

IT STARTS WITH YOU

A Parent's Guide to
Regulating Your
Nervous System and
Supporting Your
Neurodivergent Child

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It Starts With You: A Parent's Guide to Regulating Your Nervous System and Supporting Your Neurodivergent Child

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The author does not claim to be a licensed therapist or healthcare professional. The tools and techniques shared are meant to supplement any care you receive from professionals.

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Table Of Contents

Preface	<u>4</u>
Chapter 1: The Symbiotic Parent-Child Connection	<u>8</u>
Co-Regulation and Why It Matters	<u>8</u>
Co-Regulation: More Than Just Calming Down	<u>9</u>
The Power of Self-Regulation	<u>10</u>
The Science Behind Co-Regulation	<u>11</u>
Why Your Well-Being Matters	<u>12</u>
Moving Forward with Hope	<u>12</u>
Chapter 2: Foundations of Nervous System Regulation	<u>14</u>
Introduction to the Nervous System	<u>14</u>
Recognising Signs of Dysregulation	<u>15</u>
The Science Behind Self-Regulation	<u>17</u>
The Importance of Co-Regulation	<u>18</u>
Why Regulation Matters for the Whole Family	<u>19</u>
Chapter 3: Practical Techniques for Parental Self-Regulation	<u>20</u>
Gratitude Practices for Emotional Stability	<u>21</u>
Journaling for Self-Reflection and Growth	<u>22</u>
Physical Activity: Moving Toward Emotional Stability	<u>24</u>
Time in Nature	<u>25</u>
Finding Glimmers and Awe in the Everyday	<u>26</u>

Building Resilience Through Self-Care	<u>28</u>
Chapter 4: Supporting Your Child's Nervous System	<u>29</u>
Recognising Your Child's Emotional Cues	<u>29</u>
Co-Regulation Techniques	<u>30</u>
Declarative Language and Low-Demand Approaches	<u>33</u>
The Underrated Role of Sunlight	<u>34</u>
The Impact of Light and Dark on Sleep and Regulation	<u>35</u>
Building Emotional Resilience Together	<u>36</u>
Chapter 5: Rethinking Modern Therapy Approaches	<u>37</u>
Limitations of Conventional Interventions	<u>37</u>
Respecting Professional Expertise While Acknowledging Limitations	<u>38</u>
Intuitive, Needs-Based Parenting	<u>39</u>
Balancing Professional Advice with Parental Instinct	<u>41</u>
Developing a Personalised Support Plan	<u>42</u>
Empowering Parents for Lasting Change	<u>43</u>
Chapter 6: Building a Resilient Family Unit	<u>44</u>
Celebrating Small Victories	<u>46</u>
Self-Care Strategies for the Whole Family	<u>48</u>
Creating the Support You Need	<u>49</u>
Conclusion	<u>51</u>
Glossary	<u>53</u>

Preface

First, I want to warmly welcome you to this book and thank you for taking the time to be here. As a parent of an autistic child myself, I understand how precious your time and energy are, and I don't take that for granted. It means the world to me that you're here, trusting me to share these tools with you.

I want to start by saying that I'm not a therapist or a doctor. I'm a parent, just like you, who has walked a similar path, filled with challenges, overwhelm, moments of uncertainty, and utter despair. I've faced my own struggles with anxiety, trauma, and my diagnosis of OCD as a teenager. As a mother of four, my own mental health struggles made life very challenging. But the worst was yet to come.

At the age of six, my daughter entered an extreme state of immobilisation. She stopped speaking, making eye contact, playing with toys, and interacting with us. She even stopped walking. Her body was in survival mode, a biologically defensive state triggered by her highly sensitive nervous system's attempt to protect her.

When my daughter regressed into this shutdown, I was heartbroken. She could no longer tolerate being touched or spoken to, and even being looked at caused her major distress.

I felt like I had lost her forever. I was scared, confused, and so very alone. I felt like life was barely worth living. We desperately sought help, but when professionals didn't have the answers—or worse, made the situation more difficult—it became clear that I had to find another way forward.

Two years later, my daughter has made incredible strides. She has not only regained her ability to speak and walk—she now runs with joy and confidence. Her interactions have blossomed; she makes eye contact, initiates conversations, and even playfully teases her siblings, showing a newfound sense of humour that is truly delightful. There's a noticeable comfort she now feels in her own body and in the world around her.

She's independently exploring writing and numbers, and I've watched with pride as she takes on a leadership role in playtime with her younger sister. Most remarkable of all, she's now able to identify and articulate her emotions—something she was never able to do before. She is connected, present, and safe. The transformation has been nothing short of miraculous for our family.

What I've learned, and what I want to share with you, is that the key to supporting your child's growth and potential isn't about trying to change their behaviours directly. It's about supporting their nervous system—and yours.

Our nervous systems are deeply connected, and when we can learn to regulate our own, we create the space for our children to feel safe enough to do the same. And it can be quite a natural, organic process. When we heal ourselves, we provide the ideal conditions for our children to also heal without the need for direct interventions.

I know how overwhelming life can feel when you're managing such significant challenges. The exhaustion is real. But this book isn't about adding more to your plate. It's about giving you simple, science-backed tools that can fit into the moments you already have. These tools will help you strengthen your own nervous system so that you can co-regulate with your child. To provide them with precisely what they need. And what you need too.

These milestones remind me daily of the power of resilience and the immense potential that comes when a child feels safe and supported. Our journey hasn't been easy, but the progress speaks for itself, filling me with hope for the future.

I'll also guide you on how to be present with your child, how to hold space for them in moments of stress, and how to use declarative language to foster their sense of safety.

These are the moments that build a deep connection and give your child the safety they need to move from survival mode to a place where they can engage, learn, and grow.

This is how my daughter was able to move out of immobilisation and burnout and to reengage with the world around her, and how her skills of speech and play progressed so massively.

I know your bandwidth is limited. That's why this book is designed for flexibility. You can go at your own pace, and these tools are about progress, not perfection. Even the smallest steps can make a big difference for both you and your child.

Thank you for being here. I hope these pages give you the space to pause, reflect, and begin taking small, meaningful steps toward creating a more regulated, resilient foundation for both yourself and your family.

Let's take it one step at a time—starting with you.

