



Connecting the Brain and Body to Support Equity Work: A Toolkit for Education Leaders

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Part 1: Introduction

What Is the Purpose of This Toolkit?

To help education leaders in equity work, this toolkit offers evidence-based information on the brain and behavior in the context of leadership and educational equity work, then offers brain-body and somatic strategies, with specific examples, to guide leaders in recognizing and responding to physical, social, and emotional needs in the education agency context.

Who Is It For?

- K-12 education leaders who recognize and are committed to changing the existence and impact of stress and oppression that continue to perpetuate harm and inequities in the education system
- Leaders who lead equity work individually or as part of a team; leaders who have been designated the “equity person” in their agency
- Leaders who feel unsupported, unsafe, or burnt out as well as those who have the support and resources they need
- Leaders who want to sustain their energy and commitment to achieving equity
- Leaders who want to increase their impact on the structures and systems that perpetuate harm, inequities, and oppression

What Might I Gain From Engaging With the Resources in This Toolkit?

- Understanding the significance of brain-body connections and learn to recognize responses to stress, oppression, and group interactions
- Understanding brain-body and somatic approaches and how they can support regulation, connection, and cognition in educational equity work
- Ability to apply information and use preventative and restorative strategies to promote self-care and collective-care and transformation in the context of challenging equity work

Why Might I Need This Toolkit?

Education leaders have varying power to change inequitable structures and systems, but all need safety, support, skills, strategies, and practices to sustain

change efforts—especially when doing this work in a stressful or oppressive context. Often overlooked, the health and wellbeing of staff (all types) is as important as the health and wellbeing of students and families.

How Should I Use This Toolkit?

Because each individual comes into equity work from a different perspective and a different set of experiences, this toolkit is designed to meet you where you are, to be used in ways that you prefer. You may find some sections more applicable than others. If you're more of a listener or would like a high-level summary, you may want to enter this toolkit by listening to the interview in Part 2 for information and strategies. If you need or prefer more background information to understand the significance of the issues, along with the rationale and research basis for engaging in this work, then Part 3 may be a good place to enter this toolkit. If you're grounded in the rationale and research and are simply looking for strategies, then Part 4 may be the place for you to start. If you're looking for additional resources, Part 5 provides those.

The bottom line: Enter where you wish. There is no wrong door here. This is an invitation to the work—not a prescription. Read or listen, pause, reflect, and practice. Keep an eye out for pullouts, quotes, and reflective questions along the way. To help you navigate to where you want to be, the following is a quick overview of how the toolkit is organized:

- **Part 1:** (this section): *a brief overview* of what this toolkit is about and some background and key terms to help orient users before they dive in
- **Part 2:** *an interview* with subject matter expert, equity coach, and somatic centering practitioner Terna Tilley-Gyado, discussing the rationale for somatic (or body-based) practices and some issues pertaining to leadership and equity work—<https://vimeo.com/677553695>
- **Part 3:** *the “what” and “why,”* providing background information on the brain, body, and stress responses; the significance and challenges of equity work and the issues leaders face; and a foundation for brain-body, somatic approaches
- **Part 4:** *the “how,”* offering some preventative and restorative strategies, with specific examples
- **Part 5:** *further resources,* including videos demonstrating somatic centering practices.

A Few More Considerations Before You Engage With the Toolkit

- **About the authors:** Our identities influence the ways in which we experience the world, our power and positionality in the world, and the lenses through which we perceive and approach the world. Thus, our identities impact the content and approach of this toolkit. We provide here brief descriptions of our identities that we wish to share, as they may influence the content and process of using what we offer in this toolkit.
 - Christina Pate: I am a white, able-bodied, cisgender woman with lived mental health experiences, a first-generation college graduate raised in working-class Midwest households, and currently middle-income.
 - Terna Tilley-Gyado: I am a black, first-generation, middle class, spiritual, queer Muslim woman who has moved through higher education institutions.
 - Jenny Betz: I am a white, genderqueer/nonconforming, married lesbian and parent from California who was raised in low-income households and is currently middle-income.
- **About the toolkit:** This toolkit is inspired by the authors' experiences working together and with Equity Accelerator Fellows from county offices of education in California as part of the [Equity Accelerator](#) initiative, a year-long project funded by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation which was part of the [COVID Education Equity Response Collaborative](#).

Key to the Equity Accelerator project was our recognition of how challenging the work of our Fellows was and the intentional integration of somatic and brain-body practices into the project's process. Often, these practices were led by our Equity Coach (and Body-Based Therapist and Healing Justice Facilitator), Terna Tilley-Gyado. These practices supported Fellows and project staff in their personal capacity to pause and notice what was going on in their minds and bodies, often during times of tension or stress.

Throughout the year, we saw that somatic practices were impactful, accessible, and necessary for Fellows, coaches, and staff to sustain the Equity Accelerator work. Our intention is to share some of these strategies along with other research-backed brain-body strategies to help others sustain their own equity work.

As Equity Accelerator staff, we were incredibly grateful to work closely with Terna Tilley-Gyado, whose expertise, grace, wisdom, integrity, and skill was foundational to the deep personal and professional growth experienced by Fellows and staff. We are thrilled to introduce you to Terna and her work throughout this resource.

- **About complexity and fit:** There are many dynamics at play in educational equity work, and these issues are complex. Thus, this toolkit's information and accompanying resources have their limitations and should not be perceived as all-encompassing nor the best fit for all people or all contexts. Also, a toolkit such as this cannot consider all possible scenarios. Thus, our examples and strategies are limited. Please discern what is right for you and your context and leave the rest.

Glossary of Terms

- **Brain and Mind:** The term *brain* is associated with the term *mind* and the two are often used interchangeably. The brain is considered physical in nature and the mind is considered mental. The brain is composed of matter and can be touched, whereas the mind is composed of energy and cannot be touched. While the brain is the center of the nervous system and coordinates movements, feelings, and different body functions, the mind refers to a person's conscience, understanding, and thought processes (Prabhat, 2011). In essence, the functioning of the brain can influence the mind (thoughts and feelings) and the mind can influence the functioning of the brain. There is often a reciprocal process at play. This toolkit uses the term *brain* throughout but may use *mind* in some instances, particularly where literature is cited that focuses specifically on the mind.
- **Dominant culture or identity:** This term refers to a culture or identity that is dominant within a particular political, social, or economic entity in which multiple cultures or identities coexist. It may refer to language, religion or ritual, social value, or social custom and often represents a norm for an entire society. An individual culture or identity achieves dominance by being perceived as pertaining to a majority of the population and having a significant presence in institutions relating to communication, education, artistic expression, law, government, and business (Wikipedia, n.d.).

“Whether we are aware of it or not, we are all assigned multiple social identities. Within each category, there is a hierarchy—a social status with dominant and non-dominant groups. For example, as with race, dominant members can bestow benefits to members they deem ‘normal,’ or limit opportunities to members that fall into ‘other’ categories.” (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.)

Examples of dominant cultures or identities in the United States include (but are not limited to) adult, White, male, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, neurohomogenous, and native English-speaking.

