

# FINDING CALM IN CHAOS

## RECOGNIZING AND RESPONDING TO CAREGIVER STRESS

### A GUIDE FOR PARENTS NAVIGATING TRAUMA, ONGOING STRESS, AND MOMENTS OF CALM

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#### UNDERSTANDING MEDICAL TRAUMA

**Medical trauma** happens when healthcare experiences overwhelm your ability to cope — when your sense of **safety, control, or predictability** is shaken.

Both patients *and caregivers* can experience it.

It can affect:

- your physical and mental health
- your relationships and sense of self
- how you view the world and your future

#### LEVELS OF MEDICAL TRAUMA

| Level                                   | Description                             | Trauma Can Happen When...                     |
|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| <b>Planned &amp; Routine</b>            | Regular check-ups, labs, therapies      | A “normal” visit re-triggers fear or grief    |
| <b>Life-Threatening / Life-Altering</b> | New diagnosis, surgery, or major change | Life feels uncertain or permanently different |
| <b>Medical Emergency</b>                | Acute crises, ICU, ER                   | Total loss of control, life feels at risk     |

***Trauma can happen at any level and may be re-activated by later experiences.***

#### LAYERS OF IMPACT

- **Patient factors:** history, personality, coping skills
- **Diagnosis & procedures:** the nature and severity of conditions
- **Medical staff & system:** empathy, communication, culture
- **Environment:** sounds, lights, routines, loss of privacy

Trauma isn’t only about what happens — it’s also about how every layer interacts and how powerless it can make us feel.

#### ENDURING SOMATIC THREAT

When danger lives *in the body* (yours or your child’s), safety can’t be found by “getting away.”

Ongoing illness, uncertainty, or pain keeps the nervous system alert — always scanning for the next threat.

The goal becomes learning to find *moments of pause and grounding*, even when the situation isn’t over.

## ♥ UNDERSTANDING GRIEF

Grief is the **normal, healthy response to loss** — not something to overcome or fix.  
It's an expression of love and connection.

### COMMON IMPACTS

- **Mind:** racing thoughts, confusion, sadness
- **Body:** fatigue, tension, headaches
- **Relationships:** changes in support and roles
- **Spirit:** questioning meaning, faith, or purpose
- **Practical life:** finances, routines, daily function

### TYPES OF GRIEF

- **Non-Death Loss** – Losses unrelated to death, such as health, function, identity, or relationships.
- **Anticipatory Grief** – Grieving that begins before an expected loss occurs.
- **Traumatic Grief** – Grief following a sudden, violent, or traumatic loss.
- **Secondary Loss** – The chain reaction of additional losses that follow the primary one.
- **Ambiguous Loss** – Loss that lacks clarity; the person may be physically present but psychologically absent, or vice versa.
- **Non-Finite Loss** – Ongoing, changing, and uncertain losses with no clear end point.
- **Cumulative Grief** – Experiencing multiple losses over time, often without space to recover or process between them.
- **Collective Grief** – Shared grief experienced by groups or communities after a large-scale or shared loss.
- **Disenfranchised Grief** – Grief that is not recognized, validated, or socially supported by others.

Each gives language to different layers of what you carry.

### THE “ASSUMPTIVE WORLD”

Grief shakes our assumptions about how life should work — safety, fairness, trust, control.

#### When Loss Occurs:

- These assumptions are **violated, ignored, or disrupted**
- The world feels unsafe or chaotic
- The grieving process becomes the work of **rebuilding meaning** and a new assumptive world

What beliefs about safety, fairness, or control were shaken by this loss?

## ♥ UNDERSTANDING THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

| State                          | Feels Like             | Purpose             |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| ● Ventral — calm & connected   | grounded, hopeful      | rest, connect, heal |
| ● Sympathetic — fight / flight | tense, anxious, urgent | mobilize, protect   |
| ● Dorsal — shutdown / numb     | flat, foggy, detached  | conserve, withdraw  |

You move through these states all day. The goal isn't to stay calm — it's to **shift smoothly**.

## HOW STRESS SHOWS UP

**Body:** racing heart, stomach drop

**Mind:** “what-if” thoughts, replaying events

**Emotions:** anger, tears, numbness

**Relationships:** snapping, isolating, over-functioning

## RECOGNIZING A STATE SHIFT

| Shift                      | How It Feels                        |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| ● → ● Calm → Mobilized     | fast talking, tension, urgency      |
| ● → ● Overwhelm → Collapse | foggy, withdrawn, “I can’t do this” |
| ● → ● Collapse → Reconnect | deeper breath, reaching out         |

Awareness is the first step from automatic survival to intentional regulation.

## PAUSE → NOTICE → RECOGNIZE → IDENTIFY → RESPOND

| Step             | What It Means           | Example                            |
|------------------|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 1 Pause          | Stop and breathe        | “Let me exhale before I answer.”   |
| 2 Notice         | Scan body, mind, heart  | “My jaw is tight.”                 |
| 3 Recognize      | Name the state          | “My body thinks I’m in danger.”    |
| 4 Identify Needs | Ask what’s needed       | “Do I need comfort or connection?” |
| 5 Respond        | Choose one small action | “Text a friend, pray, or stretch.” |

## GLIMMERS AND ANCHORS

Small moments that remind your body it’s *safe enough*:

- A kind nurse
- Your child’s laugh
- Warm sunlight
- A steady song
- Breathing after a hard moment

Noticing glimmers builds flexibility — it reminds your brain that safety still exists even in pain.

