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Breathe, Move, Soothe

in this issue

Breathing and Beyond

Creative Co-Regulation Skills for Kids and Adults

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The start of a new school year brings with it a fresh crispness in the air, changing leaves, a swell of nervous excitement—and a rise in stress levels for both kids and adults. Navigating the shifting routines, busier days, and increased expectations of the season can cause strain and distress for people of any age. An ability to calm ourselves becomes one of our most important skills.

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To learn how to soothe ourselves, others must soothe us first. While even young children use strategies to manage stress, their primary tactic is signaling caregivers for help (Gennis et al., 2022). *Co-regulation* is more-or-less synonymous with *other-regulation* in adult-child relationships. As adults provide other-regulation, children learn *self-regulation*. Yet this assumes that the adult has the ability to offer soothing through both supportive activities and comforting biological cues. This is not easily achieved for two reasons:

> “In adult-child dynamics, emotional regulation is conscious and behavioral, guided by a responsible, intentional, regulated adult. But it is also unconscious, biological, reciprocal, and often complicated by multiple emotional states impacting adult and child at once.”

1. Emotional regulation operates not only on a behavioral level but also on hormonal and nervous-system levels (Bornstein & Esposito, 2023). Outside of our awareness, we detect and respond to cues of dysregulation in others' physiology. Stephen Porges (2022), the originator of the polyvagal framework, calls this phenomenon “neuroception.” This means that even if a stressed caregiver can mimic a regulated state (for example, by using a neutral tone to prompt a child to take a breath), the child may still unconsciously respond to biomarkers of the adult's underlying stress.

2. Emotional regulation is bi-directional. The most emotionally well-equipped caregiver can be challenged by a child's heightened emotion, especially when the adult is emotionally, mentally, or physically taxed. Unhelpful beliefs about the child's behaviors, sensory over-stimulation, and thwarted attempts to soothe the child can all contribute to the caregiver slipping into a dysregulated state alongside the dysregulated child. What's more, adults are often tasked with monitoring and responding to several people's emotional lives simultaneously (Paley & Hajal, 2022). Emotional regulation within systems such as families and classrooms is complex.

Given these challenges, therapists may find that cognitive and behavioral strategies are insufficient when supporting co-regulation between caregivers and children. In adult-child dynamics, emotional regulation is conscious and behavioral, guided by a responsible, intentional, regulated adult. But it is also unconscious, biological, reciprocal, and often complicated by multiple emotional states impacting adult and child at once. As such, mental health practitioners can benefit from knowing accessible and flexible calming strategies that work for adults and children concurrently, whether in a dyad or in a larger system.

The Upside of Bottom-Up Strategies

People make sense of the world through a billion bits of sensory input per second but only process 10 bits per second consciously (Zheng & Meister, 2025). This means a vast amount of information is filtered and processed unconsciously. Based on cues of relative safety or threat, the body, brain, and mind work together to quickly adjust energy levels, muscle tension, heart rate, respiration, and more, while also making meaning about it. This process is complex yet holds simple keys to emotional regulation.

Even though cognitive and behavioral approaches have arguably been the long-held gold standard for therapeutic change (David, Cristea, & Hofmann, 2018), evidence-based bottom-up strategies such as breathing, muscle relaxation, swaying, and focusing on pleasant sensory cues may provide advantages that other approaches lack.

Work with the Body

Bottom-up strategies attend to the strong biological component of emotions. About 80 percent of the longest cranial nerve is composed of sensory fibers that carry information from the body to the brain (Howland, 2014). With so much communication flowing from the bottom (body) up (brain), there are endless possibilities for influencing human physiology in creative ways that positively impact the body-brain feedback loop and, thus, alter emotions.

Useful at Any Age

Bottom-up strategies are impactful at any age. While accounting for individual preferences, strategies that involve breathing, stretching, swaying, or pleasant sensory input, for example, can positively influence child and adult nervous systems alike without the need for talking or cognitive understanding.

Support Synchronicity

Bottom-up strategies can be used by multiple people synchronously. This helps adults manage their self-regulation while they guide children toward emotional regulation. Moreover, synchronizing movement, breath, and sound has the added benefit of promoting feelings of connectedness, cooperation, and empathy (e.g., Balconi et al., 2023; Tzanaki et al., 2025).

Bypass Rational Thought

Bottom-up strategies' effectiveness does not depend on clarity of mind, self-reflection, discussion, or problem-solving skills. This is particularly important because when people are emotionally dysregulated their heightened emotion impairs verbal and cognitive functioning (Nair et al., 2020), making it difficult for them to feel soothed by words or solutions.

Easily Carry Over

Lastly, bottom-up strategies are easily replicable in various environments. Once learned, they can be used in the home, the community, the classroom—even the car. These strategies can also be applied to different problematic situations and are useful for regulating various degrees of distress.

Breathing and Beyond

One of the most common bottom-up strategies for co-regulation is intentional breathing.

