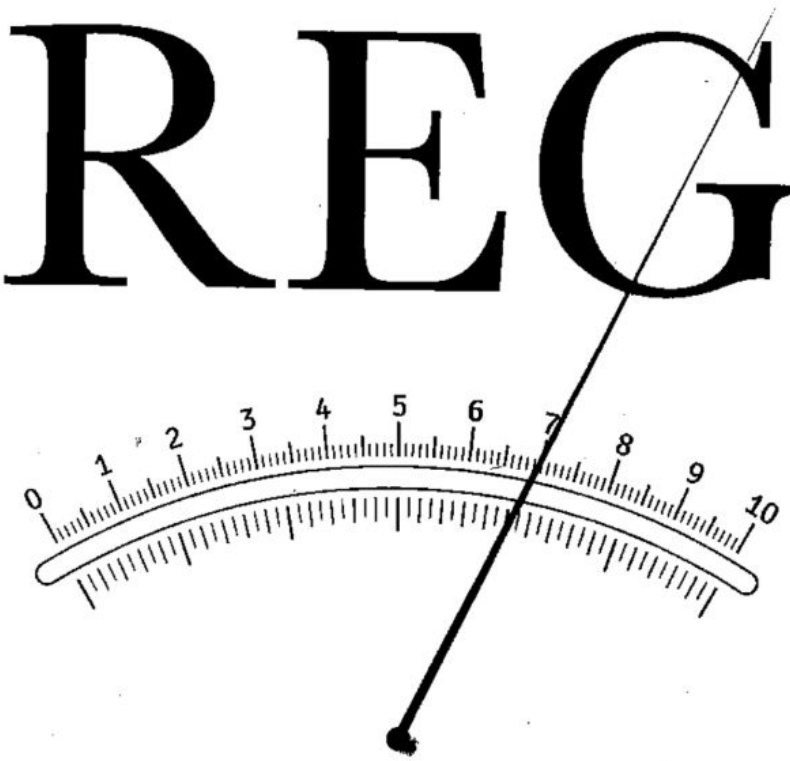
SELF-REG



How to Help Your Child (and You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life

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with Teresa Barker

ONE

The Power of Self-Reg

Try harder!

You hear it all the time. You say it yourself. Have more willpower, more self-control over what you eat, or drink, or say to your boss, or do in your free time. You need to exercise. Control your spending. Resist the endless temptations out there, and if you fail—when you fail!—try harder.

That's the message we get constantly, and so much of the conversation about helping our kids succeed focuses on the same thing. But for them as for so many of us, it seems that the harder we try, the harder it is to impose self-control and the more distant the goal becomes. We berate ourselves for being weak. Children do the same thing, and the self-blame and shame work against every good thing we hope for them in school and life.

New advances in neuroscience are unlocking the secrets of why we behave the way we do and, more to the point, why it is so hard at times to behave the way we want. These same advances are also telling us how to change our behavior and that self-control has little to do with

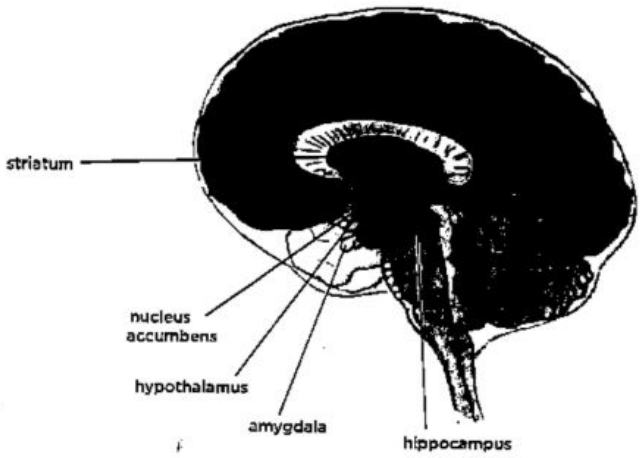
the solution. In fact, research now shows that the more we focus on self-control and the harder we push for it, the harder self-control and positive behavioral change can become.