Chapter 1: The Symbiotic Parent-Child Connection

Co-Regulation and Why It Matters

As parents of neurodiverse children, we quickly learn that our emotional state profoundly impacts our ability to support our children. The concept of **co-regulation**—the real-time emotional exchange between a parent and child—goes beyond simply managing our emotions; it's about creating a safe, connected environment in which our children can thrive.

I vividly recall the moment I realised how deeply my own feelings of stress and anxiety were affecting my daughter. I was constantly trying to control or fix her behaviour, not recognising that her nervous system was in distress. The more I pushed for calm or compliance, the more she withdrew. In truth, both of our nervous systems were caught in a loop of survival, unable to connect or find peace.

We've all heard the phrase, "You need to take care of yourself first," but when I initially received that advice, it felt impossible.

How could I focus on my own needs when my child was struggling so much?

It felt selfish, even indulgent, to think about my own well-being.

But over time, I learned that my own regulation was essential not only for my well-being but for hers as well. Bandaid strategies—like quick fixes to soothe overwhelm—may provide momentary relief but don't offer lasting peace. What we need is deeper nervous system healing.

Co-Regulation: More Than Just Calming Down

Co-regulation isn't focused on calming or controlling your child; it centres on providing them with a sense of safety through your presence. This sense of safety helps their nervous system shift from **survival mode** (fight, flight, or freeze) into a state where they can better access connection and communication.

In a moment of distress, your child's nervous system is scanning for cues—looking to you to signal whether they are safe. When your own nervous system is dysregulated, you may unknowingly send signals of danger, even if your words are calm. A child, especially one who is neurodivergent, is highly attuned to these nonverbal signals. Your body language, tone of voice, and even facial expressions communicate safety—or a lack of it.

This is where co-regulation becomes a two-way process. Your child's distress can trigger your own nervous system, pulling you into a state of fight, flight, or freeze as well. It becomes a feedback loop: their dysregulation affects yours, and vice versa. Understanding this dynamic is key to breaking the cycle and creating space for healing.

The Power of Self-Regulation

When I finally accepted that my well-being mattered, everything changed. I started to focus on regulating my own nervous system—learning to recognise when I was feeling overwhelmed and practising tools to ground myself. The goal here was not to be perfectly calm all the time but rather to stay present and connected to myself. As I became more attuned to my own emotional state and validated my own experiences, I was better able to stay grounded during my daughter's intense dysregulation, offering her the stability she needed without feeling overwhelmed.

The result? Our interactions shifted. I began to notice that when I stayed authentic and connected, my daughter's periods of dysregulation became shorter and less intense. She started to feel safer and more secure because I was no longer trying to fix her or control her emotions *or my own*.

Instead, I was simply present with her, offering the emotional space she needed to feel seen, heard, and supported.

For parents, healing our own nervous systems is the first step in helping our children regulate theirs. When we create safety for ourselves, we create safety for them.

The Science Behind Co-Regulation

Polyvagal Theory, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges, is at the heart of co-regulation. Polyvagal Theory explains that our nervous systems constantly scan for safety or danger cues. When we perceive danger, our body reacts by shifting into either the sympathetic state (fight or flight) or the dorsal vagal state (freeze or shut down). When we feel safe, we can access the **ventral vagal** state, where connection, communication, and emotional regulation happen.

For parents of neurodiverse children, understanding how your child's nervous system operates is critical. Many neurodiverse children, due to heightened sensitivity, spend more time in states of fight, flight, or freeze, making it difficult for them to regulate on their own. This is why they rely so heavily on **your** regulated state to guide them toward safety.

Deb Dana, a leading voice in Polyvagal Theory, identifies four key connections essential for nervous system regulation: connection to **self**, **others**, the **world**, and **spirit**. These aren't luxuries—they are necessary for moving from survival to thriving, for living with curiosity, joy, safety, peace, and love. When I first saw this list, I felt overwhelmed. It seemed impossible to achieve these things while navigating my daughter's challenges. But the truth is, these connections aren't something we must pursue all at once—they develop slowly as we heal our own nervous systems and begin to feel more grounded.

Why Your Well-Being Matters

Looking back, I realise that no one had explained to me why my well-being was so critical to my daughter's. I thought that sacrificing myself was the only way to be a good parent. But I've since learned that healing myself is my greatest gift for my child. When I am self-compassionate and regulated, I create the emotional space for her to feel safe, secure, and connected.

For parents of neurodiverse children, this goes beyond traditional notions of self-care. It focuses on nervous system care. We can't pour from an empty cup, and we can't help our children feel safe if we aren't regulated ourselves. Co-regulation is a powerful tool that begins with you. It involves taking steps to heal your own nervous system, allowing you to show up as the calm, steady presence your child needs.

Moving Forward with Hope

Healing your nervous system takes time, but each step you take toward regulation brings you closer to a deeper connection with your child. The focus isn't on achieving perfection—it's on making progress. As you become more attuned to your own needs and work to regulate your nervous system, you'll start to notice positive changes in your child as well.

Remember, you're not alone on this journey. Every parent who has walked this path has felt similar struggles, frustrations, and moments of doubt. But there is hope. Healing begins with you, and when you prioritise your well-being, you create a ripple effect that reaches your child. Together, you can move from surviving to thriving, one step at a time.

Chapter 2: Foundations of Nervous System Regulation

Introduction to the Nervous System

The **nervous system** is the body's central command centre, managing everything from physical movements to emotional responses. It controls how we perceive and react to the world around us, acting as the gateway between our internal and external environments. For neurotypical children, the nervous system processes information in ways that allow them to handle sensory input and emotional experiences with relative ease. However, for children with special needs—whether they have ADHD, Autism, PDA, Selective Mutism, OCD, or other neurodivergent conditions—their nervous systems may process information differently, leading to challenges in emotional regulation, sensory processing, and social interactions.

Understanding the nervous system is key to supporting your child's development and well-being. The behaviours we often see in neurodiverse children—emotional dysregulation, withdrawal, sensory overload—are not random but rather direct reflections of how their nervous systems are processing stimuli. Once we grasp this, we can begin to see their behaviours not as fixed traits or flaws but as their nervous system's response to overwhelm and perceived threats.

