A fact sheet about

Who helps you settle

Understanding Zoe

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Understanding Zoe

Who helps you settle

What co-regulation is, why the right presence helps, and how to name yours.



Key points

- Co-regulation (definition below) means settling with help from someone else's calm, so you do not have to do it all on your own.
- A calm person you trust nearby can make a hard moment take less out of your body. That is why the same moment can feel easier with the right person there.
- The right presence is different for everyone. It might be a partner, a friend, an animal, someone on a call, or, for many autistic adults, time alone.
- One step to try: on a calm day, name your settler and the one thing they do that helps.

What co-regulation is

The kitchen is loud, a delivery has turned up at the wrong time, and someone has asked you the same question twice. Then one person comes in and sits down without asking anything, and it all gets a little easier. On another day, a different person comes in and asks what is wrong, and it gets harder.

You were the same in both moments, but who was nearby had changed. A lot of advice about overwhelm is written as if you are always on your own, so it leaves this out.

Co-regulation means settling with help from someone else's calm. Your body reads the people around you all the time. A calm person you can predict gives your body less to guard against.

Between adults it is usually quiet. Someone sits in the same room, keeps their voice low and does not need anything from you. It is rarely someone talking you down or fixing the problem.

When it works well, it goes both ways: a person can only lend you the calm they have on that day.

Why the right presence can make the moment easier

Your brain seems to expect people you trust to be close by. When one of them is there, a hard moment takes less effort to get through, because the load is shared. When nobody is there, your body carries all of it.

In one study, holding the hand of someone close made the brain react less to a threat. This was true for married, dating and friend pairs. A stranger's hand did not help.

In another study, people with their pet in the room had a smaller stress response.

This only works with someone you trust: a person who is hard to predict, or who you feel is judging you, can add to the load instead.

In addition, in one small study, autistic adults described time with other autistic people as easier, with less need to mask and no pressure to talk. Many also say time alone is how they recover before they are ready to be around anyone.

Sensory differences change the answer too. A hand on your arm may settle one person and feel awful to another. It depends on whether you tend to seek touch or avoid it. So if your answer is an animal, a room, a call or being alone, that is a real answer.

Most of these studies were done with adults who were not autistic or ADHD or otherwise neurodivergent.

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: name your settler

On a calm day, decide who or what settles you. Choose one, and keep a second for when the first is not around:

- a person you live with or see often
- a friend who will stay on the phone or a video call without needing you to talk
- an animal
- a room you like, with the door shut and the light low
- being alone for a set time, with someone knowing where you are

Then name the one thing that helps, because "being there" is too vague to ask for. "Sits nearby and does not ask questions" is clear. So is "takes over dinner without being asked", "the dog leaning on my legs" or "twenty minutes in the bedroom with the door closed".

Write it as one line: who or what, and the one thing. You can keep that line in your notes in the Understanding Zoe app. You can also set a reminder to read it on a calm day, so it feels familiar when you need it.

On a bad day, you do not have to work out what you need. You go to the line you already wrote. It also gives the people around you something clear to do, so they do not have to guess. You can read more about telling your partner what helps you here.

The person who settles you has their own hard days. If they are already wound up, two people can make each other more upset, and that is nobody's fault. Asking can feel like a burden, but the person you ask may be glad to have something clear to do.

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. It matters most if you feel overwhelmed most days, or if nobody and nothing helps you settle. A GP is a good place to start, and 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

Understanding Zoe is the first neuroaffirming AI-powered app that turns every report, observation and moment into an actionable next step, supporting neurodivergent people and those who care about them to thrive.

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