

CO-REGULATION AND INTERPRETER TEAMING: RELATIONAL PROCESSES AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE



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Introduction

Interpreter teaming is often understood as a logistical arrangement—two or more interpreters working collaboratively to manage the time, fatigue, and linguistic demands of any given assignment. However, experienced practitioners know that effective teaming involves far more than alternating between the infamous “on interpreter” (active) and “off interpreter” (support or rest) roles. At its best, teaming functions as a relational system in which interpreters actively support one another’s cognitive processing, emotional regulation, ethical reasoning, physical stamina and resulting work product. With the now very prevalent and not-so-new virtual landscape of interpreting, the important collaborative aspect is often reduced to a standard list of “how can I support you?” questions, quick “interrogations” under the guise of getting to know each other (sometimes for the sake of teaming, others just to be nosy), and incomplete connections. These ‘popcorn’ encounters have desensitized interpreters to the importance of genuine connection leading to a complete disregard for co-regulation and its impact on the work product.

This publication argues that **co-regulation**—the interpersonal process of mutually stabilizing attention, affect, and cognitive processing—is central to high(er)-quality interpreter teaming, performance and access. When co-regulation occurs coupled with matched and/or complementary competency, interpreters experience greater sustainability and collaboration, and Deaf and hearing consumers have a higher possibility of receiving more consistent and coherent access. When it is absent, labor becomes disproportionate, fatigue intensifies, and access is compromised.

Instead of viewing teaming as a mere staffing solution based on job duration and setting, this publication reframes it as essential to professional infrastructure.

Understanding Co-Regulation in Professional Contexts

Co-regulation originates in interpersonal neurobiology and refers to the way in which individuals regulate their nervous systems through automated (often unconscious) mechanisms in connection with others (Siegel, 2012). Co-regulation involves both affect and cognition and operates on both a biological level and within a behavioral domain (Bornstein and Esposito, 2023). In professional environments, conscious co-regulation can manifest through shared pacing, mutual attunement, feedback loops, and problem-solving and collaborative approaches. In ideal circumstances, co-regulation should occur between the Deaf consumers, interpreters and amongst the interpreting team to co-create a collaborative access experience. The following describes co-regulation specific to interpreting teams.



In interpreting teams, co-regulation appears in the following everyday practices:

- ▶ Monitoring each other's fatigue (beyond the confines of the :15/:20/:30 typical turn-taking structure) and stepping in proactively
- ▶ Offering linguistic support without undermining authority or autonomy (establishing feeding preferences with practical application)
- ▶ Maintaining alignment through eye contact, gestures, and subtle cues (private chat/message, pre-established signals, etc.)
- ▶ Pace adjustment in response to discourse complexity (requesting appropriate, timely yet minimally disruptive pauses for processing and accurate transmission of source messages and/or supportive team reminders to prioritize clarity of production and accuracy over speed)
- ▶ Providing affective support during emotionally charged content (defining what "emotionally-charged" is and understanding that check-ins are crucial since people who have had to become skilled at masking may not have an overt physical response that is easily identified)

These interactions (should) distribute (equitable) responsibility across the team. Instead of each interpreter managing demands in isolation, the regulation becomes collective.

- ▶ In general, “[e]motion regulation refers to the processes by which we influence the occurrence, duration, and intensity of subjective experience, expression, and physiological arousal associated with emotions” (Butler and Randall, 2013, p. 203).
- ▶ Co-regulation is a “process of continuously unfolding individual attributes and actions that are susceptible to being modified by the changing attributes and actions of a partner...[which] involves bidirectional linkages between partners in recursive patterns” (Borstein and Esposito, 2023 p. 1).
- ▶ Butler and Randall (2013) offer a complementary definition of co-regulation “as a bidirectional linkage of oscillating emotional channels between partners, which contributes to emotional stability for both partners (p. 202). This ‘stability’ takes into account the emotional fluctuations that are appropriate for the setting/ situation as well as the return to a neutral and stable baseline. Co-regulation is irreducible to an individual’s behavioral responses but should instead be viewed as “a recursive pattern of mutual regulation” (Butler and Randall, 2013, p. 203).
- ▶ This approach is supported by research on collaborative cognition and cognitive load. Specifically, when sustained attention and alertness are required, brain-to-brain interface or human-to-human interactions improve performance in complex environments when the cognitive load is shared (Maksimenko et al., 2018). Similarly, it has been shown that relational support reduces burnout and increases professional longevity (Maslach & Leiter, 2016).
- ▶ Co-regulation has an important relationship to self-regulation. In the context of a parent-child relationship, co-regulation from a regulated parent is a prerequisite to a child’s development of individual self-regulation (Borstein and Esposito, 2023).
- ▶ Capacity for co-regulation is wired into our brains, using mirror neurons to emulate the affective and emotional dispositions of other people (Mahony, nd). We perceive the other person’s emotional state through signals such as subtle expressions and the modulation or inflection of their voice, enabling what one clinician terms ‘a temporary ecosystem of synchronization’ which makes learning and adaptation possible (Mahony, nd).

