

You Don't Have to Be Calm to Have a Choice

Making Room for Feeling Without Letting Urgency Decide

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You know the conversation matters. You want to listen, speak honestly, and avoid saying something you will later regret. Then your chest tightens, your face gets hot, and a familiar sentence arrives before you have decided what to say: Here we go again. Within seconds, the wish to understand becomes the need to defend. You may argue, explain too much, go silent, or agree to something you do not mean. Later, when the moment has passed, you can see several responses that were difficult to reach while you were in it.

Advice about these moments often begins with calming down. Sometimes that is helpful. A little space, a quieter room, or a slower pace may make thinking and listening easier. But calm can also become another requirement you believe you are failing. Now you are upset about the conversation and ashamed that you cannot make yourself stop being upset. You may decide you have no right to speak until you feel better, or that being visibly affected proves you are the unreasonable one.

There is another possibility. You may still feel anger, fear, sadness, or uncertainty and have enough room to choose your next action. Your voice may tremble while you ask an honest question. Your stomach may tighten while you decline an unreasonable request. You may remain hurt while acknowledging that you interrupted. The aim is to increase access to responses that serve the situation, your values, and your responsibilities. Calm can help with that access. It is not the only form it takes.

What We Mean by Regulation

Self-regulation is often imagined as turning down emotion, as though the person who feels least has learned the most. But emotion can carry information about loss, unfairness, danger, desire, and connection. Its intensity alone cannot tell us whether it is useful, accurate, proportionate, or overwhelming. Nor can a composed appearance tell us whether someone is present and listening. A person may speak softly while feeling unreachable; another may cry while remaining able to understand and respond.

Kim Gratz and Lizabeth Roemer describe emotion regulation as including awareness, understanding, and acceptance of emotion, along with the capacity to act in desired ways while distressed. This broadens regulation beyond changing arousal: can a person recognize what is happening and respond with some flexibility? Their measurement research informs this distinction; it does not validate BKL's reflection tools (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

James Gross's process model also makes room for intervention at different points. We can change a situation, shift attention, reconsider its meaning, or influence a response already underway. Regulation is therefore more than one technique performed after everything has become difficult (Gross, 2015). Sometimes the most useful step is scheduling a conversation when neither person is rushing out the door.

Sometimes it is requesting a clearer instruction. Sometimes it is delaying an email while deciding what actually needs to be communicated.

These choices do not require you to become untouched by life. They help you participate in it with a little more room between what you feel and what you do. That room can be modest and uneven. It may be available in one setting and harder to find in another. Recognizing this variability keeps a difficult moment from becoming a verdict on your character.

We Learn Regulation in Relationships

A child has to learn more than what to do with a strong feeling. There is also the question of what happens between people when the feeling appears. Does someone stay interested? Must distress become very loud to be noticed? Is there room to be angry and still loved? Over time, these encounters may influence what it feels possible to show, ask for, or manage alone. Present relationships can offer different experiences, while present unreliability can make caution sensible.

John Bowlby's secure-base formulation connects a caregiver's availability with a child's freedom to explore and return for comfort (Bowlby, 1988). Donald Winnicott approaches a related paradox: a capacity to be alone can develop through reliably supported experience in another's presence (Winnicott, 1958/2016). These are developmental formulations, not histories we can read from an adult's behavior. They challenge the idea that needing someone and becoming more capable are opposites.

In ordinary adult life, useful company may give you room to hear yourself. Someone can listen without deciding what you should feel, sit nearby without requiring disclosure, or help with a task while you recover. Receiving this may bring relief, awkwardness, suspicion, or grief for what was missing. You can ask for a form of support and notice whether the response fits. "Could you listen for a few minutes without solving it?" leaves both people room to answer honestly.

The First Signal Is Often Small

Consider an illustrative example, rather than an actual client's story. Alex receives a message from a partner: "We need to talk about what happened last night." Alex feels a drop in the stomach, begins reading the message repeatedly, and starts composing a long defense. The first draft assumes an accusation that the message has not yet specified. Before the conversation even begins, Alex is preparing to win it or survive it.

