

Regulation 101:

Tuning Into Your Unique Nervous System

By:

Sam Nesthus, MS, OTR/L

About Me



SAM NESTHUS
OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY FOR WELL-BEING

- Occupational therapist
- Background in pediatrics & sensory integration
- Last 2 years exclusively working with parents
- Mother of 2 young children

You can find me at www.samnesthus.com or contact me directly at sam@samnesthus.com

How I Help Parents

- Understand how their sensory preferences and unique nervous system impacts their day-to-day living
- Improve their self-awareness and tune into their body so they may better recognize and meet their own needs
- Explore proactive and reactive strategies to mitigate stress and feel more regulated
- Make a plan for impactful and sustainable changes towards their personal goals
- Services Offered (in person & virtual):
 - 1:1 consultation & coaching for California residents
 - Monthly Parent Group: Focus on Parent's Well-Being
 - Book Club Series

You can find me at www.samnesthus.com or contact me directly at sam@samnesthus.com

Learning Objectives

- Investigate how regulation plays a part in your daily life
 - Explore your unique body and brain signals so you can tune into your regulatory state throughout the day
 - Review some of the variables that impact your regulation
 - Consider what your own regulatory needs are so you can build sustainable lifestyle routines to support your daily well-being
-
- Grab a pen or open up a notes page and let's get started!

Parenting in Today's World

- Parents are more likely to feel overwhelming levels of stress, to the point where they cannot function (American Psychological Association, 2023)
- Cultural expectations of child behavior
- Judgement for parenting choices
- “Professional” information overload via social media
- Fast-paced family life
- Overscheduling
- Competition & overachievement
- Value of parents as martyrs
- May result in:
 - Burnout
 - Loss of personal identity and/or value
 - High levels of stress
 - Dysregulated family

Additional Stressors

- Sleep struggles (Martin et al., 2019)
- Medication & symptom management
- Management of therapy, specialists, doctor appointments, IEP team, etc.
 - Career choices of parents (Case-Smith, 2004)
 - Financial impact (Case-Smith, 2004)
- Navigating social situations with peers (Dubey et al, 2023)
- Behavior management across environments (Dubey et al, 2023)
- Childcare options and respite (Case-Smith, 2004)
- Sensory and movement needs of child and of parent (Chang et al, 2022; Donaldson et al., 2017)
- Mental load (Dubey et al, 2023) and unpredictability of child (Case-Smith, 2004)
- Mental and physical fatigue (Dubey et al, 2023)
- Difficulty making family decisions (Bar et al., 2023; Case-Smith, 2004)

Meeting the Needs of All Household Members

- What are the child's needs?
 - What are the sibling's needs?
 - What are your partner's needs?
 - What are your needs?
-
- Are these needs similar or different? Do they conflict?
 - Does everyone have a space that meets their needs?
-
- Resource: Winnie Dunn's book "Living Sensationally"

Regulation: Throughout the Lifespan

- If you're a parent, you may have heard of regulation- in regards to children
- Regulation impacts everyone every day

Self- Regulation

- “Self-regulation is what enables us to respond to life’s twists and turns with flexibility and forethought rather than exploding or acting impulsively”
- It is “the intentional control (regulation) of one’s thoughts, emotions, and behaviors”
- It is “our ability to manage how we act and feel”

(Dr. Mona Delahooke, Brain-Body Parenting, pg. 95)

Why do we care about regulation?

- A well-regulated person has improved:
 - Emotional well-being
 - Adaptability to change
 - Access to executive function skills
 - Mental clarity
 - Sleep
 - Digestive system

We are at our best when we are well-regulated.

Co-Regulation

- Using our interactions with our child to help the child become regulated
- How we respond to a child “in order for them to feel safe, calm, and comfortable”
- “Helps a child feel understood, seen, and valued”
- Prioritizing your own regulation needs not only matters for you as a parent, it also enables you to co-regulate with your child

(Dr. Mona Delahooke, Brain-Body Parenting, pg. 98)

Dysregulation Throughout the Lifespan

- “Dysregulation happens when a person does not have the resources to meet the challenge at hand”
 - Greg Santucci, MS, OTR/L
- We all feel dysregulated sometimes!

