

Ep #264: How to Calm Down When You're Emotionally Overwhelmed



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With Your Host

Amanda Hess

[How to Love Yourself No Matter What](#) with Amanda Hess

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Have you ever experienced that full body shutdown where your brain is spinning, your heart's racing, and you just want to cry or disappear? That's emotional overwhelm. And I know, I've been there too. In this episode, I'll give you three simple ways to calm your nervous system so you can feel more grounded, clear, and actually in control again.

This show is for women who've been labeled, misdiagnosed, or misunderstood. Whether you have a diagnosis or just know deep down that you experience life differently, this is your space to stop fixing yourself and start trusting who you already are. My name is Amanda Hess. Let's go.

Okay, my friends. Welcome to the podcast. Today we are going to talk about how to calm emotional overwhelm using your nervous system.

I remember the first time I was away from my baby, and I was on a trip with my mom to Vegas, and we were going to go see a horse show. I had never left my son overnight, let alone left the country. And so, I went to this excited but also very nervous about being able to pump milk because it was never really something that I could do very well. So, on this trip, in the airport, I couldn't get my milk to let down. And when I got to the hotel room, I couldn't get my milk to let down. And it was painful, and I was panicking. And I started losing control of myself. I was hyperventilating, I was crying, I was making loud noises. And I remember my mom coming out of the bathroom and just losing her mind on me, which is a whole other story. But that was emotional overwhelm. That's what happened. I was emotionally overwhelmed in that moment.

If this sounds familiar, if you've had some version of that story come up for you, I want you to know that you're not broken. You're not dramatic. You're just dysregulated. When we experience panic attacks, when we experience emotion that takes over, we feel out of control because we are out of control. And it's not purposeful. It's not conscious. It is an automatic response that our body has and has set up for stress.

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So, let's talk about what's really happening when your emotions take over and how you can start feeling safe again in your body. The first thing that we really need to talk about is what the nervous system has to do with any of this. And what I will say is that we begin with understanding the purpose of our nervous system, okay? So, our nervous system exists to keep us safe. The reason why we experience pain is so that we don't hurt ourselves further, so that we avoid pain. The reason why we experience pleasure is so that we go and find the things that are going to make our life better. Our brain is wired to avoid pain and to seek out pleasure. This is automatic. We all come with the same system.

Now, what happens is when we are in a situation where our brain has decided something is dangerous, it elicits a stress response. And a stress response is fight, flight, freeze, and fawn. So, let's just really talk about what those things are. Fight is when we are going to get in a fight. So, if we were having somebody attack us, we would fight back. In our regular day-to-day life, fight can look like getting in a fight with somebody, either online or in person, physically or verbally. But fight can also look like beating up yourself. That can be fight. Fight can be arguing inside of our own head. That can be a fight response, that perpetual thinking, that rolling around again and again and again and again, can be a fight response.

Flight is running away. So, you always have the picture of the deer that runs away, right? But in our day-to-day life, we're not actually physically being chased. However, we still run away. We run away through scrolling our phone. We run away through watching TV, bingeing shows. Sometimes a flight response can look like overeating to escape a feeling. Sometimes a flight response can look like overexercising. Flight is just running away from a feeling. Okay? Run away.

The next is freeze. And it's just like it sounds: we freeze. That deer in the headlights, that freeze response. I have a really good freeze response when I mountain bike, by the way. Definitely not the best response for mountain biking because if you freeze, you don't move your arms and then you don't actually go where you want to go. But I've really noticed I have

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intense freeze response when I mountain bike, which doesn't necessarily serve me. But we have freeze responses in our day-to-day life that we might not recognize as such, such as procrastination.

Procrastination is a freeze response. When we procrastinate, it's not because we're lazy or we are unmotivated or we are lacking qualities to do things. It's because we're experiencing a freeze response. So we feel unsafe, emotionally, mentally, potentially physically unsafe, and then we freeze.

And then lastly, fawn. And a fawn response is simply people-pleasing. People-pleasing is saying yes when you want to say no, going against your values or things that are important to you, and instead acquiescing so that the other person will be satisfied. Sometimes people-pleasing is control in that we do things to try and manipulate how the other person receives us so they will take certain actions, right? That is a fawn response. And what's important to know about all of this is that all of this is automatic. It is definitely not something that we consciously put into place. It's really just a symptom of feeling unsafe when we fall into the stress response.

The truth is that when this happens for us, this is our nervous system doing exactly what it's supposed to do, but it's doing it without context. And therefore, it feels like chaos. If a bear was chasing you, you would want this. You would want no thinking, just acting. But a bear is not chasing you, and so that chaotic feeling can create a lot of chaos in your life. The goal, just so you know, is not to never get emotionally overwhelmed because that's not even possible.

