

Last week when I published a series of sensory regulation activities for young people a parent contacted me and asked for self-regulation activities for parents.

It got me thinking about a piece of work I regularly do with parents before I start work with the young people/adults and that is for parents/carers/professionals to understand how they regulate them-selves.

There have been many articles on social media recently about how we are not able to help fill someone else's cup if your own cup/teapot is empty.

They go on to talk about self-care and filling up your cup.

You might also be thinking, how can I fill up my cup when I am caring for my child 24/7?
And the answer is...it is not easy.

However, the first step to helping others to emotionally regulate is to be regulated yourself.

What does that even mean?

- In basic neurological terms it means that we can make calm, conscious choices in the moment in response to the situation we are in. As humans we have evolved to have a sophisticated part of our brain (pre-frontal cortex or thinking brain) which other animals do not have. It allows us to carry out higher functions such as communicate, self-regulate, to plan
- Millions of years ago cave man went out to hunt where they were under constant threat of physical danger from animals, falling etc. The brain responded by a fight or flight response: a physiological and psychological response to the stressor which prepared the body to react to the danger.



Heart rate. Your heart beats faster to bring oxygen to your major muscles.

During freezing, your **heart rate** might increase or decrease.

Lungs. Your breathing speeds up to deliver more oxygen to your blood. In the freeze response, you might hold your breath or restrict breathing.

Eyes. Your peripheral vision increases so you can notice your surroundings. Your **pupils dilate** and let in more light, which helps you see better.

Ears. Your ears “perk up” and your hearing becomes sharper.

Blood. Blood thickens, which increases clotting factors. This prepares your body for injury

Skin. Your skin might produce more sweat or get cold. You may look pale or have **goosebumps**.

Hands and feet. As blood flow increases to your major muscles, your hands and feet might get cold

Pain perception. Fight-or-flight temporarily reduces your perception of pain.

- Once the danger was past, they were able to go to their cave and rest/sleep and calm the stress response. This is known as the para-sympathetic nervous response or rest and digest.
- When you see, hear, touch, or taste something, that sensory information first heads to the thalamus, which acts as your brain's relay/filtering station. The thalamus then relays that information to the neocortex (the “thinking brain”). From there, it is sent to the amygdala (the “emotional brain”) which produces the appropriate emotional response.
- However, when faced with a threatening situation, the thalamus sends sensory information to both the amygdala and the neocortex. If the amygdala senses danger, it makes a split-second decision to initiate the fight-or-flight response before the neocortex has time to overrule it.
- This cascade of events triggers the release of stress hormones
- Now lets face it...the potential threat of being physically attacked by a tiger nowadays is nil and even our potential for physical attack is very small and certainly not daily yet our survival response is being triggered more than ever. We respond to ‘perceived’ threats and our brain is easily tricked.

- As a result, our body still responds with biological changes that prepare us to fight or flight, even though there is no actual physical threat with which we must contend.
- In a family living with PMLD you are very likely to become over stimulated by the very behaviours your child is using in an attempt to self regulate: e.g. rocking, stimming, screaming crying or physically lashing out. There is a high likelihood this can trigger a stress response in yourself. The more it happens the quicker you become stressed.
- Understanding the body's natural fight-or-flight response is one way to help cope with such situations. When you notice that you are becoming tense, you can start looking for ways to calm down and relax your body. We will explore this in part 2.

Part 2: The Para-sympathetic nervous system (rest and digest)



The **parasympathetic nervous system** (“rest and digest”) helps produce a state of equilibrium in the body.

The parasympathetic, or “rest and digest” system is a much slower system that moves along longer pathways. The parasympathetic response is responsible for controlling homeostasis, or the balance and maintenance of the body’s systems. It restores the body to a state of calm and counterbalance, and allows it to relax and repair.

Strategies

Just as we can exercise some control over the sympathetic nervous system (just thinking of a public speaking engagement can trigger a response for many people), we can also activate the parasympathetic nervous system.

Simply reading a book does the trick for some people, which may be why so many people read before going to bed for the night.

Soaking in a hot bath, getting a massage, or petting a dog or cat are good relaxation strategies.

Some people react well to **deep breathing exercises** or activities like yoga and tai chi.

The less time we spend in the sympathetic response mode, the better.

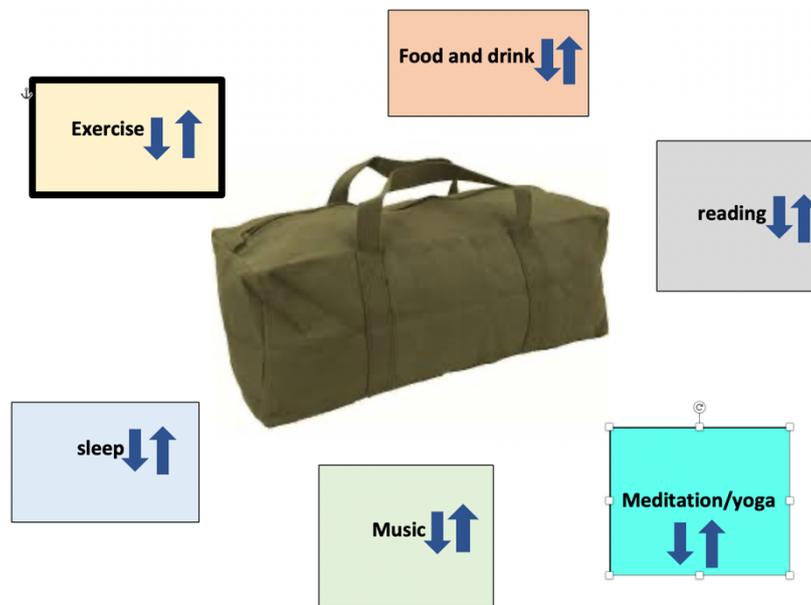
Now this is where you may be shouting at me down the screen at this point because you get very little time to yourself to read a book, take a bath etc and your child may sleep very little and therefore you are also sleep deprived and have very little time to rest and digest.