I used to believe that many of my daughter's behaviours were simply part of her condition, something permanent and unchangeable that I had to learn to live with. But as I began to study the nervous system, I realised that many of her behaviours were actually driven by a dysregulated nervous system rather than inherent defiance or incapability. This understanding completely shifted my approach. I no longer saw her reactions as obstacles to manage but as signals—her nervous system was crying out for help, for safety, for regulation. By focusing on her nervous system's needs, I came to understand that much of her distress could be alleviated by creating a supportive, regulated environment.

Recognising Signs of Dysregulation

Recognising when you or your child is **dysregulated** is the first step toward creating a calmer, more supportive environment. As parents, we can often overlook our own dysregulation while focusing on our children. However, it's crucial to understand that both parent and child can experience dysregulation, and often, our nervous systems mirror each other's. When we are dysregulated, we may feel heightened anxiety, irritability, or a sense of overwhelm. This can manifest physically as shallow breathing, muscle tension, or an elevated heart rate. In our children, particularly those with neurodiverse conditions, dysregulation can take on different forms, such as aggression, emotional shutdowns, restlessness, or physical withdrawal.

One of the most valuable lessons I've learned is to recognise the early signs of dysregulation, both in myself and in my daughter. For her, it might begin with subtle cues—a change in her posture, a tightening of her shoulders, or a sudden shift in her vocal tone. For me, it's often my breath that signals dysregulation. Shallow breathing or a racing heart are my early warning signs that I need to pause and regulate. When we can catch these early cues, we create the opportunity to intervene before the situation escalates.

Polyvagal Theory, developed by Dr. Stephen Porges, plays a key role in understanding these states. The vagus nerve, often referred to as the "information highway" of the body, is central to regulating our response to stress. It helps us shift between states of survival (fight, flight, or freeze) and states of calm and connection. When we learn to recognise our own nervous system's signals—whether we're stuck in survival mode or starting to relax—we gain the ability to influence our state. This is not only beneficial for our own well-being but also for our children's well-being. When we are attuned to ourselves, we provide our children with a model of emotional resilience, helping them feel safe enough to begin calming themselves.

The Science Behind Self-Regulation

The **autonomic nervous system** operates mostly outside of our conscious control, constantly scanning our environment for signs of safety or danger. When we're stressed, the **sympathetic nervous system** kicks in, preparing us for action—either to fight or flee from perceived threats. This is a natural survival mechanism, but for both parents and children, spending too much time in this heightened state leads to exhaustion and anxiety and affects our ability to connect and communicate effectively.

On the other hand, the **parasympathetic nervous system**, specifically through the vagus nerve, helps us return to a state of rest and relaxation. This is where healing and connection occur. When we engage in practices like deep breathing, mindfulness, or grounding exercises, we activate the parasympathetic system, allowing our bodies to shift out of survival mode and into a state where we can connect with others and feel safe.

Recent research in **neuroplasticity**—the brain's ability to change and adapt—gives us hope. Just as our brains can be wired into patterns of stress and survival, they can also be rewired to favour states of calm and connection. Self-regulation practices are the key to this rewiring. Each time we engage in a calming practice, we're essentially strengthening the neural pathways that support emotional regulation. This applies to our children as well. By creating a regulated environment, we give their developing brains the chance to build flexibility and resilience.

The Importance of Co-Regulation

The more I learned about nervous system regulation, the more I realised how essential **co-regulation** is in the parent-child relationship. Neurodiverse children, in particular, often struggle to self-regulate. This means they rely on their caregivers' nervous systems to help them find calm and safety. When we, as parents, remain grounded and regulated, we provide a model for our children's nervous systems to follow.

Co-regulation is more than just calming your child during "meltdowns". It's about creating an environment where they feel emotionally safe and connected. It's about sending non-verbal cues—through your tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language—that tell your child, "I'm here with you. You're safe."

When I began practising nervous system regulation myself, I noticed profound changes in both my behaviour and my daughter's. She became more present and connected, less vulnerable to sensory overload, and her ability to communicate dramatically improved. I became more patient, more empathetic, and more present with her needs. The ripple effect of a regulated nervous system doesn't just impact the parent-child dynamic—it touches every part of our lives, improving communication, reducing stress, and deepening our connection as a family.

Why Regulation Matters for the Whole Family

As I continued to focus on regulating my own nervous system, I saw changes not only in my daughter but in the entire family dynamic. Co-regulation benefits the entire family because emotional states are contagious—our nervous systems are wired to sync up with those around us. When one family member is dysregulated, it often spreads tension and stress throughout the household. But the reverse is also true: when one family member remains calm and regulated, it can create a ripple effect, helping others find their own sense of calm.

This is why nervous system regulation matters—not just for you, not just for your child, but for your entire family. A well-regulated parent sets the emotional tone for the home, creating a safe space where every member can thrive. By focusing on your own well-being, you're laying the foundation for a resilient, connected family that can handle life's challenges with more ease and grace.

The foundations of nervous system regulation are simple but profound. By understanding how the nervous system operates, recognising the signs of dysregulation, and practising self-regulation, you can create a powerful shift in your family dynamic. Co-regulation is not a quick fix but a long-term approach to building emotional resilience and connection. The work starts with you, but the impact reaches every corner of your child's world—and yours.

Chapter 3: Practical Techniques for Parental Self-Regulation

In the early days of navigating my daughter's condition, I often found myself overwhelmed, stretched thin, and unsure of how to keep myself grounded. My emotions were constantly on a rollercoaster—bouncing between fear, frustration, and the occasional fleeting joy. Over time, I realised that to effectively support my daughter, I had to focus on regulating my own nervous system. This became a pivotal lesson: if I didn't take care of myself, I couldn't truly be present for her. Self-regulation wasn't just a luxury; it was a necessity for creating a safe, supportive environment for both of us.

Through research, exploration, and practice, I discovered that simple tools could make a profound difference in my day-to-day life. These techniques weren't quick fixes—they were foundational practices that allowed me to maintain emotional stability and show up fully for my daughter. Below, I share some of the most practical self-regulation techniques that have helped me and that I believe will help you as well.

Gratitude Practices for Emotional Stability

Gratitude is a powerful tool for maintaining emotional balance and supporting nervous system regulation. By shifting our focus from stressors to moments of appreciation, we can create a buffer against the emotional toll of caregiving. For parents of neurodivergent children, practising gratitude can offer much-needed perspective and calm when life feels overwhelming.

