

When Emotions Run High

A co-regulation guide for parents and carers of pre-teens and teens

Understanding What's Happening

You're not a bad parent, and your child is not a bad child!

When a child or young person becomes dysregulated and shouts, swears, says things they later regret, lashes out, hits out, refuses, withdraws or shuts down, it can feel deeply personal.

These moments are not signs of “naughtiness” or “poor parenting” – it’s biology.

They are physical symptoms of an overwhelmed nervous system.

The science... our brains and bodies are always balancing two jobs:

1. keeping us safe
2. helping us connect.

When stress or fear is high, it can create a sense of danger or overwhelm - the thinking brain (responsible for reasoning, empathy, and problem-solving) temporarily switches off, the body’s internal alarm and safety systems activate, the survival brain takes charge and forces our bodies to respond with....

Fight!



Flight!



Freeze!



What you see is not defiance – its biology.

This is why, in the heat of the moment, your child can not listen, reason, or use strategies they know — their body needs help first - to feel safe. When we feel safe, our nervous system communicates with our brain...

“It’s okay - it was a false alarm - we are safe - stand down”
...leading to a restored calm state.

As Parents/carers, you are the key to helping your child move out of these survival states and back to their calm state. You can do this by using a process called **Co-Regulation**.

The 'Ladder'	State	How it feels / looks	What helps
	Alert - Defensive - "Meltdown"  AMBER — MOBILISED = Survival State	The body speeds up: - Heart races - Fight instinct activated - Run Away (Flight mode) - Restless - Anxious - Angry - Resists Control/ Control Seeking	- calm voice - slow breathing - predictable routine
	 GREEN — CALM & CONNECTED Calm State	- Breathing Steady - Muscles Relaxed - Talkative - Playful "Thinking Brain" is switched on - Personality Shines Through	- ordinary connection - shared moments
	Switched Off - Low Mood  RED — SHUTDOWN = Protective State	- Energy Drops (can happen suddenly) - Mood Suddenly Switches - May appear Grumpy - Withdrawn - Distant - Blank - Quiet - Silent - Sometimes 'Stuck' (Freeze mode) Older children may describe this as their batteries or social batteries have run out.	- gentle presence - patience - sensory comfort "de-people-ing"

The 'Ladder' is based upon Polyvagal Theory, by Steven Porges and Deb Dana.

Why big feelings can feel so big

Sometimes children and young people can become overwhelmed because the world around them — or inside them — simply feels too big. Everyday situations can involve a flood of sights, sounds, smells and emotions that are difficult to process all at once. A busy restaurant, for example, might mean bright lights, clattering plates, and lots of people watching and waiting while being asked to choose from a long menu, they can't make sense of in the moment. A noisy classroom, supermarket, birthday party or family gathering can bring the same sensory overload — too many people talking, music playing, new smells, unfamiliar routines, and pressure to join in or make choices quickly.

Even joyful occasions like birthdays, Christmas, Eid, Diwali or other celebrations can feel challenging. The build-up can be long, the excitement intense, and the social expectations to look happy, say thank you, or enjoy gifts can create extra pressure. Children and young people who find the world confusing, unpredictable, or overwhelming may struggle to regulate their emotions in these situations, even when they are positive ones. For some, the bright lights, strong smells, changes to routine, or simply being watched as they open a present can trigger distress.

It helps to remember that when a child or young person becomes upset, withdrawn, or controlling, it's often not about misbehaviour — it's about coping. Their brain and body are trying to manage a flood of sensory and emotional input. In those moments, slowing things down, lowering expectations, offering simple choices, or giving your child time and space to recover can help. Wherever possible, try to prepare them in advance for what to expect, and plan in calm, predictable “breathing spaces or regulation breaks” during busy days. These small steps can help both you as the parent/carer your child to stay connected, regulated, and ready to re-engage when things feel safer again.

It is important to remember that these shifts happen automatically, like reflexes. When a young person feels unsafe, misunderstood, trapped, or shamed, their brain moves up or down the ladder into a survival mode. The part that manages logic and empathy simply turns off until the body feels safe again.

This is why reasoning, consequences, or long talks don't work mid-meltdown or shut down.

Their body needs safety first — a calm voice, slower breathing, a sense that you are steady enough to help them find their balance.

