

# Nervous System Guide

*For those feeling stretched, fatigued or in need of a gentler way to work*

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# Introduction

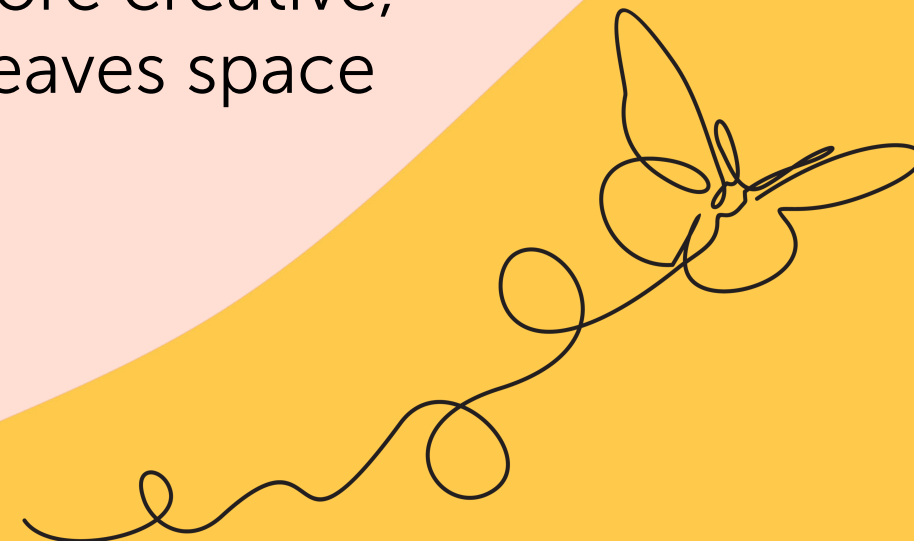
Your nervous system is at the heart of how you work, create and recover.

It quietly shapes your energy, focus and sense of safety long before you make a to-do list or open your laptop. When it's supported, work can feel grounded, creative and sustainable. When it's strained, even the smallest tasks can feel overwhelming.

I'm not an expert in neuroscience. But I have been using my research to transform how I work amid chronic (and disruptive) illness. This guide gathers what I've learned about the nervous system, with ideas for how this awareness can shape the way you approach your business.

If you are reemerging or reinventing, having this information can help you build a more creative, intuitive and sustainable business. One that honours your energy and capacity and leaves space for regulation.

Let's begin by gently exploring the anatomy of the nervous system.



# The Structure of the Nervous System

Your autonomic nervous system is always running in the background. It regulates the processes that keep you alive (breathing, heart rate, digestion, stress response) without your conscious control.

It also constantly scans for cues of safety and danger in a process called neuroception\*. This happens below the level of thought, based on signals from your body, environment and past experiences.

Before you've read an email, joined a call or even sat down at your desk, your nervous system has already decided:

*Am I safe? Can I act? Do I need to shut down?*

Your autonomic nervous system has two main branches, each playing a crucial role in how you show up at work. Let's take a look at those.



