 'move towards' kind of way. We call this the social engagement system and it includes calling a friend for support, talking something through, sending out a kind look or a text with a simple emoticon or words of connection.

And today we're going to expand the definition of social engagement to include conscious positive engagement with yourself and the natural world around you. This could include going for a walk, doing some stretches, having a shower, even listening to some favourite music.

It might be that you started a social engagement response feeling in fight, flight or freeze mode, but after taking the action you settled. So write down any conscious, moving towards the positive responses you were able to make today, after experiencing stress. Note down how your body, your breathing, your muscle tone, your heart rate, your posture and just the general sense of how you felt in your body changed as you did this.

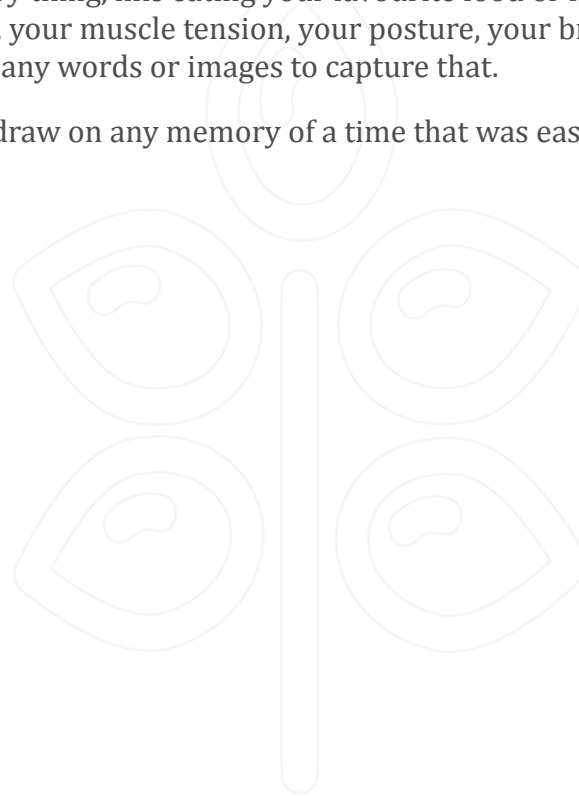


PART B. SOOTHING

Describe today's best moment. This could be a very relative thing if life is tough right now.

Think about any moments where you felt in the flow, doing your thing. Or where you had a sense of connection with people or the natural world around you or a creative process or experience you are drawn to or a sensory thing, like eating your favourite food or moving your body. As you recall that moment, think about how it felt in your body, what changed with your heart rate, your muscle tension, your posture, your breathing, even if just for a moment, in a very relative way. Think about the feeling tone inside you and see if there are any words or images to capture that.

If today has been a particularly tough day, then feel free to draw on any memory of a time that was easier.



More help and information

For more information on getting to know your nervous system intimately and working with it for better health, wellbeing and relationships:

- contact Deborah to book a session on Skype or in person on the Gold Coast
- your friends might like to **sign up here** for their own copy of Zone of Presence and ongoing updates



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www.djpsych.com.au

About Deborah Jackson

I'm a Registered Psychologist with a special interest in integrative approaches to healing trauma and attachment-system related problems.

I had a first half of life corporate career. I worked with organisations to uncover and express their unique value through integrative practice - working with brand, marketing, business process, structure, leadership and cultural change. I was always about getting to the essence of things and connecting things up – people, opportunities, ideas and resources.

Over time, the call of the soul saw me wanting to work one-on-one with people in ways that allowed for 'going deep', for touching into the authentic self and for healing what may be inhibiting the ability to express, create and connect as authentic self in the world.