Just as storms pass, a hi-jacked nervous system will return to a calm state - but it can't do it alone.

Your child needs you - to lend them your calm.

Your steady presence helps your child's body and brain learn, over time, that emotions can be felt, soothed, and survived. This supports them in learning how to self-regulate, but this takes time and practice, and they need you to model it to them.

Why Your Calm Matters – becoming their anchor



Your nervous system is their anchor.

When a young person loses control, they borrow regulation from their adult nearby.

If you stay calm and steady, you are communicating to their body and brain...

"I'm safe, I've got you, you're safe, we are safe together."

Now... you are only human and it is natural that when faced with a situation where you are being hit, shouted at, sworn at or maybe completely ignored by the person you love most in the world – you will feel overwhelmed, distressed, frustrated, embarrassed, judged, frightened, angry and more - your own body may flood with adrenaline — heart racing, chest tightening, muscles tensing. This feeling is your own survival system doing its job, when you are faced with a highly emotional, difficult and painful experience, which is REALLY HARD to not take personally.

Now - this is where you are going to need to take a **BIG DEEP BREATH** and tell yourself...

"I GOT THIS!"

It is understandable that situations like these are going to feel dysregulating for you too.

BUT - if you give in to your own natural reaction to respond with fear or anger....

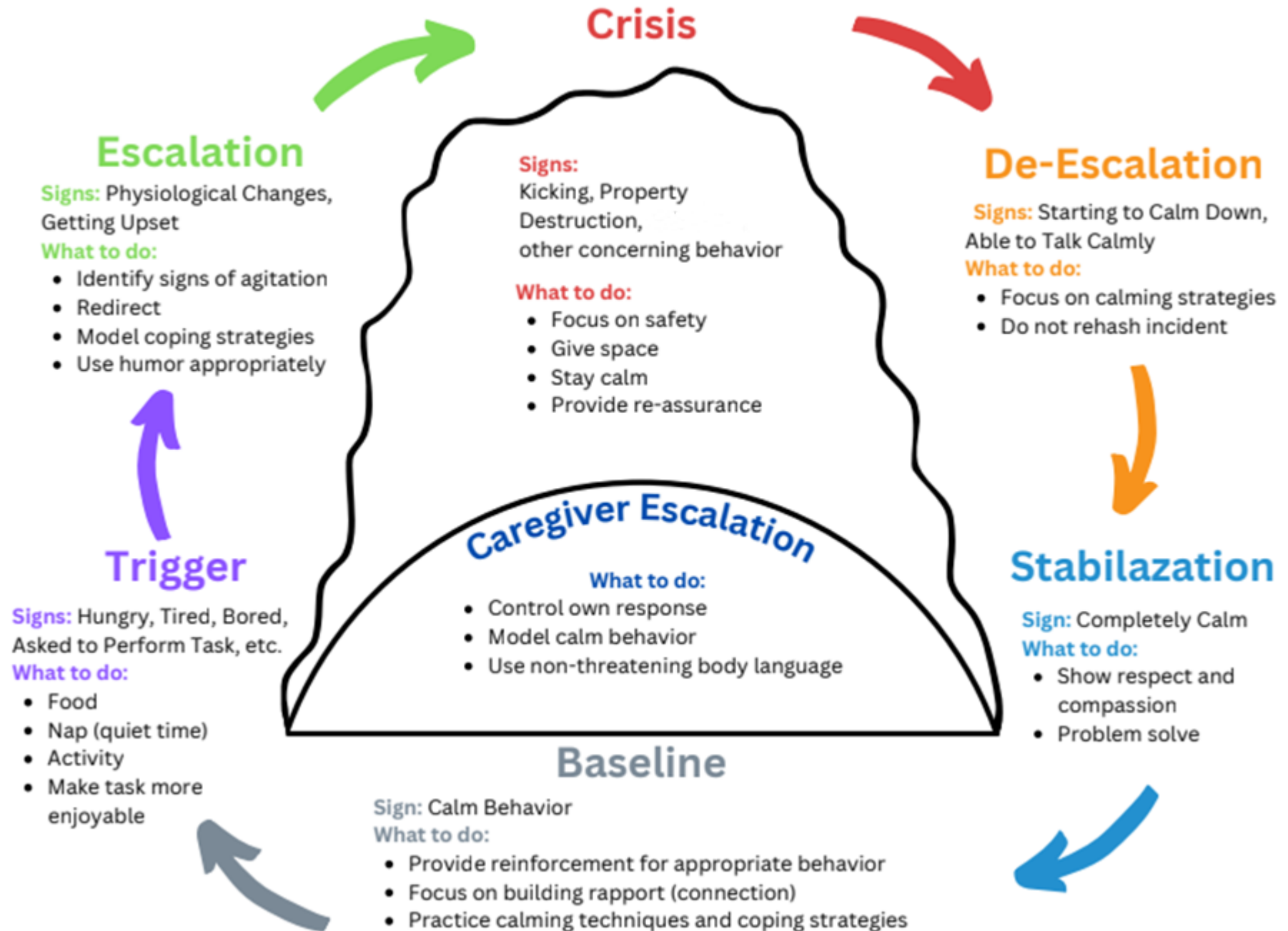
.... it signals danger and creates a bigger storm!