# The Structure of the Nervous System

## 1. Sympathetic Nervous System (Mobilise for Action)

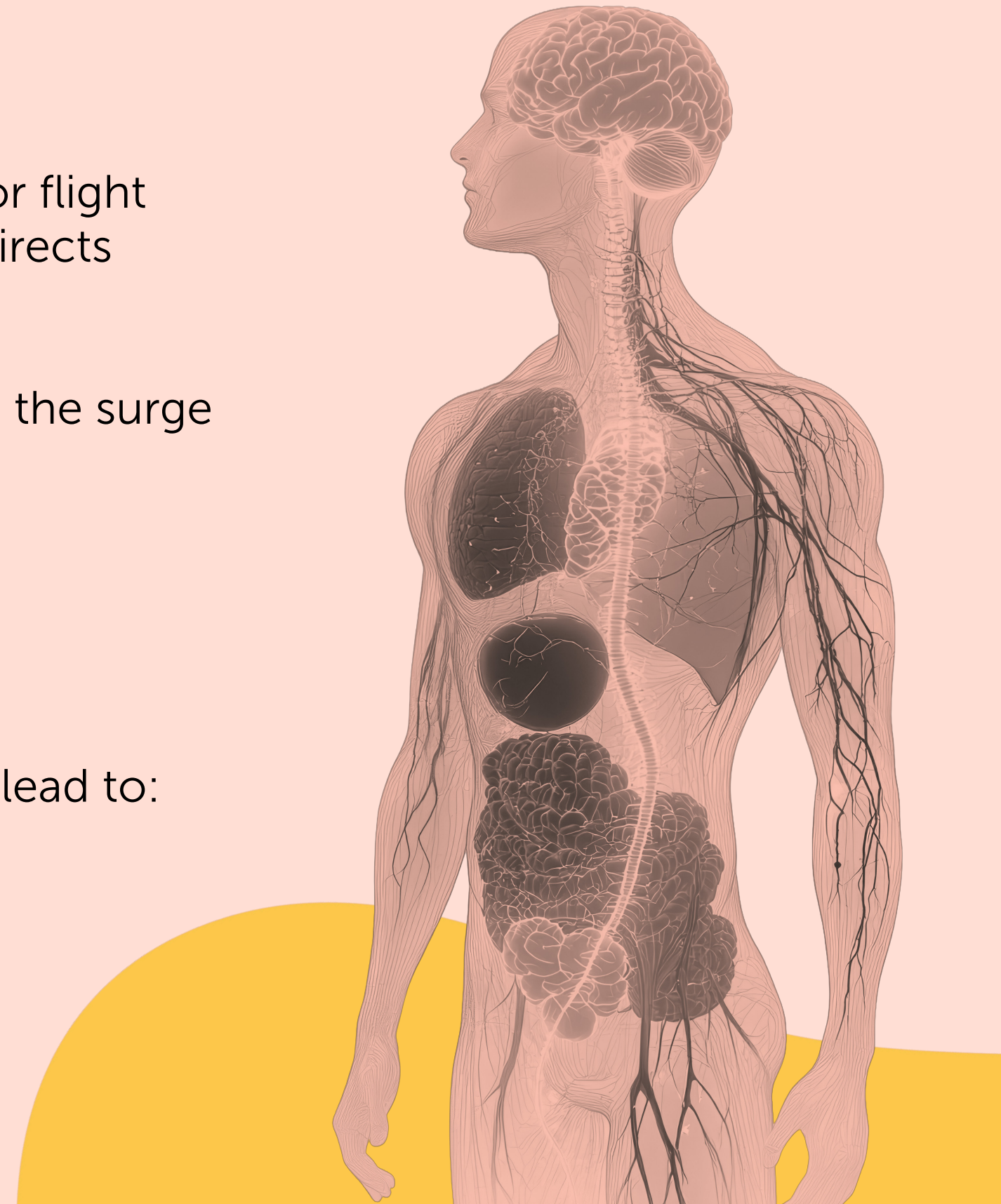
The sympathetic system prepares you to act (sometimes called the fight or flight response). It raises heart rate, quickens breathing, tenses muscles and redirects energy away from long-term processes like digestion.

Short-term, this helps you focus and perform under pressure. At work, it's the surge that allows you to:

- Step into a meeting alert and prepared
- Meet a tight deadline
- Respond to a live question or opportunity

But long-term sympathetic activation is costly. Staying "switched on" can lead to:

- Hypervigilance: checking messages and notifications compulsively
- Irritability, reactivity or mental overload
- Trouble switching off at the end of the day
- Poor sleep and eventual burnout



# The Structure of the Nervous System



## 2. Parasympathetic Nervous System (Regulate and Recover)

The parasympathetic system slows the body down, returning you to a state of recovery and repair. It has two distinct pathways:

### Ventral Vagal Pathway

- Myelinated fibres (wrapped in a protective coating that helps signals travel quickly and clearly) connect the brainstem to the heart, lungs and face
- Supports calm focus, safety, curiosity and social engagement (sometimes called the “social engagement system”)
- Acts like a vagal brake, slowing the system down after stress

At work, ventral vagal activation might feel like:

- Steady focus and creativity during a planning session
- Open collaboration without defensiveness
- Confidence to set boundaries without shutdown

### Dorsal Vagal Pathway

- Unmyelinated fibres (without the protective coating, so signals travel more slowly and less precisely) connect the brainstem to the gut
- Acts as an emergency stop when a threat feels overwhelming or prolonged
- Can trigger collapse, fatigue, numbness or disconnection (known as the freeze response)

