

Co-Regulation:

Supporting Everyone's Well-Being in the Classroom

When students are dysregulated, your ability to stay grounded makes all the difference — and this course shows you how.

You'll explore the science of stress and emotional regulation, reflect on your own triggers and coping strategies, and build a practical toolkit to support students through their most challenging moments.

By the end, you'll understand how your calm, attuned presence is one of the most powerful tools you have in the classroom.

Course Objectives in Learning Portal:

In this course, you will:

Develop an understanding of the science and biology behind emotional regulation, including how the brain and nervous system respond to stress.

Evaluate personal stress responses and identify strategies to regulate your own nervous system during moments of distress.

Identify and apply evidence-based coping and regulation strategies that support both educator and student well-being.

Examine the role of co-regulation in supporting student emotional and behavioral regulation. You'll also learn to implement strategies that foster regulation through relationships, validation, and skill-building.

Commented [MS1]: In the first course, you put a large portion of the idea in bold. Doing the same here just for consistency -- the other option is to make Supporting Every Learner bold just the first word.

Commented [AW2R1]: Updated to first word only and made consistent through all 3 courses.

Cover Page:

Co-Regulation: Supporting Everyone's Well-Being in the Classroom

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You'll explore the science of stress and emotional regulation, reflect on your own triggers and coping strategies, and build a practical toolkit to support students through their most challenging moments.

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What This Course Covers

Across four lessons, we build from the inside out. We will start with biology, then move to your own responses, then to practical strategies, and finally to how you'll use this knowledge to support your students.

Commented [FW3]: I don't think this is necessary text, since the objectives are listed right below.

Commented [MS4R3]: True, but the first lesson has a similar set up, so we need to either keep this one or delete it from the first lesson.

Commented [FW5R3]: Right, up to you Audry! See what you guys prefer.

Commented [AW6R3]: Formatted consistently across all 3 courses. See below.

Here's what we'll cover:

1. The Science of Regulation

Developing an understanding of the science and biology behind emotional regulation, including how the brain and nervous system respond to stress.

2. Activators and Emotional Responses

Evaluating personal stress responses and identifying strategies to regulate your own nervous system during moments of distress.

3. Self-Regulation Skills

Identifying and applying evidence-based coping and regulation strategies that support both educator and student well-being.

4. Co-Regulation in Practice

Examining the role of co-regulation in supporting student emotional and behavioral regulation. You'll also learn to implement strategies that foster regulation through relationships, validation, and skill-building.

Your Brain Under Stress

A student flips a desk, shuts down completely, or lashes out at a peer.

While it might seem like the child is simply acting out, biology paints a more complex picture.

Understanding what happens inside the brain during stress changes how you see behavior —
and how you respond to it.

Commented [AW10R9]: Really helpful insight. By identifying brain science, I wouldn't want to neglect a child's agency here. Will update language to include this concept.

Four Brain Regions That Shape Regulation

The brain develops from the bottom up, with survival functions forming first and higher-level thinking skills coming later. Four regions work together — and sometimes against each other — when stress enters the picture.

Brain stem

The Brain's Communication Pathway

The **brain stem** connects the brain with your spinal cord, sending messages throughout the body to help regulate several basic survival functions, including breathing, balance, and heart rate. It acts automatically, before any conscious thought kicks in.

Limbic system

The Emotional Nervous System

The **limbic system** is made up of interconnected brain structures that help regulate emotions, behavior, memories, and the systems involved with stress response.

Prefrontal cortex

The Decision-Maker

The **prefrontal cortex** is one of the last parts of the brain to finish developing. It handles executive functions such as decision-making, impulse control, and problem-solving. Chronic stress can make all of those functions harder to access.

Amygdala

The Alarm Center

As part of the limbic system, the **amygdala** detects threats and works with the hypothalamus to trigger your fight-or-flight response. It's also involved in many other functions, such as matching emotions to memory and regulating social-emotional communication.

An **amygdala hijack** happens when the brain perceives a threat and reacts before logical thinking can kick in — overriding the **prefrontal cortex** and putting **the sympathetic nervous system on full alert**.

You can see it in the body.

Stress can trigger fast, shallow breathing and a racing heart.

Commented [FW11]: This section feels potentially too neuroscience heavy. Need to find that sweet spot of simplifying but not oversimplifying!

Commented [AW12R11]: See comments from Allison below.

Commented [MS13]: I'm making these sentence case (only capitalizing the first word) to match what was in the first lesson. I don't feel strongly about this — you can go back and adjust the first lesson instead.

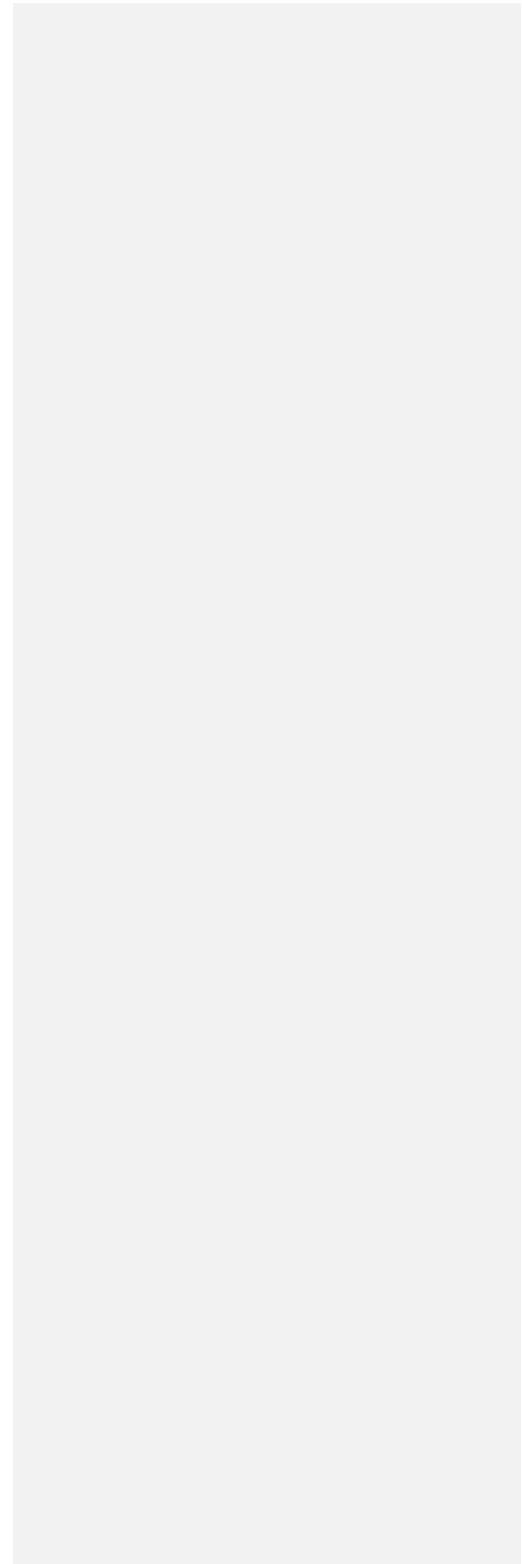
Commented [FW14]: The different title feels awkward here.

