Your nervous system *in pregnancy & motherhood*

Why you may feel on high alert, overwhelmed or "touched out", and gentle ways to help your body feel safer.

MOTHER GROUND
YOUR VILLAGE

Your nervous system is your body's alarm and safety system. During pregnancy and early motherhood it goes through enormous change. Hormones shift, sleep is broken, your body is healing, and your brain becomes finely tuned to your baby's needs. It makes sense that you may feel more alert, more emotional, and sometimes overwhelmed.

Research shows pregnancy reshapes the brain, with changes in areas linked to understanding others that can still be seen years later. Your heightened sensitivity is part of how your body prepares to care for a baby. **It isn't a sign that you're not coping.**

Accelerator
SYMPATHETIC

heart speeds up
breathing quickens
muscles tense
digestion slows
alert, ready to act

fight or flight

Brake
PARASYMPATHETIC

heart slows
breathing deepens
muscles soften
digestion restarts
rest, repair, connect

rest and digest

The accelerator and the brake

The **autonomic nervous system** works automatically. Its **sympathetic** branch is like an accelerator, preparing us for action. Its **parasympathetic** branch is like a brake, helping us rest, digest and recover.

With a new baby, the accelerator can be pressed many times a day and night, with little chance to brake.

In motherhood, this can feel like...

BODY
- Heart racing at baby's cry
- Tight jaw, shoulders
- Exhaustion from broken sleep
- Feeling "touched out"

EMOTIONS
- Rage that surprises you
- Tearfulness
- Anxiety, dread
- Feeling numb or far away

MIND
- Listening for every sound
- "What if" thoughts
- Brain fog
- Unwanted scary thoughts

BEHAVIOUR
- Can't switch off, even when baby sleeps
- Snapping, then guilt
- Avoiding going out
- Checking repeatedly

THREE STATES

The nervous system *ladder*



Psychiatrist **Stephen Porges** developed **polyvagal theory**, and therapist **Deb Dana** turned it into a simple picture: a ladder we move up and down through the day. Parts of the theory are still debated by scientists, but many people find the ladder a helpful way to describe their experience.

Our nervous system is always checking for safety and danger. Porges called this **neuroception**: detection without awareness.

With a newborn, you might move up and down the ladder many times an hour. That's normal.

Fight, flight, freeze and fawn

RESPONSE	WHAT IT DOES	IN MOTHERHOOD IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE
Fight	Pushing against the threat	Snapping at your partner or older children, rage
Flight	Escaping the threat	Wanting to run out of the house, constant busyness
Freeze	Staying very still	Zoning out, scrolling, feeling stuck on the sofa
Fawn	Keeping others happy	Saying yes to every visitor, hiding how you feel

Your baby borrows your nervous system

Babies can't calm themselves yet. They settle by **co-regulating** with a caregiver: your heartbeat, voice, rocking and touch help their nervous system find safety. This is why a crying baby can set off your own alarm, and why **calming yourself first**, even for a breath or two, can help you both.

UNWANTED, SCARY THOUGHTS ARE COMMON

Many new parents have sudden, upsetting thoughts about something bad happening to their baby. These are a sign of an alert, protective nervous system, not a sign that you would act on them. If they are frequent or very distressing, please speak to your GP or health visitor. You will not be judged.

YOUR REGULATION TOOLKIT

Helping your body *feel safe*

IF YOU'RE REVVED UP (FIGHT OR FLIGHT)

Help your body slow down

- Long, slow out-breaths while you feed or rock
- Hum or sing to your baby (it calms you both)
- Sway, rock or walk with the pram
- Cold water on your wrists
- Put baby down safely and step away for a minute
- Hand on heart, "I'm doing my best"

IF YOU'RE SHUT DOWN (NUMB, FLAT)

Gently wake your body up

- Get outside, even to the doorstep
- A warm drink, a strong scent
- Music while you change nappies
- Message a friend or another mum
- Gentle stretches on the floor with baby
- Change room, open the curtains

Glimmers

Deb Dana calls small moments of safety and joy **glimmers**, the opposite of triggers. A sleepy smile, sunlight, a kind text.

My glimmers this week: .....

.....

My ladder

	WHAT IT FEELS LIKE FOR ME	WHAT HELPS ME
Safe and connected		
Fight or flight		
Shut down		

Recommended reading



Mother Brain
Chelsea Conaboy (2022)
The science of how parenthood changes the brain.



Anchored
Deb Dana (2021)
A practical guide to befriending your nervous system.



Matrescence
Lucy Jones (2023)
How motherhood transforms body, mind and identity.



Good Inside
Dr Becky Kennedy (2022)
Parenting with connection, including managing your own big feelings.

Looking after you

If you feel constantly on edge, have frequent scary thoughts or flashbacks of the birth, or feel low for over two weeks, speak to your GP, midwife or health visitor. Samaritans: **116 123** (free, 24 hours). NHS 111, mental health option. In an emergency, call **999**.

This information sheet offers general support and is **not intended to replace therapy, or medical or professional advice, diagnosis or treatment.** Draws on Porges' polyvagal theory and Deb Dana's ladder and glimmers; Hoekzema et al. (2017). © Velvet Couch Therapy. For personal use only.