At work, dorsal activation might feel like:

- Struggling to start or finish tasks
- Procrastination paired with guilt or flatness
- Avoiding calls, emails or messages
- Feeling cut off from your work or colleagues

# The Three Core States

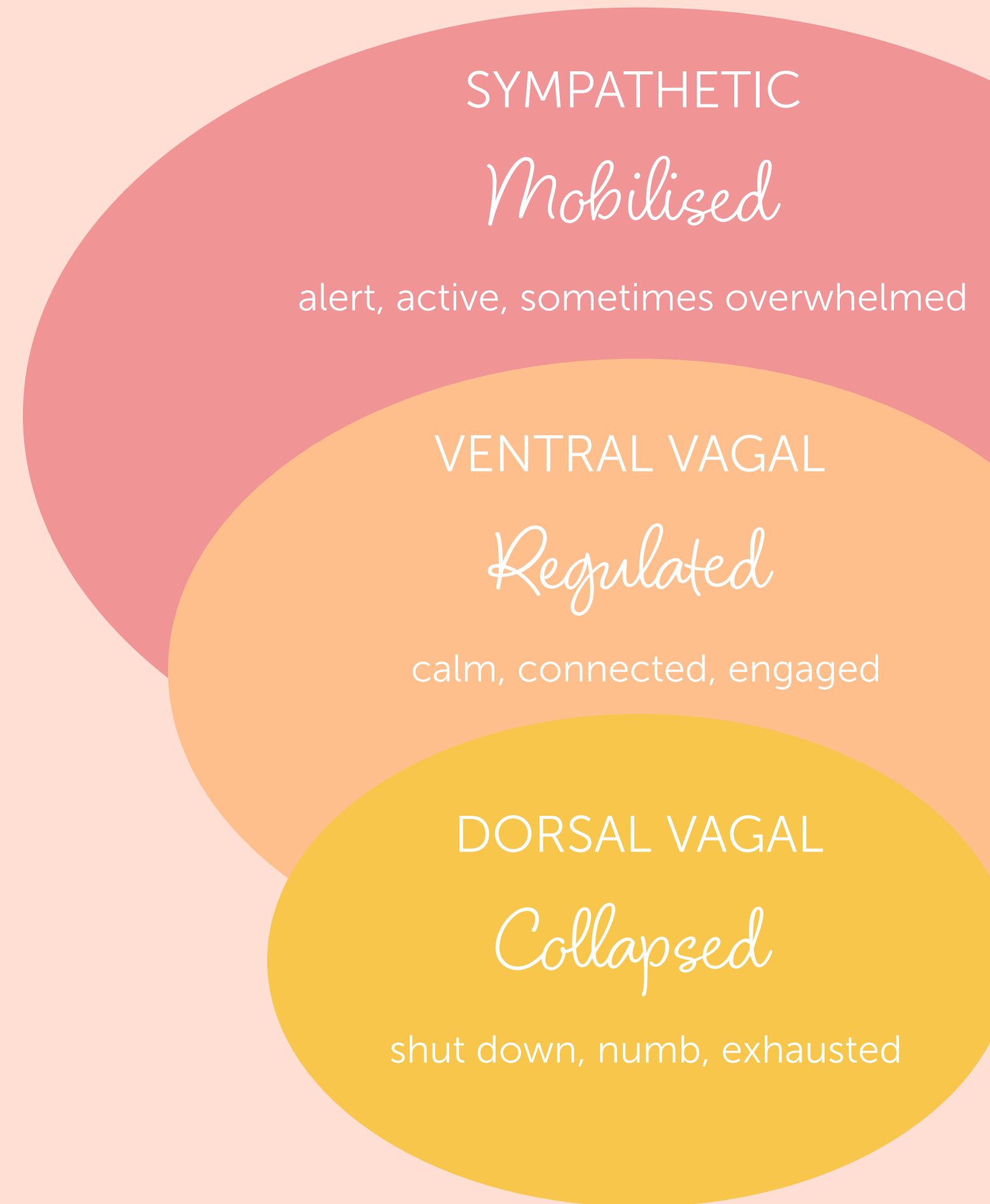
Your nervous system moves between the three states all the time:

- Mobilised (Sympathetic)
- Regulated (Ventral Vagal)
- Collapsed (Dorsal Vagal)

All of these states are part of a healthy, responsive nervous system. Each one has a purpose. Mobilisation gives us energy to act. Shutdown protects us when the system feels overwhelmed. Regulation allows us to rest, connect and recover.