Co-Regulation Across the Assignment Lifecycle

Pre-Assignment Alignment

Effective co-regulation begins *before* the assignment. It is common practice for intentional, introspective interpreters to engage in pre-assignment preparation which may include but is not limited to: becoming familiar with the consumers and their preferences, getting acquainted with the space and context they will be working in, identifying their knowledge and gap areas related to the content they will be interpreting, making (initial) contact with their team(s), and engaging in self-regulation (nervous system) practices. However, in addition to the aforementioned, teams that function well invest time in the following areas:

- ▶ Joint preparation and terminology alignment
- ▶ Clarifying roles and expectations for turn-taking, linguistic and space management
- ▶ Discussing the anticipated challenges (including the impact of the team members' intersectional identities in the space with the context of the assignment) and developing proactive strategies for mitigating those challenges and addressing them if/when they arise
- ▶ Establishing feedback preferences
- ▶ Acknowledging experiential differences and identifying how the team proactively plans to complement and/or supplement those differences



These conversations foster (albeit temporary and assignment-specific) professional psychological safety and reduce the additional cognitive load caused by silent assumptions. Without this foundation, interpreters often work in parallel, functioning as mere duty relief tag teams, rather than collaboratively.

- ▶ Consensus-building discussions among teams with shared objectives and perspectives help align brain activity, which is essential for optimizing performance on group tasks (Sharika et al., 2024).

Preparation before an assignment includes

- ▶ discussing each other's strengths and weaknesses so that team members can "capitalize on their strengths and minimize their weaknesses" (Swabey, 2000, p. 9).

Effective preparation—both mental and

- ▶ emotional—is also critical for managing the flow of information in a fast-moving and linguistically challenging "to manage or reduce the cognitive load during the interpreted mediated event" (McClure 2024, p. 143). Mental preparation can reduce surprises during the assignment, which can enable interpreters to have "fewer reactions" or "thoughts about the content" (McClure 2024, p. 141).

Intrapersonal strategies:

▶ Physiological sighs:

long, deep inhale through the nose, then without releasing the breath, add a shorter inhale to fully expand the lungs. Release air as a long, slow breath through the mouth. This action activates the parasympathetic nervous system to release stress and anxiety

▶ Progressive Release:

discharge stored energy by tensing up a specific muscle group for 5 seconds and then releasing for 10 seconds. This action releases stored tension you may be bringing from previous assignments.

▶ Synchronized breathing:

upon arriving at the job location and settling in with the team, breathing with your team for 4 inhales and 4 exhales. This can be paired with soft eye contact or gentle touch (with expressed consent) and can help initiate physical and physiological co-regulation with the team.





Co-Regulation During the Assignment

During active interpreting, co-regulation can become embodied and continuous. This looks different and unique for every team. Co-regulation—while cognitive, neurological, and physiological—can also be physical which includes both the intentional use or avoidance of touch. This level of co-regulation, of course, requires a certain level of familiarity, comfort, intentionality, and most importantly, CONSENT.