## ♥ LIVING BETWEEN STATES

Many parents live with **one foot in Sympathetic (mobilized)** and **one in Ventral (connected)** — alert yet anchored. That overlap helps us survive while staying human.

| Blend                 | Feels Like         | Looks Like                             |
|-----------------------|--------------------|----------------------------------------|
| Sympathetic + Ventral | alert but grounded | making decisions calmly while afraid   |
| Dorsal + Ventral      | tired but hopeful  | resting intentionally, asking for help |

You can be scared *and* steady.

You can act *and* stay connected.

## 🛡️ WHAT YOU CAN DO

### 🌱 IDENTIFY YOUR TRAUMA

Take a few quiet moments to name the experiences that still carry charge or pain. You're not reopening wounds — you're naming where your body still remembers.

#### Prompts:

- What moments or memories still bring a strong reaction?
- When do you feel powerless, unheard, or unsafe?
- What reminders tend to activate your body's alarm system?

### 💔 IDENTIFY YOUR GRIEF

Grief is woven throughout the medically complex parenting journey — not just when something ends, but every time life changes in ways you didn't expect.

You may notice different types of grief showing up at different times:

**Non-Death Loss      Anticipatory Grief      Ambiguous Loss**  
**Non-Finite Loss      Secondary Loss      Cumulative Loss      Disenfranchised Grief**

Each of these brings its own mix of emotions — sadness, anger, guilt, love, or even relief — and they can overlap or reappear as life unfolds.

#### Reflection Prompts:

- Which kinds of grief feel most present for you right now?
- What have you lost or had to let go of — dreams, routines, expectations, a sense of normalcy?
- What does your heart still hold hope for, even in the middle of this?

### IDENTIFY YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

We all carry assumptions — about safety, fairness, control, our role as parents, and what life “should” look like. Grief and trauma often shake these foundations.

#### Prompts:

- What beliefs have been challenged by your experience?
- What do you wish others understood about your reality?
- What new truths or meanings are beginning to form for you?

## NAME YOUR STATES

Describe what each state feels like for you and come up with a name/nick name that fits for YOU

- Ventral: \_\_\_\_\_
- Sympathetic: \_\_\_\_\_
- Dorsal: \_\_\_\_\_

Your body gives signals when it's changing states:

- Faster heartbeat → Sympathetic
- Muscle tension or jaw clenching → Sympathetic
- Detachment or foggiess → Dorsal
- Clear thinking and deep breathing → Ventral

### Mini-Activity: "Name Your States"

Write a few words that describe *you* in each state:

- When I'm grounded: \_\_\_\_\_
- When I'm on edge: \_\_\_\_\_
- When I'm shut down: \_\_\_\_\_

## NAME YOUR TRIGGERS

What moves you between states — the hard and the good?

Hard: \_\_\_\_\_ Good: \_\_\_\_\_

### Mini-Activity: "Name Your Triggers"

Think of moments that make you shift between states:

- Hard triggers: \_\_\_\_\_
- Good triggers: \_\_\_\_\_

## TRACK YOUR STATES

Notice patterns: When do you feel most tense or most at ease?

Use an app, journal, or a daily note: "What gear am I in right now?"

### Mini-Activity: "Take Stock"

Rate your daily energy from 1 (shut down) to 10 (over-activated).

Notice where you spend most of your time.

## IDENTIFY WHEN SHIFTING GETS STUCK

When tension or numbness lingers, pause and ask:

What is my body trying to do for me right now?

Write one thing that helps you come back:

When tense → \_\_\_\_\_ When flat → \_\_\_\_\_

## PAUSE → NOTICE → RECOGNIZE → RESPOND

When you feel a shift happening:

- 1 Pause:** Take one slow exhale.
- 2 Notice:** Where do you feel it? (body, mind, heart, relationships)
- 3 Recognize:** "My body's protecting me right now."
- 4 Respond:** What's one small thing I can do — breathe, stretch, text a friend, cry, pray?

**Micro-Activity:** Practice one full cycle today. Write how it felt: \_\_\_\_\_

## ✦ GLIMMER PRACTICE

Write three moments that helped you breathe today:

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_

A **glimmer** is a micro-moment of calm, connection, or meaning — not always happy, but grounding.

An **anchor** is a place, sound, or memory that helps your body remember safety.

## ♥ LIVING BETWEEN STATES

Many caregivers live with **one foot in sympathetic** (mobilized, alert) and **one in ventral** (connected, aware).

That's okay — it's often how survival works.

**Think:**

"I can be scared and steady.

I can act while still caring.

I can hold safety and stress at the same time."

**Do:**

Write some statements that help you recognize this in-between and acknowledge it to yourself.

## 🌱 MOVING FORWARD

- Trauma therapy can help process what's in the past.
- Grief counseling can help honor what's still unfolding.
- Every small pause expands your ability to hold both pain *and* joy.
- The goal isn't perfection — it's connection.

You can't always choose the storm,  
but you can learn to steer the boat —  
one breath, one moment, one glimmer at a time.

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