An early signal might be a lump in the throat, tightness across the chest, heat in the face, cold hands, a clenched jaw, or a sudden heaviness. It might also be behavioral: reading the same line again, speaking faster, checking the phone repeatedly, or losing track of what another person is saying. Some people notice very little in their bodies and recognize a shift through attention or action instead. You do not need a particular sensation to begin understanding a response.

Separate what you observed from the meaning you gave it. "My stomach dropped" describes a sensation. "My partner is about to leave" is an interpretation. Both may feel compelling, but they answer different

questions. The sensation tells you that something affected you. It cannot, by itself, establish what the other person intends. Alex can notice the alarm without treating the predicted abandonment as a fact.

There may be good reasons for that prediction. The relationship may include repeated threats, unresolved injuries, or a history of conversations that become punishing. Or Alex may be bringing an expectation that does not fit this message. Understanding requires attention to what has actually happened, not an automatic decision that the reaction belongs to childhood. Present danger, past learning, ordinary uncertainty, and fatigue can all matter; none can be diagnosed from a tightening stomach.

When the Feeling Becomes a Second Problem

Many people have learned that being upset is itself unacceptable. Anger means you are difficult. Fear means you are weak. Sadness means you are burdensome. You may respond to the first feeling with an additional judgment: I should not be like this. Perhaps being useful, undemanding, or composed once helped you keep someone's goodwill. That achievement can have value and a cost: you may know how to reassure everyone else before you know what you feel. This is one possible history to recognize, not a story to fit yourself into.

Brett Ford and colleagues examined habitual acceptance of thoughts and emotions across laboratory, diary, and longitudinal studies. Acceptance was associated with better psychological health and less negative emotional responding to stress. An important distinction in their findings was between accepting internal experiences and accepting situations. Making room for an emotion does not mean approving the conditions that elicited it (Ford et al., 2018).

In everyday terms, you can acknowledge "I am angry" while deciding that an insult needs to be addressed. You can recognize "I am frightened" while seeking safety rather than remaining in the conversation. You can allow disappointment without agreeing that someone has failed you. Acceptance gives the feeling a place in your understanding; it does not appoint the feeling as the authority on what happened or what must happen next.

For Alex, this might mean noticing fear without writing the entire defense immediately. "This message unsettled me, and I do not yet know what my partner wants to discuss." There is still uncertainty. The difference is that uncertainty has become something Alex can name, rather than something that must be eliminated through a message written in haste.

Sometimes there is room to become interested in what a feeling is like and what it concerns. Beneath irritation there might be hurt; alongside hurt there may be love, a wish to matter, or anger that still needs a boundary. Sometimes anger is simply an accurate response to what happened. A tentative question - "What matters to me here?" - can open understanding without requiring a deeper hidden feeling.

Diana Fosha's account of dyadic affect regulation places emotional experience within a responsive relationship: another person's presence can help someone approach what had been difficult to bear alone (Fosha, 2001). This is a clinical formulation, not an instruction to intensify emotion. Its educational

relevance is to make room for supported contact, at a tolerable pace. A sadness you can acknowledge with someone may call for company or mourning, rather than another attempt to make yourself efficient.

The Impulse and the Action

An impulse can arrive with a persuasive sense of necessity. Explain now. Leave now. Make them understand. Apologize before they get angry. When urgency is strong, waiting may feel almost irresponsible. You may believe that if you do not act immediately, you will lose the chance to protect yourself, repair the relationship, or prevent a worse outcome.

Sometimes prompt action is necessary. A threat, a medical emergency, or a consequential deadline may require it. In other moments, urgency is part of the experience rather than an accurate instruction about timing. The distinction cannot be made by intensity alone. It helps to ask what needs to happen now, what can wait, and what information is still missing.

You may want both to be understood and to get away; to repair an injury and to avoid discovering that you caused one. These wishes can coexist. Understanding them gives you more to work with than calling yourself irrational. It also leaves room for impact: disappearing without explanation may leave a partner confused or a commitment unmet. A response can make sense from within your experience and still need to change.

