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FINDING RECOVERY & EMPOWERMENT FROM ABUSE

Emotional Self-Regulation

BY JULI STEINOCHEER

We humans are naturally self-regulating organisms. Just like thermostats, we automatically regulate our vital functions ---- pH, body temperature, and hormone levels ---- close to their set-points. If we get too warm or too cold, we automatically sweat or shiver. Furthermore, we can self-regulate (at least, some functions) consciously: we eat when we need food, we drink when we need water, and we put on sweaters when we feel cold.

Besides regulating our body functions, we need to regulate our emotions as well. Emotional self-regulation refers to the ability to adjust or regulate our emotions. It is the ability to calm ourselves down when we're upset or stressed, and to lift ourselves up when we're feeling down. Our minds and bodies are intimately connected. Just as we can relax our bodies by calming our minds using meditation or self-hypnosis, we can also calm our minds by relaxing our bodies.

When we are infants, we have not yet learned to control our body functions. We pee and poo when we feel the need; and we cry, yell and scream trying to get our needs met. We first learn to self-regulate through our interactions with our mothers. When a little child is upset or feeling scared, her mother picks her up and rocks her; and the child learns that *"Mom is here, it's OK, it's all right..."* and begins to calm down.

Those who have been traumatized or who deal with constant or chronic stress can become numb to their feelings (de-sensitized) or overly sensitive (constant state of hyper-alert). Self-regulating techniques can prove to be extremely helpful so people can begin to feel alive in their bodies, but not feel so much that it overwhelms them.

It's important to remember that stress is NOT "all in your head." Stress is very physical. The stress response --- aka Fight or Flight response --- evolved over centuries to protect us from threats like lions, tigers and bears. For many people it is no longer adaptive or helpful when the "threats" we're reacting to are deadlines, demanding bosses and customers and buzzing smart phones. Then our pulse and blood pressure go up and cortisol levels remain elevated; and we're not able to relax, unwind and let go.

For many, self-regulating takes the form of self-medicating. We have become a society of addicts and pill-poppers, in search of a quick fix. As soon as we get home, many of us reach for a beer, a joint, a pill or a "treat." While self-medicating does take the edge off, chemical

escapism can lead to addiction and emotional bondage.

Fortunately, there are other and better ways to self-regulate our emotions. In addition to the Fight/Flight response, we also have an innate Relaxation Response. Being able to self-regulate is developmental in nature (like walking and talking) and requires a little practice – mostly practice in *remembering* to self-regulate at those moments you need it the most.

Here are a few examples of ways to engage the Relaxation Response:

1. Touch is a very powerful anti-depressant, far more powerful (and much faster!) than Prozac or Xanax. Touch ---- including sex, but also simply holding, hugging or connecting ---- lowers our levels of stress hormones, and triggers the release of feel-good hormones like oxytocin and endorphins. Getting a regular massage does wonders.

2. Walking is another powerful way to self-regulate. A recent study from the UK found that simply walking in the countryside for 30 minutes reduced depression and boosted self-esteem levels.

3. Mind-body practices include activities such as yoga, qi gong, mindfulness meditation, and playing with our pets and children.

4. Spiritual practices include activities such as prayer, meditation, spiritual reading and cultivating positive relationships: with ourselves, our partners and families, and with a Higher Power.

5. Spending time in nature (ideally barefoot, weather permitting!) and connecting with Mother Nature for as little as 20 minutes is very healing and beneficial. By unplugging from electronics (cell phones, computers and other devices) we give our minds and bodies a break, and an opportunity to re-set back to their normal rhythms.

6. Energy techniques include self-care techniques such as tapping, holding points (like the Triple Warmer Spleen Hold), breathing (e.g. Heart Breathing) and other **energy balancing techniques** [LINK](#).

The last item on the list – energy techniques – are methods for emotional self-regulation FREA recommends and teaches. These are our go-to techniques since they can be used most anywhere and anytime you need them, either with others or by yourself.

We have arranged the techniques into five categories:

- **Creating Safety**
- **Calming and Balancing**
- **Transforming Stress and Trauma**
- **Energizing and Stimulating**

- **Unscrambling and Re-organizing.**

For more information see the article on **EMOTIONAL SELF-HELP TECHNIQUES - LINK** or to **the video links** to follow along.

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