Don't get me wrong: Self-control is important. We're all aware of individuals who have risen to the top of their field who are models of self-control. But much more fundamental is the stress load that we're under and how well we deal with this: how well we *self-regulate*. In fact, the closer you look at these "success stories," the more you'll see that what really sets them apart is their remarkable ability to self-regulate.

The more aware we are of when we're becoming overstressed, and know how to break this cycle, the better we self-regulate: in other words, manage the myriad stresses in our lives. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) reacts to stress with metabolic processes that consume energy and then sets in motion compensating processes that promote recovery and growth. The greater our stress load, the more constrained this recovery process, and as a result, the fewer our resources to exercise self-control and the more intense our impulses become. Once you understand the brain's natural response to stress and practice Self-Reg, the very need to impose self-control often disappears.

Advances in Neuroscience Upend Stubborn Myths About the Roots of Behavior

The association between poor self-control and weakness is the most punishing aspect of a remarkably ancient outlook that viewed self-control as a matter of strength and character. That idea has held sway for thousands of years. Being judged as having poor self-control has been the source of untold guilt and personal recrimination. Modern science tells us that this outlook isn't just archaic; it is fundamentally flawed.



The Limbic System

One of the big modern breakthroughs in the science of self-regulation was the discovery of the operation of the limbic system, what Joseph LeDoux called the "emotional brain." This subcortical complex lies below the *prefrontal cortex* (PFC), and its main structures are the *amygdala*, *hippocampus*, *hypothalamus*, and *striatum*. The limbic system, and in particular the amygdala and nucleus accumbens (in the ventral striatum), is the source of our strong emotions and urges. It plays a critical role in the formation of memories and the emotional associations that get attached to those memories—positive as well as negative. Love, desire, fear, shame, anger, and trauma share a neurological home base here.

In times past it was initially tempting to see the brain's functioning as a kind of hierarchy in which "higher" executive systems in the PFC rule over and control the urges coming from the "lower" limbic system. The idea was that when we give in to desires, it is because our PFC is too weak to inhibit the strong impulses emanating from the limbic system. The ancient and unchallenged idea of willpower and self-control as a kind of mental muscle fit right into this view. Just as in Socrates' day, the remedy, it was thought, was to strengthen the executive systems for self-control much as you'd strengthen a muscle, through rigorous practice and discipline. In that paradigm the exercise

of self-denial—resisting temptation and "base" impulses—becomes a kind of bench press for self-control.

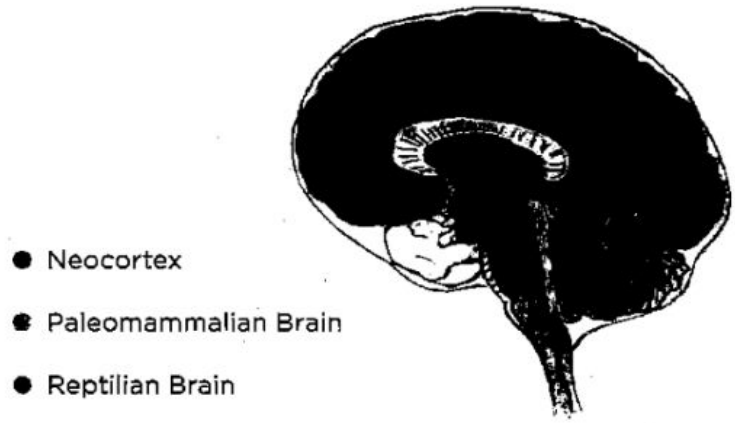
However, advances in brain science in the past two decades reveal a strikingly different picture. The capacity of the prefrontal cortex to play a rational, inhibitory role—for example, by weighing the value of an immediate reward against a long-term gain or cost—is significantly reduced when someone's stress load is excessive. Especially important here is the hypothalamus, which is viewed as the brain's "master control system" because of the critical role it plays in the regulation of an extraordinary number of systems: the immune system, body temperature, hunger, thirst, fatigue, circadian rhythms, heart rate and breathing, digestion, metabolism, cellular repair, and even important aspects of hearing, speaking, "mindreading" other people's social and emotional cues, parenting, and attachment behaviors. All of these different functions are tied to the brain's most primitive response to anything from relatively minor stressors to full-on threats—or at least what our limbic system "decides" is a threat. When we can calm that response, we begin to bring all the other self-regulation processes into sync.