Alex's next action could be brief: "I can talk after dinner. Is there something you want me to think about beforehand?" The anxiety may remain. But the message requests information and makes a realistic commitment. It creates room for the actual conversation instead of rehearsing an imagined one. A useful choice has occurred before a comfortable feeling has arrived.

More Than One Way to Make Room

There is no single regulation practice everyone should use. One person finds walking helpful; another needs less movement and less sensory input. Someone may benefit from naming a feeling, while someone else needs a practical task that restores a sense of orientation. A strategy that helped yesterday may be poorly suited to today's circumstances. The purpose is to develop options and learn what they allow you to do.

George Bonanno and Charles Burton's framework of regulatory flexibility emphasizes sensitivity to context, a repertoire of strategies, and responsiveness to feedback (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). A pause can support a conversation or become a way never to return to it. Reconsidering an interpretation can broaden understanding or explain away mistreatment. Their theoretical synthesis helps us ask how a strategy functions here; it does not establish a universally effective sequence.

Thomas Webb and colleagues' experimental meta-analysis found differences in effects both between and within broad strategy categories (Webb, Miles, & Sheeran, 2012). For everyday learning, this encourages specificity about what you tried and what changed. "I regulated" tells us less than "I stopped rereading the

message, took a short walk, and could then write a clearer reply.” The example is an educational application, not an outcome tested in the review.

You might look around the room and name a few ordinary objects, feel the support of a chair, reduce noise, stretch if comfortable, or speak with someone you trust. Gentle breathing may help if it feels easy; forcing a breath pattern or insisting on inward attention may make things harder. You can keep your eyes open and orient outward. A practice does not earn its place by sounding therapeutic. It earns its place by helping you stay oriented, preserve safety, and reach an appropriate response.

Naming Without Explaining Everything

Sometimes a simple description makes experience more workable. “I feel embarrassed.” “I am scared of being blamed.” “I am angry, and I am not ready to decide what that means.” You do not have to produce a complete account of your history before acknowledging what is present. Nor do you have to make the description impressive or certain. “I feel unsettled” can be enough.

In Matthew Lieberman and colleagues’ imaging study, participants labeled emotions in facial images. Labeling was associated with lower amygdala responding than comparison encoding conditions in that task (Lieberman et al., 2007). This finding concerns images, not people naming their own relationship distress. Everyday naming remains something to try and evaluate, rather than a promise about what your brain must do.

Naming can also become another way of circling the moment. Recognizing hurt differs from spending an hour assembling a complete explanation of it. Amelia Aldao and colleagues’ meta-analysis found associations between habitual regulation strategies, including rumination, and psychological symptoms (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010). That does not diagnose your thinking. A useful question is whether reflection is helping you understand, decide, or make contact with what matters.

For Alex, a useful description ends with a practical question: “I am anxious about this conversation. What would help me hear what is actually being said?” More detail may become useful later. Right now, the description serves participation rather than replacing it.

A Pause With a Purpose

Taking a pause works best when it protects the possibility of a responsible next step. In a safe conversation, you might say, “I want to answer this carefully. I need a little time, and I can come back to it at seven.” The other person does not have to enjoy the delay. They can ask for clarity, express concern about previous unfinished conversations, or explain a time constraint. Your need for room and their need for follow-through can both matter.

When the conversation takes place, Alex interrupts, then catches it: “I started defending before you finished. Let me hear the rest.” The partner explains that a shared task was left to them after Alex had agreed to help. Alex had expected rejection; there is an actual missed commitment to address. Alex feels

regret and still disagrees with part of the partner's account. Acknowledging the interruption and the missed task need not mean accepting every accusation.

A pause should not be used to require another person to stop having feelings, conceal their hurt, or present a concern perfectly before it will be considered. "You need to regulate" can become a sophisticated dismissal. Equally, someone else's distress does not require you to tolerate threats or abandon a boundary. The aim is a conversation with enough room for both people's experience and accurate responsibility.

