

Mapping Your Nervous System

Complete this month's lead-o-meter.

So, how are you coming along with identifying your triggers and glimmers?

If you are reading ReCharge for the first time and are wondering what we are talking about, see [last week's issue](#).

It is understandable if you have not had the time to log into your [Stress Journal](#), or to capture some moments in your [Glimmers Diary](#). Let's face it: life is hectic and reactive right now. Even just making time in your day to mentally note your triggers and what brought you back to feeling safe and calm is an accomplishment. Perhaps over the holidays, you can take a bit of time to try these exercises which will help you regulate for January's return!

This week's ReCharge will show you how to build on your trigger and glimmer exercises by mapping out your nervous system. This will further expand your knowledge of the *Polyvagal Theory* and how to apply the learning to improve your health!

The Perception of Safety and Danger

The [Polyvagal Theory](#) recognizes that we will have the right response when we find ourselves in both dangerous and safe situations. However, the theory also highlights that we can have the same emotional, physical, cognitive and relational hardships when our perception of danger or safety is actually inaccurate.

We need to learn to approach daily situations with an accurate assessment of both danger and safety. Sometimes, our reality can be challenged by — or confused with — our perception, particularly when we are in danger. This is especially true if we have a history of trauma, or we are already struggling with anxiety and/or depression.¹

Polyvagal mapping will assist us to better understand how life experiences of safety and danger impact us physically, cognitively, emotionally and relationally. By mapping our nervous system, we can create workable solutions for change which will **decrease unhealthy reactivity**.

HOW TO MAP YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM

Recall the different states of the Polyvagal Theory: Rest & Digest, Fight or Flight, or Freeze. Use this [*My Regulation Map* worksheet](#) and follow the three steps below:

STEP 1

Under the Word Association column, think of a word or two that defines each of these states for you. For example, if you are in the **Rest & Digest** state, you may feel happy, content, or joyful. In the **Fight or Flight** state you may feel irritated, worried, or stressed. In the **Freeze** state, you may feel shut down, overwhelmed, hopeless or numb.

By identifying a word that you connect with each of these three states, you will be able to more quickly recognize which state you are in. This enables you to really tune into your body and understand what state your feelings align with. You will then be able to learn and apply the glimmers that return you from where you are, back to the **Rest & Digest** state. ²

STEP 2

Now pull out your Stress Journal and review your triggers. Triggers are cues of danger that bring you either into the **Fight or Flight** state (sympathetic nervous system) or the **Freeze** state (dorsal vagal). Triggers can cause harm when their intensity and/or frequency overwhelm your internal resources, causing you to exert too much energy when trying to resolve the event. This trigger can also take you out of your **Rest & Digest** state (ventral vagal), where we are safe and socially engaged.

On the **My Regulation Map** provided, label which triggers brought you to a **Fight or Flight** state, and which triggers made you shut down or freeze. Use your Word Association list to help you connect the trigger you experienced to the appropriate state.

STEP 3

Now, let's focus on your glimmers. Glimmers are cues of safety that bring you back to your **Rest & Digest** state. Glimmers have the ability of enabling you to safely connect with others in a way that is relaxing, regulating and reduces your need to be in survival mode. Glimmers can come when you are alone or with others. By recognizing these brief moments, you can learn how to return to your safe, **Rest & Digest** state whenever you are triggered in the future.

On the **My Regulation Map**, look at your Glimmer Diary and consider which glimmers helped you regulate and return to your **Rest & Digest** state from your **Fight or Flight** state, and which glimmers brought you back from your **Freeze** state.

To help further complete your map, ponder the following questions and fill in the mapping tool. Reflecting on the glimmers you already identified, think of 3 – 5 ideas for each of the questions below:

1. *What can I do by myself and/or with others to stay in my rest & digest state?*
2. *What can I do by myself and/or with others to get out of my fight or flight state?*
3. *What can I do by myself and/or with others to get out of my freeze state?*

The **My Regulation Map** helps us to understand that we can improve our state by using your own resources and strengths. It may also highlight any additional coping skills we each may need to develop, and help illustrate how connecting with others can serve as a powerful regulator.

The intent of this exercise was to assist you in understanding your level of reactivity to situations that are — or appear to be — safe or dangerous. The map can also assist you in creating reasonable reactions in these scenarios. Our thought patterns and perception of dangers often take years to take shape. Therefore, it makes sense that it will take time and practice to understand your glimmers and find what works best to regulate your nervous system. Conscious repetition may be needed before it becomes automatic.

Complete the December Lead-o-meter!

We'll share the anonymous results at the end of the month! Please note: the last ReCharge post before the holidays will be on Dec 17th. ReCharge will resume in January.

The end goal:

- To feel better, energized, and connected by increasing our Window of Tolerance
- To take ownership of what is happening in our bodies and know how to regulate our emotions and responses to stress
- To strengthen our resilience
- To respond appropriately to life's challenges by going into our *Fight or Flight* state for only a short period, and then quickly returning to our *Rest & Digest* state

We can truly have more enjoyable moments in life by staying in or returning to our state of safety, where we can be mindful, grounded, and joyful. It starts with mapping your own nervous system!

Sources

¹ Dwarshuis, Jeff, LMSW, ACSW, (2020) [Polyvagal Mapping for Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#)

² Missimer, Arianne (2020) [How to Map Your Own Nervous System: The Polyvagal Theory | The Movement Paradigm](#)



How did you like this issue of ReCharge?

We welcome and appreciate your feedback and suggestions! [Fill out our feedback form](#) or contact [Rochelle Morandini](#).



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