

Regulation First

What is Self-regulation?

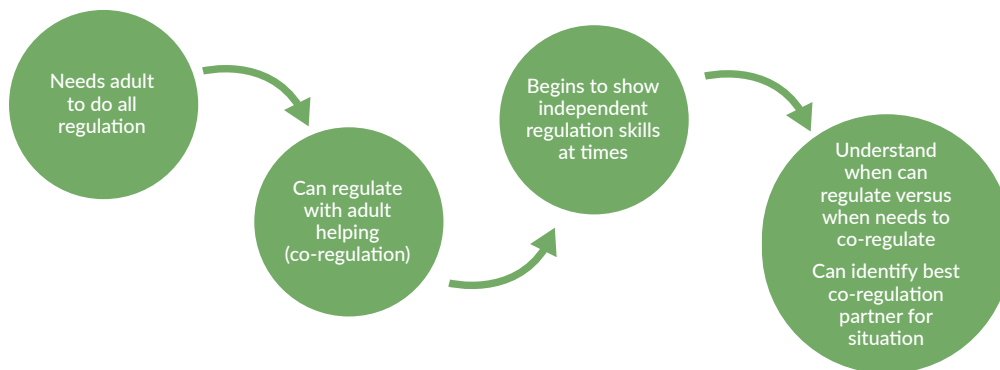
Self-regulation is a complex higher level executive functioning skill. It is defined as the ability to manage your energy levels, emotions, attention, and behaviour. Effective self-regulation supports you to engage in learning, establish and maintain good relationships and maintain wellbeing (Shanker, 2010).

When we are regulated we can:

- focus on the task at hand
- be at the appropriate energy level for the environment and the task
- manage emotions
- maintain a sense of calm
- wait for our turn

How we perceive and experience any given moment is dependent on our current state of regulation. It impacts our capacity to participate and engage with the world around us. Regulation can be influenced by the school and classroom environment, people in the room, the means of communication and the learning experiences.

Stages of Regulation



What is Co-regulation?

The ability to 'self' regulate is developmental, it is not a skill that we are born with. The part of the brain where self-regulation takes place doesn't fully develop until we are approximately 25 years old, hence students at all stages of their educational journey will continue to need some level of regulation support from the adults in their surroundings.

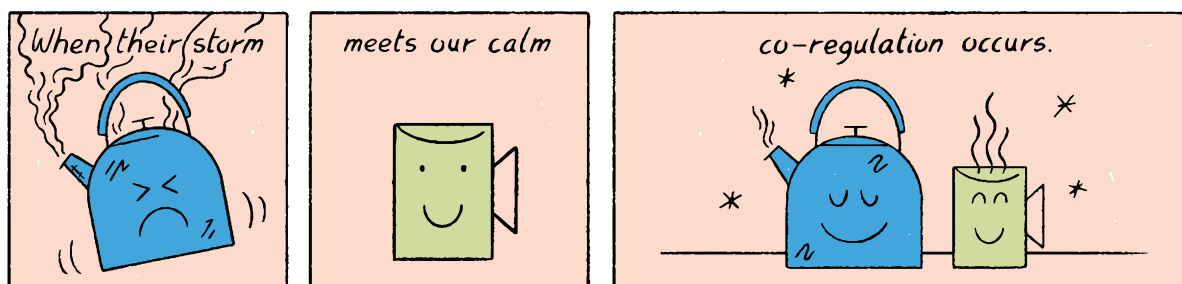
It is important that we have realistic expectations of our students when it comes to their regulation. We need to shift our focus away from 'teaching' students to become 'independent at self-regulation' towards the adults focusing on being intentional and active co-regulators.

Co-regulation is one of the first processes of learning how to self-regulate. Co-regulating requires teachers to pay close attention to the cues students send and respond consistently and sensitively so that students can understand, express and modulate their thoughts, feelings and behaviours (Gillespie, 2015). This results in a widening of students' capacity to be present within our environment and their readiness to engage and learn.