Self-control is important but not the central organizing feature of a strong, healthy mind and life success. Self-regulation is.

Three-Part Harmony: The Triune Brain

In the 1960s Paul MacLean, a neuroscientist at Yale, developed a theoretical model of the brain that remains highly instructive. According to his "triune" model, we actually have three distinct brains, each of which evolved at a different time in our evolutionary past and which are layered on top of one another. On top and at the front is, as its name suggests, the "newest" brain, the *neocortex*. It supports higher-order functions like language, thinking, mindreading emotional cues, and self-control. Underneath this is a much older, paleomammalian brain, which houses the limbic system and strong emotional associa-

tions and urges. And at the very bottom is the oldest and most primitive, so-called reptilian brain, which works closely with the limbic system to regulate our arousal and alertness.



The Triune Brain

MacLean's model is now seen as an oversimplification, yet it is helpful in understanding the neurophysiological difference between self-control and self-regulation. For self-control is very much a neocortical phenomenon, supported by a small number of systems in the PFC, while self-regulation operates on systems deep in the mammalian and reptilian brains: systems that are not only activated independent of, and even prior to, prefrontal functions but can also seriously constrain the operation of those prefrontal systems.

The Vigilant Brain: Wired to Protect and Defend Around the Clock

The hypothalamus oversees our internal milieu, making sure, for example, that our body temperature is close to 98.6 degrees, that we have the right amount of sodium and glucose in the bloodstream, that during sleep some systems rest and recover while others make repairs and promote healing. If the temperature outside suddenly drops, the hypo-

thalamus triggers a metabolic response to generate body heat: Our breathing and heart rate go up, we shiver, our teeth chatter. All of these processes consume a considerable amount of energy.

The cold outside is a classic example of an environmental stressor that the ANS monitors and reacts to. If there are too many of these external "costs," on top of the usual emotional, social, and cognitive stressors, the limbic system can become hypersensitive to the slightest hint of danger. It registers something as a threat before the PFC has a chance to decide whether or not it really is one, tripping an alarm—something like a car alarm triggered by movement or vibration—that causes the release of neurochemicals for dealing with danger: fight-or-flight mode. If that doesn't work, the brain resorts to freeze—akin to the "play dead" behavior of some animals when threatened. The most ancient part of the triune brain, the so-called reptilian brain, responds to the danger by releasing *adrenaline* and setting in play a complex neurochemical chain that results in the release of *cortisol*.

These neurochemicals raise heart rate, blood pressure, and the rate of breathing to deliver glucose and oxygen to the major muscles (the lungs, throat, and nose all open). Energy surges. Fat is metabolized from fatty cells and glucose from the liver. Alertness and reactivity increase: Pupils dilate, hair stands on end (which allowed our hominin ancestors to appear larger and more formidable), sweat glands open as part of a cooling mechanism, and endorphins are released, increasing pain tolerance. This is just what you need in a dire situation that demands a quick response: fight or flee.

This alarm system is very primitive, at least in terms of contemporary life. As far as it's concerned, there's no difference between a real enemy and the pretend enemy of, say, an online role-playing game: Both trigger the release of adrenaline. These systems were designed for reptiles and mammals in the wild and cannot judge the severity of a threat or how long that threat might persist. The alarm stays on and the system remains in a state of fight or flight, pumping out stress hormones, which, in excess, can disrupt normal functioning of organs

and organ systems and even cause cellular damage in parts of the developing brain.

In order to have enough energy for this continual heightened stress response, our hypothalamus shuts down whatever functions consume energy but are not necessary for survival in this perilous moment: nature's way to channel maximum energy to systems needed to deal with the threat at hand. The list of these nonessential functions that get slowed or shut down is quite extraordinary and the fundamental key to why it is so hard to exercise self-control when we most need to.