Incorporating a gratitude practice into my routine became a grounding force in my life. This practice wasn't about forcing positivity or ignoring challenges but about genuinely acknowledging small moments of goodness amidst the chaos. I started by listing three things I was grateful for each day, no matter how small. Over time, this simple act eased my constant anxiety and allowed me to shift from a mindset of fixing everything to appreciating what was already working.

Gratitude also supports neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to rewire itself toward healthier, more supportive thinking patterns. This practice helps caregivers navigate the emotional highs and lows while recognising that the struggles are real. It's about acknowledging both the challenges and the small victories, creating a more balanced and sustainable emotional outlook.

Practical Exercise:

Daily Gratitude Journal: Set aside a few minutes each day to write down three things you're grateful for. Whether it's a moment of peace with your child, a supportive word from a friend, or the sunlight filtering through the trees, this practice can anchor your emotional state and reduce feelings of overwhelm.

In-the-Moment Gratitude: During stressful moments, pause and reflect on one small thing that's going well. This can provide an emotional reset. Focus on amplifying the feeling and notice how it affects your body and emotions.

Journaling for Self-Reflection and Growth

Journaling is a valuable tool for **self-reflection** and emotional processing. For parents of neurodiverse children, it offers a dedicated space to explore emotional responses, track growth, and gain deeper insights into how self-regulation impacts the family. Journaling allows you to reflect on how your emotions shift throughout the day and how your state of mind influences interactions with your child.

By setting aside time to journal, you create an opportunity to become more aware of your stress triggers and discover strategies that help you stay grounded. Journaling not only helps you process emotions but also allows you to see patterns in how you respond to stressful situations and identify what works best in regulating yourself. This heightened awareness leads to more effective self-regulation.

Practical Exercises:

Rant Journaling for Emotional Release:

Sometimes, what we need most is a safe space to let out all the frustration, anger, or overwhelm that comes with the daily challenges of parenting. Rant journaling is a technique where you write freely, without holding back, to release pent-up emotions. There's no need for structure or positivity—just let your thoughts flow as they are. This kind of raw expression can help you process emotions without judgment and prevent them from building up inside.

Practical Tip: Set a timer for 5-10 minutes and just write whatever comes to mind, even if it feels messy or disorganised. Allow yourself to release what you're feeling. Once finished, you may want to take a few moments to reflect on what came up or simply let it go. The key is not to censor yourself—this is your space to be completely honest.

Structured Journaling for Self-Awareness:

In addition to rant journaling, structured journaling can help you gain insights into your emotional patterns. Each day, write down how you responded to moments of stress—whether positively or negatively. Reflect on what helped you stay grounded and where you could improve. Tracking these moments over time helps you see your progress and identify areas for growth.

Physical Activity: Moving Toward Emotional Stability

Physical movement has a direct impact on emotional regulation. As a parent, I learned early on that physical movement helped release built-up stress and tension, providing an immediate sense of relief. You don't need a full workout to feel the benefits—even a brief walk, stretching session, or dancing can shift your mood and help regulate your nervous system. Whatever feels right for you.

Moving your body helps discharge the energy that accumulates when you're under stress. This is especially important when you feel stuck in survival mode. By incorporating small, regular movement breaks into your day, you can prevent stress from building up and improve your emotional resilience.

Practical Exercise:

Daily Movement Breaks: Take 10 minutes each day for simple movements like walking, stretching, or dancing. This doesn't have to be elaborate—just enough to release tension and ground yourself.

Move with Your Child: Engage your child in gentle movement too. Whether it's a walk together or playful stretching, this not only regulates both of your nervous systems but also creates moments of joy and connection.

Time in Nature

Spending time outdoors, particularly in natural environments, has proven benefits for both physical and emotional well-being. Nature has a calming effect on the nervous system, helping reduce stress and anxiety. Studies show that time spent in forests, parks, or near water can lower cortisol levels, improve mood, and promote relaxation.

One practice I found especially regulating was walking through tree-filled areas. The visual patterns created by trees and natural landscapes influence the brain in positive ways, promoting a sense of peace and flow. Even short walks in nature helped me regulate my emotions and find balance during difficult days.

Practical Exercise:

Walk Through Trees: Find a park or nature reserve and make it part of your routine. Even short walks in these environments can significantly benefit your emotional state.

Nature Breaks with Bare Feet: When possible, stand or walk barefoot on natural surfaces like grass or soil. This helps you reconnect with the earth and calm your nervous system.

Bringing Nature Indoors: If going outside isn't possible, bring elements of nature inside—plants, nature photos, or recordings of nature sounds—to mimic the benefits of being outdoors.

Finding Glimmers and Awe in the Everyday

Experiencing awe doesn't have to come from grand events—it can be found in the smallest moments. These "**glimmers**" are brief but powerful moments that spark joy, safety, or connection. Whether it's the way sunlight filters through the trees, the sound of birds singing, or a small accomplishment from your child, glimmers remind us of the beauty in the everyday and help us stay grounded.

These moments may be fleeting, but they play an important role in regulating the nervous system. Unlike negative triggers that often provoke stress, glimmers gently guide us toward calm and connection. By cultivating awe and seeking out these small moments of wonder, you create a buffer against stress and build resilience.

Practical Steps:

Keep an Awe and Glimmer Journal: At the end of each day, write down one moment that inspired awe or a glimmer of joy—something simple like your child’s smile or the sound of rain. This practice trains your mind to notice positivity, even on hard days.

Create Daily Awe Rituals: Take a few moments each day to deliberately notice something awe-inspiring, like the colours of the sky at sunset or the peaceful stillness of early morning. These moments don’t need to be elaborate—the key is being present and mindful.

Building Resilience Through Self-Care

These tools aren't just about finding fleeting moments of relief—they're about building a foundation of emotional stability and resilience. When you take care of yourself, you're better equipped to navigate the challenges of caregiving with patience, calm, and clarity. Self-regulation doesn't just benefit you—it creates a more grounded and harmonious environment for your entire family. As you begin incorporating these practices into your life, remember that progress is the goal, not perfection. Small, consistent steps in caring for yourself can lead to profound changes in how you show up for your child and your family.

