

When Helping Hurts: Protecting Yourself While Caring for Others

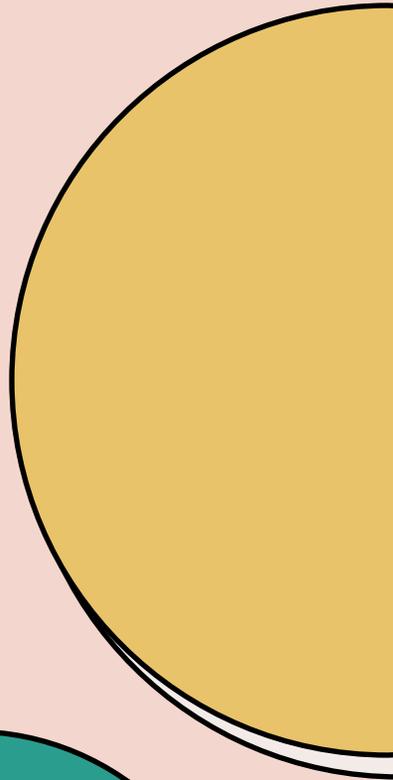
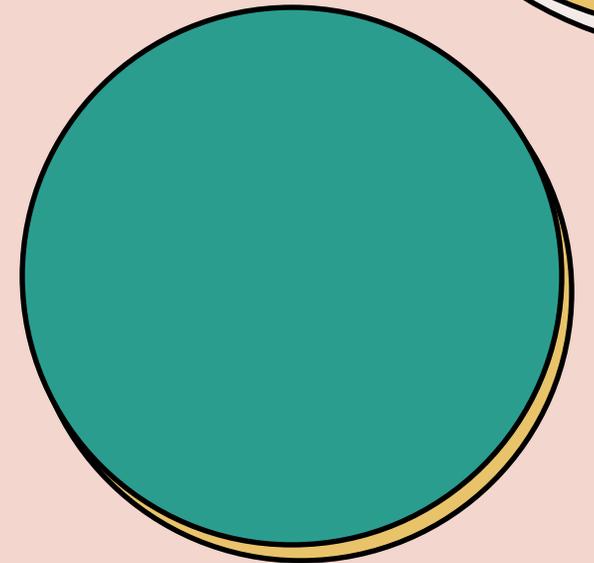
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Agenda