When there is violence, intimidation, coercion, or fear of retaliation, this is not a joint practice assignment. Confidential individual support and safety take priority. Being able to endure an unsafe interaction more quietly would not establish progress.

Recovery Is Part of the Work

A response does not end when the conversation ends. You may remain tired, shaky, distracted, or tempted to replay everything that was said. Returning to ordinary activities may take time. Recovery deserves attention because repeated demands can reduce the room available for the next moment, even when you handled the previous one thoughtfully.

Bruce McEwen describes stress responses as potentially protective in the short term and costly when demands accumulate. His account of allostatic load concerns biological adaptation and burden (McEwen, 1998). It supports taking accumulated demands seriously; it does not let us infer a person's physiological state from a questionnaire or a sensation.

Sleep, pain, illness, hunger, caregiving, money worries, discrimination, sensory demands, and workload can affect what is manageable. Some conditions need medical attention, accommodations, practical help, or changes in the environment. A person cannot always regulate their way out of an impossible schedule. Asking what can be reduced or supported may matter as much as asking which exercise to try.

Recovery may be quiet company, a meal, rest, an ordinary walk, or help with a task. You do not have to revisit every detail immediately. If distress is persistent, intense, or interfering with functioning, individualized professional care may be needed. Educational practice can accompany care; it cannot determine what care is appropriate.

When something does help, there can be value in pausing before the next improvement task. Fosha and Nathan Thoma describe attending to the experience of therapeutic change itself (Fosha & Thoma, 2020). A modest educational adaptation is to notice what receiving help or making a clearer choice was like. Perhaps there was a moment of being less alone; perhaps relief sat beside distrust. You do not need to enlarge it into gratitude or confidence. Let the actual experience, including its limits, contribute to what you understand about yourself and others.

Learning From the Next Ordinary Moment

Begin with a manageable situation. Notice the cue and interpretation, then choose one small response and say what you expect it to make possible: “If I ask what this is about before defending, I may hear the actual concern.” Decide what would make you stop, seek support, or return later. An optional outward focus, a written question, or practical help may fit better than attending to your body. You can decline an exercise and still learn from the encounter.

Afterward, ask what became more available. Could you hear another sentence? State a limit more clearly? Keep a commitment? Request support? Your distress might decrease, stay the same, or briefly increase as you attempt something unfamiliar. Evaluate the action and its consequences alongside the feeling. Relief alone does not prove that a response was helpful; continuing discomfort does not prove that it failed.

Alex’s anxiety does not disappear. But the conversation moves from a feared rejection to a specific commitment, and they agree who will do what next. There is some relief, some regret, and work still to do. Alex revises the first account: “I expected rejection, but this conversation concerned something I had left undone. Asking helped me find out.” That is a limited conclusion about this encounter, not proof that every alarm is mistaken.

Your result may be less satisfying. You may notice the signal and still react as before, discover that the pause made no difference, or learn that the other person will not engage respectfully. Revise the size of the step, the explanation, the conditions, or the support. Keep what helped and leave what did not. Nothing requires you to turn an unchanged result into a success story.

Over time, the hoped-for change is a wider range of possible responses. You can be affected and still ask. Angry and still accurate. Afraid and still able to seek help. Hurt and still capable of taking responsibility for your part. Calm remains welcome when it comes. Your next useful choice does not always have to wait for it.

Clinical Foundations and Further Reading

This essay accompanies BKL’s Self-regulation: notice, choose, and recover pathway. Attachment and psychodynamic formulations, experiential clinical proposals, measurement studies, observational findings, research reviews, experimental meta-analysis and a laboratory imaging task make different contributions. The developmental and clinical ideas are not evidence that these educational exercises treat a condition. Alex is fictional. The practices do not establish a diagnosis, measure nervous-system function or require a childhood explanation. This is educational reading rather than individualized treatment or supervision; using it does not establish a therapist-client relationship.

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