Co-Regulation in Practice

STRATEGIES FOR PRACTITIONERS WHO SERVE YOUTH AGED 14-24:

TAKE NOTE STRATEGY

Self-Regulation is a central ingredient in lifelong success, predicting healthy relationships, economic self-sufficiency, and physical and emotional well-being. Adolescence involves rapid change in youths' brains and bodies, and is therefore an important time to foster self-regulation development. Adults play a significant role in this development.

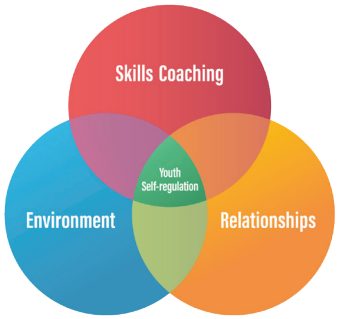
Adults can enhance youth self-regulation by providing **co-regulation** support. Through co-regulation, adults form relationships where youth feel cared for and known; co-create safe and nuturing environments; and give youth opportunities to practice self-regulation skills and reflect on how to apply them in their lives.

Self-regulation
/self reg je' lei sh(a)n/ noun
the act of managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed behavior. Examples include calling a time out in an argument for the good of the relationship, or avoiding an impulse purchase to save money for something of greater value to you in the future.

Co-regulation
/co reg je' lei sh(a)n/ noun
the supportive process between adults and youth that integrates three key types of support: 1) providing warm, responsive relationships, 2) creating supportive environments, and 3) coaching and modeling self-regulation skills.

Practitioners can use strategies like the one in this handout to provide co-regulation support for youth.

Co-Regulation



The complete Co-Regulation in Practice Series offers six strategies to foster self-regulation, each targeting one part of Co-Regulation.

- **Relationship Strategies** — Welcoming, Positive Praise
- **Environment Strategies** — Group Agreement, Rest and Return
- **Self-Regulation Skills** — Breath to Refocus, Take Note

TAKE NOTE

The *Take Note* strategy is about pausing to breathe, notice feelings or sensations in the body, and connect to the present moment. Often referred to as being mindful, this kind of strategy shows promising benefits like reduced anxiety, depression, and stress; increased focus; improved self-awareness and acceptance; and decision-making that honors both emotion and reason. Research also links the practice of being mindful to improved job performance and reduced desire to quit, suggesting it may have an important role in the workplace. Integrating this strategy facilitates emotional and cognitive self-regulation, and may enhance staff capacity for co-regulation.

Mindfulness exercises are rarely framed in ways that resonate with people of color, and, as a result, are sometimes reported as awkward or irrelevant. To resonate with diverse individuals, and, as a result, begin addressing this gap, several exercises in this module were developed in partnership with diverse staff and participants.

The module includes several approaches to the strategy, indicating those for use by staff and/or participants.

TAKE NOTE (CONT'D)

Take Note at Work: Working in the human services field can be very rewarding. It is inspiring to serve people who have demonstrated profound bravery and resilience, and humbling to witness individuals and families struggling with staggering adversity. Staff who give of themselves to support others, however, often experience vicarious trauma and significant stress in their roles. It is important to build skills that make it easier to cope with the stressors and demands of work in healthy ways.

To do this during your workday, you can *Take Note* of the present moment—not judging what has been, and not worried about what comes next—as a way to check in with your brain and body. With practice, you can discover messages your body is trying to communicate, increase your compassion for yourself and others, and refuel for the important work you do.

Take Note with Youth: Youth are uniquely affected by stress, heightened emotions, and a hypervigilance about themselves. Developments happening in the brain make youth acutely attuned to the emotional content of a situation, which can trigger reactivity and stress that sometimes leads to interpersonal conflict. At the same time, youth are motivated to take greater risks, seek rewards, try new experiences, and establish increased independence. To balance the risks and opportunities presented by this stage in their development, youth need support from caring adults through authentic relationships. In the context of supportive relationships, adults can coach youth to pause and *Take Note* of their feelings and their surroundings to become mindful. This strategy can help youth become more aware of their emotions and values, serving as a precursor to emotion regulation and helping them move from a state of stress and myopic focus to a state of awareness and understanding of feelings in the broader context of life.

AT WORK / WITH YOUTH

The Strategy:

At Work: The exercises in this module are designed for use either as a group or individually. We recommend using a *Take Note* exercise at least weekly for about ten minutes, or daily if possible.

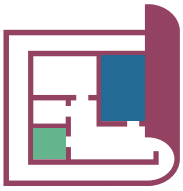
With Youth: The strategy can be used in group workshops or individual sessions with youth. We recommend trying one *Take Note* exercise during each meeting for 3-7 minutes, if possible.

1 Make a plan.

2 Select your exercise.

3 Model the strategy.

4 Support emotional safety.



Make a plan.

At work: *Take Note* exercises can be done anytime, like at the beginning of the workday, at the start of staff meetings, or during a *Rest and Return* break. Select a time and location to practice that is right for your team. Try out different approaches to find what works best, and keep it going by putting it on the calendar regularly.

With youth: Decide when to introduce the strategy (the introduction takes about three minutes, followed by the first exercise) and make a schedule for integrating the strategy over the course of the workshops.

Select your exercise.

This module offers several resources to practice *Take Note* with youth or in the workplace, including recordings and scripts. Choose resources that will resonate with the audience. You are not limited to the resources in this module. If you have other mindfulness exercises you would like to try, please do. You might even suggest participants could find an exercise they like and share it with the group.

Model the strategy.

Because slowing down to *Take Note* can feel awkward at first, it is very important that the facilitator model the practice with comfort and openness. As a result, over time, participants will feel more at ease using the strategy themselves.

Support emotional safety.

Sometimes tuning in to one's feelings can trigger intense emotions. It is important to give people the freedom to *Rest and Return*, or to opt out if they feel unsafe or uneasy about the strategy for any reason. It can be helpful to have a staff person available for emotional support, if needed.

Exercises in this module

There are numerous resources on the internet, and in books, audio files, and apps for guided imagery, meditation, mindfulness, noticing, and breathing exercises. For your convenience, this module includes exercises we developed, as well as a few from other sources. The approximate length of each exercise is included below, with all exercises taking 10 minutes or less.

1. **Introduction to *Take Note*:** A sample script for introducing the *Take Note* strategy for the first time. *(3 minutes)*

2. **The Basic Practice:** A simple breath and body-scan exercise produced by Headspace and based on the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD and Myla Kabat-Zinn, BSN. The purpose of this exercise is non-judgmental self-awareness. This is a foundational exercise for the practice of noticing and mindfulness. This exercise is appropriate for use with staff and with participants. *(6 minutes)*

3. **Feel the Rhythm:** A guide to a kinesthetic exercise for use with participants or staff that involves playing music and finding a rhythm both individually and as a group. The purpose of the exercise is to become present in the moment and demonstrate the value of each individual to the collective group. The exercise was developed by Aly Frei, MN, RN, in partnership with staff and youth at Children's Harbor in Pembroke Pines, Florida. *(5 minutes)*

4. **Rebooting the Mind:** A script and/or recorded exercise in MP3 format developed by Aly Frei, MN, RN, and Chelsea Yamamoto, MA, for use with participants or staff. This exercise engages the listener by comparing the overloaded mind to a computer with too many open windows, in need of a restart. The listener focuses on the movement of breath in and out of the body and the resulting rhythm as a way to "reboot the mind." *(4 minutes)*

5. **My Phone:** A script and/or recorded exercise in MP3 format developed by Aly Frei, MN, RN, for use with participants and staff. The exercise is about noticing how we react to our phones with the goal of increasing our awareness and perspective about their role in our emotional balance. *(5 minutes)*

Other Resources

Learning to Breathe (L2B): A series of four recorded exercises in MP3 format from the evidence-based mindfulness program for teens and young adults developed by Patricia Broderick, PhD. These exercises are focused on improving self-awareness and emotion regulation.