Problems start when we get stuck in one state for too long or when our system moves outside its natural balance. This is called dysregulation.

You can't control these shifts with logic, but you can notice them and create conditions that help your system recover more easily.

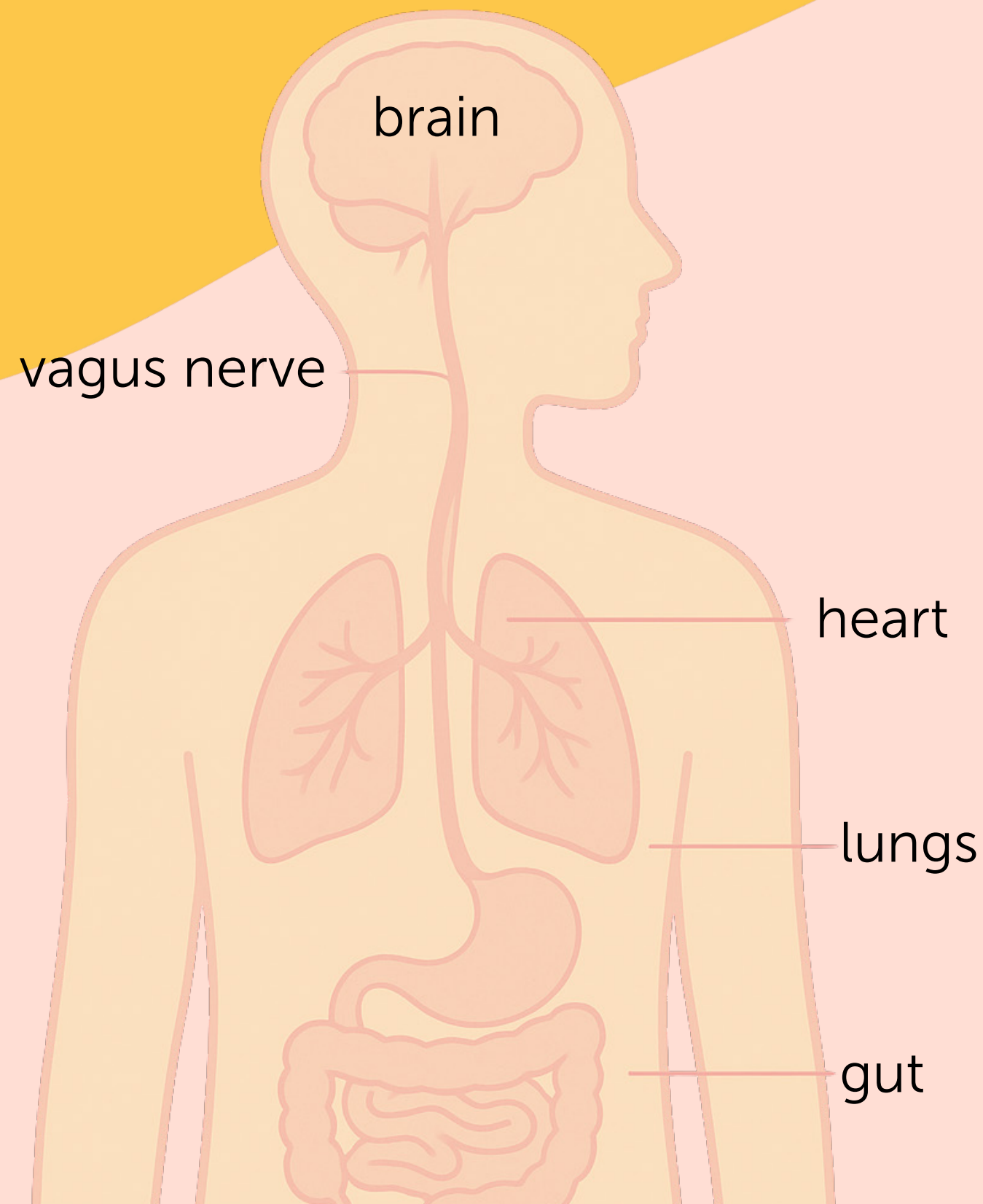


# Dysregulation

All three states (mobilised, collapsed, regulated) are natural and necessary. When the system can't move between them with ease, it can get stuck. This table shows common signs of dysregulation at work.

