

# Regulation Inventory Resource

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Part of being a trauma-informed professional involves knowing how to support other people to feel safe and regulated while we are interacting with them, as well as supporting them to develop skills to self-regulate when we aren't with them. To do this, we need to build an awareness of our body's responses to environmental stressors and perceived threats. Starting with ourselves, this involves understanding what happens when we become dysregulated, cultivating awareness of what brings us back to the present, and how we personally support ourselves to regulate are all essential for co-regulating others. Experiences of feeling dysregulated or regulated (on a spectrum from agitated to calm) is governed by our autonomic nervous system, which controls the unconscious processes involved in being a living, functioning human. The autonomic nervous system connects our brains to many of our other internal organs and is responsible for things like heart rate, digestion, perspiration, and managing stress responses, working to detect and scan the environment for safety or danger. The autonomic nervous system has sympathetic and parasympathetic divisions, each with distinct responsibilities:

**Sympathetic:**

Mobilises us when we feel threatened or in danger; is responsible for a 'fight or flight' response. Heart rate increases, digestion is inhibited to direct energy and oxygen to muscles and brain for quick survival responses- in response to the adrenal glands (on top of the kidneys) releasing the stress hormones adrenaline and cortisol.

**Parasympathetic:**

Counteracts the sympathetic, bringing us back down from 'high alert'; facilitates 'rest and digest' responses. Heart rate slows, digestion is innervated (including salivation), muscles relax; enables sleep, sexual activity and much immune function.

This system includes the vagus nerve, running from the brain to the chest and stomach (Breit, et al., 2018<sup>1</sup>).

When the parasympathetic division of the autonomic nervous system is engaged, we may feel safe, calm and connected. However, it also this part of the nervous system that is expressed through 'freeze' responses; when danger is perceived as too great, and we can't fight or flee, we may go into this dissociated response to check out from overwhelm or pain.

Our bodies automatically respond to perceived threats first; our nervous system leads the way, often reacting to our environments before the cognitive, reasoning part of our brain kicks in to help us make sense of a situation. For example, our body might respond to something that feels threatening before we have a chance to rationalise what is happening and make conscious decisions about how safe (or unsafe) we think we are. Another part of the autonomic nervous system, the enteric nervous system or 'second brain' in the gut is working quickly on often unconscious levels to let us know if we truly feel safe or unsafe.

Most of us have developed some strategies to activate the part of our autonomic nervous system that can help bring us back to a regulated state. For example, some people find chewing gum helpful when stressed and anxious. Chewing gum produces saliva which stimulates digestion by activating the soothing vagus nerve; in doing this, we are taking action to engage the parasympathetic nervous system. We might also do things like hold our hands, pace, breathe deeply, or sigh audibly.

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1 Breit S, Kupferberg A, Rogler G, Hasler G. Vagus Nerve as Modulator of the Brain-Gut Axis in Psychiatric and Inflammatory Disorders. *Front Psychiatry*. 2018 Mar 13;9:44. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2018.00044. PMID: 29593576; PMCID: PMC5859128.



Bringing conscious attention to our senses is a first step towards engaging our parasympathetic nervous system, allowing us to tap into the resources within our whole, physical bodies to help bring us to a place of safety and regulation. When our bodies are able to access feeling safe, we can also settle further into safety and regulation through the way we talk to ourselves and reach out to connect and receive support from others. In parasympathetic mode, both external language and self-talk can be more open-minded and less judgmental – being in sympathetic stress response needs us to make snap decisions of ‘good or bad’ rather than the time and space to step back and see an overview with compassion. Our tones of voice are also lower and we use less of the high notes that signal ‘danger’ to others.

Becoming aware of the strategies we already use, and developing a repository of additional practices and strategies we find helpful is vital for professionals who regularly interact with people experiencing chronic stress or trauma.



### **Self-regulating to other regulate**

Over time, exposure to chronic stress or trauma can lead to feeling stuck. Tasks considered low stress by others trigger a sympathetic nervous system response, and the strategies a traumatised person might employ to try and feel regulated (e.g. alcohol use to feel calm) can be harmful to their health, to others, or lead to other difficulties. To engage with this person in a trauma-informed way, we need to think of ourselves as lighthouses, drawing people gently into the light of our calm, regulated presence. To do this, we need to know ourselves and our own self-regulation strategies well. We need to employ them to stay safe and regulated, and recognise that our safe presence is essential to meeting people where they are (even in dysregulated states). We can then come alongside them and offer our calm presence to facilitate their capacity to feel regulated.

The chart below is intended to help you explore both the strategies you already use alongside identifying new/additional strategies you might incorporate to expand and further develop your capacity to self-regulate, to remain healthy and support you to regulate with others. We recommend watching Charlotte Watts' video on this topic before embarking on this exercise<sup>1</sup>.




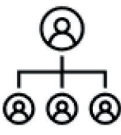
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1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiU2FXBTfts>

**First:** tune in to how your body feels right now. Are your muscles relaxed or can you identify where you might be holding tightness? How is your posture? How is the quality of your breath? Do you feel present or are you having a hard time just being 'here' in the moment? If you wanted to try and feel more relaxed and regulated, what might be the first things you try and do, instinctively and without having to think very hard about it?

**Next:** think about a recent experience when you felt stressed. You can choose to think about something that is very stressful or perhaps only slightly stressful (for us, this might look like a spilled cup of coffee or patchy wi-fi!). Then think about what you would do to consciously lower your levels of stress after that experience.

With these experiences and strategies in mind, fill out the table below, thinking about strategies you can realistically bring into your daily life.

Regulation Inventory		
	Strategies you use	New strategies to experiment with
 <p>Bottom Up: things you do that support you to regulate physically (e.g. engaging your senses through breathing, movement, touch).</p>		
 <p>Top Down: Things you do cognitively to support your regulation (positive self-talk – rationalisation etc)</p>		
 <p>Bottom Up and Top Down: Who do you seek connection with (emotional and/or physical) to help you regulate.</p>		
 <p>Bottom up and top down: What and who helps in your organisation to support your regulation. Think about services, trainings, people and other things.</p>		



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