

BEYOND SEPTEMBER GUIDE

How to Regulate Your Nervous System

After a suicide attempt, your body can stay on high alert — racing heart, shallow breath, a stomach that never settles. That's your nervous system doing its job too hard. These practices help signal to your body that you are safe. They take minutes, and they work better with repetition.

Why your body feels this way

The vagus nerve is the main communication line between your brain and body. When it senses threat, your body shifts into fight, flight, or shutdown. Slow breathing, cold water, sound, and grounding all stimulate the vagus nerve and help shift you back toward calm. This is physiology, not willpower.

Six practices that help

- **Long exhales.** Breathe in through your nose for 4 counts, out through your mouth for 6–8. A longer exhale than inhale is the fastest way to tell your body it is safe. Do 5–10 rounds.
- **The physiological sigh.** Two quick inhales through the nose, then one long, slow exhale through the mouth. Repeat 3–5 times when panic spikes.
- **Cold water.** Splash cold water on your face or hold a cold bottle to your cheeks and the sides of your neck. Cold on the face triggers a reflex that slows your heart rate.
- **Humming or slow exhale sounds.** Hum a single note for the length of one breath, a few times. The vibration stimulates the vagus nerve. Singing and gargling work too.
- **5-4-3-2-1 grounding.** Name 5 things you see, 4 you can touch, 3 you hear, 2 you smell, 1 you taste. It pulls attention out of the spiral and into the room.
- **Feet on the floor.** Press your feet down and notice the pressure. Say out loud where you are and that you are safe right now.

Make it a habit, not an emergency tool

These skills work best when your body already knows them. Practice once or twice a day when you're calm — two minutes is enough — so the pathway is familiar when you actually need it.

If calming your body feels impossible right now, or the thoughts are coming back, call or text 988. You don't have to be in crisis to call.

Sources & further reading

- NIMH — Caring for Your Mental Health: nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/caring-for-your-mental-health
- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — Attempt survivors: 988lifeline.org/help-yourself/attempt-survivors

Beyond September is an awareness and education initiative. This guide is general education — it is not medical, mental-health, or crisis care, and it is not a substitute for advice from a qualified professional. If you are struggling right now, call or text **988** or chat at 988lifeline.org. If you are in immediate danger, call 911.