The four following audio-based exercises for use in workshops can be found at https://learning2breathe.org/:

- Body Scan (10:33 minutes)
- Awareness of Thoughts (9:29 minutes)
- Awareness of Feelings (8:12 minutes)
- Kindness Practice (9:29 minutes)

"Six Mindfulness Exercises to Try Today": A handout with content developed by Alfred James, published by Pocket Mindfulness, and presented in an outline style, for those who prefer more flexibility with the language and practice. This group of exercises is focused on being present and in the moment. These exercises can be longer or shorter, as you prefer, and are appropriate for use with staff. https://www.pocketmindfulness.com/6-mindfulness-exercises-you-can-try-today/. Each of the following exercises can be done in 3-10 minutes:

- Mindful breathing
- Mindful observation
- Mindful awareness
- Mindful listening
- Mindful immersion
- Mindful appreciation

TAKE NOTE INTRODUCTION SCRIPT

Introduce Take Note to Youth 3 MIN

Sample language is included in italics in the green callout boxes.

> *We have a strategy called Take Note that we are going to try out in our [program/workshops]. Take Note can help us understand ourselves, notice what we feel, and reduce some of the stress in our lives. This strategy will help us get perspective about the reactions or emotions within us so we have more control and more choice about how we respond when we are upset. This kind of "noticing" or "mindfulness" practice can help us have more compassion, less judgment, and more acceptance for ourselves and others around us.*

Feel free to share this definition of mindfulness by Jon Kabat-Zinn: "paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, with an attitude of nonjudgment, or with an attitude of acceptance."

> *Let's try it! Is that okay with everyone? If you feel uncomfortable at any time, you can Rest and Return (i.e., take a break).*

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

(Ask after completing a Take Note exercise [i.e., Feel the Rhythm] for the first time.)

- *Have any of you ever tried this kind of exercise before?* (discuss)
- *How many of you have heard about noticing or mindfulness?* (discuss)

Great! Some of you have heard about this idea before. Sometimes it's called mindfulness; sometimes it is called meditation. We like to call it Take Note.

TAKE NOTE SAMPLE SCRIPTS

The Basic Practice[1] (Script) 6 MIN

It's okay if you've never done an exercise like this before. These instructions will guide you through each step. Some days these exercises will feel easy. Other days, it might feel difficult. The trick is to try to stay with it, no matter how challenging it feels.

Make sure you're sitting comfortably before you start. We recommend sitting in a chair with your legs and arms uncrossed, feet flat on the floor, and arms resting in your lap or on your legs. Try to keep your back straight but not too tense. That's it. Now you're ready!

All you need to do is sit back, relax, and allow your body and mind to unwind. Take a moment to get comfortable. Please begin with your eyes open. Not staring too intently, just aware of the space around you, and maintaining a soft focus with your eyes. Start off with a couple of big deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. As you're breathing, feel the lungs expand as they fill with air, and as you breathe out, notice how the muscles soften as the body exhales. Then one more time. As you breathe out this time, gently close your eyes and allow your breath to return to its natural rhythm in and out through the nose.

Now take a moment to feel the weight of the body pressing down into the seat beneath you. The feet on the floor, the hands, the arms just resting on the legs. Start to notice any sounds in the space around you, just allowing those sounds to come and go.
(Pause for 5 seconds.)

[1] *Practice adapted from Headspace, a guided mindfulness meditation app for beginners, based on the work of John and Myla Kabat-Zinn.*

Then bring the attention gently back to the body, noticing how the body feels right now. To help with this, start at the top of the head, gently scanning down through the body. Notice what feels comfortable, what feels uncomfortable. Smooth, even, steady, from head to toe. (Pause for 5 seconds.)

As you scan down, start to notice the movement of the breath in the body and how the breath creates a rising and falling sensation. For some people, that's in the stomach; for others it's in the chest or diaphragm. If you can't feel anything, just gently place your hand on your stomach, and notice that movement.

Don't worry if your mind wanders off; that's perfectly normal. As soon as you notice it's wandered, gently bring your attention back to the breath again. (Pause for 25 seconds.)

Start to notice whether the breaths are long, short, deep, or shallow. (Pause for 35 seconds.)