| Regulated                     | Dysregulated                                    |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Clear thinking                | Scattered, overthinking                         |
| Creative ideas flow easily    | Creativity feels blocked or frantic             |
| Confident decision-making     | Hesitation, second-guessing or impulsive action |
| Steady energy                 | Wired and restless, or flat and unmotivated     |
| Balanced workload             | Overworking, procrastinating or avoiding        |
| Comfortable visibility        | Avoiding visibility or overperforming           |
| Engaged communication         | Defensive, withdrawn or people-pleasing         |
| Can pause and recover quickly | Struggle to switch off, slow to recover         |

# The Vagus Nerve & Vagal Tone



The vagus nerve is the longest cranial nerve in the body. It connects the brain to the heart, lungs, gut and other organs. Around 80–90% of its fibres carry information from the body to the brain meaning your nervous system's state is shaped more by body signals than by thoughts.

The vagus nerve helps shift the body between activation and recovery (like a biological dimmer switch!) When it's healthy, you can respond to challenges and then return to a steadier, more regulated state.

# Vagal Tone

## *Your “Bounce Back” Ability*

Vagal tone is a measure of how well your vagus nerve helps you recover from stress.

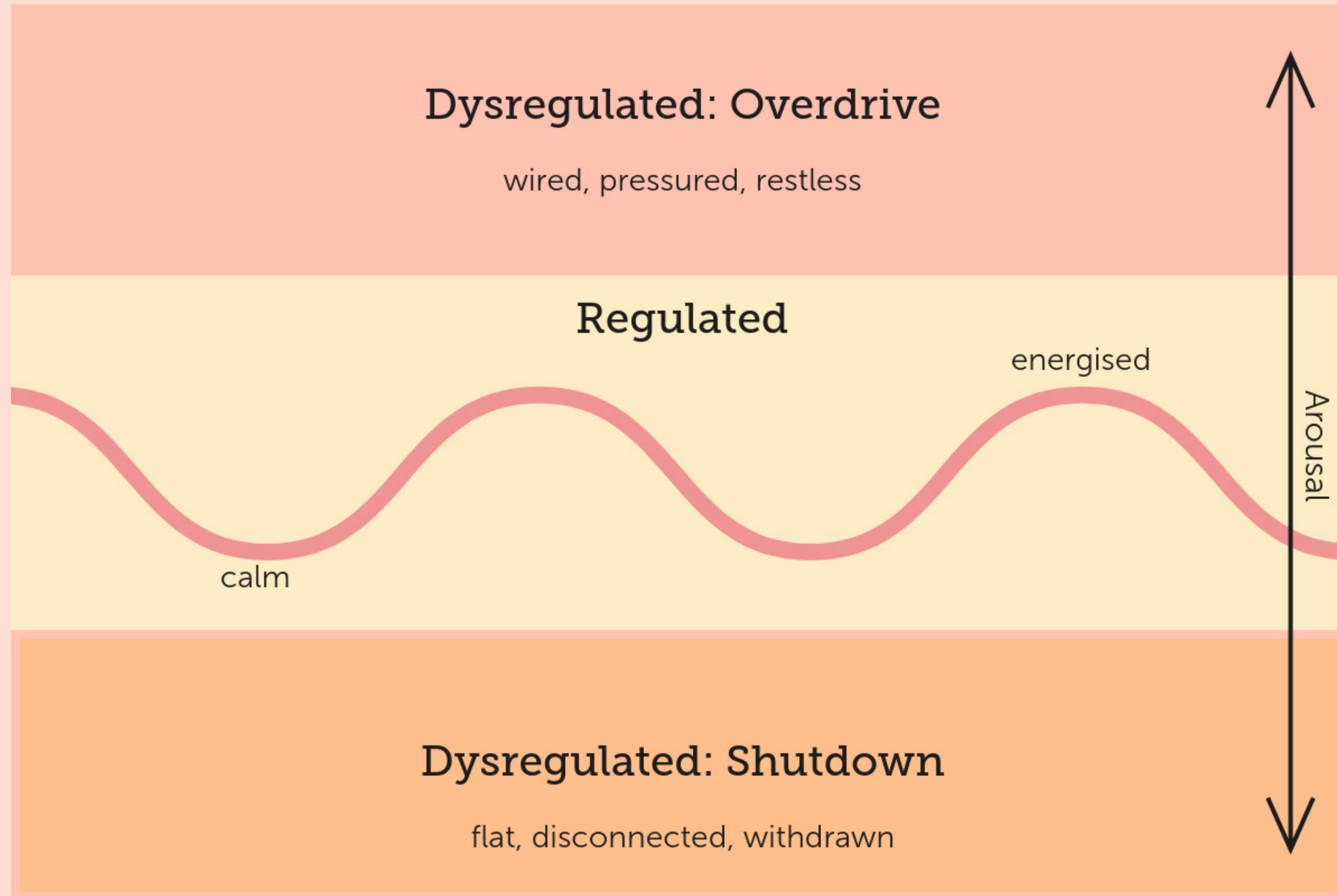
- High vagal tone - the system can flex, respond and return to balance
- Low vagal tone - recovery takes longer, and you might stay stuck in one state