> Even though cognitive and behavioral approaches have arguably been the long-held gold standard for therapeutic change, evidence-based bottom-up strategies such as breathing, muscle relaxation, swaying, and focusing on pleasant sensory cues may provide advantages that other approaches lack.

Breathing is accessible to everyone, anywhere, and it's a well-established stress-reducing tool for children (e.g., Zisopoulou & Varvogli, 2022) and adults (e.g., Bentley et al., 2023; Finchman et al., 2023). However, even though the average adult takes about 20,000 breaths per day (Chourpiliadis & Bhardwaj, 2022), many do not know how to breathe effectively for emotional regulation.

Instead of inviting a client to take a deep breath, the practitioner can prompt them to exhale deeply. Slow exhales in particular are known to activate and strengthen the parasympathetic nervous system (Bentley et al., 2023), which creates a calming response. Exhales also inhibit the sympathetic nervous system (Gerritsen & Band, 2018), preventing increased activation. Slow, full exhales cause heart rate, blood pressure, and inflammation to go down while heart rate variability goes up—all biomarkers of decreased stress.

A recent systematic review of existing research (Bentley et al., 2023) summarized that breathing reduces stress even more significantly when practiced in the following ways:

- With slow exhales, defined as 12 breaths or fewer per minute
- For approximately five minutes
- With guidance from someone who can ensure correct mechanics such as inhaling through the nose, filling the lungs and abdomen, and exhaling completely

This analysis also showed that when it comes to stress reduction, it doesn't matter if the person uses box breathing, 4-7-8 breathing, alternate nostril breathing, or any other approach—it's simply exhale … all the way … repeatedly.

Where Creativity Comes In

One effective approach is to tell clients that exhaling slowly, fully, and repeatedly is like flossing: Intentional breathing is good hygiene, but few of us do it as often as we should. And as with flossing, we seldom realize how much gunk is stuck inside until we remove it by practicing good emotional hygiene. Clients typically laugh and agree to "floss their emotions" daily.

Layering bottom-up strategies with stories, imagery, and creative metaphors like this one can significantly help clients understand, retain, and apply them (Brunetti et al., 2024). Brains young and old have a natural affinity for creative stories and images (Cohn-Sheehy et al., 2021). They help connect the unfamiliar to the familiar and offer multiple pathways to information, making new strategies more accessible later (Boccaccio et al., 2024). Relatable metaphors make emotional regulation strategies more relevant and memorable (Mon et al., 2021), and they promote engagement through fun, humor, and connection.

Calming Down for Kids

Teaching young children how to soothe their nervous systems can be particularly challenging. Children may struggle to focus long enough for calming tools to become effective. A curious mind, amplified imagination, and busy body can make it difficult to settle down, especially at night. What's more, families with a neurodiverse child commonly find that their child's overthinking, anxieties, and restlessness increase at bedtime (Page et al., 2025). This makes it even more important to go beyond the basics of breathing (and other bottom-up co-regulation practices) by layering calming strategies with creative images, metaphors, and stories.

Here's an example of a kid- *and* adult-friendly visualization paired with a breathing technique that's adapted from the children's book *Max and the Imaginary Tree* (Williams & Curtis, 2025). It invites kids and their caregivers to imagine that they're moving the leaves of a tree together with each inhale and exhale.

Breathe Together Using Imagery

1. Imagine your breath is like a breeze that floats through the leaves of a beautiful tree.
2. Every time you breathe in together, the leaves pull toward you both. When you breathe out, the leaves move away from you both.
3. Remember to fill the belly all the way up with air when you breathe in so that it gets big and round. When the belly pushes the air out, it gets flatter again.
4. Now, together take a deeper breath in and imagine the branches and trunk pulling toward you.
5. Push the breath out to see the whole tree bend away from you, still anchored at its roots.
6. Finally, take in the deepest breath possible and hold it. Watch the movie in your mind to see what happens to the leaves next!
7. Now, blow the leaves away, making a loud "whoosh!" sound. Exhale as long as you can. Keep blowing and watch the leaves.
8. Let your body breathe on its own now. Continue watching how the leaves move in your imagination.

The practitioner can invite children and adults to do this activity together, either by each person imagining their own tree or by everyone synchronizing their breath to blow the leaves on the same imaginary tree.

Add Art and Action to Make Breathing Concrete

The therapist can add art or action to this activity to increase engagement and understanding. For example, they can collaborate with the client on drawing the imaginary tree to make visualization easier or use the following activity to make the exercise more concrete:

1. Cut out a simple paper leaf shape for each child and grown-up.

2. Everyone place one on your open palm.

3. Take a deep breath in and then blow your paper leaf off your hand. Watch how far the leaf moves. Try to use one long sustained exhale.

4. For a more relaxed version, place your cheek or chin on a table or pillow. Place your leaf on the surface near your lips. Blow slow, easy, and long.

Making intentional breathing more tangible in this way provides scaffolding for children who are particularly inattentive or restless, or who struggle with imagination. Once the participants have achieved a few deeper exhales, the therapist can invite everyone to check in to see if their body is naturally breathing more deeply and slowly.