The Adult as a Co-regulator

Co-regulation occurs when one person can transmit a sense of safety, trust and comfort to another (Murray *et al.* 2015, 14). This is done by being reliable and present. Co-regulation occurs mostly through how we use our non-verbal communication such as our facial expression, tone of voice, gestures and body language (Cameron-Whiting & Tekell, 2021). Our nervous systems scan for cues of safety and danger within our environment, without us even being aware of this happening. This is called neuroception (Dana, 2019).

Therefore, it is vital to recognise our role as co-regulators and the power positive relationships with our students has in making them feel safe and regulated. **The adults in the room are the most valuable regulatory and environmental tool.**



Like learning most skills, learning to regulate takes exposure, modelling, supervision and practice.

This can be done by the adults:

- being mindful of their own regulation
- creating a predictable learning environment
- establishing positive relationships with students
- modelling their own regulation strategies
- providing opportunity for choice and reflection of regulation strategies
- understanding students' regulation needs
- recognising when a student may need time and space



By investing time in this foundational practice, students are more likely to remain in a regulated state for longer. When in a regulated state, there are more opportunities to develop proactive and positive skills for times when self-regulation strategies may be needed.

To be effective co-regulators, we need to take care of our own wellbeing and regulation first.

We need our nervous system to be regulated before we can regulate another.

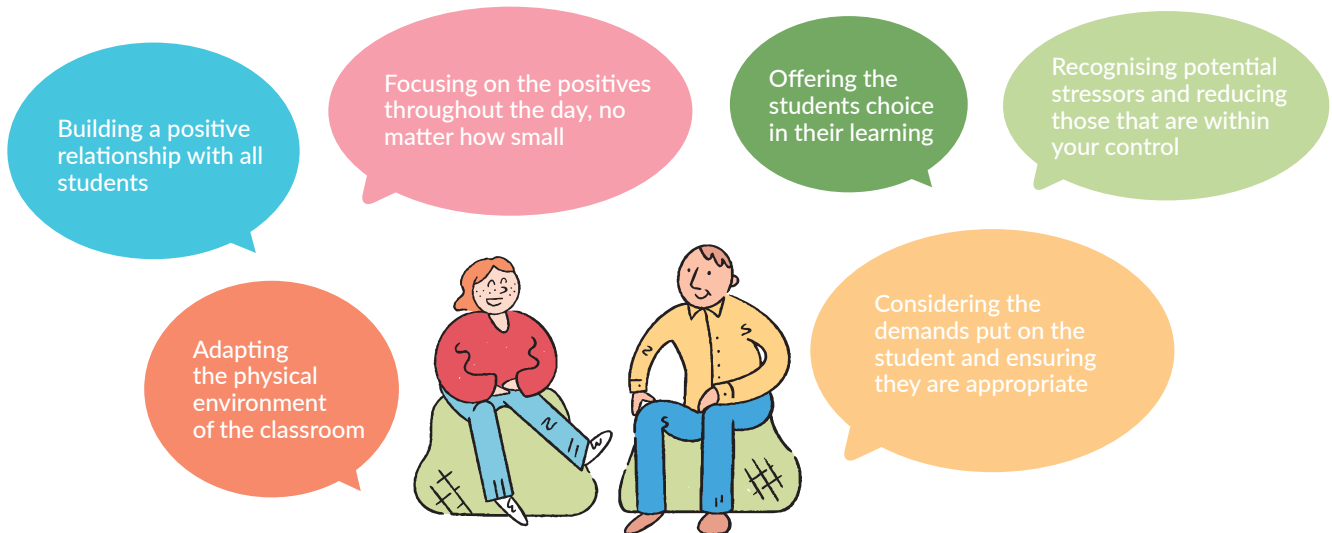
Reframing Behaviour as Dysregulation

Our ability to self-regulate can be impacted by the amount of stress in which we are tolerating. Stress can be thought of as extra loads. Stuart Shanker (2012) categorises these stressors into five domains (biological, emotional, cognitive, social and prosocial). Considering these stressors supports us to reframe behaviours as a stress response, rather than as a 'misbehaviour'. Behaviours are often a response to the level of stress an individual is tolerating. This may present as someone 'flipping their lid' (Dr Dan Siegel) or in other words, having a fight or flight stress response.

