

A GENTLE FIELD GUIDE TO YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM AFTER BETRAYAL

Why You Carry So Much Shame When It Was Never Your Fault



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Of Course You Reacted That Way

You might be here because you trusted someone or something that was supposed to be safe, only to be hurt instead.

Maybe it was a partner who promised to protect you and used your soft spots as leverage. Maybe a parent told you that love meant obedience. Maybe it was a friend, a community, or a whole system that said all the right words about safety and then quietly chose comfort or control over you.

Whatever its shape, betrayal has a way of getting under your skin. It doesn't just stay in the past. It starts to color how you see yourself. Instead of thinking, "Something awful happened to me," it becomes, "What does this say about me?"

That's where shame starts doing laps.

The late-night autopsy of every red flag you missed. The way you ask yourself why you stayed, why you believed them, why you didn't leave sooner. The quiet suspicion that you're the common denominator, so you must be the problem. You might even start calling yourself dramatic or "too sensitive" before anyone else gets the chance.



Here's the part the pastel quotes leave out:

Your reactions are not evidence that you're defective. They're evidence that your body kept score when no one else did.

Your nervous system learned in real conditions. It learned how to keep you alive in rooms where you had to fawn, stay quiet, read every micro-expression, or scan for danger inside the people who said they loved you. When a new betrayal lands, it presses every old bruise at once. That's why your response can feel so big and so "out of proportion" to whatever is happening on the surface.

You are not overreacting. You are remembering.

This little field guide is not here to tell you to be the bigger person or hurry up and forgive. It's here to give you a simple map of what your nervous system is doing, so you can stop diagnosing yourself as the problem and start seeing your reactions as information.

You don't have to twist this into a lesson or a redemption arc. For now, it's enough to say:

something happened that should not have happened, and my body noticed, and I'm allowed to understand what that did to me.



What Your Nervous System Is Trying To Do For You

You don't need to memorize brain parts or impress anyone with Latin. What actually helps is knowing that your body has a built-in safety system that's always running in the background, asking one question:

“Am I safe enough to soften, or do I need to protect myself?”

After betrayal, that system gets jumpy. It remembers being blindsided. It remembers the moment the ground gave out under your feet, even if you've tried very hard to move on.

For the sake of this guide, think of your nervous system as having three main “settings.” You move between them all the time, often without noticing, but betrayal can shove you into the more protective ones and keep you there longer.

Safe & Connected

This is the setting your body is hoping for, even if it doesn't trust it yet.

Here, your breathing has a little more room in it. You can feel your feet on the ground. You can have a hard conversation without feeling like you're going to explode or disappear. You might even feel a flicker of curiosity about people again, instead of assuming everyone is either a threat or a disappointment.

After betrayal, this state can feel suspicious. Relaxing might register as “letting your guard down” or “inviting it to happen again.” You're not weird if you tense up when things feel good. That's what happens when good things have come with a price tag for too long.

Safe and connected doesn't mean you trust everyone. It just means your system believes you're safe enough in this moment to be a person, not just a lookout.



Fight / Flight

This is your “do something right now” setting.

In fight, you might feel a sharp edge inside you: anger, sarcasm, the urge to argue your way back into safety. Your brain can spin up a closing argument at 3 a.m. without breaking a sweat. You replay every conversation, thinking of all the things you should have said.

In flight, the energy is similar but pointed toward escape. You might want to block, ghost, move states, start over, disappear, burn the whole thing down before it can hurt you again. You might also run in quieter ways: overworking, over-explaining, over-accommodating, so that no one can accuse you of being the problem.

None of this makes you “crazy” or “too much.”

It means your body is trying to keep you out of the line of fire in the only ways it learned.



Freeze / Shutdown

This is the “too much” setting.

Instead of gearing up, your system hits the brakes. Your thoughts get foggy. Basic decisions feel like advanced calculus. You might find yourself staring at your phone, scrolling, or just... flattened. The world keeps moving, and you feel like you're watching it from behind glass.

