A fact sheet about

Co-regulation between adults

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Co-regulation between adults

What it looks like in an ordinary week, and one thing to agree together.



Key points

- Co-regulation (definition below) between adults means two people helping each other feel steady again. Either of you can lend calm to the other.
- It is mostly quiet. It can be being in the same room, or doing something side by side, with no demands and no pressure to talk.
- Two people can also wind each other up. When you are both overwhelmed, it may help to settle on your own first.
- One step to try: ask one person you are close to what helps them settle, tell them what helps you, and agree on one thing to try.

What co-regulation between adults is

You are both on the couch after a long day. One of you is reading, one of you is on a puzzle game, and nobody has spoken for an hour. You both get up calmer than you sat down. Or a friend comes over after a week that has fallen apart, and you cook dinner together without talking about any of it.

Neither of those looks like support from the outside. But both are what co-regulation between adults often looks like.

Co-regulation is the way two people's feelings affect each other. Each person helps the other come back to steady after something hard. In close relationships, this goes both ways. When it is working, both people end up calmer than either would be alone.

Part of it happens in the body. Over time, people who are close start to affect each other's bodies. Each person's presence helps keep the other steady, without either of them trying. That is part of why losing someone close can leave your whole body unsettled for a while.

It also changes from day to day. One evening you are the steady one, and the next week it is them.

What it looks like in an ordinary week

Between adults, co-regulation is usually quiet and asks nothing of you. It can look like any of these:

- being in the same room doing different things, with no need to talk
- doing something side by side, such as walking, driving, cooking or gardening
- playing a game together online, or staying on a call while you both do other things
- one person making a cup of tea for the other and leaving it there
- the same small routine at the same time each week

In one small study, autistic adults described this kind of time with friends who are also autistic. There is no pressure to talk, and silence feels comfortable rather than awkward. Sitting together drawing without speaking counts as time well spent.

It is usually not talking it all through, cheering someone up or fixing the problem. For some people, talking is what helps, and then talking is the co-regulation. Some people settle best on their own, and that is fine too.

When it goes the other way

Two people can also wind each other up. If you are both stressed, one person's tension can raise the other's. You can end up more upset together than either of you was at the start.

Researchers see that as different from co-regulation, because co-regulation brings you both back down. When you are both overwhelmed at once, it may help to settle on your own first and come back together after.

Sensory differences change what this looks like too. Sitting close or leaning on someone settles some people and is too much for others.

Most of this research was done with couples, and little with neurodivergent adults. Research has also often left out BBIA (Black, Brown, Indigenous and Asian) people, LGBTQIA+ people and other groups. So your lived experience is what is most valid here.

The one thing to try: ask, tell and agree one thing

Choose one person you are close to, at a calm time. A message is fine if talking is harder.

Ask them: "What helps you settle?"

Tell them what helps you, as clearly as you can.

Agree one thing to try. For example, an hour in the same room on Sunday with no talking, or a word either of you can say that means "quiet night".

You can set a reminder in the Understanding Zoe app to try it, and keep a note there of what you agreed.

This means neither of you has to be the steady one every time. It also builds up on ordinary days, so it is easier to reach for on hard ones.

Because it goes both ways, you will sometimes be asked to lend calm when you have little to spare. You can only lend what you have, and saying "not tonight" is part of the deal. You may also need different things from each other, so agree on it rather than guess. You can read more about telling your partner what helps you here.

The research supports the idea behind this step, but the step itself has not been tested yet.

Getting support

This page describes what many adults say about themselves. It is not an assessment, and it cannot tell you what is going on for you.

You can ask for support at any point, for example if you and the people close to you keep unsettling each other. A GP is a good place to start. A GP can also talk with you about a Mental Health Treatment Plan, which can lower the cost of sessions. Different health professionals can help, and your GP can help you work out who is right for you. You can also book a telehealth session through Understanding Zoe.

Sources

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UnderstandingZoe

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hello@understandingzoe.com

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