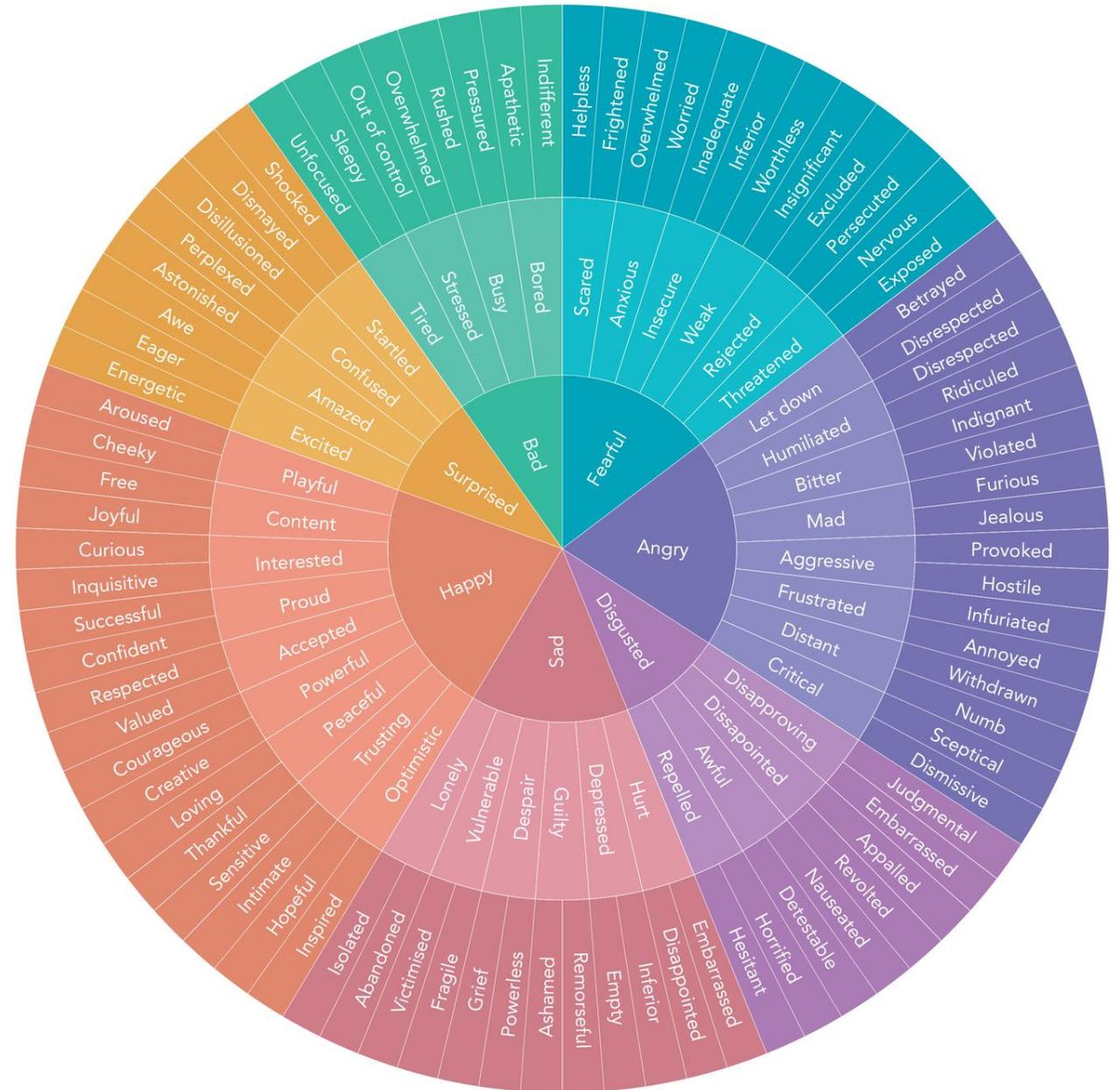
- Check in
- What trauma fatigue is and how it shows up in foster caregiving
- How the nervous system reacts to chronic caregiving stress
- How to *feel better in your body* through simple, proven practices
- How to build resilience without needing a vacation



Check In

What is one word to describe how you're feeling today?

Put it in the chat!



Body Scan

 **Mind:** What's on your mind right now? Are your thoughts racing, focused, foggy?

 **Heart:** What emotions are you carrying? Any tightness, heaviness, or openness?

 **Body:** Where do you feel tension, ease, or sensation? What's your posture like?

 **Breath:** Is your breathing shallow or deep? Fast or slow?

 *Let's take 3 minutes to slow down and notice what's happening within.*

What are we talking about?

- VICARIOUS TRAUMA
 - When someone else's trauma starts to live in your body and mind.
 - e.g., feeling emotionally drained, numb, or detached after engaging with a child regarding their traumatic experience.
- COMPASSION FATIGUE
 - The cost of caring for others who are suffering.
 - e.g., You love your kids, but you notice yourself feeling emotionally numb or distant.
- BURNOUT
 - Chronic stress from caregiving that makes you feel physically, emotionally, and mentally exhausted.
 - e.g., You feel like giving up over "small things" or fantasize about leaving the situation.

Why does it matter?

Foster care is beautiful and hard

You hold complex stories, emotions, and responsibilities

You cannot pour from an empty cup

You matter as much as the children you care for

Poll Time

What percentage of foster parents do you think have experienced some kind of secondary trauma stress?

Put your best guess in the chat!