During assignments, teams practicing healthy co-regulation demonstrate the following:

- ▶ Awareness of each other's physical, psychological and emotional states
- ▶ Shared pacing and rhythm
- ▶ Smooth transitions between interpreters
- ▶ Real-time explicit or implicit negotiations or reallocation of work load in response to changing demands
- ▶ Real-time repair without discourse disruption
- ▶ Timely lexical or conceptual support

Co-regulation also involves *restraint*. **Knowing when to not intervene is as important as offering support.** Overcorrection or dominance can disrupt relational balance and weaken team cohesion. These micro-adjustments not only determine whether access is seamless or fragmented, but also the quality of the team's experience with one another.

- ▶ This approach is supported by neurobiological research that shows that similar brain activity between individuals is “a biomarker of shared goals, perspectives, or understanding of the environment” (Sharika et al., 2024, p. 1). Studies in this field have also demonstrated that synchronicity in heart rates and shared peripheral arousal contribute to improved performance on tasks such as “joint attention, empathic accuracy, and group cohesion” (Sharika et al., 2024, p. 1).
- ▶ Likewise, Hasson et al. (2012) have argued that many neural processes in an individual's brain are coupled to those of another's through environmental signals. Such brain-to-brain coupling enables complex, mutual behaviors and actions, such as speech and nonverbal communication like gestures and facial expressions, and efficient information sharing.



- ▶ Co-regulation necessitates a process of mutual awareness and adjustment in behavior and expression. This state of “stability through change” is known as an allostatic balance, which could also be described as “coordinated variation of psychological and biological systems that optimize performance and minimize costs” (Butler and Randall, 2013, p. 204, summarizing Sterling, 2003). This dynamic of change and stability is rooted in human biology and involves the modulation of energy output (measured in heart rate variation) in response to energy demands (Butler and Randall, 2013).
- ▶ According to the social baseline theory, co-regulation occurs through proximity to a trusted other (Butler and Randall, 2013, p. 204). Humans have evolved as a social species and are hard-wired to draw on the stable support and resources of close others to reduce threat responses and promote emotional well-being. One way this might occur (although not the only way) is through co-regulation, whereby psychological and biological interdependencies with a trusted partner may automatically restore emotional and physiological balance with limited cognitive or metabolic cost (Coan, 2008, 2010) (Butler and Randall, 2013, p. 204).

Intrapersonal strategies:

► Orientation 5-4-3-2-1:

Turn your head slowly and scan the environment. Name 5 objects, 4 colors, 3 sounds/types of touches, 2 textures, 1 smell to help reset the “threat scanner” and feel safer in the space. This prevents or minimizes disassociation and tunnel vision.

► Pendulation:

Place one hand on a “hot spot” (point of tension in the body) and the other hand on a “neutral spot”. Focus on the hot spot for 20 seconds then on the neutral spot for 20 seconds. Repeat for a few cycles. This helps to reduce the intensity you are experiencing and aims to prevent a shutdown moment.

Post-Assignment Integration

After the assignment, co-regulation continues through intentional introspection, reflection and debriefing. This process allows interpreters to perform the following:

- Process difficult content
- Normalize emotional responses
- Share learning moments
- Offer constructive feedback
- Create a foundation for strengthening future collaborations



Feedback is an essential part of the role interpreters play. Heritage Interpreting (2023) provides the following insightful commentary:

- ▶ “As an ASL Interpreter, you are not just a language service provider but also a vital link in fostering authentic relationships between the Deaf and hearing communities. You play a significant role in empowering the Deaf community with reliable access to well-qualified, trustworthy interpreters. One essential element to excel in this role is the ability to give and receive feedback constructively.”
- ▶ Empathy is an essential element of constructive feedback: “When offering advice or feedback, it’s crucial to cultivate an attitude of empathy and compassion. This means understanding the other person’s experiences, feelings, and thoughts. When we understand where they’re coming from, we’re more likely to give relevant and helpful advice. It also means caring about their wellbeing and wanting to alleviate any suffering or difficulties they’re experiencing. When you develop a genuine concern for others’ wellbeing, they’re more likely to feel that and appreciate your advice, even if they disagree”.
- ▶ Feedback involves not only delivering advice, but also ‘mindful listening’ which means paying the other person your full attention and being open to their perspective. This practice also “creates a safe space where the other person feels heard and valued, which can make them more open to your advice. [B]etter understand[ing] their situation and needs...can guide you in giving more effective advice.” This act of creating space for emotional processing supports nervous system recovery and team cohesion (Mahony, nd).