Stress Response Patterns



Fight – mobilization *towards* the problem or stressor



Flight – mobilization *away* from the problem or stressor



Freeze – immobilization

Stress Response Continuum

- Stress responses are not all-or-nothing
- The intensity can vary from low to high
- Throughout the day, you may be shifting into low or moderate intensity stress responses
- This can impact our behavior or how we react to daily events
- May or may not be aware of this process happening



What Does “Well- Regulated” Feel Like to You?

MY SIGNALS

WELL-REGULATED BRAIN SIGNALS

Settled	Alert	Joyful	Calm
Grounded	Attuned	Ready to Participate	Safe
Open/Curious	Engaged	Grateful	Trusting
Mindful/Present	Accepting	Compassionate	Thoughtful
Socially Connected	Affectionate	Cooperative	Playful
Perseverance	Attentive	Friendly	Engaged
			Other:

MY SIGNALS

WELL-REGULATED BODY SIGNALS

Resting Heart Rate	Wide Range of Facial Expressions
Steady Movements	Comfort with Eye Contact
Coordinated Movements	Wide Range of Vocal Expressions
Slow Breathing	Gastrointestinal System Working
Relaxed Muscles	Other:

Adapted from Unyte-iLS SSP Intake Forms

What Does “Dys- Regulated” Feel Like to You?

Fight or Flight

MY SIGNALS

FIGHT & FLIGHT BRAIN SIGNALS

Frustrated	Uptight	Obsessive	Easily Distracted
Fear or Panic	Stressed	Defensive	Low/No Patience
Impulsive	Confrontational	Rigid Thinking	Need to Control Things
Agitated	Overstimulated	Anger or Rage	Intrusive Thoughts
Irritated	Short Fuse	Anxious/Worried	Pervasive Thoughts
Restless	Hypervigilant	Reactive	Difficulty Focusing
			Easily Offended
			Shame

MY SIGNALS

FIGHT & FLIGHT BODY SIGNALS

Rapid Breathing	Shallow Breathing	Rapid Movements
Loud Voice	Limited Eye Contact	Clumsy
Racing Heart	Limited Facial Expressions	Monotone
Tense Muscles	Gastrointestinal Symptoms	Other:
	Limited Vocal Range	

Adapted from Unyte-iLS SSP Intake Forms

What Does
“Dys-
Regulated”
Feel Like to
You?