A healthy nervous system isn't always calm. Rather it's responsive. It can gear up when needed and settle back down when safe.

One way researchers measure vagal tone is through Heart Rate Variability (HRV) - the variation in time between heartbeats. Higher HRV is linked with better flexibility and resilience in the nervous system. This can be a helpful signal when exploring your recovery or regulation over time.



# The Window of Tolerance



The Window of Tolerance (Dr Dan Siegel) describes the range where your nervous system can respond flexibly to challenges without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down.

Your vagal tone shapes how wide or narrow this window feels. A responsive vagal tone can help you spend more time inside the window and return there more easily after stress.

Inside this window, you can think clearly, make decisions, create and respond to what's happening around you. You can still experience stress, but it doesn't tip you into crisis or collapse.

# The Window of Tolerance

## Above the Window – Hyperarousal (Overactivation)

- Anxiety, irritability or frustration
- Feeling “always on” and unable to switch off
- Racing thoughts, scattered focus, restlessness

**At work:** This might look like responding to every email as if it’s urgent, saying yes to too many requests or pushing through even when you’re exhausted.

## Inside the Window (Regulated)

- Calm, grounded focus
- Able to adapt to changes without feeling overwhelmed
- Creative ideas flow more easily
- Energy feels steady enough to work, rest and recover

**At work:** This might be planning your week with a clear head, creating content with curiosity or ending the day without feeling drained or depleted.

## Below the Window – Hypoarousal (Shutdown)

- Fatigue, numbness, brain fog
- Feeling stuck, withdrawn or disconnected
- Trouble starting or finishing tasks

**At work:** This might look like procrastinating on projects you care about, avoiding calls and meetings or feeling flat even after you’ve met a big goal.

# Why it Matters

A nervous system-friendly business isn't about never leaving your window. It's about:

- Recognising when you're above or below your window
- Creating rhythms, systems and supports to help you return
- Widening your window over time so you can manage more without tipping into stress or shutdown.