This is where we will have to use a dual approach by helping your child to self-regulate in order not to be 'alerted' yourself however there ARE some quick ways to decrease your fight/flight response.

We will be looking at strategies for your child in future videos and Q&A sessions online.

So first of all its important to understand what you already use in your toolkit of sensory/emotional regulation strategies.

Examples of areas of sensory activities we might use



Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present, aware of where you are and what you're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by past events or future events what's going on around you without attaching an emotion to it

There are various free apps available which provide off the shelf daily meditations and mindfulness exercises.

Some of these are as short as 3-5 minutes. That is a trip to the toilet (if you are lucky).

HEADSPACE. <https://www.headspace.com/covid-19>

CALM

https://www.calm.com/?url=https://www.calm.com/&pid=google&af_channel=g&af_c_id=6459091396&af_adset_id=81030214447&af_ad_id=378985127438&af_sub_siteid=&af_key_word=calm%20app&af_sub3=e&af_sub4=EAAlQobChMIt5eBpvWP6QIV1IBQBh2NbQUeEAAAYASAAEgJd3vD_BwE&af_sub5=&utm_medium=paid&utm_source=google&utm_campaign=6459091396+81030214447+378985127438&utm_content=homepage&utm_term=calm%20app&gclid=EAAlQobChMIt5eBpvWP6QIV1IBQBh2NbQUeEAAAYASAAEgJd3vD_BwE

AURA <https://www.aurahealth.io/>

BREETHE <https://breethe.com/>

Breathing

I am not talking about the automatic breathing that keeps us alive but the act of consciously working on our breathing to calm our systems. we are beginning to understand the true power of using breathing to calm us down.

For many years we have heard about but probably not paid enough attention Now that we have advance significantly in neuroscience the positive effects of mindful breathing

REF: NHS

- Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it.
- Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from 1 to 5. You may not be able to reach 5 at first.
- Then, without pausing or holding your breath, let it flow out gently, counting from 1 to 5 again, if you find this helpful.
- Keep doing this for 3 to 5 minutes.

Step-by-step instructions for this calming 2-1-4-1 breath: Ref:
<https://www.mindbodygreen.com/>

1. To begin, sit still and tall somewhere comfortable. Close your eyes and begin breathing through your nose.
2. Inhale for a count of 2. Pause at the top of your inhale for a count of 1.
3. Exhale gently, for a count of 4. Pause at the bottom of your exhale for a count of 1.

4. Keep your breathing even and smooth. If the 2-4 count feels too short, try increasing the breath lengths to 4 in and 6 out, 6 in and 8 out, and so on. (If longer breaths create any anxiety, there is no need to push yourself. The most important thing is that the exhale is longer than the inhale.)
5. Set a timer and breathe this way for at least 5 minutes to see a difference in your mood.

Exercise/sensory

If you have heard me speak before you will know that I believe exercise is necessary for everyone to allow them to regulate to learn, work, play effectively. It doesn't have to be something energetic, expensive or even out of the house (and at this time of corona virus thank goodness)

We generally learn we have 5 senses however in reality we have 8!

Out of these 3 extra, proprioception (the information coming from our muscles and joints) is one of the senses which provides much calming and grounding. Have you noticed when you are agitated and stressed that going for a walk or squeezing your hands helps you to calm? This is proprioception.

This is why exercise such as Pilates and yoga are so good (and for other reasons of course) as they provide you with significant proprioception.

HYPERMOBILITY EXERCISES (FREE): <https://jeannie-di-bon-wellness-movement.thinkific.com/courses/take/strengthen-your-hypermobility-core/lessons/1074356-introduction-video-by-jeannie-di-bon>

PILATES: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/nhs-fitness-studio/pilates-for-beginners/>

YOGA: <https://www.yourtango.com/2018317900/15-best-free-yoga-videos-youtube-has-offer>

Music: we all use music in different ways sometimes to lift our mood and sometimes to calm it.

Food: we use food as a sensory regulator. I don't just mean cake, chocolate..wine! But foods that are crunchy, foods that are chewy, some that are warm, some that are fizzy, some that are spicy some that are bland. Think about the foods you use to regulate yourself. If you are not making a healthy choice these foods can be substituted for something else that provides a similar texture, temperature etc. e.g crunchy crisps can be substituted for carrot sticks and a dip or sugary cola can be substituted for carbonated water with fruit juice.

Activity:

Really be aware of the subconscious things you use to modulate your own systems. Take a few days to be more aware of you own strategies. Draw your own tool bag using the headings from the diagram below and list the specific things in each section that increase your mood or calm it (decrease).

Examples:

