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# the co-regulation workbook



by sharon vincuilla, otd, cdbc

A skill-building guide for feeling grounded, communicating effectively, and flourishing mutually with your dog.

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This book is an educational tool.

It is not meant to replace therapy for humans, nor is it a replacement for dog training or veterinary services. If your dog is behaving with anxiety, reactivity, or aggression, it is recommended that your dog be seen by their primary veterinarian to rule out pain or an underlying physical condition before proceeding with any behavioral modification plan.

I, Sharon Vincuilla, do not make any claims or guarantees that you will achieve specific results by engaging with this work. Behavior is a result of the interaction between beings and their environment, therefore you and your dog's environment are responsible for your dog's behavior.



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# what is co-regulation?

Co-regulation is a supportive process between two beings that promotes nervous system balance and rhythm. While co-regulation is most often thought of in the relationships between human parents and their children, co-regulation can occur between any two beings who are in relationship with one another. This workbook explores how we can implement the co-regulation process with dogs.

## how do we do it?

Co-regulation involves cultivating a supportive daily routine that promotes balanced internal rhythms, AND building a toolkit of strategies that you can use in the moment when certain situations arise.

This is very similar to how we have a daily routine of things we do to care for ourselves that promote our mental health, AND we have a toolkit of soothing strategies that we can use in the moment when things don't go as planned, something upsetting happens, stress becomes overwhelming, or you have a trauma response.

For example, something I do everyday to promote my mental health is go to bed and wake up at the same times. And when something upsetting happens, like when my instagram account was hacked, I used soothing strategies like laying in a hammock and talking to friends to add extra support to my day.

**Co-regulation with your dog involves doing things everyday with your dog that promote balanced internal rhythms, AND building a toolkit of strategies that you and your dog can use in the moment when certain situations arise.**



# the basic premise

When you can

- recognize your dog's nervous system state, and
- meet their universal life-affirming needs

your dog will

- feel pleasant / comfortable feelings,
- experience body functions that are rhythmic and balanced,
- and they will behave in ways are appropriate and that we like.

## co-regulation has 3 steps

1

Learn to recognize YOUR needs (by building awareness of your nervous system).

2

Learn to understand YOUR DOG'S communication and needs (by building skills for recognizing their nervous system state).

3

Build SKILLS to incorporate activities into your daily routine that meet both of your needs AND that you can use in-the-moment when something unexpected happens, stress becomes overwhelming, or one of you has a trauma response.



# breathing: a skill for co-regulation

Breathing is a function of our autonomic nervous system. Breathing is something that we can do without thinking, and it changes depending on our moment-to-moment needs.

Breathing is also something we can do with intention, which allows us to SHIFT our nervous system state.



slow, deep,  
long, expansive  
breaths



shift into a  
calmer state

rapid, shallow,  
irregular, sharp  
breaths



shift into a  
more alert  
state

# breathing for co-regulation

try this to  
start building  
awareness of how  
your body  
feels

inhale sharply, like a gasp

What changes do you notice in your body when you do this?

Maybe you sit up straighter?

Do your shoulders go up by your ears?

Perhaps you feel tension in your trunk, neck, arms or legs.

try this when  
you feel anxious,  
tense, stressed, or  
overwhelmed

now exhale slowly and make a sigh

What changes do you notice in your body when you do this?

Maybe you sink into your seat?

Do your shoulders relax?

Perhaps you feel a release in your trunk, neck, arms or legs.

# breathing for co-regulation

Breathing is the first SKILL you are going to learn and teach to your dog.

Any skills you teach to your dog for co-regulation will be initiated by INVITATION only, not by commanding your dog.

This is because CHOICE and AUTONOMY are life-affirming needs.



When these needs are not met, dogs may feel scared, anxious, or stressed. These feelings contribute to a nervous system state that is focused on survival, and no one can learn when they are just trying to survive.

- 1 Put some dog food or treats in a bag or pouch.
- 2 Sit somewhere comfortable and place a mat, bed, or towel on the floor for your dog.
- 3 Start practicing slow, deep, long breaths while observing your dog.
- 4 When your dog lays near you, give a treat. When your dog INHALES give a treat. Continue for 2 minutes, or until your dog walks away.

Practice this 1x per day with your dog to promote a CALM nervous system state.

When dogs INHALE, they flare their nostrils, puff their cheeks, or expand their ribs.

# breathing for co-regulation

Some additional tips:

- 1** You can give a treat for inhaling, exhaling, or any sign that your dog is relaxed (ie. hips turned sideways, chin down, laying on side, etc).
- 2** You do not need to add any verbal cue to tell your dog to do this. Your breathing and subsequent calm nervous system ARE the cues that tell your dog that they are safe and can be calm.
- 3** Do not say "yes" or click when giving a treat. These sounds often increase alertness, and alertness is not something that contributes to a calm state.
- 4** If your dog becomes alert in the presence of food, try a lower value food (ie. kibble, berries, green beans, apples, banana, broccoli, dehydrated sweet potato, etc). If your dog is still too alert with low value food, put all food aside and just be in stillness and quiet with your dog - that is rewarding enough!
- 5** Incorporate this into regular activities to help yourself and your dog feel calm BEFORE exciting or stressful activities. You can ALSO use this as a soothing in-the-moment strategy AFTER something stressful or exciting happens, such as passing that barking dog during a walk, the mail carrier walks away, or when your friend arrives in your home.





# here's the recap

When you can

- recognize your dog's nervous system state, and
- meet their universal life-affirming needs

your dog will

- feel pleasant / comfortable feelings,
- experience body functions that are rhythmic and balanced,
- and they will behave in ways are appropriate and that we like.

## co-regulation in 3 steps

1

Learn to recognize YOUR needs.

2

Learn to understand YOUR DOG'S communication and needs.

3

Build SKILLS to cultivate a supportive daily routine AND to use in-the-moment (before, during, or after) unexpected or stressful situations.

## breathing: a co-regulation skill

Practice daily with your dog to support a balanced nervous system, or use in the moment as a soothing strategy. Slow, deep, long exhales shift you and your dog into a calm and grounded state.



# references, collabs, & inspirators

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