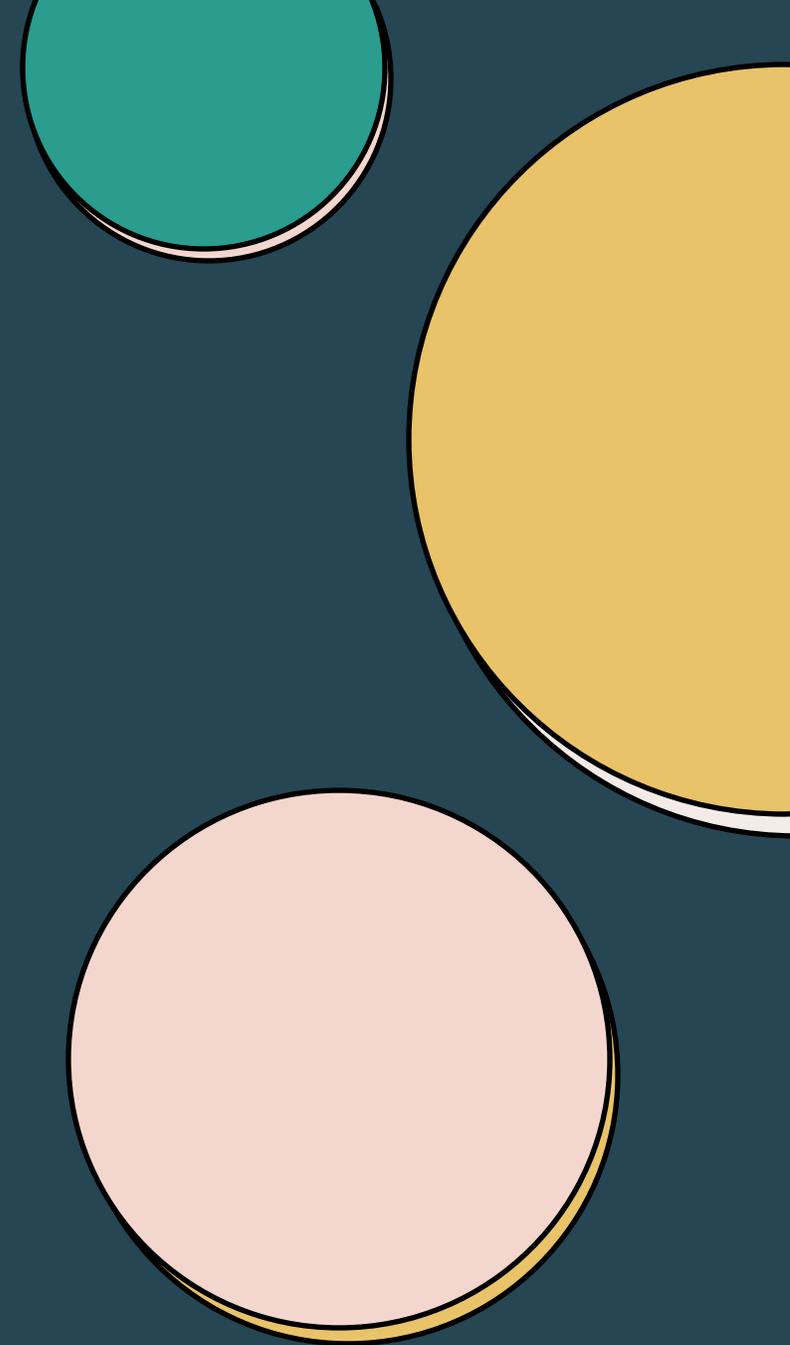
> 80%

"Over 80% of foster parents experienced some level of secondary traumatic stress." (Savani et al., 2025)

Could This Be You?

Which of these have you experienced in the last month?

1. I feel emotionally numb or checked out
2. I'm more irritable than usual
3. I have trouble sleeping
4. I feel guilt for not doing enough
5. I cry more often or feel overwhelmed
6. I think about quitting caregiving



Common Signs of Vicarious Trauma, Compassion Fatigue, and Burnout



You snap at your partner or kids over little things, then feel guilty



You zone out during case meetings or family visits



You feel like you're on edge all the time — even when things are calm



You doubt your ability to keep doing this work



You wake up tired, even after a full night of sleep



You find yourself thinking: "I shouldn't feel this way — I chose this."

What You Are Feeling is Also Happening in Your Body

- These signs of exhaustion, numbness, and overwhelm aren't just "in your head"
- Your nervous system is constantly working to protect you from stress and threat
- Chronic caregiving stress can leave your body stuck in survival mode
- Understanding your body's responses helps you respond with care—not shame
- Let's explore how your nervous system works—and what it needs to feel safe again

Sympathetic: “I need to fix this or run away.”