- **Equity:** This term may refer to different concepts, as several definitions exist, but this toolkit uses a definition that the Equity Accelerator project adopted to acknowledge the intersection of race—Rogers-Ard and Knaus (2020) define equity as “the condition that would be achieved if intersectional racism was not a major predictor of people’s outcomes.”
 - **Educational Equity:** The National Equity Project (NEP) defines this phrase as follows: “educational equity means that each child receives what they need to develop to their full academic and social potential” (NEP, n.d.).
- **Leader and Leadership:** Many definitions and conceptualizations of leadership exist. We conceptualize leadership as one that emphasizes influence and agency over positional leadership. We believe a leader can be authorized or not authorized as such. Yet, a leader is someone who takes responsibility for finding and developing the potential in people and processes (Brown, 2018); understands and addresses the adaptive aspects of systems change (Heifetz et al., 2009); and takes courageous action to facilitate change and transformation (Burns, 1978) on personal, collective, and systemic levels.
- **Marginalized identities:** This term refers to social identities that are not part of a dominant culture. Marginalized identities may encompass individual experiences such as trauma, poverty, or other adverse life events. By definition, marginalized groups are those that have been historically disenfranchised and therefore experience systemic inequality; that is, they have operated with less power than have systemically privileged groups (Hall, 1989; Johnson, 2018; Williams, 1998).
- **Oppression:** Oppression is the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group, or institution. Typically, a government or political

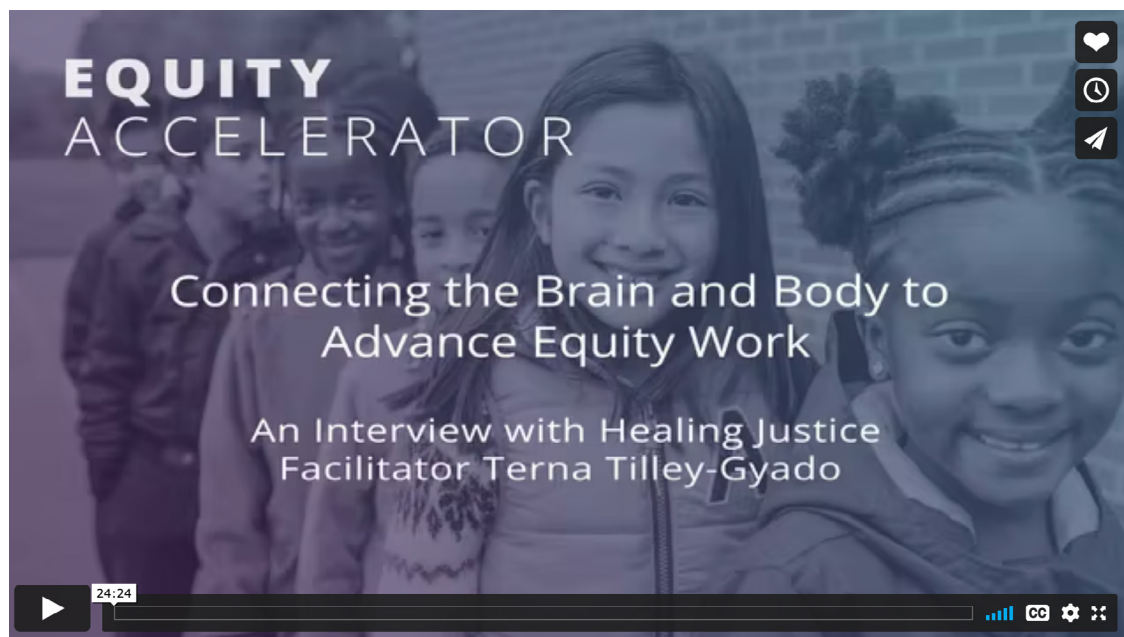
organization in power places restrictions formally or covertly on oppressed groups so they may be exploited and less able to compete with other social groups. The oppressed individual or group is devalued, exploited, and deprived of privileges by the individual or group who has more power (Barker, 2003).

- **People of the global majority:** A collective and inclusive term coined by Rosemary Campbell-Stephens (2009), this term refers to people who are Black, Asian, Brown, dual-heritage, multiracial, Indigenous, and/or have been racialized as “ethnic minorities.” These groups collectively represent about 80 percent of the world’s population currently, making them the global majority.
- **Safety:** Safety is a complicated word for many people, especially people who have experienced stress and trauma, both directly related to oppression and otherwise. It does not mean the same thing for everyone and what feels safe for one person may not feel or be safe for another. For the purposes of this document, safety means a space or condition in which the following are present: respect; intentional relationship and trust-building; people can be real and authentic; people can hold vulnerability in ways that do not perpetuate oppressive patterns; harm is acknowledged or disrupted and repair and amends are valued; and there are intentional pauses to allow people to catch up with themselves.
- **Stress:** In this toolkit, *stress* refers to the physiological or psychological response to internal or external stressors. Stress involves changes affecting nearly every system of the body, influencing how people think, feel, and behave (APA, 2020). What is stressful for one person may or may not be stressful for another. It is not anyone’s right to determine whether someone has experienced stress or whether an event, person, or circumstance is stressful. That is solely up to the individual who experienced the event, person, or circumstance.
- **Trauma:** In this toolkit, *trauma* refers to any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning. Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g., oppression, aggression, violence, accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes, hurricanes, fires) and often challenge an individual’s view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place (APA, 2020).

We want to emphasize that trauma is someone's experience of something or someone. What is traumatic to one person may not be traumatic to another person. It also does not have to be a major event or catastrophe for something to be traumatizing to someone. Trauma is a deeply distressing or disturbing experience or a physical or psychological injury. It is not anyone's right to determine whether someone has experienced trauma or whether an event, person, or circumstance is traumatizing. That is solely up to the individual who experienced the event, person, or circumstance.

Part 2: Terna Tilley-Gyado in Conversation With Laura Buckner

For a discussion of the rationale for somatic centering (or body-based practices) and of related issues pertaining to leadership and equity work, we invite you to view an interview with healing justice facilitator Terna Tilley-Gyado, available online from the following link: <https://vimeo.com/677553695>



Part 3: Understanding the Brain-Body Connection and Its Importance to Equity Work

Educational equity work is action-oriented and solution-centered, also complex and challenging. It involves significant demands and requires substantial resources (time, space, willingness, support from leaders) which are often limited. Equity work also requires a personal and collective skillset and stamina. People are asked to engage in hard conversations, to show up vulnerably, to do “inner work,” to unlearn and relearn ways of doing and being, and to change systems in big and small ways.

However, these aspects of the work are not easy. For some of us, we are unaware of the missed opportunities and invitations we’ve received to engage in this work meaningfully. Many of us have learned that good intentions aren’t enough. For others of us, we’ve lacked the opportunities to build the knowledge, insights, skills, self-efficacy, and stamina necessary to meaningfully and sustainably engage in this work professionally. And for those of us who have been harmed by the very systems we aim to change, no amount of our own knowledge, skill, or resilience can fully protect us from continued harm—particularly given the ways systems are designed and perpetuate inequities and given the lack of resources and supports for this work in most education systems.

For people with marginalized identities and those who may have experienced chronic or toxic stress, adverse experiences, and trauma (including abuse, neglect, household and community distress, and oppression), equity work in education is not only challenging but may be unsafe and further traumatizing. For example, the following situations are common, especially for those of us with marginalized identities:

- We are often expected to engage and remain engaged with colleagues around equity issues even if those colleagues say and do harmful things.
- We are often expected to singularly represent an entire ethnic, racial, or cultural group to which we belong, particularly people of the global majority.
- We are often expected or assigned to lead equity efforts, based more on our identities than our interests or skills.

- When leading equity work, chosen or otherwise, we are often the only one doing the work. We are often expected to ignore, disregard, or disconnect from the stress caused by unsupportive, toxic, oppressive, or otherwise harmful working environments.

Stress, trauma, and oppression impact more than our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors—they impact our whole selves (mind and body) and are systemic—affecting our individual and collective sense of self or identity, impairing our capacity for physical and emotional regulation, reducing our ability to attend, focus, and engage, and lowering our tolerance for interpersonal connection and collaboration (Levine, 2010; Levine & Crane-Godreau, 2015; Hammond, 2015; Van der Kolk, 2015).

