A Sensory Guide to Supporting Your Nervous System in Early Recovery

Helping you help your nervous system as it is learning a new way to feel safe.

LITTLE SEED COUNSELING

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A Sensory Guide to Regulating Your Body in Early Recovery

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The information provided reflects current clinical knowledge and neuroaffirming, trauma-informed practices at the time of publication. Individuals are encouraged to work with their healthcare providers to determine the most appropriate treatment for their unique needs.

Published by Little Seed Counseling, PLLC
Greensboro, North Carolina

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Start here:

If you're reading this, chances are you're working incredibly hard to build a life that no longer depends on substances to get through the day. **That is no small thing.**

Recovery is often talked about as changing behaviors, making healthier choices, or learning new coping skills. While those things matter, there is another piece that often doesn't get enough attention:

Your nervous system is learning an entirely new way to exist.

For many people, substances weren't just about "getting high."

They helped quiet racing thoughts, numb emotional pain, create energy, slow the body down, feel connected, avoid overwhelming sensations, or simply make it through the day. **When those substances are removed, your brain and body don't immediately know what to do instead.**

You may notice that you feel more anxious, more emotional, more restless, more sensitive to noise or light, or more uncomfortable sitting still. You may swing between feeling overwhelmed by everything around you and feeling completely disconnected from yourself. Some days your body may crave movement. Other days it may crave stillness. You may find yourself wondering why everything suddenly feels so intense. Nothing about these experiences means you're failing at recovery.

They are often signs that your nervous system is adjusting.

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Understanding Regulation

Your nervous system is constantly asking one question: "Am I safe?"

When the answer is yes, your body can rest, connect with others, think clearly, and recover.

When the answer is no—or when your nervous system believes the answer is no—**it shifts into survival mode.** You might notice racing thoughts, muscle tension, irritability, restlessness, emotional numbness, shutdown, panic, or a powerful urge to escape uncomfortable feelings.

These responses are not character flaws. They are adaptive survival responses. **The goal of recovery is not to force yourself to "calm down" or "just cope better."** The goal is to help your nervous system discover new ways to experience safety, comfort, connection, and regulation without relying on substances.

Why a Sensory Workbook?

Many recovery resources focus on changing thoughts and behaviors, but our bodies are part of the recovery process too. Long before we can put our experiences into words, our nervous systems communicate through sensation**. Sometimes what feels like a craving is actually a need for movement, deep pressure, rest, connection, or a quieter environment.** Learning to recognize these sensory needs doesn't replace addiction treatment or make recovery easy, but it can help you better understand what your body is asking for in moments of distress. This workbook is designed to help you become more aware of your **unique sensory experiences, identify what helps you feel regulated, and build a personalized toolkit of strategies that support your recovery and overall well-being.**

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Gentle Reminder

There is no "right" way to complete these worksheets.

Some exercises may resonate with you immediately. Others may not fit your experiences at all.

That's okay.

This workbook isn't about finding the perfect coping skill.

It's about learning the language of your nervous system.

As you move through these pages, I invite you to replace one question:

"What's wrong with me?"

with a different one:

"What might my nervous system need right now?"

That single shift can change the way you experience recovery—not by eliminating discomfort, but by helping you respond to it with curiosity, compassion, and understanding.

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A Note on Cravings

One of the most confusing parts of early recovery is learning to understand cravings.

Sometimes a craving is exactly what it feels like: your brain and body remembering a substance that once brought relief, comfort, or escape.

Other times, what feels like a craving may actually be your nervous system trying to communicate an unmet need. When we're overwhelmed, under-stimulated, lonely, exhausted, or emotionally flooded, our brains naturally search for what has helped us feel better in the past. For many people, that was a substance.

Before acting on an urge, try pausing and asking yourself:

- What am I feeling right now?
- What is happening in my body?
- What happened just before this feeling started?
- Does my body need more input or less input?
- Am I hungry, thirsty, tired, overwhelmed, or needing connection?

Sometimes the answer will be an unmet need. Sometimes it will be a true craving. Sometimes it will be both.

This workbook isn't about ignoring cravings or talking yourself out of them. It's about expanding your options. The more ways your nervous system learns to find comfort, safety, and regulation, **the more choices you have in moments that feel difficult.**

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Check In:

Check in with your nervous system. Take a moment to notice what your body is telling you. Circle or check any words that describe how you are feeling right now.

Right now, my body feels:

□ Restless
□ Wired
□ Jittery
□ Tense
□ Heavy
□ Tired
□ Numb
□ Calm
□ Foggy
□ Disconnected
□ On edge
□ Safe
□ Other: _____

Right now my mind feels:

□ Racing
□ Quiet
□ Scattered
□ Focused
□ Stuck
□ Overwhelmed
□ Blank
□ Hopeful
□ Other: _____

My energy level right now:

Low ○——○——○——○——○——○——○——○——○— High

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If I had to describe my nervous system in one sentence, I would say:

Which of these best describes me right now?

□ I need more stimulation.
□ I need less stimulation.
□ I need movement.
□ I need rest.
□ I need comfort.
□ I need connection.
□ I'm not sure what I need.

