

A Mind of One's Own

(BEING WITH ONESELF)

We all have this ability to converse with ourselves! When we do, we notice that many voices emerge... This is because the human mind is not a unified entity but a dynamic, complex system that is full of contradictions and paradoxes.

We can be many and no one - but we always have a private sense of Self that is our

Centre of Gravity that anchors us.

It is from this 'Centre' of ours that we relate to ourselves ... or rather to our many parts.



Each **part** of ours is holding a particular view of the world, others, and our sense of identity. It also holds a particular story, mood, feelings, fears and longings. There are parts that carry shame, others that fight to be in control, parts that are highly critical, parts that are vulnerable like a child, and parts that ache for peace and rest. None of them is the whole of who we are, and the **key** is to get to know them always remembering that behind the noise they create, there is a steadier place, our centre of gravity. In time what once felt like chaos begins to make sense and what once felt unbearable becomes knowable.

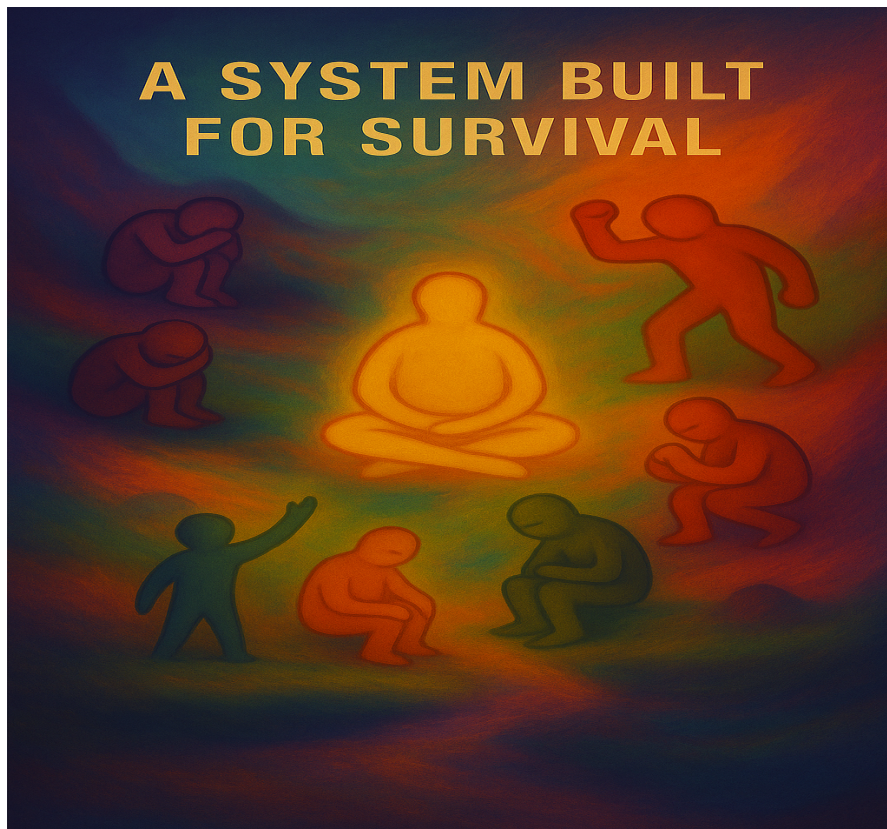
All it takes is openness and curiosity.

Sometimes the feelings and thoughts of these parts are intense and so we do our ultimate best to avoid them, to suppress them, to deny them. We often reject them or even hate them. The irony is that the more we want to 'get rid' of them, or 'fix them', the louder they get and soon they become noise, or what we call 'symptoms'.