Hippocampus

The Memory Center

The **hippocampus** helps with memory and learning, distinguishing between past and present danger.

Chronic stress can shrink the hippocampus over time, making it harder for students to learn, follow instructions, and remember details.



How Mirror Neurons Support Co-Regulation

Mirror neurons are specialized brain cells that activate when we perform an action, and we see someone else performing that same action. Their main functions include:

- **Helping us “mirror” what we observe in others.**

Allowing our brains to respond to another person’s actions or emotions as if we were experiencing it ourselves. If you see someone cry, your mirror neurons let you *feel* their sadness.

- **Helping us learn new skills through observation. Think of how toddlers mimic adults!**

They also play a big role in social bonding — like when someone smiles, and you feel the urge to smile back.

Commented [FW15]: This feels misplaced. It stands out from the rest of the info presented in this section. Would put the "amygdala hijack" page before this one.

Commented [AD16R15]: Moved amygdala hijack above this

Behavior or Biology?

Think about a time a student completely shut down or exploded in your classroom. In that moment, you may have wondered, “Are they choosing to do this?” While students make choices each day, they are also influenced by biology..

Consider what the science says.

True/False

When a student is emotionally overwhelmed, they can still rationally reason through the situation.

True Explanation

Incorrect. It feels intuitive that effort or willpower should be enough. But during an amygdala hijack, the prefrontal cortex is actively bypassed. The brain is stuck in survival mode, so reasoning, impulse control, and problem-solving are genuinely harder to access.

False Explanation

Correct. During an amygdala hijack, the brain perceives a threat and reacts impulsively, bypassing logical thinking.

The Escalation Cycle

Student behavior doesn't just happen – rather, it **builds, peaks, and returns to calm** in a predictable cycle.

Knowing this cycle helps you choose the *right* strategy at the *right* moment, especially for students with a history of dangerous or destructive behavior.

Commented [MS17]: Similar to in lesson 1, it feels odd to have 3 levels of information. I would make this the same text size as the sentence below.

Commented [AW18R17]: Will update formatting in the course.

The Seven Phases of the Escalation Cycle

Some students can't recognize their own triggers, making it hard to interrupt the cycle alone. Others see it coming but still escalate due to stress, skill gaps, or unmet needs. It's rarely a straight line.

Phase 1

Calm

The student is relaxed and cooperative.

What you can do: This is the best time to teach coping skills, provide tools for building relationships, and reinforce positive behavior.

Phase 2

Trigger

A stressful event — such as a hard task, a routine change, or a peer conflict — sparks frustration.

What you can do: Identify triggers early to give yourself the best chance to intervene before escalation begins. It's helpful to preemptively remove or avoid these triggers in the classroom, if possible.

Phase 3

Agitation

Restlessness or withdrawal signals rising tension. This can look like fidgeting, darting eyes, or staring into space.

What you can do: Reduce demands, offer movement breaks, and use calm, low-key check-ins or coping skills prompts to help the student regain their footing.

Phase 4

Acceleration

Defiance or verbal threats begin to emerge. The child may start throwing things or even harming themselves.

What you can do: Stay calm, avoid power struggles, and give simple, clear directives. Remove other people and reduce stimulation from their immediate surroundings, if possible.

Phase 5

Peak

This is the crisis point. They will not be able to respond to directions or attempts to de-escalate.

What you can do: Safety comes first — follow your school's protocol. Avoid reasoning or consequences in this moment.

Phase 6

De-escalation

The student begins to regain control but may seem confused, withdrawn, or tearful.

What you can do: Offer a quiet space, minimal demands, and a calm, nonjudgmental presence. At this point, any sort of directive can set them back into the agitation phase.

Phase 7

Recovery

The student re-enters their calm phase.

What you can do: Once the student is ready and regulated, you can debrief gently, reinforce positive behavior, and collaboratively problem-solve.

Quiz

Ava, a 13-year-old student, has been stressed out all week about an upcoming exam. That Friday afternoon, a peer accidentally bumps into them while they're walking down the hall, causing Ava to drop their things. Angrily, Ava shoves back hard and then bursts into tears. They are not sure why they are so upset. Biologically, what is most likely happening?

Select the best response:

Ava's brainstem overrode their limbic system, causing them to lose emotional awareness entirely.

Explanation: Incorrect. The brainstem helps to regulate basic survival functions such as heart rate and breathing, but it does not override the limbic system in this way.

Ava's amygdala detected a threat and worked with the hypothalamus to activate a survival response, bypassing their prefrontal cortex before they could think it through.

Explanation: (Correct) Correct. During an amygdala hijack, the amygdala overrides the prefrontal cortex and fires before logical thinking can engage. Since Ava's been stressed out all week, a small trigger can be enough to activate their survival response.

Ava's hippocampus failed to store the memory of classroom rules, so they forgot how to behave appropriately.

Explanation: Incorrect. The hippocampus supports memory and learning. And while chronic stress can impair it over time, it is not the activator for impulsive survival reactions.

Ava's prefrontal cortex motivated her decision to react aggressively, and she is now feeling guilty about it.

Explanation: Incorrect. The prefrontal cortex handles deliberate decision-making, but during an amygdala hijack, it is bypassed. The reaction was impulsive, not calculated — which is the defining feature of a survival response.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Behavior Starts in the Brain

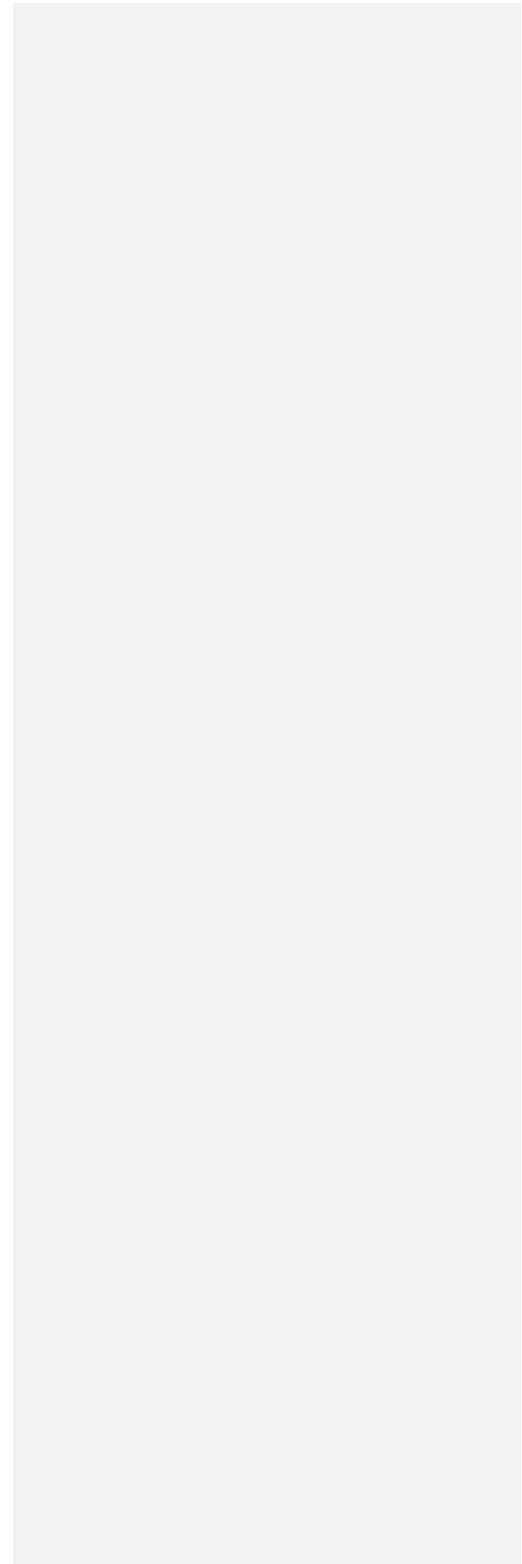
When a student explodes, shuts down, or can't follow a simple direction under stress, their **amygdala may have hijacked the rational part of their brain.**