Chapter 4: Supporting Your Child's Nervous System

Recognising Your Child's Emotional Cues

Recent research on the autonomic nervous system has shown that many behaviours we label as "**meltdowns**" or "shutdowns" are actually the body's natural response to overwhelming situations—a result of being stuck in survival mode: fight, flight, or freeze. This state reflects a nervous system that is overloaded and in need of support rather than correction. Understanding this shift allowed me to approach these moments with greater compassion and patience, focusing on the underlying need for regulation rather than simply managing behaviour.

For me, recognising my daughter's emotional cues meant tuning into more than just her expressions or words. I began to notice subtle shifts—her posture stiffening, her energy changing, or even her silence. These were all signals that her nervous system was becoming overwhelmed. Over time, I learned to be more attuned to these cues, which allowed me to offer support before her distress escalated into a full-blown panic attack. This **attunement** was the key to co-regulation, enabling me to provide the emotional safety and presence she needed to regain balance.

Being attuned to your child's nervous system requires patience and practice. As parents, we often expect emotional cues to be obvious, but neurodiverse children may communicate their distress in ways that are harder to read. By becoming more observant and tuning into these subtle signals, you create the opportunity to co-regulate with your child more effectively, offering them the support they need to feel safe and understood.

Co-Regulation Techniques

Co-regulation became one of the most transformative tools in our journey together. Research into the nervous system revealed that children often mirror their caregiver's emotional state. This meant that my ability to regulate my own emotions was crucial in helping my daughter feel safe, providing the foundation for her nervous system to stabilise.

In the past, I would often react to her distress with frustration or anxiety of my own. But once I understood the power of co-regulation, I realised that staying regulated myself was the first step in helping her find balance. This didn't mean I had to be perfect or always calm, but that I could model emotional resilience and provide a space where her nervous system could begin to shift out of a state of distress.

Co-regulation is not about forcing a particular outcome; it's about creating an environment where safety and connection can naturally emerge. During stressful moments, I would first focus on regulating myself—slowing my breath, relaxing my body, and staying present. By doing this, I created a sense of safety that she could attune to. Attunement became central to this process. It wasn't just about managing myself; it was about being fully present with her, noticing her emotional cues, and reflecting back a sense of safety.

One powerful technique I found helpful was mirroring her emotional state without judgment. This meant validating her feelings rather than trying to fix them. If she was upset, I would reflect her emotions through my tone of voice or body language, letting her know that I saw her and understood. This validation wasn't about amplifying her distress but about helping her feel seen, which naturally supported her nervous system in shifting out of a survival state. By staying present, I created a space where she could process her emotions, knowing she was supported.

When she was in her most heightened threat state, she couldn't tolerate being spoken to. In these moments, I would reflect back with sympathetic noises, like a sigh or a soft "Hmm." And if even this distressed her, I would reflect on her experiences and emotions by silently saying reflective statements in my head. Although she couldn't hear my words, I saw profound benefits.

Whether it was because this kept me deeply present and attuned to her, or perhaps my body was sending signals of safety that she perceived through neuroception, it felt like she could read my mind. The words I silently spoke seemed to reach her in some way, allowing her to regulate and calm.

Presence was key. I had to remind myself that I didn't need to rush to solve the situation or manage her emotions. My role was to be present and attuned, allowing her to process her feelings in her own time. By doing this, I was modelling nervous system regulation and showing her that she wasn't alone in her experience. Allowing her to fully feel her emotions in the presence of a well-regulated adult nervous system helped strengthen her ability to regulate over time.

Research on co-regulation emphasises that it's not about controlling the outcome or pushing for a specific emotional state but rather about creating an environment where connection and safety can naturally develop. As I became more consistent in my self-regulation practices, our moments of distress became more manageable and less frequent.

Declarative Language and Low-Demand Approaches

As I became more attuned to my daughter's emotional needs, I also learned that the way I communicated with her during moments of distress made a significant difference. This is where declarative language became a powerful tool. Instead of asking direct questions or giving instructions that might increase her stress, I started using statements that described what was happening in the moment.

For example, instead of asking, "Would you like a drink?" I might say, "There's a glass of milk on the table." The tone of voice is key here. A curious and light tone and an agenda-free attitude from you allow your child to feel safe and free to act. This approach removed the pressure to respond and allowed her to process her emotions at her own pace. **Declarative language** creates a **low-demand environment**, giving children the space to be without feeling the need to act immediately.

By reducing the demands placed on her during emotionally intense moments, I created a space where she could regulate without the added stress of needing to make decisions. Over time, this approach helped her develop more confidence in navigating her emotions, knowing that she had the space and support to process them.

The Underrated Role of Sunlight

One of the most surprising discoveries for me was the profound impact that natural light has on our nervous systems. Through my research and experience, I learned that sunlight plays a critical role in regulating **circadian rhythms**—the body’s natural 24-hour clock—which directly influences our mood, energy levels, and sleep patterns. Studies show that early morning sunlight exposure helps reset the body’s internal clock, supporting better nervous system regulation throughout the day. This connection between light and our biological rhythms is especially important for neurodiverse children, who may already struggle with emotional regulation and sleep disturbances.

For neurodiverse individuals, especially those on the autism spectrum, there is growing evidence that circadian rhythm disruptions are more common, leading to sleep challenges and increased stress. Sunlight, particularly in the morning, signals the brain to increase **serotonin** production, a **neurotransmitter** that helps improve mood and focus. It also suppresses **melatonin**, the hormone that regulates sleep, helping to wake the body up naturally.

Once I understood this, I began prioritising outdoor time—whether it was having breakfast outside or taking a short walk in the morning. Even 15–20 minutes of sunlight made a noticeable difference in both my daughter’s mood and my own.

Her sleep improved, she seemed more regulated during the day, and I felt more grounded and energised. This simple act of stepping outside each morning became a powerful daily ritual that supported both of our nervous systems. In fact, research from the National Institute of Mental Health indicates that regular sunlight exposure not only improves sleep but can also reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The Impact of Light and Dark on Sleep and Regulation

Along with prioritising natural light during the day, I also became much more mindful of how **artificial light**—particularly blue light from screens—was affecting her nervous system in the evening. Research has shown that blue light emitted from phones, tablets, and other devices can disrupt melatonin production, making it harder for the body to transition into sleep. This is especially challenging for children with neurodiversity, who may already have difficulty winding down at night due to heightened sensory sensitivity or emotional dysregulation.