Understanding the brain-body connection and how its processes show up in behavior, individually and collectively, is essential to creating the organizational culture necessary for making meaningful and sustainable change. Simply guiding people to shift their mindsets and behaviors isn't enough; nor does solely acquiring new knowledge change mindsets or practices. Rather, people change because they engage in new practices that change who they *are*. Thus, it's not simply shifting your way of doing—it's shifting your way of doing to a way of *being*. Making this shift is what we call *embodiment* in this toolkit—and brain-body and somatic approaches may help.

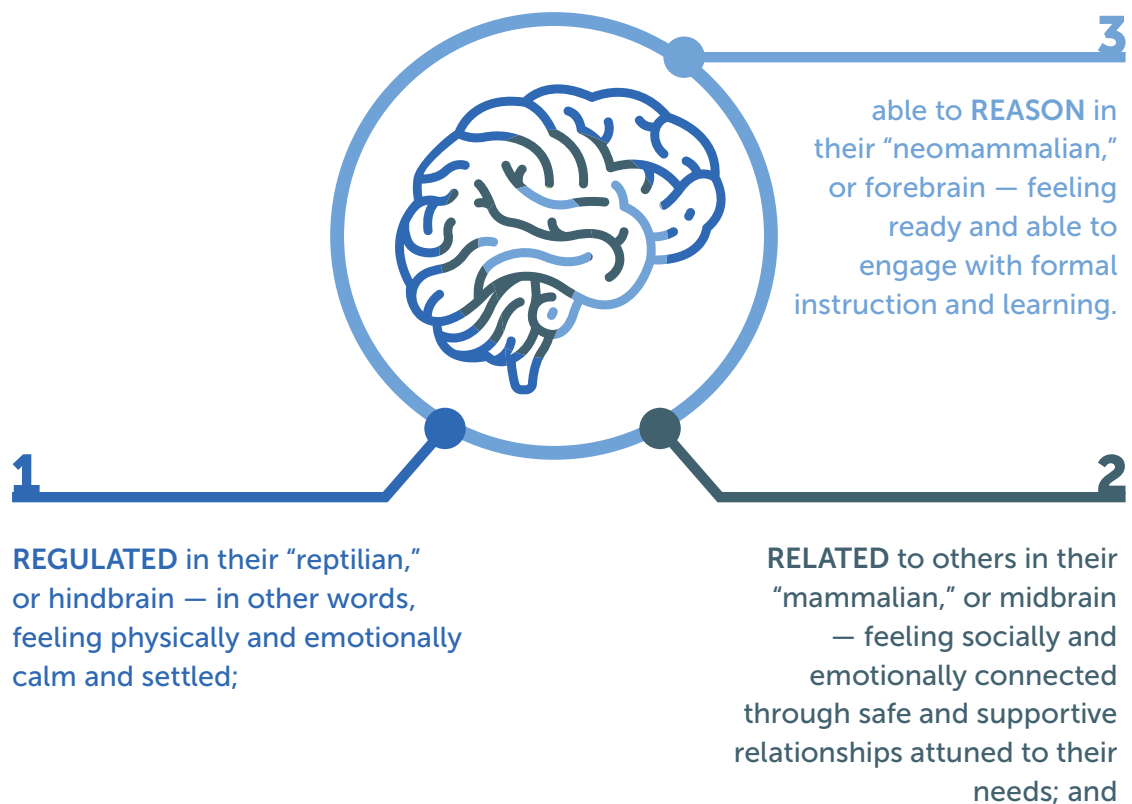
The root of the word somatic is “soma”—a Greek term meaning “body.” For embodiment of leadership, of wellbeing, or of equity, somatic practices can be explicitly taught and embodied through the physical state. Somatic practices are body-centered approaches that attend to the connection of mind and body (Levine, 2010; Levine & Crane-Godreau, 2015).

Whether you're leading equity efforts or advocating for equity in your organization, the information in this toolkit is intended to support you in the restorative and transformative approaches necessary to do this work and to introduce you to the embodied leadership traits to sustain you and your focused efforts. While there are many other factors that support sustainable equity work (e.g., mindsets, resources, systems, policies), this toolkit and the accompanying resources focus on and prioritize what is within your immediate locus of control: your own brain and body.

Understanding the Brain and Body

Understanding how brains and bodies influence behavior is essential in the workplace. One simple framework is neuroscientist Bruce Perry’s 3 Rs: Regulate, Relate, and Reason (Perry, n.d.). In order to effectively learn, work, and thrive, a person must first feel physically and emotionally safe, calm, and settled (“regulate”), then feel socially and emotionally connected through safe and supportive relationships that are attuned to the person’s needs (“relate”), and only then can a person feel ready and able to engage with learning, working, and leading (“reason”).

3 Rs Approach to Intervention



When unsettled, or “dysregulated,” you are unlikely to relate to and connect with other people and, until you feel safe and supported, are limited in your capacity to connect with other people and will have a limited ability to access key thinking, learning, and leading strategies. While this understanding of stress has universal application, it becomes more salient within the bounds of equity

work. Further, recognizing stress-related feelings and behaviors is essential for applying appropriately responsive and restorative strategies and supports.

Some Essential Questions:

- How do you help yourself and others get grounded and centered first and then connected in safe and supportive relationships before engaging in challenging work?
- How do you learn to recognize the signs in your mind and body that indicate you're being harmed or about to harm?
- How do you and others support each other in preventing or responding early to distress and dysregulation?
- How do you create cultures of care that allow people agency over their own minds, bodies, and behaviors in the workplace and that offer culturally appropriate and timely supports when needed?

What Is My Brain-Body Telling Me and Why Should I Listen?

The body is an incredible source of information, wisdom, and strength. Studies on the brain-body connection show that internal systems react to stimuli long before a person's mind and conscious behaviors catch up; these reactions are sometimes called reflexes and can often be much more subtle than conscious thoughts or behaviors (Ju, n.d). For example, when you touch a hot stove, the nerves in your skin quickly send a message of pain to your brain and then your brain quickly sends a message back telling your hand to pull away. This reciprocal process happens almost instantaneously.

In cases of mild stimuli or stress, the brain may react or spike quickly and then reset and resume normal function (Dedovic et al., 2009)—as is the case when you touch a hot stove. However, extreme or prolonged stimuli or stress (e.g., social disconnection, chronic overworking, abuse, persistent microaggressions, sexism, racism) can cause brains and bodies to remain in an elevated state of stress and dysregulation (e.g., Berger & Sarnyai, 2015; Broschott et al., 2005). This persistent elevated state will often affect a person's reactions (sometimes disproportionately or inappropriately) to future stimuli. You don't need to see inside someone's brain, however, to know this process. In fact, being in tune with one's brain-body connection helps with observing shifts in physical sensations (numbness, shaky hands), mental sensations (brain fog, racing thoughts), physiological reactions (body temperature, heart rate), body language (clenched fists, leaning back, avoiding eye contact), or other behaviors (leaving room, appeasing).

A common example can be seen in the behaviors of others who have experienced chronic stress or trauma and how they may react with a “flight, fight, or freeze” response to being provided constructive feedback from a manager (Golkar et al., 2015). To an outside observer, the feedback may seem gentle or benign, but to the person whose brain and body are already in an elevated state of stress, it may be experienced as an attack that elevates their system further, causing a seemingly extreme reaction. Additionally, being on the receiving end of oppression (sexism, racism, etc.) forces the brain to constantly be on the lookout for threats (hypervigilance) or the next source of danger (Hammond, 2015).

