

Bringing the System Down

A reflection guide for recognizing early signs of tension buildup and practicing ways to help your body settle.



Catch It Before It Spikes

Tension rarely arrives all at once. It builds slowly, a tightness here, a shorter breath there, often well before you consciously register it. By the time it feels obvious, you're already running high.

The earlier you catch the signal, the easier it is to bring the system back down. You don't need to fix everything. You just need to notice it one step sooner and give your body a moment to reset. That's the whole skill.

Notice Early

Catch subtle cues before they compound into something harder to manage.

Act Small

One small reset is more effective than waiting to be maxed out.

Stay Ahead

Awareness is a skill. The more you practice it, the sharper it gets.

Early Signs of Buildup

Your body signals tension long before your mind catches up. These are common physical and behavioral cues that something is starting to build. Check what's showing up for you today.



Tight Jaw

Clenching or grinding, often without realizing it, especially during high-demand moments.



Raised Shoulders

Shoulders creeping toward your ears is one of the most common and overlooked tension signals.



Fast Breathing

Shallow, rapid breaths keep the nervous system in alert mode longer than needed.



Short Fuse

Reacting faster or sharper than usual is often the nervous system, not the situation.



Racing Thoughts

When the mind won't slow down, especially around things you can't control right now.



Clenched Hands

Hands tightening around a wheel, pen, or nothing at all, tension looking for somewhere to go.

☐ Restlessness, the urge to move, fidget, or escape a space, is also a sign. Notice when stillness feels impossible.

What Usually Sets It Off?

Knowing your personal triggers is as important as knowing your signs. These are common situations that tend to push the system higher. Recognizing them gives you a moment of choice before the buildup takes over.

Common Triggers

- **Noise**, sustained loud environments or sudden sharp sounds
- **Crowds**, high-density, unpredictable situations with no off-ramp
- **Conflict**, ongoing interpersonal friction, not just on-call incidents
- **Fatigue**, reduced sleep narrows the window before the system tips

Situation Patterns

- **Feeling rushed**, back to back demands with no breathing room between them
- **Replaying work**, reviewing calls or incidents mentally on repeat after shift
- **Too much stimulation**, screens, alerts, noise, and demands all stacking at once

i You don't have to eliminate triggers. You just need to recognize them faster so you can respond with intention.

What Helps Bring You Down?

Different things work for different people, and different moments. Below are practical, low-barrier tools that help the nervous system downshift. The goal is finding what actually works for *you*, not what sounds good on paper.



Longer Exhale

Breathe out for twice as long as you breathe in. Activates the brake.



Quiet

Even 90 seconds of low-stimulus space can shift your baseline.



Walking

Rhythmic movement helps metabolize stress chemicals built up during tension.



Stretching

Releasing held tension in the neck, shoulders, and jaw directly lowers arousal.



Cold Water

Splashing cold water on the face or wrists activates the dive reflex, fast reset.



Music

Intentional listening, not background noise, can anchor and regulate mood.



Step Outside

A change of environment breaks the loop. Fresh air and a physical shift help.



Less Screen Time

Reducing input before bed or during a break lowers background system load.

Build Your Downshift Plan

The most effective reset strategies are ones you decide on *before* you need them. Use the prompts below to build your personal plan. Keep it simple, one honest answer per line is enough.

Your Personal Plan

My first warning sign

What's the earliest physical cue that something is building for me?

What usually makes it worse

Which situations, environments, or habits tend to push it higher?

One thing that helps

What's the one reset tool that actually works for me, even on a hard day?

One thing I can do earlier next time

What's one small action I can take *before* I reach the spike?

How to Use This

Review your answers at the start or end of a shift. You don't have to share this with anyone. It's a private reference, a reminder of what you already know works.

The goal isn't perfection. It's just catching it one level earlier than last time. That's enough.

- ✔ Over time, your early warning system gets sharper. What used to take a spike to notice will become something you catch before it builds.

"You do not have to wait until you are maxed out. Catch it early. Bring it down one level."