ONE STEP CLOSER CO™

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EMERGENCY TOOLKIT · NO. 04

The Freeze ***State***

What to do when your nervous system shuts down, goes numb, or stops

Shutdown · Numbness · Paralysis · Disconnection

The Nervous System Regulation Toolkit Series

One Step Closer Co™

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BEFORE YOU BEGIN

A Note Before You Begin

If you are in a freeze state right now, reading this may feel difficult. The words might not land. You might read the same sentence twice and find nothing there. That is the freeze doing exactly what it does.

You do not need to understand everything in this toolkit right now. You do not need to do it correctly. You just need to find one small thing — one tiny action — and do only that.

> *Freeze is not laziness. It is not weakness. Freeze-like shutdown can be a protective response to overwhelm, threat, chronic stress, exhaustion, depression, dissociation, or other physical and psychological conditions.*

The way out of freeze is never force. It is never demand. It is warmth, gentleness, and very small invitations back to the present.

This toolkit speaks to you as gently as it knows how. There is nothing here you have to do. There is only what you might try.

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Small is enough. One degree warmer. One thing noticed. That counts.
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ORIENTATION

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is built differently from the others. Freeze responds to very small steps, not structured protocols. You do not need to work through it in order.
This toolkit contains six core tools, supported by a three-step protocol, quick-reference guide, personal profile, and customized action plan.

THREE WAYS TO USE IT

IN THE FREEZE

Open to any page. Read one sentence. Try one thing for 30 seconds. That is enough. Come back for more when you can.

COMING OUT OF IT

When there is a little more capacity, try Tool 01 or 02. Very gentle. No pressure. Stop if it feels like too much.

BUILDING AWARENESS

Complete My Freeze Profile when you are out the other side. The pattern becomes easier to work with once you can see it.

FIND YOUR TOOL BY WHAT'S HAPPENING RIGHT NOW

Completely shut down, can't move → Tool 01: The Orienting Response	Cold, numb, disconnected from body → Tool 02: Comfort and Sensory Contact
Can't start anything at all → Tool 03: Micro-Movement	Stuck between frozen and flooded → Tool 04: Pendulation
Everything feels impossible → Tool 05: The 1% Protocol	Breath is shallow or held → Tool 06: Gentle Breath Activation

The most important thing: do not push. Freeze deepens under pressure. Warmth and patience often help it ease, though not on command.

UNDERSTANDING FREEZE STATE

What Is the Freeze State?

Polyvagal Theory offers one commonly used framework for organizing experiences of connection, mobilization, and shutdown. Some of its specific anatomical and evolutionary claims remain scientifically debated. This toolkit uses the three-state framework as a practical metaphor, not as a diagnosis or complete explanation of the nervous system.

CONNECTED

Socially Engaged

Connected, regulated, able to think and feel simultaneously.

MOBILIZED

Fight-or-Flight Activation

Activated, mobilized, flooded. The state of the other toolkits.

SHUT DOWN

Immobilized or Disconnected

Immobilized, numb, collapsed, disconnected. This toolkit.

This kind of shutdown is not chosen. It is the nervous system's response to overwhelm that exceeds fight-or-flight capacity — a protective pattern thought to help animals survive inescapable threat. In humans, it can activate in response to relational overwhelm, chronic stress, or situations that feel impossible to escape.

SIGNS YOU ARE IN FREEZE

- Can't make decisions
- Feel far away from yourself
- No emotion — just flat
- Can't start tasks
- Body feels heavy or still
- Time passes strangely
- Hard to speak or reach out
- Wanting to disappear

Freeze is not laziness, avoidance, or not caring. It is a physiological state. It responds to warmth and tiny movement — not to pressure, demands, or willpower.

GENTLE PROTOCOL

The Three-Step Gentle Protocol

There is no emergency protocol for freeze. Urgency makes it worse. Instead, this is a three-step invitation — very gentle, very slow, with no requirement to get it right.

01 NOTICE WITHOUT JUDGMENT

Simply observe: "I think I might be in a freeze state right now." You don't have to do anything with that information yet. Just naming it is the first step — it activates a tiny amount of prefrontal engagement and creates the smallest crack in the shutdown.