Seeing behavior as biology is the first step toward responding in a way that actually helps.

Next up

Identifying what activates that alarm in the first place, and how your own nervous system responds.

Activators and Emotional Responses



Activators

Events that put the nervous system into alert mode.

Activators are **shaped by personal history and trauma**, which is why the same classroom moment can land very differently for each student, educator, or classroom support person.

This is not a flaw — it is a reminder that our nervous systems are always interpreting the present through the lens of the past.

Let's take a look at how activators can affect your own responses and behaviors.

Commented [MS19]: Audry, there are so many boxes and layers of information that as a user, I'm not sure what to read first. Faith tried to simplify the text in this section but that would also require a design change. If you find you need to revert to "What Are Activators?" please capitalize "Are"

Commented [AW20R19]: Will update formatting in the course.

Commented [MS21]: Isn't the classroom support person also an educator? So can we just say "student or educator"?

Commented [AD22R21]: This could be referring to paraprofessionals or other student support providers. Could say "each student and adult in the room"?

Commented [FW23R21]: Classroom support person makes sense to me

Commented [FW24]: Thought it could be helpful to make it clear we're talking about the educator/adult rn.

Types of Activators

External

Sensory stimuli in the school environment, such as sounds, sights, smells, or textures.

A loud hallway slam or a student shouting suddenly activates pent-up stress from a difficult school year or past incident, and your body reacts before the rational part of your brain can catch up.

Internal

Strong emotions that surface from **past experiences or personal history**.

A student questioning your instructions reminds you of a past situation where you felt undermined, and you feel irritated.

Trauma-related

Emotional responses are tied **to past traumatic events**.

A heated argument between students might activate your nervous system if you've experienced violence or instability in your own life.

Physical

Physical states that make emotional reactions stronger.

Coming to school exhausted or overwhelmed makes small behaviors — like tapping, talking out of turn, or constant requests — feel much bigger, and your patience drops quickly.

How intense can an activator become?

Once an activator fires, your response follows a scale. Knowing where you (or your students) land in the moment is the first move toward regulation.

Level 1: Calm

"I'm fine. No emotional reaction. I feel in control."

Thoughts are rational and steady. You can listen, respond, and engage without distress.

This is a good time to practice your coping skills while you're calm.

Level 2: Mildly Activated

"I'm annoyed or uncomfortable, but I can manage it."

You notice a shift in mood or energy. You can still think clearly and respond intentionally.

This is the ideal moment to use coping skills to self-soothe.

Level 3: Agitated/Activated

"I'm visibly upset. I feel like I am losing my grip a little."

Physical signs appear, including tension in the body and a fast heartbeat.

You are emotionally reactive, feeling anger, frustration, and/or anxiety. You're at risk of saying or doing something impulsive.

Take a moment to pause and acknowledge your stress response before responding or reacting. Use a coping skill while knowing that it might take more time for your nervous system to regulate.

Level 4: Explosive/Overwhelmed

"I'm about to explode. I feel out of control."

You're experiencing the same signs as Level 3, but at greater intensity.

Problem-solving is not possible here.

It's time to step away from the situation and focus only on self-regulation.

Commented [FW25]: Since you're giving advice on what to do at this stage, advice should be provided at every stage (just like the escalation cycle previously)

Commented [AD26R25]: How are these, @Faith Wilkins

Commented [FW27R25]: Good! Though now that I'm reading again, I'm wondering if it's helpful to give an example of a coping skill (like using breath work or something). But leaving that decision to you guys!

Commented [28R25]: Sure! How about "...to use coping skills to self-soothe, such as paced breathing or mindfulness grounding exercises."?

Know Your Own Landscape

You have just mapped four types of activators and four levels of stress response. Now bring it into your own classroom or workspace.

Describe a recent moment when you felt activated at work.

What type of activator was it?

How intense was it on a 1–4 scale?

What did you notice in your body or behavior?

Please provide your detailed response below.

Type your response here...

Commented [MS29]: I think you can skip this because there are instructions inside the box below.

Commented [AW30R29]: Default sentence in the LMS. Formatting is fixed in this location.

I
Quiz

A student questions your instructions in front of the class. You feel a flash of irritation, stronger than the moment seems to warrant. Later, you realize it reminded you of a past situation where you felt publicly

undermined by a colleague. While this isn't something you think or worry about often, the memory of this experience is still upsetting. Which type of activator best describes what triggered your reaction?

Select the best response:

External activator: A sensory stimulus in the environment set off your reaction.

Explanation: Incorrect. While the student's words were external, the intensity of your reaction came from a past personal experience being stirred up, not the stimulus itself.

Internal activator: Strong emotions from a past personal experience surfaced in response to the situation.

Explanation: Correct. The student's behavior reminded you of a previous situation where you felt undermined. That personal history is what amplified your reaction.

Trauma activator: An emotional response tied to a past traumatic event was triggered.

Explanation: Incorrect. Trauma activators involve responses rooted in past traumatic events, such as domestic violence, abuse, or the unexpected death of a loved one. The scenario describes a past professional experience that stirs irritation, not a trauma response. Internal activators cover reactions driven by personal history that's not necessarily traumatic.

Symptom activator: Physical depletion made you more reactive than usual.

Explanation: Symptom activators are physical states — like exhaustion, hunger, or illness — that lower your threshold for reactivity. Nothing in this scenario points to a physical cause.

Quiz

You are in the middle of a lesson when a student repeatedly interrupts. You notice your jaw tightening and a slight rise in irritation — but you can still think clearly and feel in control of your response.

Which level are you at?

Select the best response.

Level 1 — Calm.

Commented [FW32]: Isn't this kind of subjective? Who's to say this wasn't traumatic? I would maybe change the wording here to make it more clear either why it's not a trauma activator or why it could be.

Commented [MS33R32]: It might help to give examples of past traumatic events in the first sentence, so "... rooted in past traumatic events, such as EXAMPLES OF TRAUMA"

Commented [AD34R32]: I added some language to the question as well as the answer choice - let me know if you think this helps with the distinction.

