

# THE FROZEN MOMENT

## A Guide to Understanding Nervous System States on Snow

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This guide is for ski pros who know their clients can ski - but something beyond technique is stopping them from enjoying it.

When anxiety, hesitation, or tension don't match skill level, what you're seeing isn't mindset - it's a nervous system state.

Understanding what's happening in the body helps you read clients differently and respond in ways that move them from surviving to enjoying skiing again. And when enjoyment returns, progress naturally follows.

### BEYOND TECHNIQUE

You're halfway down a blue run with a technically capable client when they stop. Skis flat, knees locked, breath held. "I just need a second", they say. But the second stretches on.

Or perhaps this: a client who skied confidently yesterday stands at the top of today's run and can't make that first turn. Body braced, saying all the right things - "I'm fine; I've got this" - but still they're hesitating.

Or this: someone who's been chatty all morning goes quiet mid-lesson. They're still skiing, but something's changed - less presence, less connection.

#### **You've tried the usual:**

- "You've got this"
- "Don't overthink it"
- "Remember yesterday — you skied this perfectly"
- Technical prompts
- Reassurance

Sometimes that works. Often it doesn't.

When your usual input doesn't change anything, that's your cue something deeper may be going on - not in their mindset but in their physiology.

Because what you're seeing isn't a technique problem. **It's a disconnect from confidence and enjoyment. It's a nervous system state.**

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**You can't instruct someone out of a nervous system state.**

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## WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING

The human nervous system has one primary job: alert and protect mode.

It constantly scans for potential threat, and activates protection to keep us both physically safe and socially connected. We're wired to stay with the herd.

In skiing, this protection system responds to many things: ice, steepness, speed, unfamiliar terrain, fatigue, previous falls or injury, being watched, keeping up with others, or feeling left behind. The brain doesn't distinguish between social risk ("I'll look stupid") and physical risk ("I might fall"). Either can activate the same protective cascade.

**Anxiety and fear aren't the problem. They're information. Feelings are data, not drama.**

The issue isn't the feelings - it's what happens when someone's capacity is exceeded. Once protection switches on, energy is redirected: muscles tighten, breath shortens, vision narrows. Focus shifts from exploration to survival - often before the skier even realises they're afraid.

**And when that happens, their capacity to choose shrinks.**

They can't access what they know. They can't voice what they need. Simple decisions - "Do I want to take a break"? "Should I ski at the front or the back of the group"? "Would I prefer a different route down"? - become unavailable.

**On snow, protective states often appear as:**

MOBILISED (Fight/Flight)	Speeds up, muscles tense, breath shallow and fast, perhaps humour or jokes to mask discomfort
FROZEN	hesitating or braced; knees locked, breath held, says "I'm fine" but remains frozen in that moment
FAWN	People -pleasing - agreeable, apologetic, eager to please, mirrors group behaviour, prioritises belonging over personal comfort
SHUTDOWN	Quiet, withdrawn, skiing mechanically, low energy, disengaged

When these responses are active, learning momentarily switches off as the nervous system does its job so we need to see these signs as data not drama.

# HOW TO RESPOND IN REAL TIME

The starting point isn't more information - it's observation.

This is **Whole Body Listening**: noticing what the body is communicating before you speak.

**YOU ALREADY READ TECHNICAL CUES. NOW READ STATE CUES:**

Notice:

- **Breathing**: visible chest/shoulder movement - shallow, held, or steady?
- **Posture**: braced, collapsed, or settled?
- **Position**: at the back of the group? Isolated? Shoulders slumped even when saying "I'm fine"?
- **Voice**: tone tight, flat, or engaged?
- **Congruence**: do words match body? ("I'm fine" but posture is frozen, bracing, hesitant)
- **Movement quality**: rushed, mechanical, or fluid?

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## Finding Connection Moments

Helmets and goggles hide facial cues. Use strategic moments when you're not actively moving - chairlifts, safe stopping points, lifting goggles when appropriate. Facial expressions reveal what voices can't. Mix up who you get on lifts with or speak to at rest points to gauge the whole group.

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## Then meet the state with curiosity, not correction:

When a skier stops feeling part of the group - no longer included or at ease - their body protects them by slowing down, speeding up, or switching off.

**Your response isn't always a question. Sometimes it's:**

- A slower pace
- A longer pause
- Sitting beside them on the lift before you speak
- Inviting them to share what they're feeling without needing to fix it; sometimes being heard can move the dial

**And when you do speak, it might sound like:**

- "How's that feeling"?
- "Take your time - no rush"

- "What do you need right now"?
- "Want to pause for a bit"?

**These simple moments help bring choice, connection, and capacity back online.**

But here's what makes the difference: **your state influences theirs**. Before you can help someone else regulate, you need to regulate yourself first. That's where self-regulation and co-regulation come in - the foundation of nervous system literacy, and what the full training covers in depth.

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**Listen. Respond. Choose.**

This is Whole Body Listening in practice.

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This isn't about technique adjustments. It's about helping the body move from protection to participation where awareness, curiosity, learning, and enjoyment return.

## WHAT NERVOUS SYSTEM LITERACY CREATES

When protection eases, your clients can:

**Listen** — to what their body's telling them, reconnect to technique that's always been there

**Respond** — to what their nervous system actually needs, not what the group expects

**Choose** — terrain, pace, whether to lead or follow, when to pause - based on what they want, not what fear decides

The shift isn't from anxious to fearless.

**It's from surviving to enjoying skiing again.**

# GO BEYOND TECHNIQUE

This guide offers an introduction.

**Beyond Technique: Nervous System Literacy for Ski Professionals** expands on this foundation:

- How your own nervous system state can influence clients (co-regulation)
- Tools for self-regulation on snow
- Early signs of dysregulation and what to do next
- Hormonal influences and post-injury sensitivity
- Group belonging and social safety
- Communication that supports nervous system regulation and learning

For instructors and coaches who want to recognise nervous system states on snow - and respond with confidence and skill.

## READY TO GO DEEPER?

**Beyond Technique: Nervous System Literacy for Ski Professionals**

Practical Professional Development for instructors who want to recognise, respond to, and work with real-time nervous system states on snow.

👉 Join the waitlist: [flourishwell.coach/for-the-pros](https://flourishwell.coach/for-the-pros)

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### About Sarah Gilbertson

Sarah Gilbertson is a Certified Therapeutic Coach and BASI-qualified Ski Instructor. After back surgery and perimenopause reshaped her relationship with skiing, she discovered that real confidence isn't mindset - it's nervous system literacy. She now teaches ski professionals how to bring body-informed awareness to their coaching.

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