Here are some quick grounding tools for you to use, in the moment:

- Slow breathing: inhale through your nose for the count of 4 counts, hold your breath for the count of 3 and exhale through your mouth (like you are blowing through a straw) to the count of 6.
- Press your feet down and feel the floor supporting you.
- If you need it, and it is safe to do so, step out/ away briefly (but nearby) and tell your child— "I'm going to take a moment and come right back."

You cannot pour from an empty cup; your calm is not indulgent -

it's protection for you both.



Supporting Your Child Through the Storm

1. In the Moment – Regulate

- Keep language short, low, and calm. Here are some examples:

“I can see this is really hard for you.”

“You’re safe. I’m here.”

- Avoid reasoning or consequences while emotions are high — the thinking brain is offline.
- Lower your tone, soften your face, reduce movement and noise.
- Offer safety-based choices:

“Would you like space or company?”

“A drink of water or music for a minute?”

If there’s risk of harm, prioritise safety — step back, remove siblings, call for support if needed.

2. After Calm – Relate & Reason

Once the storm passes and breathing slows:

- Name the feeling, not blame the behaviour.

“That was a big moment — it looked like you were scared and angry.”

- Listen before problem-solving.

“What was happening just before it felt too much?”

- Reflect together.

“What helped you get back to calm?”

- Use visual emotion scales or colour charts to help them notice early signs next time.

3. Restore & Reconnect

- A short repair goes a long way:

“We both had a lot of strong feelings earlier. I love you; we’re okay.”

- Model apologies don’t demand them.
- Rebuild safety through small, shared acts — a walk, humour, cooking, watch something - together.
- End with connection, not correction.

The 5 R's

Regulate → Relate → Reason → Restore → Reconnect



Inspired by Beacon House' resource: 'The Three R's'

From Guidance to Partnership, Co-Regulating as They Grow.

As children move from pre-teen years into adolescence, the way they need our support begins to change - but the need for connection stays the same. Co-regulation gradually shifts from guiding and modelling calm to working alongside them as partners in managing emotions, choices, and boundaries.

These small, age-appropriate adjustments help young people feel both safe and respected as they grow, showing them that even as independence increases, you continue to be their anchor, and your relationship remains their steady base.

Ages 10–13 (Pre-teens)

- Keep routines clear; predictability = safety.
- Use calm-down kits (fidgets, weighted items, soft blanket, playlists).
- Practise naming feelings through games or emojis.
- Offer **“time-in”** rather than isolation — sitting nearby until calm returns.
- Praise effort and regulation, not perfection:

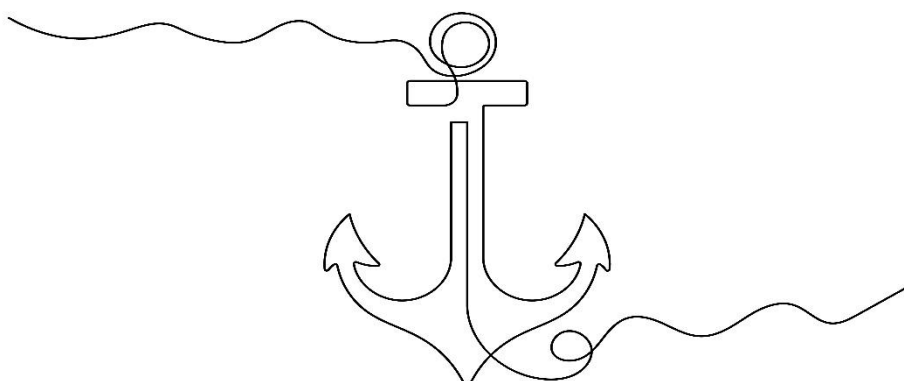
“You really worked hard to calm yourself — that really matters.”