02 FIND ONE SMALL WARMTH

Make contact with something warm. A blanket. A hot drink. Your own hands pressed together. Warmth may provide a cue of comfort, care, and present-moment safety. You don't need to do anything else yet. Just find the warmth. For some people, cool or neutral sensory contact feels better than warmth. Choose the sensory cue that feels most orienting rather than following a rigid rule.

03 ONE TINY MOVEMENT

Move one part of your body. Wiggle one finger. Roll your shoulders once. Turn your head slowly left, then right. Freeze maintains itself through stillness. Any movement — however small — begins to interrupt it.

→ If even these three steps feel too much: start with just the noticing. That is genuinely enough. The rest can wait.

TOOL 01

01 The Orienting Response

Coming back to where you are

USE WHEN: Completely shut down, can't move

The orienting response is one of the most fundamental nervous system functions — the instinct to look around and assess: where am I, is it safe here? In freeze, this function has switched off. Gently reactivating it begins the thaw.

This practice comes from Somatic Experiencing, developed by Peter Levine. It is very slow. That is intentional.

THE PRACTICE

- If you can, sit upright. If that's too much, stay exactly where you are.
- Do not force eye movement or scan rapidly. Let your eyes rest naturally on one neutral or pleasant object.
- Very slowly, turn your head to the right. Let your eyes move with your head. Look — really look — at what's there. Notice one object. Its color. Its shape. Whether it's still or moving.
- Pause. Breathe. There is no hurry.
- Very slowly, turn your head to the left. Look at what's there. Notice one thing.
- Let your eyes rest on something in the middle distance — not a screen. A window, a wall, a plant.
- If you have low vision, listen for one sound, notice one point of contact, or identify where your body is supported.
- Ask very gently: "Where am I right now?" Name the room, the building, the city.
- Ask: "Is there immediate danger here, in this room, right now?" Let the answer register — even if it takes a moment.
- Notice any very small shift. A breath. A slight settling. That is the orienting response beginning to work.

> *Orienting tells the nervous system: I am here. I can see. It is now. There is no predator in this room. That information — slowly received — begins to unlock the freeze.*

TOOL 02

Comfort and Sensory Contact

02

Bringing the body back online

USE WHEN: Cold, numb, disconnected from body

Freeze is often experienced as coldness — physical and emotional. The body temperature may drop slightly during this kind of shutdown. Warmth — physical warmth — signals safety to the nervous system at a level beneath cognition.

This tool works through the senses, not through thinking. You cannot reason yourself warm.

Heat

Wrap both hands around a warm drink. Hold it. Feel the heat move into your palms. Stay with that sensation for at least 60 seconds. A warm shower, bath, or a few minutes in sunlight can also help for some people.

Texture

Hold something with a distinct texture — a rough stone, a soft fabric, a wooden object. Rub it slowly with your thumb. The tactile input activates sensory processing and begins to pull attention back into the body.

Scent

Find a smell that is neutral or comforting — coffee, a candle, your own clothing. Breathe in slowly and deliberately. Olfaction bypasses the cortex and goes directly to the limbic system — one of the few senses that does.

Sound

Put on music you know well — something with a steady rhythm. Familiar music can support feelings of safety and connection. Hum along if you can — humming creates vibration and a longer exhale, which some people find settling.

Weight

Pull a blanket over you. Hold something heavy in your lap, or invite pet contact if it is welcomed. Comfortable weighted pressure may help you feel held, contained, and less like you are falling.

TOOL 03

Micro-Movement

03

The smallest possible start

USE WHEN: Can't start anything at all

Freeze maintains itself through immobility. The nervous system reads stillness as continued threat — or continued shutdown. Any movement, no matter how tiny, begins to disrupt that loop.

The key word is micro. This is not about exercise or effort. It is about the smallest possible action that counts as movement.

Movement may be visible or nearly invisible: moving the eyes, swallowing, pressing a fingertip, shifting weight, imagining a movement, or changing one point of contact.

START HERE — CHOOSE THE SMALLEST ONE

Wiggle one finger

Just one. Let the rest of the body stay still. One finger moving is enough.

Roll your shoulders

Once. Slowly. Forward, up, back, down. Then stop. That is complete.

Tap your foot

One foot, gently tapping the floor. A slow rhythm. You don't have to maintain it.

Turn your head

Left, then right. Slowly. Let the room change as you move. Then stop.

Open your hands

If your hands are closed or tensed, gently open them. Spread the fingers. Then rest.

Stand up for 10 seconds

Just stand. Not to go anywhere. Just to change the shape your body is in.

Walk to another room

Not to do anything there. Just to move through space. Then come back if needed.

Shake your hands

Loose wrists, shake the hands for 10 seconds. This is neurologically completing a stress response.

> *You don't have to want to move. You don't have to feel ready. The movement comes first. The feeling of readiness sometimes follows movement — rarely the other way around.*

TOOL 04

Pendulation

04

Moving between freeze and safety

USE WHEN: Stuck between frozen and flooded

Pendulation is a somatic practice, used in Somatic Experiencing, that involves gently moving attention between discomfort and a neutral or more tolerable sensation. It may be useful for some people and destabilizing for others. Stop if symptoms intensify.

The swing itself is regulating. It teaches the nervous system that it can move in and out of difficult states without being overwhelmed.

THE PRACTICE

- Notice the freeze sensation in your body — wherever you feel it most. Heaviness, numbness, flatness, distance. Just locate it without trying to change it.
- Now move your attention to something that feels neutral or even slightly okay. It doesn't have to feel good. Just: less bad. A part of your body that feels relatively okay. A color you can see. A texture you can touch.
- Stay with the neutral thing for 30–60 seconds. Let your attention rest there.
- Gently bring your attention back to the freeze sensation. Notice it again — briefly.
- Move back to the neutral resource. Stay there again.
- Continue this gentle pendulum — frozen → neutral → frozen → neutral — for 5–10 minutes.
- Notice, very gradually, whether the freeze sensation shifts at all. Even 5% change is significant.

EXAMPLES OF NEUTRAL RESOURCES

A plant or tree visible from where you are · The weight of your feet on the floor · The feeling of the chair supporting you · A color on the wall · The temperature of your hands

→ Pendulation works because it shows the nervous system that it can visit the difficult place and come back. The coming back is what builds capacity over time.

TOOL 05

The 1% Protocol

05

When everything feels impossible

USE WHEN: Everything feels impossible

Freeze makes everything feel like it requires the same impossible amount of energy — whether that thing is running a marathon or washing one dish. The 1% Protocol works by reducing the task to something so small it bypasses the freeze's resistance.

The goal is not completion. The goal is starting. Starting changes the nervous system state.

THE PRACTICE

- Think of one thing you have been unable to start.
- Ask: "What is 1% of this task?" Not 10%. Not 50%. One percent. Examples: The task is 'reply to that email' → 1% is opening the email. The task is 'have a shower' → 1% is walking to the bathroom. The task is 'get out of bed' → 1% is moving your feet to the edge.
- Do only the 1%. When it is done, stop. You do not owe the rest of it right now.
- Notice that you did something. Even something tiny. This is real.
- If you can, do another 1%. But only if it arises naturally — not from pressure.

1% EXAMPLES

Get out of bed
Move feet to the edge of the bed.

Clean the kitchen
Put one thing in the sink.

Reply to a message
Open the message and read it once.

Exercise
Put on shoes. Just the shoes.

Make food
Open the fridge and look at what's there.

Call someone
Find their name in your contacts.

Done is not the point. Started is the point. Momentum — even the smallest momentum — is the opposite of freeze. The purpose is not productivity. It is to make contact with choice and movement at a scale that feels possible. Completing only the 1% is a complete use of the tool.

TOOL 06

Gentle Breath Activation

06

Breathing life back into the system

USE WHEN: Breath is shallow or held

In freeze, breath becomes shallow, slow, or occasionally held without awareness. Unlike flooding (where the breath is too fast), freeze breath is too still. The goal here is not deep breathing — it is slightly more breath than you are currently taking.

These practices are gentle. Do not force anything. If any of these increase discomfort, stop and try the Warmth tool instead.

SIGHING

Let yourself sigh — long and audible, or make any vocalized exhale that feels natural. A comfortable sigh may release held breath and create a small shift in sensation. If it doesn't come naturally, pretend to yawn — the yawn mechanism often produces a real one.

HUMMING BREATH

Breathe in normally. On the exhale, hum — any note, any volume. Humming creates vibration and naturally lengthens the exhale. Some people experience this as settling or orienting. Even quiet humming works. Do this for 5–8 breaths.