We began using warm, amber-coloured lighting in the evening, which mimicked the natural dimming of daylight and signalled to her body that it was time to rest. These small changes had a big impact, greatly improving her ability to settle into sleep and, ultimately, making a difference in her overall emotional regulation.

I also learned that exposure to natural sunlight in the morning is just as important for setting up a healthy sleep-wake cycle. Morning sunlight helps regulate **melatonin** production for the following night. This daily rhythm between morning light exposure and evening dimming created a balance that not only improved her sleep but also stabilised her mood and energy throughout the day.

Building Emotional Resilience Together

Supporting your child's nervous system is not about eliminating every moment of stress or controlling their emotions. It's about creating an environment where their nervous system can find balance and where they feel supported, seen, and safe. By recognising emotional cues, practising co-regulation, adapting daily routines, and paying attention to the impact of light, you're giving your child the tools they need to develop emotional resilience.

The key is not perfection but presence. As you focus on your own regulation and attunement, you're modelling emotional resilience, which your child will naturally begin to mirror. This journey is about building safety, trust, and connection—one moment at a time.

Chapter 5: Rethinking Modern Therapy Approaches

Limitations of Conventional Interventions

As a parent navigating the maze of therapies for my daughter, I often felt frustrated and disillusioned with conventional approaches. While well-intentioned, many **interventions** seemed to miss the mark in truly addressing her unique needs. They were often focused on external goals and skills, which didn't align with her individual journey. This left me questioning whether these sessions were genuinely supporting her growth. I wanted to address the underlying causes of her distress rather than focusing on behaviours and skills "head-on."

What I eventually realised was that many traditional therapy models focus on **modifying behaviour** without fully considering the role of the nervous system in driving that behaviour. This narrow approach often overlooks the root causes of distress—namely, an overwhelmed nervous system in need of support. I began to understand that helping her feel emotionally safe and regulated and validating her experience of being in the world was far more effective than simply trying to modify behaviours or teach skills. Many therapies, confined to **clinical settings**, fail to recognise the importance of co-regulation and emotional attunement at home. True progress isn't just about checking off external milestones but hinges on the well-being of the entire family, especially the parents.

Once I shifted my focus to regulating both my daughter's and my own nervous systems, I began to see real growth. I came to believe that a family-centred approach—one that empowers parents to regulate their nervous systems and create an emotionally supportive environment—was far more impactful than traditional therapies alone. Tools like mindfulness, adjusting the environment, and intuitive parenting became powerful complements to therapy, offering a more holistic way to support her.

Respecting Professional Expertise While Acknowledging Limitations

It's important to acknowledge that professionals and therapists play a crucial role in supporting our children's development. Their expertise, tools, and methodologies can offer invaluable insights and guidance. However, it's equally important to recognise the limitations within conventional therapy models, particularly when it comes to fully addressing the relationship between parent and child. Many top therapists acknowledge that the parent-child relationship is at the heart of a child's emotional regulation. They understand that parents are often in the best position to regulate their child's nervous system because of the deep bond and trust already in place.

Therapists often need to spend a considerable amount of time building a connection with the child before their therapies can be effective. Much of their initial work focuses on gaining the child's trust, which is essential before any therapeutic techniques can truly take root. As a parent, you already hold that trust. You are your child's primary source of safety and connection, making you the most effective person to support their nervous system regulation on a daily basis.

This doesn't mean we should discount professional advice or intervention. Therapists can provide essential guidance and frameworks that can complement what we do at home. However, we must also trust our instincts and recognise that we, as parents, are in a unique position to influence our child's emotional regulation in ways that professionals cannot.

Intuitive, Needs-Based Parenting

The turning point in my journey came when I embraced intuitive, **needs-based** parenting. Early on, I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of therapies, each offering its own set of solutions for my daughter's challenges. It was exhausting to constantly wonder if I was doing enough or following the "right" path. This created unnecessary pressure, both for me and for her.

As I became more attuned to my daughter's nervous system, I realised that my own instincts were often the best guide. Instead of rigidly following therapy schedules or advice, I began tuning into what my daughter needed in the moment. Sometimes, this meant setting aside therapy exercises and focusing instead on creating an emotionally attuned environment where she could feel secure.

Co-regulation was central to this shift. I came to understand that my emotional state significantly influenced how my daughter responded to daily challenges. When I was attuned and regulated, she was much more likely to feel safe and connected. This balance of professional guidance and intuition allowed me to create a caregiving style that honoured her unique needs and rhythm of development.

This approach doesn't mean abandoning professional advice but finding the right balance between external suggestions and parental instinct. Blending the two has allowed me to focus on connection and emotional well-being, which ultimately led to more meaningful progress than simply adhering to a rigid therapeutic model.

Balancing Professional Advice with Parental Instinct

Learning to balance professional advice with my own parental instincts was challenging, but it became a source of empowerment. As parents, we are often bombarded with expert advice, which can make it difficult to trust our own insights. However, over time, I learned that while professional expertise is valuable, my deep connection with my daughter gave me access to insights that no one else could see.

There were many moments during therapy sessions when I noticed my daughter's nervous system becoming overwhelmed. Though well-meaning therapists often wanted to push through, I learned to trust my instincts and advocate for her when necessary. In those moments, taking a step back allowed her to regulate and process the situation without unnecessary pressure.

Finding this balance involved asking questions, seeking second opinions when needed, and adjusting standard therapy models to better suit her emotional and sensory needs. By becoming more attuned to her signals, I was able to discern which approaches worked for her and which needed modification. This balancing act allowed us to stay aligned with her progress while still benefiting from expert guidance.

Developing a Personalised Support Plan

One of the most significant shifts in our journey came when I developed a personalised support plan for my daughter. This plan wasn't focused solely on meeting clinical goals or ticking boxes—it was built around a deep understanding of her sensory needs, emotional state, and nervous system regulation.

Our support plan centred on practical strategies that focused on everyday regulation, both for her and for me. We created **sensory-friendly** spaces at home, incorporated daily time outside in nature, and ensured there were enough rest breaks throughout the day to prevent overwhelm. These practices weren't rigid or forced but adaptable, designed to meet her needs in the moment.

One of the most important lessons I learned was the value of flexibility. Some days, therapy interventions worked well; other days, they didn't. Rather than seeing this as a failure, I began to see it as an opportunity to adjust based on her immediate needs. This flexible, child-led approach allowed us to stay attuned to her progress without forcing it based on an external timeline.