Commented [FW35R32]: It does!

Commented [FW36]: Adding what to do on top of identifying the level overcomplicates the quiz.

Commented [AW37R36]: Updating wording to focus on the action vs. level identification.

Incorrect. Level 1 is a fully calm state with no emotional reaction. The physical signs described — jaw tightening and rising irritation — indicate your nervous system has already begun to respond. You are past Level 1.

Level 2 — Mildly Activated

Correct. Level 2 is the sweet spot. You notice a shift — tension, mild irritation, a change in energy. Stopping here prevents escalation to Level 3 or 4, where rational thought becomes much harder to access.

Incorrect. At Level 3, you are visibly upset and at risk of reacting impulsively. The scenario describes mild, manageable irritation with clear thinking still intact.

Submit

KEY TAKEAWAY

Regulation Starts With Recognition

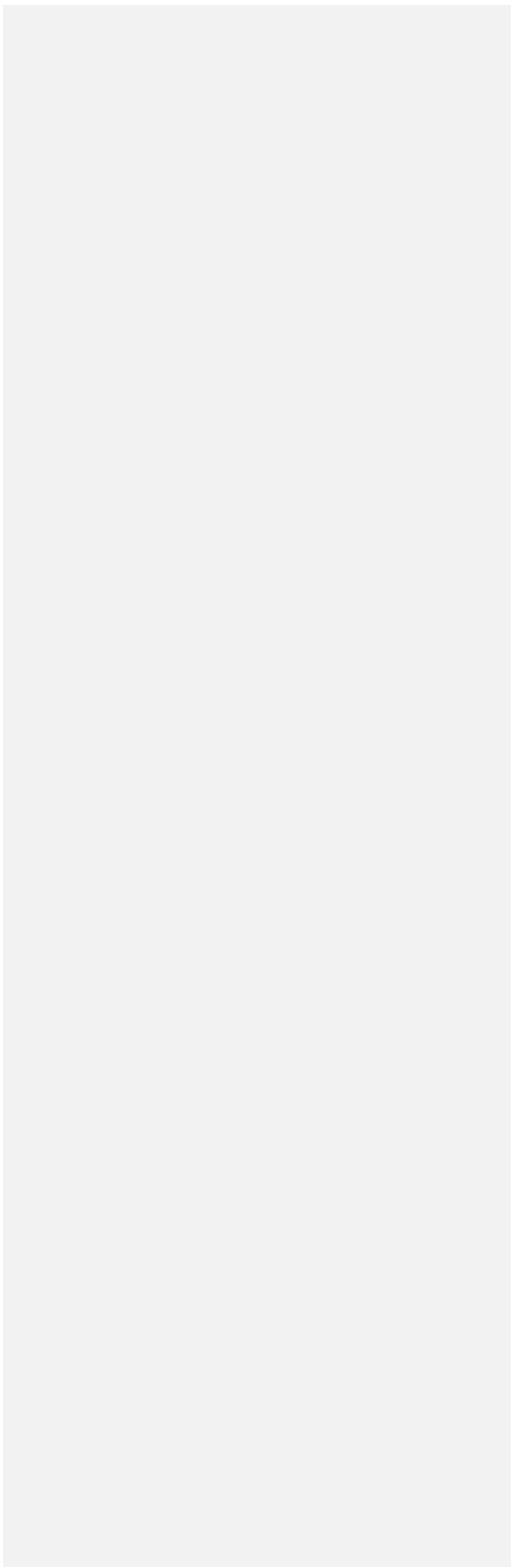
You cannot regulate a reaction you have not noticed.

Identify your activator type and your place on the 1–4 scale early. Catching yourself at Level 2, before physical signs appear, is when you still have the most choices.

Next Up

In the next lesson, you'll explore practical strategies to regulate your response — so you can act with intention, even under pressure.

Self-Regulation Skills and Coping Strategies



Strategies That Keep You Grounded

When a student experiences an intense emotional episode and your own nervous system spikes in response, good intentions are not enough.

You need a strategy that works on a body already in fight-or-flight mode.

This lesson goes into a deeper explanation of two evidence-based frameworks: STOP & TIPP — why they work physiologically, and how to build them into your classroom routine so they are ready when you need them most.

Before We Start...

Think of these distress tolerance skills as a **circuit breaker for overwhelming emotion** — not a cure, but a way to stop the surge before it causes damage.

These skills are for **high-intensity moments only** — when emotions are so high that problem-solving is not yet possible. A win here is simply *not making things worse*.

Commented [FW38]: Is this a new page?

Strategies in Practice

STOP

STOP is a mindfulness-based pause you can use the moment you notice emotions taking over. It interrupts the automatic reaction and creates just enough space to choose a response.

STOP

S = Stop

Stop what you are doing the moment you notice emotions seem to be in control. This is not about freezing, but rather interrupting the automatic chain of reaction before it escalates. Even a one-second pause can break the cycle.

Commented [MS39]: these are so tiny, with just one letter, they look like a mistake. I would put STOP in here and make the headlines S = Stop, T = Take a Step Back, etc.

Commented [AW40R39]: Will update formatting in the course.

STOP

T = Take a Step Back

Physically and mentally create distance from the trigger. Step away from the situation if possible or simply shift your posture and take a breath. Distance reduces the intensity of the emotional signal and gives you the chance to start thinking rationally again.

STOP

O = Observe

Observe what is happening inside and around you — without judgment. Notice your thoughts, feelings, and body sensations as they are rather than what you fear they might become. This step builds self-awareness and allows you to choose a deliberate response.

STOP

P = Proceed Mindfully

Reengage with the situation intentionally. Ask yourself, “What do I want to happen here, and what action is most likely to get me there?” Proceeding mindfully means acting from values and intention rather than from the heat of the moment.

TIPP

TIPP targets your physiology directly — because when you are too upset to do anything else, changing your body is the fastest route to calm.

TIPP

T = Temperature

Changing your body temperature decreases emotional intensity. Try splashing cold water on your face, holding ice, or stepping outside into cool air. Cold activates the dive reflex, rapidly slowing your heart rate and calming the nervous system.

TIPP

I = Intense Exercise

Intense physical movement burns off the stress hormones (cortisol and adrenaline) that fuel emotional reactivity. Even a few minutes of brisk movement — jumping jacks, a fast walk, or climbing stairs — can reduce the physiological charge of a strong emotion.

TIPP

P = Paced Breathing

Slow, deliberate belly breathing calms you down, signaling safety to the brain. Try inhaling for four counts, expanding the belly to help lower the diaphragm, and exhaling for six. The longer exhale is key to triggering the calming response.

TIPP

P = Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)

Alternating between tensing and relaxing muscle groups creates a deeper calm. Tensing builds awareness of existing stress; releasing it signals safety to the brain, lowers cortisol, and reduces heart rate and blood pressure.

REFLECTION

Think about a recent moment in your work when your stress level spiked.

Which strategy, TIPP or STOP, would have been most useful in that moment, and what would using it have looked like for you? Are there any barriers you anticipate in using it?

Please provide your detailed response below.

Type your answer here...