BALLOON BREATH

Place one hand on your belly. Breathe in just enough to feel your hand move slightly — as if you're inflating a small balloon. Don't force a big breath. Just slightly more than your current resting breath. Exhale slowly. Repeat 6 times.

VOCALIZED EXHALE

Breathe in. On the exhale, make a soft sound — not a hum, but a quiet 'ahhh' or 'vvvv' or 'shhhh'. Any sustained vocal sound on the exhale. The vibration signals safety to the nervous system.

→ Don't try to breathe your way out of freeze all at once. One or two of these, then warmth, then maybe some movement. Layer them gently. Do not force deep breathing. If breath attention increases discomfort, return to sensory contact or micro-movement.

AFTER THE FREEZE

After the Freeze

Coming out of freeze can feel strange. Sometimes it's gradual — like warming up after being very cold. Sometimes emotions that were frozen begin to surface as the system thaws. Both are normal.

Be very gentle with yourself in the hours after a significant freeze state.

RECOVERY RITUALS

1. Eat something warm if possible. The body has been in a low-resource state.
2. Be outside briefly if you can — natural light and gentle movement help consolidate the return.
3. Do not immediately fill the space with demands, decisions, or high-stimulation activity.
4. If emotions surface as you thaw — sadness, grief, irritability — let them. They were waiting.
5. Tell one person, if you have a safe one: "I'm coming back. I was in a frozen place."
6. Journal when ready: "What was I trying to protect myself from? What did the freeze stop me from having to feel?"

> *Freeze happens when the system decides the world is too much. Coming back out is not a return to before — it is a return to now. And now is different from then.*

Each time you found one small thing — one degree of warmth, one tiny movement, one noticed sensation — you were not failing to overcome the freeze. You were working with your nervous system, not against it. That is the only way through.

QUICK REFERENCE

When to Use What

TOOL 01

The Orienting Response — 5–10 min

When: Completely shut down

TOOL 02

Comfort and Sensory Contact — 5–15 min

When: Cold, numb, distant

TOOL 03

Micro-Movement — 1–2 min

When: Can't start anything

TOOL 04

Pendulation — 5–10 min

When: Stuck / cycling

TOOL 05

The 1% Protocol — As needed

When: Everything impossible

TOOL 06

Gentle Breath — 3–5 min

When: Breath shallow or held

ALWAYS FIRST

Notice without judgment → Find warmth → One tiny movement

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Persistent numbness, immobility, fatigue, confusion, memory loss, fainting, medication effects, severe depression, substance use, withdrawal, neurological symptoms, or inability to care for basic needs require professional assessment. Do not assume every shutdown state is trauma-related freeze.

PERSONAL WORK

My Freeze Profile

Complete this after the freeze has passed. No pressure to have answers — write what you can.

What tends to precede my freeze

Overwhelm, too much input, emotional exhaustion…

How my freeze feels in my body

Heavy, numb, slow, cold, distant, flat…

What I avoid doing when frozen

Replying, deciding, reaching out, eating, moving…

What has helped me thaw in the past

Warmth, a person, movement, sleep, time alone…

My earliest warning sign — before full freeze sets in

The moment I still have a small window to intervene:

The one thing that most reliably helps me return

PERSONAL WORK

My Personal Protocol

Choose your tools and write them in. Made when you can think clearly, for when you cannot.

I KNOW I AM FREEZING WHEN…

MY THREE TOOLS — IN ORDER

01 FIRST

The very first thing I do:

02 THEN

Once I have the smallest movement, I do:

03 FINALLY

As I begin to thaw, I try:

THE ONE PERSON I CAN CONTACT WHEN FROZEN

I don't have to explain. I can just say: "I'm frozen. I need to know you're there."

WHAT I WILL NOT DO TO MYSELF WHILE FROZEN

e.g. Call myself lazy, force productivity, compare to others

A FINAL NOTE

You came back.

From somewhere very far away, you came back.

Freeze takes you somewhere that feels permanent. The flatness, the distance, the sense that this is just how things are now — it lies. It always lies. It is a state, not a destination.

The wiggle of one finger. The warmth of a mug. The slow turning of your head to look at the room. These are not small things dressed up as important.

They are the bravest things. Done from inside a state that wanted nothing more than to stay still forever.

You moved. You came back. You are here.

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