Make Art to Brainstorm Personalized Bottom-Up Options

A visual, physical reminder makes calming down options more accessible when heightened stress has weakened problem-solving and brainstorming abilities. This next activity makes it easier to recall comforting everyday images and items to support co-regulation.

1. Draw a simple tree with branches.

2. Work together to draw leaves on the tree.

3. Inside each leaf, write or draw an object, person, or place that is pleasant or calming to think about, for example, beach, cat, blanket, hugs, and music.

4. Work together to name the resulting tree image, something like "The Calming Tree."

Therapists and teachers who work with groups can construct a large tree, distribute pre-cut leaves on which children and adults can write or draw calming items, and invite participants to take turns taping their leaves onto the branches of the tree. They can then display the tree somewhere easily visible at home, in the office, or in the classroom and refer to it regularly. If the Calming Tree is used routinely, children and adults will be able to recall calming objects, people, and places more easily simply by picturing it.

Stretch and Sway Together to Settle Down

Muscle relaxation and swaying are additional well-established, bottom-up strategies that can regulate the nervous system effectively. One major study across 46 publications from 16 different countries (e.g., Khir et al., 2024) looked at the benefits of systematically tensing and releasing body parts. The researchers concluded that progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) effectively reduces stress, anxiety, and depression and noted that when it's combined with other stress-reducing interventions, PMR efficacy increases. Studies also show that activating the vestibular system through a rocking or swaying motion effectively reduces stress (e.g., Kumar et al., 2016). Swaying and rocking before bedtime, specifically, promotes faster sleep onset and increased time in deep sleep with fewer night wakings (Subramaniam et al., 2023). The following activity also makes use of tree imagery:

1. Stand up or lay down.

2. Stretch your legs out long like the strong trunk of a tree. Tense your leg muscles. Hold … then release.

3. Stretch your arms, hands, and fingers out wide like the branches of a tree. Tense your limb muscles and hold. Then release.

4. Stretch and tense your whole body, from the trunk to the tips of the branches. Imagine you are a strong, tall tree. Then release everything so that your whole body becomes limp and floppy.

5. Now, gently and loosely sway your body and limbs, imitating how trees and leaves move in a calming breeze.

6. Imagine the breeze changing direction. How does your movement change?

7. Practice taking long deep breaths as you sway your body.

Adults and children can do this activity side by side, or they can try mirroring one another, taking turns with who leads. Alternatively, if safe touch is appropriate for the relationship and setting, the child can remain limp and relaxed while the adult play-acts as the breeze, gently lifting and swaying each of the child's arms, hands, legs, and feet.

Connect with a Comforting Collection of Sensory Cues

As discussed earlier, the human senses provide a direct route to influence the nervous system's relative activation or calm. Thus, intentionally seeking out and focusing on pleasant cues through the five senses can support relaxation, stress reduction, and a present-oriented mindset (Ahmed et al., 2017).

This interactive, sensory-based mindfulness activity turns simple everyday objects into a comforting collection of sensory cues:

1. Together, search for and collect a few small, natural objects in a basket or bowl.

2. If natural objects are not readily accessible where you are, make available a collection of small rocks, leaves, sticks, or seashells in advance.

3. Talk about the objects by using your senses. How do they feel and look? Do any objects have a smell or sound? You will likely not taste any of the objects!

4. Select objects that, to you, have the most pleasant colors, shapes, textures, or mass. Adults and children can discuss the similarities and differences between their nervous system's preferences. Place selected items in the basket or bowl.

5. Take turns holding a single object. Focus on its comforting aspects. As you do, experiment with repeating a single adjective such as "smooth … smooth … smooth" or "green … green … green."

> Calming skills that engage mind and body at any age, through imagination, intentional breathing, mindful movement, and pleasant sensations, can become lifelong supports that make self-regulation, other-regulation, and co-regulation easier in everyday moments.

6. Notice where your mind is. Notice where your mind is not. Notice how your body feels.

7. Return the object to the basket or bowl and repeat with a different object.

Therapists can generalize this strategy to other environments. They can invite adults and children to carry one of their chosen objects with them throughout the day or encourage participants to search for pleasant sensory cues in other environments, such as the home, the classroom, the grocery store, or while walking or driving.

Lifelong Calming Down Skills

Emotional regulation is an ongoing developmental task (Paley & Hajal, 2022). In early childhood, soothing ourselves requires soothing from others. In later childhood and adolescence, we can alternately soothe ourselves and seek soothing from others. Even adults who can self-soothe commonly practice healthy emotional regulation with other adults so they receive reassurance and care. But adults who care for children are tasked with soothing their own nervous system while simultaneously soothing younger nervous systems. This is no small task. Calming skills that engage mind and body at any age, through imagination, intentional breathing, mindful movement, and pleasant sensations, can become lifelong supports that make self-regulation, other-regulation, and co-regulation easier in everyday moments.

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Risa and Erica's new illustrated children's book, Max and the Imaginary Tree, *includes calming-down skills and activities for therapists, educators, and parents to use with kids. It's available on Amazon and in bookstores worldwide.*

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