When the stress and chaos of life are swirling or when in the midst of challenging conversations, managing conflict, or making critical decisions in the workplace, being present (aware, attentive, calm) is more crucial than ever. It is essential for you to be able to tap into what your body and mind are communicating. If not present (distracted, disassociating, hypervigilant), the connection and commitment to your individual values and to the values of the group are compromised and you lose the ability to hold those values with and for other people (Tilley-Gyado, 2021). Consequently, you may cause harm to yourself or others.

Yet, stress and trauma can block you from being present. In fact, people go into automatic, default mode—which, for most people, is fight, flight, or freeze (e.g., Schauer & Elbert, 2015; Sripada et al., 2012). When you are present, safe, and connected, you are operating from your “upstairs” brain—the top and front parts of the brain. However, when you are not present, you operate from your “downstairs” brain—the middle, back, and bottom parts (Siegel, 2012).



Did You Know?

When you are emotionally dysregulated, you can't fully access the parts of your brain that are necessary for processing and reasoning, especially through hard topics and challenging conversations.

Also, when dysregulated, you are less self-aware—which limits your capacity to be open and practice discernment and may cause you to act more on your conditioning (habits, reactions)—so it can be more harmful to yourself and to those with whom you interact when you're in a dysregulated state (e.g., Lueke & Gibson, 2015). So it is important to get regulated first!

For strategies on getting regulated and narrating what's going on in your body, see the strategies in Part 4.

You can see the stress responses (fight, flight, or freeze) through what are called “signs of dysregulation” (see box listing “Examples of Common Signs of Dysregulation”). All of these signs are completely common brain responses to stress and they are often mislabeled or misunderstood as problematic, disruptive, or disrespectful. These behavioral reactions may seem misaligned, confusing, or out of proportion to the situation—but they may actually be a person’s best attempt to cope with their experiences.

Dysregulated stress responses often come with punitive consequences—like reprimands, corrections, and disciplinary action. Sometimes consequences show up in more interpersonal ways, like criticizing or judging, ignoring, invalidating, gossiping, or excluding people. Alternatively, sometimes consequences show up in ways that appear appreciative. For example, someone who remains quiet or withdrawn during times of stress may be validated for not being disruptive or for being compliant, or may be seen as calm and collected on the surface, even if they’re actually in a freeze response. Overall, there is a tendency to respond to stressful situations through manipulation or control—that is, trying to manage these behaviors—either in yourself or in others rather than hold space for your issues to be acknowledged and processed for personal growth or collective healing and transformation.

Impact of Stress, Trauma, and Oppression on the Brain and Body

The body is an important source of knowledge and power in resolving the traumatic imprint of stress, trauma, and oppression (Van der Kolk, 2015; Johnson, 2009). Somatic-based research teaches that the sensations associated with stress, adverse experiences, and trauma accumulate within the body and impact the central nervous system (Levine, 2010; Porges, 2011). The impact of unresolved stress can manifest

Examples of Common Signs of Dysregulation

- Appeasing or people pleasing
- Overperforming or perfectionism
- Being still or spacing out
- Shutting down or numbing out
- Reacting like a “deer in headlights”
- Being at a loss for words or unable to communicate
- Blushing
- Having sensitivity to light, sound, or temperature
- Clenching jaw, clenching fists
- Breathing rapidly
- Being easily startled
- Fidgeting
- Being unable to concentrate or focus

in many physical and cognitive ways, including in posture, facial expressions, body language, cognitive functioning, behaviors, and in various forms of pain, illness, and disease (Levine, 2010; Hammond, 2015; Porges, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2015).

Furthermore, researchers have explored how people embody stressful, toxic, and oppressive social conditions through nonverbal interactions and how these experiences affect people's relationships with their bodies (Johnson, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2015). Johnson (2009) refers to this impact as a "somatic imprint of oppression." For example, a cisgender man in a position of authority may lean back in his chair with his head resting in his clasped hands (a relaxed and casual posture) whereas a cisgender woman who has an administrative support staff role may be expected to behave in a more formal, "professional" manner, with upright and still posture (Johnson, 2021). The person with more power or status is afforded more control of the relationship, physical space, and agility (Van der Kolk, 2015; Johnson, 2009).

Stress and trauma do not occur in a vacuum. They stem from biological, ancestral, cultural, environmental, societal, and systemic conditions; thus, they need to be addressed on the personal, collective, and systemic levels. Johnson (2009) examines how mindsets and systems of oppression impact both the oppressed and oppressor and shape social interactions and expectations, how each feels about themselves and each other, and how they can begin to unlearn, through somatic practice, these internalized experiences. Such unlearning is especially critical for professionals who want to help, not harm. As Johnson (2015) writes, "It is essential that the embodied dimensions of privilege, discrimination, and marginalization are brought to the surface of our awareness and that we become more skilled at navigating them honestly, respectfully, and with grace" (p. 81).



Did You Know?

A common response to stress is unconsciously holding your breath or breathing shallowly high up in the chest and throat. Enduring effects of chronic breath-holding or shallow, effortful breathing include muscular tension, pain, and deleterious effects on life-giving systems, including endocrine (hormonal), immune, and nervous systems. Chronically breathing in these ways can also impair both physical and psychological functioning. For strategies to develop self-awareness and to release this tension, see Part 4.

We believe that to work somatically with yourself and others, it's important to observe how you have been shaped by your experiences and how this impacts your leadership capacities. Using the practices described in Part 4 of this toolkit, you can learn and apply strategies to embody new skills and behaviors and to support your mood. In our experiences, such exercises can increase attention and focus, support deep listening, facilitate healthy interactions, and guide effective leadership and management.

Brain-Body and Somatic Approaches

Somatic approaches, such as those in Part 4, are body-oriented ways of understanding and processing experiences. They focus on exploration through sensing and movement and observing how the body responds to thoughts and experiences.

At their most basic level, somatic practices can help you *notice*—that is, recognize stress responses (signs of dysregulation) within your body and begin to facilitate returning the response process to a regulated, functioning state. They also help with noticing feelings of presence, safety, and connection.

This noticing, or awareness, may be especially helpful in situations when experiences with historical oppression are brought to the surface. For example, in cross-racial interactions or ones in which there are other significant power differentials (e.g., adult-young person; leader-staff person), individuals are encouraged to tune in to and actively explore the sensations they feel in their body, asking what these sensations mean for how they are interacting with and experiencing the world around them. Such noticing can also be applied to the organizational and cultural power dynamics present in order to prevent or acknowledge harm.



Did You Know?

As you practice *noticing*, you might realize that there are times when you are involuntarily holding your breath or tensing up in your body. Often, this response may occur when you are under stress or perceive a threat. When you hold your breath, your breathing is restricted due to tension in the muscles responsible for breathing. Once you notice you are holding your breath, try to notice what's happening at that moment or leading up to it for clues about what activated that response. For strategies to release this tension, see Part 4 of this toolkit.

It is important for dominant culture individuals to be able to notice when they may be about to cause harm or have caused harm (e.g., speaking over, taking up too much space, getting defensive, speaking without thinking, or checking in with their bodies) in order to recognize the potential impact, change their behavior, or make amends.

For the sake of tending to wellbeing, it is important for non-dominant culture individuals to be able to notice when harm may be imminent or has happened (e.g., experiencing microaggressions or being shamed, shut down, excluded, ignored, or invalidated) in order to decide how to respond or self-protect in the moment. Doing so may include noticing if the muscles tense or brace, if hyper-vigilance shows up or increases, if heart rate increases, or if mentally or physically numbing out or disassociating.

This noticing, or awareness, is critical not just for the self. You need to notice and become aware of others as well. Notice what is happening in the room. Notice others' signs of dysregulation. Also notice when others are about to harm or be harmed and do what you can to prevent, interrupt, or intervene early. It is especially important for dominant culture individuals to interrupt or intervene early when harm is about to be done. Most critical, however, is knowing that relationship-building and trust are essential in doing equity work. Having explicit and honest conversations about how the group handles harm is of utmost importance.