The plan wasn't about discarding professional advice but integrating it into a holistic approach that honoured her nervous system and her unique journey. This blend of structure and flexibility has allowed her to develop at her own pace in a way that feels natural and supportive without the added pressure of rigid expectations.

Empowering Parents for Lasting Change

Rethinking traditional therapy approaches allowed me to shift from a focus on external outcomes to one rooted in nervous system regulation and emotional connection. While professional interventions have their place, true progress happens when we combine expert guidance with our deep parental intuition. By trusting ourselves and focusing on creating a safe, regulated environment, we can support our children in ways that align with their natural rhythm of development.

Ultimately, it's not a matter of adding more therapies but of creating a holistic environment where both parents and children feel regulated, understood, and supported. Embracing intuitive parenting and focusing on nervous system regulation empowers us to better support our children's growth and well-being.

Chapter 6: Building a Resilient Family Unit

One of the most important aspects of supporting your child and maintaining a resilient family unit is creating an **environment of safety** and connection. Neurodiverse children, in particular, rely on their parents to feel emotionally safe. This sense of safety isn't simply intellectual—it happens on a deeper, unconscious nervous system level. I realised my daughter needed to feel secure before she could open up or share her emotions. Although we practised low-demand parenting, her highly sensitive system still picked up on subtle cues of stress and threats in our environment. She was deeply attuned to the challenges I was facing, even if I tried to hide them.

To truly support my daughter, I first had to take care of myself. As a mother, I was stretched thin, stressed, and isolated. My own nervous system lacked the regulation it needed. I had to create a support system for myself so I could feel safe and understood. I needed to reconnect with myself—validating my own emotions and experiences to feel secure in my own body. I also needed to reconnect with others, building relationships where I felt understood, supported, and seen. Finally, I had to reconnect with nature, allowing myself to feel a sense of belonging to the world around me. Only after I created this foundation for myself could I hold space for my daughter's healing and regulation.

As I increased my own **capacity to regulate**, my daughter naturally began her own journey alongside me. This was a gentle, step-by-step process that required patience and an absence of expectations. My role was not to push for communication or to drive any specific outcome. Instead, I focused on being an agenda-free co-regulator—offering her the emotional space to regulate at her own pace. Whether we sat quietly together after a challenging day, her openness emerged naturally when she felt safe. These moments of co-regulation allowed her to express herself in her own time, free from pressure.

A key part of my journey was ensuring I had the emotional capacity to stay regulated myself. I found that seeking out supportive spaces—joining select communities of like-minded parents and creating an online space for connection—made all the difference. Having a space to share experiences, reflect on challenges, and co-regulate with others helped me recharge emotionally and allowed me to be fully present when my daughter needed me most.

As I became more grounded, I saw positive changes in my daughter's behaviour and emotional responses. By staying regulated myself, I provided her with the deep emotional safety she needed to feel secure. Over time, this approach deepened our connection and fostered more open communication within our family.

Celebrating Small Victories

When raising a neurodivergent child, one of the most important lessons I've learned is the value of celebrating small victories. In the early days, I was overwhelmed by the enormity of the challenges we faced, constantly worrying about the unknown future. I found myself questioning if things would ever improve or if the weight of those struggles would always dominate our lives. But over time, I realised that shifting my focus to the small wins—those fleeting yet meaningful moments—made all the difference.

These victories could be as simple as my daughter making brief eye contact, giving me a smile, or engaging in an activity for just a few extra minutes. Instead of dismissing them as insignificant, I began to cherish these moments, amplifying them in my mind and heart. I let myself dwell on the joy and optimism they brought, savouring the sense of connection and progress. These small wins weren't just signs of progress for my daughter—they became essential for my own emotional well-being.

By focusing on these small steps forward, I began to free myself from the constant stress and uncertainty that had weighed me down. I shifted from living in fear of what might happen to embracing what was happening.

Each small victory became a beacon of hope, reinforcing that every bit of progress, no matter how small, mattered. This practice of acknowledging small wins helped regulate my own nervous system, shifting me into a more resilient, positive state. As I became more regulated, it became easier to show up for my daughter with patience, support, and love.

As a family, we created a daily ritual of acknowledging one positive moment or small victory from each day. It wasn't just a reflection for me—it helped my daughter gain confidence in her own abilities. We honoured her progress, not by comparing her to others or setting unrealistic expectations, but by celebrating her unique path. This simple practice strengthened our bond, reminding us that growth doesn't always come from grand milestones but from the small, beautiful moments of connection and development.

Self-Care Strategies for the Whole Family

I eventually learned that **self-care** isn't an optional luxury—it's a necessity. For a long time, I struggled with guilt, believing that taking time for myself meant I wasn't fully present for my daughter. I thought I needed to sacrifice everything for her well-being. But the reality was that when I neglected my own needs, I was less effective at supporting her. Over time, I discovered that prioritising my own well-being wasn't selfish—it was essential for me to show up as the parent she needed.

A powerful self-care strategy was incorporating mindful movement into our daily routine. It didn't have to be intense exercise—sometimes, it was as simple as a walk around the block, gentle stretching, or dancing in the living room. Moving our bodies together wasn't just about physical health; it was about releasing stress, sharing moments of joy, and creating opportunities for connection. These moments helped regulate my nervous system and strengthened our family bond.

By integrating self-care strategies into our lives, we built a foundation for better emotional health and resilience. I learned that taking care of myself wasn't an act of neglect toward my daughter—it was an essential part of supporting her. When I was regulated and steady, I had the capacity to show up for her in the ways she needed most.

Creating the Support You Need

One of the most **transformative realisations** I had was that I didn't have to navigate this journey alone. At first, I felt isolated, believing that I had to manage everything on my own. The weight of that responsibility was overwhelming, but it took time to realise that building a support network wasn't just helpful—it was essential to our family's well-being.

Connecting with other parents who understood the unique challenges of raising a neurodivergent child was invaluable. Local support groups and online communities gave me a space to share experiences, vent frustrations, and receive advice from others who were on similar journeys. These connections became a lifeline, reminding me that I wasn't alone and that there were others who truly understood what I was going through.

