

Recognize and Regulate Your Activation Responses

Created in collaboration with Licensed Professional Counselor [Katie Fleming Thomas, MS, LPC](#)



[Nervous System Regulation & Somatic Tools](#)

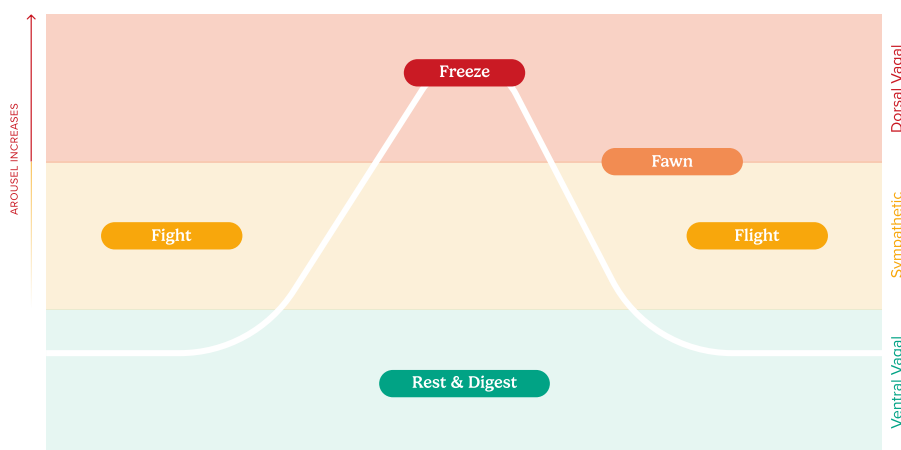
Most people think **activation** is "bad" or something to avoid. But activation is actually your nervous system trying to protect you. It's your body's built-in alarm system responding to perceived threats or stress. Getting curious about your specific activation patterns helps you work **WITH** your system rather than against it.

What Is Activation?

Activation happens when your nervous system detects something that might be unsafe or overwhelming. Your body mobilizes energy to help you respond - whether that's fighting, fleeing, freezing, or trying to keep everyone happy (fawn). This system has kept humans alive for thousands of years.

The key is learning to recognize YOUR unique activation signature and catching it early, so you can use your regulation tools before you're completely overwhelmed.

The Four Main Activation Responses



Fight Response

- Your system mobilizes to confront or push back against the threat.
- You might feel: anger, irritation, tension, heat
- Body signs: clenched jaw, tight fists, forward-leaning posture
- Behaviors: arguing, snapping, wanting to push back



Flight Response

- Your system wants to escape or get away from the situation.
- You might feel: anxiety, panic, restlessness, urgency
- Body signs: racing heart, shallow breathing, fidgeting
- Behaviors: wanting to leave, pacing, feeling trapped



Freeze Response

- Your system locks up, unable to fight or flee.
- You might feel: stuck, paralyzed, confused, overwhelmed
- Body signs: holding breath, muscle tension, feeling "deer in headlights"
- Behaviors: can't speak, can't move, mind goes blank



Fawn Response

- Your system tries to keep everyone happy to stay safe.
- You might feel: anxious to please, responsible for others' emotions
- Body signs: collapsed posture, tight chest, shallow breathing
- Behaviors: over-apologizing, people-pleasing, losing your own needs

Pre-Activation: Your Early Warning System

The goal isn't to avoid activation completely - that's impossible and not healthy. Instead, learn to catch the early, subtle signs before you're fully activated.

Activation Mode: Your Personal Activation Signs

Everyone's activation shows up differently in their body. Getting to know YOUR specific patterns is like learning your body's unique language.

A slight shift in your breathing

Beginning tension in your shoulders or jaw

A small change in your energy level

Feeling slightly "off" or different

Your window of tolerance starting to feel smaller

Reaching for your usual regulators more often

Temperature changes (getting hot, cold, or clammy)

Energy shifts (buzzy, jittery, or suddenly drained)

Breathing changes (shallow, fast, or holding breath)

Muscle tension (shoulders, jaw, stomach, back)

Heart rate changes (racing, pounding, or feeling it stop)

Digestive responses (nausea, butterflies, tightness)

Mental changes (racing thoughts, blank mind, or confusion)

A need to reach out for something (Regulator) to comfort

From Activation to Regulation

Once you notice activation, you can work with it:



Acknowledge It:

- "I notice I'm getting activated right now."

Get Curious:

- "How is this showing up in my body? What is my system trying to protect me from?"

Use Your Tools:

- Orientation practices to ground yourself in the present
- Resource vortex tools that help you settle
- Breathing that supports regulation
- Movement that helps discharge the energy
- Environment changes if possible

Titrate:

- Work with the activation in small doses rather than trying to push through or shut it down completely.

- Your physical state (tired, hungry, etc.)
- Whether you feel supported or alone
- Past experiences that might be triggered

Remember: Activation Changes

Your activation patterns can vary depending on:

- How much capacity you have that day
- What's happening in your life

Working WITH Your Activation

Instead of judging your activation, try getting curious:

1. What is my nervous system trying to tell me?

2. What might it be protecting me from?

3. How can I support my system right now?

4. What do I need to feel safer in this moment?

Your activation system is sophisticated and intelligent - it's trying to keep you safe based on all your past experiences. The more you understand how it works for you, the more you can support it and help it settle.

Reflection Questions

1. Which activation response (fight, flight, freeze, or fawn) feels most familiar to you? How does it typically show up in your body?

2. What are your earliest, most subtle warning signs that activation is starting? What does your body notice first?

3. What are your earliest, most subtle warning signs that activation is starting? What does your body notice first?

Your activation system is trying to protect you. Learning its language helps you become a compassionate partner with your nervous system rather than working against it.