Ages 14–17 (Adolescents)

- Respect privacy and autonomy; involve them in solutions once calm.
- Keep boundaries consistent and collaborative: *“Let’s agree what happens next time”*.
- Encourage physical movement to release energy.
- Suggest short **“reset breaks”** before re-talking issues:

“let’s take a reset break to help us feel ready to talk this through together”

- Focus on mutual respect and trust: your relationship is the intervention.



Useful Phrases

When...	Instead of...	Try saying...
emotions are intense	"Calm down right now!"	<i>"I can see this feels really big. Let's slow our breathing together."</i>
	"Stop overreacting!"	<i>"That feels like a lot to handle — I'm here with you."</i>
	"There's nothing to cry about."	<i>"It's okay to feel upset — your feelings make sense."</i>
	"If you don't stop, there'll be consequences."	<i>"Let's pause and find a way to make this feel safer."</i>
you want to connect and de-escalate	"What's wrong with you?"	<i>"Something feels off today — want to tell me what's been hardest?"</i>
	"You're being rude!"	<i>"I can hear you're angry. Let's talk when it feels calmer."</i>
	"Go to your room!"	<i>"Do you need some space, or would you like me to stay nearby?"</i>
	"You're fine!"	<i>"It looks like that really bothered you — how can I help right now?"</i>
you need to redirect behaviour	"Stop shouting!"	<i>"Your voice is loud — can we take a breath together first?"</i>
	"You're being disrespectful."	<i>"I know you're frustrated; let's find a way to say that safely."</i>
	"You need to behave!"	<i>"Let's figure out what will help you feel back in control."</i>
	"Don't talk to me like that."	<i>"I want to listen — can we both slow down so I can really hear you?"</i>

When...	Instead of...	Try saying...
reflecting or repairing after conflict	"You shouldn't have done that."	<i>"That was a tough moment — what do you think was happening for you?"</i>
	"I told you so."	<i>"We both learned something there. What could help next time?"</i>
	"Say sorry now."	<i>"We both had big feelings earlier. How can we make things right?"</i>
	"Let's forget it."	<i>"Let's talk about what helped you calm and what didn't — that really matters."</i>
offering encouragement	"Good job."	<i>"I noticed how you took a breath before answering — that showed real control."</i>
	"I'm proud of you."	<i>"You worked really hard to calm yourself — that takes strength."</i>
	"See, that wasn't so bad!"	<i>"That looked hard, and you managed it — how does it feel now?"</i>
	"You're so clever."	<i>"You kept trying even when it felt tough — I love that determination."</i>
When setting limits calmly	"Because I said so."	<i>"This might not feel fair, but my job is to keep you safe."</i>
	"End of discussion."	<i>"I hear what you're saying. Let's revisit it when we're both calm."</i>
	"Don't argue with me."	<i>"I can see you disagree — let's take a break and come back to it."</i>
	"You're grounded."	<i>"Let's talk about what happened and decide together how to move forward."</i>

Helpful phrases that communicate safety

“You’re safe - I’m here”

“We’ll figure this out together”

“Let’s take a reset break”

“I’m not leaving - We can get through this”

“You’re not in trouble — you’re overwhelmed”

“You’re safe - I’m here”

Useful Phrases - Adapted for Older Teens...

As teenagers grow, they need to feel heard, respected, and trusted. How we speak to them matters just as much as what we say. Small shifts in tone — from telling to collaborating, from correction to curiosity — help keep communication open and preserve connection, even during conflict. These phrases support calm conversations that respect their growing independence while still offering the safety of your steady guidance.