Instead, it's to recognize it sooner and to know what to do about it, and also create an environment within yourself where this happens less often. We want to balance out this state. And the reason why is because so many of us end up trapped here. So often when I'm working with clients, they are trapped in a stress response that they are repeating again and again and again and again. And they can't find the exit ramp. They recognize possibly, you might even listening to this podcast recognize that you are

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stuck here, but not really understand how to stop it. How do you get out of there?

And what I will tell you is that we want to get out of our brain. We won't solve our problems at all when we're in this state. There's no action you can take that will solve this. Instead, we need to get into our body. So, I want to talk about a client that fully started understanding nervous system regulation, okay? I've actually had so many. It was hard to pick just one for you. But I have had several clients who have experienced panic attacks. And they manifest in different ways. They manifest in the way that I explained at the beginning of this podcast, but they can be many different versions of a panic attack.

But with this particular client, it would stop her from being able to do what she wanted to do. And she had tried everything to deal with them. She ended up just basically taking an Ativan to calm them down, and that's all she really could do to create any kind of traction. And so, she ended up missing out on a lot of things because of this.

So, when we started moving into regulating her nervous system and implementing some of the things that we're going to talk about today, what she started to realize is she was no longer trying to outthink her anxiety. And she would notice the cues, notice what was happening before she would start to spiral. And what she also noticed is that it happened less often. She was less often stuck in that stress response that led to a panic attack because she would be able to go in her body, use the tools, recover, and keep going. And to me, that's the most important part.

Many times we start to have this experience and we become afraid of our nervous system. And you wouldn't put it as that to me. You would be basically in a state where you felt like you were freaking out or that you couldn't cope. But at the end of the day, what's really happening is when your body starts to show up with this stress response and you notice your mouth getting dry and heart starting to be a little faster and your palms are getting a little sweaty, that would immediately start panic. And for her, what

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she learned is that she has agency over this. She has the ability to go in her body and regulate and then talk herself through this. And so you also have that ability. There's not a person I know that can't do this. You can do this. If I can do this, if she can do this, if all my other clients can do this, you can do this.

So, there's three things that I like to focus on when I'm talking about nervous system regulation. And when I think about nervous system regulation, it might be different than what you might have heard in the past. A lot of people will talk about meditation, and I think meditation can be great. It's a tool in the toolbox, but it's not the only tool. And we want to have more accessible tools because if you're driving your car, how are you going to drop into a meditation? Or if you're giving a presentation, how are you going to start meditating? You're not. You can't. And at the end of the day, I think I just want to reiterate that nervous system regulation isn't about getting rid of a feeling. It is about being able to move through the experience and stay out of a stress response.

So, when I'm looking at this, there are three things that I really tap into. Number one is your senses. Your senses are a very accessible point for regulation. And what I do find to be very, very effective is pleasure. So, really bringing into your space smells that are pleasurable, sights that are pleasurable, things that you feel that are pleasurable, things that you touch, that you taste, that you smell, that you hear. Start bringing in pleasure into your day-to-day. And I recommend this to be in every room in your house, to be in your car, to be something that you're always consciously thinking about.

You want this to be a mindful experience. This is a simple way to begin experiencing mindfulness. And it's a way that you can do it where your brain is going to object the least. And that's what I really want is for you to be able to have regulating practices that there aren't a lot of brain objections to so that you can start doing them, A, because getting started is very important, and B, that you can maintain because consistency is also very important when it comes to this.

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The second thing that I really recommend to my clients is movement. Movement can be anything you want. It can be a yoga class, it can be a run, it can be a walk, it can be a hike, it can be stretching in your office. I do not care. But we must start moving our body. When you consider that the way that our nervous system works is it's going through our whole body. We have nerves everywhere. We need to move this along, move the energy.

And especially when you think about hitting a stress response, what's happening is we're stimulating that amygdala and we are actually creating epinephrine, which is adrenaline, which makes us feel jittery. So, movement is going to help with that. It's going to help with it from a sort of a vaccine approach in that we keep doing it over and over and it helps with that overall experience of it, but it will also help when you actually really need it. So moving your body when you feel depressed, when you feel anxious, when you feel frustrated, when you feel whatever you feel is going to help move the emotion through your body.

And then the last thing is nature. Going out into nature, going for a walk, being in the trees, being with the grass, being with the water. What parts of nature do you experience that you find the most regulating or grounding? For me, I would say water, but I would also say the forest. Those are two things that really work well for me. It could be very different for you. But we want to start noticing what do we love doing outside because just going outside isn't really enough, okay? We need to go outside in an area where we feel regulated by being there.

Now, if you're listening to this podcast and it's winter and it's not sunny and it's not the thing, it's pouring rain, whatever. You can have plants, you can have flowers, you can have air plants, but regulating through nature is actually science-based. So we want to use it, and it's very easy. Once again, a simple step for our brain to be able to engage in that. And the simpler the better because too often if we make it too complex and too hard, our brain is going to say, 'Oh, we'll do it tomorrow when we have more time.' And that's the last thing I want for you.

