

Taking the Emotion out of Dysregulation

WRITTEN BY HOLLY HUNT

Dysregulation happens! . . . to everyone. It is an autonomic nervous system response to the question: **Am I safe right now?** It moves faster than the thinking brain because its role is protection, not reasoning. Stress can compound this response, and by the time the school day begins, every person in the building already has a nervous system in motion.

EDQUIDDITY

EDUCATION FOR YOUR WHATNESS

Your Autonomic Nervous System Has Two Primary Branches

Sympathetic Nervous System

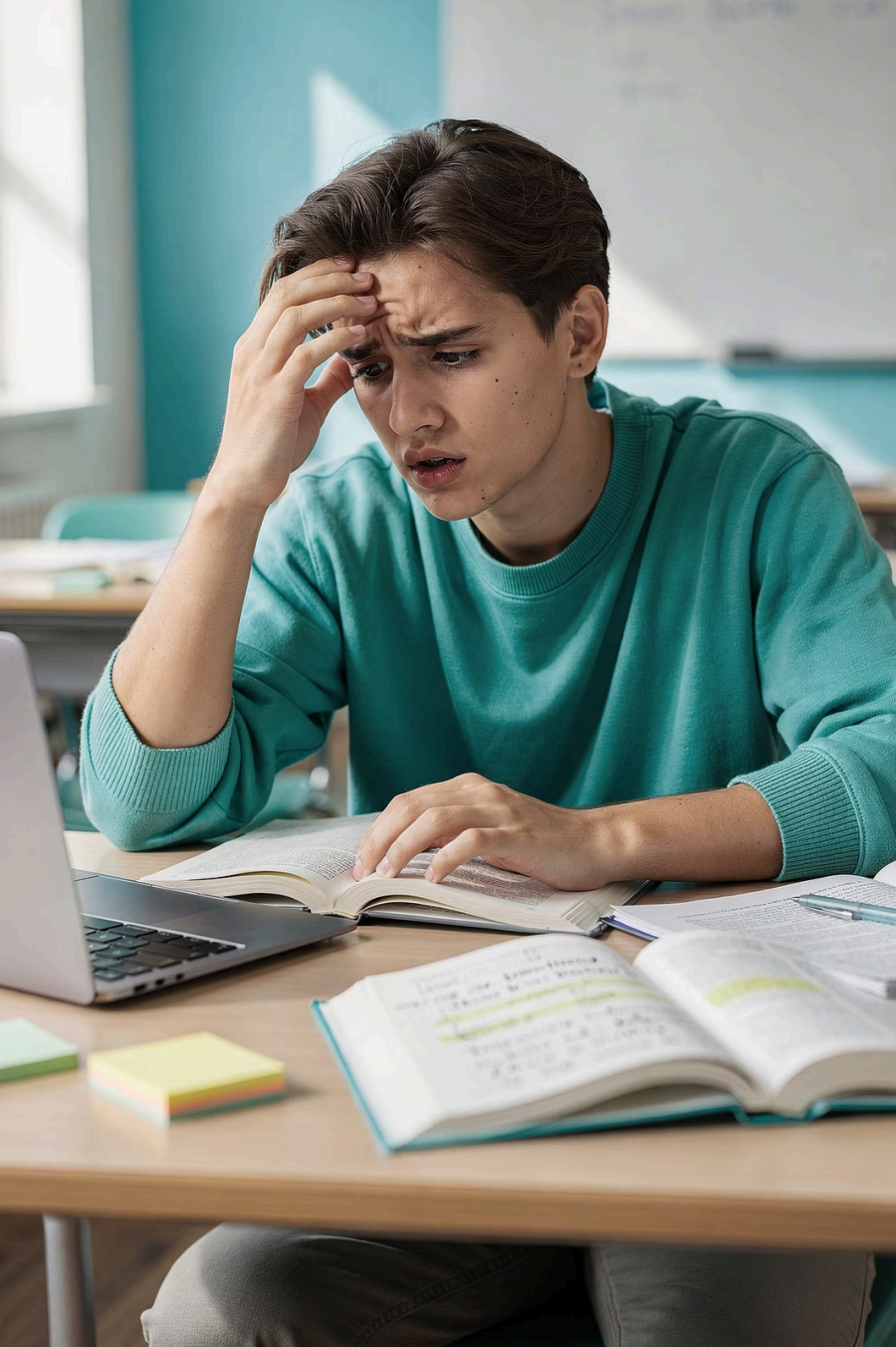
Your "**fight or flight**" response. It increases alertness, energy, and focus. But when it is overstimulated, the brain prioritizes survival over reasoning, and access to higher-level thinking decreases.

