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WHAT IS SELF-REGULATION AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

It's an oversimplification, but still mainly true to say that much of life is about revving up or calming down. To get through a day we need both activity and rest, stimulation and calm—too much of either can make it hard to feel good and get things done. At one extreme a person feels uncontrollably reactive, fidgety or hyperactive and at the other, entirely lacking in spark and motivation. Either extreme can impinge, heartbreakingly, on success and enjoyment of life.

Some people seem blessed with an even keel. They get enthused, but not overly excited, and they relax without becoming lethargic. Others of us who want to be balanced may have to work at it.

Most of us tend to be a little lethargic or a little hyper, and some of us vacillate between the two. We may start the day with caffeine to rev up and end it using alcohol or another depressant to wind down. In any case we don't think much about self-regulation until we're hurting or a loved one complains that we're hard to live with.

Most of the clients who walk through my door want some level of help with self-regulation. These are common complaints:

- Even if I go to bed on time my mind races and I can't sleep.*
- I need to get things done, but just can't motivate myself.*
- My kid is so hyper it's driving me nuts.*
- When something angers me I go from zero to sixty in a flash.*
- I have tons of stuff to catch up on, but keep falling asleep at my desk.*
- My coworkers say I'm too excitable.*
- My spouse says I'm passive and don't contribute.*
- My partner says I get upset over little things and can't let things go.*
- I have every intention of exercising and eating well, and then I pig out on junk food and play video games.*

Whether we're trying to self regulate mood, energy, temper or appetite, the following healthy habits can help:

- 1) Do what it takes to establish a good sleep routine.
- 2) Get fresh air and exercise outdoors, even during the rainy season.
- 3) Cultivate interests that enrich you and add dimension to your life.
- 4) When indoors for long stretches, get out of your chair, stretch your limbs and torso, exercise distance vision by looking out a window.
- 5) Create quiet time with a daily meditation, prayer or mindfulness practice.
- 6) Cultivate your “noble” emotions of compassion and gratitude.
- 7) Keep a daily journal listing things you feel good about.
- 8) Learn to pause, breathe and respond to life in ways you feel good about.
- 9) Depend more on rest, positive attitude, breath, exercise and fresh food. Depend less on sugar, caffeine, processed foods and alcohol.
- 10) Nurture healthy relationships.

These good habits allow the human organism to do what it was designed to do. They help our bodies and brains regulate themselves, making our task of self-regulation a whole lot easier.

Each person is unique and will select and incorporate new healthy habits in their own way. It helps to have the support of a therapist or a friend with similar goals. It delights me when clients put effort into one or two and report several of the others falling into place with relative ease. These are common reports:

- When I take lunchtime walks, it's easier to skip the afternoon sugar and caffeine.*
- When I'm well rested, it's easier to be patient with my kids.*
- When I practice mindfulness I'm less prickly with coworkers.*
- I like myself better when I make time for my art.*
- Walking gives me time to think about my day.*
- I have better dreams after writing in my gratitude journal.*
- Going to book club helps me feel more connected to my own deeper thoughts.*
- When I play with my son he's a happier child.*
- Prayer helps me express gratitude and positive intention and keeps me more positive in general.*
- I'm swimming more and obsessing less over the small stuff.*
- When I really listen and show compassion to my partner, she's more loving with me.*
- Running makes me feel strong and gives me energy for everything else.*

Mental and physical health often restore themselves when given half a chance. Healthy habits like those listed above help create the right conditions for self-regulation and maintaining an even keel. If efforts at self-regulation help a little but you still feel too tired, too wound up, too frightened, too angry, or too impulsive, then your

dysregulation might be based on factors that are more complex. Discussing it with a counselor, therapist, or with your doctor might be the right next step.

For more information see:

<http://www.webmd.com/depression/default.htm>

<http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/news/20141016/more-evidence-that-exercise-may-help-fight-depression>

<http://www.webmd.com/diet/ss/slideshow-healthy-eating-resolutions#>

<http://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/guide/tips-for-reducing-stress>

<http://www.webmd.com/depression/tc/meditation-topic-overview>

<http://www.webmd.com/balance/features/can-prayer-heal>