Submit

Commented [MS41]: I don't think you need this -- the instruction in the box is enough.

Commented [AW42R41]: This is the default sentence. The formatting is fixed in the platform.

Putting It Into Daily Practice

Now that you know how to apply these strategies to yourself, you can focus on how to teach them to your students.

1. Teach each skill explicitly.

Spend time explaining what each skill does and why it works. Students who understand the benefits are better able to use skills in moments of distress and build awareness of their own signs.

2. Designate daily practice time.

Consider setting aside a consistent time each day, even if only for a few minutes, to invite students to practice. Repetition in calm moments is what makes a skill automatic under stress.

3. Post visuals in the classroom.

Include visuals around the room that remind students of the steps for each skill. A posted TIPP or STOP reminder is available even when memory fails under pressure.

4. Create a coping skills kit.

Identify barriers to using skills in your specific setting and build a classroom kit around them. A plan for self-practice and for teaching students makes the difference between a strategy you know and one you actually use.

Quiz

It is a Tuesday afternoon. You have a mountain of paperwork due by the end of the day. Your principal asks you to cover lunch duty and present at a last-minute meeting.

You realize you will need to stay late, but you also have to care for a sick family member after work.

Your chest tightens, and your thoughts start racing.

Which strategy is the best first move?

Select the best response:

Use progressive muscle relaxation only after the workday ends, since it requires a quiet environment.

Explanation: Not quite. Progressive muscle relaxation is one of the TIPP tools and can be used in the moment, not only after the fact. Waiting until the day ends means the window for preventing an impulsive reaction has already passed. The point of TIPP is to intervene while arousal is still rising.

Skip both STOP and TIPP frameworks, because these skills are not designed for work-related stress.

Explanation: Incorrect. These skills are designed for exactly this kind of moment: when emotion is high and impulsive action risks making things worse. The scenario describes a classic high arousal situation.

Use TIPP by doing a few minutes of intense movement or slow-paced breathing to calm down before responding.

Explanation: Correct. When emotion is high, and the body is already in a stress response, TIPP targets physiology directly. Paced breathing or intense movement reduces emotional intensity quickly, making it possible to think clearly before deciding how to respond.

Use STOP and immediately begin to problem-solve the schedule conflict by listing priorities.

Explanation: STOP creates a mindful pause, but its purpose is to interrupt the automatic reaction, not to launch problem-solving. When arousal is this high, problem-solving is not yet possible.

KEY TAKEAWAY

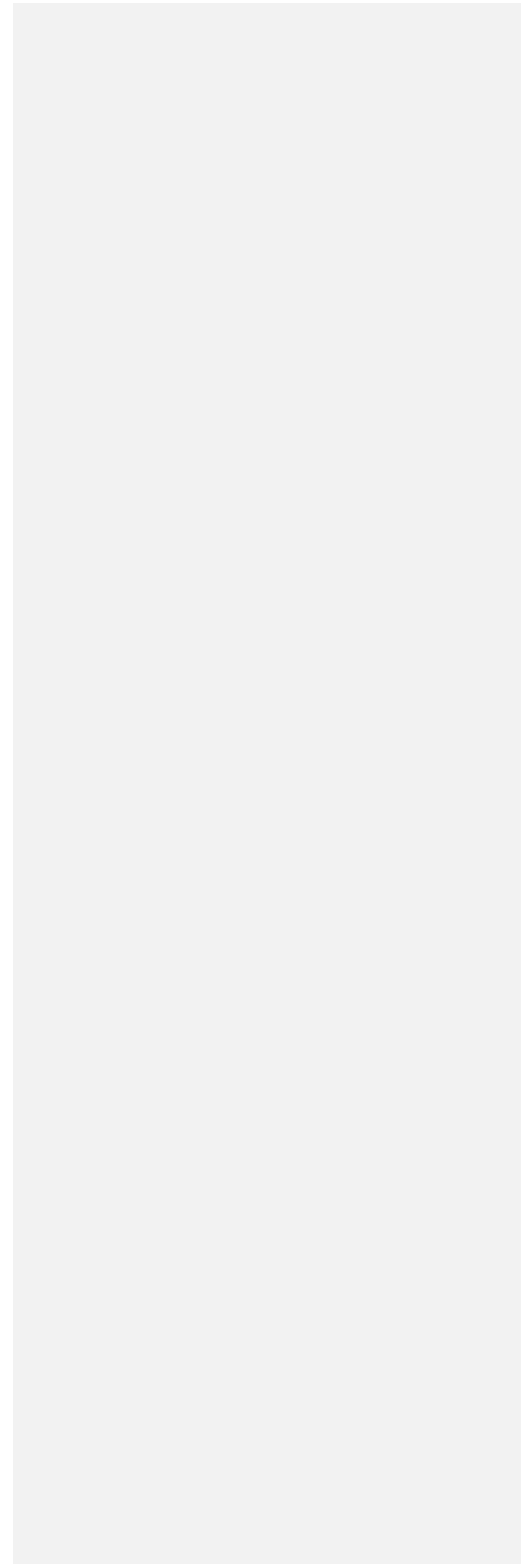
Have your skills ready before the storm hits.

When emotions are too high for problem-solving, **TIPP works on the body and STOP works on the reaction** — and neither works unless you have practiced them in calm moments first.

Build both into your daily classroom routine now, so they are automatic when you and your students need them most.

Co-Regulation Builds Student Capacity

You can teach every coping skill in the book, but if a student's nervous system is in survival mode, none of it lands. Co-regulation is what bridges your calm to their capacity — and it starts long before a crisis hits.



An Interactive Practice

Co-regulation is the interactive process where a caring adult supports a student in managing their emotions and behaviors.

Unlike self-regulation, which develops over time, co-regulation provides **immediate support**. You model the regulated response so the student can borrow it until they can generate it themselves.

1. Mirrors Brain Development

Students learn to regulate by watching and experiencing calm, supportive responses — social learning in action.

2 Supports Rational Thought

Co-regulation helps the prefrontal cortex stay in charge instead of emotions taking over.

3. Builds Lasting Habits

Practiced over time, co-regulation strengthens the brain pathways that help students manage emotions and behavior independently.

Four Practices That Make It Work

Co-regulation does not happen by accident. Four practices create the conditions where students can actually receive your support.

1 Connection First

Establish safety and trust **before** correcting behavior. A student who feels unsafe cannot take in what you are offering.

2 Attunement

Notice and respond to cues you can recognize in their posture, tone, and emotional responses. Regulation starts with being *seen*.

3 Modeling Regulation

Stay calm, steady, and predictable. Your nervous system is the reference point for their nervous system.

4 Flexibility

Adjust your approach to meet the individual's needs. One size does not fit all students or all moments.

Belongingness is the foundation.

Effective co-regulation requires **trusting, affirming relationships** and a safe, positive environment. When students feel seen, heard, valued, and accepted, the conditions for regulation are already in place.

Let's check our knowledge...

Sorting

Match each description to the best-fitting co-regulation practice.

Drag each item into the correct category.

Connection First

Establish safety and trust before correcting behavior.

A student who feels unsafe cannot take in what you are offering.