BASELINE CONSIDERATIONS FOR DETERMINING HOW GROUPS HANDLE HARM MAY INCLUDE:

- What is required to make intervening feel possible?
- Do folks who are harmed want intervention to happen, whether publicly or privately?

Leaders must be centered in their brains and bodies in order to create environments that are safe and supportive for others. At a basic level, embodiment is the way in which the body perceives its environment, gathers information, and turns information into thoughts and behaviors. Thus, if the body is experiencing or perceiving threats, it will turn that information into thoughts and behaviors to react to that threat.

When relaxed, you can focus, engage, keep commitments, and build trust—creating a warmer and more supportive environment for others to engage. When not relaxed or when feeling separate from others or like you don't belong, you can feel vulnerable. Your body may begin communicating that you are unsafe or unliked—even if your thinking brain does not detect a viable threat. Thus, telling yourself or someone else to relax won't work. The body won't hear that message because the lower brain is in charge. When that part of your brain is in control, your ability to communicate with words can be diminished because the middle and top or front parts of the brain are offline. Thus, you want to learn to regulate these parts of your brain so you don't get overwhelmed by looping thoughts and emotions.

Furthermore, for leaders, simple brain-body and somatic centering exercises can lead to increased presence. Too often, you may consciously understand what is needed in a mental sense, but the body holds on to old habits. However, simple exercises, such as those in Part 4, can help you unlearn old ways and learn or relearn new ways of not just “doing” leadership but “being” a leader.

Altogether, brain-body and somatic approaches can support the lived, embodied experiences and understandings of all people, especially those who have experienced oppression. For education leaders, particularly those of us engaging in equity work, brain-body and somatic approaches can support our ability to maintain control, self-awareness, and authenticity in difficult interactions as well as build our capacity to explore emotional and physical concerns and healthy connections to others. The body is part of our whole selves. Thus, including the body is essential for building the skills of, modeling, and truly embodying educational equity and leadership.



Did You Know?

Noticing what is happening in the room is crucial in educational equity work. Examples may vary by person, culture, or context, but can include the following:

- Signs of anxiety or nervousness that you may notice in yourself or others
- Shallow breath that is high in the chest, or holding one's breath while engaging in conversations
- Tense neck, shoulders, upper back
- Lack of eye contact, darting eyes

“Oftentimes, we’re moving at such a pace that there’s a separation that happens between our commitment and our actual action or what we care about and our action, because we haven’t taken that moment to actually see where am I in this moment? Am I here?”

- Terna Tilley-Gyado

Part 4 of this toolkit provides educational equity leaders with simple brain-body strategies and somatic practices to integrate into your work. What Part 4 provides is not exhaustive nor prescriptive. Rather, it is an invitation and a foundation upon which to build and tone your embodied leadership muscle. We also invite you to check out the accompanying interview in Part 2 and sample practice videos linked in Part 4 as well as the resources in Part 5 for additional supports.

Part 4: The “How”— Integrating Brain-Body Practices Into Your Work

The strategies in this section are organized according to the process of reaching the “thinking” or “rational” brain. This section uses neuroscientist Bruce Perry’s 3 Rs to organize the strategies: Regulate, Relate, Reason (Perry, n.d.). *Each “R” builds off the previous one, so there is some overlap in strategies.*

Regulate Strategies

Supporting yourself and colleagues to become regulated is a first priority. To help you feel more settled, you can practice, model, and provide opportunities for noticing, awareness, breath, movement, and vocalization. You can incorporate practices to support stress or trauma release and healing on a body-centered level by releasing core tension and “blocked” (unexpressed, suppressed) emotions.

Brain-Body Awareness

At the most basic level, brain-body and somatic approaches invite you to 1) pause, 2) notice, and 3) feel. Whenever you start to feel signs of dysregulation, first pause—that is, get still and quiet—and fully honor that time and space so that you can then notice. Notice what is happening in your body (physical feelings) as well as in your mind (thoughts and emotions). Last, allow yourself to feel these feelings (physical, mental, and emotional). You don’t want to get stuck in them and become them, but you do need to feel them and allow them to move through.

Note

The brain-body and somatic strategies provided here are for general support. It is normal to have a low mood or some anxiety sometimes. But intense, persistent, or prolonged feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, despair, or anxiety are not. It’s ok to not be ok, but seeking professional help is important if fear or hopelessness is significantly disrupting your daily functioning. Also, be on the lookout for signs of distress in colleagues. Remember, these can show up as outbursts, withdrawal, task avoidance, or absenteeism, so let them know where they can find support or help connect them to support.

Grounding and Centering

Grounding and centering exercises can help you focus on what is happening in your mind, body, and surroundings, which can help you engage and stay focused. These exercises are also great if you or a group of people get dysregulated and are looking for brief exercises to help bring yourselves back into regulation.

These simple exercises can be recorded, spoken, written, or read aloud. As with all individual and group strategies in this toolkit, make sure to consider the context, connections, identities, abilities, and overall vibe in the room to select activities that are safe, doable, and helpful for everyone, and always make each activity an invitation, not a requirement.

- Say, “Before beginning this meeting/day, close your eyes or turn your gaze down to the floor and take three deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth.”
- Ask people to scan their bodies for where they feel tense and where they feel relaxed, then have them silently invite the tense parts to relax so that the tense parts will feel more at ease like the calm parts do. (You can do this exercise individually—silently on your own—as well.)
- Acknowledging that for some people, a body scan or otherwise focusing in on their bodies may feel overwhelming or unsafe, you might suggest that another way to engage is to sense *around* the body or the environment. For example:
 - Notice temperature or pressure sensations around different parts of the body. Also notice sensations of tightness or looseness on the surface of the body.
 - Ask people to look around their environments, name one thing that makes them happy (or calm, or relaxed), and explain why. (You can do this exercise individually—silently on your own—as well.)
 - Use the 5-4-3-2-1 activity: Invite people to look around the room and notice 5 things they see, 4 things they hear, 3 things they feel, 2 things they smell, and 1 thing they taste. (You can do this activity individually—silently on your own—as well.)
- See the video “[Somatic Centering: Practice](#)” by Terna Tilley-Gyado which includes noticing our center, length, depth, width, and more.

Breathing

Note: Light coughing, yawning, tingling, or lightheadedness as your body adjusts to breathing practices is fine, so be sure to sit or lie down. However, cease the exercise if you feel weak or breathless and consult with a medical professional first if you have any medical conditions.

Deep breathing: Try belly breathing, also known as diaphragmatic breathing. While sitting or lying, breathe in slowly through the nose and down into the belly (versus the chest)—filling up the belly and allowing it to rise. Exhale through pursed lips to slow down the breath. Start with 2 minutes, work up to 5, 10, and 20 minutes. Set a timer so you don't have to mind the time.

Rhythmic breathing: Count to four slowly on inhale, pause and hold for four, and exhale slowly for four. Continue this pattern by increasing the count on the exhales. For example, four on the inhale, hold for four, exhale slowly for five. Then, four on the inhale, hold for four, exhale slowly for six. Work your way up to exhaling for eight.

Mindful breathing: Close your eyes or shift your gaze to floor. Begin breathing naturally in through the nose and out through either the mouth or nose. Just notice the breath. When thoughts wander, bring your focus back to the breath. As thoughts come, re-center back to the breath. It's common to have trouble focusing. This is the practice. Try starting with 2 minutes and increase by a minute with each practice.



Did You Know?

