

Nervous System Tools for Therapy Sessions



(A Therapist's Cheat Sheet for When Insight Isn't Cutting It)

Focus: nervous system regulation in therapy

So... What Are We Actually Doing Here?

This is not about turning your session into a breathwork retreat or suddenly becoming a somatic specialist overnight.

This is about noticing when a client's nervous system has entered the conversation... and knowing how to respond without overcomplicating it.

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If you've ever thought:

"They get it... so why isn't anything shifting?"

This is where these tools come in.

1. Orienting

AKA: Let's Remind Your Brain You're Not in Immediate Danger

When to Use:

- Anxiety spikes
- Dissociation or fading
- Client feels "not here"

Therapist Prompt:

"Can you take a moment and just look around the room? Maybe name a few things you see that feel neutral or okay."

Why It Works:

Orienting brings the nervous system out of past or future threat and back into present-moment safety.

Keep in Mind:

This is not a test. If they say "I don't know," you're still doing the work.

2. Grounding Through Contact

AKA: Your Body Exists, Let's Use That

When to Use:

- Overwhelm
- Panic
- Client feels unsteady or floaty

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Therapist Prompt:

“Can you notice your feet on the floor... or how your body is supported by the chair right now?”

Why It Works:

Contact with physical support gives the nervous system something stable to anchor to.

Neurodivergent Note:

For some clients, pressure or movement may work better than stillness. Follow their lead.

3. Sensation Tracking (Keep It Light)

AKA: Let's Gently Invite the Body In

When to Use:

- Building awareness
- Client is stuck in cognition
- Early nervous system work

Therapist Prompt:

“As you're talking about that, what do you notice in your body—if anything?”

Why It Works:

This helps rebuild the connection between awareness and physical experience.

Important:

“I don't feel anything” is not failure. It's the starting point.

4. Resourcing

AKA: Find Something That Feels Even Slightly Better

When to Use:

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- Client is overwhelmed
- Stuck in distress
- Needs stabilization

Therapist Prompt:

“Can you think of a moment, even a small one, where things felt just a little more okay?”

Why It Works:

The nervous system needs contrast. It learns safety by experiencing it, not just talking about it.

5. Slowing the Moment

AKA: Interrupt the Spiral Without Making It Weird

When to Use:

- Client is speeding up (flight)
- Emotional intensity is rising quickly

Therapist Prompt:

“Can we slow this down for a second and just notice what’s happening right now?”

Why It Works:

Dysregulation often rides on speed. Slowing creates space for regulation.

6. Gentle Pendulation

AKA: We’re Not Diving Into the Deep End

When to Use:

- Client is touching something difficult
- You want to avoid overwhelm

Therapist Prompt:

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“You’re noticing tension in your chest... is there anywhere in your body that feels even a little more neutral?”

Why It Works:

Moving between discomfort and neutrality builds nervous system flexibility.

7. Naming the Shift

AKA: You See It, So Say It

When to Use:

- Something subtle changes
- Client may not have noticed

Therapist Prompt:

“I just noticed your shoulders dropped a bit—did you feel that?”

Why It Works:

It helps the client track their own nervous system in real time.

8. Tracking State (Without Saying “State”)

AKA: Read the Room Beneath the Words

When to Use:

Always. This is your background skill.

What You’re Watching:

- Pace (fast, slow, stuck)
- Presence (here, drifting, gone)
- Pressure (too much, too little, just enough)

Why It Works:

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Because intervention depends on state—not just content.

What Not to Do (Yet)

Let's keep this grounded, ethical, and not something your supervisor side-eyes.

Do not:

- Push for emotional release
- Try to “unlock” trauma through the body
- Override pacing because you think you're close to a breakthrough
- Use touch without training and consent
- Tell clients to “breathe into it” without support

The Reality:

This work is not about intensity.

It's about **capacity**.

And capacity builds slowly.

A Quick Reality Check (Because This Part Matters)

If this feels like a lot to remember mid-session...

You're not wrong.

So instead of memorizing everything, come back to this:

- 👉 Slow down
- 👉 Notice what's happening
- 👉 Respond to the state, not just the story

That alone will shift your work more than any perfectly worded intervention.

Final Note

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You don't need to do all of this.

You don't need to do it perfectly.

You just need to start noticing when the nervous system enters the room...

...and stay with it long enough that something new can happen.

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