Attunement

Notice and respond to cues you can recognize in their posture, tone, and emotional responses.

Regulation starts with being seen.

Modeling Regulation

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Flexibility

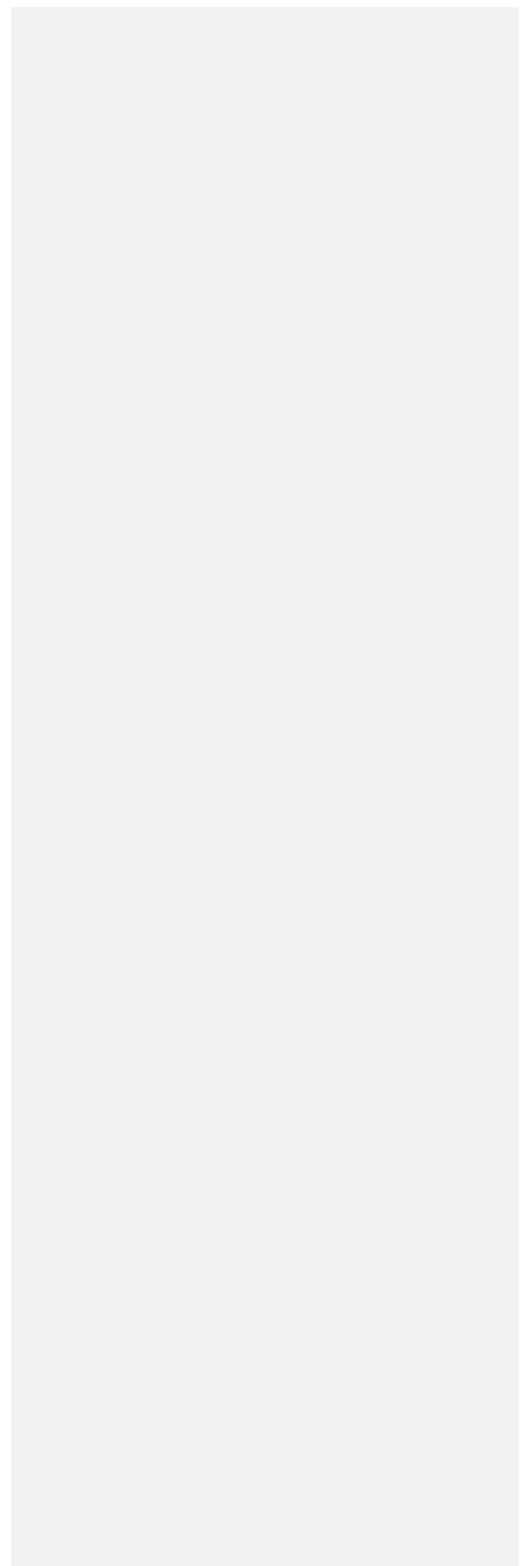
Adjust your approach to meet the individual needs.

One size does not fit all students or all moments.

Explanation (shown after submission)

The four practices are: connection first (establish safety and trust before correcting behavior), attunement (notice and respond to emotional cues so students feel seen), modeling regulation (stay calm and predictable so students can borrow your steadiness), and flexibility (adjust your approach to the individual and the moment).

How to Build Your Own Co-Regulation Practice



Setting the Stage: Designing Your Environment for Co-regulation

There are several ways you can build an environment where co-regulation can flourish. [Click the options below to learn more:](#)

Calming Space

All students benefit from having a space to reset when they feel frustrated or overstimulated. For trauma-impacted students, a designated calming area provides a sense of safety and control when they feel dysregulated.

Predictable Routines

Routines help all students feel secure, but for students with trauma, unpredictability can trigger anxiety. Knowing what to expect each day reduces fight-or-flight responses.

Warm Welcomes

A simple greeting fosters a sense of belonging for all students. Trauma-impacted students may feel invisible or disconnected, and being acknowledged daily can help them feel seen and valued.

Flexible Seating

Some students focus best in structured seating, while others may feel safer near the door or in a quiet corner. Giving students seating options fosters comfort and reduces hypervigilance.

Emotional Check-Ins

All students need help identifying emotions, but traumatically impacted students may suppress their feelings. Check-ins give them a low-pressure way to express emotions and ask for support.

Break Passes

Some students just need a moment to reset. For students with trauma, forcing them to stay engaged while dysregulated can escalate distress. Offering a break prevents behavioral outbursts.

Silent Signals

Some students feel uncomfortable speaking up, especially if they've experienced shaming or punishment for expressing needs. Silent signals allow for discreet help-seeking.

Space & Time

Immediately discussing behavior while a student is dysregulated fuels their emotional response. Giving them time allows them to process and respond more calmly.

Reviewing the environment-design strategies above, which strategies are you actively using?

Are there any new practices you'd like to begin?

Use the space below to jot down the strategies you'd like to start incorporating. There are no wrong answers here!

Type your response here...

Commented [MS43]: I think it's fine to have these instructions, but we don't have instructions like this in the first section where it's the same design

Commented [AW44R43]: Noted!

Commented [MS45]: I would reconsider the symbols for the last four - light bulb, rocket, bulls eye, and hazard sign -- they don't really match the topic

Commented [AW46R45]: Will update formatting in the course.

Commented [FW47]: Start this on a new page

Commented [MS48R47]: I don't understand why it should be on a new page-- wouldn't the user want to review the list above? Or are you looking for a design change so that it's not a continuation of the element above?

Commented [FW49R47]: I'm asking for a design change, because right now the spacing is weird. I think if the copy for each drop-down was the same font size and just contained the definition, then the spacing wouldn't be as weird and they can all remain on the same page.

Commented [AW50R47]: Will update formatting in the course.

CO-REGULATION IN PRACTICE

Your Co-Regulation Toolkit

Now that we have set the stage, here is what co-regulation looks like in action.

Remember mirror neurons!

Your emotional state is contagious. Students' nervous systems are reading yours constantly. Regulate yourself first.

Be attuned and responsive.

Proactively and in the moment, respond to students' holistic needs — physical, emotional, and cognitive.

Provide scaffolds.

Support the management of attention, emotions, and executive functions so students can stay focused enough to learn.

Model and match energy.

Match the type of engagement and energy required for students to participate and meet their goals.

Keep students safe.

Physical and emotional safety tones down their survival responses and gives them room to learn. Make it the baseline.

Validate and reinforce.

Validate emotions, positively reinforce skills when used, and always lead with connection before moving to problem-solving.

Steps to practice in the moment

- Approach the student at their level.
- Maintain a calm body and tone of voice. Use reflective language, like saying their name while you validate their emotional response.
- Begin to engage in a co-regulation skill (use a visual aid if accessible) and invite the student to engage with you.
- Keep talking to a minimum.

Commented [MS51]: The little symbols in this section also don't match the text well

Commented [AW52R51]: Will update formatting in the course.

Commented [MS53]: Noting that the interactive element -- checking the boxes on the list crosses them out -- is not ideal. It would be better to have a check mark show up instead. If that's not possible, then have these just be bullet points.

