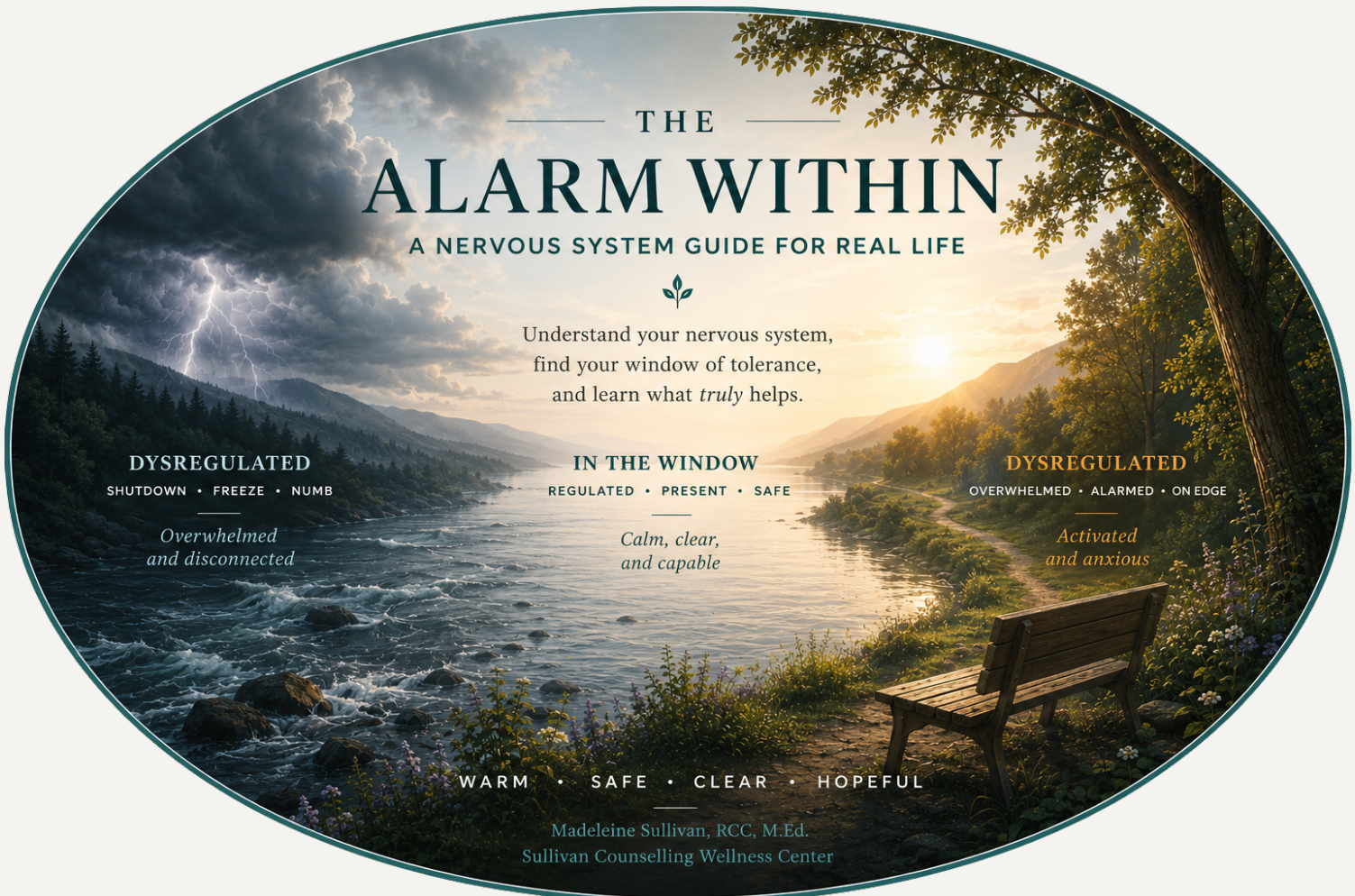




THE ALARM WITHIN

A NERVOUS SYSTEM GUIDE FOR REAL LIFE



Understand your nervous system,
find your window of tolerance,
and learn what *truly* helps.

