

The logo features the words "soulful" and "steps" in white. "soulful" is in a bold, lowercase, sans-serif font, with the "l" being a vertical bar. "steps" is in a white, lowercase, cursive script font with a black outline. The text is centered within a dark brown circular background.

soulful
steps

**RIDING THE WAVES:
EMOTIONAL REGULATION**

CREATED BY: STEPHANIE BURTON, MA, MSed, LMHC

This resource is for your personal, educational, or professional use only. Please do not copy, resell, or distribute without prior written consent from the creator.

Thank you for honoring the work and the care behind it.

While it can be used as a tool to supplement an existing therapeutic relationship with a licensed mental health professional (LMHC, LCSW, LMFT, LPC, or a Licensed Psychologist), this resource should NOT be used as a substitute for therapy.

If you find that this resource brings up feelings and thoughts that are challenging to deal with on your own or with a trusted person, I encourage you to seek therapy to continue your healing journey.

Copyright © 2025 by Stephanie C. Burton, MA, MEd, LMHC
All rights reserved.



INTRODUCTION

VOL. 7

Emotions can feel overwhelming, unpredictable, and even frightening—especially when trauma is part of our story. For some of us, the natural instinct is to fight against emotions, push them down, avoid them, or numb them out, often because we have been societally and culturally influenced to believe that certain emotions are not only not to be displayed, but not to be acknowledged or felt.

Therapeutically, we know that trauma and stress affect the brain and body in ways that make our emotions feel stronger and harder to manage. Trauma can shrink the “window of tolerance,” causing the nervous system to flip quickly into **fight, flight, or freeze mode**. Through developing an understanding of how this works, we can learn to widen our nervous system’s capacity for balance, safety, and resilience.

Culturally, this work is especially vital for us as Black women. Our communities have carried generations of trauma—from slavery and segregation to present-day racism and other forms of inequity. These collective wounds may show up in our bodies as high blood pressure, stress-related illnesses, and exhaustion from constantly being “on guard.” They also show up in behavior: masking emotions, over-functioning to prove worth, or shutting down to avoid being misjudged or stereotyped.

Soulfull Note to Self:

The real work is not to stop the waves of our emotions, but to learn how to ride them. By learning how to ride the wave, we teach our body that emotions are temporary, survivable experiences—not threats.

The following pages provide education, tools, and journal prompts designed to help us gain a general understanding of what trauma looks like, how it can impact our emotions, and how to anchor ourselves in the storm, and recover with compassion.



What is Emotional Regulation?

DEFINITION

Dr. Thema Bryant emphasizes that **emotional regulation** is not about suppressing feelings, but rather expanding one's capacity to **experience the full spectrum of human emotion without being overwhelmed**. It involves learning to hold and move through emotions without collapsing into them, fostering a return to oneself and navigating feelings without drowning. She further describes it as **an important skill** for managing reactions and responses, **acknowledging that emotions are a healthy part of the human experience**.

What Emotional Regulation is NOT:

- Suppressing your emotions.
- Judging your emotions.
- Avoiding your emotions.
- A diagnosis.

Emotional dysregulation is identified as difficulty managing feelings that often make emotions seem more intense than expected, impacting mental and physical health, relationships, and daily life.

Feelings rise, peak, and fall like ocean waves. Emotional waves are temporary, and if we do not feed them with negative thoughts, they may not last as long. You don't need to stop the wave—you can learn to ride it. There are many trauma-informed emotional regulation tools that you can use on your own, whenever you feel the waves billowing in your life.

One that I have created is to remember just a few of them to access from your memory at any time, think C.A.L.M.E.R.

Connect: Call a safe person, cuddle a pet, pray

Acknowledge: Name 5 things you see, 4 things you can touch, 3 you can hear, 2 you can smell and 1 you can taste.

Let Go: sigh out slowly, hand on your heart

Move: walk, dance, sway, or hum

Exhale: inhale for 4 seconds, exhale for 6–8 seconds

Refocus: gently bring your mind back to the present, or listen to grounding music.

Common Sources of Trauma

The following list, though not exhaustive, includes many of the common sources of trauma we may experience as humans.

