

An Ounce of Prevention

Complimentary

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Why Self-Regulation Is the Most Important Thing in the World

Andrea Bell (LCSW), GoodTherapy

"The term self-regulation means 'control [of oneself] by oneself.' It refers to a system taking the needed steps to keep itself in balance. Specifically, somatic therapy helps people learn to self-regulate the balance of the fight/flight response in their nervous system. This balance can (and should) change moment by moment, depending on the current situation and environmental demands upon the person. In other words, it's a dynamic balance—and it has to be accurate or there will be problems!

According to Stephen Porges, we have four basic states (like "gears") in our autonomic nervous systems. Our thoughts and behaviors at any moment are hugely influenced by the relative proportions of each. These are physiological states in the autonomic nervous system.

They are:

1. Social engagement. This state is controlled by the ventral vagal (10th cranial) nerve. In social engagement, a person remains calm. They are truly available to be present with others. They can experience empathy. They are able to hold good boundaries, cooperate with others, and maintain a sense of humor. The key concepts here are calm, flexibility, and empathy. This state is vitally important; it forms the foundation of good self-regulation and should be the most predominant "gear" in daily life. However, it's often overlooked, as the public doesn't tend to have much education about it.
2. Fight. Usually experienced as anger, irritability, or rage; this state is controlled by the sympathetic nervous system (SNS). It comes online when the person's midbrain structures perceive a threat. The more predominantly the person is in a fight response, the more the prefrontal cortex goes offline and the less the person is able to experience calm or empathy.
3. Flight is usually experienced as fear, anxiety, or restlessness. Also controlled by the SNS, the flight state includes the same loss of cortical function as with fight.
4. And then there is freeze, which is usually experienced as passivity, low energy, amotivation, dullness, foggy-headedness, and reduced

capacity for cognition and emotion (other than fear). This state is also mediated by the vagus nerve—but an older, more primitive portion of it, the dorsal vagal system. Basically, freeze is a death preparation state, and it shows up when the body "thinks" social engagement, fight, and flight would be ineffective.

As Peter Levine writes, previous traumatically stressful events that have not been fully resolved in the nervous system will disrupt a person's self-regulation, biasing their response to present-day events. Specifically, unresolved trauma causes the person to respond with excessive fight, flight, and/or freeze response relative to the current situation.

Here is a thought exercise to illustrate the vital importance of self-regulation and how it impacts just about every situation across our human lives—on small and large scales. Imagine each of the following common scenarios. Then, imagine how each scenario could be different if at least one person involved was able to maintain calm social engagement.

- Bobby is growing up in an impoverished neighborhood. One of his parents is absent and the other is stressed, working two low-wage jobs in order to pay the rent. In his family and in his immediate community, there is no one consistently available who creates a sense of calm and safety. Bobby's nervous system never learns how to drop out of threat response and into relaxed social engagement. As he grows up, this lack of internal safety and stability has an impact on every interaction and decision he makes.
- Two next-door neighbors don't get along well. One decides to start barbecuing his dinner. The other is allergic to smoke; she yells at him to stop, or else she's going to get her cousin to beat him up. The first neighbor pulls out a knife and waves it at her.

Somatic Therapy Exercises for Healing from Trauma

PsychCentral

Somatic therapy is a body-focused approach that may be particularly helpful if you have symptoms of chronic stress or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Somatic experiencing may allow you to revisit trauma without recalling specific events and emotions.

When you practice these body-focused exercises, you focus on physical sensations, instead of thoughts and emotions as you'd do in talk therapy, or your fears as you'd do with exposure therapy.

Trauma is “when too much happens too soon for the nervous system to process,” says Valerie Candela Brower, a licensed professional counselor and certified somatic experiencing practitioner in Southbury, Connecticut. “Somatic work offers the body time and space to complete whatever it needed to do at the time that it didn’t get to do.”

Somatic experiencing also helps you realize if you’ve been “stuck” in the fight, flight, or freeze response. This could lead to symptoms of chronic stress, in addition to those linked to trauma.

One of the main goals of somatic experiencing is to develop a body/mind connection and increase your ability to regulate your emotions. This can help you manage some of your most distressing symptoms.

