WHOLESOME YOGA THERAPY

Yoga Therapy Guide to Nervous System Regulation

For everyday resilience, chronic stress, pain sensitivity, and emotional balance.

This guide offers a yoga-therapy–informed approach to supporting nervous system regulation in daily life. It is designed for gentle, accessible use and emphasizes safety, choice, and self-awareness rather than performance or force.
The practices and reflections here aim to help individuals:

- Increase awareness of stress responses
- Support parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) tone
- Build capacity for self-regulation and co-regulation
- Respond to stress with greater flexibility rather than reactivity

This guide may be used alongside one-to-one yoga therapy, group classes, or personal self-care routines.

Understanding the Nervous System
The nervous system is constantly gathering information from within the body and from the environment, asking one essential question:
“Am I safe right now?”
Based on this perception of safety or threat, the body shifts between different states:

- Settled / Regulated – calm alertness, ease of breath, digestion, connection
- Activated (Fight or Flight) – tension, rapid thoughts, shallow breathing, urgency
- Shut Down (Freeze / Collapse) – heaviness, numbness, low energy, disconnection

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Nervous system regulation is not about staying calm all the time. It is about moving more smoothly between states and returning to regulation with greater ease.

Key Principles of Nervous System–Informed Yoga Therapy

- Safety first: the body regulates best when it feels safe, supported, and unpressured
- Choice and agency: options are always available; nothing is mandatory
- Small inputs matter: subtle practices can create meaningful shifts
- Bottom-up approach: working with breath, sensation, and movement rather than forcing cognitive control
- Consistency over intensity: gentle repetition is more regulating than effort

Signs of Nervous System Dysregulation

These experiences are common and not a personal failing:

- Difficulty relaxing or falling asleep
- Chronic muscle tension or pain sensitivity
- Feeling constantly “on edge” or overwhelmed
- Emotional reactivity or emotional numbness
- Digestive disturbances
- Fatigue despite rest

Awareness of these signs helps guide practice selection and pacing.

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Foundational Practices for Regulation

1. Orientation (Creating Safety in the Present Moment)
Purpose: To remind the nervous system that the present moment is safe. Practice:

- Gently look around the room
- Name 3–5 neutral or pleasant things you can see
- Notice the support beneath your body (chair, floor, wall)

This practice is especially helpful during anxiety, overwhelm, or dissociation.

2. Breath Awareness (Without Control)
Purpose: To build interoceptive awareness without triggering effort or strain. Practice:

- Place one hand on the chest, one on the belly (or anywhere comfortable)
- Observe the natural breath without changing it
- Notice where the breath feels easiest to sense

If breath awareness feels activating, shift attention to sound or touch instead.

3. Extended Exhale (When Appropriate)
Purpose: To gently support parasympathetic tone. Practice:

- Inhale naturally
- Exhale slowly, as if fogging a mirror
- Pause briefly before the next inhale

Suggested ratio (optional): inhale 4, exhale 6
Stop if dizziness, anxiety, or discomfort arises.

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Gentle Movement for Regulation

Movement can help discharge excess activation and restore a sense of agency. Recommended Qualities:

- Slow
- Rhythmic
- Small range of motion
- Coordinated with breath or sensation

Examples:

- Seated spinal circles
- Cat–cow with reduced range
- Rocking side to side
- Gentle neck movements with pauses

Rest frequently. Regulation improves when movement is followed by stillness.

Rest and Stillness Practices

Rest is an active nervous system skill, not a passive one.

Supported Rest:

- Use props (bolsters, blankets, pillows)
- Choose positions that feel secure rather than stretched
- Options include constructive rest, side-lying, or seated support

Body Scanning (Trauma-Sensitive):

- Move attention only to neutral or pleasant areas
- Skip areas that feel intense or numb
- Allow attention to drift naturally

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Everyday Regulation Tools

Small, frequent inputs throughout the day are more effective than occasional long practices.

- Feeling your feet on the ground before standing
- Pausing for one slow exhale before responding to stress
- Gentle humming, sighing, or shaking
- Stepping outside and breathing fresh air
- Placing a hand on the heart or belly

Habits That May Increase Dysregulation (Without Blame)

- Pushing through exhaustion or pain
- Forcing relaxation techniques
- Excessive screen time without breaks
- Irregular meals or sleep patterns
- Ignoring early signs of stress

Awareness—not judgment—supports change.

Reflective Prompts

- What helps me feel even slightly more settled?
- Where do I notice ease in my body today?
- What signals tell me I am becoming overwhelmed?
- How do I know when I am returning toward balance?

Journaling or quiet reflection can deepen regulation skills over time.

Integrating This Work

Nervous system regulation is a gradual, non-linear process. Celebrate small shifts. They matter. Progress may look like:

- Shorter stress responses
- Faster recovery after activation
- Increased capacity to notice choice