

Co-Regulation Exercises for Couples

Polyvagal-Informed Practices for Building Safety Together

Co-regulation is the process by which one partner's nervous system helps calm and stabilize the other's. These exercises are designed to help you and your partner practice co-regulation outside of moments of conflict, building the neural pathways that become available when things get harder.

Tips:

- Start with the exercises that feel most accessible.
- Practice in calm moments.
- Start small - even five minutes of intentional connection can be meaningful.

1. Co-Regulation through Eye Contact

Sit facing each other in a comfortable position. Gently gaze into each other's eyes without speaking for 1–3 minutes. Focus on maintaining a calm, relaxed presence. Allow emotions to surface without judgment.

Tip: If either partner feels uncomfortable, take a break and try again later. Discomfort is information, not failure.

Why this helps: Activates the social engagement system and builds non-verbal attunement between partners.

2. Rhythmic Breathing

Sit or lie down comfortably and hold hands. Synchronize your breathing: inhale deeply through your nose for a count of four, hold for a count of four, and exhale slowly through your mouth for a count of six. Repeat together for 5–10 minutes.

Tip: You can enhance this exercise by adding a gentle hum on the exhale, which stimulates the vagus nerve.

Why this helps: Activates the ventral vagal pathway, promoting a shared state of calm and safety.

3. Grounding Together

When either partner feels overwhelmed, practice this grounding exercise together. Sit close, touch hands, and take turns describing three things you can see, three things you can hear, and three things you can feel — both physically and emotionally.

Why this helps: Helps both partners stay present and connected during moments of tension, reducing anxiety and returning both nervous systems to the present moment.

4. Humming Together

Sit or lie down next to each other. Choose a soothing sound or hum — such as “Om” or a simple, calming melody — and hum it together for a few minutes. Feel the vibration in your own body and notice how it resonates with your partner’s. You can also take turns humming while the other listens and matches, creating a shared rhythm.

Why this helps: Stimulates the vagus nerve, calms the nervous system, and creates felt connection through shared vibration and sound.

5. Partnered Gentle Touch

Use light, intentional touch — such as slowly stroking your partner’s arm, hand, or shoulders. Maintain soft eye contact and communicate openly about comfort levels. You can also take turns giving each other a gentle hand, foot, or shoulder massage using slow, soothing strokes. Focus on being fully present with each other.

Why this helps: Engages the vagus nerve through physical connection, reduces cortisol, and promotes felt safety between partners.

6. Shared Gratitude Practice

Take turns sharing three things you appreciate about each other, focusing on specific qualities, behaviors, or moments. As you listen, maintain a warm tone and supportive body language. Let yourself receive what your partner is offering.

Why this helps: Activates the parasympathetic system and strengthens emotional bonds through intentional positive regard.

7. Co-Regulation Walk

Take a slow walk together in a quiet, calming environment. Match your pace and breathing. Hold hands if comfortable. Focus on being present with each other and your surroundings rather than problem-solving or planning.

Why this helps: Encourages connection through movement, rhythm synchronization, and shared sensory experience.

8. Safe Haven Visualization

Sit together and close your eyes. Take turns describing a place that feels safe and calming to you — real or imagined. Describe what you see, hear, smell, and feel in that place. Then visualize being in that place together, creating a shared internal landscape of safety.

Why this helps: Reinforces the feeling of safety and belonging with your partner, and builds a shared resource you can return to during difficult moments.

9. Heart to Heart Breathing

Sit facing each other and place your hands gently on each other's heart area. Begin breathing deeply together, aiming to synchronize your inhales and exhales. Focus on the sensation of your partner's heartbeat and breathing rhythm beneath your hand, allowing a sense of attunement to develop between you.

Why this helps: Promotes co-regulation and physiological safety by synchronizing two nervous systems through breath and touch.

These exercises are most effective when practiced regularly in calm moments. Over time, the patterns you build together in safety become available during moments of stress.

If you'd like support integrating these practices into your relationship, or if you're interested in couples therapy that works with the nervous system, we're here to help.