When...	Instead of...	Try saying...
emotions are high	Calm down right now!"	<i>"I can see you're really wound up — want to take a minute before we talk?"</i>
	"You're being dramatic."	<i>"This feels really intense — what's made it hit so hard today?"</i>
	"You're overreacting."	<i>"It seems like this really matters to you. Help me understand what's behind it."</i>
you want to keep connection	"You never listen!"	<i>"I can tell you've got your own view — I really want to hear it."</i>
	"Stop being disrespectful."	<i>"I get that you disagree; can we find a way to talk about it calmly?"</i>
	"I'm your parent — end of story."	<i>"We might not agree, but your opinion matters — let's figure it out together."</i>
	"You're so moody."	<i>"Looks like you're carrying a lot today. Do you want space or company?"</i>

When...	Instead of...	Try saying...
setting limits or boundaries	"As long as you live under my roof..."	<i>"I know independence is important — let's talk about what feels reasonable for both of us."</i>
	"Because I said so."	<i>"I get that you want more say — let me explain the 'why' behind this boundary."</i>
	"You're grounded."	<i>"We need a pause on that for now — let's talk about what repair looks like when things calm down."</i>
	"I can't believe you did that!"	<i>"That was a tough call — what do you think led up to it?"</i>
supporting reflection or repair	"You've really let me down."	<i>"That didn't go how either of us hoped — what do you think could help next time?"</i>
	"Say sorry."	<i>"We both had strong feelings earlier — how can we make things right between us?"</i>
	"You should have known better."	<i>"It seems like that choice didn't work out — what might you want to do differently?"</i>
	"We're done talking about this."	<i>"I know it's uncomfortable — but I think this conversation could help us both understand each other better."</i>
encouraging responsibility and problem- solving	"You need to sort yourself out."	<i>"I can support you to work this out — where do you think you could start?"</i>
	"You're making bad choices."	<i>"I can see you're struggling with that decision — want to think it through together?"</i>
	"That's your / sounds like a 'you' problem."	<i>"This sounds really hard — what do you need from me right now?"</i>
	"I'm disappointed in you."	<i>"I know you're capable of better — let's figure out what got in the way this time."</i>

Phrases that maintain respect and trust

“I trust you — even when we don’t agree”

“We’ll figure it out together”

“You deserve to be heard”

“You’re allowed to feel how you feel”

*“I love you - that doesn’t change, even
when we argue”*

Pay attention to those shiny moments

In between the challenges, there are always tiny moments that signal safety, warmth, or connection — these are your glimmers. They may only last a few seconds, but they remind your nervous system that calm, and joy still exist, even on hard days. Noticing them doesn't deny the struggle — it simply balances it. Paying attention to glimmers helps both you and your child's body learn that safety can return.

Shiny Moments might look or feel like:

- The first sip of a warm drink when the house is quiet.
- Your child giving you a half-smile after a difficult day.
- Hearing laughter from another room.
- The smell of rain, fresh air, or cooking.
- Music that brings you back to yourself.
- Feeling sunlight on your face or wrapping in a soft blanket.
- Catching your child's eye and sharing a small moment of humour.
- Finishing a task you've been putting off.
- Sitting beside your child while they watch something they enjoy.
- Your pet greeting you like you're their favourite person.
- Remembering a time thing went well.
- Taking a full breath and feeling your shoulders drop.

Shiny moments don't need to be grand — they're the quiet reminders that safety, love, and life continue alongside the tough times.

You could try:

- Writing down one or two positives or shiny moments each day.
- Keeping a jar of 'shiny moments' or a 'pot of positivity' - drop in a note each time you notice one, to reread on tougher days. These can be good to share together with your young person when you are both in need of some shared encouragement too:

"My shiny moment/ positive of the day today was..."

- Taking a quick photo on your phone of something that made you feel calm or connected.

Little by little, these small moments retrain your mind... it does this by helping you to notice the moments of safety and connection as often as it notices stress, and by sharing them with your young person — you are helping them to retrain their mind to notice these things too ★

Caring for Yourself, as You Care for Them

When Things Feel Tough

Being your child's safe person can feel draining and intense at times. You may sometimes feel judged, isolated, or hesitant to join in with every day or social activities. These feelings don't mean you are failing — they show how much you care. Supporting a child or teenager who is struggling with big emotions takes energy, patience, and courage. It's okay to admit that it can feel hard, even when you love them deeply.

