

- **Co-regulation- Written by Andy Smith of Spectrum Gaming**

Co-regulation is the act of soothing and helping to calm someone during a moment of dysregulation. No-one is born with the ability to self-soothe; it is a skill we develop over time and with experience. Children need repeated experiences of co-regulation from a regulated adult before they can begin to self-regulate.

We may have to act as “external nervous systems” for children who are constantly in a heightened state. By being nearby and in a state of regulation ourselves, this can help a child’s Nervous System to become regulated.

As explained above, autistic people may experience a huge amount of difficulties, resulting in high levels of stress/ trauma. The result of this can be that autistic young people are unable to regulate themselves when they are stressed, as they may not have much experience of being able to get themselves to a feeling of safety. When this is managed successfully e.g. leaving a room, they can be punished for it - which sends the message that regulating themselves is not ok.

This means that we often have to act as “external nervous systems” for young people who are in a heightened state. Through our actions and through co-regulating with young people, we can show that they are safe, and also that we are safe people to go to when they are stressed. Then over time, with repeated experiences where it is ‘ok to not be ok’ and young people are met with support and empathy, they will be able to better regulate themselves over time.

The feelings and behaviour of people around us, affect how we feel. This applies to everyone, but can be more important in the case of autistic people, who often have higher emotional sensitivity than others (one of the reasons autistic people can struggle with eye contact, is because eyes are incredibly emotional so they can cause emotional overwhelm).

This means that when young people become upset, they can calm down quicker if the people around them appear calm, and demonstrate how to calm down to them.

Co-regulation is the ability to regulate emotions and stress related behaviours, with the support and direction of a connecting individual. The connecting individual supports regulation through the use of a variety of strategies to soothe or respond in times of stress. This includes looking at external stressors, but also internal thoughts and feelings.

Co-regulation is about “showing young people the ropes” of calming their internal and external systems. Then over time, young people will gain the skills to be able to do this for themselves.

Co-regulation involves various types of responses. It can include:

- Being a warm and calming presence
- Empathising with a young person
- Modelling behaviours that can modulate arousal
- Providing a structured environment that reduces uncertainty and provides feelings of safety.
- Making changes to the environment, such as removing triggers and reducing sensory input when a young person is becoming stressed.



An important part of co-regulation is that it is only possible to do this when we are not too stressed ourselves. Our response when we are stressed is exactly the same as when a young person is stressed. We lose our abilities to think logically and our brains tell us that we are unsafe. Then, we can default to punishments, making demands and doing what you can to regain control. In hindsight, this is not the right approach to take, but in the heat of the moment your brain is unable to access the parts of the brain it needs to work out a better way of supporting young people.

It is important to know that this is a natural part of being human and happens to all of us sometimes. When this happens, we believe in apologising, explaining why this happened and making sure young people know it was not their fault. Otherwise, young people may see you as hostile/ unpredictable, or feel like they have done something wrong but do not know what it was, and this can cause additional stress. Sometimes, this reparation process is more impactful than getting everything right, all of the time.

If we start to focus on a young person's behaviour too much, this is a sign of stress! If this happens consistently, it may be a sign you need extra support with your role or that

some time away could be helpful (as supporting young people who have been traumatised by the world is stressful for caregivers too).

A key factor here is that connection/ a positive relationship is what young people say is the most important when it comes to supporting them. Even if you don't get everything right or can't work out all the solutions, being willing to try matters. If a young person is struggling and you don't know how to help, they will still be grateful you are there and trying. Sometimes, this is enough to reduce the amount they are struggling with over time.