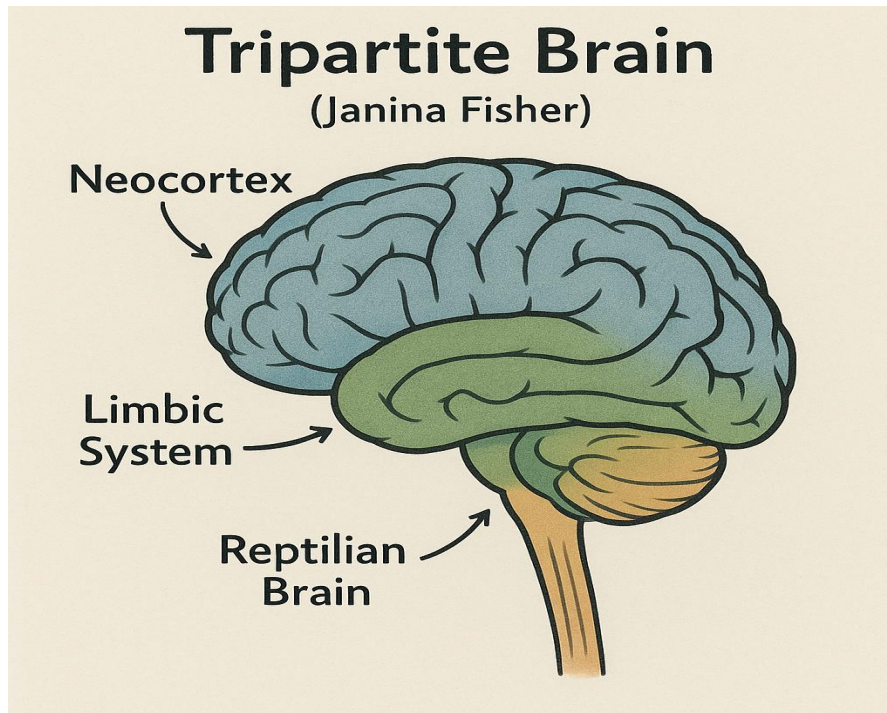
Psychotherapy is not about 'cure' in the traditional sense of the word and mental distress is certainly not an illness - again in the traditional sense of the word. Our sense of unease emerges when feelings have been left unattended for too long or when an event took us by surprise and left us feeling totally overwhelmed and unable to process – let alone understand it.

In therapy we attend to our experience with openness and curiosity so that we begin to safely witness what is experienced as a threat within or outside.

Like any other living being on this planet our system is **built for survival** – how we do this depends on our lived experiences, the situation we are in, and the times we are living in.