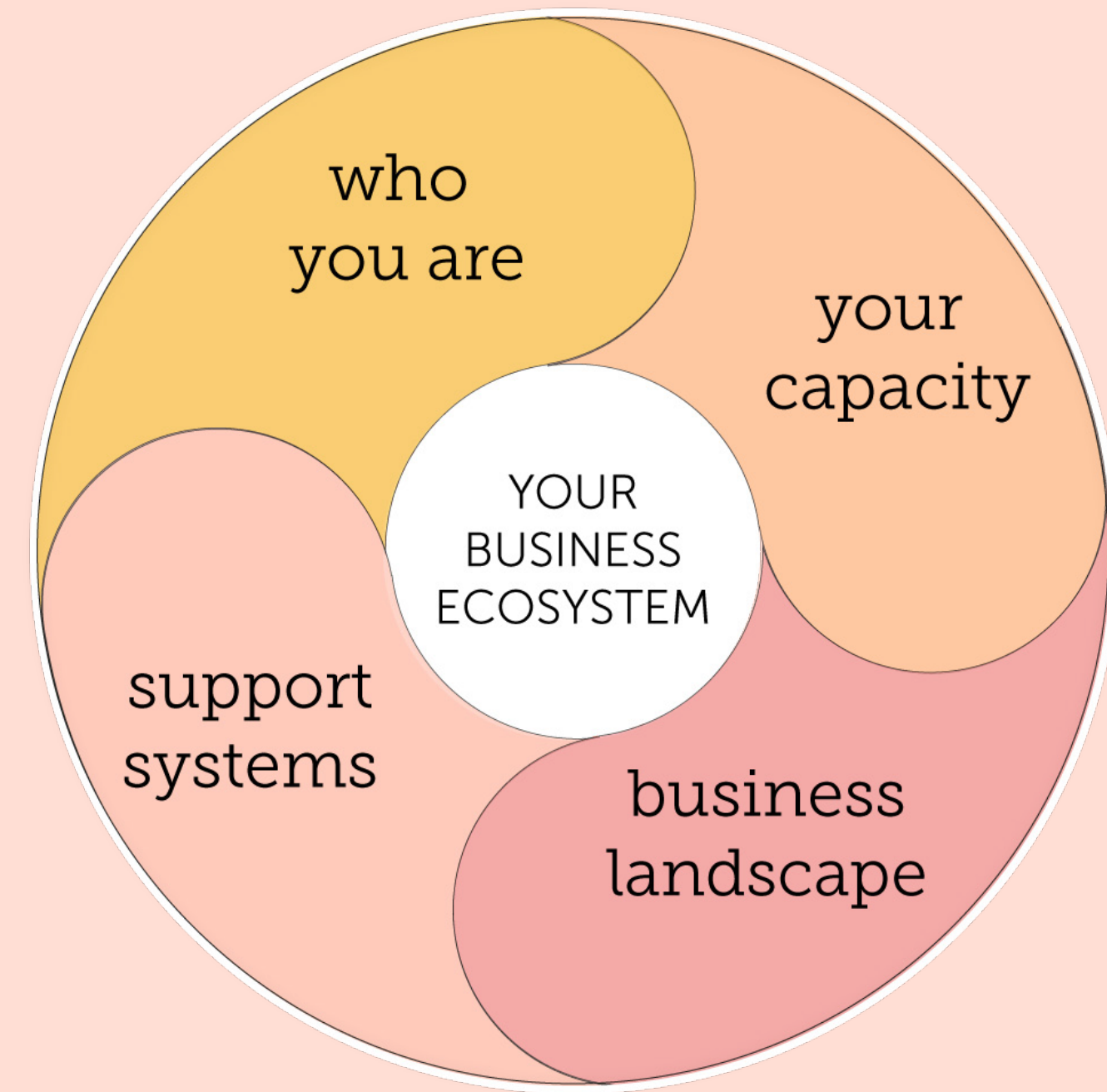
Spending too long in overdrive can deplete the system and lead to burnout. Noticing the early signs helps you make changes before you reach that point.

## The Business Unfolding Model

*A nervous system friendly approach*

We've looked at how the nervous system works, how it moves between states and how it shapes the way we show up in work and life.

Now we can start to see how this awareness translates into a different way of doing business.



# Business Unfolding

The Business Unfolding Model is a nervous system friendly approach to work. It's not a prescriptive set of rules but rather a framework that honours your capacity, energy, creativity and real life.

1

## *Capacity over performance*

Energy, bandwidth and nervous system needs shift all the time. A business that adapts to those changes will support you far longer than one built on constant output. You do not need to give up your health or sense of self to keep working. Energy and capacity naturally rise and fall, and your business can work with those patterns. Sustainable work comes from a model that fits you as you are now.

2

## *Pace of presence*

Your rhythm matters more than external timelines. The shape of your days, weeks and seasons can be guided by what feels right. You do not need to catch up. You set the pace. Choosing stillness or spaciousness can be part of how you move forward in a business that grows with you.



# Business Unfolding

3

## *Creative over productive*

Curiosity and joy deserve space in your work. They bring energy and fresh ideas that lists and schedules can't always deliver. Creative work can be regenerative when there is room for experimentation and play. There is value in creating for its own sake.

