autism
wellbeing

Supporting parents and families with emotional and sensory regulation under Covid-19.

All of us experience the world through our senses. This includes how we see, hear, smell, taste and touch the world – as well as how we know where our bodies are and how they are feeling.

To function at our best as individuals and families, we need to be in what we call the "just right state". This means that our brains and nervous systems can receive, organise and understand sensory input and respond to it in a regulated way.

We all need different amounts of input at different times. Many autistic people need more sensory information or less sensory information than other people typically do to stay in the just right state and be regulated.

Emotional and sensory regulation is about getting the balance just right.

If we feel hyped-up or over-stimulated, we may need to calm ourselves. If we are feeling lethargic, flat, or floppy, we may need to do something energising. Regulating ourselves is part of our daily lives for most people and often we don't even notice we are doing it – think about how we instinctively take a deep breath, or enjoy a relaxing soak in the bath, or enjoy the stimulating effect of inhaling the aroma of our morning cup of coffee.

We are also quite natural at co-regulation too. Many of us will hug each other to provide comfort or turn the volume down on the radio to help each other concentrate and focus. As parents we are often attuned to our children's needs and maybe recognise their distress before they do and act in ways that help them to regulate themselves.

At the moment, many of us don't feel like we have a minute to ourselves.
Family life can feel more stable when everyone is better regulated.

We mustn't forget that in order to best help our children, we need to be in a "just right" state ourselves. Remember the advice given at the start of a flight. In the event of an emergency, out your own oxygen mask on first and then help your child.

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Tips for self-regulation and co-regulation…

Check in on yourself regularly and notice how you feel. If you can, set aside time for a bath, a walk, or some other activity that you can do on your own.

Maybe this isn't possible, so aim for a few minutes at regular intervals throughout the day, where you can focus on your own needs and practice self-care and self-regulation.

If your household has a partnership of parents then take turns giving each other some time alone for self-care.

If you are a lone parent in your household then see if siblings can take on some responsibility for a short time or if responsible adults from another household can help. At the time of writing, two households can meet outdoors – maybe this time can be used to help each other have a break for self-care.

In the same way that we show kindness and compassion towards others, it is important that we show ourselves kindness and compassion too:

- Take your time, back off from pushing yourself, take a few minutes to chill – if it is safe to walk away from the situation you are in then do so when you need to.
- Accept that sometimes things feel tough and this is not your fault.
- Use your senses to notice what you can see, feel, smell, and hear in this moment.
- Do something that is fun – dance with your kids, make something, listen to music.
- Consider the language you are using towards yourself in your thoughts and words.
- Treat yourself in the way you treat your most loved ones.
- Make a list of helpful strategies you can go to when you notice you are being hard on yourself. You could make and keep your list on your phone.

Ask for help when you need it via your family, friends, GP or social worker or join online groups. Autism Wellbeing facilitates private Facebook peer support groups for parents and carers of autistic people and for autistic adults. Lots of people are in both groups. Contact us if you'd like to join.