Reflection
What do I notice about myself after slowing down long enough to check in?

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More or Less?

Not every difficult feeling needs the same response.

Sometimes your nervous system is asking for more input because it feels disconnected, restless, or under-stimulated. Other times, it's asking for less input because everything feels too loud, too bright, too busy, or too overwhelming.

Learning the difference can help you choose strategies that actually work.

Your nervous system may be asking for MORE input if you notice...

□ Feeling bored or restless
□ Difficulty focusing
□ Feeling emotionally numb
□ Constantly seeking something to do
□ Feeling disconnected from your body
□ Wanting intense sensations
□ Low energy or feeling "stuck"
□ Craving stimulation

Your body may benefit from:

- Movement
- Music
- Crunchy or sour foods
- Cold water
- Fresh air
- Deep pressure
- Fidgets
- Rhythmic activities
- Exercise

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Your nervous system may be asking for LESS input if you notice...

□ Feeling overwhelmed
□ Irritability
□ Racing thoughts
□ Muscle tension
□ Sensitivity to noise, light, or touch
□ Feeling like you need to escape
□ Difficulty thinking clearly
□ Feeling emotionally flooded

Your body may benefit from:

- A quiet space
- Dim lighting
- A weighted blanket
- Slow breathing
- Gentle rocking
- Warm tea
- Noise-canceling headphones
- Soft, familiar textures
- Reducing demands for a few minutes

Remember

There isn't a "right" kind of nervous system.
Sometimes you'll need more input.
Sometimes you'll need less.
Sometimes you'll need something completely different.

The goal is to become curious enough to ask:
"What does my nervous system need right now?"

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Proprioception

Deep Pressure & Heavy Work

What is proprioception?

Think of this as your body's internal GPS.

Proprioception tells your brain where your body is in space. It's activated through pushing, pulling, lifting, carrying, squeezing, hugging, chewing, and other forms of resistance.

This is one of the most regulating sensory systems because it sends calming information directly to the nervous system.

You might benefit from proprioceptive input if...

□ You feel restless
□ Your thoughts won't slow down
□ You feel disconnected from your body
□ You feel like crawling out of your skin
□ You want to hit something
□ You're pacing
□ You keep clenching your jaw
□ You're craving intense sensations

Try...

☐ Carrying groceries
☐ Lifting weights
☐ Wall push-ups
☐ Push against a wall
☐ Bear hugs
☐ Weighted blanket
☐ Compression clothing
☐ Gardening
☐ Vacuuming
☐ Kneading bread
☐ Chewing gum
☐ Resistance bands
☐ Yoga

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Reflection

Which of these helped?

How did your body feel afterward?

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Vestibular

Movement & Balance

What is the vestibular system?

Your vestibular system helps your brain understand movement, balance, and where your head and body are in space. It influences coordination, attention, alertness, and your sense of stability.

Some movement can help organize the nervous system, while too much movement may increase feelings of dizziness or overwhelm. The key is finding the type of movement that helps your body feel regulated.

You might benefit from vestibular input if...

□ You feel restless or "stuck"
□ You can't sit still
□ You feel disconnected from your body
□ You need to pace
□ You have extra energy
□ You feel sluggish or sleepy

Try...

☐ Going for a walk
☐ Gentle stretching
☐ Yoga
☐ Dancing
☐ Rocking in a chair
☐ Swinging
☐ Riding a bike
☐ Slow head and neck stretches
☐ Tai Chi
☐ Swimming

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Reflection

Which of these helped?

How did your body feel afterward?

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Tactile

Touch & Texture

What is the tactile system?

Your tactile system helps your brain process information through touch. **Texture, temperature, pressure, and physical contact can all influence how calm or overwhelmed you feel.** Some people regulate through comforting textures, while others become overstimulated by certain fabrics, tags, or unexpected touch.

You might benefit from tactile input if...

□ You feel anxious
□ You want to fidget
□ You feel disconnected
□ You notice yourself picking at your skin or nails
□ You feel overwhelmed by certain textures
□ You need comfort

Try...

☐ Holding a soft blanket
☐ Using a stress ball
☐ Playing with putty or clay
☐ Wrapping yourself in a blanket
☐ Petting an animal
☐ Running your hands under warm or cool water
☐ Applying lotion
☐ Holding a smooth stone
☐ Knitting or crocheting

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Reflection

Which of these helped?

How did your body feel afterward?

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Visual

What You See

What is the visual system?

Your visual environment affects attention, energy, and emotional regulation. Bright lights, clutter, movement, or busy spaces can increase stress, while calming visual environments may help your nervous system settle.

You might benefit from visual regulation if...

□ Bright lights bother you
□ Clutter makes you anxious
□ You feel visually overwhelmed
□ You have trouble focusing
□ Busy environments drain you

Try...

☐ Dimming the lights
☐ Sitting near a window
☐ Looking at nature
☐ Organizing one small space
☐ Wearing sunglasses
☐ Lighting a candle (if safe)
☐ Watching fish, clouds, or a fireplace
☐ Closing your eyes for a minute

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Reflection

Which of these helped?

How did your body feel afterward?

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Auditory

Sound

What is the auditory system?