- This is your **fight-or-flight** response
- You feel anxious, irritable, overwhelmed
- Body is tense, breath is shallow, heart may race
- **Example:** You snap at your partner, over-function, or feel like you're buzzing inside
- **Regulation:** Movement, breathwork, rhythmic activities, reduce stimulation

Dorsal Vagal: “It’s too much. I can’t deal.”

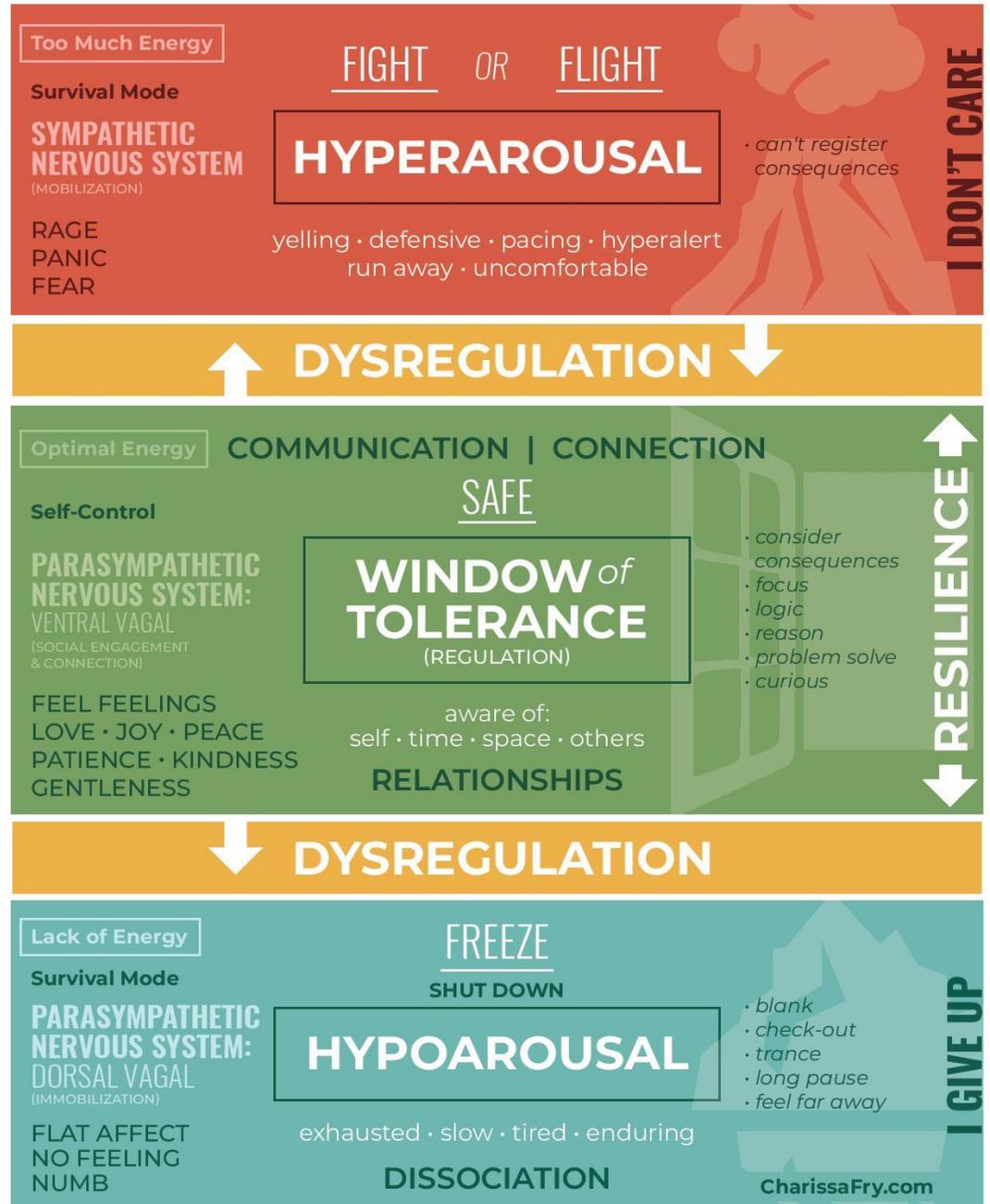
- Freeze or collapse response
- You feel numb, foggy, disconnected
- Body feels heavy; energy is low
- **Example:** You withdraw, avoid responsibilities, or stop caring
- **Regulation:** Gentle sensory input, warmth, light, slow movement, safe connection

Ventral Vagal: “I’m okay. I can handle this.”