Shutdown loves to invite shame to the party:

“Why can't I just get over this?”

“Other people go through worse and function. What's wrong with me?”

“If I were stronger, I wouldn't still be struggling.”

What's actually happening is that your system has decided, “This is too much to handle all at once,” and pulled the plug for a bit. **It's not laziness. It's a full-body safety mechanism that's been overused.**

You move between these states more than you think. You can feel relatively okay in the morning, snap into fight-or-flight after a text, and slide toward shutdown by evening. None of that means you're failing at healing.

It means your body is still trying to figure out what “safe enough” even feels like after being blindsided.



Three Tiny Experiments When Betrayal Won't Leave You Alone

None of these is meant to “fix” you. They’re tiny experiments you can try when your system is loud, your shame is bossy, and your old patterns are dragging you around by the hair.

Think of them as ways to give your nervous system a slightly different script, not a test you can pass or fail.

1. Come Back To The Room, Not The Story

Betrayal loves a mental replay. Your brain queues up the greatest hits: the moment you found out, the thing they said, the text you wish you hadn’t sent. Before you know it, your body is reacting to a memory as if it’s happening again right now.

This practice is about returning to this room, in this moment, with this version of you.

Very quietly, either in your head or out loud, start naming what’s around you in slow detail:

- the color of the wall
- the shape of the lamp
- the way the light hits the floor
- the texture of the fabric under your hand

You’re not trying to make the betrayal disappear. You’re reminding your body that the danger is not physically in the room with you right now. Your nervous system doesn’t know what year it is. You do. This is you lending it your perspective.

If your mind drifts back to the story (and it will), that’s not failure. You just gently notice: “Ah. There I go again.”

Then you name one more thing in the room.



2. Let One Inch Of You Soften

When you've been blindsided, full-body relaxation can feel impossible or even unsafe. So we're not doing that. Instead, we're going for one inch.

Sit or lie down the way you already were. No fancy pose. Notice three points of contact:

- your feet on the floor or mattress
- the weight of your body in the chair, couch, or bed
- where your back, hips, or shoulders are being held up by something that isn't you

Then see if you can let just one small area soften a little.

- Maybe your jaw.
- Maybe your forehead.
- Maybe your hands.

You don't have to unclench your whole life. You're simply letting one part of you get the memo:

"Something outside of me is holding some of this weight."

If it helps, you can quietly think or whisper:

"Some part of me is allowed to rest, even if the rest of me isn't ready yet."

That's it. That's the whole practice.



3. Thumb-To-Fingers, Shame-To-Truth

This one is sneaky. You can do it in a meeting, in bed, at a stoplight, or while someone is talking at you about “forgiveness.”

Gently press your thumb to each finger of one hand, one at a time. As you touch each finger, pair it with a short sentence that’s actually kind.

For example:

Thumb: “Something happened that should not have happened.”

Index: “My reaction makes sense in context.”

Middle: “Shame is not the same as truth.”

Ring: “I’m allowed to protect my future self.”

Pinky: “I deserve relationships that feel safer than this.”

You can change the words to fit you. The point is the pairing: a small, repetitive physical rhythm with a sentence your nervous system rarely hears.

If your brain tries to argue with you, that’s normal. Shame has had the mic for a long time. You’re not trying to convince it. You’re simply letting another voice exist in the room.

You don’t have to do all three of these. You don’t even have to like them right away. Notice if one feels slightly less annoying than the others and start there.



You Are Not “Too Sensitive.” You Were Never Meant To Carry This Alone.

If you’ve been called “too sensitive,” it probably wasn’t said on your best day. It was more likely tossed at you when you cried at something everyone else agreed to ignore. When you noticed the shift in someone’s tone before they admitted they were angry. When you felt the tension in the room and couldn’t pretend it wasn’t there. When you reacted to a betrayal that everyone else wanted to sweep under the rug.