Oftentimes, our teams are the only people we can openly and ethically process difficult assignments with, without necessitating concerns of breaking confidentiality or needing to explain nuances that an outsider would not understand. However, the parallel teaming approach robs interpreters of the space to develop authentic trust to externalize internal emotions and thoughts that might have arisen during the assignment, especially difficult ones. Engaging in healthy co-regulation practices before and during an assignment, sets a foundation for post-assignment integration, rather than dipping to the next assignment. The more interpreters begin to place as much priority on this phase as on the pre- and during-assignment phases, the more intentional space would be created for closing cognitive, emotional and psychological loops that could impact us and/or access in subsequent assignments.



Intrapersonal strategies:

- ▶ **Therapeutic Shaking:** Stand (or sit) with soft knees. Gently shake legs, hips, arms and jaw for 2–4 minutes. Lie down with one hand on your chest and one on your belly for 1 minute of stillness. This helps to reset after an adrenaline dump or after hard conversations.
- ▶ **Vagus Toning with Humming:** Upon leaving the assignment or after arriving home, inhale through the nose for 4 counts, while exhaling hum to your comfort level, feeling the vibrations in your chest and/or face. Repeat for 3–5 minutes.

When Co-Regulation Breaks Down

Not all interpreter teams co-regulate effectively. Common barriers include the following:

- ▶ Lack of willingness (prevailing “trial by fire” attitudes and/or dispositions)
- ▶ Mismatched competencies
- ▶ Egos
- ▶ Unacknowledged power dynamics
- ▶ Impaired performance (i.e., diminished working memory, slower recall/lexical retrieval, cognitive overload); this can also occur with novice interpreters who may be willing to co-regulate but lack the capacity because of the aforementioned
- ▶ Lack of preparation time
- ▶ Performative teaming
- ▶ Institutional pressures that prioritize productivity over quality, including not accepting preparation (and other needs) as legitimate labor worthy of compensation



Co-Regulation as a Mitigator to Burnout

- ▶ When co-regulation breaks down or is not implemented, one team member can become over-burdened with the shared stress of the assignment, resulting in dysfunctional outcomes, such as burnout and disengagement (Mahony, nd).
- ▶ Workplace culture plays a role in burnout: “Masculinity contest culture” occurs when workplaces (and organizational leaders) promote norms, practices, and values centered on competition and dominance in line with traditional masculinity ideals (Berdahl et al., 2018), and they have been associated with higher levels of burnout (Regina and Allen, 2023). Conversely, a supportive workplace culture that promotes worker health and well-being is associated with lower levels of burnout. For example, after controlling for baseline levels of burnout, organizational culture that valued a focus on health was associated with reduced burnout 1 year later (Day, 2025; Ybema et al., 2011).
- ▶ Work overload is a major factor in stress reactions, such as burnout (Schaufeli et al., 2005). Burnout and emotional exhaustion also result in workplace absenteeism (Schaufeli et al., 2005).
- ▶ According to the Job-Demands Resources (JD-R) model, both job demands and resources each have an effect on burnout and other workplace outcomes. Job demands encompass not just the formal tasks one has been assigned but also the associated physical, psychological, and social expectations and requirements. Job resources can be assets or features of the job that reduce those demands, assist in the achievement of a goal, or engender self-growth or learning. When job demands are excessive, burnout can result; likewise, a lack of resources can also lead to negative outcomes such as frustration, disengagement, and job departure (Schaufeli et al., 2005).
- ▶ Poor workplace responses intensify burnout. A lack of coworker support also contributes to emotional exhaustion (Day, 2025).
- ▶ In a healthcare setting, burnout can have a negative impact on quality of care (Salyers et al., 2016; Batanda, 2025). According to one study by Williams et al. (2006), burnout can lead to a self-perpetuating cycle in which employee exhaustion “negatively affects the quality of the patient encounter, leading to dissatisfied patients, poor adherence, and worse health outcomes, which can cause additional provider burnout” (Salyers et al., 2016, p. 476). For interpreters, emotional exhaustion can lead to dissatisfaction with the teaming experience, limited cognitive capacities for which the team must compensate, and poor performance during interpreting assignments.



When co-regulation fails, the following consequences quickly emerge:

- ▶ One interpreter unintentionally carries disproportionate cognitive, physical, and emotional load
- ▶ Dysregulation at the individual and/or team level
- ▶ Deaf consumers may experience inconsistent access
- ▶ Interpreters report exhaustion, frustration, or distress
- ▶ Teams disengage from collaborative practice

These breakdowns are not (always) individual failures. They reflect systemic conditions that undervalue relational labor (and sometimes prioritize financial gain, dominance, and/or ego-stroking).





Interpreters who feel supported are more likely to remain in the field.

Why Co-Regulation Matters

Interpreter Sustainability

Co-regulated teams experience:

- ▶ Reduced physical, psychological and emotional burnout
- ▶ Greater job satisfaction
- ▶ Increased professional longevity and satisfaction
- ▶ Stronger peer relationships and connections

- ▶ Sustainability is a significant issue for interpreters, with a new study showing that 18% show symptoms of burnout (Palmer et al, 2025). The study also found that this level of exhaustion is disproportionately higher among interpreters with disabilities and those in the LGBTQIA+ community (Palmer et al, 2025). In addition, chronic stress in the profession has also been linked to injury and illness (Schwenke, 2015).
- ▶ According to Maslach (1982) there are three key dimensions to burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a lack of personal accomplishment, which only further diminish one's engagement with their work (Schwenke, 2015). Factors that lead to burnout in the workplace include: "overload, lack of control, insufficient reward, breakdown in community, absence of fairness, and conflicting values" (Schwenke, 2015).

- ▶ Individuals who lack sufficient resources to fulfil the demands of their job experience chronic stress, putting them at risk for burnout (Schwenke, 2015, citing Karasek’s (1979) job demand theory). Social exchange theories have shown that “receipt of resources from another person is valued more highly if thought to be discretionary rather than dictated by circumstances largely beyond the donor’s control” (Eisenberger et al., 1997, p. 803). This signals the importance of intentionality, autonomy and consent as foundational aspects of co-regulation, rather than reactionarily accepting ‘lifelines’ when in the throes of survival during interpreting work.
- ▶ Three factors affect employee retention: mental, social, and physical. The mental dimension refers to work tasks in which the participants can use their knowledge and see the results. The social dimension “consists of the contacts that the employees have with other people, both internal and external” while the physical dimension involves the conditions of the workplace and pay level (Das and Baruah, 2013, p. 9). Another study by Walker (2001) breaks these down further into seven factors, which include ‘positive relationships with colleagues,’ and ‘good communication’ (Das and Baruah, 2013, p. 9).
- ▶ At the occupational level, burnout results in a loss of talent, poorer work performance, poorer employee wellbeing, and less growth in talent (Lai et al., 2025). Annually, turnover due to burnout costs the economy \$4.6 billion (Lai et al., 2025).