THE HUMAN BRAIN

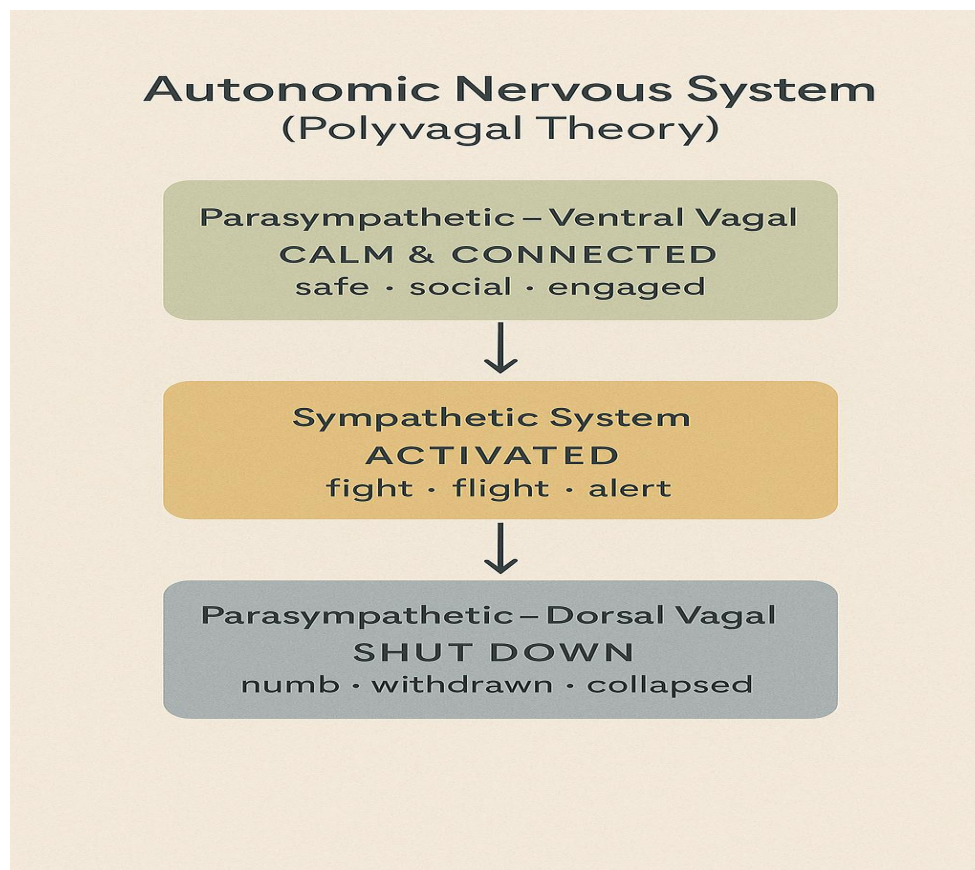


The human brain is an ancient structure layered through evolution, and each part plays a distinct role in how we survive and relate.

- **The reptilian brain** — our most primitive system — governs basic survival functions: breathing, heart rate, body temperature, and threat response: fight, flight, freeze. It doesn't think; it just acts. Under threat, it seizes control, prioritizing safety over reflection at all cost.
- **The limbic system (Right Hemisphere)** — our **emotional brain** — still old but relational in nature. It evolved to help us bond, detect danger, and interpret relational cues. The emotional brain is the 'seat of attachment' constantly scanning for connection or rejection. This is also where emotional or felt memories live. This system reads the world through images, tone, expression, rhythm and energy. There are three main players: i) the amygdala is our alarm bell; ii) the hypothalamus translates emotion into bodily responses; and iii) the hippocampus helps store and retrieve emotional/felt memories. The same system also holds love, joy, play, compassion and empathy.
- **The neocortex (Left Hemisphere)** — our **thinking brain** — is the newest layer. It is the 'seat of consciousness' and is capable of logic, language (story telling), symbolism, cognition, and moral reasoning. It also holds our capacity to understand and resonate with Others. It helps us reflect, plan, and make sense of things (i.e., create meaning). But it is also the most fragile under stress. When the lower brains are activated, the neocortex goes offline; it literally shuts down and goes inactive. That's why when in panic mode, logic/thinking do not help – we literally have no access to these faculties!!!

In those moments, **regulation is the key NOT reasoning**. We need to help the body and limbic system feel safe enough because safety lets the thinking brain return to action. With both hemispheres active all three parts of the brain can once again work together harmoniously.

OUR NERVOUS SYSTEM



The nervous system is the body’s command centre for survival — a fluid, responsive network constantly scanning for safety, danger, or life threat. It is not rational; it is ancient, it is fast, and it is fiercely protective.

- **The parasympathetic system** is our anchor — the body’s natural stabiliser. It is the system that brings us back from a state of activation to a state of balance and groundedness. It is the “calm and digest” state where our pace allows everything to flow naturally. When it leads, the body slows and is in rhythm, muscles loosen, digestion (emotionally and physically) resumes, and the breath deepens. We feel grounded, connected, comfortable in our own skin. We are fully attuned with our centre of gravity (our Self). This system operates through the Vagus Nerve (more later).
- **The sympathetic system** is our accelerator — it is the system that mobilises us for action “fight or flight” response but also excitement, assertiveness, and drive. It is a system that surges with adrenaline and cortisol and so muscles tense, heart rate spikes, and breath shortens. This system is our vitality BUT it becomes problematic when it does not know when to stop! Under these circumstances excitement and vitality become anxiety and threat. This system when left unregulated can **get stuck in overdrive**: body cannot rest, we become hypervigilant, irritable, anxious, unable to slow down or sleep. In those moments the world becomes noise; the body feels wired, and the mind races. The key is again **regulation NOT reasoning** so that it can begin to trust our lead.