Refilling Your Tank

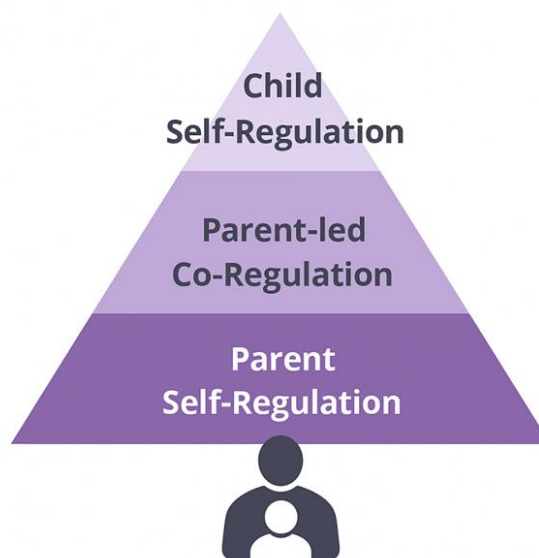
Taking care of yourself doesn't need to be expensive or time-consuming; it can mean tiny, consistent choices that restore you bit by bit. By building small meaningful pauses — you can help yourself to refuel.

It's easy for parents and carers to put their own needs aside to keep everything else afloat, often without realising the impact on their own wellbeing. Taking care of yourself doesn't need to be expensive or time-consuming; it can mean small, consistent moments that help you restore your energy bit by bit.

You could try:

- Reaching out to debrief and talk things through with a friend or supportive professional.
- Noticing at least one positive or calm moment each day.
- Finding a parent or carer support network, peer group, or therapy space if the strain feels too much.
- Building short pauses into your day — a few deep breaths, a walk, or simply sitting quietly to reset.

Your emotional balance is
the
firm foundation
required
for your
child's
regulation
to rest upon...



...but to do this
you need
support
and
co-regulation too!

By making space or taking time to refuel, you strengthen your ability to be that steady, safe presence your child or teenager needs.

Self-Care ideas for busy parents and carers

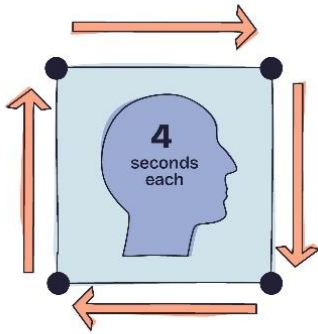
5-Minute Resets	Step outside and notice three things you can see, two you can hear, and one you can feel. Take three slow breaths before re-entering a room; let your shoulders drop with each exhale. Make a warm drink and drink it slowly — no phone, no multitasking. Sit quietly in the car or by a window for a few minutes before heading back inside. Put on a song that lifts or soothes you – singalong or just take time to really listen to it.
Comfort in Motion	Stretch, walk around the block, or move your body in a way that feels good. Use movement as a release — sweeping, gardening, dancing, or pacing all count. Put some music on and have a dance around the kitchen. Take a short walk or two minutes of fresh air to reset your mind and body. If possible, walk with a friend, family member, or pet and let conversation flow naturally. Do one small household task mindfully — noticing your breath as you move.
Moments of Connection	Text or voice-note a trusted friend — even “today was hard” is enough. Schedule a short call or chat with someone who truly listens. Share a small win, funny moment, or favourite song with someone who understands. Join (or rejoin) a supportive parent, community, or faith group.
Rest and Recharge	Choose an early night instead of tackling another job that “needs sorting.” Swap screen time for quiet, music, journalling, or a warm bath. Keep a small comfort box or drawer with things that soothe you (soft socks, scent, photo, blanket). Take a few minutes of morning quiet before anyone else wakes. Allow yourself permission to do nothing for a while — rest is productive too.
Grounding Reminders	You cannot pour from an empty cup — caring for yourself is caring for your child. Small, regular acts of rest make the bigger storms easier to weather. Notice and celebrate the moments when you pause, breathe, or choose calm — they all count.

These can all signal to your nervous system that you are safe, seen, and cared for too.

These moments of calm are not luxuries – they are acts of maintenance that allow you
to protect your capacity to co-regulate, to think clearly,
and to respond with empathy for your child.

When you look after you, you are looking after them.