Using your diaphragm and stimulating muscles in the neck and throat activates the vagus nerve, which is the nerve in your body that activates your body's relaxation response (or parasympathetic nervous system) and lowers the body's stress response (or sympathetic nervous system).

Movement and Vocalization

General exercise: Engage in whatever exercise works for you including, but not limited to, walking (in nature is best), running, swimming, cycling, yoga, etc.

Simple movements: Engage in simple movements, especially those that allow for movement across the midline of the body, as these can be especially helpful for centering and regulating. A few examples are provided here, but there are many more.

Trunk turns: Either place hands on top of the head or clasp hands in front of you at the chest. Then turn slowly to one side, back to center for a brief hold, then turn to the other side. This set of movements stretches the core and re-centers the spine.

Sun breaths: While seated in a sturdy chair or stool, place your hands palm down on your thighs. Straighten and elongate the spine. As you inhale, lift your hands a few inches. As you exhale, bring your hands back to your thighs. Repeat 5-10 times.

Foot flexes: Seat yourself ideally where you can stretch your legs out in front of you (e.g., floor, bed, but a chair will also work). Flex the feet and then point toes—holding each flex and point for a few seconds each. This movement stretches the lower legs and allows the lower body to relax.

Hand press: Bring the palms together in front of the chest (prayer pose) and push the hands together firmly. Hold for 4-6 counts and release. Repeat 5-10 times.

Arm swing and slaps: Bring the arms up, straight out to the sides (parallel to the ground). Begin swinging from side to side and allow the arms wrap around the body and gently slap as they fall. Swing back and forth 10-20 times.

Dancing and shaking: Dance or shake the body in any way, which can move stress up and out of the body and support physiological regulation.

Vocal toning: Hum, chant, or sing, which can support physiological regulation by toning the vagus nerve.



Did You Know?

Exercise increases oxygen and blood flow to the brain in areas associated with rational thinking and as well as physical, social, and cognitive performance. Exercise also decreases stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol) and increases the number of “feel good” neurotransmitters, such as serotonin and norepinephrine, which are known to accelerate information processing.

Relate Strategies

Relationships are necessary for physical, social, and emotional wellbeing—and they can be quite challenging at times! Autonomic awareness helps you recognize when a relationship lacks engagement, connection, or reciprocity and may end up feeling overwhelming or draining. Thus, being aware of your own self and your own limits and when you reach them is critically important for communication and connection with others. Also, bear in mind that what feels draining or overwhelming to you might not to someone else, and vice versa.

Tip

Try to notice what others are feeling around you, but don't make assumptions about what people's behaviors (verbal and nonverbal) actually mean or what emotions underlie them. They're probably not the same as yours! Emotions vary by person, context, and culture. Thus, get curious, build trust, listen, and learn.

Unspoken somatic exchanges—even more than mental and verbal exchanges—can affect your ability to engage and to transform yourself and systems. Safe and supportive relationships and environments can support the mind and body in regulating and reconnecting so you can best learn, connect, work, and thrive. The following information outlines a few strategies that support the brain-body in regulating and connecting.

Structure and Consistency

Provide yourself and colleagues with structure and consistency through regular routines, agendas, clear norms and expectations, proactive planning, clear and concise instructions, schedules, and other practices. Organization and predictability help to decrease stress in self and others.

Physical Environment

Physical environments play a critical role in people's ability to regulate, engage, and subsequently feel safe and supported. The environment needs to be clean and organized, as people benefit from calm and consistency. While workplaces have different needs, rules, space, and equipment, here are a few relatively easy steps you can take to improve your space:

- **Lighting:** Try to avoid overhead fluorescent lights that come standard in many buildings. When possible, turn lights off and use natural light from windows or soft bulb lamps. You can also put sheer coverings over the fluorescent lights to dim them (make sure coverings are made for this purpose, for safety reasons). Benefits include reducing eye strain, headaches, and blurred vision (Hedge, 2010), and exposure to natural light helps regulate circadian rhythms (Boubekri et al., 2014).
- **Sound:** For some people, even small amounts of noise have been tied to increased stress hormones, reduced motivation, and reduced cognitive ability (Evans & Johnson, 2000; Perham et al., 2013; Smith-Jackson & Klein, 2013). Try to avoid having loud sounds or jarring music playing and minimize as much noise from the outside as possible. When playing music, calming acoustic music works well for calming the brain, and more upbeat rhythmic music can be effective for waking the brain. An ambient noise machine can help reduce distractions during independent work time. Effects can vary by person, though—noise may be distracting for some and enable focusing for others. Use headphones when possible.
- **Smells:** A lot of research shows that some scents can be distracting and even have negative cognitive and affective effects (Rotton, 2010), while some can be calming or energizing (e.g., Moss et al., 2008). Consider an essential oil diffuser, but check to make sure no one in your work environment has allergies to the oils. You can even make a team activity of using scents in the workplace. Allergies permitting, you can bring in small mesh pouches and dried lavender or other sources of calming scents. Then, people can fill, decorate, and use their own calming pouches whenever they want.
- **Movement:** The average employee is sedentary for 7.7 hours a day, and sedentary lifestyles are strongly associated with increased health risks (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Provide plenty of opportunities and space when available for movement of all kinds. Even simple chair exercises or stretching can help when transitioning and refocusing (see strategies in the prior section). Some people benefit from wobble stools or yoga chairs. Places around the room to stand and work can be good for people as well. For discussions, head outside when possible so you can move and communicate (as long as there are appropriate facilities for varying mobility abilities). For more movement-related ideas, see the [Physical Activity Breaks for the Workplace guide](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- **Colors:** Colors can affect feelings, attention, and behavior at work because of the way the brain processes them (Elliot, 2015). For example, blue may help with creativity and productivity. Green and pink can be calming. Orange and yellow can be energy and mood boosters. And red, while stimulating, can also be threatening to the brain.

Overall, think about the elements of your physical environment and try some things out. But don't forget that what works for one person may not work for another, and some spaces may not accommodate or be appropriate for varying abilities and preferences, so take it slow and see how it goes. Sometimes less is more.

Communication and Connection

As you work to connect with self and others, being aware of the mind and body is important. The following outlines some strategies for becoming more aware of verbal and nonverbal communication, which can impact your ability to regulate and connect.

Intentional Space and Bi-Directional Feedback

Be intentional about creating space and opportunities for healthy interactions and for explicitly addressing the importance of safe and supportive social connections.

Elicit feedback from colleagues and others involved in the work and ensure that communication is reciprocal. It is important to ensure that all voices, especially of those furthest from power, are provided a safe and supportive space to be listened to, acknowledged, and affirmed in ways that will result in some action. As Pohl (2017) notes, "Taking a closer look at what is happening in the space between us, where 'knowing with' resides, will provide more insight into how to somatically engage others." Doing so entails understanding and leveraging the role of verbal and nonverbal feedback in relationships. Pohl's (2017) research on this topic has helped identify the types of feedback that produce more expansive and engaged or more contractive and disengaged thinking and behavior patterns.

One way you can facilitate safe and supportive conversations is by identifying actions that are connected to the somatic shifts that enhance system equilibrium and life force (Pohl, 2017). Pay attention to the language and dynamics that either engage or disengage yourself or others. Furthermore, observe and interrogate organizational culture and processes to determine if they are engaging or disengaging, liberating or oppressive.

Notice, Connect, and Reflect

When communicating, notice your breath and facial expressions. Be sure to breathe slowly into the belly, relax the face, and be mindful of facial expressions (e.g., eye rolling, grimacing, etc.), sighing, crossing the arms, or other gestures that move the self or others away from connection and into dysregulation.