People who benefit from your silence have a way of rebranding your sensitivity as the problem.

But here’s what I see, over and over: The people who get labeled “too sensitive” are usually the ones who were paying attention the whole time.

- You noticed what was off.
- You felt the impact in your body.
- You tried to address it, repair it, and talk about it.
- You were told you were overreacting.

Betrayal hits people like you especially hard because you weren’t sleepwalking through your life. You were invested. You cared. You were trying to build something real. When that gets yanked out from under you, it’s not a small adjustment. It’s a nervous system event. **None of this was meant to be carried alone.**

You were not designed to metabolize betrayal in isolation, while the people around you tell you to be grateful, be quieter, be more forgiving, be less dramatic. Your body was built to heal in the presence of people who are honest, regulated, and capable of holding your story without turning it into an indictment.



If you've made it this far into this little field guide, I'm going to guess a few things about you:

- You are probably smart, observant, and hard on yourself.
- You've gotten very good at making sense of other people and not nearly as good at extending that same kindness to your own reactions.
- You've survived things you still haven't fully named, and you're tired of pretending it was "no big deal."

Your nervous system is not defective. It's vigilant and exhausted. It has been on duty for a long time with very little backup.

You deserve more than pep talks and spiritual slogans. You deserve language that matches the size of what you've lived through, and support that doesn't require you to shrink yourself to receive it.

This guide is a beginning, not a complete map. If it felt like someone finally put words to what's been happening inside you, you are exactly who I write and work for.

My name is Jane. I'm a Trauma Recovery Coach and the human behind The Humble Pie. I work with people who are done blaming themselves for other people's choices and ready to understand what betrayal and chronic stress have actually done to their bodies, minds, and relationships.

If you want more support as you untangle all of this, you're welcome to:

- Read more of my essays and reflections at The Humble Pie, and
- Schedule a free 30-minute consult to see if working together feels like a good fit for your nervous system, not just your calendar.

You are not "too sensitive."

You are exactly as sensitive as a human has to be to survive what you survived and still want something better.

Read more of my essays and reflections at The Humble Pie



Suggested Reading for Tender, Tired Nervous Systems

On Betrayal, Trauma, and the Body

The Body Keeps the Score – Bessel van der Kolk

A thorough, sometimes heavy look at how trauma shapes the brain and body, and why things like movement, creativity, and connection often help more than “just talking about it.”

The Betrayal Bond – Patrick Carnes

Explains why it is so hard to leave or emotionally detach from people and systems that hurt us, and why our nervous system keeps reaching for what is familiar, even when it is not safe.

On Boundaries, Self-Trust, and “Too Sensitive”

Set Boundaries, Find Peace – Nedra Glover Tawwab

A clear, practical guide to what boundaries actually are, how to set them without a script of guilt and apology, and why they are an act of self-respect, not selfishness.

The Highly Sensitive Person – Elaine Aron

An introduction to sensitivity as a trait, not a defect, and a helpful lens if you have ever been told you are “too much” or “too emotional” for noticing what no one else wanted to name.



On Shame, Worthiness, and Attachment

The Gifts of Imperfection – Brené Brown

A gentle invitation to loosen the grip of shame, perfectionism, and performance, and to experiment with being a whole person instead of a constantly improving project.

Attached – Amir Levine and Rachel Heller

A beginner-friendly look at attachment styles in adult relationships, helpful in understanding why anxious, avoidant, or mixed signals in love can feel so familiar after a history of betrayal.

On Nervous System Regulation in Everyday Life

Anchored – Deb Dana

A very readable guide to Polyvagal theory in daily life, full of examples of what different nervous system states feel like and small practices that can help you move toward more safety and connection.

You do not have to read any of these to be “doing healing right.”

They are simply here if you want more language, more context, and a few wise co-regulators on the shelf while you keep listening to your own body

