



Am I Overwhelmed or Dysregulated?

A safe, practical guide to understanding what's happening in your nervous system – and how to respond with care

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When life feels like it's too much

If you've ever found yourself thinking: "Why does everything feel so hard lately? - Why am I not coping the way I think I should be? - Why do small things tip me over the edge?"

This guide is for you.

It's designed to help you understand the difference between everyday overwhelm and nervous system dysregulation — and to offer practical, compassionate ways of responding.

Why listen to me?

I'm an experienced therapeutic coach and trauma-informed practitioner, and I work every day with people who feel overwhelmed, anxious, shut down, or stuck in patterns they don't fully understand.

My work is grounded in nervous system awareness, emotional regulation, and both personal and professional understanding of how stress, trauma, neurodivergence, and chronic strain shape how we experience ourselves and the world.

I've seen again and again that when people understand what's happening in their nervous system, everything softens and change becomes more possible.

This guide brings together that perspective in a way that's accessible, practical, and gentle.

A quick reassurance before we begin

This guide is **not a diagnostic tool** and it's not here to tell you what's "wrong".

Many people come to therapy believing they are too much, too sensitive, not coping properly, overreacting, lazy or unmotivated, broken, not enough...

Very often, what's actually happening is nervous system dysregulation — a state that makes everyday life feel harder than it needs to be.

Understanding this can replace self-criticism with compassion, and pressure with more appropriate forms of support.

Overwhelm vs dysregulation: what's the difference?

Overwhelm

Overwhelm usually happens when:

- there is too much to manage
- demands exceed capacity
- sensory input exceeds capacity
- rest and recovery haven't been sufficient

You might feel tired, stretched, mentally overloaded, or emotionally full.

Importantly, when overwhelm eases (through rest, support, or reduced demands), you generally start to feel like yourself again.

Overwhelm vs dysregulation: what's the difference?

Nervous system dysregulation

Dysregulation is less about what's happening now and more about how your nervous system has learned to respond over time.

It can be triggered by:

- prolonged stress
- past trauma
- chronic illness
- ongoing uncertainty
- sensory or emotional overload

When dysregulated, your nervous system may be operating from threat mode, even if there is no immediate danger.

This can make simple things feel disproportionately difficult.

Common signs of nervous system dysregulation

You might recognise dysregulation if you notice several of the following:

- You feel on edge, shut down, tearful, numb, or emotionally flat
- Your body feels tense, restless, heavy, frozen, or disconnected
- You struggle to concentrate or make decisions
- You feel unsafe or unsettled without knowing why
- Small stresses feel huge
- You're exhausted but can't properly rest
- You keep analysing yourself but feel no clearer
- You're being hard on yourself for "not coping better"

You don't need to experience all of these. Even one or two can be significant.

Why dysregulation isn't a personal failure

Your nervous system's primary job is **protection**.

When it perceives threat — whether physical, emotional, relational, or internal — it automatically shifts into survival responses such as:

- fight (irritability, anger, urgency)
- flight (anxiety, overworking, avoidance)
- freeze or shutdown (numbness, fatigue, dissociation)

These responses are **adaptive**, even if they feel uncomfortable or unhelpful now.

Dysregulation means your nervous system is trying to keep you safe — not that you're broken.

A gentle self-check

Instead of asking: "What's wrong with me?"

Try asking: "What might my nervous system be responding to?"

This simple shift can soften the inner environment and create space for support.

What helps when you're dysregulated (and what often doesn't)

What often *doesn't* help

- Pushing yourself harder
- Trying to think your way out of how you feel
- Forcing positivity
- Analysing yourself endlessly
- Comparing yourself to others

These approaches tend to increase pressure, which the nervous system often experiences as further threat.

What *does* help

Supportive responses focus on safety, slowing, and connection. Below are some practical, gentle tools you can experiment with. You don't need to do all of them. Choose one that feels most accessible.

When to consider additional support

If dysregulation feels:

- frequent
- intense
- long-lasting
- or begins to shape how you see yourself

then working with someone who understands nervous systems and trauma can be very supportive.

Support is not a sign that you're failing — it's often how regulation becomes possible again.

Practical tools for nervous system support

1. Reduce demand before increasing coping

Ask yourself: *What can be postponed? What can be simplified? Where can I be a little less demanding of myself today?* Sometimes regulation begins not with adding tools, but with removing pressure.

2. Bring attention to the body

Dysregulation lives in the body, not just the mind. You might try placing a hand on your chest or stomach, pressing your feet gently into the floor, wrapping yourself in a blanket or holding something warm. These sensations can help signal safety.

3. Use orientation

Orientation helps remind the nervous system that you are here and now. Gently notice three things you can see, two things you can hear, one thing you can feel in your body. There's no need to search for calm — noticing is enough.

4. Soften the breath (if accessible)

If breathing feels safe for you, inhale through the nose, exhale slowly through the mouth. Longer exhales can support settling. If breath awareness doesn't feel good, skip this — that's okay.

5. Adjust your inner language

When dysregulated, the nervous system is especially sensitive. You'd likely benefit from a compassionate inner voice, try telling yourself, "This makes sense given what I've been dealing with" or "it's ok, I don't need to fix this right now." Kindness is not indulgence — it's regulating.

How therapy can help with nervous system dysregulation

If you recognise yourself in this guide, therapy can offer a space where you don't have to manage this alone.

Therapy that is nervous-system-informed is not about pushing you to talk more, think harder, or relive painful experiences.

Instead, it can help by:

- Creating safety first – so your system has somewhere to settle rather than stay in threat mode
- Understanding your patterns without judgement, shame, or blame
- Working at your pace rather than forcing change before you're ready
- Building practical regulation skills that fit your real life
- Making sense of your responses in the context of your history, health, and relationships

Over time, this kind of support can help your nervous system learn that it doesn't have to stay on high alert all the time.

You don't need to be in crisis to benefit. Wanting things to feel more manageable is reason enough.

A final reminder

You are not behind. You are not weak. You are responding to your life with the nervous system you have.

With understanding, support, and the right pace, things can feel more manageable again.

You're allowed to take this gently.

You don't need to be in crisis to benefit. Wanting things to feel more manageable and comfortable is reason enough.



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