This noticing, or awareness, is not just critical for the self. You need to notice and become aware of others as well. Notice what is happening in the room. Notice others' signs of dysregulation. Examples may vary by person, culture, or context, but include signs of anxiety or nervousness that you may notice in yourself or others: breath that is shallow and high in the chest, or breath being held during conversations; tense neck, shoulders, upper back; lack of eye contact or darting eyes. Also notice when others are about to harm or be harmed and do what you can to prevent, interrupt, or intervene early. It is especially important for dominant culture individuals to interrupt or intervene early when harm is about to be done.

One way to connect with others is by making warm and friendly eye contact when appropriate, expressing empathy through verbal and nonverbal communication (nodding, validating, etc.), and holding the person's hand or putting your hand on their shoulder when appropriate (with consent). All of these strategies, when applied appropriately, can calm the nervous system and make way for safe and supportive connections and are particularly important to consider when you have any sort of organizational or societal power in relation to the people around you. When that is the case, use your power to model welcoming and respectful behavior.

When appropriate, you can reflect back what you notice about self or others. For example, you might say, "You seem upset about something," or, "Hmm, do I feel upset about something?" Doing so builds awareness of yourself and others and opens the door to validating experiences and demonstrating compassion for yourself and others.

Attune and Assure Safety

As a leader, attuning to others' brain-body states can support regulation and create a sense of safety. Remember, safety is a complicated concept for many people, especially those who have experienced stress, trauma, or oppression, and it does not mean the same thing for everyone (what feels safe for one person may not feel or be safe for another).

You might say things like “I’m here with you,” “I’m here to support you,” “You have supports here,” or “We’ll get through this.” By using these words in a soft, warm tone of voice, you can calm the nervous system and create channels for safe and supportive communication and connection.

Sometimes, though, you may be the one who needs safety and support which is not present in the work environment. Especially for those of us who have experienced oppression or trauma, taking care of ourselves is the priority. In these situations, it is reasonable and acceptable to have your guard up and to focus on your own safety and regulation. However, doing so does not mean someone should “check out” when situations get uncomfortable (versus unsafe). If you are uncomfortable, we encourage you to lean in and narrate what is going on (see the strategies in the “Reason” section, later in Part 4).

Acknowledge and Affirm

Without trying to rationalize or reason with yourself or others when dysregulated, you can acknowledge and affirm another person while reflecting back. You can practice doing so even if you disagree or don’t understand the other person, as long as you feel safe and regulated yourself. The following are some example acknowledgements and affirmations that you might use to support your colleagues.

“This must be hard for you, feeling xyz.”

“Thank you for sharing this with me.”

“I understand you feel that way.”

“That sounds like a [adjective] experience.”

“I hear you.”

“I’m not sure what to say right now, but I’m here to listen.”

Co-Regulate

You can also support yourself and others through co-regulation. When you notice that others are getting dysregulated, you can assure safety (see prior section on “Attune and Assure Safety”), then bring your focus back to the present. One way is to focus on something tangible that can be touched.

If you or another person is hyper-aroused (fidgety, anxious, angry), you can sit next to them calmly and ask them to breathe with you or close their eyes with you (if they’re comfortable) or engage in any of the other calming activities discussed in the earlier “Regulate” section. Because of mirror neurons, another

person's calming energy can help co-regulate. The same is true if someone is hypo-aroused (down, withdrawn, fatigued, stuck). If they're feeling stuck or withdrawn, encouraging them to join you in energizing movements like stretching, walking, jumping, etc., to get them moving again can support co-regulation.

If someone consents to physical touch and it is appropriate in the context, you may want to hold their hand or rub their back while speaking calmly and asking them to breathe with you or offer a hug. You can also ask someone if they can provide you with physical touch.

Overall, understanding how to somatically engage the self and others allows you to integrate and leverage the intelligence of the body to actualize individual and collective potential.

Reason Strategies

Remember, before trying any of the brain-body or somatic "Reason" strategies, you need to feel calm and connected first. Please review the strategies in the prior sections before moving into the following ones. Also, many of these strategies overlap categories.

Engage

Once ready, you can engage the top and front parts of your or another person's brain by:

- Asking what might help
- Trying a known or obvious strategy (breathing, walking, conversing, etc.)
- Asking what usually works when dysregulated



Did You Know?

You can be a co-regulator for another person and help to calm their survival responses through your connection. Brains contain mirror neurons which support co-regulation (Cook et al., 2014). Mirror neurons allow for emulation and imitation of others' feelings and actions. These interactions between people can support empathy and compassion as well as facilitate co-regulation (e.g., Lamm & Majdandžić, 2015). So, when someone is upset, you may feel sad for them. You can also sit with them in a calm, relaxed state (regulation), which can help enact their mirror neurons to then match your state (co-regulation). The tone of your voice, your facial expressions, and your gestures can also signal safety to another person and help them regulate.

- Acknowledging if someone is not ready to engage
- Listening without trying to solve problems
- Acknowledging each person's agency to do what they want or need with or without support

Notice and Name

You can personally name and honor your thoughts and feelings and can model for others how to do so. Our society often doesn't allow this kind of recognition. People often tell others "Don't be so sad," "Don't cry," or "They didn't mean any harm," and angry outbursts tend to be punished. However, if you and others can learn healthy ways to express emotions, you can start to identify when people are getting dysregulated before becoming completely dysregulated. You and colleagues can then begin to take steps to learn about your biases, shift your mindsets, and improve your behaviors to align with your growth.

For example, in moments when you or others are showing signs of dysregulation, you can simply ask yourself or the other person to name what they're feeling, where you or they feel it in their body, and offer calming and centering strategies. Once calm and settled, then coping strategies can be considered or discussed. Another example is to notice where you are in terms of fight, flight, or freeze, and name that state. Then turn towards your experience and get curious. Listen for a moment to the story of your state.

The following expands on noticing and naming and provides two practices for *somatic sensing and narrative work*.

Somatic Sensing and Narrative Practice #1

STEP 1: Regulate!

If you find yourself becoming dysregulated in a particular situation or interaction, remove yourself (leave the room, turn your camera off if online, etc.) so that you can regulate yourself. Let the person (or group) know that you need some time and you will return when ready. Tell yourself, "Let's breathe for a few moments." (See breathing techniques in the prior section for ways to regulate. Other regulating strategies are also appropriate. Do what works for you.)

Once you're feeling more regulated, you may begin the next step.

Note: When you're emotionally dysregulated, you can't actually access the parts of your brain that are necessary for processing and reasoning, especially for hard topics and challenging conversations, so the next step is to narrate what's going on in your body right now.

STEP 2: Narrate what's going on in your body right now.

What body part is speaking to you right now?

Tune into your body and either point to or say where you're feeling distress. Your head may hurt or feel dizzy; heart may be beating quickly or pounding; chest may feel tight; neck may feel hot, tense, or painful; throat may feel dry, hoarse, or burning; voice may be shaky; lungs may feel short of breath or have fast breathing; hands or legs may feel weak or shaky; stomach may feel sick or fluttery; skin may be itchy, cold, or sweaty; etc.

What emotion is connected to that body part?

The emotion may be anger, fear, anxiety, agitation, shame, humiliation, guilt, sadness, feeling out of control, etc.

What was the cause of that emotion?

Consider the topic of conversation, the dynamic or interaction between people, feeling put on the spot, not being seen, feeling misunderstood, being disrespected, feeling further oppressed, etc.

How does this emotion (or its behavioral manifestation) impact you?

How does this influence your work?

Consider how the emotions show up in behavior. For example, someone might feel misunderstood, which led them to feel shame, which led them to center or decenter themselves, which could cause more harm to the self or group, which led to more feelings of misunderstanding and shame and eventually withdrawal or fleeing from a situation. Another example: Someone may have also felt shame or guilt or may have felt their power threatened, which led them to further center themselves and assert their power and cause more harm to the group. Many possibilities exist, but walk yourself through this process a few times until it becomes clear what is underneath the emotion or behavior and what impacts it has.