Fight or Flight Diverts Energy, Drains Reserves

In a fight-or-flight response energy is diverted from systems considered nonessential in emergency mode, such as digestion. The sluggishness you feel after a big meal is a reflection of how much energy digestion requires—roughly 15 percent to 20 percent of the body's total energy, the same amount the brain requires for the day-to-day job of keeping everything running. Digestion takes anywhere from four hours to a couple of days and is "energy expensive" because it takes a lot to produce the right chemical balance in the stomach to digest food and to produce the enzymes that will break down and distribute the nutrients throughout the body. Some of the other metabolic functions that are slowed down or suspended under stress include the immune system, cellular repair and growth, blood flow to the capillaries (so you're less likely to bleed to death if you get wounded), and reproduction.

You might wonder what any of this could possibly have to do with your losing your temper or eating that extra slice of cake you intended to leave on the plate, or with your child's tantrums, meltdowns, or math anxiety. The answer lies in the effect of fight or flight on our rational, inhibitory functions supported by the PFC.

Think of a time you've been absolutely furious with your eight-year-old for doing the thing you've told her a thousand times not to do. How well were you able to speak, let alone think? We tend to splutter when we're in a rage because when the mammalian and reptilian brains are running the show, the left side of our PFC has been sidelined. We lose all of those wonderful higher-order functions served by the PFC: language, reflective thinking, mindreading, empathy, and, of course, self-control!

Fascinating discoveries are being made by molecular biologists about the functions that get turned off in fight or flight. For example, sudden, pitched stress affects the muscles in the middle ear, reducing the child's ability to process speech and amping up his hearing attuned to low-frequency sounds. That makes eminent sense for the mammalian and reptilian brains: Those low-frequency sounds might be signs of a predator lurking in the bushes. But for us it explains why our distressed or distracted child appears to be ignoring us unless we stand right over him. And if we're standing right over him, chances are our tone of voice and body language are perceived as all the more threatening.

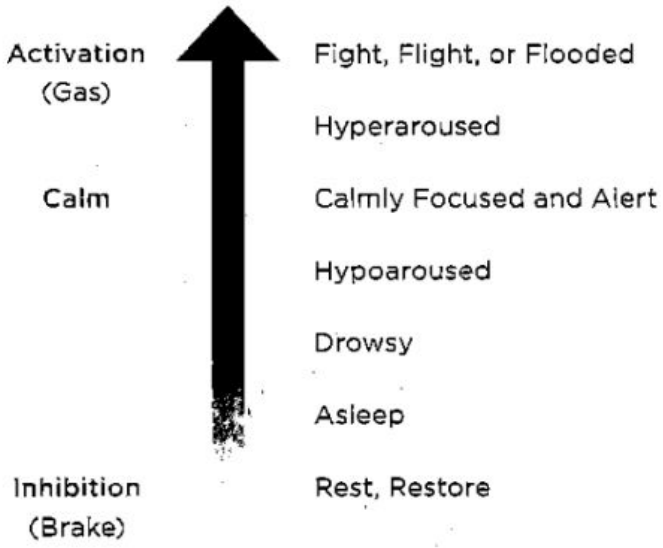
In fight or flight our modern, language-based social brain is put on hold and we instantly regress to what is in essence an ancient, pre-social, prelinguistic state in which the primitive survival mechanisms of a cornered animal are called into play.

Self-Regulation: How the Brain Balances Arousal and Arousal Regulation

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) regulates transitions between arousal states, from being sound asleep, our lowest state of arousal, to the highest, full-out flooded state, which you see in a child having a temper tantrum.

Arousal regulation is a function of the complementary forces of sympathetic nervous system (SNS) *activation*, which makes us more aroused, and parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) *inhibition*, which slows everything down: in effect, the brain's way of putting its foot on the gas pedal or the brakes. How much activation or recovery is necessary for any particular task varies from situation to situation and, of course, depends on our reserves. All day every day we are shifting up and down this arousal scale. As arousal goes up, energy consumption naturally does as well; as arousal goes down, we restore our reserves.