Commented [AW54R53]: Will update to bullet points in the course.

Putting the Steps Into Practice

Imani is a 10-year-old who has been struggling since her parents separated two months ago. Today, during a group writing task, a classmate accidentally knocks her pencil case off the desk.

Imani yells, "Ugh!" She crosses her arms and puts her head down — refusing to speak or engage. Her breathing is fast, and her body is rigid.

Consider the following approach in response to Imani. Read through the educator prompts on the left and consider how they impact Imani's ability to regulate on the right.

Your approach	Imani's response
① Approach at their level. You quietly move away from the front of the room, crouch down beside Imani's desk, and stay still. You do not stand over her or draw attention to the situation. Your posture is open and unhurried.	① Her reaction She does not look up, but her shoulders shift slightly — a small signal that she has registered your presence without feeling threatened by it.
② Model a calm body and tone. You take a slow, visible breath and let your own body soften. You do not rush to fill the silence.	② Her reaction After a few seconds, her breathing begins to slow very slightly. She has not spoken, but her body is no longer as rigid. Your calm is doing the work before any words are exchanged.
③ Use reflective language. You say softly, <i>"Imani, I can see something really hard just happened. That makes sense. I'd feel that way too."</i> You do not ask questions or push for a response. You simply name what you see.	③ Her reaction She lifts her head just slightly. There are tears in her eyes. She does not speak, but the wall has cracked a little — she feels seen rather than managed.
④ Invite a co-regulation skill. You slide a small breathing visual card onto the corner of her desk and say quietly, <i>"I'm going to do some slow breaths right here. You don't have to do anything. Just sit with me, if that's okay."</i> You begin breathing visibly, in for four counts and out for six.	④ Her reaction After two cycles, Imani's breathing begins to mirror yours — not perfectly, but noticeably. She has not been told to calm down. She has borrowed your calm instead.
⑤ Keep talking to a minimum You stay beside her in comfortable silence for another minute. When her body has settled, you say, <i>"Take your time. I'm here when you're ready."</i> Then you give her space.	⑤ Her reaction She eventually picks up her pencil and makes a small attempt to reengage with her work. She did not need the incident resolved right now — she needed to feel safe first. That is exactly what happened.

Commented [FW55]: The girl in this current image seems a bit older than 10. Maybe remove the image for consistency, because I don't think you use one for other questions. Also fun fact, Imani means Faith in Swahili!

Commented [AD56R55]: Cool!!

Commented [AW57R55]: Love this 😊

Commented [FW58]: These should be aligned. There's a weird mismatch going on in the graphic

Commented [AW59R58]: Updating format here. Will update formatting in the course as well.

Quiz

Why were the interventions used with Imani effective?

Select all that apply:

Approaching at her level avoided a power dynamic and signaled safety rather than threat.

Correct. Crouching beside Imani rather than standing over her removed the physical power imbalance and communicated that the teacher was there to support, not control.

Modeling calm breathing gave Imani a regulated nervous system to borrow from.

Correct. Because students co-regulate by mirroring the adults around them, the teacher's visibly calm breathing gave Imani's nervous system something steady to sync with.

Reflective language helped Imani feel seen rather than managed.

Correct. Naming what she saw without demanding a response validated Imani's emotional experience and built trust, which is the foundation for regulation.

Asking Imani questions helped her process what had happened more quickly.

Incorrect. When a student is dysregulated, questions increase cognitive demand and can escalate distress. The teacher deliberately avoided questions and kept talking to a minimum.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Regulation is biological, relational, and practiced.

Self-regulation is not just a skill — it is a whole-body, whole-system process that is **biological, relational, and practiced**.

When you stay regulated, model calm, and co-regulate with intention, you give every student in your classroom a living example of what regulation looks like.

Commented [FW60]: For consistency, would put this at the end of the section instead of putting it in the wrapping up section.

Commented [AW61R60]: Agree. Will move to that location.

Final Assessment

Co-Regulation in Review

You've learned about the brain's stress response, activators, coping skills, and the power of co-regulation. Now it's time to put it all together.

This short assessment checks your understanding of the science and practice behind supporting calm, regulated classrooms.

Target the Brain's Response

During a heated moment, a student suddenly stands up and mutters something under their breath while glaring at you.

You notice your own heart racing, and you raise your voice sharply at the student before thinking it through.

Multiple choice

What just happened in your brain?

Select the best response:

You experienced an amygdala hijack, an instinctive reaction overriding your prefrontal cortex.

Correct. The amygdala acts as the brain's alarm system. When it perceives a threat, it can bypass the prefrontal cortex and help trigger an impulsive fight-or-flight response before logical thinking kicks in.

Your parasympathetic nervous system is activated to slow your heart rate and calm your body.

Incorrect. This describes the calm response system, but the scenario shows the opposite.

Your prefrontal cortex was activated and helped you carefully calculate the best response.

Incorrect. Actually, the opposite occurred. The prefrontal cortex handles reasoning and impulse control, but under acute stress it can get hijacked.

Commented [MS62]: In the LMS, there's an extra space between "system" and "activated" and an extra "is" at the end

Commented [AW63R62]: Will update formatting in the course.

Identify the Activator

During a staff meeting, you present a new student support plan. A coworker cuts in and says, "I'm not sure that approach is really going to work." You feel a sharp wave of irritation, far stronger than the comment seems to warrant.

Later, reflecting on your reaction, you realize it echoes a pattern. At your previous school, your ideas were routinely dismissed by a supervisor, leaving you feeling professionally invisible and powerless.

Multiple choice

What type of activator is this?

Select the best response:

A trauma activator, when an emotional response is tied to a specific traumatic event.

Explanation: Not quite. Trauma activators are specifically tied to traumatic events like violence or instability. This scenario describes a more everyday internal activator, like feeling undermined.

A symptom activator, when physical exhaustion intensifies emotional reactivity.

Explanation: Incorrect. Symptom activators involve physical states, like being tired or hungry, making small things feel bigger. There's no mention of physical depletion here.

An internal activator is when a strong emotion tied to a past experience surfaces in the present moment.

Explanation: Correct. Internal activators happen when strong emotions from past experiences resurface, like feeling undermined again, causing a reaction that feels bigger than the current situation warrants.

An external activator is caused by a sensory stimulus like a loud noise.

Explanation: Incorrect. This scenario is about an emotional memory resurfacing, not a sensory input.

Sort the Type of Activator

Sorting

Drag each item to the correct activator category:

External Activator

A door slams loudly in the hallway, and your body reacts before you can register why.

A sudden shout from across the room makes you flinch before you consciously process it.

Internal Activator

A student questioning your instructions brings up an old feeling of being undermined.

Trauma Activator

A loud student argument activates your nervous system because of past experience with violence.

Symptom Activator

You arrive at school running on little sleep, and small behaviors suddenly feel overwhelming.

Being exhausted from a rough week makes you snap faster than usual at minor disruptions.

Explanation (shown after submission)

- **External activators** come from sensory input in the moment (e.g., sounds, sights).
- **Internal activators** involve everyday emotions resurfacing from past experiences.
- **Trauma activators** are specifically tied to past traumatic events like violence or instability.
- **Symptom activators** stem from your current physical state, like exhaustion, intensifying your reactions.