Parasympathetic Nervous System

Your "**rest and regulate**" system. It restores calm, supports recovery, and creates the sense of safety the thinking brain requires.



These systems are not opponents. They are dynamic, continuously adjusting in response to experience. All humans move between these systems. Students with regulation-related disabilities experience these shifts more frequently, more intensely, or with greater difficulty returning to baseline. Although we cannot remove all stress from a school day, we can create the conditions that make learning possible.



Dysregulation is not defiance. It's physiology.

As educators, you walk into the school day with your own internal state.

Your students walk in with theirs.

If students become dysregulated, teachers can help them regulate through co-regulation strategies.

What Is Co-Regulation?

Co-regulation is one regulated nervous system helping another return to baseline. It is the intentional use of tone, pacing, body language, predictability, and presence to create enough safety for the thinking brain to come back online.

What Co-Regulation Is NOT

Co-regulation is not rescuing. It is not lowering expectations or removing accountability.

What Co-Regulation IS

It is providing the external stability the nervous system needs in order to settle so that expectations and accountability can be accessed.

Those signals communicate to the brain: ***You are safe. You can stand down.***



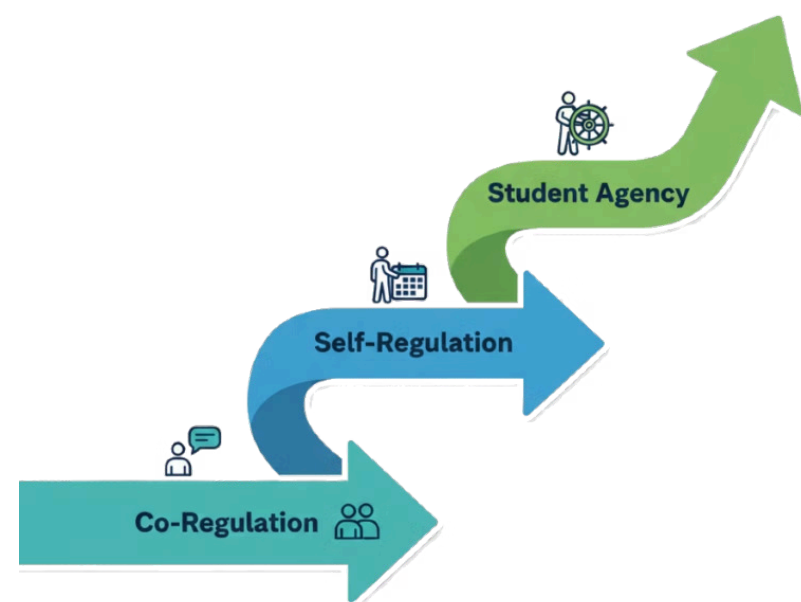
When a Student Becomes Dysregulated...

When a student becomes dysregulated, it's normal for an adult in the room to feel:

- Frustration
- Embarrassment
- Irritation
- The thought: *"They're doing this on purpose."*
- Or: *"They know better."*

⚠ Those feelings are real. And they are signals that our own sympathetic nervous system is now activating.

The moment we interpret a student's dysregulation as intentional, ours escalates. Tone tightens. Pace increases. Control replaces regulation. Two survival systems collide, and thinking shuts down.



The Most Important Question

So the most important question is not, *"What is the student doing?"*

It is, **"What am I doing in response?"**

Because we cannot regulate a student when we are in a dysregulated state.



What a Dysregulated Brain Responds To

If the stress response is automatic, logic alone will not reverse it. A dysregulated brain does not respond to lectures, consequences, or raised voices.



Cues of Safety

Signals that communicate the environment is not a threat.



Routine

Predictable patterns that reduce uncertainty and lower the nervous system's alert level.