Self-Regulation Arousal States



The more stress a child is under, the harder his brain finds it to manage these transitions. The recovery function begins to lose its resilience and the child can become "stuck" in hypo- or hyperarousal. Think, for example, of the child who finds it hard to get going or is always on the go and finds it hard to sit still.

Maybe most serious of all is when the fight-or-flight response becomes "kindled," or sensitized, making the child much more easily and repeatedly startled. When this happens, the child pulls away from

us. Parents tend to experience this behavior as a sort of rejection, but, in fact, it is the function of a different kind of brain hierarchy—a series of natural biological responses to threat:

1. Social engagement
2. Fight or flight (sympathetic arousal)
3. Freeze (parasympathetic arousal)
4. Dissociation (the "out-of-body" state in which subjects report looking at what is happening to them as if it were happening to someone else)

This hierarchy of stress responses reflects MacLean's triune model of the brain, from the "newest" brain system in the PFC, social engagement, to ancient mechanisms for responding to threat. When social engagement is not available or sufficient, the brain shifts to fight or flight. In this state social interaction is not only eschewed but can become a stressor in its own right, i.e., the child flees from or fights with us, even when we are exactly the resource he most needs. If the danger persists, the brain shifts to "freeze" to marshal its dwindling energy reserves for one last push for survival. The last stage, dissociation, is more of a mechanism to reduce psychic and physical pain than a survival mechanism.

In chronic hypo- or hyperarousal there is a major shift from what is called the "learning brain" to the "survival brain." The child has enormous difficulty attending to and processing what is going on around or indeed inside him. He is now highly susceptible to "shutting down," impulsivity, and/or aggression (against himself as well as others). Children who are chronically zoned out or hyperactive are not somehow "weak" or simply *not trying hard enough*; they are experiencing too much stress.

Children cannot be forced to "calm down," and threatening to punish them if they don't can add considerably to the stress they're already under. They aren't *choosing* to be hypo- or hyperaroused any

more than they can choose to calm down when they don't know how. Self-Reg gives them the tools and skills to do that.

At War with Ourselves: The High Cost of the Battle Within

A chronic state of heightened arousal makes the limbic alarm so sensitive to stress that it takes very little to set it off. Perception itself changes as the system becomes primed to look for threats, even where they are nonexistent. In experiments it is remarkable to see how when children are chronically hypo- or hyperaroused, they are much more likely to label neutral pictures of actors' faces as hostile.

This makes perfect evolutionary sense in a dangerous environment. The problem is that the more the alarm goes off, the more it is primed, or kindled, to go off again. Unfortunately, alarms are triggered way too often and way too easily, to the point where we no longer even notice when this is happening.

Consider your typical workday: Your alarm clock goes off (there's a reason why this common household device goes by that name), jerking you into a sudden state of hyperarousal, especially if you haven't been getting enough sleep or slept poorly the night before. You have to rush your children through their morning routines, drive them to school, and then commute to work, dealing with crowds, traffic, noise, and delays. Your stress load is high even before your workday has begun.

Maybe a midmorning coffee and doughnut calms you. There are physiological reasons why such a treat is soothing, including positive emotional associations. But maybe your need for treats is getting out of control and you're feeling guilty when you indulge, so you start to resist. Just fighting these urges can put you into a state of fight or flight, and being angry with yourself afterward—once your PFC has come back online—for your lack of self-control makes you that much

more vulnerable to tripping into the fight-or-flight cycle you know and dread.

The 2,500-year-old idea that we experience a sort of "war" between our executive functions and our impulses turns out to be the perfect metaphor for the state we're in when we berate ourselves for our lack of self-control. The idea behind self-control is that if you can develop the "muscle" (grit, determination, self-discipline) to win this war, this carries over to things like suppressing the impulse to give up when the going gets tough—with your child, your partner, your work. You are basically learning how to deal with a feeling of discomfort without "giving in" to it. But, then, the cost of war is always high and in this case takes a heavy toll on our energy reserves.