Commented [FW64]: The space between the title and the question is too big in the module.

Commented [AW65R64]: Will update formatting in the course.

Select the Co-Regulation Tool

You're in the middle of a tense phone call with a parent, when you feel your frustration rising. Before responding, you pause, take a slow step back from your desk, and check in with what you're feeling and why. Then you choose your next words carefully and calmly.

You notice your shoulders drop, and your thinking clears as you move through each step.

Quiz

Which evidence-based coping tool are you using?

Select the best response:

STOP

Correct. STOP stands for Stop, Take a step back, Observe, and Proceed mindfully. Each action in the scenario maps directly to one of those four steps, making it a textbook use of this tool for interrupting an emotional reaction before it escalates.

TIPP

Not quite. TIPP (Temperature, Intense exercise, Paced breathing, Progressive muscle relaxation) works by changing your physiology when emotions are very high. The scenario describes a mindful, step-by-step pause rather than a physical intervention.

Paced belly breathing

Incorrect. Paced belly breathing is specifically about slowing and deepening your breath to calm down. The scenario involves more than breathing — it includes stepping back, observing your emotional state, and choosing a mindful response.

Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)

Explanation: PMR works by alternating between tensing and relaxing muscle groups to release physical stress. The scenario doesn't describe any muscle tensing or relaxation — it describes a cognitive and behavioral pause sequence.

Select the Best "Setting the Stage" Practice

A student with a history of trauma enters your classroom visibly tense. Before the lesson begins, you greet them by name at the door, check in briefly about how they're feeling, and remind them their usual seat near the window is available if they would like to sit there.

Multiple choice

Which combination of "Setting the Stage" practices is the educator using?

Select the best response:

Warm Welcomes, Emotional Check-Ins, and Flexible Seating

Correct. Greeting the student by name is a warm welcome that fosters belonging. The brief emotional check-in gives the student a low-pressure way to express feelings. And offering their preferred seat is flexible seating that supports comfort and reduces hypervigilance.

Predictable Routines, Break Passes, and Silent Signals

Not quite. These are all valid "Setting the Stage" practices, but they don't match what's described. The scenario shows a personal greeting, an emotional check-in, and a seating option.

Calming Space, Space & Time, and Breaks

Not quite. A calming space is a designated reset area. This does not match the proactive, welcoming actions described in the scenario.

Validating Student Emotions, Predictable Routines, and Calming Space

Incorrect. Validation is a related skill, but it's a separate co-regulation practice from the proactive "Setting the Stage" strategies shown here. The scenario focuses on a warm greeting, a check-in, and a seating preference — not a calming corner or a set daily routine.

Submit

Commented [FW66]: I would consider doing another matching question for this? Like matching the practice to an example. This one seems maybe too obvious of an answer?

Commented [AD67R66]: I'm ok with it being a bit obvious. I like the review of all of these helpful strategies in each answer choice, even if they don't match the scenario.

Building a Co-Regulation Practice

Ms. Okafor has been working with a student, Darius, who frequently shuts down during transitions to lunch.

Over the past month, she has made a point of greeting him warmly each morning and learning more about his interests and family. Each day, she finds moments to model her own use of coping skills and has the students practice with her before each transition.

When Darius starts to tense up before a transition, she pulls him to the side of the room, kneels to his level, takes a slow breath, and quietly says, "I see you, Darius. Let's breathe through this one together."

Multiple choice

Which factors necessary for building an effective co-regulation practice is Ms. Okafor demonstrating?

Select the best response:

Trusting relationships, modeling and personal use of skills, and daily practice of skills

Correct. Ms. Okafor builds a trusting relationship through consistent warm greetings and genuine interest in Darius. She models regulation by breathing alongside him rather than just instructing him. And the daily pre-lunch breathing practice ensures skills are practiced routinely, not just in crisis moments.

Safe, positive environment, break passes, and flexible seating

Incorrect. Break passes and flexible seating are "Setting the Stage" practices, not the core factors for building a co-regulation practice. While Ms. Okafor does create safety, the scenario specifically highlights relationship-building, skill modeling, and daily practice.

Avoiding public shame and attunement

Not quite. Ms. Okafor does show attunement by noticing Darius's cues, but avoiding public shame isn't the focus here. The stronger match is the relationship, modeling, and daily practice she has built over time.

Flexibility, predictable routines, and validating student emotions

Not quite. These are related co-regulation concepts, but they don't capture what Ms. Okafor has intentionally built over the past month. The scenario centers on the sustained factors that make co-regulation work: a trusting relationship, personal modeling of skills, and consistent daily practice.

Submit

Commented [FW68]: This feels pretty close to the previous question. Would make it more clear that this question is about the Four Practices (Connection, Attunement . . .) Right now it seems like a continuation of Setting the Stage.

Commented [AD69R68]: I added a few more details and also took out "direct teaching of skills" for the incorrect answer choice, as that is a bit confusing. Let me know what you think.

Theo, a seventh-grade student who is usually upbeat and social, enters the classroom with his jaw tight, shoulders raised, and eyes fixed on the floor.

When you redirect him for talking during instructions, he shoves his notebook off his desk, crosses his arms tightly, and begins muttering under his breath — refusing to make eye contact or acknowledge you.

Rank

Arrange the co-regulation steps in the correct order for responding to this student.

Drag to reorder the steps from first to last.

- Approach the student at his level.
- Say his name and validate his emotional response.
- Begin a co-regulation skill and invite the student to engage with you.

Explanation: The correct sequence is:

1. Approach at the student's level to reduce threat and signal safety.
3. Say his name quietly and validate his emotion (e.g., "Theo, it looks like you're having a really hard moment right now.").
4. Begin a co-regulation skill and invite them to join you, such as a slow breath or a brief pause.

Submit

Commented [FW70]: This copy is missing in the module.

Commented [AW71R70]: Will add into the course.

A student yells, "This is so stupid, I'm never going to get this!" and slams their pencil down.

Multiple choice

Which response best reflects the concept of validation as a co-regulation strategy?

Select the best response:

"Let's move on to something else since this is clearly too frustrating for you."

Incorrect. This avoids the emotion rather than validating it. True validation stays present with the feeling and helps the student move through it, rather than sidestepping the challenge entirely.

"Calm down, it's not that big of a deal. You'll figure it out."

Incorrect. This dismisses the student's emotion rather than validating it. Telling someone to calm down or minimizing their frustration tends to escalate stress rather than co-regulate it.

"You're right, sometimes assignments are too hard. Let's just skip it."

Incorrect. By saying the assignment is "too hard," you are inadvertently implying the student cannot do the task. It misses an opportunity to build confidence and resilience.

"This looks really frustrating right now. Want to take a breath together before we look at it again?"

Correct. This is validation in action — it communicates acceptance and understanding of the student's frustration without agreeing that the work itself is impossible, which calms the stress response by making the student feel heard.

Submit

Your course is complete!

You may now close this window.

Thanks again for showing up for yourself and for your students.

