Understanding emotional regulation

Regulation is not about hiding feelings or staying calm all the time. It is about recognising what is happening, supporting your needs and finding enough space to respond with choice.

Your emotional regulation map

State	Possible experiences	What may help
Connected / available	Thinking feels accessible; emotions are manageable.	Maintain routines, nourishment and breaks.
Fight / flight	Urgency, tension, irritability, wanting to escape.	Reduce demands; find safety; move if helpful.
Freeze	Feeling stuck, unable to decide or act.	Offer time, simple choices and gentle support.
Shutdown	Reduced speech, withdrawal, exhaustion or numbness.	Reduce input and expectations; allow recovery.

These are possible responses, not fixed stages or diagnoses. People can move between them or experience several at once. Shutdown and fatigue may also have other causes.

Recognising early changes

Notice what changes in your thinking, movement, speech or tolerance of noise. The earlier you recognise a need, the more options you may have. You do not have to identify every sensation.

What does feeling regulated or overwhelmed look like for me?

Emotions and body signals

Emotions can offer clues about needs, boundaries and experiences. A bodily sensation does not prove which emotion is present, and physical symptoms can have medical causes.

Emotion	Possible body signals	Possible needs
Anger	Heat, clenched jaw, tension	Boundaries, fairness, space
Fear / anxiety	Restlessness, faster breathing	Safety, clarity, reassurance
Sadness	Heaviness, tears, low energy	Connection, comfort, time
Frustration	Tight shoulders, urge to stop	Help, clearer steps, a break
Joy / excitement	Energy, movement, smiling	Expression, connection, pacing
Overwhelm	Noise sensitivity, fog, agitation	Less input, fewer demands

My early warning signs

Consider changes in speech, appetite, concentration, sensory tolerance, sleep or the urge to rush. If body awareness is difficult, use external prompts or ask a trusted person to help notice patterns.

New, severe or persistent physical symptoms deserve appropriate medical assessment rather than being automatically attributed to emotions.

My body signals and what they might be communicating

My personal regulation menu

Different strategies suit different people and different moments. Regulation may involve movement, stimulation, quiet, connection or practical changes rather than stillness.

Need	Options to explore
Movement / stimulation	Walk, stretch gently, rock, fidget, use a familiar rhythm.
Reduced sensory input	Dim lights, reduce noise, change clothing, find a quieter space.
Physical care	Eat a suitable snack, drink, use the toilet, rest or change position.
Connection	Ask someone to listen, sit nearby or help with a task.
Predictability	Use a written plan, clear instructions or a familiar routine.
Grounding	Notice external colours or textures; breathe comfortably without forcing it.

Neurodivergent regulation may include stimming, pacing or reduced speech. Safe self-regulatory movements do not need to be suppressed to make someone appear calm.

Choose according to capacity

When energy is low, choose the smallest accessible option. Stop an exercise if it increases distress, dizziness or discomfort.

Strategies I want to try, and strategies I prefer to avoid

Pause, notice, choose

This exercise creates an opportunity to respond differently when it is safe and possible. If you are in danger, prioritise getting to safety rather than completing the exercise.

1. Pause

Reduce the immediate demand if possible. Put down the task, step away, or ask for more time. You do not need to force yourself to be still.

2. Notice

What has changed? Consider body signals, emotions, sensory input, hunger, pain, fatigue and the situation around you. “I am not sure” is a valid answer.

3. Choose

Choose one accessible action: request a break, reduce noise, communicate a boundary, seek support or postpone a decision. Revisit the situation when you have more capacity.

A phrase I could use

“I need some time before I respond.” / “I am finding this difficult to process.” / “Can we reduce the demands for now?”

Practise using a recent situation: what could I pause, notice and choose?

From trigger to choice

A trigger may be an event, sensation, memory or accumulating demand. Understanding the context can help you identify support without blaming yourself for your response.

What happened?

Describe the situation without judgement.

What was already affecting my capacity?

Consider sleep, pain, sensory input, uncertainty or competing demands.

What did I notice and do?

Record body cues, thoughts, feelings and actions.

What did I need?

Consider a boundary, clarity, safety, rest or help.

What could support a different response?

Identify one realistic adjustment, not a perfect outcome.

One thing I learned

Repair and recovery

After dysregulation, recovery may need to come before conversation. Repair is about taking responsibility where appropriate while recognising your own needs and the impact on others.

Before a conversation

Allow time for rest, food, quiet or movement. Check whether you can listen and communicate. Agree a later time if needed.

When repair is appropriate

Name what happened, acknowledge the impact, apologise for harmful behaviour if appropriate, and discuss what might help next time. An explanation of overwhelm is not a reason to dismiss another person's experience.

A possible repair message

"I was overwhelmed earlier and I recognise that my response affected you. I would like to talk about what happened when we both have capacity. Next time, I will try to ask for a break earlier."

Protecting safety and boundaries

Repair does not require returning to an unsafe situation, accepting mistreatment or apologising for having a disability or a legitimate need. Seek support if needed.

What helps me recover, and what would meaningful repair look like?

My weekly capacity tracker

Use a brief check-in once a day if helpful. Rate available capacity from 0 (none) to 10 (high), using your own baseline. Leave entries blank if tracking feels burdensome.

Day	Capacity /10	Signals or demands	Support / recovery
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Further reading and support

NHS Every Mind Matters: nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/ | Mind: mind.org.uk | National Autistic Society: autism.org.uk

Books to explore: The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook (McKay, Wood and Brantley); The Neurodivergent Friendly Workbook of DBT Skills (Sonny Jane Wise).

A message from Maggie

You do not need to aim for perfect emotional control. Give yourself permission to notice what you need, make adjustments and take recovery seriously. Small changes can create more room for choice.

Draft personal message. This workbook is educational, not a substitute for individual healthcare or crisis support. In an emergency call 999.

One supportive change for next week