A Mind of One's Own

We all have the ability to reflect and converse with ourselves in the same way that we converse with people around us. When we become our own observers, we notice that many voices emerge… This ability is part and parcel of the human condition and its origin is evolutionary in nature and the product of the human brain's structure. Human beings are not isolated creatures but embodied and embedded organisms that are inter-related in nature. Our brain has three main distinct parts – each one of them has very different purposes and functions. Equally our psyche is ***not*** *a unified entity but a dynamic, complex system.*

Our Adult Self can be seen as a Centre of Gravity that anchors us internally and externally and that organizes our experience. In this sense, the Self ceases to be a 'static noun' and becomes a ***plural verb*** *that organizes our inner and outer experience in a coherent and integrated way.*

From this 'Centre of Gravity' we can ***relate*** *to ourselves … or rather to our many* ***PARTS.***



Each **part** of ours is holding a particular view of the world, of others, and of our sense of identity. It also holds a particular story, mood, feelings, fears and longings. There are parts that carry shame, others that fight to be in control, parts that are highly critical, parts that are vulnerable like a child, and parts that ache for peace and rest.

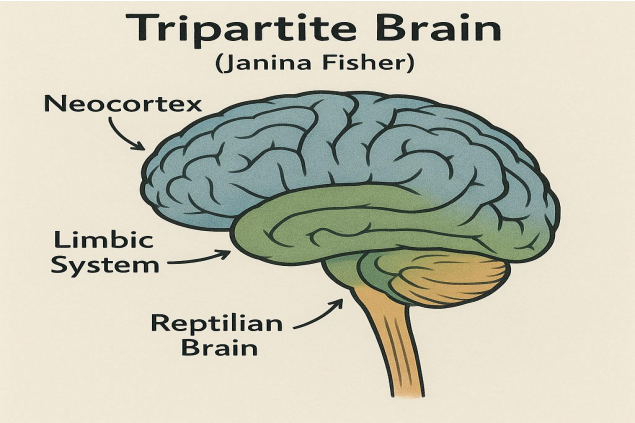
None of them is the whole of who we are; the **key** to being with ourselves is first and foremost getting to know them.

Sometimes the feelings and thoughts of these parts are intense and so we do our ultimate best to avoid them, to suppress them, to deny them. We often reject them or even hate them. The irony is that the more we want to 'get rid' of them, or 'fix them', the louder they get and soon they become noise, or what we call 'symptoms'.

Psychotherapy is not about 'cure' in the traditional sense of the word and mental distress is certainly not an illness - again in the traditional sense of the word. Our sense of unease emerges when feelings have been left unattended for too long or when an event took us by surprise and left us feeling totally overwhelmed and unable to process – let alone understand it.

In therapy we attend to our experience with openness and curiosity so that we begin to safely witness what is experienced as a threat within or outside.

THE HUMAN BRAIN



The human brain is an ancient structure layered through evolution, and each part plays a distinct role in how we survive and relate. A helpful way to understand our responses is to think of the brain in terms of three interacting systems: survival, emotion, and thinking.

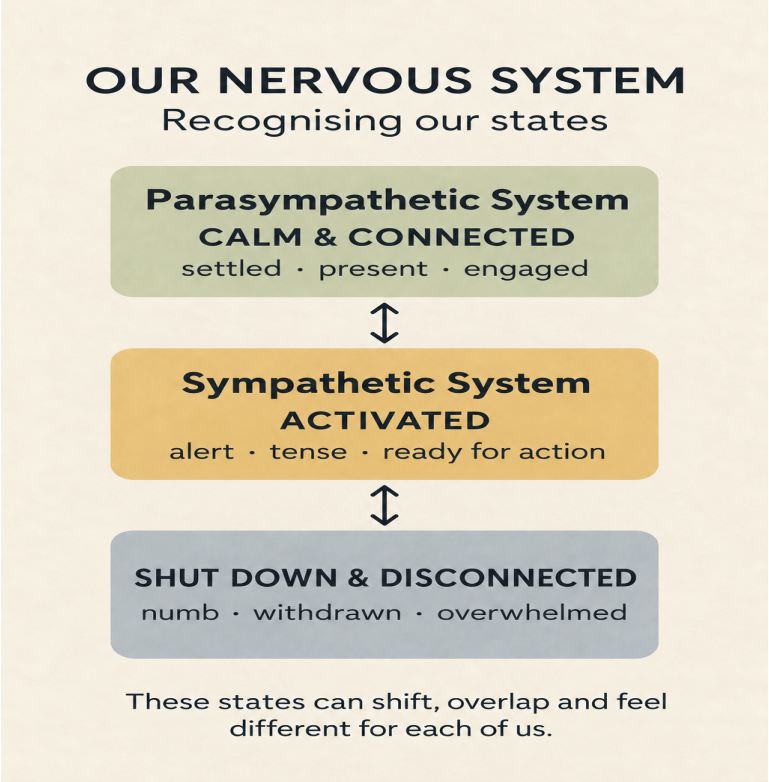
- **The reptilian brain** — our most primitive system — governs basic survival functions: breathing, heart rate, body temperature, and threat response: fight, flight, freeze, fix. This part does not think; it just REACTS at the speed of light. When it perceives threat, it seizes control, prioritizing safety over reflection.