Dysregulation occurs when a student's stress level becomes too much to manage. Dysregulation limits a student's ability to maintain 'readiness' for participation in any aspect of the education setting, as well as reducing their ability to connect with others (Cameron-Whiting et. al., 2021).

Reframing students' behaviours as a stress-response or as a sign of dysregulation, can support you to shift your expectations of the student. Instead of focusing on stopping their behaviour and using reactive interventions, adopting this lens helps shift our focus to the learning environment and our role in supporting the student. You can then consider the proactive measures to put in place there instead.

This may involve:



* See The Classroom Element for tips and resources to create a classroom environment that is regulating for students, reducing barriers to enable them to be successful in their learning.

Further resources:



[NCSE Relate Video: Flipping the Lid](#)



[Co-regulation for Adolescents](#)



[Self-regulation for Pupils: A guide for school staff \(Post Primary\)](#)



[Mona Delahook - The Polyvagal Theory](#)



[Dr Bruce Perry: Regulating Yourself and Your Classroom](#)



[Every Moment Counts Breathing and Movement Strategies](#)



[The Kids Guide to Staying Awesome and In Control](#) by Lauren Brukner



[Stuart Shanker's podcast: The Self Reg Show](#)



See **NEPS training** on Introducing a Trauma Informed Approach: [The Stress Factor - Getting the Balance Right](#)

NCSE TPL



Promoting Positive Behaviour for Learning

Understanding Behaviour

Pathways to Prevention

Emotional Regulation and Promotion of Positive Behaviour

Reframing Behaviours by Recognising and Reducing Stressors

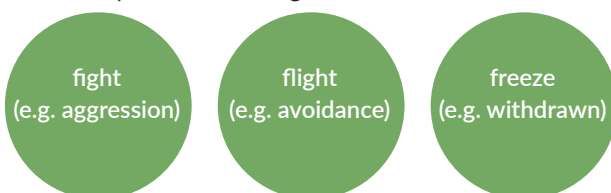
'Stressors' are the extra loads that we all tolerate day to day that may impact our regulation.

Some of these stressors may be internal, for instance a physical feeling (e.g. hunger) or an emotional feeling (e.g. frustrated) or there could be external stressors happening around a person or to a person (e.g. a noisy room). Everyone has different tolerance to different stressors and everyone's capacity to manage stressors differs depending on what stress-loads are already being managed.



If a person's 'bucket' becomes too full with mounting stressors, the stressors become less manageable and we lose tolerance of what may be a small stressor. If we reach a point where we cannot tolerate any more stressors, we may have a stress response reaction.

This usually falls into 3 categories:



When a person reaches one of these stress responses, their brain and body are showing us that they are in 'survival mode' and are therefore not in a position to follow instructions, make choices or learn.

It is important at this time, the adult is a co-regulator, supporting the students to feel safe and transition out of 'survival mode'.

This can be achieved by:

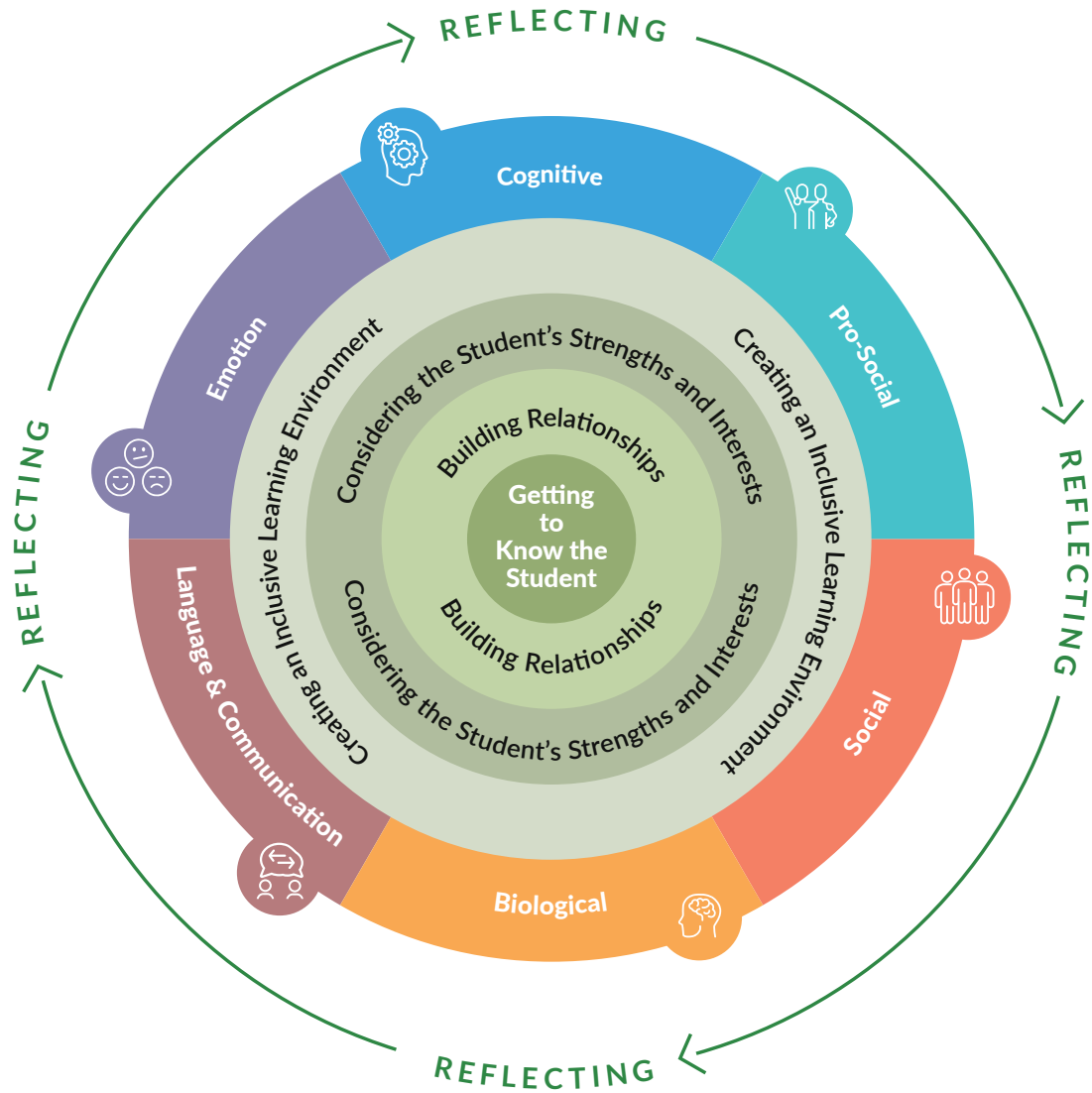
- significantly reducing language
- providing personal space
- giving the person time
- using a soft tone of voice
- transmitting a feeling of safety and understanding

We know that behaviour is a form of communication, but sometimes it can be challenging to figure out what is being communicated.

By being mindful of the stressor domains, it can help us to reframe behaviour and be proactive in reducing stressors. By adopting this proactive approach, it can expand the student's capacity to engage, participate and regulate.

There will be times where although we are able to reframe the behaviour and can recognise the stressor, reducing that specific stressor is out of our control. At these times, we focus on supporting students by removing other recognised stressors, expanding their capacity to manage and engage.

