

A close-up photograph of a woman with long, wavy brown hair and red lipstick, looking down with a gentle smile at a large brown and black dog. The background is a soft-focus green field.

THE PAUSE TECHNIQUE

A Co-Regulation Strategy for Dog Guardians

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What is Emotional Dysregulation?

If we define emotion regulation as managing emotions and maintaining a stable and balanced internal state, it's not difficult to understand what emotional dysregulation means – an impaired ability to regulate emotional reactions.

Canine dysregulation involves an internal process that encompasses three primary steps:

1. An internal or external event (for example, feeling physical pain or encountering a stressor such as a strange dog) provokes a subjective inner experience (emotion);
2. Then a cognitive response (thought/association) is followed by an emotion-related physiological response (for example, an increase in heart rate or hormonal secretion);
3. The process culminates in behaviour that expresses an aroused internal state (fight/flight/freeze), such as defensive or ritualized communicative signals.



What is Emotional Dysregulation?

When dogs are emotionally dysregulated, they tend to overreact to situations where no real danger or threat is present.

They cannot pause, assess an environment, and respond with a healthy coping strategy. Instead, they react quickly out of survival and self-preservation.

This can manifest as defensive or ritualized behaviours such as barking, lunging, and snapping or aggressive behaviours such as biting or other disruptive actions that can lead to conflicts with other individuals.

We can break canine dysregulation down into four components:

1. Increased sensitivity/hypervigilance;
2. Heightened arousal or unstable internal states;
3. A lack of adaptive regulation & coping strategies;
4. A plethora of maladaptive emotion regulation strategies.

So, now that we understand canine dysregulation, how can we help our dogs learn how to regulate their nervous system?

CO-REGULATION
builds resilience



Self-Regulation & Resilience

Self-regulation refers to an individual's capacity to manage emotions effectively, including maintaining, changing, inhibiting, and increasing emotional responsiveness and reactions through various regulatory processes.

Developing self-regulation and building resilience requires effective co-regulation with family members and other significant people in a dog's life. In other words, dogs can learn how to self-regulate by following the example of those around them.

So, before you can expect your dog to self-regulate, you have to ask yourself if you've effectively co-regulated with them to show them how to return to their baseline after arousal.



Defining Resilience

Canine resilience can be defined as responding adaptively to challenges ranging from everyday experiences, such as feeling overwhelmed on walks, to major adversities or traumatic events, such as being attacked.

Dogs who demonstrate increased resiliency can cope better with the demands of the environment, bounce back faster from distressing or traumatic events, and generally have enhanced well-being.

When dogs have to continually adapt or flex because the demands of an environment overwhelm their coping ability, this can result in disequilibrium or instability in their emotional state. Chronic overwhelm leads to impaired resilience and maladaptive coping.

Impaired resilience is the leading determinant of canine dysregulation and mental health issues. Dogs unable to cope with everyday stress are more prone to medical problems, are deeply impacted by stress and live a decreased quality of life.

Helping dogs build resilience is a process that involves repeated and intentional engagement with well-being-enhancing processes. It doesn't just happen. We, as guardians, make it happen through lifestyle choices.

What is Co-Regulation?

One of the well-being-enhancing processes dog guardians can utilize to help their dogs build resilience is co-regulation techniques.

Co-regulation is a mutual process that utilizes the calm, soothing presence of a guardian or caregiver to help regulate the nervous system of another and open up a window of safety between them.

The ability to regulate emotions and arousal is developed primarily through the guardian-dog connection, which begins when your dog comes home and extends well into adulthood.

Co-regulation encompasses a range of responses, such as emitting a warm and soothing presence, using a calm tone of voice, acknowledging distress verbally, demonstrating techniques that can modulate arousal, and establishing a structured environment that fosters emotional and physical safety.

Having a strategy for co-regulation can be a real game-changer for families with dogs experiencing the challenges of canine dysregulation. Through co-regulation with a guardian or caregiver, a dog develops the ability to self-regulate, which also helps to build resiliency to stress.

WHEN YOUR DOG
IS TRIGGERED,
REMEMBER TO
pause.



