



Co-regulation & Burn Out

Definitions

Self-regulation

Self-regulation is our ability to monitor and control our own behavior, emotions, or thoughts, altering them in accordance with the demands of the situation.¹

Co-regulation

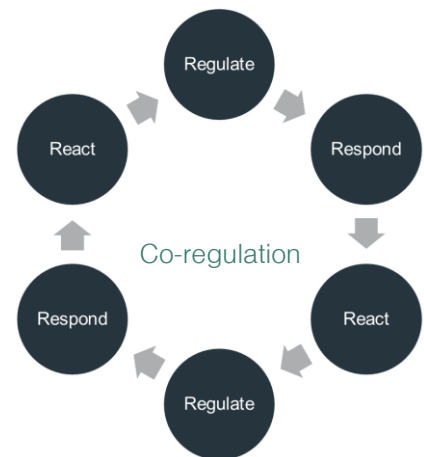
Co-regulation occurs in the context of social relationships and refers to how we adjust our physical and emotional response in order to maintain and encourage a regulated state.²

The Process

Throughout the day we react to ongoing and incoming external stimuli. These reactions are driven by many factors including our past experiences, our biases, our mood, etc. Reactions can be quick and last a split second or they can linger.

In our role as coaches, we work to keep these reactions from lingering by regulating our emotional or physical responses. Over time, we learn how to do this in a way that works best for us.

Our response after we react and then regulate is a chance to model self-regulation in the coaching relationship and in turn support the regulation of the individual with whom we are working. This dual process is referred to as co-regulation.



Co-regulation Techniques

The Window Pane

Imagine a glass pane, or window, is situated between you and your participant – you can still see, hear, and engage with your surroundings but that glass pane is there to absorb or reflect the feelings of stress you may be inclined to internalize. As a coach, our role is to co-regulate and effectively and compassionately respond in the moment. The “window” exists to protect you from over-exerting your emotional capacity.

Question Reframe

It can be tempting to ask questions that dig deeper into past trauma, but validation does not have to equal excavation. If you are not a clinician, or trained to navigate a trauma narrative, it can be helpful to reframe questions that have the potential to re-trigger or activate a participant’s stress response. Below are examples of questions that can be used to step outside the trauma narrative:

- What would it look like for you to move forward?
- How can I best support you in this moment?
- Are there ways we can work together to achieve (enter goal)?

Inhale-Exhale Endurance

Take time each day, when you aren't feeling heightened or stressed, to breathe deeply. Inhale for 8-10 seconds and exhale for 8-10 seconds. Start with one minute a day and increase the time over the course of a few weeks. It can be challenging to utilize deep breathing to calm ourselves if it is not something our bodies are used to doing – however, building it into our everyday routine helps our bodies become accustomed to regulating during times of stress and in turn co-regulating as we support participants.

Head-to-Toe Scan

Throughout the week, take a few moments to jot down or note the physical sensations you experience when stressed. Pay close attention to body cues such as tensing shoulders, clenching fists, or furrowing eyebrows. Over time, as you notice these tendencies occurring, practice intentionally releasing the tension. This form of body mindfulness encourages relaxation and a sense of control over our stress response.

Boundaries Check & Mantra

As you work with participants, it is important to be mindful that there is an inherent boundary that exists between our experiences and the experiences of our participants. However, the absorption of stress can often result in countertransference, or a provider's over-identification with a participant. It can be helpful to use a personal mantra that resonates with us to remind ourselves in the moment that a participant's experience is separate from our own. Examples include:

- Their crisis is not my crisis
- This experience is not my experience
- I have my limits and that is OK

It may be helpful to seek outside support from a supervisor, trusted colleagues, or mental health professional to address challenges associated with countertransference.

Things to Keep in Mind

Note Individual Differences in Regulatory Responses

As individuals, we experience unique triggers and different self-regulation techniques may work better for some than for others – knowledge of this comes with introspection, time, practice, and building rapport with participants.

Tip: At a time when both parties are feeling calm, it can be helpful to talk through with participants what feels most helpful when he or she is feeling heightened emotions. This gives you as a mentor insight into how you might best model self-regulation and engage in co-regulation during times of stress.

Know Your Limits and Boundaries

Know where you draw the line both personally and professionally. This includes familiarity with organizational policies but also creating routines and schedules that support your self-regulation so you are better able to engage in co-regulation.

- Not scheduling meetings back to back
- Not going more than (x) number of sessions without a debrief
- Not extending meetings beyond the hour

- Only responding to e-mails a certain time of day
- Engaging in an activity or closing ritual to mark the end of the work day, i.e., 5 minutes of using a bullet journal that you can physically close, 30-second plank challenge with a co-worker or listening to a favorite song
- On your commute home, create a habit of giving yourself time to think about work until an identified landmark, and then grant yourself permission to file work away until your next work day begins

Separate the Individual from the Crisis

It can be particularly challenging to co-regulate when you are experiencing feelings of anger, sadness, frustration, or disappointment. In order to maintain unconditional positive regard and acknowledgement that individuals are whole people who possess inherent strengths, it is important to separate the person from the crisis. The individual is not his or her behavior.

Tip: It can be helpful in supervision or debrief sessions to actively identify strengths of the individuals and families with whom you work.

Create a Plan for Self-care

Self-care looks different for every person but it means finding ways to spend your time that either rejuvenate or relax you in some capacity.

- Keep a journal for a few weeks and note the things you do each day that make you feel positive feelings (happy, relaxed, grateful, content, etc.) and conversely the things you do that make you feel negative feelings (worried, anxious, sad, angry, etc.)
- Reflect on how you can increasingly build the activities that result in positive feelings into your week

Self-care isn't designed to be an intervention once you feel symptoms of burn out. It is designed to be preventative. You are not an afterthought.

Utilize Supervision

Use regular supervision, whether that be one-on-one or group supervision, as a space to practice self-regulation and co-regulation. A coaching culture is designed to encourage co-regulation, and supervision is a space to practice the same skills coaches are using in direct-service programming with individuals and families.

- Set an agenda with designated time to vent
- During each supervision, touch base on progress towards professional goals
- Make it a habit each supervision to recognize your individual strengths as a colleague, supervisor, and coach, highlighting the things you do well in addition to the areas you'd like to grow

1. <https://www.education.com/reference/article/self-regulation-development-skill/>
 2. <http://occupationaltherapychildren.com.au/what-is-co-regulation/>