

Navigating Grief: How to Reset Your Nervous System

Grief is like a sailboat navigating the open sea. We face ever-changing conditions—from chaotic storms, to eerie stillness, to moments when we try to move forward but feel stuck, as if something beneath us is holding us back. These shifting seas mirror how our nervous system responds to loss. When we learn to recognize and respond to each state, we can begin to steer through grief with greater steadiness and intention. These tools don't "fix" grief or replace the need to process loss, but they can help you stay afloat when the waves feel too overwhelming to navigate alone.

Fight-or-Flight: The Stormy Sea

- What it feels like: Anxiety, agitation, anger, guilt, self-blame, hypervigilance, panic. The waves are violently crashing against your boat and everything feels out of control.
- What's happening: Your nervous system has activated your sympathetic state—preparing you to fight or flee.
- Try this: Box Breathing
Slow inhale for a count of four, then hold for a count of four. Exhale for a count of four then hold for a count of four. Start with one to two minutes and work your way up to five to ten minutes—whatever it takes for the storm to calm.

Shutdown: Still Waters

- What it feels like: Numbness, depression, despair, fatigue, loneliness, disconnection, isolation, flat affect (mood), withdrawal. Like you're adrift at sea with no wind in your sails—unable to move.
- What's happening: You're in dorsal vagal shutdown, a biological response to overwhelming distress.
- Try this: Double Breathing
Take in two short inhales through your nose and one long exhale through your mouth. Variation: Take in two short inhales through your nose (sniff sniff) then two short exhales through your mouth (ha ha). Repeat for about 30 seconds or so. Note: Stop if you start to feel dizzy.

Freeze: Full Speed Ahead with the Anchor Still Down

- What it feels like: Emotional overwhelm, shame, fear, trapped, stuck, tense. You're trying to move, but something's holding you back.
- What's happening: This is a blended state—part of your nervous system wants to move; the other is shutting down.
- Try this: Gentle Movement
Take a few minutes to gently rock back and forth, sway from side to side, stretch slowly, or engage in small, rhythmic movement such as tapping feet or shaking hands out.