The Pause Technique

Any time you feel triggered by your dog's behaviour or a circumstance that is too difficult for you, you can remember to PAUSE: Pause. Attune. Understand. Support. Engage.

The Pause Technique is a supportive process between caring guardians and dogs that fosters the development of self-regulatory skills.

The Pause Technique guides guardians through the processes required to pay attention to their feelings and reactions during stressful events or experiences with their dog.

When a dog is already dysregulated and unable to cope with environmental demands, they don't need a heavy hand or correction. They need their guardian or caregiver to help support them back into a baseline of feeling calm, content and connected.

Dogs will not feel safe enough to regulate their nervous system and shut off the survival-based operating system if their caregiver or guardian is distressed, agitated, or angry. You must practice self-regulation to meet your dog's core need to feel safe.

The Pause Technique

There are three broad categories of support that guardians and caregivers can provide to dogs through co-regulation techniques.

1. Become aware of the emotions triggered within themselves during distressing events with their dog.
2. Pay attention to their thoughts and beliefs about their dog's behaviour.
3. Use strategies, like The Pause Technique, to self-calm and respond to their dogs with compassion and empathy.

By expanding these self-regulatory skills, guardians can learn to meet the complex regulatory needs of their dogs. Guardians and dogs alike will benefit from the development of self-regulation abilities.

When a guardian responds calmly to their dog, it helps keep them from escalating into higher states of arousal and distress and models the self-regulation skills we want our dogs to develop.

Let's break The Pause Technique down into each step so you can implement this strategy with your whole family today.

Pause. Take a breath. Notice what is happening and create a space between your dog's reaction and your response to it. This simple pause will interrupt the cycle of dysregulation and bring you back into the present moment.

By staying calm, you can model regulation for your dog and not get caught up in their chaos. Be a mirror for your dog. If you want them to be calm, that starts with you.



Attune. Pay close attention to your body and any physical or mental responses you may have when your dog reacts. Take note of any physiological responses or thoughts, and be mindful of any behaviours you typically exhibit that could contribute to your dog's escalating behaviour.

Before responding to your dog's behaviour, take a moment to connect with yourself and stay in a logical mindset. This will help you understand what your dog is experiencing and allow you to respond appropriately and supportively.



Understand. When your dog is overwhelmed, they don't need a heavy hand or correction; they need you to understand that the environmental demands are exceeding their current level of coping. Instead, try to empathize with their situation and understand that the environment may be too much for them to handle now.

By approaching the situation compassionately, you can figure out how to help your dog become more resilient. Remember that resilience is developed by successfully coping with environmental demands, not by experiencing failure. It's your responsibility to identify their needs, create a safe space to cope and guide them toward building their resilience.



Support. When your dog is dysregulated and “reacting” to a stimulus, they have switched to their survival brain, where responding with logic is next to impossible.

In an already fast-paced and demanding world, your dog might feel like their stress bucket is full, even before you head out on a walk. Reduce unnecessary demands from their daily schedule and support sound sleep, relaxation and diet.

When they encounter a trigger on a walk that exceeds their coping capacity, they need you to guide them back to feeling safe in their baseline operating system.



Engage. Instead of allowing distress to accumulate, help your dog release it through movement. Move in a way that helps to bring your dog's thinking and reasoning brain back online.

Utilize your dog's senses as a grounding mechanism. Relocate away from the trigger to where your dog can sniff and investigate their surroundings. Or find an area where your dog can balance on rocks or fallen trees and maneuver over obstacles.

Facilitate your dog's reconnection with their physical self through movements, breath, and sensory experiences. Be present, calm, empathetic, and encouraging and focus on connecting with your dog to build resilience.



About the Author

Niki Perry holds impressive qualifications as a Registered Professional Canine Counsellor, a Certified Family Dog Mediator, and a Karen Pryor Academy Certified Training Partner.

She is also pursuing a certification in Professional Counselling for humans, aiming to provide families with comprehensive support, healing, and transformation.

The focus of Niki's work is to help those dealing with Canine Dysregulation Syndrome, a common and debilitating condition affecting domesticated dogs and impacting families worldwide.

For more information about how Niki can help you, visit www.nikiperry.ca.