- **The limbic system** — our **emotional brain** — is still old but relational in nature. It evolved to help us bond with others, so it is extremely good at detecting danger and at interpreting relational cues. For example when you see someone frowning you immediately interpret this sign as something that can potentially risk your connection to them. The emotional brain is the ***'seat of attachment'*** constantly scanning for connection or rejection. This is also where emotional or felt memories live. This system reads the world through images, tone, expression, rhythm and energy. There are three main players: **I) the amygdala,** which is our alarm bell that signals danger when activated; **II) the hypothalamus**, which translates emotion into bodily responses; and **III) the hippocampus,** which helps store and retrieve emotional/felt memories. Important to remember that this system also holds love, joy, play, compassion and empathy.

- **The neocortex** — our **thinking brain** — is the most recent in terms of evolution part of our brains. It is the ***'seat of consciousness'*** and is capable of language (story telling), logic, execution of planning, symbolism, cognition, and moral reasoning. This is where our **Adult Self** resides. From this place, we have perspective. We are capable of thinking and reflecting upon ourselves and our actions; we are also capable of resonating with and understanding our experiences and the experiences of other people. This place although private is also highly relational in nature. It is a relational field where we recognise that we are interconnected to others and situated to the bigger picture of the world. We are therefore capable of understanding that our actions have consequences and impact both ourselves and those around us.

B U T

Our **thinking brain is also the most fragile part**. When the lower brains are activated, when we feel under threat or stressed, our thinking brain goes offline; particularly the prefrontal networks that help us reflect, plan and take stock of our responses get highly compromised. That's why when in panic mode, we cannot think straight – we are on a system shut down. What matters in these moments is survival not thinking. Let's have a look at our Nervous System:

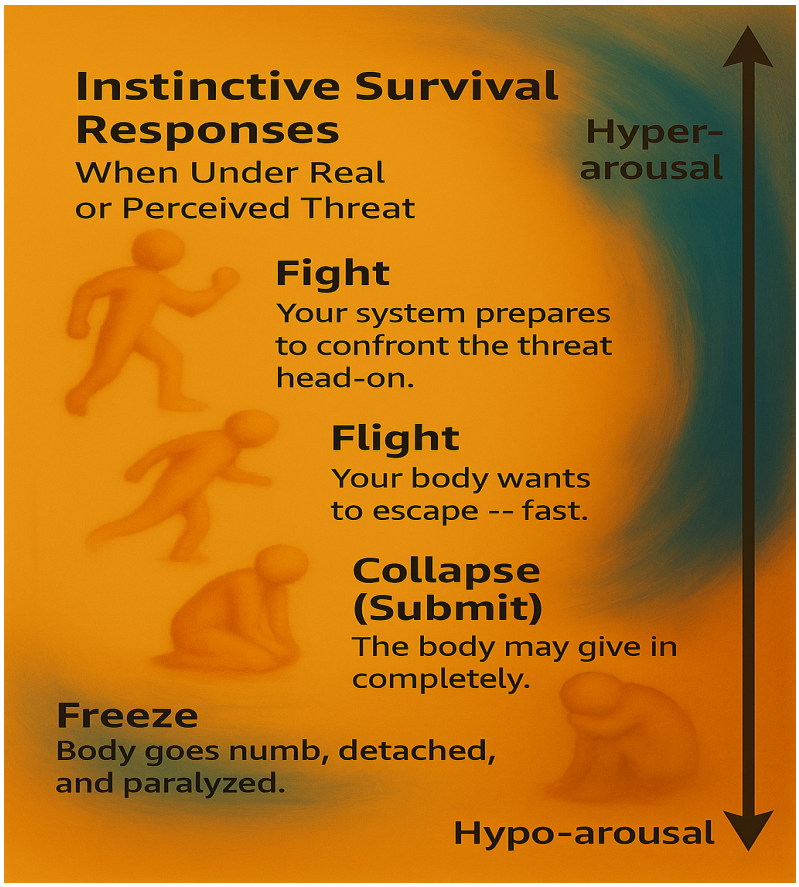


The nervous system is the body's command centre for survival — a fluid, responsive network constantly scanning for safety, danger, or life threat. It is not rational; it is ancient, it is fast, and it is fiercely protective.

- **The parasympathetic system** is our anchor — the body's natural stabiliser. It is the system that brings us back from a state of activation to a state of balance and groundedness. It is the "calm and digest" state where our pace allows everything to flow naturally. When it leads, the body slows and is in rhythm, muscles loosen, digestion (emotionally and physically) resumes, and the breath deepens. We feel grounded, connected, comfortable in our own skin. We are fully attuned with our centre of gravity (our Self).