This toll *will* eventually be felt, if not in the moment, then later, in an even more uncontrolled bout of negative emotions or self-gratification, or some deeper problem in our physical or mental health or emotional well-being. In fact, scientists have shown that increasing the stress on subjects *increases* the potency of their impulses and *reduces* their self-control. Rather than ignore these feelings, Self-Reg teaches us to recognize them as signs that our stress is far too high—our alarm system is stuck in the "on" mode—and what we really need to learn is how to turn it off.

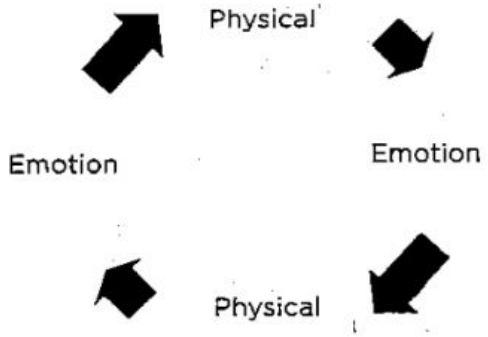
The Stress Cycle: When Colliding Stressors Kick the System into Overdrive

The point of Self-Reg isn't to label a response or a behavior as something you must resist or control. The question we always need to ask ourselves isn't "Why can't I control this urge?" It's "Why am I having

this urge—*why now*?" That's where Self-Reg becomes a powerful tool for positive and lasting change.

It's not just cravings we are talking about here. It might be a constant worry or, for that matter, something unspecific: a general sense of dread or simmering anger, an intrusive thought, or a dark outlook. The list goes on and on: strong associations that trigger arousal—a sudden fight-or-flight or freeze response, sudden impulses, powerful emotions, strong needs.

But arousal isn't the enemy. We depend on it when we need to transition from asleep to awake, from daydreaming to attentive, from play to work. A child needs it to learn. It is normal and healthy to *up-regulate*, to cycle through those transitions that require an uptick in energy. We normally move through a number of such cycles in an ordinary day. Up-regulating and the cyclical nature of it reflect purely biological states, having nothing to do with "bad" or "good" behavior.



The Physical/Emotion Nexus

It's when the cycle gets *stuck in overdrive* and we can't "downshift" that we need to intercede, need to break a "stress cycle" that is spinning out of control:

I'll add more elements to the stress cycle, but we'll start with this simple version, which shows us how the physical and emotional elements of a cycle are interlocked and mutually reinforcing.

For example, the tingling or painful feelings associated with adrenaline can trigger an emotional association, a sudden sense of fear or worry. But equally, feeling a sudden fear or worry can trigger an uncomfortable physical sensation. When stress is chronic, the adrenaline response continues too. The effort of trying to forcibly stop the cycle through an act of self-control can leave us even more out of control as both the physical and emotional arousal responses intensify one another and further deplete our already depleted resources for responding. Bursts of impulsivity are so often seen as moments of weakness when they are actually signs of this physiological chain of events: the different regulating processes that are activated or deactivated.

Rather than insisting that we must exert greater self-control to restrain ourselves from acting on our impulses, Self-Reg teaches us how to recognize the source of the impulse and interrupt the cycle. Often just recognizing the powerful link between the emotional and the physical is enough to make a serious start on this.

Cars come equipped with a dashboard message system that alerts us when our engine is running hot, when fluids are low, or when the fuel supply is down to the reserve tank. We don't have such a system. There's no gauge to tell us when we've become stuck in a stress cycle that is rapidly draining our fuel tank *and* overheating our engine. *Negative feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are those signals.* They tell us when we're overstressed and running on empty.

This is especially important for regulating our children. The problem is that children and even teens find it very hard to articulate what they're feeling. It is through their actions—or lack of action—that they show us. Once we learn how to read their signals, there are effective steps we can take to help them manage their arousal. But often the very first step for parents is to recognize the significance of their own signals, which, in the heat of caring for their child, they ignore or even deny.

