SESSION TRANSCRIPT · THE MISSING PIECES OF PERIMENOPAUSE

Why Am I Reacting Like This? Understanding Your Nervous System in Perimenopause

with Leanna M. Hunt · Day 4, Thursday, October 29 · The Unfamiliar Feelings

Hi, and welcome, everyone, to Why Am I Reacting Like This? Understanding Your Nervous System in Perimenopause.

Have you ever had a moment where you reacted to something, and afterward thought, what was that? Why did I react like that? Maybe something your husband said that normally wouldn't bother you suddenly makes you want to lose your mind. Or maybe you're feeling more anxious than usual, or you're overwhelmed by things you used to manage just fine. Or maybe you find yourself shutting down, withdrawing, or feeling like you just can't handle one more thing.

And then comes the frustration with yourself. Why am I so irritable? Why can't I handle this anymore? What is wrong with me? And if you're navigating perimenopause, you may be wondering how much of this is hormonal.

Today I want to introduce another piece of the conversation: your nervous system. Because your reactions aren't automatically evidence that something is wrong with you. They may be giving you information about what's happening in your body. And when we can start to understand those responses with curiosity instead of judgment, we can create more room for self-compassion and choice.

Hey, everybody, I'm Leanna Hunt. I'm an associate clinical mental health counselor, a certified performance coach and author, and a certified Brainspotting therapist. I'm also a wife, a mom of four, an entrepreneur, and a 47-year-old woman navigating this season of life myself. I've spent years recovering from chronic illness and working through my own perfectionistic patterns. Thankfully, my hormones are currently in a pretty good place, at least for the time being, and we'll see how long that lasts. But one of the things I've learned, both personally and professionally, is that understanding what's happening in our bodies can change how we relate to ourselves. And that's what I hope to offer you a little bit more of today.

Think for a minute about what this season of life can ask of us. Our bodies may be going through hormonal changes. Sleep may be different. We might be caring for children, aging parents, or maybe even both. Relationships change. Our roles change. Our responsibilities don't necessarily get any smaller. And sometimes we're still carrying patterns we've developed

over a lifetime, like feeling responsible for everyone, needing to get everything right, or having a hard time saying no. Now add the physical and emotional changes that can accompany perimenopause, and suddenly things that used to feel manageable might start feeling a whole lot harder.

This is where I think it's so important that we stop looking at everything in isolation. Because hormones totally matter, and so do sleep, stress, relationships, past experiences, and what's happening inside our nervous systems. And research actually supports looking at this bigger picture. A 2026 systematic review that included more than a million participants found that anxiety and depressive symptoms are common during the menopausal transition. The pooled estimates were about 29% for anxiety symptoms and 32% for depressive symptoms in perimenopausal women. Now, those numbers don't mean hormones caused every symptom, and they don't mean every woman will have these experiences. But they do help us recognize that emotional changes during this transition deserve to be taken seriously.

Research from the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation has also looked at how sleep, stressful life events, social support, and hormonal factors relate to mood during this season of life. So rather than asking whether it's hormones or stress or our nervous system, I want us to consider how these pieces may be interacting, which is a really, really good question to ask.

You've probably heard of fight and flight, and maybe you've even heard of freeze. You may also have heard of fawn, but the word that I'm going to use today is appease. These are ways we can understand protective responses in our nervous system. Our nervous system is constantly gathering information about what's happening around us and inside our bodies, and it's using past experiences to help anticipate what might happen next. And you guys, much of that happens automatically.

We need these protective responses. They help us take action. They help us get away from danger. They help us become still, or seek safety through connection. But these patterns don't always show up in dramatic situations. They can also show up in everyday experiences, especially when we aren't getting the sleep we need, when we're extra stressed or overwhelmed, or when we're dealing with something unfamiliar in our personal lives, our work life, or even in our bodies. And during perimenopause, when sleep, mood, physical symptoms, and life demands may all be changing, it's worth becoming curious about how we're responding.

So as we go through these four responses, notice whether anything feels familiar. Not to label yourself, but to better understand what might be happening.

The first is fight. And remember, fight isn't bad. We need that energy in our bodies to protect ourselves. We need it to help advocate for what matters and to hold boundaries. But sometimes that same protective energy can show up as irritation, defensiveness, controlling behavior, or feeling like everything is just too much. Maybe you've spent the day managing everyone's needs, you didn't sleep well the night before, and someone asks you one more question, and suddenly you're snapping over something that normally wouldn't bother you.

Now, that doesn't automatically mean you're in fight. Hormonal changes, fatigue, and other factors can contribute to irritability too. But if you start to notice that urge to push, to defend, to control, I want to invite you to start to get curious. And the question I love with fight is: what am I responding to right now, and what might I actually need instead?