Freeze

MY SIGNALS

MY SIGNALS

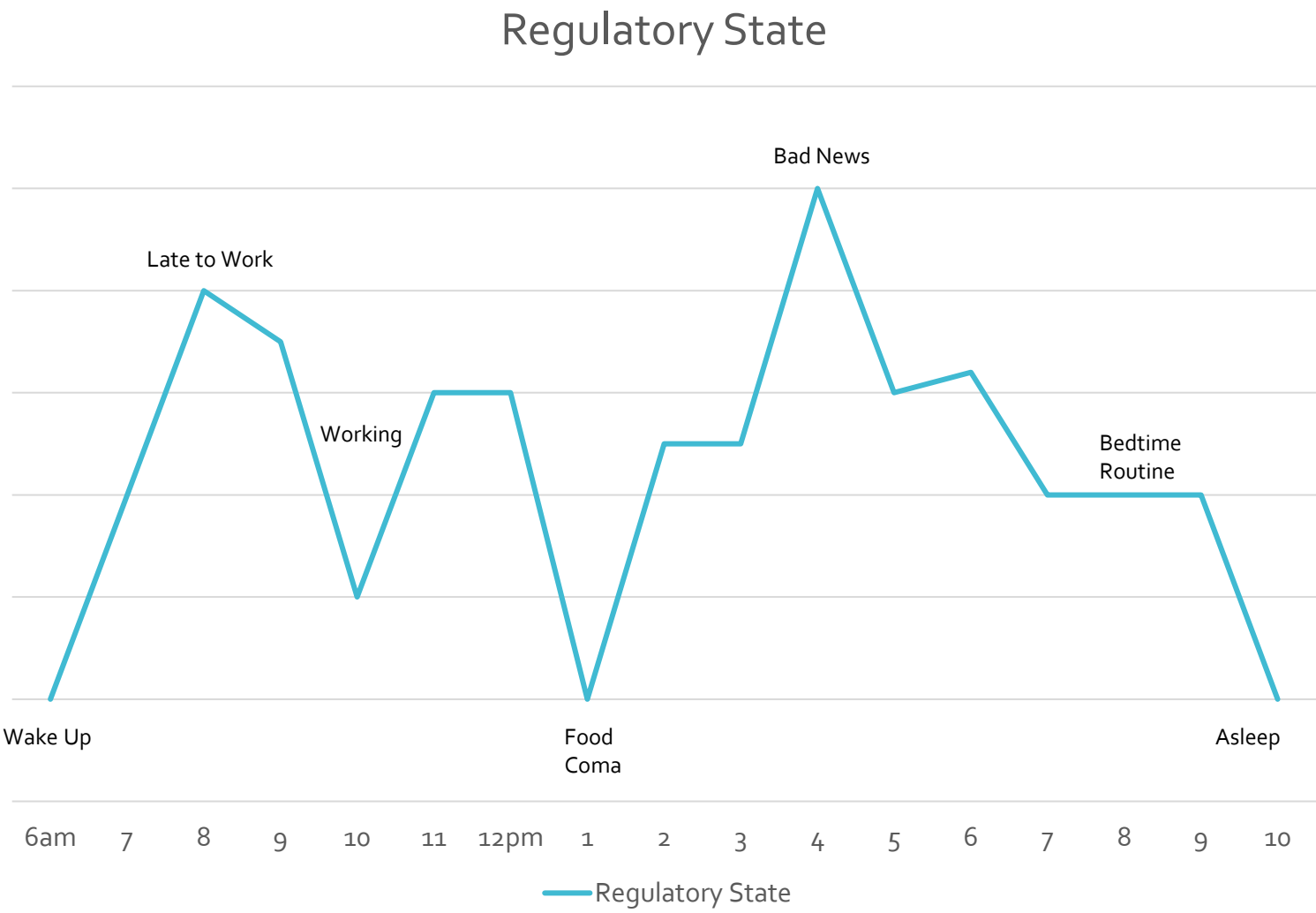
FREEZE BRAIN SIGNALS

Shut Down	Don't Care	Withdrawn	Socially Isolating Self
Shame	Helpless	Disconnected	Feeling Low
Depressed	Stuck	Zoning Out	Avoid Physical Touch
Hopeless	Trapped	Giving Up	Lonely
Numb	Disinterested	Giving In	Avoid Social Contact
Worn Down			Other:

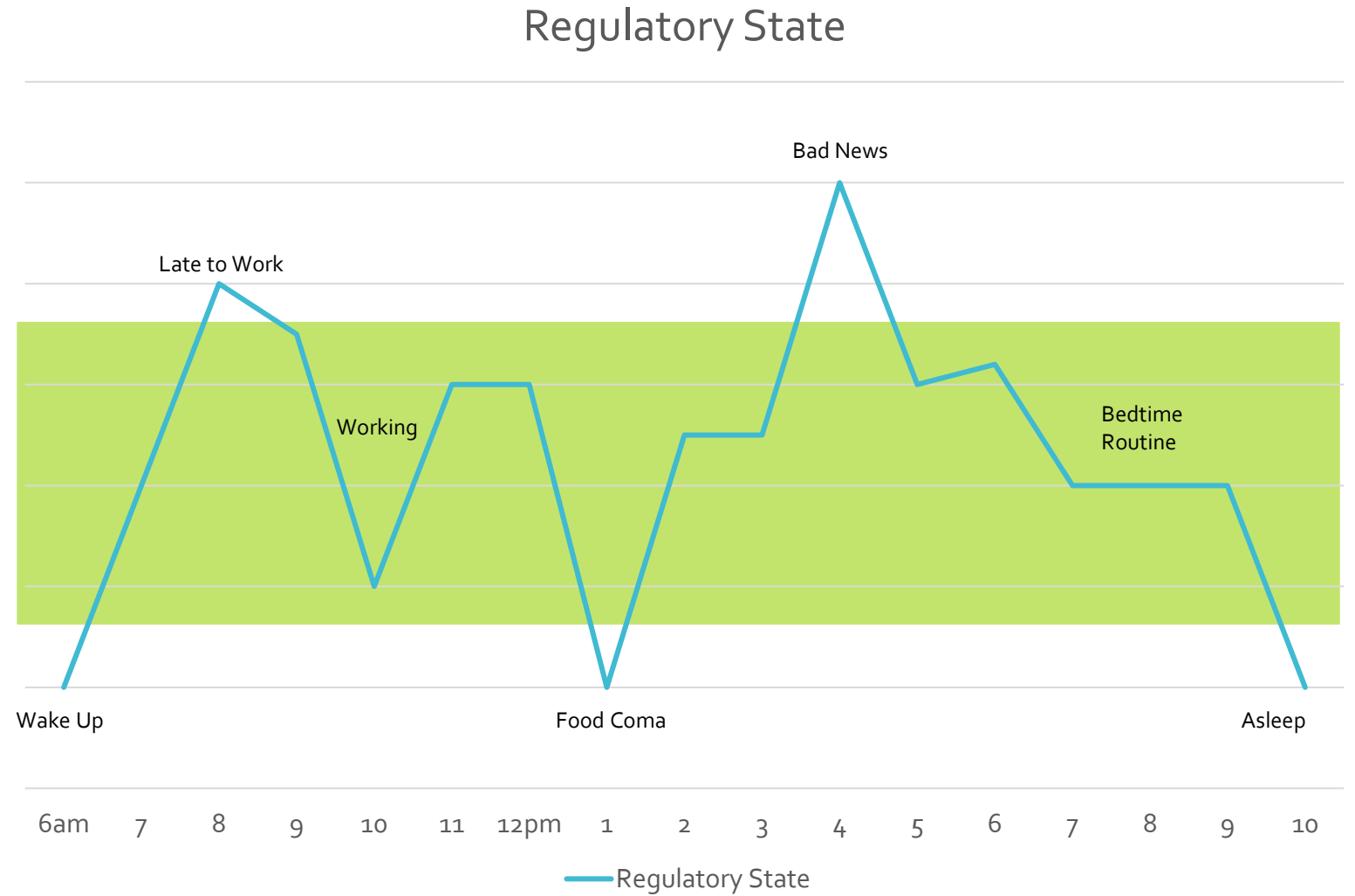
FREEZE BODY SIGNALS

Flat Facial Expression	Physically Feel Heavy
Monotone Voice	Shallow Breathing
Avoid Eye Contact	Sluggish Movements
Energy Depletion	Less Talkative
Silent	Other:

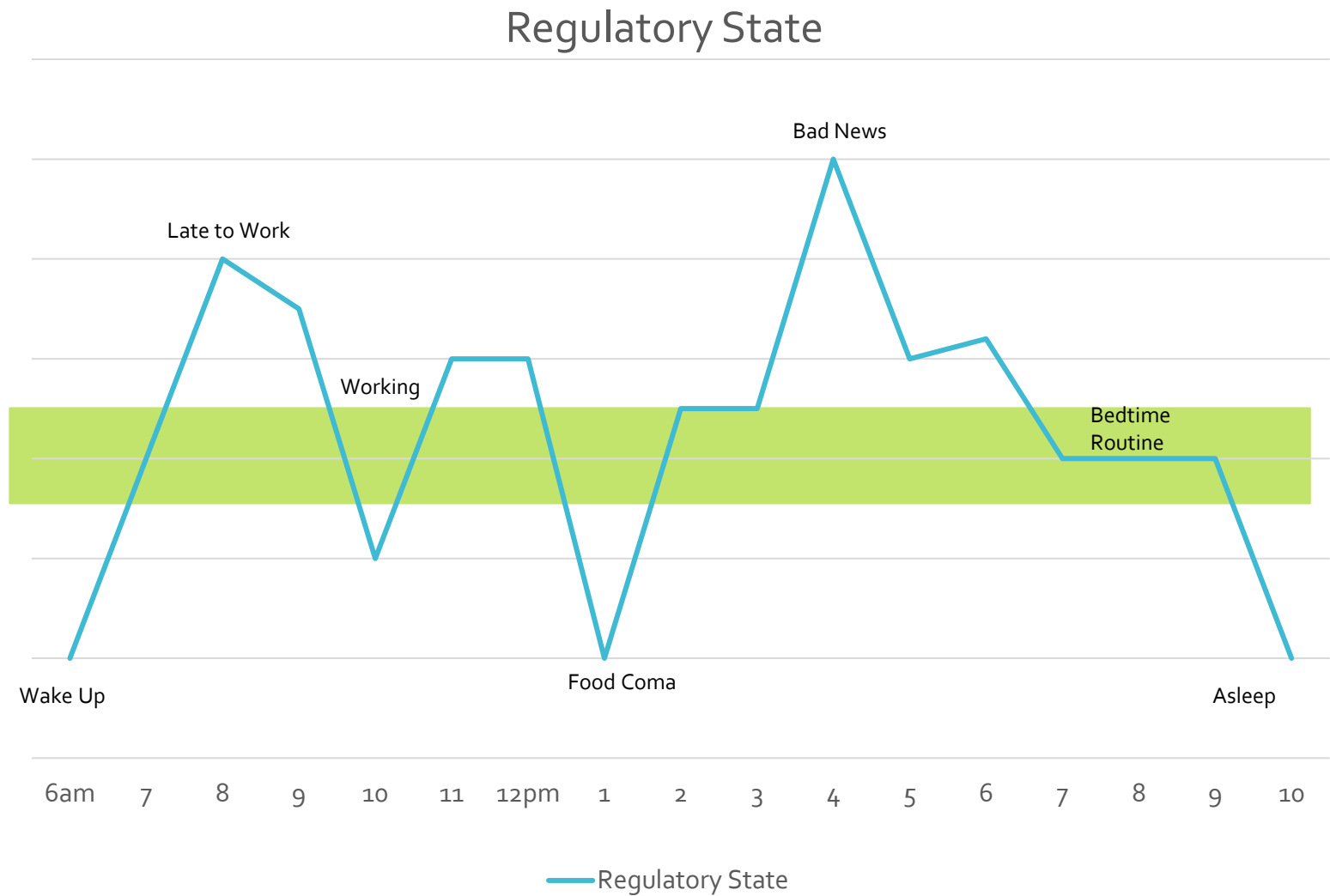
Realistic Expectations



Optimal Range of Regulation



Optimal Range of Regulation



Self-Reflection Activity

Regulatory State

6am 7 8 9 10 11 12pm 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

- How would you “graph” your typical day?
- Are there consistent “high” and “low” points?
- How wide or narrow is your Optimal Range?

What Impacts Regulation?