Parents Are Nature's Appointed Partners in the Self-Reg Process

Bernice and Autumn:
At the Self-Reg/Self-Control Crossroads

Bernice came to see us for help with her twelve-year-old daughter, Autumn, who was struggling with serious anxiety. But Bernice herself was incredibly anxious. She fidgeted nonstop and the stains on her fingers showed she was a chain-smoker. All this was perfectly understandable: She was consumed with worry about her daughter.

Bernice was the sort of mom who wouldn't put her own needs above her daughter's, but the problem was that she was in the firm grip of a stress cycle herself and in full-blown, relentless hyperdrive. She was having a great deal of trouble sleeping, which contributed to her worries about money, her other child, her marriage, and her job. When she woke up in the middle of the night, her mind would race from one worry to another. She was, as she admitted, "a nervous wreck," and this state of chronic tension only made her more vulnerable to the waves of worry that struck when Autumn was having a bad day. The repeating loop of worry, tension, vulnerability, and more worry only increased her tension and reduced her energy still further.

Bernice presented us with a fascinating pattern that I've seen so often that it deserves a title of its own: the "Self-Reg/Self-Control Parental Dichotomy." She immediately saw the importance of doing Self-Reg for her daughter; but for herself she was absolutely convinced that what was needed was more self-control: for her daughter's sake! She instantly saw how her daughter was overstressed because of a number of biological, emotional, and social stressors;

but she felt responsible for and in fact guilty about her daughter's anxiety and was certain that she needed to try much harder to control all her own worries.

It took time, but eventually she recognized that she needed to do Self-Reg for herself as much as for her daughter. Bernice decided to start attending a yoga class with Autumn. She had done yoga when she was younger—before she became a mother—and had found it calming and enjoyable. Before long, Bernice and Autumn were showing up at their weekly sessions with their yoga mats strapped to their backpacks.

Of course, there was much more behind this result than just doing Pranayama breathing exercises. For one thing, Bernice had a strong drive to do whatever it took for them both to feel better. For another, the fact that Autumn was benefiting from her own Self-Reg exercises did wonders to undo Bernice's feelings of helplessness. But the biggest driver was Bernice recognizing that she needed to do Self-Reg every bit as much as Autumn did.

It was fascinating to see the two of them improve very quickly, not so much *with* as *through* each other.

Self-Reg: The Five Core Steps to Transforming Behavior

The self-control paradigm represents a one-size-fits-all response to all challenges. In contrast, self-regulation creates an open, expansive system designed to channel our energy to help us function at our best under any circumstance. The better we understand self-regulation, the better we can turn challenging behaviors into active opportunities for engagement.

Children of all ages can learn Self-Reg skills, and my primary goal

is for you to learn how to help your child self-regulate. Like Bernice, you'll learn to read your child's signs and understand the significance of your child's behaviors, to identify stressors and reduce them, and to engage your child in this process of self-awareness rather than trying to suppress or control what he is thinking, feeling, or doing. You'll help your child experience what "calm" feels like and learn how to access or create that state when he feels the need. These five Self-Reg steps will become second nature to you:

1. Read the signs and reframe the behavior.
2. Identify the stressors.
3. Reduce the stress.
4. Reflect. Become aware of when you're overstressed.
5. Respond. Figure out what helps you calm, rest, and recover.

Each of the five steps is something you can learn to do routinely for yourself in the moment.

Read the signs and reframe the behavior. A lot of the work we're going to do will involve learning how to understand the meaning of behaviors that you would otherwise find only troubling or irritating. This starts close to home with learning how to read your own signs and recognize them for what they are, something every bit as significant as a fever or a rash.

Identify the stressors. Ask, "Why now?" Stress usually means work, money problems, social worries, having too much to do and not enough time. These are certainly all stressors, but the concept of *stress* is much broader and subtler, especially when we turn to *hidden stressors*. For some people noise or certain kinds of sound can be significant stressors. For others light or visual stimulation (too much or too little) is stressful. Other common stressors include smells, textures, sitting or standing, and waiting. Remarkably, our environment may be highly stressful and yet we block this out as conscious information. But those

monitoring systems deep in the brain, the mammalian and reptilian brains, aren't blocking it out, and they are in a constant dialogue with our internal receptors about how to deal with all this stress.

