

Understanding Your Nervous System Regulators

InsightTimer

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[Nervous System Regulation & Somatic Tools](#)

We all try to regulate in some way. It's how we soothe our nervous systems when life feels overwhelming. **Regulation** isn't bad; it's a natural survival mechanism. Some regulators truly support us, while others may not be as helpful. You're learning what is what. Becoming mindful of what you use to regulate is a foundational tool for awareness. Once you tune into what truly supports you, you can make conscious choices that genuinely settle your nervous system.

The Three Types of Regulators

Auto-Regulators: Self-Soothing Strategies

Auto-regulators are ways we calm and soothe ourselves on our own.



Healthy auto-regulators:

- Movement like walking, yoga, gentle stretching
- Breathing practices, meditation
- Time in nature
- Creative activities (art, music, writing)
- Warm baths, self-massage
- Reading, journaling



Less healthy auto-regulators:

- Excessive screen time, binge-watching
- Compulsive shopping, eating, or cleaning
- Substances (alcohol, cannabis, etc.)
- Overworking or oversleeping
- Social media scrolling
- Addictive thinking or behaviors
- Isolating from others when connection might help

Co-Regulators: Soothing Through Connection

Co-regulators involve finding calm and regulation through connections with people, animals, environments, or experiences that help settle our nervous system.



Healthy co-regulators:

- Supportive friends, family, or partners
- Therapy or counseling relationships
- Pets or animals
- Nature and outdoor environments
- Spiritual or community connections
- Calming music or sounds



Less healthy co-regulators:

- People-pleasing to avoid conflict
- Drama or crisis-bonding
- Codependent relationships
- Using others to avoid your own feelings
- Toxic relationships

Side note: Remember that the same strategy (whether auto or co-regulator) can sometimes help you feel calm and other times feel overwhelming, depending on your current state or what's happening in the moment.

Dysregulators: What Actually Increases Stress

These are things we might turn to, hoping they'll help us feel better, but they actually create more activation or shutdown in our nervous system rather than true settling.



Common dysregulators:

- Caffeine when you're feeling anxious
- Sugar when you're already exhausted
- Alcohol when you're trying to avoid difficult feelings
- Heavy "comfort foods" when your body is asking for nourishment, not numbing
- High-intensity exercise when already overstimulated
- Overwhelming media or news
- Chaotic environments when you need calm
- Things that disconnect you from your body (excessive screens, substances, compulsive behaviors) — these create temporary numbness but often leave you feeling more scattered or activated later

Getting Curious About Your Patterns

The key question to ask yourself: "How does my body actually feel after I use this regulator?"

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1. Do I feel more settled and connected to myself?

2. Do I feel temporarily numb but then more activated later?

3. Does this help me feel safer and more grounded?

4. Am I reaching for this from authentic desire or from a need to cope?

After using any regulator, pause and notice:

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1. Has my breathing changed?

2. Do I feel more or less connected to my body?

3. Is there more ease or more tension?

4. Do I feel present or disconnected?

Remember: There's no shame in any of your current regulators. They've helped you survive and cope. This is simply about bringing awareness to your patterns so you can make more conscious choices about what truly supports your nervous system.

Reflection Questions

1. Which type of regulator (auto, co, or dys) do you find yourself reaching for most often? What do you notice about this pattern?

2. Think of a regulator that truly helps you feel settled and grounded. How does your body let you know it's actually working?

3. Is there a regulator you use that you suspect might actually be dysregulating you? What would it be like to get curious about this without judgment?

4. What would it look like to give yourself permission to actively seek out and prioritize things that resource you?

Further Worksheets on Somatics by Katie Fleming Thomas, MS, LPC:

- [Somatics 101: Learning Your Body and Nervous System](#)
- [Stress Vortex and Resource Vortex](#)
- [Sensory Orientation Technique](#)
- [Window of Tolerance: Nervous System Zones](#)
- [Recognize and Regulate Your Activation Responses](#)