For a few seconds, let go of that focus on the breath and allow the mind to do whatever it wants to do. So, if it's been wanting to think, just let it think now. (Pause for 25 seconds.)

Then bring the attention back to the body again. Coming back to that feeling of weight pressing down, perhaps noticing the sounds around you again. And you can open your eyes in your own time.

Ask yourself how that feels, having taken a few minutes out of the day. Whether there's a greater sense of calm, perhaps clarity. Don't worry about whether there are a lot of thoughts in your head. That's perfectly normal. The mind can change a lot from day to day. But before you jump up, take a moment to sit back and appreciate how it feels to Take Note.

3. Feel the Rhythm (Script) 5 MIN

Note to the facilitator: This exercise may be useful when you don't want the group to become too relaxed, but want to increase focus and work to integrate the right and left hemispheres of the brain. To participate, the youth will listen to the rhythm of the music and then drum a beat on their desk, table, or lap. You can also invite the group to stand, find space on an open wall or counter in the room, and use the wall/counter like a drum (gently, of course). The group may sound chaotic at first, but ideally, the group comes together to create a rhythm in harmony with the music. Then, the music may be turned off and the group can continue their beat together.

Hi everyone, let's try an exercise to increase our focus, to help us think more clearly, and give us some space from things that get in the way of feeling present.

This exercise is about tuning into rhythm. We're going to play music, and you will start by just listening for a beat. Then, as you feel the rhythm, each of you will drum your own beat to the music. You can sit and drum on your lap or stand and drum on the wall—whatever feels right to you. You can have your eyes open or closed as you tap the beat, whichever helps you focus.

This kind of exercise might seem awkward at first, but as we try it, our senses—and the different parts of our brain—have to focus and work together. We engage our senses to listen and both hands to find the rhythm—and that wires the brain in powerful ways.

The point of this exercise is to take a break from the past, avoid thinking about the future, and focus only on the here and now. Finding our beat allows us to be who we are (our unique selves) based on what we feel now—and then contribute to the rhythm of the group as a whole.

To get started, put down anything you are holding, be sure your phones are off, and find a spot to drum. (Give folks a moment to move around, stand against the wall, near a table, or use the back of their chair.)

Everyone ready? (Notice if the group looks ready. If there are distractions [e.g., air blowing on someone] feel free to adjust the situation as needed.)
I'll play the music, and you can follow with your beat after I start mine.

Note to the facilitator: Play music. Wait until a clear rhythm forms (maybe 15-20 seconds) to begin to beat your rhythm. Then participants can follow. Let the group beat for several minutes, finding their rhythm and listening to how it changes over time. At the end, you can ask the participants to keep their rhythm going as you turn down the music (or the song ends). See what happens as they continue their beat together.

See if you can help them come to an end by either guiding them to wind down to a very simple beat and then saying something like "And … cut!" or winding them up to something complex and then saying "Yes!" and applauding, encouraging them to applaud themselves as well. When finished, ask for volunteers to debrief the exercise:

Music can make us feel powerful, calm us down, and bring us clarity. It can bring us to a place of mental focus if we really feel the rhythm. Music can be with us anytime we want.

- *What was it like at the beginning of the exercise?*
- *What did you notice as you kept going?*
- *How did your emotions change from the beginning to the end?*

One of the cool things about this exercise is that we begin to see how we can be totally ourselves and totally connected to each other at the same time. If any one of us were not here, the rhythm would change. At the same time, our beat is our beat, and that is unique to who we are in that moment—no judgment, just acceptance.

Thanks for doing this with me!

4. Rebooting the Mind (Script and MP3) 4:10 MIN

For a link to the MP3 for this exercise, click here.

Note to the facilitator: The language here is a guide, but if there are words or phrases that feel awkward, please say them in your own way.

Hey all, I'm [name]! Thanks for trying this exercise to reduce stress and build mental strength.

This is a chance to increase our ability to focus when it counts and avoid being controlled by thoughts and feelings when we are upset. Practicing this kind of exercise enhances the circuits in the brain and helps us handle relationship or life challenges in positive ways instead of reacting in ways that might make things worse.