DYSREGULATED

SHUTDOWN • FREEZE • NUMB

*Overwhelmed
and disconnected*

IN THE WINDOW

REGULATED • PRESENT • SAFE

*Calm, clear,
and capable*

DYSREGULATED

OVERWHELMED • ALARMED • ON EDGE

*Activated
and anxious*

WARM • SAFE • CLEAR • HOPEFUL

Madeleine Sullivan, RCC, M.Ed.
Sullivan Counselling Wellness Center

I know my anxiety inside out. Why can't I heal it?

*For those still living on high alert —
even when life says it's safe to rest.*

Madeleine Sullivan, RCC, M.Ed.

sullivancounselling.com • Registered Clinical Counsellor

This resource is not a substitute for therapy.

You've tried everything you know.

This comes from someplace different.

Something important gets missed — almost every time. The tools don't always fail because you're doing them wrong. They fail because they skip a step.

I have one question for you:

Where is your nervous system living right now?

Not where you want it to be. Not where it used to be. Where it actually is — in your body, right now.

Your nervous system has three states. Each one needs something completely different. When a tool hasn't worked for you — this is usually why.

The diagram on the next page is a map to your nervous system.

This is an invitation to notice — with curiosity, not judgment — what your body is feeling right now. What is true, right now, for you.

Take a quiet breath.

There is no pressure to have this figured out.

Look at what comes next with compassion for yourself.

You have already done the hardest part by choosing to be here.

You only need to notice. The rest follows from there.

Window of Tolerance

BLUE · FREEZE · COLLAPSE · SHUTDOWN

Dorsal Vagal · Life Threat

*"I can't cope. I'm collapsed and shut down.
I've gone somewhere inside and I can't get back."*

You may notice:

- Numbness, flatness, no feelings
- Disconnected - watching from a distance
- Shutdown, unavailable, not present
- Dissociation / freeze response
- Shame, hopelessness, collapse
- Heavy, frozen, cannot move
- Auto-pilot - going through motions
- No display of emotion / flat affect
- Separated from self and feelings
- Depression, trapped, hopeless

AMBER · HIGH ALARM · FIGHT / FLIGHT

Sympathetic · Hyperarousal

*"My nervous system is running on full alarm.
I can't turn it off."*

You may notice:

- Racing heart, shallow breath
- Hypervigilance - scanning for danger
- Anger, panic, overwhelm, outbursts
- Feeling unsafe even when safe
- Chaotic responses, impulsivity
- "I need to run or fight back."

GREEN · WINDOW OF TOLERANCE · SAFE

Ventral Vagal · Regulated

*"I can think and feel at the same time.
My responses fit the situation. I feel present."*

In this state you can:

- Breathe slowly and fully
- Think clearly and feel at once
- Connect with others safely
- Trust yourself and your responses
- Self-soothe and regulate your state
- Feel curious, open, present
- Rest and digest - body feels safe
- Respond - not just react
- "I feel connected to the world."
- Calm, cool, collected, connected

Warm · Safe · Clear · Hopeful

Your Window of Tolerance

*Read each statement slowly. Check anything that feels true in your body — not just your thoughts.
Notice what feels true. This is simply a map of where you are right now.*

Shutdown · Hypoarousal · Dorsal Vagal

- ☐ I feel numb, flat, disconnected — like I'm watching my life from a distance.
- ☐ I'm exhausted, but it's not tiredness — it's more like I've gone somewhere inside.
- ☐ I can't feel much. Emotions seem blocked or far away.
- ☐ I go through the motions but I'm not really there.
- ☐ I feel heavy, frozen, shut down — not anxious exactly, more like collapsed.
- ☐ Sometimes I disappear — even from myself.

High Alarm · Hyperarousal · Sympathetic

- ☐ My heart races or pounds even when nothing is happening.
- ☐ I feel tense, braced — like something bad is about to happen.
- ☐ I scan rooms, conversations, faces — looking for what's wrong.
- ☐ I'm quick to anger or overwhelm — my reactions feel too big for the situation.
- ☐ I can't settle. My mind runs constantly.
- ☐ I feel twitchy, constricted, knotted — my body is always "on."