Then there's flight. I know this one all too well, especially after years of looking productive on the outside while dealing with so much chronic illness and other things internally in my body. Flight helps us mobilize and move away from something that doesn't feel safe. But sometimes in everyday life, that movement looks like constant busyness. Maybe you're exhausted, but you can't stop doing things. Maybe you're mentally running through tomorrow's schedule, worrying about your family, researching another symptom, or trying to get everything under control. And even when you finally have a moment to rest, your mind keeps going.

Sometimes anxiety and restlessness during perimenopause may have hormonal, sleep-related, or other medical contributors. And sometimes we may also recognize familiar patterns of trying to manage uncertainty by staying busy. So the question I really like here is: am I moving because I want to, or because slowing down doesn't feel safe, or feels really uncomfortable?

And then we have freeze. Freeze is another protective response, when taking action or getting away doesn't feel possible. Our bodies can inhibit movement and action, and that experience of feeling stuck can be super frustrating. Maybe you're looking at everything that needs to be done and you can't figure out where to start. Or you feel so overwhelmed that you withdraw. You go quiet, or find yourself starting to numb out, or stare at your phone because you just can't deal with one more decision. And then maybe you start judging yourself with things like, why am I so lazy? Why can't I just get it together?

Now, I want to be careful here too, because exhaustion, poor sleep, depression, and physical health concerns aren't automatically a state of freeze. But when we can start to recognize that this protective pattern may be part of our experience, we can become more curious instead of immediately criticizing ourselves.

And the fourth response I want to talk to you about today is appease. As I said, sometimes you might hear it called fawn. I like the term appeasement, because appease rhymes with people-

please, and I feel like it's actually more accurate than the word fawn. Appease is where we may use connection, agreement, or keeping other people comfortable as a way of maintaining safety.

I think this one can feel especially familiar for women who've spent years being the person that everyone counts on. Maybe you're exhausted, but you say yes anyway, because you don't want to disappoint anyone. Maybe you feel like you're the one who has to keep the peace, or you manage everyone else's feelings while quietly ignoring what your own body is asking for. And sometimes we've been doing this for so long that we don't even recognize it as a pattern.

Of course, being kind, helpful, and caring isn't a problem, and those might be goals that look really, really good. But the question is whether we're choosing to give, or whether we're saying yes because saying no feels too uncomfortable, or even unsafe. Because what's really important here, when we start to look at these protective responses, is that your needs matter, especially in this stage of life.

Here's what I really want you to understand. None of these responses tell you who you are. You're not necessarily an angry person because you've been more irritable. You're not lazy because you're exhausted or struggling to get things done. And you're not weak because you're feeling anxious or overwhelmed. These experiences may have several contributing factors, and we don't want to label everything as a nervous system response. Sometimes we just need rest. Sometimes we need support. Sometimes we need to talk with our healthcare provider about what we're experiencing.

But instead of immediately asking, what's wrong with me, I want to propose a different question. What if, instead of that negative question, we ask: what is happening in me? Because awareness gives us a powerful place to work with ourselves.

So with awareness, what do we actually do? This is where I use a framework I created called the 4Ns. You can see them up on the screen: notice, name, nurture, and navigate.

The first step is notice. Before trying to fix anything, we start to get curious. What am I experiencing in my body right now? What am I feeling? What's happening? For some of my clients, when they slow this down and start to feel off, when they're starting to head toward fight or flight or shutting down completely, it might just be: I'm noticing my chest is getting really tight. I notice I'm holding my breath. I notice my body is feeling really hot. I notice I'm feeling like I just want to shut down, scroll my phone, run and hide. Noticing is powerful, because that awareness is so significant toward creating any type of change.

The second step is name. We want to start to name it, especially out loud if you can. There's research from Ethan Kross at the University of Michigan showing that when we name things out loud, using our own name in the third person, we can start to become our own coach. So it might be like, "Leanna, it seems like your body is moving into a state of fight." Or, "Leanna, you are so exhausted." Or, "Leanna, you're feeling like you're being stretched too thin. You haven't taken time to rest." So after we notice, we name.

It also helps with something really important. When we use our language and logic, we're maintaining access to the logical part of our brain, our prefrontal cortex, right here, so that the emotional part, where our survival responses live, isn't going to take over. As we talk, even out loud, and use our own name in the process, we become our own advocate or coach. And we're able to use our words and language to help us solve problems and work through it.

The third step is nurture. What might support me and my nervous system right now? Maybe that's slowing down. Maybe I actually need to move my body because I'm feeling so shut down: go for a walk, go to the gym, do some yoga. Maybe I need a nap. Or maybe I want connection with somebody who feels like a safe person. Sometimes nurture is simply recognizing that I'm carrying a lot. And this is where we start to offer ourselves self-compassion. Sometimes nurture, for me, is simply sitting and giving myself a hug, and telling myself, hey, this moment is important. We are safe. I'm talking to myself, right? Trying to be my own advocate. We are going to be able to move through this.

