

SELF REGULATION

For further information

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WHY IT IS IMPORTANT TO KNOW HOW TO SELF REGULATE

SAFETY

Stephen Porges Polyvagal Theory identified that

- safety is central to humans if they are to relax, rest and enjoy life. He looked at how our autonomic nervous system evolved differently to other mammals and realised that an important part of our survival depends on a long term carer being present to meet our needs in early life.

After childhood we are our own long term carer, responsible for daily needs and this is when knowing how to self regulate gets tested.

We humans have also developed a complex nervous system to not only survive the everyday dangers of possible threat but also the intensity of relationships, emotions, communication and thinking. It is not surprising that we get stressed by the pressures of daily life and relationships.

Normal stress

Everyday stress can be managed by a healthy balance of sleep, diet and exercise blended with healthy relationships and work. However, when stress becomes too much because of changing circumstances, threats to our sense of safety and/ or difficulty in relationships, we can become distressed - this is when it can be good to know how to consciously self regulate - reducing the level of stress in mind/ body.

Much distress is Manmade

Much of the stress that causes anxiety is created by worrying/ thinking. Our nervous system responds to disturbing thoughts as if there is real danger in our environment - it can't tell the difference between a lion running toward us and the worry of an unpaid bill.

The unpaid bill can quickly become a sleep disturbing worry, confusing our nervous system that is trying to rest. Not being able to pay our rent is a concern of course but we tend to make better decisions when we have had a good nights sleep.

SELF REGULATION CAN BE LEARNT

Practice

Learning to self regulate needs a daily practice while life feels ok. We don't learn to drive a car when it is moving at 60 miles an hour. We practise gear changing initially while the car is parked. We get a feel for the brake, clutch and accelerator. We do it when we have a calm mind that can learn what works and how. Like wise with self regulation we practise the tools that calm us while we are calm to understand and get a feel for them.

Then when we begin to feel stressed we know how to move towards a calmer state. Anxiety and stress can feel out of our control so knowing we have tools that we can choose to use can be quite empowering.

Tools for Self Regulation Porges identified certain body processes that support us feeling calm and relaxed which are regulated by the vagus nerve and by engaging the following activities we can choose to stimulate the vagus nerve by our actions and move ourselves closer to a state of calmness. Informed use of breath and voice specifically stimulates calmer states. The vagus nerve is directly connected to the larynx and voice and middle ear muscles of listening.

So what can we do?

Breath out

We cannot think calmly without enough oxygen getting to our brain. Fact. We become more irrational the less oxygen the brain gets. And we can only breathe-in fully when we have breathed-out fully. When stressed this needs to be done more consciously as anxiety causes us to breathe more shallowly reducing the amount of oxygen we get with each breath, so we breathe faster and get more stressed, a vicious cycle.

Slowly extending the out breath supports a calmer state. The in-breathe will happen naturally.

- Consciously focus on breathing slowly out through the mouth and extend it by 1-2 secs more than feels normal.
- Allow the in-breath to just happen. If you can, breathe in through the nose.
- Making a sound helps focus; ah, shh, sss, any sound that helps you concentrate.
- Singing, humming are all done on the out-breath, as is speaking with a friend
- Or - this one is strange - bark like a dog, yap yap yap, or woof, woof - this has the effect of pulsating the breathing muscle called the diaphragm which can get tense.

I suggest 3 conscious out-breaths when you are not busy; each time you fill the kettle, stop at traffic lights, looking out the window, sitting on the toilet etc.

Orient

Safety is a sensory experience. Animals check they are safe by looking around the place where they are. We humans have been conditioned out of many natural instincts, as it can feel rude to look around where we are in a new place. Letting the eyes slowly take in the environment and allowing the head to follow the eyes in curiosity helps our nervous system to be present and sense safety.

Grounding

Understanding our physiology we come to realize that the nervous system feels safe when it can feel the ground beneath us, through our bones. Feet and sit-bones send messages of having landed safely in the present. Moving from foot to foot, sit bone to sit bone brings an embodied sense of oneself which is often missing when stressed.

Slow movements

The more stressed we are the more likely we are to either freeze in fear with worrying thoughts or to speed up in agitation and anxiety - fight/ flight. Slow conscious movement supports us in shifting towards a more present awareness of

where we are and this moment. Movement also changes breathing as muscles need oxygen for fuel.

Dancing in a conscious way, listening and responding to the sound and beat.

Being in nature

Our human life is busy and has taken us away from the rhythms of nature, seeing a sunrise, a sunset, the movement of water flowing, whether it is rain, river or sea, clouds moving, feeling the breeze on our faces, smelling a flower, hearing a child laugh. These are all mindful practices that help our nervous system be in the present moment.

Sensory development

Again slowing down our connection to our environment supports a more embodied awareness of what we are doing. Taking a little more time to enjoy our food, smelling a flower, stroking our face/ hands with a feather, listen to a bird, slows time and can make life more enjoyable. It only needs our attention for a few minutes once or twice a day to transform our day.

Cold water

Yes, splashing our face with cold water stimulates the vagus nerve, in a way it's a wake up call, taking us out of our thoughts into the cold light of day. Also swimming, immersing oneself in water can be very soothing. A cold shower is the ultimate wake up call.

A warm bath also has a place in calming our nervous system. However if we are already hot and bothered a warm bath can potentially be dis-regulating. Take time to see which you need.

Mindfulness

You may have noticed a common theme, the journey is shifting from the busy over worrying mind to a slower more embodied sense of the present moment, observing oneself becoming distressed and knowing that we have the capacity to choose where we put our attention and how we can be proactive about the actions we take, to take care of oneself and return to a calmer state more quickly.

Becoming sensitive to our body we learn to know what we need just as a good enough parent does for their child, Is my child too hot, too cold, hungry, tired, thirsty, need touch, need to share a feeling of sadness, fear, anger or joy, we begin to adapt to our changing states of being just as we adjust our clothing in response to the weather. We take responsibility for our own welfare no longer dependent on another meeting all our needs as a child must. And we also know there are people there to help us when we are struggling and we allow ourselves to ask for support.

Practice

Self regulation is something that can be learnt. If you want to enjoy life and feel less stressed it is worth making this commitment of 5-10 minutes spread throughout the day of being mindful of how you are breathing, what you are thinking, where you are, feeling the safety of this moment and then check if you feel a little more relaxed. It does work - but needs practice. Your practice is your commitment to yourself.
ENJOY LEARNING HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF