Emotional & Nervous System Regulation

Client Education & Practical Skills | Encouraging Hand Trauma Counseling

Regulation means noticing what is happening inside you and choosing supportive responses. It does not mean never feeling upset, forcing yourself to calm down, or staying comfortable all the time. Different strategies work for different people and situations.

Recognize your current state

Activated / on high alert: racing thoughts, tension, fast heartbeat, irritability, panic, urge to flee or argue.
Shut down / disconnected: numbness, heaviness, fogginess, withdrawal, feeling far away.
More settled / connected: greater flexibility, curiosity, steadier attention, ability to respond rather than react.

When you feel anxious, overwhelmed, or activated

• Lengthen the exhale: Breathe gently and comfortably; try an exhale slightly longer than the inhale for a few cycles. Stop if breath focus increases distress.

• Orient to the room: Slowly look around and name five neutral objects or colors. Remind yourself where you are and what year it is.

• Ground through contact: Feel both feet on the floor or press your palms against a chair. Notice support beneath your body.

• Reduce stimulation: Lower noise, step into a quieter space, dim harsh lights, or put your phone away briefly.

• Use a coping statement: “This feeling is intense, and I can choose one next step.”

When you feel numb, disconnected, or shut down

• Invite gentle movement: Stand, stretch, walk slowly, or shift your posture without pushing through discomfort.

• Engage your senses: Hold a textured object, notice a pleasant scent, or sip a cool or warm drink.

• Find safe connection: Text a trusted person, sit near a supportive person, or spend time with a pet.

• Choose a tiny task: Open a window, wash your hands, or put away one item. Small actions count.

Important: Grounding is an invitation, not a test. If a strategy makes you feel worse, stop and try another. You can keep your eyes open and avoid focusing on your body if that feels safer.

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For a mental health crisis, call or text 988. For immediate emergencies, call 911.

Emotion Regulation: Responding With Intention

Skills for difficult emotions

• Name the feeling: “I notice sadness, fear, anger, or shame.” Naming an emotion may help create space to respond.

• Validate without judging: “Given what I have experienced, it makes sense that this is difficult.” Validation is not the same as agreeing with every thought.

• Check what you need: Ask whether you need rest, support, food, a boundary, information, or a change in environment.

• Pause before acting: If safe, wait a moment before sending a message or making a major decision while highly distressed.

• Choose one values-based action: Speak respectfully, ask for help, take a break, or return to a manageable responsibility.

Examples in everyday life

After a stressful meeting: Notice jaw tension → feel your feet → take a short walk → decide whether a conversation or boundary is needed.

When thoughts are looping at night: Name “worry is here” → lower stimulation → write down one concern and a next-day action → return attention to rest.

When feeling disconnected after a reminder of trauma: Open your eyes → look for familiar objects → identify today's date and location → contact a trusted support if helpful.

My regulation plan: Client self-reflection

1. What are my earliest signs that I am becoming activated or shut down?

_____

2. Which two strategies feel safest or most helpful for me?

_____

3. Who or what helps me feel supported and connected?

_____

4. What is one small step I can practice this week?

_____

Practice tip: Try one skill during a relatively calm moment first. Repetition may make it easier to remember when stress rises. Work with your therapist to adapt these skills to your needs.

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