- **The sympathetic system** is our accelerator — it is the system that mobilises us for action "fight or flight" response but also excitement, assertiveness, and drive. When this system is activated, adrenaline helps prepare us for action: our muscles may tense, our heart rate increases, and our breathing may become faster. This system is our vitality BUT it becomes problematic when it does not know when to stop! Under these circumstances excitement and vitality become anxiety and threat. This system when left unregulated can **get stuck in overdrive:** the body cannot rest, we become hypervigilant, irritable, anxious, unable to slow down or sleep. In those moments the world becomes noise; the body feels wired, and the mind races.

Our survival responses are built early on in our lives; we instinctively choose the survival tactic that has the greatest chances to work and restore safety. These early tactics are stored in our brain and become our *survival template response* that kicks in involuntarily. Sometimes in the absence of any imminent threat something or someone in our environment **triggers us**. In that moment - at the speed of light - our survival system gets activated. Moreover, even when the danger has passed – even when it is years later – the body remembers and so our nervous system never gets the chance to rest. We remain alert or docile. This is not a fault in the system but the product of the shutdown of our thinking brain. This shutdown is equally not a 'glitch' but absolutely necessary because the fact of the matter is that when under threat (real or perceived) in order to survive we need immediate survival responses not thoughts and reflections! Only when we are safe we can start processing the unfathomable.



There is one more survival tactic that needs to be added to the above image and that is: **FIXING.**

For some people, feeling under threat brings an urgent need to put things right: resolve the conflict, ease someone else's distress or make everyone feel better. This pattern may begin in childhood, when a child learns that keeping the peace helps them feel safe. They may become the family's mediator, comforter or joker, using humour to ease tension.

In adulthood, someone else's distress can awaken that same urgency. We may feel responsible for making things better, as though their difficulty were ours to resolve. It can become hard to listen, stay alongside them or allow the situation to remain unsettled.

We often notice these protective responses first in our bodies: tension, agitation, a racing heart, numbness or disconnection. Recognising these signals gives us a chance to pause and attend to what we need. Grounding and emotional regulation can help us regain enough steadiness to be present and choose how to respond.

As part of my scuba diving qualification, I completed Rescue Diver training. The five steps below offer a way to pause, regain composure and respond when something goes wrong underwater. I have found them equally valuable on land, as a framework for finding our footing when we feel overwhelmed.



STOP

When you notice yourself becoming overwhelmed, pause. If you are somewhere unsafe, move to safety first. Otherwise, give yourself a moment before replying, making a decision or acting on an impulse.
Sit down or find a comfortable, steady position. Feel the support of the chair beneath you or the floor under your feet. You do not have to work everything out immediately. Stand still and begin taking deep breaths because your body needs you.

BREATHE

Allow your breathing to slow gently, at a pace that feels comfortable. Gentle, deep breathing is key here. Slowly take a deep breath counting to four, hold your breath if you like for a couple of seconds and then slowly exhale. Repeat the process following your rhythm.

ASSESS THE SCENE

As you begin to settle, notice where you are. What is happening in your surroundings? Is there an immediate threat, or might your body be responding to a reminder of something difficult?
To help orient yourself, turn your attention outwards and name three things you can see, two sounds you can hear and one point of contact between your body and its surroundings. You can also remind yourself of the place, day and time: "I am here, in this room, and this is what is happening now."
If you are safe, gently remind yourself: "I feel alarmed, but there is no immediate danger here." If something is unsafe, focus on getting to safety or seeking help.

THINK

As you begin to feel even more settled, ask yourself: "What do I need right now?" You do not have to solve the whole situation. Start with one small thing that might help.
Do you need some space, a quieter place, a short walk, or a conversation with someone you trust? Do you need to step away from a difficult exchange or ask someone to stay with you? You may simply need more time before deciding what to do next. If thinking still feels difficult, return to something concrete: feel your feet on the floor, look around the room or notice the object in your hand. There is no deadline for becoming calm.

ACT

Choose one manageable next step that responds to your need. Take a break, ask for support, move somewhere quieter, or give yourself time before replying or making a decision.

EMOTIONAL FLOODING or WHEN OUR PARTS TAKE OVER

Sometimes, a part of us is so loud that it takes over to such an extent that everything else disappears. When this happens, we end up equating our entire being with it. This state is called **blending** – a state that holds no perspective and no groundedness. We are literally emotionally flooded, at the mercy of the part.



Here are some Signs that Show that We Might Be Blended

- Everything feels urgent or unbearable

- We feel rageful

- We feel small, helpless, or like a failure

- We want to give up, disappear, shut down, lash out, or even hurt ourselves and/or others

- We forget what helps, we lose touch with the present moment and sometimes reality altogether

- There is no room for curiosity and openness. There is only a sense of feeling overwhelmed.

In these moments, your body may signal that you are overwhelmed. Before deciding what to do next, take a moment to ground yourself, using the scuba diver's approach or any other grounding techniques you find helpful. Once your body is grounded and your thinking brain is back online, continue breathing deeply and this time **witness** your emotional state. Engage in a conversation with yourself and instead of saying **"I AM this or that" (e.g., angry, depressed, stressed, anxious, stupid etc)** turn your attention inwards and say: **"a part of me is feeling this or that".** Focusing on a part can help restore perspective.



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