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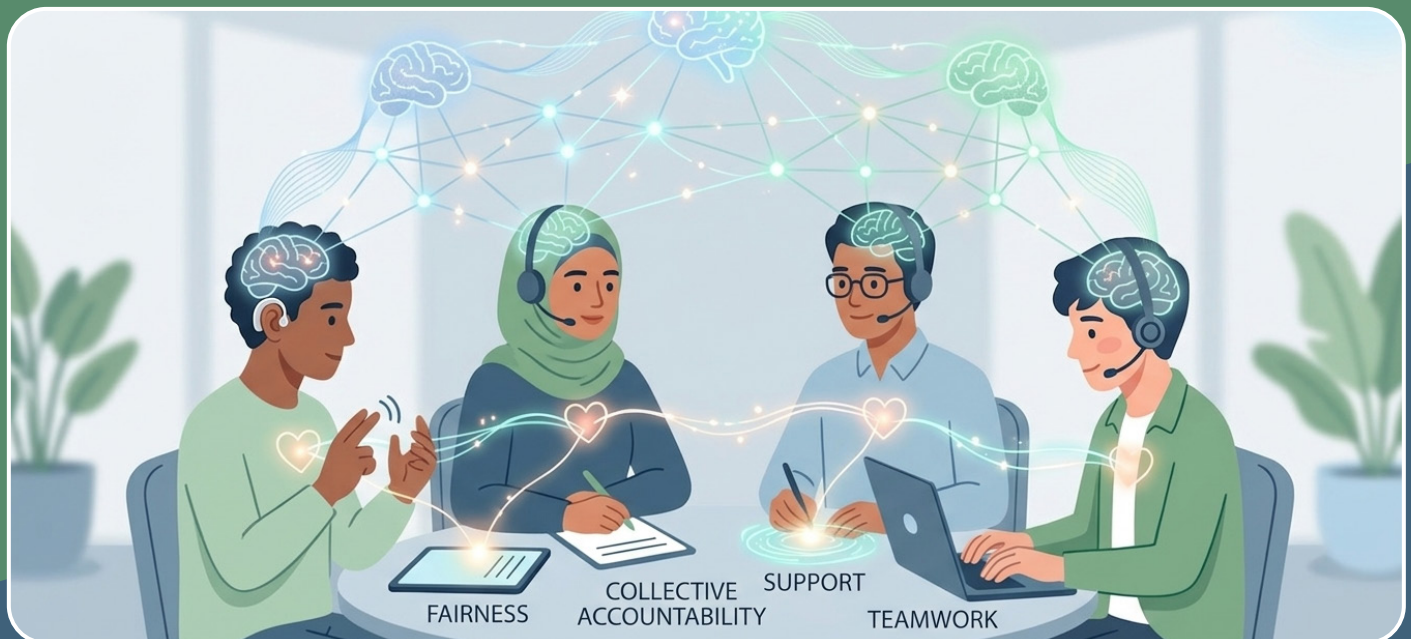
Quality of Access

For Deaf consumers, co-regulation translates to the following:

- ▶ Greater linguistic coherence
- ▶ A more consistent message flow
- ▶ Improved responsiveness to shifts in discourse
- ▶ Increased trust in interpreting team and services
- ▶ A co-created or collaborative access experience (when the Deaf consumer is part of the co-regulation triad)

Access is not merely about interpreter presence—it is about relational continuity and co-creation.

- ▶ Without adequate support, interpreters may leave their positions, leading to retention and recruitment problems and reducing access to services for those who need them. This is reflected in the current national shortage of interpreters. According to Deaf Services Unlimited (2025), there is currently one interpreter for every 50 Deaf persons who use ASL.
- ▶ According to one major healthcare provider, the lack of interpreters is more than just a matter of numbers: “It’s a complex puzzle, intricately linked to individual needs, situations, and contexts. Every Deaf individual has unique communication preferences, and what works seamlessly for one might be less than ideal for another. The nuances of interpretation in educational settings differ vastly from those in medical or legal contexts. Thus, having a rich pool of specialized interpreters is vital to cater to these diverse requirements” (Gateway Maryland, 2023).



Equity and Accountability

Co-regulation redistributes responsibility. It challenges productivity models that isolate interpreters and instead focus on collective accountability. This shift is especially important for Deaf interpreters, multilingual teams, and practitioners navigating professional hierarchies.

- ▶ Drawing upon social resource theory and the norm of equity, Scheel et al. (2019) have shown that an equitable distribution of tasks (and/or one that takes into account capacity and representation considerations—see *Myers & Lawyer June 2025*) in the workplace increases employee well-being and reduces emotional exhaustion. Perceived fairness in workplace assignments and load also leads to positive health outcomes such as lower rates of anxiety, depression, and stress (Scheel et al., 2019).
- ▶ Effective distribution of the workload has positive benefits for morale, productivity, engagement, and motivation and increases the chances of success on a task or project (Management Concepts, 2026).