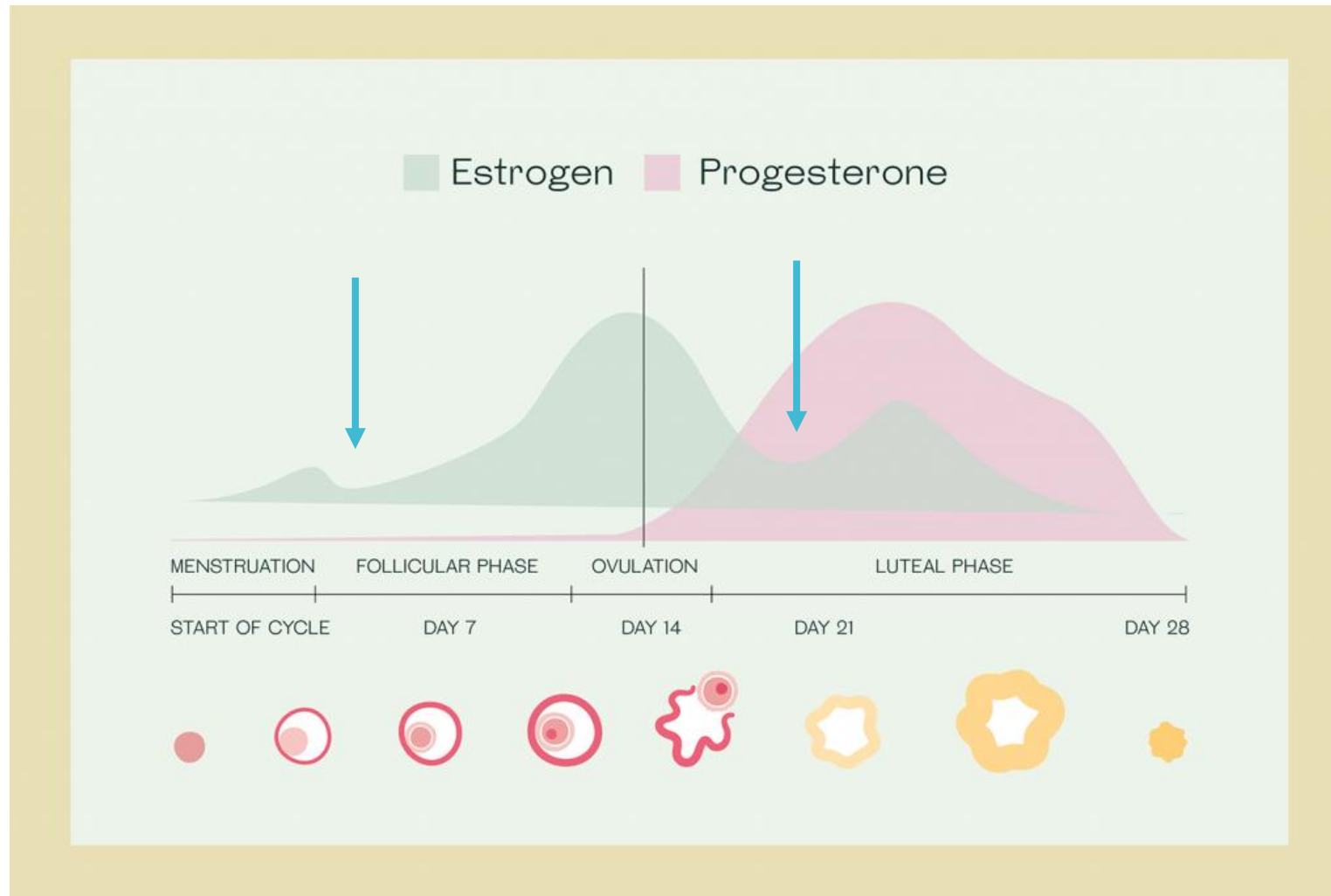
- Basic Needs:
 - Food & Nutrition
 - Movement & Exercise
 - Sleep
- Social Needs:
 - Romantic relationships
 - Friendships
 - Family
 - Community
- Sensory Needs:
 - Sensitivities
 - Cravings
 - Calming sensations

What Impacts Regulation?

- Environment
 - Clutter or organized?
 - Calm or stimulating?
 - Predictable or unpredictable?
- Personal Identity
 - Hobbies, interests, leisure participation
 - Roles – work, family, community
 - What fills your bucket?
- Cultural Factors
 - Social media
 - Percieved & actual expectations
 - Division of labor & mental load

Hormones & Regulation

- Hormone fluctuation can hugely impact your regulation
- ADHD women are more likely to experience Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) and Post Partum Depression (PDD) (Dorani, et al, 2021)
- Menopause & perimenopause
- Note: thyroid disorders symptoms can look very similar to ADHD symptoms- can be helpful to rule out thyroid condition



- Early follicular stage and post-ovulation are often associated with greater ADHD symptoms due to the drop in estrogen levels (Roberts, Eisenlohr-Moul, & Martel, 2017)
- Becoming in tune with the phases of your menstrual cycle and any corresponding symptoms can help you then make lifestyle changes to foster regulation

What Can You Do?