4

## *Rest as integral, not earned*

Rest is part of the work. Recovery is not optional or indulgent, it's the foundation of your capacity to keep going. When rest is woven into the rhythm of your business, there is more room for replenishment and renewal.

5

## *Integration over separation*

Your business can hold all of you. Illness, hormone shifts, grief and uncertainty are part of life and shape how you work. You do not need to set parts of yourself aside to be professional. Your lived experience has value and can be included in how you show up.

6

## *Structure with soul*

Systems and tools can support you without constraining you. Choose structures that work with your energy and natural flow. Let them create breathing room and clarity. A business supported by gentle structure has room for both steadiness and flexibility.

# Business Unfolding

7

## *Emergence over effort*

Clarity often comes when there is space to listen and watch what unfolds. Ideas and opportunities can take time to develop. Allowing them to emerge without force creates work that is more manageable and aligned.

8

## *Your business, your ecosystem*

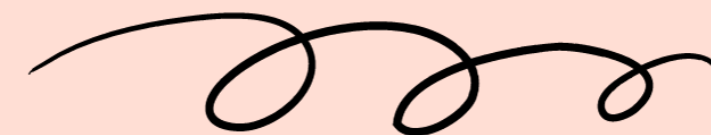
Your business can grow and change alongside you. It can move through cycles of building, exploring and restoring. It doesn't need to be linear. You can choose to embrace uncertainty. Trust that clarity and opportunity will develop in their own time.

9

## *Business as sanctuary*

Your business can be a space where you feel safe to express yourself and do meaningful work. It can also be a place that supports you rather than drains you. When your business feels human and aligned, you can regulate without burning out.

These nine principles are touchstones to return to. They can guide how you shape your work so it feels regulated, sustainable and nourishing.



# Questions for Reflection

1. When does your business feel most supportive to your energy and capacity?
2. What signals tell you it is time to slow down or pause?
3. Where in your work are you moving at someone else's pace?
4. What brings a sense of curiosity or play into your business?
5. How do you recognise when you are most creative?
6. What does rest look like for you in a work context?
7. What parts of your life or experience are you keeping separate from your business?
8. Where could gentle structure bring more clarity or ease?
9. Which areas of your business are asking for more space to emerge naturally?
10. What would make your business feel more like a sanctuary?



# Further Reading

If you'd like to go deeper, these books offer rich perspectives on nervous system health, presence and sustainable ways of living and working

## **Anchored: How to befriend your nervous system using Polyvagal Theory – Deb Dana**

A practical, accessible guide to polyvagal theory with reflections and exercises for everyday life.

## **The Mindful Body – Ellen Langer**

Explores the link between mindset, body and health, with ideas that apply to energy, ageing and daily life.

## **Better in Every Sense – Norman Farb & Zindel Segal**

A rich exploration of sensory experience as a pathway to presence, offering practical insights into how we relate to the world through our body, not just our thoughts.

## **The Way Out – Alan Gordon & Alon Ziv**

A look at pain reprocessing therapy and how the brain can change its patterns in response to stress and chronic pain.

*And of course:*

## **From Pursuit to Presence by Tiffany Kay**

A gentle invitation to step away from constant striving and reconnect with a way of living that honours presence, alignment and self worth.



# About me

Over the past 20 years, I've built consultancies, coached clients, designed courses, created products and even written a couple of books. My path has been anything but linear, moving from personal development to digital design, from creative entrepreneurship to coaching.

But each time I tried to make traditional business models work, I found myself overwhelmed, overextended and ultimately burnt out. The push through mentality was exhausting, unsustainable and demanding a kind of consistency and intensity that didn't fit my energy, capacity or differently wired brain.

Eventually, chronic illness, burnout and a series of life changes brought me to a full stop. That's when I began to see things differently. I realised that business doesn't have to be built on constant growth, endless optimisation or external validation. It can be creative, intuitive and deeply personal, shaped around your capacity, rhythms, and values.

That's where **Business Unfolding** began. Not as a plan, but as a lived inquiry to discover a different way of working. Now, I support others in moving away from outdated, one-size-fits-all models and into a way of working that feels aligned, sustainable and deeply fulfilling.

**Find out more at [tiffanykay.com](https://tiffanykay.com)**



**tiffany kay**