Your auditory system processes sound. Noise can energize, comfort, distract, or overwhelm your nervous system depending on the type, volume, and your current stress level.

You might benefit from auditory regulation if...

□ Noise feels overwhelming
□ Silence feels uncomfortable
□ You become startled easily
□ You have trouble concentrating
□ You seek constant background noise

Try...

☐ Listening to calming music
☐ Nature sounds
☐ White noise
☐ Noise-canceling headphones
☐ Singing
☐ Humming
☐ Deep breathing with slow music
☐ Spending a few minutes in silence

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Reflection

Which of these helped?

How did your body feel afterward?

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Oral

Taste, Temperature & Chewing

What is oral sensory input?

The muscles of the mouth and jaw are closely connected to regulation. Chewing, sipping, tasting, and temperature can all influence how alert or calm your nervous system feels.

Many people in recovery notice increased cravings for gum, coffee, candy, crunchy foods, or ice. Sometimes these behaviors reflect a need for oral sensory input rather than substance use itself.

You might benefit from oral input if...

- ☐ You constantly chew on things
- ☐ You clench your jaw
- ☐ You crave strong flavors
- ☐ You feel restless
- ☐ You grind your teeth

Try...

- ☐ Chewing gum
- ☐ Crunchy vegetables
- ☐ Pretzels
- ☐ Ice chips
- ☐ Peppermints
- ☐ Sour candy
- ☐ Herbal tea
- ☐ Cold water
- ☐ Smoothies

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Reflection

Which of these helped?

How did your body feel afterward?

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Olfactory

Smell

What is the olfactory system?

Smell has a direct connection to memory and emotion. Certain scents can bring comfort, while others may trigger stress or memories associated with substance use.

Learning which scents help your nervous system feel safe can become another regulation tool.

You might benefit from olfactory input if...

□ Certain smells immediately calm you
□ Certain smells trigger cravings or distress
□ You enjoy scented products
□ You notice smell affects your mood

Try...

☐ Lavender
☐ Peppermint
☐ Citrus
☐ Fresh air
☐ Baking bread or cookies
☐ Coffee beans (if not triggering)
☐ Fresh flowers
☐ Pine or cedar

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Reflection

Which of these helped calm you?

How does your body feel?

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Interoception

Listening to Your Body

What is interoception?

Interoception is your ability to notice what's happening inside your body. It helps you recognize hunger, thirst, fatigue, pain, muscle tension, excitement, anxiety, and other internal sensations.

For many people in early recovery, these signals can feel confusing. You may mistake anxiety for danger, thirst for a craving, or emotional distress for a need to use. Building interoceptive awareness can help you respond to your body's needs with greater confidence and self-compassion.

Check in with yourself.
Right now...

□ I am hungry.
□ I am thirsty.
□ I am tired.
□ My muscles feel tense.
□ My breathing feels shallow.
□ My heart is racing.
□ I feel emotionally overwhelmed.
□ I feel calm.
□ I'm not sure what my body is telling me.

What might my body need?

☐ Water
☐ Food
☐ Rest
☐ Movement
☐ Quiet
☐ Deep breathing
☐ Connection
☐ Time outside
☐ Something else: _____

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Reflection

Which of these helped calm you?

How does your body feel?

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Recovery Cheat Sheet

My Top Three Regulation Strategies are:

1.
2.
3.

My Top Three Triggers are:

1.
2.
3.

When I'm overwhelmed, I don't have to feel calm immediately. Instead, I can ask:

What's one step closer to feeling regulated?

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Stop Light

🟢 GREEN

My nervous system feels...

- Present
- Connected
- Flexible
- Curious
- Able to solve problems

Things that help me stay here:

🟡 YELLOW

I'm beginning to notice...

□ Racing thoughts
□ Irritability
□ Tight muscles
□ Isolating
□ Skipping meals
□ Not sleeping
□ Thinking about using
□ Avoiding people

What usually helps here?

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Stop Light

🔴 RED

My nervous system is overwhelmed.

I might notice...
□ I want to escape.
□ I can't think clearly.
□ Everything feels impossible.
□ I'm craving intensely.
□ I'm shutting down.
□ I feel emotionally flooded.

My emergency regulation plan:

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Was this helpful?

About Little Seed Counseling

At Little Seed Counseling, we believe there is no one "right" way to have a brain.

We are a neuroaffirming, trauma-informed counseling practice that recognizes behavior as communication and regulation as a foundation for healing. Whether someone is navigating recovery, ADHD, autism, trauma, anxiety, or simply trying to better understand themselves, we believe lasting change begins with curiosity—not judgment.

This workbook was created to offer practical, compassionate tools that honor the wisdom of your nervous system. We hope it reminds you that regulation isn't about forcing yourself to be calm or "getting it right." It's about learning what your body is asking for and responding with care.

Our Services

- Individual therapy
- Couples therapy
- Groups
- ADHD and autism assessments
- Neurodiversity-affirming counseling
- Trauma therapy
- Addiction and recovery support
- LGBTQIA+ affirming care
- Clinical training and consultation

Thank you for allowing us to be a small part of your journey.
Little Seed Counseling

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