When working with a student who continuously demonstrates survival mode behaviour, Dr Stuart Shanker encourages us to ask 'Why this student and why now?' Gathering insight into the student's life and looking at the school and classroom environment through the lens of the below domains supports us to implement potential solutions.



Biological Domain



The biological domain recognises the role that the nervous system plays in regulating energy levels and the basic physiological needs we need to successfully function in life such as physical health, sleep, nutrition and exercise.

Examples of biological stressors:

- Hunger
- Thirst
- Being Sick
- Pain
- Poor Sleep
- Scents/Fragrance
- Temperature
- Extreme Weather
- Bright Lights
- Loud Music
- Uncomfortable Clothing

Cognitive Domain



The cognitive domain focuses on the processes of memory, attention, the acquisition and retention of information and problem solving.

Examples of cognitive stressors:

- Reading challenges
- Making decisions
- Slow processing in a speedy world
- Constant new learning
- Multitasking
- Too much inferring vs. clearly stating expectations
- Information overload
- New information that doesn't fit in to what you currently 'know'
- Learning something new
- Information presented too quickly or slowly
- Working memory

Emotion Domain



In the emotion domain, a regulated student can monitor, cope with and adapt their responses to any strong emotion, such as intense feelings of happiness, curiosity, excitement, frustration, fear or worry.

Examples of emotion stressors:

- An intense surprise, over-excitement
- Anticipation during the build-up to birthdays or holidays
- Feeling or being responsible for other people
- Not feeling safe, not feeling welcome or that they belong
- Feeling fearful, e.g. fear of trying something new, general fear, such as, heights, spiders
- A grief/loss of a significant person or relationship, e.g. parents, grandparents, sibling, peers, pets, neighbours, placement in foster care
- Feeling lonely or experiencing conflict, e.g. disagreements, falling out with peers, confrontation
- Experiencing disappointments or frustrations
- Comparing themselves with peers or others, feeling embarrassed, low self-esteem
- Anxieties due to changes in family circumstances, e.g. moving house, parental separation, new siblings, new relationships
- Intense feelings due to a parent or family member being sick, e.g. worry, anxiety, guilt

Social Domain



The social domain recognises stressors that impact the student in relation to social engagement.

Examples of social stressors:

- Being a quiet person in a loud world
- Being left out of a group/feeling rejected
- Putting on a social face when your 'social battery' feels low
- Working within a group when you are struggling to connect with those around you
- Participating in circle time or public speaking
- Being in a setting where you are expected to use 'small talk'
- Not being understood by friends or classmates
- Fitting in to different cultural social norms
- One-to-one interactions that feel intense (this could include the SET room)
- Not having anyone to play with/chat with at break times
- Peer pressure from friends or other classmates

Pro-Social Domain



The pro-social domain includes the energy and emotions we take on from others. This includes empathy, relating to others, social approval and 'fitting in'.

Examples of pro-social stressors:

- Peer rejection and bullying
- Conflict in the family
- Academic pressure
- Cultural or socioeconomic stressors
- Digital technology
- Transitions and changes
- World events
- Injustice
- Sharing
- Fatigue

(Shanker, 2010)

Language and Communication Domain



Students with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) can have difficulties in understanding what others say to them (e.g. multiple meaning words, non-literal language, complex multi-part instructions, etc.) and may have expressive language difficulties (e.g. finding the right word, constructing sentences or using narrative).

Examples of language and communication stressors:





- Using increasingly complex language (oral and written) to access and engage with learning
- Need to learn thousands of new vocabulary terms
- Difficulties understanding curriculum reading and understanding a wide variety of texts
- Unable to name the emotion and express how they are feeling
- Difficulties explaining their actions clearly
- Learning English as an additional language
- Not having access to supportive communication partners who use a total communication approach
- Not having access to augmentative and alternative communication (AAC)
- Having the language skills to seek clarification appropriately if they have not understood
- Using language to problem solve and resolve conflict with peers in school

(Murphy and Franklin, 2013)

STRESSOR TOOL

Recognising and reducing stressors is an important part of reframing behaviour. Start with the student's strengths and interests. Then fill out the potential stressors that you recognise through your own observations or what you have learned from the student, their parent/caregiver or other supporting adults. When you have recognised the stressors, consider how you might reduce some of them with consideration to the student's strengths and interests. Some will be outside of your control.