To get started, put down anything you are holding, focus your eyes on the floor so you aren't distracted by others, and get comfortable while I explain how stress can affect our minds and our health. Then we'll all give it a try.

Imagine your mind is a computer. It can work fast and efficiently, until we open too many tabs, or ask it to do too many things at once. Then it starts to work slowly. It might get hot or freeze up, and pretty soon, it crashes. Too much stress or anger affects us in the same way.

In order to get the computer functioning again, it needs a reboot. This means you shut everything down, and when you do, you realize (often fairly quickly) which tabs you need to return to and which tabs can stay closed. It is clear which ones were important and which were more like background noise causing extra stress on the system.

(Use an increasingly relaxed, soothing voice, and slow the pace gradually. Pause between phrases so youth have time to experience the moment.)

This exercise is a mental reboot for our brains. We are concentrating on the most basic task needed for survival: breathing. Focusing on the breath quiets the mind and brings clarity.

So, now, take a moment to re-position your body if you need to. Set aside your phone, snacks, whatever it might be. Let your arms and hands rest uncrossed in your lap. Put both feet flat on the floor. Sit so your back is straight, but not tense, and focus your eyes on the floor. Be sure you're comfortable, and when you are ready, take one deep breath.

As you breathe out, you can let your eyes close. Begin to notice the sounds around you, and the sensations within the body. And then, just like restarting your mind, let all the distractions go and focus your attention just on your breath—the way it feels as it passes through your nose.

Let your breath come to its natural rhythm. (Pause for 3 seconds.) *Does the rhythm feel fast or slow? Do the breaths feel shallow or deep?* (Pause for 2 seconds.)

Notice where you feel movement as you breathe.
(Pause for 1 second.)

Just rest your attention on that movement. (Pause for 5 seconds.)

If you find your mind wandering, that's okay. Remember we're not trying to stop thoughts. We're simply allowing them to come and go. Not judging them, just noticing them and allowing them to move on. (Pause for 2 seconds.) *Now gently bring your attention back to the breath again, not breathing in any special way—just following the natural rhythm of the body.*
(Pause for 2 seconds.)

For a moment, let go of the focus on the breath—just let the mind do whatever it wants—no sense of control. Just let the mind be free. (Pause for 6 seconds.)

Then bring the attention back to the body, once again—back to the space around you as you notice any sounds.

In your own time, when you're ready, go ahead and open your eyes. (Pause for 2 seconds.)

(Return to a conversational tone to debrief.)

Do you feel a bit clearer in the mind? Sometimes rebooting makes us anxious at first because we have to process what to let go of and what to keep. But in the end, once we reboot, we feel calmer, clearer, and a lot less stressed. Then, our mind can respond again with clarity, compassion, and a new perspective.

5. My Phone (Script and MP3) 7:15 MIN

For a link to the MP3 for this exercise, click here.

Hello everyone! We're going to do an exercise that actually uses our phones—it's about noticing how we react to them. The goal is to increase our awareness and perspective. To get started, put down anything you are holding, feet flat on the ground, sit up straight, focus your eyes on the floor so you aren't distracted, and get comfortable while we notice our reaction to our phones. You can keep your eyes open for this exercise.

Silently in your head, answer these questions:

- *Where is your phone right now?*
- *How do you feel when you can't find your phone and don't know where it is?*

Let's get some perspective on how the brain responds to the phone and the thoughts and feelings that come up because of our phones.

- *First, take two deep breaths: Inhale ... Exhale.* (Pause.) *Inhale ... Exhale. Focus your mind on your breathing and not on anything else in the room.*
- *Now, gently reach for or take out your phone. But don't try to turn it on or activate the screen yet. (For some phones, the screen lights up just by picking it up. You can click it off if that's the case.)*
  - *What do you notice first as you hold the phone?*
  - *Pay attention to how it feels in your hand. Does it have familiar size, shape, and weight as you hold it? Think of the words you might use to describe the phone. Soft? Heavy? Other words?*
- *Take another inhale ... and exhale.*