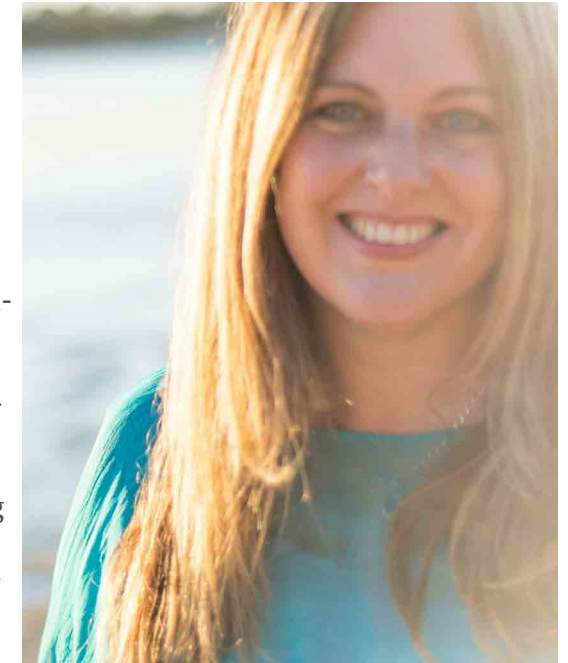
My professional journey has been intimately woven together with my personal life challenges, openings, insights and integration.

I have always been fascinated by consciousness and the nature of things. Life has 'acted on me' as it does all of us, creating difficult situations I've had to find my way through. There's been chronic illness, great aloneness and at times desperate survival struggle. There's also been an ever-expanding capacity to see, feel and experience beauty in the world and plenty of opportunity for adventure and a life richly lived.

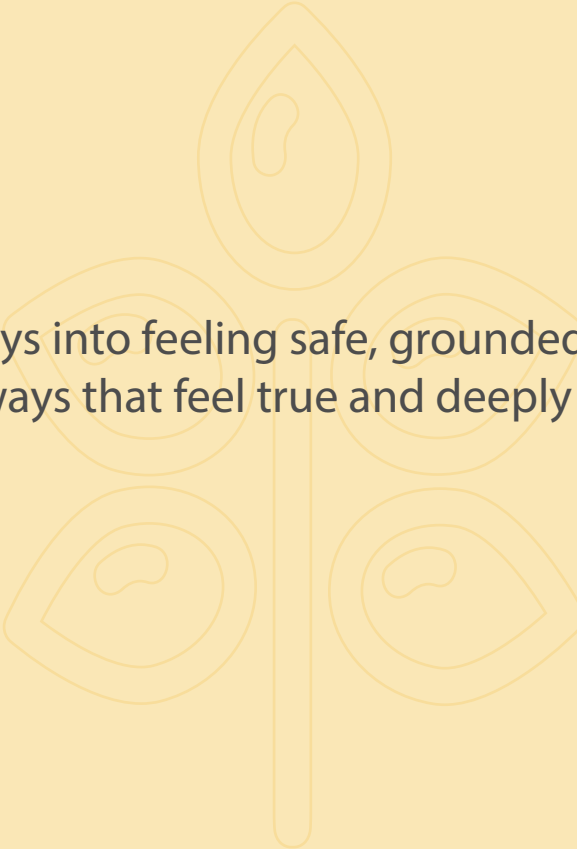
To the extent that I understand trauma and chronic stress and their impact on the nervous system, it's from my personal experience of much of the territory, as well as my keen desire to learn and understand. My exploring took me deeply into meditation and reflective practice, self-inquiry, spiritual life, consciousness, mind-body medicine and experiencing of the deep ecology and connected wholeness of the world we live in. I understand much of the gifts these processes can bring and the pitfalls along the way.

Professionally, I have for some time been absorbed by the field of neuroscience and interpersonal neuro-biology for the understanding it brings about the nature of our essential wholeness and connectedness, as well as the challenges that arise out of rupture to this, on a personal, social and larger environmental level.

My desire is to 'hold space' for you, to bring information and perspective and creative processes to support you to heal the effects of any ruptures in safety and connection in your own life and nervous system and through that to support the emergence, strengthening and capacity of your authentic self in the world.



Deborah Jackson
Registered Psychologist



I'm here to help you find your best ways into feeling safe, grounded and connected and to live, relate and create in ways that feel true and deeply rewarding.