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So, moving forward, I do have a couple of—three, actually—practical techniques that I want to give you. And these are things that you can do right now, today, listening to this podcast, you could do this. So number one is 5-4-3-2-1. And this is a safety cue. And what we're going to do is we're going to look around wherever we are and we're going to name five things we see. We're going to name four things we feel that we touch, three things that you hear, two things that you smell, one thing that you taste. And then you're going to take a deep breath in and a deep breath out. And why this works is it signals to your brain that you are safe right now. That you're seeing things, hearing things, feeling things, tasting things, smelling things. It allows you to get that edge off. So, this is actually one of my go-tos when I feel edgy or off. And I really highly recommend it. Very simple.

Number two is to put one hand on your chest and put another on your belly. And what I want you to do is take a deep breath in, hold, and then blow out. I recommend doing this three times, but even one time has an effect. And then simply name the feeling without fixing it. I feel anxious. I feel frustrated. I feel sad. I feel embarrassed. This is something that you will find is super effective and that your brain will resist. However, I want you to try and implement it, even trying to do it at the beginning of your workday when you sit down at your desk or in your car before you start driving, starting to create this habit. I use this practice before coaching calls when I'm feeling off, but maybe can't name why. I don't know what's going on, but I'm feeling that anxious energy. I think, 'Okay, let's just bring it in. Let's slow this down. Let's figure it out.'

And then the last one I have for you is called a butterfly hug. And what we're doing is we're doing bilateral stimulation, okay? So, we're going to cross our arms over our chest and we're going to tap alternately. And what you're going to do is you're going to do this while you're breathing or saying a calming mantra. It could be something to the effect of no thought is true, not even this one. No feeling lasts forever, not even this one. I am safe. I am okay. Nothing is going wrong. The reason why this works is because it calms the amygdala and it supports the vagus nerve tone. So when we're

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looking at how to approach our nervous system, these are things that actually work with your nervous system.

What I want you to also know is that none of these are about doing it perfectly. They are about practicing safety a little at a time, becoming more safe with whatever is happening in your body due to emotion, becoming more safe with your nervous system, noticing the panic, and being able to walk yourself back from the edge of that. Notice that none of the things that I've given you here are thoughts. These are practices to regulate your nervous system and it's where we always want to start. What you need to know is that you're not broken, that instead, what's happening is your nervous system is simply speaking to you. And to me, emotional overwhelm is a signal, not a flaw. There's nothing wrong with you because you're experiencing emotional overwhelm, such as I did in that hotel room with my mom. No matter what emotional overwhelm looks like for you, whether you are outwardly freaking out or you're inwardly shutting down, it's a signal.

And we can build emotional safety by first of all, understanding the state we're in, by using simple regulation tools, and practicing these things daily, not perfectly, okay, but consistently. And it's really very essential that you do find daily simple things that work for you. Start small.

One analogy that I gave a client today that I think you might find helpful is if you've ever driven a vehicle that's a rear-wheel drive vehicle. So I got a truck a year ago. And when it's pouring rain and I'm at a light, if I stomp on the gas, my tires will spin out because I'm trying to go too fast for the conditions. And so what is required is for me to slowly press on the gas pedal to start picking up some momentum so that we can start propelling ourselves forward. And what I'm really bringing you here today is the ability to do that. We must start small, easy, doable. And then we keep going. We build upon that momentum. The more you build your emotional capacity, the less you'll fear your own emotions. And that's real power. And it's possible for you.

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I always am looking at a client, myself, through the same lens, which is this isn't a problem and this is a problem. This isn't a problem because what I'm experiencing here or what you're experiencing here is very human, very normal. And it is a problem because it's creating results in your life that you don't want. So, we work towards being curious, compassionate, tapping into our nervous system, doing things that bring us that feeling of centeredness, groundedness, and we keep going. And knowing that it's not about getting rid of all the anxiety, it's not about getting rid of all of the emotion, it's about being powerful, being the person that conducts the energy inside of ourselves.

If this landed for you and you want to learn more about calming emotional chaos, I want to invite you to come check out the Love Yourself No Matter What membership. You can just go to joinamanda.ca. I talk about this in that membership every single week. And it's where we turn this kind of insight into a lifestyle.

All right, my friends, that's what I've got. I hope you have a beautiful week and I'll see you next time. Bye for now.

Thanks so much for listening. You can look forward to a new episode of this podcast every week. And hey, if you like this podcast, do me a favor and leave a review. When you do, it helps this podcast grow, and it allows me to help more women just like you. And if you just know that you need help putting this all together, why don't you book a free consult with me? We can talk about you and what's happening in your life and put a real plan in place to manage the stress and anxiety for good. Just head on over to amandahess.ca/bookacall to set that up.