- *What emotions, urges, or thoughts are happening right now for you? What is your body's response as you hold your phone?*
  - *Is it harder to stay focused on the exercise? Do you feel a strong urge to turn on the screen, tap an app, or check texts? Is it hard to resist the urge?*
  - *As you notice the influence of the phone on you, what reaction do you have to that awareness?*
  - *Remember: your feelings are never right or wrong. They just are. This is simply an exercise to notice them, not to judge them or change them.*

- *Now, go ahead and turn on your phone and notice how you feel as the screen lights up.*
  - *What is different about how you feel now that your phone is on and you can see the screen? Is the urge stronger to text or check an app? Or do you feel relieved to know what's there?*
  - *Please take a deep breath in … and exhale.*

- *You're not going to actually tap any apps or send any texts right now, but think to yourself:*
  - *If I were going to open an app, which one would it be?*
  - *Why do I want to open that app right now?*
  - *Do I notice a feeling that is making me want to do something with my phone?*

- *If you phone beeps or buzzes, how does the sound or buzz make you feel?*
  - *Stay with that feeling and just be aware of it. How would you describe it?* (Pause for 3 seconds.)
  - *Is it hard not to do something on your phone?* (Pause for 5 seconds.)
  - *How much power does your phone have in this moment over your emotions?* (Pause for 4 seconds.)

Take an inhale and an exhale. Remember, this exercise is only about awareness, not judging yourself or others. The goal isn't to resist technology, but to simply notice how it affects you. The urges, frustrations, worries, or impulses that you have inside you when you hold your phone and what they might mean.

(Pause for 10 seconds).

Bring your attention back to the feeling of the phone in your hand. Take a deep breath in and notice how the breath feels as it moves past your skin and into your lungs.

Now slowly release the breath and exhale.

Our phone can seem like part of our body, part of who we are. Sometimes, it can almost control us—like part of our brain. It's with us in bed, in the bathroom, at the dinner table. Many of us keep our phones close by at all times. Hey, I love my phone too! It makes life better and easier in so many ways.

But, how often is that glowing screen the last thing we say goodnight to and the first thing we tap in the morning? Sometimes I realize I check my phone in the morning before I even check in with myself or those I love. What feelings are inside us causing us to post certain things or hit certain buttons? Are those feelings telling us important information we should notice before we touch our phones?

The beeps and buzzes of our devices can be reminders to take a breath or pause for a second to be sure it's you that's really in control, and not your phone.

Thanks for doing this exercise with me!

Suggested Citation

Frei, A., and Herman-Stahl, M. (2021). Co-Regulation in Practice Series. OPRE Brief #2021-91, Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Self-Regulation Training Approaches and Resources to Improve Staff Capacity for Implementing Healthy Marriage Programs for Youth (SARHM)

The SARHM project was a study that aimed to increase the capacity of practitioners in youth-serving Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE) programs to promote self-regulation development among participants. It is funded through a collaboration between the federal Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) Office of Family Assistance (OFA) and the Office of Planning Research and Evaluation (OPRE) with the aim of further advancing relationship health and self-sufficiency by applying a developmental frame to human services. SARHM translated theory about co-regulation—the interactive process of adult support for youth self-regulation—into practice by developing a set of strategies that aligned with an evidence-informed co-regulation framework. The strategies were developed based on theory and evidence, but have not yet been tested for effectiveness.

As part of a nationwide initiative to promote healthy relationships in adult individuals, couples, and youth, OFA funds comprehensive healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) services. The SARHM project team partnered with two youth-serving HMRE programs to conduct formative, rapid-cycle evaluations to develop and refine co-regulation strategies by pilot testing them, providing data about their implementation, and refining them in the field without changing their curricula. Visit OPRE's website for a detailed final report on SARHM (Baumgartner et al., 2021). A list of additional products, including a guide for practitioners (Frei et al., 2021), a brief describing a preliminary draft co-regulation measure (Alamillo et al., 2021), and additional resources are available on OPRE's website under SARHM.

OPRE HMRF Healthy Marriage & Responsible Fatherhood Public Strategies Mathematica Progress Together