And then navigate is such a powerful step. Navigate is the fourth step in the process, and it means: what is just the next thing I want to choose? What is that next step? Not what's going to happen at the end of the day, or the end of this week, or next month. What is that next thing? Maybe this is where we realize we need to take a longer break. Or we realize we cannot do this alone, and we need to ask for help. Sometimes this is even where we realize, okay, it's time to go get my hormones checked, or I need a new healthcare provider, or I need to have a conversation with somebody. So the question becomes: what is the next meaningful step that I have capacity for? Again, I want you to think of those smaller steps, not the big, huge ones.

And because nurture, the third N, is such an important part of this process, I want to show you one really important way you can support your own nervous system. One of the simplest ways we can begin supporting our nervous system is through our breath, and I want to explain a little about how this works.

Our diaphragm is a dome-shaped muscle beneath our lungs, and it's our primary breathing muscle. When we inhale through our nose, the diaphragm contracts and moves downward, allowing our lungs to expand. As that happens, our belly gently expands outward. And when we

exhale through our nose or mouth, the diaphragm relaxes and moves upward, and our belly can naturally soften inward.

Here's where this connection is so important to our nervous system. You may have heard of the vagus nerve, which is our tenth cranial nerve and a major part of activating the parasympathetic nervous system, the part we need to get out of those states of fight, flight, or freeze. It helps regulate things like our heart rate, digestion, and how our body recovers from stress. Slow, comfortable diaphragmatic breathing can influence this system, including the vagal pathways involved in regulating our heart rate, and that can help reduce physiological arousal and support a greater sense of calm and safety in the body.

So let's try this together. You'll have these slides, so you can see the picture. If you're comfortable, place one hand on your chest and the other on your belly. Gently inhale through your nose, and let your belly expand outward at the same time. Notice here, my shoulders aren't going up. They're staying nice and calm. When we're in fight or flight, we're often breathing up here. We're holding our breath, or breathing rapidly in the chest, and that is just going to keep activating the sympathetic nervous system, where fight or flight lives.

So try again. If you want, it's really, really helpful to lie down on the ground to do this. As you breathe in through the nose, expand the belly outward and just hold that. Now, on the exhale, you can exhale out your nose, or make your mouth into what we call a straw breath, where only a straw could fit through, and let your belly go inward. Let's do a few of those. Inhale, and exhale. And one more. Inhale, hold, and exhale.

I want you to just notice how that feels in your body. As we practice diaphragmatic breathing, we're helping calm the emotional part of the brain and helping get access to the logical part again. And we're offering our nervous system a little support, so we have more capacity for whatever comes next. In the free guide I've created for you, I'll share more about this practice and other simple body-based tools you can experiment with.

Which brings me to one of my favorite concepts in this work: the power of "and." So often we think things have to be one or the other. Is this my hormones? Is it stress? Is it my nervous system? But what if it's not an either-or question?

Here are a few examples. My hormones may be changing, and I can learn to support my nervous system. I can feel overwhelmed, and I can ask for help. I can feel irritated, and choose how I want to respond. I can have compassion for what my body is experiencing, and seek appropriate medical support.

You guys, we don't have to ignore what's happening in our bodies to recognize that we still have choices. And oftentimes those choices are small, but they matter. Because the goal isn't to eliminate every uncomfortable feeling or control every reaction. The goal is to start to create enough awareness and capacity to choose what comes next. You're also going to learn all about the power of "and" in the resource I have for you for being here for this presentation.

So the next time you notice yourself feeling more reactive or anxious, or more overwhelmed or shut down than you're used to, before you immediately decide something is wrong with you, I want to invite you to get curious. Because, guys, your patterns make sense. And understanding what's happening doesn't mean you have to stay stuck in those patterns.

I only had time to introduce the 4Ns very briefly today, so I'm offering you my Perimenopause Nervous System Guide for free, as part of being here. It will help you recognize how fight, flight, freeze, and appease may be showing up in your everyday life. And then I'll walk you through notice, name, nurture, and navigate, along with diaphragmatic breathing and other simple body-based practices you can try when you need a little more support, and how to start incorporating the power of "and" in your own life. Because the goal isn't to control every reaction or make every uncomfortable feeling disappear. The goal is to create enough awareness, self-compassion, and capacity to choose what comes next. You'll find the guide link right alongside the presentation.

And if there's one thing I hope you take away from today, it's this: you aren't broken. Your body is navigating a lot, and you deserve support through this season of life.

Thank you so much for being here, and I hope you have a beautiful rest of your day. Bye, guys.