Implications for Training, Agencies, and Institutions

Interpreter Education

Programs should teach teaming as relational competence, including the following:

- ▶ Feedback literacy
- ▶ Collaborative repair strategies
- ▶ Emotional regulation in professional contexts

Agency and Organizational Policies

- ▶ Agencies and hiring entities can support co-regulation by doing the following:
- ▶ Scheduling for compatibility and not just availability
- ▶ Recognizing preparation and debrief as legitimate labor
- ▶ Avoiding pairings that exacerbate power imbalances
- ▶ Valuing quality over throughput



Professional Culture

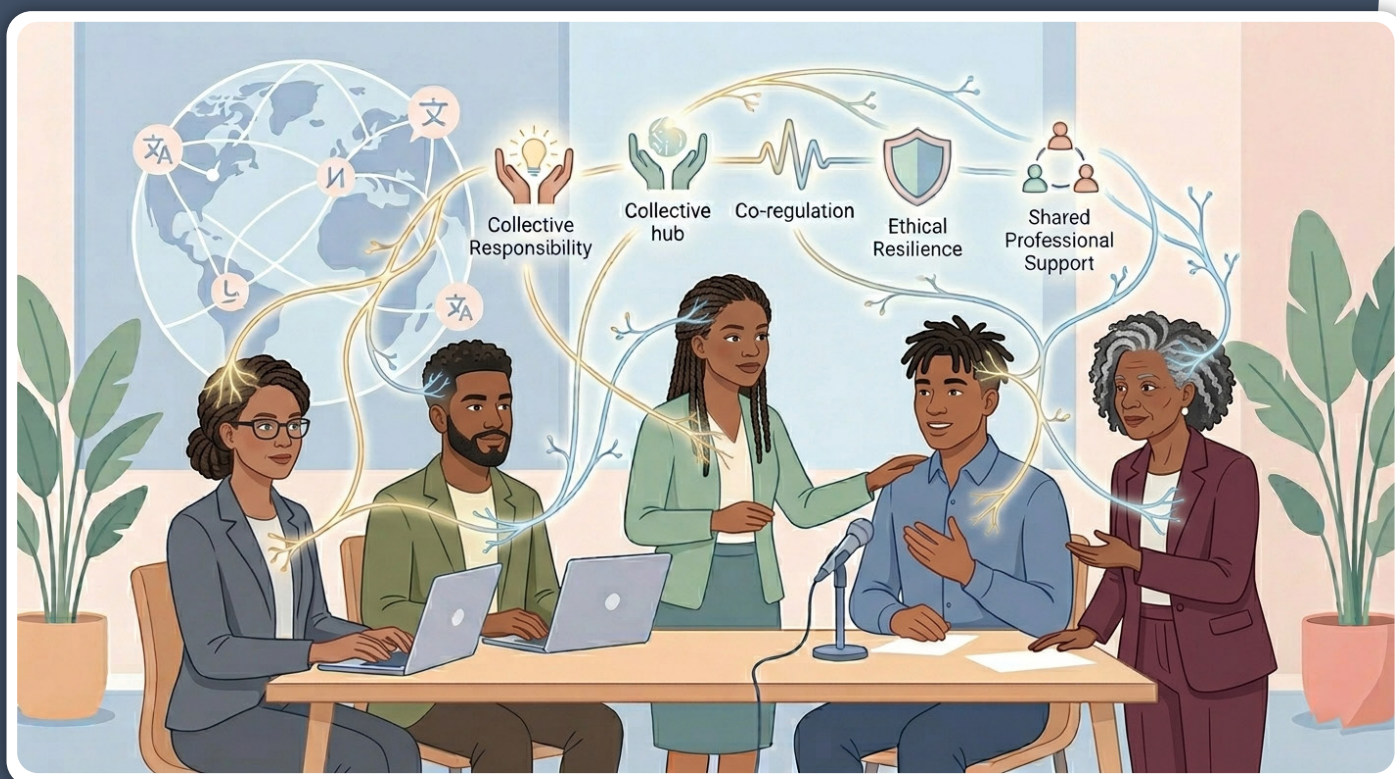
Moving away from individual heroism toward collective responsibility reframes interpreting as relational labor embedded within systems.

Conclusion

Interpreter teaming is not simply about splitting time. It is about sharing and allocating responsibility and recognizing when that responsibility is disproportionate due to intersectional aspects of the identities of the persons involved and the related additional demands they bring.