Glimpses of the Window · Ventral Vagal

- ☐ There are moments — brief ones — when I feel almost okay.
- ☐ Sometimes I can think clearly and feel at the same time.
- ☐ Occasionally something brings me back into my body — nature, music, a person I trust.
- ☐ I know what regulated feels like — I just can't seem to stay there.
- ☐ In certain moments, I feel present, grounded, and safe.
- ☐ There are people or places where my nervous system settles.

Which section resonated most with you?

What Your Pattern Means

If Shutdown resonated most · Hypoarousal · Dorsal Vagal

Your nervous system has moved into protective shutdown.

This is a dorsal vagal state — where the body conserves energy because alarm has been running so long it has simply gone quiet.

It can feel like numbness, flatness, or disconnection. It's one of the most misunderstood anxiety presentations, and it often gets missed entirely.

This is not weakness. It is a survival response — and underneath it, your nervous system is still working hard. The path forward begins with gently, safely, signalling that it's okay to come back.

If High Alarm resonated most · Hyperarousal · Sympathetic

Your nervous system is running a high-alert response.

And it has been doing this for so long that alarm has become your baseline. Your body is not broken — it learned, very effectively, to keep you safe.

The problem is it hasn't received the signal yet that the threat has passed.

What feels like anxiety, tension, or constant vigilance is your system doing exactly what it was wired to do. The work ahead is not about stopping that response — it's about helping your nervous system learn it's finally safe to lower the guard.

If both sections resonated · Mixed Pattern · Cycling States

Your nervous system is moving between states.

High alarm and shutdown — sometimes rapidly. This is one of the most exhausting patterns to live in, because neither state feels like rest.

You may swing between overwhelm and collapse, between too much and nothing at all.

This cycling is not instability. It is your system trying everything it knows. The window of tolerance is real and it is accessible. You've glimpsed it. The work is learning how to widen it.

Whichever pattern you recognised — you are in the right place.

Understanding is the beginning. What comes next is learning to work with your nervous system differently.

Three Tools For Right Now

01 Havening

When your nervous system is cycling between states - too activated to settle, or too shutdown to engage - slow, deliberate touch to specific sites on your face, arms and hands creates a direct sensory signal to your amygdala that the threat has passed.

When you are ready:

- Close your eyes and take one slow breath.
- Draw your palms slowly down your face from forehead to chin.
- Cross your arms and stroke slowly from shoulders to elbows.
- Breathe in as you stroke down, out as you pause. Repeat three times.
- Notice what shifts - even slightly.

02 The VOOO Breath

The vagus nerve responds to low, resonant sound vibration. A slow VOOO exhale - felt in the chest and belly - engages the parasympathetic system and begins to lower the alarm response. As you breathe this way, your body receives the message that it is safe to settle.

When you are ready:

- Take a slow breath in through your nose.
- As you exhale slowly, open your mouth slightly and make a deep, steady "VOOO" sound.
- Feel the vibration in your chest and throat.
- Breathe in again gently, and repeat the sound on the exhale.
- Continue as long as you feel comfortable.

03 The Butterfly Hug

Bilateral stimulation - alternating left-right input to the body - helps the brain process and integrate what it is holding. Used in EMDR therapy, this simple technique can settle a racing system and bring you back into your body.

When you are ready:

- Cross your arms over your chest, hands resting on your upper arms or shoulders.
- Begin to tap gently - left, right, left, right - in a slow, steady rhythm.
- Breathe slowly as you tap. Let your eyes close if that feels safe.
- Continue to breathe slowly and tap at a steady pace, as long as you need.

You don't need anything except your body.

One moment at a time. One breath at a time. That is enough.

WHAT COMES NEXT

You just identified where your nervous system lives.

Not where you think it should be. Not where you wish it was. Where it actually is, right now. That is rare. And it matters.

What you have tried before worked at the level of your mind. It explained your anxiety and named it. But your nervous system does not speak the language of understanding. It speaks the language of the body. That is where real change starts.

*"Wherever your nervous system is living right now —
that's where we begin. It is not where you stay.
And it does not define who you are."*

The three tools in this guide are part of a set of eleven. They are free, and they are waiting for you online — each one paired with a short visual walkthrough of why it works, a printable step-by-step guide, and a pocket card.

The Anxiety Toolbox

Free · Self-paced

anxietytoolbox.sullivancounseling.com

OPEN THE FREE TOOLBOX →