

AVALON AUTISM PARENTAL SUPPORT & RESPITE



Registered Charity No: SC048395

EMOTIONAL REGULATION

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Introduction

Emotional regulation is the ability to manage and respond to emotional experiences in a way that allows for healthy daily functioning. For autistic individuals, this can be challenging due to differences in sensory processing, communication, and cognitive flexibility.

This resource introduces the three emotional systems — **Threat, Soothing, and Drive**, and provides practical strategies to help autistic individuals regulate their emotions effectively.

The Three Emotional Systems

1. Threat System (Fight, Flight, Freeze)

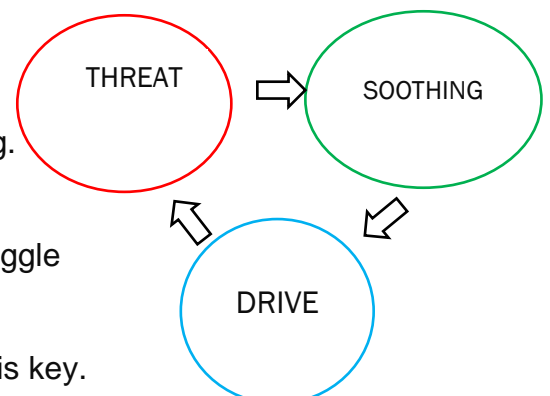
- Dopamine Release
- Activates in response to stress or perceived danger.
- Common triggers for autistic individuals include sensory overload, unexpected changes, or social stress.
- Can lead to meltdowns, shutdowns, or avoidance behaviours.

2. Soothing System (Calm, Connection, Safety)

- Endorphin Release
- Helps regulate emotions and restore balance.
- Often underactive in autistic individuals, making self-soothing difficult.
- Encouraging safe and predictable environments can help activate this system.

3. Drive System (Motivation, Achievement)

- Cortisol and Adrenaline Release
- Encourages goal setting and reward-seeking.
- Some autistic individuals may become hyper-focused on interests, while others struggle with motivation.
- Finding a balance between rest and activity is key.



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Key Strategies for Emotional Regulation

1. Managing the Threat System

(Reducing Stress and Meltdowns)

- **Create Predictability:** Use visual schedules and structured routines to reduce anxiety.
- **Provide a Safe Space:** Designate a quiet area where the individual can regulate emotions.
- **Use Sensory Supports:** Noise-cancelling headphones, weighted blankets, or movement breaks can help.
- **Minimise Verbal Overload:** Speak in short, clear sentences and allow processing time.
- **Reduce Stimulation During Meltdowns:** Lower lights, reduce noise, and avoid excessive interaction until they are calm.

2. Activating the Soothing System (Building Emotional Resilience)

- **Encourage Self-Soothing Activities:** Weighted blankets, deep breathing, and sensory toys can help.
- **Provide Emotional Validation:** Acknowledge feelings rather than dismissing them.
- **Engage in Calming Movements:** Rocking, slow stretching, or mindful breathing can be effective.
- **Model Calm Responses:** Caregivers and teachers can help by remaining calm during distressing moments.

3. Supporting the Drive System (Balancing Motivation and Rest)

- **Use Interest-Based Learning:** Tie activities to special interests to increase motivation.
- **Break Tasks into Steps:** Small, manageable goals help prevent overwhelm.
- **Encourage Rest and Recovery:** Avoid burnout by balancing focused activities with downtime.
- **Celebrate Progress:** Acknowledge achievements without pressure to achieve perfection.

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Practical Applications in Everyday Life

At Home:

- **Structured Daily Routines:** Consistent schedules help reduce uncertainty and anxiety.
- **Designated Regulation Spaces:** Provide a sensory-friendly area with calming tools such as soft lighting and weighted items.
- **Emotional Check-Ins:** Encourage communication about feelings using emotion charts or social stories.

At School:

- **Flexible Learning Approaches:** Allow movement breaks, use alternative communication supports, and adapt work expectations when needed.
- **Sensory-Friendly Classrooms:** Provide fidget tools, noise-cancelling headphones, and quiet areas to help manage sensory input.
- **Support for Transitions:** Give advance notice of changes in schedule and use transition cues such as countdown timers or first/then boards.

At Work:

- **Flexible Environments:** Allow adjustments such as quiet workspaces, dimmed lighting, or alternative seating options.
- **Clear, Direct Communication:** Provide written instructions alongside verbal directions to reduce misunderstandings.
- **Sensory Breaks:** Encourage employees to take short breaks in quiet areas to manage stress effectively.

Supporting emotional regulation in autism involves understanding how stress, relaxation, and motivation function differently in the autistic brain. Caregivers, educators, and employers can create environments that promote self-regulation and well-being by providing structured routines, sensory support, and emotional validation.

By recognising when an individual is operating from their **Threat, Soothing, or Drive system**, we can provide the right strategies to support their emotional needs, ultimately fostering greater confidence, resilience, and independence.