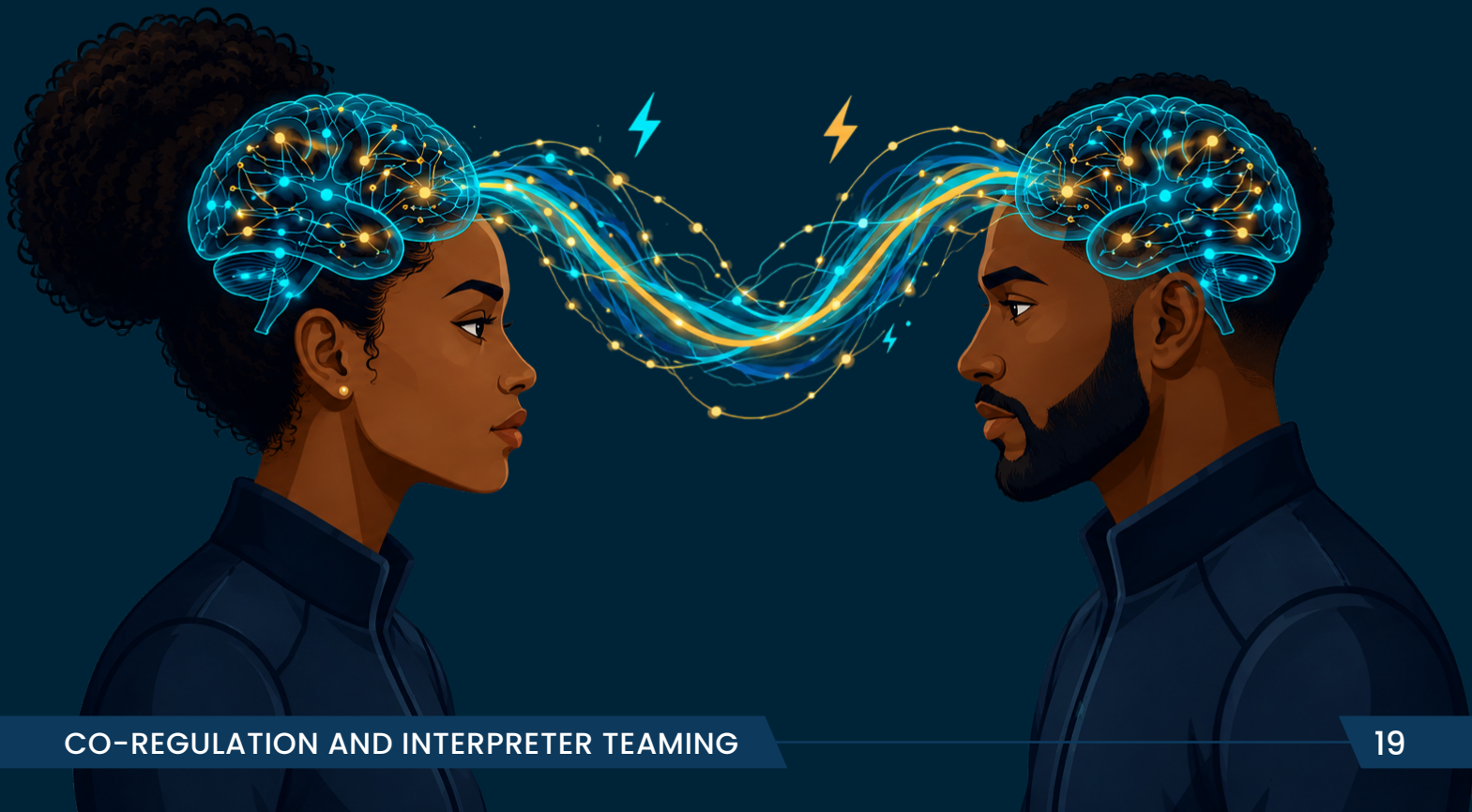
Co-regulation transforms interpreting from an individual endurance task into a relational profession. It protects practitioners, strengthens access, and builds ethical resilience.

If the field seeks sustainability, equity, and quality, co-regulation must be recognized as an essential professional infrastructure, not as an optional interpersonal goodwill. The field must also recognize that some people have a tendency to undermine collective efforts, introduce more friction than value, exhibit behaviors that are incompatible with collaborative practice, and are better off working alone. Therefore, while we must be intentional with our relationships and who we let into our spaces, we must also be realistic about what we bring to any given space and what people take from them.



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