Accidents and Emergencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Serious medical events (heart attack, stroke, near-death experiences)• Sudden illness or injury• Witnessing a violent accident
Interpersonal Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sexual assault or harrassment• Emotional abuse, manipulation, or gaslighting• Abandonment or sudden loss of a caregiver• Divorce or high-conflict family separation• Stalking or repeated threats
Environmental/Situational Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Homelessness or sudden loss of housing• Chronic poverty or food insecurity• Refugee experiences, displacement, or forced migration• Community violence (overpoliced neighborhoods, gang violence, youth violence)• Terrorist attacks or political violence
Medical/Developmental Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Long hospitalizations, invasive procedures, or medical neglect• Chronic pain or debilitating health conditions• Birth trauma (for either parent or child)• Developmental trauma from growing up in chaotic or unsafe environments

Loss and Separation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Death of a parent, sibling, child or close loved one• Sudden or traumatic grief (suicide, overdose)• Being placed in foster care for separated from parents and/or siblings
Identity-Based Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, disability or religion• Hate crimes or targeted harrasment• Being outed without consent
Ongoing/Complex Trauma	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Living with intimate partner or domestic violence• Growing up in a home with a parent or family member with untreated mental illness or substance use• Chronic neglect or emotional unavailability of caregivers

After something traumatic happens, we may notice changes in how we feel, think, or act. While not exhaustive, the following is a list of common symptoms or reactions to trauma, but they don't always look the same for everyone. Having some of them does not automatically mean you have a mental health condition. Only a trained, licensed professional, like a counselor, therapist, or doctor, can give a diagnosis. If these symptoms start to make daily life, relationships, or safety harder, it may be a sign that reaching out for professional support could help.

Cognitive/Mental Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Difficulty concentrating or paying attention• Memory problems (trouble recalling details, gaps in memory)• Intrusive thoughts or images• Feeling “on edge” or easily startled• Confusion or feeling mentally foggy
Emotional Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Intense guilt, shame, or self-blame• Hopelessness or loss of interest in things once enjoyed• Emotional numbness or disconnection• Heightened fear or mistrust of others• Sudden anger or irritability that feels hard to control

Physical Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Headaches or migraines• Muscle tension, aches, or trembling• Stomach problems (nausea, diarrhea, IBS-like symptoms)• Fatigue or low energy• Difficulty sleeping or staying asleep (beyond nightmares)
Behavioral Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avoiding reminders of the trauma (people, places, activities)• Withdrawing from relationships or social life• Self-harm or high-risk behaviors (substance use, reckless driving)• Hypervigilance - constantly scanning for danger• Trouble trusting others or maintaining close relationships
Existential/Identity Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Feeling disconnected from yourself (“I don’t feel like me”)• Dissociation (feeling unreal, detached, or watching yourself from outside)• Difficulty imagining a future• Questioning meaning, purpose, or faith

When you feel big emotions, your body is doing its job: signaling to you the need to tend to yourself. Trauma can make your body's emotional alarm system extra sensitive, sometimes detecting perceived threats (when your brain reacts as if danger is present, even when physically safe, often triggered by past experiences) vs. actual threats (physical and present, such as a car swerving into your lane or a fire alarm). This can sometimes cause us to emotionally respond to things out of proportion to what is actually necessary in the moment.

The 3 Parts of the Brain Impacted by Trauma:

1

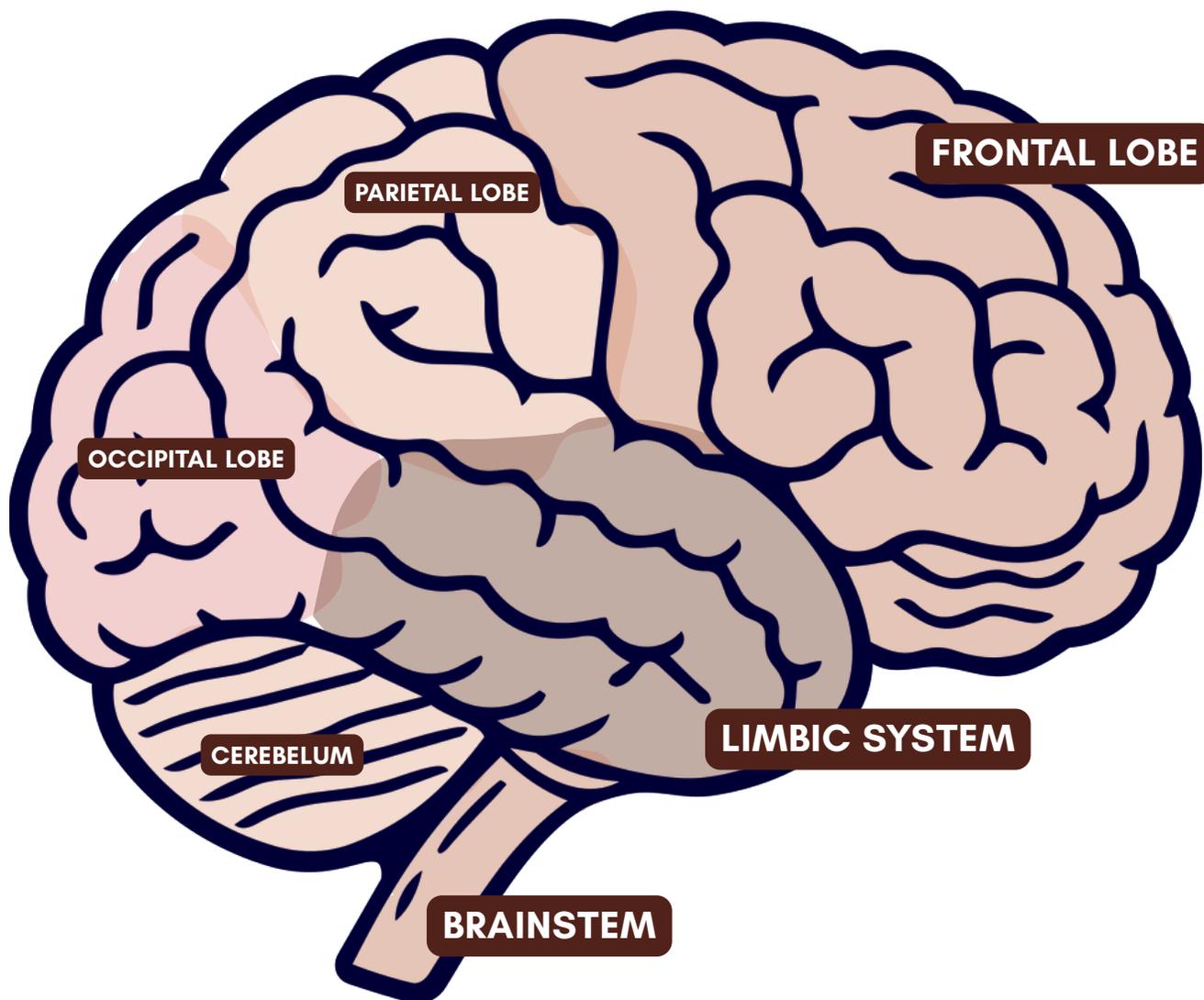
Frontal Lobes (The Thinking Part of the Brain): Plans, reasons, and makes choices. Trauma can make it harder to focus, think clearly, or make choices, and may make us feel “foggy,” forgetful, or struggle with decision-making.

2

Limbic System (The Emotion Part of the Brain): Stores memories and emotions. Trauma can cause strong emotional reactions, mood swings, or intense memories that pop up suddenly (like flashbacks). It can make it harder to manage feelings.

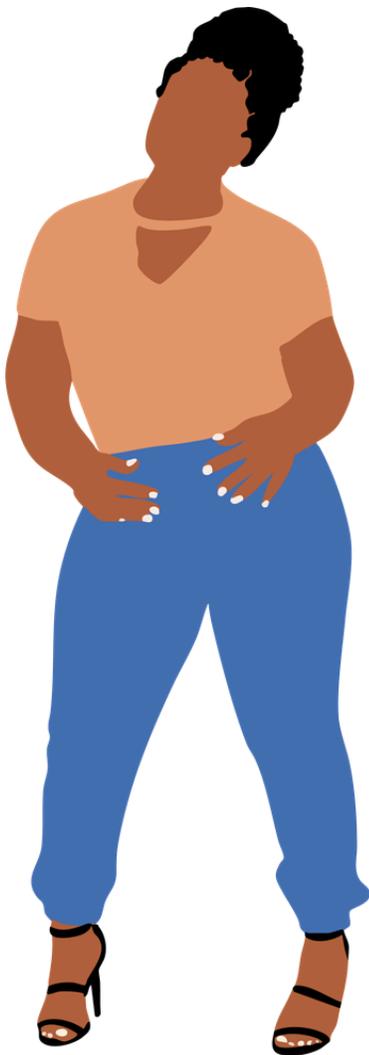
3

Brainstem (The Survival Part of the Brain): Regulates bodily functions such as breathing, heart rate, sleep, and wake cycles. Trauma can make the body feel constantly on alert, tense, or unsafe. This may show up as panic, trouble sleeping, racing heart, or feeling frozen and disconnected.