Structure

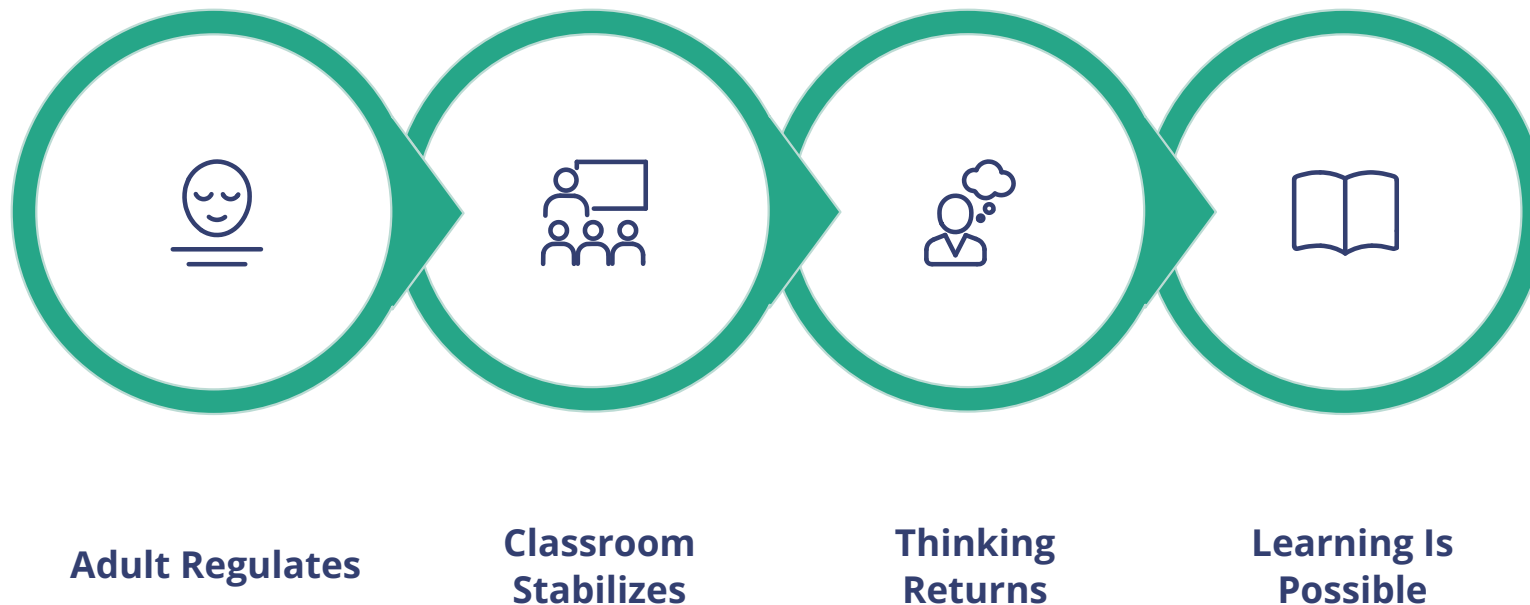
Clear, consistent frameworks that reduce unpredictability and support a sense of control.

See our co-regulation cards: <https://www.idecorp.com/wp-content/uploads/Calm-Classrooms-Co-Regulation-Cards.pdf>



Taking the Emotion Out of Dysregulation

Taking the emotion out of dysregulation does not mean ignoring what we feel. It means recognizing that activation and regulating ourselves first. When we remember that dysregulation is automatic, we create space between trigger and response. And in that space, we choose strategy.



When the adult regulates first, the classroom stabilizes. When the classroom stabilizes, thinking returns. When thinking returns, learning becomes possible.

The Goal: Building Self-Regulation Over Time

Know, too, that the goal of co-regulation is not dependence. It is building the internal capacity for self-regulation over time.



Safety First

Without safety, students cannot access working memory, flexible thinking, or self-control.



Co-Regulation

The external stability provided by a regulated adult helps the student's nervous system settle.



Self-Regulation

Self-regulation is the gateway to executive function — the internal capacity built over time through consistent co-regulation.

Co-Regulation Is the Condition That Makes Learning Possible

Self-regulation is the gateway to executive function. Without safety, students cannot access working memory, flexible thinking, or self-control. Co-regulation is not separate from academic learning; it is the condition that makes executive function possible.



Working Memory

Requires a regulated nervous system to function.



Flexible Thinking

Only accessible when the brain is not in survival mode.



Self-Control



Emerges from safety, not from pressure or consequence.

- ✔ **Remember:** Co-regulation is not separate from academic learning; it is the condition that makes executive function possible.

Download Our Predictability and Safety Design Audit



Predictability and Safety Design Audit

For each item, mark:

- Consistently in place
-  Inconsistently in place
-  Not yet in place

Then identify **one adjustment** to make this week.

1. Does the space reduce cognitive and sensory load?

Indicator	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> 	<input type="checkbox"/> 	Adjustment
The teacher clearly posts the daily agenda and ensures it is readable from all areas of the room.				
The teacher prominently displays expectations and actively references them during instruction.				
The teacher clearly labels materials and organizes them so students can locate them independently.				
The teacher keeps pathways uncluttered and maintains predictable movement patterns throughout the room.				
The teacher proactively minimizes sensory triggers by monitoring noise levels, adjusting lighting, and reducing visual clutter where possible.				

We partner with schools to address issues related to academic achievement and social, emotional, and mental wellness.

For more solutions — in person, remote, and virtual — contact Nicole (Nik) Koch at solutions@idecorp.com or 201-934-5005.