1. Tune into how your brain and body are feeling throughout the day:
 - Begin to understand what brain and body signals are connected to feeling regulated or dysregulated
 - Notice the early warning signs *before* you feel an extreme stress response
2. Determine your regulatory needs:
 - Start making connections between the factors make you feel more regulated, and the factors that throw you out of your optimal zone of regulation
3. Change your routine, your environment, your social relationships, etc. to that you can meet your regulatory needs

Questions to Ask Yourself

- Am I within my optimal zone of regulation?
- If not, am I in fight-or-flight (mobilization) or freeze (immobilization)
- What brain or body signals help me to identify my regulatory state right now?
- What signals might have I ignored that were early warning signs before this point?
- When dysregulated: what resource(s) am I currently lacking??
- How can I give myself what I need on a regular basis to support my baseline regulation?

Choose Your Top 3 Variables

I feel at my best when I...

1.

2.

3.

Make the Change

Strategies to make it stick:

- Tackle *one* thing at a time
- Be as specific as you can
- Time block: put it on the schedule/calendar (so you don't fill in something else!)
- Set an alarm
- Create a visual reminder
- Systematize it
- Anticipate barriers
- Communicate with your partner or support system
- Stack it to a habit or routine already in place

Examples of Self-Care Intentions

- I will sit down to eat at least twice per day, when my kids are eating.
- I will meet a friend for coffee on Thursday mornings after drop off.
- I will go for a walk by myself on Saturday mornings. My partner will handle breakfast while I walk.
- I will block off Friday from 12-1pm to review next week's schedule.
- I will attend the Local Gardener meeting the second Tuesday of every month.

Questions? Comments?

References

American Psychological Association. (2023). Stress in America™ 2023: A nation grappling with psychological impacts of collective trauma [Press release]. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2023/11/psychological-impacts-collective-trauma>

Delahooke, M. (2022). *Brain-Body Parenting*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Bar, S., Stephens, S.B., Mathew, M.S., Messiah, S. E., & Bordes Edgar, V. (2023). Quality of life among caregivers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: A cross sectional study [Abstract]. *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders*, 54, 4208-4215. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-023-06129-w>

Martin, C. A., Papadopoulos, N., Chelley, N., Rinehart, N. J., & Sciberras, E. (2019). Associations between parenting stress, parent mental health and child sleep problems for children with ADHD and ASD: Systematic review [Abstract]. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2019.103463>.

Case-Smith, J. (2004). Parenting a child with a chronic medical condition. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 58(5), 551–560. <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.58.5.551>

Chang, M. C., Worley, L., & Blanche, E. (2022). Influence of sensory processing patterns on stress and sleep among parents of children with autism [Abstract]. *American Journal of Occupational Therapy*, 76, (Suppl. 1). <https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2022.76S1PO141>

Donaldson, C. K., Stauder, J. E. A., & Donkers, F. C. L. (2017). Increased sensory processing atypicalities in parents of multiplex ASD families versus typically developing and simplex ASD families. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 47, 535–548. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2888-0>

Dubey, M. J., Ray, P., Ghosh, R., Bhattacharyya, A. K., Dhor, P., Chatterjee, S., Chatterjee, S., Dubey, S., Mitchell, A. J., & Benito-León, J. (2023). Health-related quality of life and perceived stress of informal caregivers of children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities and ADHD. *Neurology Perspectives*, 3(2). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neurop.2023.100120>

Dunn, W. (2008). *Living Sentionally*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Dorani, F., Bijlenga, D., Beekman, A. T. F., van Someren, E. J. W., & Kooij, J. J. S. (2021). Prevalence of hormone-related mood disorder symptoms in women with ADHD. *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, 133, 10-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2020.12.005>

Roberts B., Eisenlohr-Moul T., & Martel, M.M. (2017). Reproductive steroids and ADHD symptoms across the menstrual cycle. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 88, 105-114. doi: 10.1016/j.psyneuen.2017.11.015

Santucci, G. (2024). *Regulation is Contagious: Strategies to Validate Sensory Needs, Create Sensory Safe Environments, and Prevent Power Struggles*. [Online Course]. PESI.