It’s highly recommended that you start somatic therapy with the help of a trained therapist. This can help you customize your approach to your specific trauma, emotions, and symptoms. It may also feel safer if any unexpected emotions come up.

Keeping the above in mind, here are some somatic therapy exercises you could consider practicing at home:

Grounding

Grounding exercises help you center and anchor yourself to the present moment. This could help you take your mind off past events that are causing you distress.

Here are a couple grounding techniques to try at home:

- Move your body in ways that feel most comfortable to you. This can include jumping up and down, dancing, jogging in place, or stretching. As you move, focus on how your body feels. You can do this with a body scan: Start with your toes and go all the way up your face, one body part at a time.
- Run water over your hands. Start by running cold water over your hands. Focus on how the temperature feels on each part of your hand, from your wrist to your nails. Switch to warm water and focus on how the sensation on your hands changes. Do this for a few minutes until you calm down.
- Focus on your breathing while you control how you inhale and exhale. You can start by inhaling to the count of 4, holding for 3 seconds, and then exhaling for another count of 4. You could also repeat what you consider a happy word after each inhalation.
- Tense and relax different parts of your body. For example, press your feet to the ground as hard as you can for a few seconds. Release the pressure and notice how your feet feel now. You can also squeeze the arms of your chair as tightly as you can and then slowly relax and let go.
- Play a “categories” game with yourself. Think of different categories of things — for instance, dogs, states, or cities — that begin with a chosen letter. Don’t switch to a new letter until you’ve identified at least 5 objects that start with that letter.

Self-Regulation

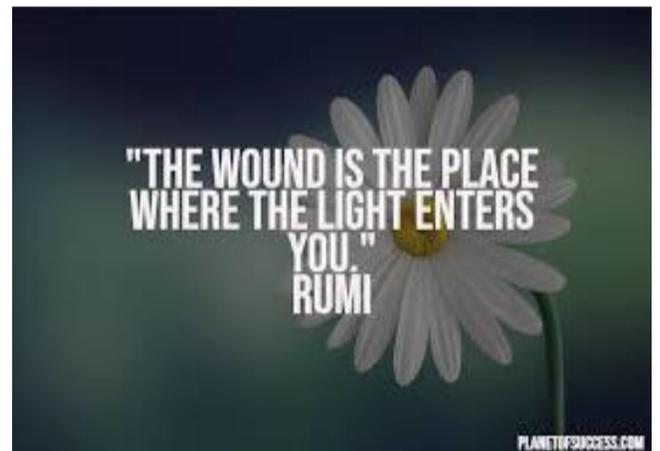
In general, emotional self-regulation is about guiding yourself through your emotions so you can shift gears when they’re leading you to feel

distressed. Within somatic therapy, self-regulation is about the nervous system.

Unresolved trauma may lead to dysregulation of the autonomous nervous system. This may mean you’re on high alert all the time. In turn, you might react to everyday stress and events in a way that’s connected to your past trauma.

You can try some of these easy at-home techniques to help you self-regulate:

- Hug yourself. To do this, cross your right arm over your chest, placing your hand near your heart. Then, cross your left arm, placing your left hand on your right shoulder. This can make you feel contained, which may make you feel safe. Hold the hug for as long as you need.
- With your hand in a cupping position, tap your body all over, from your feet to your head. You can also try squeezing different parts of your body, instead of tapping them. This will help you with grounding, but also help your body recognize your boundaries — which can also give you a sense of being contained and safe.



Net News

Here are some web sites you & your family may find helpful.

Gentle Somatic Yoga for Emotional Release

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WajHoXJac_c

The Most Important Life Skill to Teach Children: Self-Regulation

<https://nurtureandthriveblog.com/how-to-teach-your-child-self-regulation/>

The Co-Regulation Effect

<https://relationshiprestoration.org/2021/04/12/the-co-regulation-effect/>

Self- Help Corner:

Alcoholics Anonymous: 780-424-5900

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org

Al-Anon/Alateen: 780-433-1818

Support Network / Referral Line: 211

Distress Line: 780 482-4357

Cocaine Anonymous: 780-425-2715

Access 24/7 – 780 424 2424

Informative Links:

The National Women’s Health Information Center:

<https://www.womenshealth.gov/>