Reduce the stress. If you are very sensitive to light, replacing your on/off light switch with a dimmer switch gives you a way to adjust the lighting so you can be comfortable. In Self-Reg the dimmer is a useful all-purpose metaphor. We have physical, emotional, cognitive, and social stressors, and it's helpful to have a dimmer switch for all of them. In some cases you may be able to eliminate your exposure to a stressor altogether.

Reflect. Become aware of when you're becoming overstressed and why. We can get so used to feeling excessive stress that this state becomes "normal," so much so that sitting still and focusing on our breathing—something typically considered calming—can be a thousand times more distressing than being manic. Self-Reg develops this awareness of your inner state, sometimes very slowly, so that the shift isn't just tolerable but inherently enjoyable. The ultimate goal is to become aware of the causes of being overstressed and not just the symptoms.

Respond. Figure out what brings you back to being calm. Finally, we need strategies to reduce our tension and replenish our energy. This is what makes Self-Reg a completely personal journey. No one size fits all here. What one person finds calming might have the opposite effect on the next. What you find calming one day may not have that effect the next. This is why the first four steps are necessary to empower the fifth. For with the ability to read the signs you'll be able to distinguish between adaptive and maladaptive coping strategies. The reason why maladaptive coping strategies are so called is that they provide only short-term relief and then leave us even more drained, tense, and vulnerable to hypo- or hyperarousal. Self-Reg strategies are by nature adaptive—of lasting impact and value—because they focus on bringing your natural systems for self-regulation into balance and help you keep them that way.

The big appeal of popularized mindfulness practices is that these represent an important—nonpharmaceutical—way of dealing with troubling symptoms. But it's important that we don't overlook the fact that troubling symptoms like "monkey mind" are signs of excessive stress. What's more, we always need to take individual variability into account: how there are those—especially among children—who find focused breathing or meditation exercises stressful in their own way. As we'll see, a number of mindfulness practices are generally helpful, but because they can trigger greater anxiety—one more thing to control—they can at times in some cases be counterproductive to self-regulation. There are many options for relaxation practices, and what's most important is that you help your child find the right fit.

It's Not Strength We Need but Safety

It's natural to assume that when, say, you wake up in the middle of the night worried, the reason you can't get back to sleep is all these urgent problems. But it's not. This kind of anxious rumination is a sign that your internal alarm went off while you were asleep. You were likely in a high state of tension when you went to bed and stayed that way. Whatever triggered the alarm woke you with your heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing all elevated. It's the surge of adrenaline that's keeping you up and fueling the anxiety. And those systems in your PFC that you need to reappraise the worries? Forget it. They're on hold.

One way to interrupt this looping stress response is deep belly breathing and mindfulness practices that you find calming. Simple mindfulness exercises that have been shown to calm the brain include following your breath as you slowly inhale and exhale, visualizing something or someone reliably calming for you, or meditation of one kind or another. The point is to go for the so-called multiplier effect: rather than a "magic bullet"—a single activity to promote self-

regulation—your child should explore all sorts of self-regulating activities, including exercise, music, art, or other mindfulness activities. You might draw or listen to a particular piece of music that you find calming. With Self-Reg you don't do this to distract yourself or suppress what's bothering you; you do it to break the stress cycle. The very act of reframing an intrusive thought or worry can instantly release tension, which then sets in play your recovery functions and brings the PFC back online.

Humans aren't very good at noticing when we're in a state of low energy and high tension. I suspect there's a strong evolutionary reason for this: No doubt it was better to stay focused on the threat and not on how we feel. The problem today is that stressors are ubiquitous and we can frequently be overstressed without even knowing it.

The real power of Self-Reg is recognizing and knowing what arousal state we're in and how to release our tension. The result is not that we finally have the strength to vanquish our internal demons but that as the intensity lessens they simply fade away.