Student Name:	Student's Strengths and Interests	Date:

RECOGNISING STRESSORS	  Biological	REDUCING STRESSORS
RECOGNISING STRESSORS	  Cognitive	REDUCING STRESSORS

RECOGNISING STRESSORS



REDUCING STRESSORS

RECOGNISING STRESSORS



REDUCING STRESSORS

RECOGNISING STRESSORS



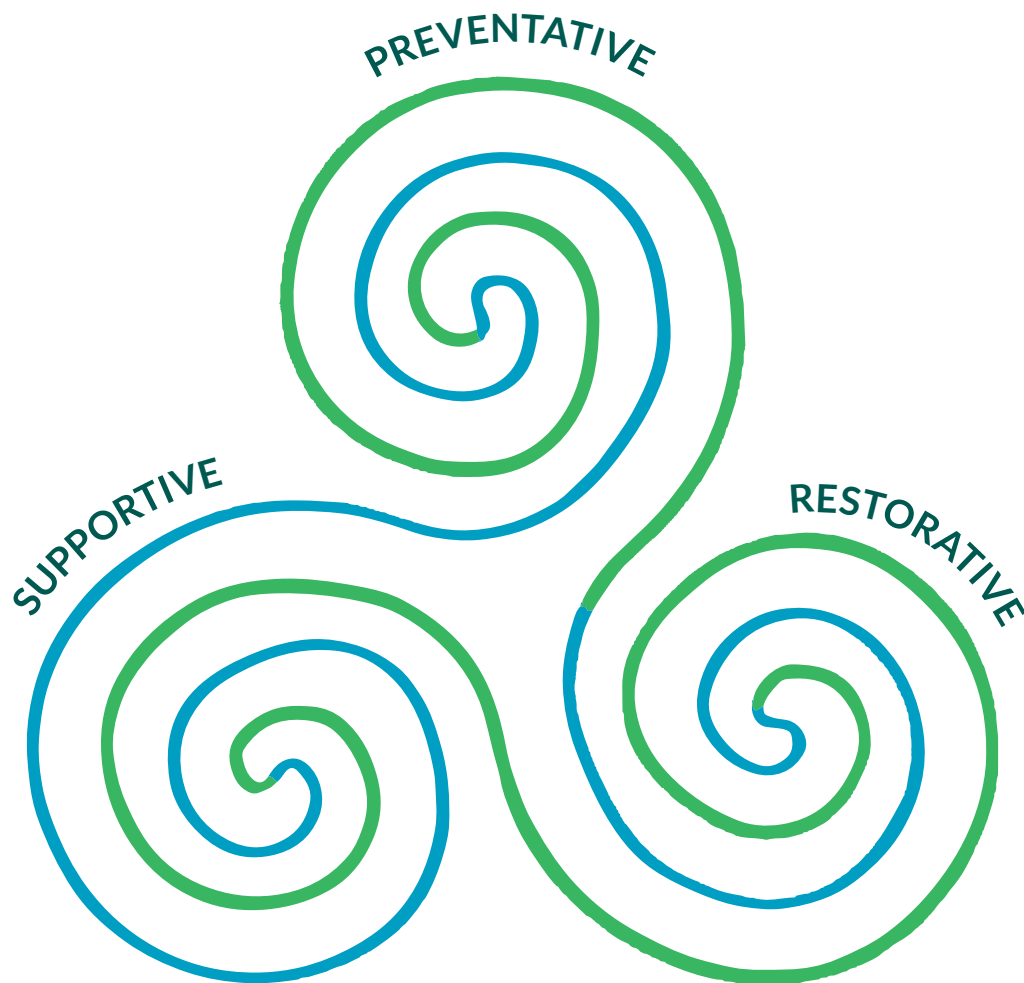
REDUCING STRESSORS

RECOGNISING STRESSORS



REDUCING STRESSORS

Phases of Support



What the student may be experiencing



What the adult is doing



Regulation and dysregulation looks different from student to student.