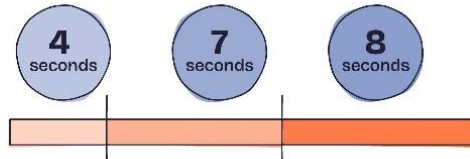
Deep Breathing Techniques for Stress Relief



Box Breathing

Cycle:

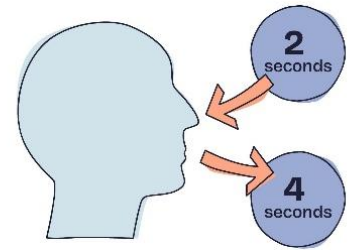
Inhale 4s - Hold 4s -
Exhale 4s - Hold 4s



4-7-8 Breathing

Cycle:

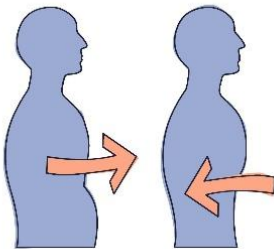
Inhale 4s - Hold 7s -
Exhale 8s



Pursed-Lip Breathing

Cycle:

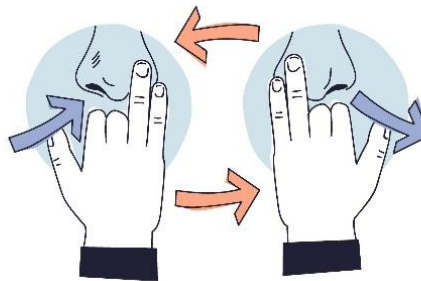
Inhale through nose 2s -
Exhale slowly through
pursed lips 4s



Diaphragmatic Breathing

Cycle:

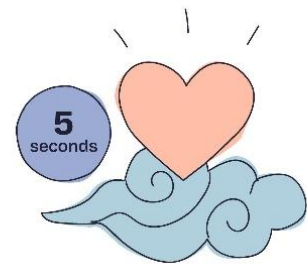
Inhale deeply into belly -
Exhale fully



Alternate Nostril Breathing

Cycle:

Inhale left nostril -
Exhale right -
Inhale right -
Exhale left

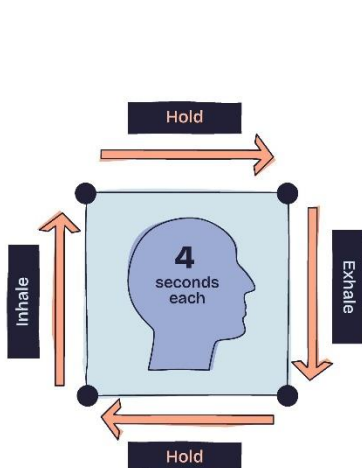


Resonance Breathing

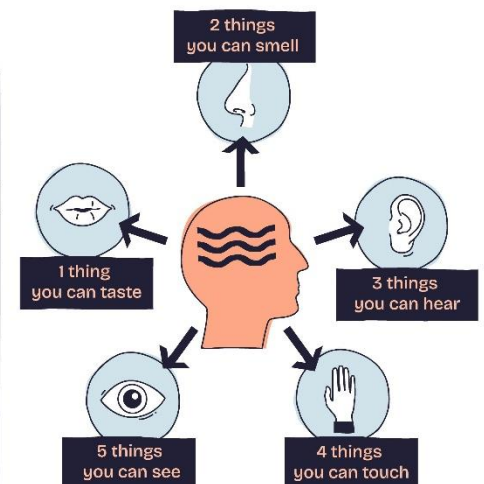
Cycle:

Inhale 5s -
Exhale 5s

Stress Reduction Techniques



Box Breathing



5-Sense Grounding for Anxiety



Child's Pose



Legs Up the Wall



Seated Forward Fold

3 Poses to Reset Your Nervous System



Final thought

You are the safest person your young person knows.

They show their hardest moments to you because, deep down, they trust your love will survive it.

Every time you choose calm over control, connection over correction, you're rewiring both of your brains for safety, trust, and growth.

As Parents/carers, you are the key to helping your child learn to self-regulate, in order to move out of survival states.

Remember: repair is always possible.

Every time you pause, breathe, and reconnect, you strengthen your child's developing nervous system as well as your own.