Somatic observation in therapy involves a focus on physical sensations, impulses, and nervous system patterns within the body, as therapists believe the body holds onto traumas and emotions. Instead of solely focusing on thoughts, therapists guide clients to notice what happens in their body in real-time, such as a tightening in the stomach or a dark feeling in the chest, and observe their behavioral responses like body language and posture.

Take some time to think about the sensations of how emotions manifest in your body. Write them down in the spaces below. Reflecting and writing them down, can be helpful in being more mindful of these emotional responses down the line, and how to better identify how to appropriately tend to your needs.



.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Anchors give us peace in a storm, so we don't feel swept away. Below are three examples of types of anchors. I invite you to write three more that you'd like to use in times of emotional distress in the spaces provided below.

Breath anchor: Inhale 4, exhale 6–8.

Touch anchor: Press feet into the ground or grip a grounding object.

Mantra anchor: "This is a wave, not forever."

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Using journaling or drawing, in the space provided below, sketch or write about the wave of anger/anxiety/sadness in the manner that you most frequently experience it, labeling “what it feels like at the bottom, middle, and top.” Plot how anger/anxiety/sadness rose and fell in your body last time it happened.

Once the wave has calmed, it is important to continue tending to your physical and emotional self. Sometimes, these waves can leave us feeling exhausted, or maybe even thirsty or hungry because of the physical and emotional energy exerted to ride the wave of our emotions. Here are a few options to help you recover after the wave:

- Take a slow sip of water.
- Stretch or shake your arms/legs.
- Take a nap
- Wrap yourself in a warm blanket
- Hug someone
- Reduce external stimuli that could potentially re-trigger you after the wave has subsided
- Journal
- Affirm yourself: “I made it through the wave.”

What are some additional options you can think of, that might be helpful for you after experiencing especially intense emotions? Write them below:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

In your own journal or notebook, reflect on the following at your own pace:

Before the Wave (Awareness)

1. What usually triggers waves of strong emotion for me?
2. How do I know a wave is starting in my body? (What signals or sensations show up first?)
3. What do I usually believe about myself when a wave rises?

During the Wave (Observation)

1. In this moment, what am I feeling? Can I name the emotion?
2. Where do I feel it most in my body?
3. On a scale of 1–10, how big is this wave?
4. What helped me stay on the board (anchored) during this wave?

After the Wave (Recovery & Reflection)

1. What shifted in my body once the wave passed?
2. What surprised me about this wave?
3. Did this wave feel different from others I've experienced? How?
4. What do I want to affirm myself with right now? ("I made it through," "I stayed present," etc.)

Building Wisdom (Integration)

1. What patterns am I starting to notice in my waves?
2. Which anchors work best for me?
3. What would I like to remind my future self the next time a wave comes?
4. How does riding the wave connect to my healing, resilience, or faith journey?

NOTES

A large white rectangular area containing 20 horizontal dotted lines for writing notes.

About

THE CREATOR



I'm a Midwestern girl raised in a home adorned in Black art, music, literature, and culture. From Faith Ringgold on the walls, to Toni Morrison on the shelves, and old-school R&B spinning through the house, my upbringing instilled a deep pride in my heritage, and a love for storytelling, creativity, and community that still guides me today.

My academic path took a few turns—Nursing, and then Psychology at Fisk University, a master's in Sociology, and ultimately a second master's in Counselor Education—each step clarifying my calling to become a therapist. Through personal experiences, faith, and growth, I felt led toward soul-centered, culturally grounded mental health work.

When I'm not in session, I'm creating, coloring, crocheting, listening to music, podcasts or audiobooks, or watching historical and sociocultural documentaries and classic Black sitcoms. I'm a proud member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., a wife to my best friend, a mama to one radiant daughter, a dog mom, and a caregiver in the sandwich generation—held up by strong women, deep friendships, and a whole lot of love.