Building a relationship with your students will help develop a deeper understanding of them as individuals, as well as creating a relationship where students feel safe.

By building a strong foundation, proactive regulating measures will be more successful and during times of dysregulation you will be more confident to respond accordingly.

What the student may be experiencing:



Preventing

When a student is regulated, they may be experiencing:

- Perceived safety
- Comfort
- Connection
- Belonging
- Calm
- Engagement
- Relaxation
- Motivation
- Content



Supporting

When a student is dysregulated, they are experiencing a stress response. For some students, this may result in an activated survival response: fight, flight or freeze. This student may be experiencing:

- Overwhelmed
- Stress
- Heightened emotions
- A need to escape
- Lack of control
- Shut down
- The need to withdraw
- Changes to physiological body responses (arousal state, body temperature, heart rate etc.)
- Changes to cognitive functioning (difficulty accessing higher level thinking, processing language)



Restoring

As a student begins to return to a regulated state they may be experiencing:

- A sense of safety
- A more regulated physiological state
- A motivation to engage with objects, people, their environment
- A readiness to connect

What the adult can do:



Preventing

- Build trust by being consistent, predictable and setting clear expectations
- Make relationships the centre of everything
- Recognise and reduce stressors where possible
- Be available as a co-regulator (work on your own calm)
- Use PACE in your approach
- Use visuals and simple language
- Select a sensory experience that might help to regulate – consider a soothing or moving activity
- Practice UDL
- Include students in meaningful classroom decisions and act on them
- Provide opportunity for students to make meaningful choices
- Adopt student-centred approaches in learning to make learning motivating and engaging



Supporting

- Reframe the student's behaviour
- Understand that the behaviour is a form of communication
- Remind yourself of recognised stressors
- Be mindful of your own regulation
- Give space and time
- Adapt your stance to be soothing and non-threatening
- Keep your own spoken language to a minimum
- Avoid questions or choices
- Avoid talking about rewards or consequences
- Reduce sensory intrusions – bright lights, loud noises, etc
- Give the opportunity to move somewhere safe and quiet or else move the other students.



Restoring

- We are applying Dr Bruce Perry's '3 Rs' – Regulate, Relate, Reason. What the adult does in the supportive phase helps to regulate the child. Continue to work on this before moving into the following two steps:
 - Relate: use connection to calm their nervous system. Attune to their emotional state and acknowledge their feelings without labelling.
 - Reason: Listen to them. Have a non-judgemental chat. Help them to 'reframe' the behaviour to problem solve a different path next time/see if there are ways to further reduce stressors.

What next?

- Consider changes that can be made to remain in the preventative phase in future.
- Consider the communicative intent of the behaviour.
- What barriers are present in the environment, communication or learning that could be removed?
- What does the student need to identify emotions? Consider teaching, role play, modelling and access to visuals to communicate.
- Consult the student, their parents and other staff involved to create a plan that lists actions under the three phases of support using the template provided overleaf.

