

Red Flags and Nervous System State Recognition

CHAPTER 3 RESOURCE

As a coach, you can't force a client's nervous system to shift, but you can learn to spot which state they are in. Use these physical and behavioral cues to adjust your pacing.

Red Flags Requiring Immediate Referral Suicidal ideation or self-harm Severe depression lasting more than two weeks Trauma symptoms requiring clinical processing Disordered eating behaviors Psychotic symptoms New or worsening medical symptoms

SYMPATHETIC STATE (Hyperarousal) (Fight, Flight, or High-Tone Freeze) **Breathing:** Shallow, rapid, or located high in the chest. **Speech:** Fast-paced, pressured, or jumping quickly between topics. **Muscles:** Visible tension in the jaw, shoulders, or hands (clenched fists). **Eyes:** Darting, wide, or hyper-focused (vigilance). **Digestion:** Nausea, bloating, or lack of appetite. **Mindset:** "I need to fix this now," black-and-white thinking, anxiety, or irritability. **Coaching Implication:** The client is not open to deep insight. Focus on grounding and safety, not challenging questions.

PARASYMPATHETIC STATE (Optimal Zone) (Rest, Digest, and Repair) **Breathing:** Slower, deeper, and rhythmic (belly breathing). **Speech:** Slower pace, pauses are comfortable, tone is varied (prosody). **Muscles:** Shoulders drop, face softens, body posture is open. **Eyes:** Soft gaze, heavy lids, or comfortable contact. **Digestion:** Stomach gurgling (a positive sign of "rest and digest"). **Mindset:** Curiosity, ability to see nuance, patience, and connection. **Coaching Implication:** The client is effectively "online." This is the state where insight, learning, and healing occur.

DORSAL VAGAL STATE (Shutdown/Collapse) **Breathing:** Very shallow or barely perceptible. **Speech:** Minimal, monotone, flat affect, long pauses or trailing off. **Muscles:** Limp, collapsed posture, heaviness. **Eyes:** Glazed, unfocused, or downcast; minimal eye contact. **Digestion:** May report feeling "nothing" or disconnected from the body. **Mindset:** "What's the point," numbness, disconnection, inability to plan or think forward. **Coaching Implication:** The client is "offline." Do not push for insight or action. Focus on gentle re-engagement: reduce session demands, offer silence, use grounding cues. If persistent, this may indicate a need for clinical support.