THE VAGUS NERVE

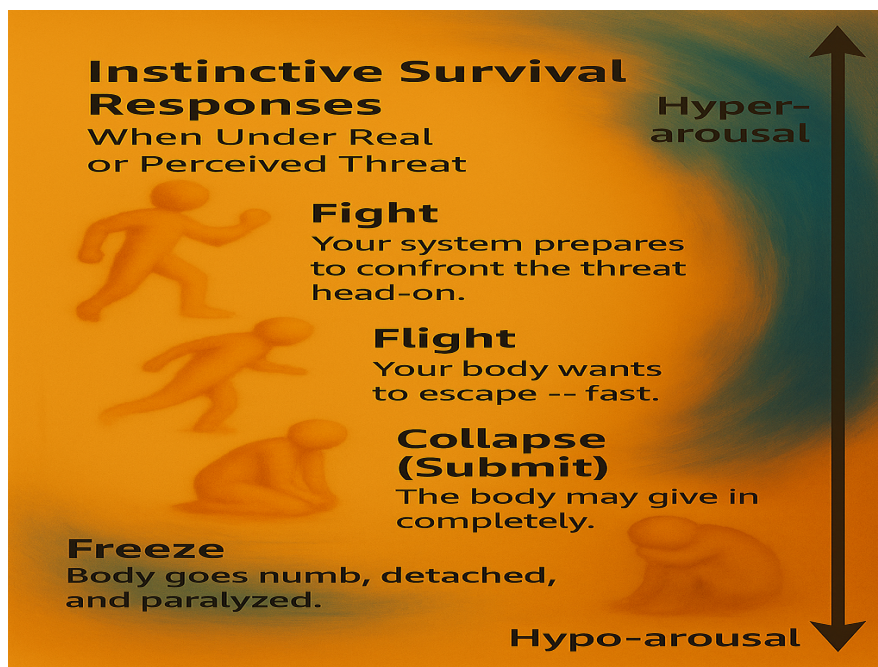
The vagus nerve has two main branches: the **ventral** and the **dorsal**.

The ventral branch can be thought of as our social engagement system. It is a nerve pathway linking the heart, face, voice, and breath. When we are in safe conditions it is active and our heart beats steadily, our eyes soften, our voice warms, our breath is steady and so we can look, listen, and respond from a grounded position.

The situation is very different when the condition ceases to be safe and when fight or flight is not an option. Under these circumstances **the dorsal vagal branch** — the deepest parasympathetic pathway — pulls the emergency brake. The system shuts down: numbness, collapse, disconnection. This is the body's last attempt at safety through disappearance (e.g., fainting or feeling sleepy).

It is not an incident that is traumatic; it is its impact on us that makes it traumatic. Trauma is not about what happened — it's what the nervous system had to do to survive it. Healing begins by helping the body rediscover flexibility: the ability to move between these states, rather than being trapped in one state or the other. **Regulation, not reasoning, is the gateway to safety.**

Our survival responses are built early on in our lives; we instinctively choose the survival tactic that has the greatest chances to work and restore safety. These early tactics are stored in our brain and become our survival template response that kicks in involuntarily. Sometimes in the absence of any imminent threat something or someone in our environment **triggers us**. In that moment - at the speed of light - our survival system gets activated. Moreover, even when the danger has passed – even when it is years later – the body remembers and so our nervous system never gets the chance to rest. We remain alert or docile. This is not a fault in the system but the product of the shutdown of our thinking brain. This shutdown is equally not a 'glitch' but absolutely necessary because the fact of the matter is that when under threat (real or perceived) in order to survive we need immediate survival responses not thoughts and reflections! Only when we are safe we can start processing the unfathomable.