- Calm, connected, clear-minded
- You feel grounded and emotionally present
- Able to respond, not just react
- Example:** You stay patient through a meltdown or handle a hard moment with grace
- Support:** Breathwork, routine, joy, social connection, gratitude

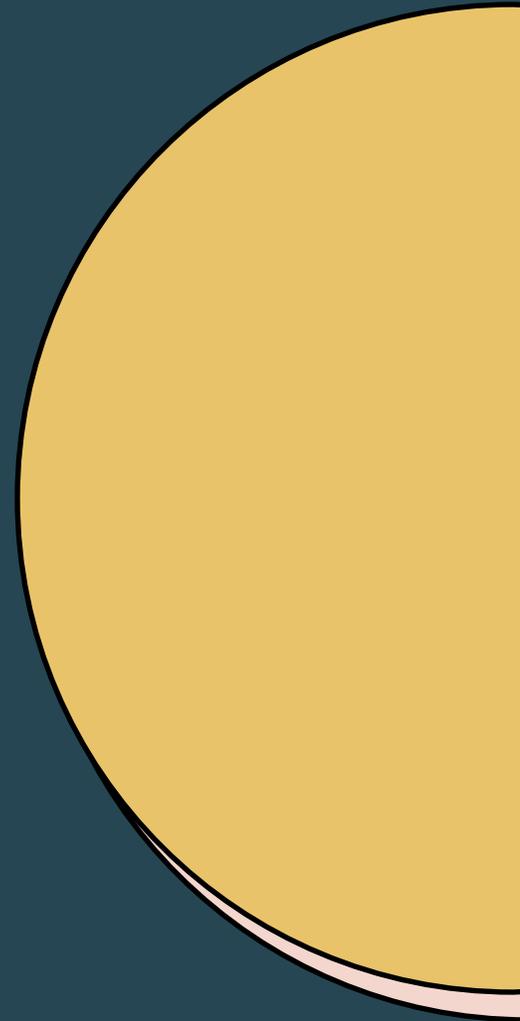
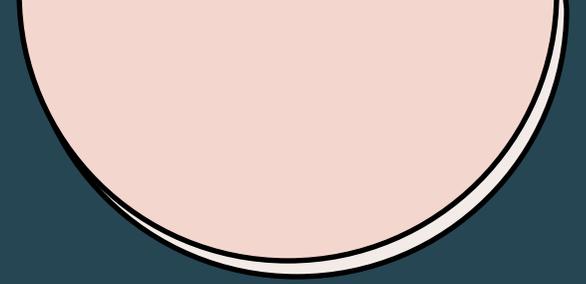
The Nervous System Ladder: Understanding Your States

POLYVAGAL THEORY



Let's Try it Together: Movement and Breath

- Gentle movements to support regulation
- Helps release stuck tension and reconnect with your body
- Try: Shoulder rolls, seated cat-cow, neck stretch, forward fold
- Pair with 4-7-8 breathing
- No right way to do this—just move in a way that feels safe



What Helps: Prevention Strategies That Actually Work

Name and respond to your stress patterns

Protect your energy with boundaries—especially emotional ones

Connect with other caregivers and people who "get it"

Make space for joy, play, and rest

Take breaks *before* you need them

You deserve care, too

What Are You Taking With You?

What's one small thing you're taking from today that you want to remember or try?

Put it in the chat!

Support Beyond This Room

Local caregiver support groups and online communities

Mental health resources: therapy, warm lines, crisis lines

Books: *The Body Keeps the Score, What Happened to You?, Self-Compassion*

Apps: Insight Timer, Breathwrk, Sanvello

Keep practicing.
Keep connecting.
Keep showing up—for you, too.

Q & A

Thank you for being here!