

Understanding Benzodiazepine Withdrawal

The Five Axes — Explained Simply

(A plain-language overview for patients and families)

First — an important message

If you are struggling during benzodiazepine withdrawal, you are not broken and you are not failing.

Withdrawal symptoms are **not random**.
They follow recognizable biological patterns in the brain and body.

Understanding *which systems are affected* helps make the process safer, steadier, and more predictable.

Why withdrawal feels so different for different people

Benzodiazepines act on the brain’s primary calming system, called **GABA**.
When that calming signal is reduced, multiple stress and regulation systems can become overactive at the same time.

Research shows that withdrawal symptoms tend to cluster into **five main biological patterns**, called *axes*.
Most people have **one or two dominant axes**, not all five.

This is why withdrawal can look very different from person to person.

The Five Axes — in plain language

Axis 1 — CRH–Adrenergic Activation (Alarm Axis)

This is the body’s alarm and threat-response system.

When it is overactive, you may experience:

- Sudden surges of fear or panic
- Internal shaking or tremor
- Morning spikes of anxiety
- Feeling “wired but exhausted”

What helps: safety, predictability, steady routines, gentle grounding, protecting sleep, and reducing urgency.

Axis 2 — Excitatory–Neuroinflammatory (Brain-on-Fire Axis)

This system affects how intensely the brain processes sensation.

When sensitized, symptoms may include:

- Burning, pressure, or pain sensations
- Head pressure or “brain on fire” feelings
- Sensitivity to light, sound, or screens
- Brain fog or a sense of inflammation

What helps: reducing stimulation, slowing pace, calming the nervous system from the body up, and avoiding overload.

Axis 3 — Autonomic Instability (Body Regulation Axis)

This system controls basic automatic functions such as heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, and digestion.

When unstable, symptoms may include:

- Heart rate or blood pressure swings
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Heat or cold intolerance
- Digestive changes

What helps: hydration, gentle rhythms, pacing, supporting regular intake, and avoiding sudden stressors.

Axis 4 — Basal Ganglia–Cerebellar Gating (Movement & Coordination Axis)

This system helps the body feel settled, coordinated, and at ease in space.

When affected, symptoms may include:

- Restlessness or akathisia
- Inability to sit still
- Internal “motor pressure”
- Balance or coordination changes

What helps: gentle movement, pacing activity, avoiding forced stillness, and recognizing this as neurological — not psychological.

Axis 5 — Mast-Cell / Neuroimmune Sensitization (Reactivity Axis)

This system influences sensitivity and reactivity to internal and external triggers.

When activated, symptoms may include:

- Flushing or itching
- Food or chemical sensitivities
- Temperature sensitivity
- Strong reactions to medications or supplements

What helps: simplicity, identifying triggers, minimizing irritants, and making changes slowly and carefully.

What this means for tapering

Withdrawal is not just about dose numbers.

It is about **stabilizing the nervous system first**.

Many people do better when:

- Their most active axis is identified
- That system is supported
- Tapering proceeds only as stability improves

This approach reduces fear, improves tolerance, and explains symptoms that otherwise feel confusing or alarming.

A final reassurance

Withdrawal symptoms are real.

They are biological.

They are understandable.

With the right framework, recovery becomes **structured, compassionate, and guided by physiology — not guesswork**.