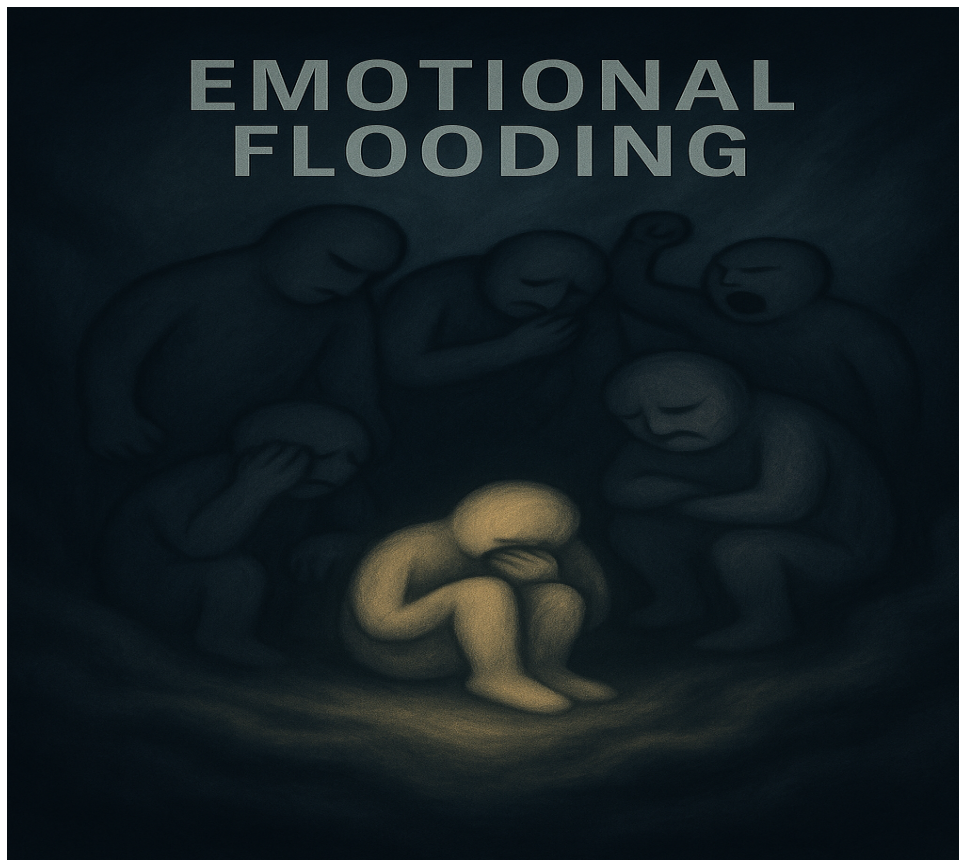


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EMOTIONAL FLOODING or WHEN OUR PARTS TAKE OVER

Sometimes, a part of us is so loud that it takes over to such an extent that everything else disappears. When this happens, we end up equating our entire being with it. This state is called **blending** – a state that holds no perspective and no groundedness. We are literally emotionally flooded, at the mercy of the part.



What Does Being “Blended” Mean?

Being blended means that a part of us — often a very intense part that is scared, angry, ashamed, exhausted or desperate — has taken over our inner space and has made us lose our Centre of Gravity. We essentially become this part and end up feeling, thinking and behaving the way it wants to. It's when we say **I am desperate** rather than **a part of me** is desperate. This lack of distance is what blending is all about and in this state, we lose our self and ability to **witness** what is going on. We also lose our ability to think - as the thinking brain has 'shut down' - and as a result we panic and end up fleeing the scene, fighting, or withdrawing. We can also go blank, feel paralyzed, dizzy, or shut down altogether. Rationally these responses might look extreme to you (even embarrassing when thought about from a calm state), but from a Nervous System perspective they are absolutely normal because when blended we are overwhelmed and when overwhelmed we are under threat (an internal threat).

Here are some Signs that Show that We Might Be Blended

- Everything feels urgent or unbearable
- We feel small, helpless, or like a failure
- We want to give up, disappear, shut down, lash out, or even hurt ourselves and/or others
- We forget what helps, we lose touch from the present moment and sometimes reality altogether
- There is no room for curiosity and openness. There is only a sense of feeling overwhelmed.

Helping You Un-blend: A Gentle Way Back to Your Centre of Gravity

Pause and Ground Yourself through the Body (How?)

- 1) Take multiple **DEEP BREATHS** making sure that you inhale and exhale SLOWLY (count to 4 when you breath in and again four when you exhale).
- 2) While you are breathing the following will provide further anchoring:

Press your feet gently into the floor

Put a hand on your heart or stomach

Sit up straight as you are breathing noticing your spine elongating

Name five things you can see; four things you can touch (do hold them and notice their texture), three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste (eat something intentionally).

Continue the breathing until you feel your body relaxing – we are all different, so stick to your own pace. All you need to do is **Pause, Breathe, and Notice.**

Silently or aloud, gently acknowledge the activated part of yours. Something like **“I see you. I feel you’re here”**. This in itself is calming for the old brain. Witness this part in your mind’s eye. See it in front of you. What does it look like? *Having an image that matches its quality and intensity is equally very helpful for the old brain.* You don’t have to fix it, push it away, or like it! You only need to be present with it. This act of witnessing and being present is the key because it creates space within you and enables the left brain to get activated again. In essence it restores your ability to reflect and relate to it rather than **BE IT**. Following these steps will allow you to come out of the flooded mode and gradually witness your activated part.

