Self-regulation · About 4 minutes

Self-regulation: Room to choose

A short introduction to You Don't Have to Be Calm to Have a Choice

"We need to talk." Before Alex knows what the message is about, a defense is already taking shape. There is a moment, sometimes only a second, when Alex can hear that defense forming. That moment is where I want to begin.

Self-regulation gives us a broader aim. It includes recognizing what is happening, making sense of it and finding a response we can stand behind.[1] Sometimes calm follows. Sometimes you make the necessary phone call with your hands shaking, or say a clear no while you are still angry.

Start with what you can notice

You may notice a quick agreement before you know whether you wanted to agree. You may recognize a defensive answer only after sending it. Neither moment is ideal, but both contain information. A correction afterward can be a useful response in its own right.

You also have more options than managing a feeling internally. Emotion-regulation research includes changing a situation, redirecting attention and reconsidering an interpretation.[2] A quieter room or a clearer question may help more than another attempt to breathe evenly. If a workload is impossible, reducing it deserves attention. Accepting your feelings does not require accepting mistreatment.[3]

Consider this fictional message to Alex: "We need to talk." Alex becomes anxious and starts composing a defense. Before sending it, Alex could separate the message from the prediction it has prompted:

The message asks for a conversation.

Alex expects blame.

The subject of the conversation is still unknown.

A question such as "What do you want to discuss?" might provide useful information. In a relationship with a history of threats, seeking support or declining contact may fit better. A prediction deserves examination without erasing the evidence that helped produce it.

Help can change what becomes possible

Dependable care has a place in this work. Bowlby describes an available relationship as a base for exploration; Winnicott considers how supported experience contributes to the capacity to be alone.[4][5] Fosha's experiential writing attends to feelings that become approachable in responsive company.[6] These perspectives leave room for learning with other people, rather than treating every need for support as a failure.

What kind of support fits you today? You might want somebody to listen, help with a practical task or give you room to think. The answer may change. Whether a strategy helps depends partly on the situation and on what happens when you use it.[7]

The Self-regulation pathway begins with recognition, then explores allowing emotion, finding support and responding while feeling remains. It also returns to what happens afterward. Perhaps a relationship needs

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repair. Perhaps you need sleep, less responsibility or assistance that has been missing. Accumulated strain matters.[8]

A conversation can remain uncomfortable even when you have said something accurate and necessary. When you look back, ask what you could hear, what you were able to say and what still needs attention. Those questions will usually tell you more than whether you appeared composed.

Alex's pause gives the larger essay's idea of choice a very ordinary shape. The message is still there, and there is a little more freedom about how to read and answer it.

Perhaps Alex reads the message again later and hears something different in it. The words are the same. This time there is room to ask what the conversation is about, if asking feels safe.

Companion reading · You Don't Have to Be Calm to Have a Choice

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Self-regulation (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Gratz, K. L., & Roemer, L. (2004). Multidimensional assessment of emotion regulation and dysregulation: Development, factor structure, and initial validation of the Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale. *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*, *26*(1), 41–54. Source.

[2] Gross, J. J. (2015). Emotion regulation: Current status and future prospects. *Psychological Inquiry*, *26*(1), 1–26. Source.

[3] Ford, B. Q., Lam, P., John, O. P., & Mauss, I. B. (2018). The psychological health benefits of accepting negative emotions and thoughts: Laboratory, diary, and longitudinal evidence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *115*(6), 1075–1092. Source.

[4] Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory*. Routledge. See "Caring for Children," p. 11; reprinted in Routledge Classics, 2005. Source.

[5] Winnicott, D. W. (2016). The capacity to be alone. In L. Caldwell & H. Taylor Robinson (Eds.), *The collected works of D. W. Winnicott: Volume 5, 1955–1959* (pp. 241–248). Oxford University Press. (Original work published 1958.) Source.

[6] Fosha, D. (2001). The dyadic regulation of affect. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, *57*(2), 227–242. Source.

[7] Bonanno, G. A., & Burton, C. L. (2013). Regulatory flexibility: An individual differences perspective on coping and emotion regulation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *8*(6), 591–612. Source.

[8] McEwen, B. S. (1998). Protective and damaging effects of stress mediators. *The New England Journal of Medicine*, *338*(3), 171–179. Source.

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