Further reading and resources



Dr Bruce Perry discusses the 3 Rs

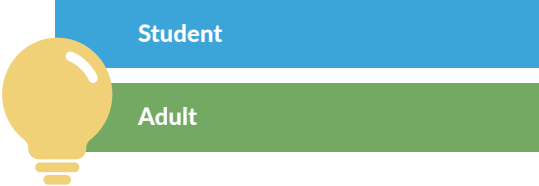
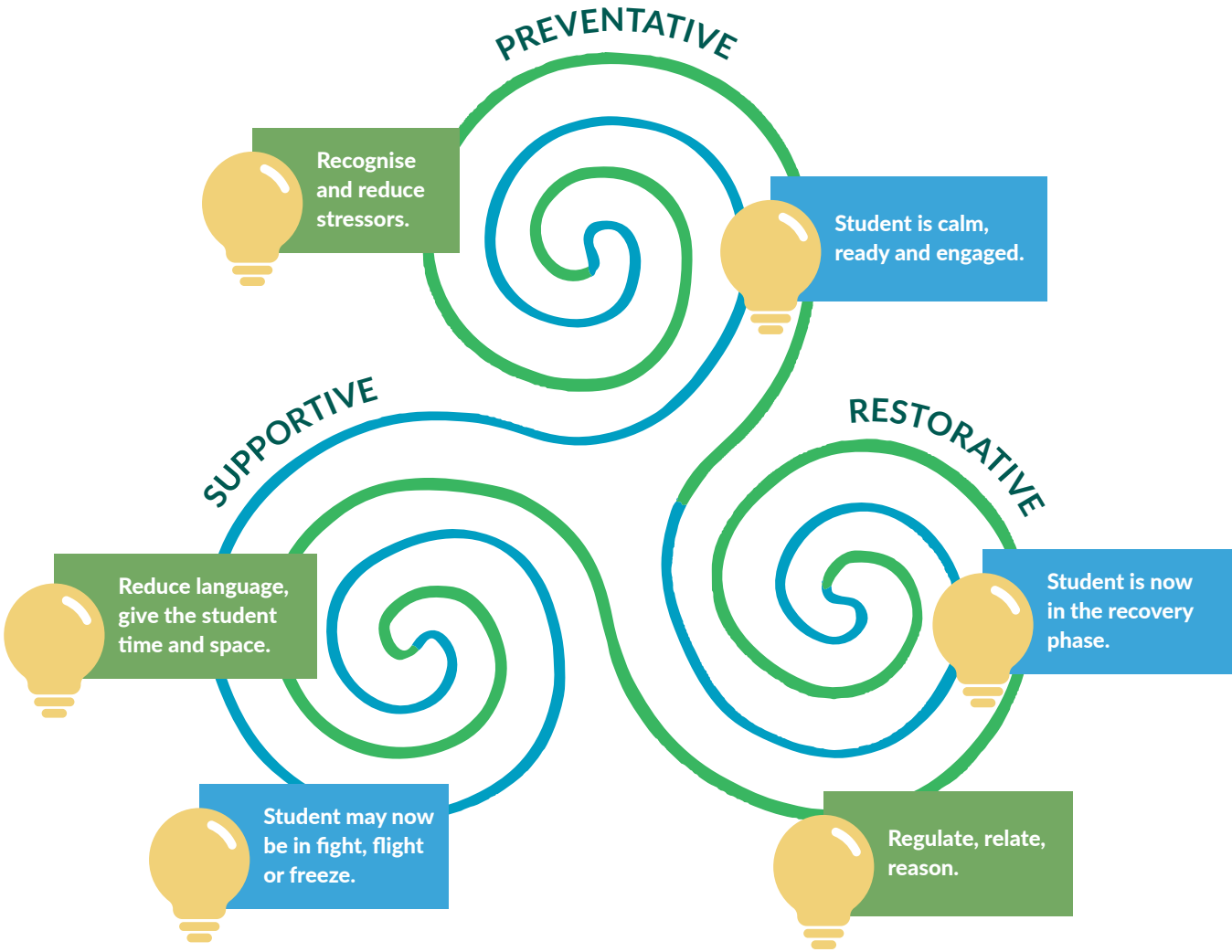


Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations






Unlocking Us: Brené with Oprah Winfrey and Dr Bruce Perry on Trauma, Resilience and Healing

Phases of Support



Phases of Support Template

What the student may be experiencing:		
 Preventing	 Supporting	 Restoring

What the adult is doing:		
 Preventing	 Supporting	 Restoring