

Finding a Soft Landing in a Divided World

The news is on in the background. Headlines scroll across the screen about political turmoil, protests, and policies. Before you realize it, your shoulders tighten, your chest feels heavy, and your mind starts rehearsing arguments you wish you could make. Maybe it's a conversation with a friend or a family member, maybe it's simply being online — but suddenly, your nervous system is lit up as if your safety is on the line.

This isn't weakness. It's human.

When our values, beliefs, or very identity feel threatened, our nervous system does what it was designed to do: protect us. The same way an argument with a partner might stir fears of rejection or abandonment, political disagreements can trigger that ancient alarm system. Our bodies translate these experiences as high stakes: *Am I safe? Do I belong? Will I be cast out if I speak up or stay silent?*

That's why political conversations often feel more like survival than discussion. The tightening in your throat or the rush of heat in your chest isn't just about the words spoken — it's your body remembering what it's like to be unseen, misunderstood, or at risk of losing connection.

But here's where the soft landing comes in.

What if, in those moments, you had a cue that reminded your nervous system: *You're safe right now. You can rest.*

How to Recognize Nervous System Activation

Before we can soften, we need to notice. Nervous system activation often shows up as survival mode — fight, flight, or freeze. These responses can be triggered by obvious external cues (like someone raising their voice or a heated political headline), but also by internal ones (like a racing thought, a past memory, or the fear of rejection).

External cues might look like:

- Hearing shouting or harsh tones in a conversation.
- Seeing a news story or social media post that challenges your values.
- Experiencing someone rolling their eyes, interrupting, or dismissing you.

Internal cues might look like:

- A pounding heartbeat or tight chest.
- Heat rising in your face or your stomach twisting into knots.
- Thoughts racing with “what ifs” or replaying an argument long after it’s ended.
- A sense of urgency — needing to prove your point or escape the situation.

These signals are your nervous system saying: *Something feels unsafe*. The body doesn’t always know the difference between an actual threat and a perceived one, so it reacts the same way it would if you were truly in danger. Recognizing these cues is the first step in shifting from survival into safety.

A Gentle Body Scan

One way to catch these cues before they take over is through a simple body scan. You don’t need any special equipment — just a pause and a few breaths.

- Start by noticing your feet on the ground. Wiggle your toes or press your heels gently into the floor.
- Slowly move your attention upward: your legs, hips, and belly. Is there tightness, heaviness, or restlessness?

- Bring awareness to your chest and shoulders. Are they lifted, hunched, or tense?
- Notice your jaw, face, and eyes. Are they clenched, furrowed, or darting?
- As you notice each area, simply name it to yourself: “*Tight.*” “*Restless.*” “*Calm.*” There’s no need to fix or change anything yet — just noticing is enough.

This kind of gentle check-in helps you identify the earliest signs of fight-or-flight so you can respond with a soft landing before the stress builds too high.

An Anecdote: The Dinner Table

Imagine this: you’re at a family dinner, and someone brings up politics. The conversation escalates quickly — voices raise, someone rolls their eyes, and you feel your own pulse quicken. You want to jump in, defend your values, and make your point clear. At the same time, you notice your jaw tightening and your chest closing in.

In that moment, instead of reacting, you quietly press your feet into the ground beneath the table. You take a slow, deliberate breath and let your exhale stretch longer than your inhale. You place one hand under the table, resting it on your stomach, feeling it rise and fall.

The conversation continues, but your body has softened. You remind yourself: *I am safe in this moment. I don’t need to win this argument to belong here.*

You might still choose to speak up — but you’re speaking from steadiness, not from survival. That’s the difference a soft landing can make.

Everyday Soft Landings

A soft landing doesn't have to be elaborate. It's any practice that gently signals to your body: *You can exhale now.* Here are ways to create that feeling when conflict or tension starts to rise:

- **Breathe with length and weight.** Inhale deeply, then make your exhale longer than your inhale. Imagine letting your breath fall heavy, like a stone sinking into water.
- **Anchor through touch.** Place one hand on your heart, the other on your belly. Feel the warmth of your own presence. Sometimes just reminding your body you're here with it is enough.
- **Ground through your senses.** Press your feet into the floor, or notice three things you can see, two you can touch, and one you can hear.
- **Create a sensory ritual.** Light a candle, make tea, or wrap yourself in a soft blanket. These cues train your body to associate certain textures, smells, and tastes with calm.
- **Soften your gaze.** When your eyes dart and narrow, your nervous system stays on alert. Try looking at something steady — a plant, a photo, or even the horizon — and let your vision widen.
- **Move slowly.** Rock gently in a chair, stretch your arms overhead, or sway side to side. Slow, rhythmic movement tells your body it's safe enough to move with ease.
- **Offer yourself words of safety.** Whisper or think phrases like: *"Right now, I am safe."* or *"I don't have to solve everything in this moment."*

Maintaining Your Soft Landing

Creating safety in a single moment matters, but cultivating it over time is what allows us to return to calm more easily. Think of it as building a nest you can come back to when the world feels loud.

- **Build rituals into your day.** A morning walk, journaling before bed, or pausing to breathe before opening the news can anchor your nervous system in predictability.
- **Limit input when needed.** Step away from media or conversations when your body feels overwhelmed. Boundaries are also a form of safety.
- **Curate safe spaces.** Surround yourself with reminders of comfort — music that soothes, objects that carry meaning, or spaces where you can truly be yourself.
- **Stay connected.** Reach out to someone who reminds you that you belong. Even a brief text exchange can reassure your nervous system that you're not alone.
- **Practice self-compassion.** Notice when you're judging yourself for feeling anxious or reactive. Replace judgment with gentleness: *"Of course I feel this way. My body is trying to protect me."*

Reflection: Your Own Soft Landings

Every nervous system has its own language of safety. What feels grounding for one person may not work for another. The key is discovering what helps *your* body exhale.

Take a few minutes to reflect or journal on these prompts:

- What signals in my body tell me I'm entering a state of tension or survival?
- What sensory cues (sights, sounds, textures, smells) help me feel safe?
- What three soft landings can I return to this week when conflict or overwhelm rises?

the collective

T H E R A P Y & W E L L N E S S

Conflict — whether personal or political — is inevitable. But how we carry it in our bodies determines whether we become consumed by it or find resilience through it. Every soft landing you create is not only a gift to yourself but also a small act of healing in a divided world.