I also began to rely on trusted friends and family members, educating them about my daughter's needs and how they could best support us. Opening up and accepting help didn't mean I was failing—it meant I was creating the emotional space I needed to be fully present for my daughter. It lightened my load and allowed me to focus on building a nurturing and supportive environment for her. It is so important to find people who you feel safe to share your experiences with. People who won't offer advice or opinions but will simply listen and be with you through it all.

Finally, I found that surrounding myself with professionals who understood and respected my parenting approach made a huge difference. Seeking out therapists and counsellors who valued nervous system regulation and emotional connection reinforced the strategies I was using at home. They became partners in our journey, supporting my daughter's progress and my well-being. This blend of professional guidance and personal support helped create a resilient and harmonious family unit.

Conclusion

As we come to the end of this book, I want to express my deepest gratitude for your time and trust in reading through these pages. I know how precious your time is, especially as a parent of a neurodivergent child. My hope is that the insights, tools, and personal experiences I've shared here will serve as a helpful guide on your journey—offering you the tools to regulate your nervous system and build a deeper connection with your child.

While this book is a starting point, the journey of parenting, especially when supporting a child with unique needs, is ongoing. There are always new strategies, resources, and ways to deepen your understanding of both yourself and your child. If you're seeking additional support or information, I encourage you to explore further. I have developed resources, including articles, workshops, and community discussions, that are available through my email list.

I also invite you to follow me on social media, where I regularly share tips, stories, and insights about parenting neurodiverse children. Through these channels, you can connect with other parents who are on similar journeys, share experiences, and continue growing together.

Thank you again for allowing me to be a part of your journey. I hope that, in some small way, this book has helped you find moments of strength, resilience, and connection in your life.

Remember, it all starts with you—and you're doing an incredible job. I'm honoured to walk this path with you.

Let's keep moving forward together.

Join the community:

- **Join my email list:** www.roisinloke.com
- **Follow me on Instagram:** www.instagram.com/roisin.loke
- **Follow me on Facebook:** www.facebook.com/roisin.loke

Wishing you strength, resilience, and peace.

With gratitude,

Roisin

Glossary

Attunement: The process of being fully present and in sync with another person's emotional state, offering them a sense of understanding and connection. In parenting, attunement involves closely observing your child's cues and responding with empathy, helping them feel supported and emotionally safe.

Co-Regulation: The process of helping another person, particularly a child, regulate their emotions and nervous system by providing a connected, safe, and attuned presence. It involves a real-time emotional exchange where the caregiver's regulated state supports the child's ability to feel secure and connected.

Declarative Language: A communication style that uses statements rather than questions or commands. This approach helps reduce pressure on the child to respond and allows them to process information at their own pace.

Dysregulation: A state where the nervous system is overwhelmed or out of balance, often resulting in emotional or physical responses like meltdowns, shutdowns, or heightened anxiety. Dysregulation reflects a nervous system in distress, needing support to return to balance.

Fight, Flight, or Freeze: The body's natural survival response to perceived danger controlled by the sympathetic nervous system. It can manifest as aggressive behaviour (fight), attempting to escape (flight), or shutting down and becoming unresponsive (freeze).

Glimmer: A small, fleeting moment of positivity or connection that sparks feelings of joy, safety, or calm. In the context of nervous system regulation, glimmers are those subtle experiences that help shift us from a state of stress or overwhelm into a feeling of ease or well-being. They offer gentle reminders of hope and can accumulate over time to create emotional resilience.

Gratitude Practice: A tool for emotional regulation that involves focusing on positive aspects of your life. Practising gratitude helps shift attention away from stressors and promotes emotional stability, supporting nervous system regulation.

Melatonin: A hormone that regulates sleep-wake cycles. Natural sunlight exposure, especially in the morning, helps control melatonin production, supporting better sleep and overall nervous system regulation.

Nervous System Regulation: The process of returning the nervous system to a balanced state after being triggered or stressed. This can involve self-regulation or co-regulation with others and is critical for emotional resilience.

Neuroception: Neuroception is one's unconscious ability to detect cues of safety, danger, or threat in the environment, triggering automatic responses in the nervous system. Unlike conscious perception, neuroception operates below our awareness and plays a key role in how we respond to stress and connection.

Neurodiverse/Neurodivergent: An umbrella term referring to individuals whose neurological development differs from the typical. Neurodiverse conditions include Autism, ADHD, OCD, and selective mutism, emphasising the natural variations in how the brain functions.

OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder): A mental health condition characterised by obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviours. Individuals with OCD may feel driven to perform repetitive actions to alleviate anxiety caused by intrusive thoughts.

Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS): The part of the autonomic nervous system that helps the body calm down and recover after stress. It promotes relaxation, digestion, and a sense of emotional safety.

Polyvagal Theory: A theory developed by Dr. Stephen Porges that explains how the autonomic nervous system shifts between states of safety (social engagement), stress (fight or flight), and shutdown (freeze). It emphasises the importance of the vagus nerve in regulating these states.

Rant Journaling: A form of journaling that involves freely expressing all your frustration, anger, or overwhelming emotions without censoring yourself. It serves as a release for pent-up emotions, helping prevent emotional overload.

Regulated: A state where the nervous system is balanced and able to respond to stress in a controlled, resilient way. Being regulated allows for clear thinking, emotional control, and the ability to connect with others. In children, a regulated state makes learning, communicating, and engaging in social interactions easier.

Selective Mutism: An anxiety-related condition where a person, often a child, is unable to speak in certain social situations despite being able to speak in others. This can often occur in settings like schools or public spaces and is driven by feelings of extreme anxiety or fear.

Self-Regulation: Ability to manage one's own emotions and nervous system responses. Techniques like mindfulness, breathwork, and grounding exercises help balance the nervous system and enhance emotional stability.

Sensory-Friendly: An environment or approach designed to reduce sensory overload by minimising stimuli such as bright lights, loud noises, or strong smells. Sensory-friendly spaces or activities are particularly supportive for neurodiverse individuals, helping them feel more comfortable and regulated by catering to their sensory needs.

Survival Mode: A state in which the nervous system perceives threat and activates the body's fight, flight, or freeze response. In this mode, the body is focused on self-preservation, and higher functions like emotional regulation, communication, and problem-solving may become difficult.

Vagus Nerve: The vagus nerve is a crucial part of the parasympathetic nervous system that connects the brain to various organs in the body. It helps regulate stress responses and is central to maintaining emotional balance and physical well-being.