Considerations

Often, the purpose of meetings focused on equity is to work through tough issues but also receive guidance about how to do the work. However, if you show up dysregulated or become dysregulated, you need to pause so you

can get regulated again and you can access the parts of your brain and body needed to do this work which involves challenging conversations. Some questions to consider include:

- Do the relationships in the room allow for people to navigate challenging issues with authenticity and respect? If not, what is required to cultivate that foundation?
- For people with dominant culture identities: Is decentering intentionally present in the room? For people with marginalized identities: What do you need to feel less drained in engaging? What do you need to feel heard or to feel that your contributions are valued by colleagues?

For more information and resources on decentering, see [Great Lakes Equity, Street Data](#), and [Equity Visits](#).

Somatic Sensing and Narrative Practice #2

STEP 1: Regulate!

If you find yourself becoming dysregulated in a particular situation or interaction, remove yourself (leave the room, turn your camera off if online, etc.) so that you can regulate yourself. Let the person (or group) know that you need some time and you will return when ready. Tell yourself, “Let’s breathe for a few moments.” (See breathing techniques in the prior section for ways to regulate. Other regulating strategies above are also appropriate. Do what works for you.)

Once you’re feeling more regulated, you may begin the next step.

Note: When you’re emotionally dysregulated, you can’t actually access the parts of your brain that are necessary for processing and reasoning, especially for hard topics and challenging conversations. So the next step is to narrate what’s going on in your body right now.

STEP 2: Complete sentence starters for physical and emotional sensations

When I hear you (or this person) say _____,
I feel _____.

I notice when I say _____ my body feels _____.

If you're having trouble naming your emotions, you can use your own sentence starters or have a trusted colleague co-facilitate brain-body awareness with you. The following are sentence starters for a trusted colleague:

It sounds to me like this might feel _____.

I can sense that you are feeling _____ [emotion].
I notice your _____ [body or voice shaking, hands sweating, eyes crying, etc.]. Is that where it's showing up for you?
Can you tell me more?

Your face is telling me that _____.
Does that sound right? Can you tell me more?

I can hear in your voice that _____.
Does that sound right? Can you tell me more?

I can hear how _____ [emotion] you are feeling.

Considerations

Often the purpose of meetings focused on equity is to work through tough issues but also receive guidance about how to do the work. However, if you show up dysregulated or become dysregulated, you need to pause so you can get regulated again so you can access the parts of your brain and body needed to do this work that involves challenging conversations. Some questions to consider include:

- Do the relationships in the room allow for people to navigate challenging issues with authenticity and respect? If not, what is required to cultivate that foundation?
- For people with dominant culture identities: Is decentering intentionally present in the room? For people with marginalized identities: What do you need to feel less drained in engaging? What do you need to feel heard or to feel that your contributions are valued by colleagues?

For more information and resources on decentering, see [Great Lakes Equity, Street Data](#), and [Equity Visits](#).

Part 5: Resources

This section presents a variety of resources to support you in incorporating brain-body and somatic practices into your equity leadership work. The resources are grouped by topic or type. The title of each resource is linked to where you can find it online, and the description below each title is a direct excerpt from the resource itself or from where it is posted, providing a brief overview of what the resource offers, in the words of those who developed it.

Resources for Equitable Leadership

[Leading for Equity Framework](#)

“National Equity Project’s [Leading for Equity Framework](#) provides a frame of reference that enables leaders to navigate the complex territory of equity challenges and to develop the capacity to engage in purposeful leadership action. In its simplest form, the Framework helps build habits of mind that are continually in practice. In its more elaborated form, it provides a set of tools, frames and processes that leaders can use in their work.”

[Tennessee Leaders for Equity Playbook](#)

“This playbook was developed by a statewide team of school, district, community, higher education, and state leaders with substantial feedback received from a comprehensive set of stakeholder groups. It features: an action plan framework to assist leaders in the selection, implementation, and monitoring of the most relevant equity commitments for their community; an equity shifts continuum describing the common misconceptions that must be examined and discussed for each equity commitment before moving to an equity mindset; key actions and resources that can be taken and used by school, district, school board, and community leaders for each of the seven equity commitments.”

[Equity Leadership Team Protocol](#)

“The Oregon Leadership Network (OLN) promotes the engagement of school and district staff to continually examine and discuss potential inequities. These conversations may address policy and procedural issues, student engagement issues, allocation or redistribution of resources, or just a new way of looking at school or districts structure, practice, or policy. One way to scaffold these important conversations is through the creation of an Equity Leadership Team.... The protocol presented in this booklet is intended as a guide for designing the structure, role, and work of the Equity Leadership Team.”

Resources for Physical Activity

[Physical Activity Breaks for the Workplace: CDC Resource Guide](#)

“Workplace health promotion continues to grow in America, with 46% of U.S. worksites having some kind of program. Employers realize the workplace offers a great way to support and promote health and wellness. More than 156 million full-time workers in the United States spend one-third of their day at the workplace. These employees often spend hours sitting at a desk or in meetings, with little opportunity for physical activity. The Physical Activity Breaks for the Workplace Resource Guide is designed for all employers, regardless of size or industry type. It provides many resources and ideas to help employees build short (5–10-minute) activity breaks into their workdays.”

Podcasts

[Trauma, Healing, and Collective Power](#)

“In June 2018, generative somatics (gs) created a podcast with Spenta Kandawalla, Prentis Hemphill and Staci K. Haines, hosted by adrienne maree brown. They had a conversation about trauma, oppression, healing and organizing for structural change. They dug into the connections between personal, collective and structural transformation, and between healing and building collective power. They also explored the term Healing Justice. What does embodied healing have to do with creating liberation?”

[Finding Our Way](#)

“Finding Our Way is a podcast hosted by writer, healer, teacher, and Somatics practitioner, Prentis Hemphill. Prentis dives into topics of embodiment, boundaries, harm, creativity, and more with people who are working to reshape this world. This isn't a podcast about answers. It is an exploration into ourselves, and the skills we need to create and embody the world we want.”

Peer-Reviewed Research Articles

[Legacy of Trauma](#)

An article about how “an emerging line of research is exploring how historical and cultural traumas affect survivors' children for generations to come.”

Racial Trauma: Theory, Research, and Healing: Introduction to the Special Issue

“Racial trauma, a form of race-based stress, refers to People of Color and Indigenous individuals’ (POCI) reactions to dangerous events and real or perceived experiences of racial discrimination. Such experiences may include threats of harm and injury, humiliating and shaming events, and witnessing racial discrimination toward other POCI. Although similar to posttraumatic stress disorder, racial trauma is unique in that it involves ongoing individual and collective injuries due to exposure and reexposure to race-based stress. The articles in this special issue introduce new conceptual approaches, research, and healing models to challenge racial trauma. The authors encourage psychologists to develop culturally informed healing modalities and methodologically sophisticated research and urge the inclusion of public policy interventions in the area of racial trauma.”

Somatic Experiencing: Using Interoception and Proprioception as Core Elements of Trauma Therapy

“Here we present a theory of human trauma and chronic stress, based on the practice of Somatic Experiencing® (SE), a form of trauma therapy that emphasizes guiding the client’s attention to interoceptive, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive experience. SE™ claims that this style of inner attention, in addition to the use of kinesthetic and interoceptive imagery, can lead to the resolution of symptoms resulting from chronic and traumatic stress.”

Somatic Experiencing for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Randomized Controlled Outcome Study

“This study presents the first known randomized controlled study evaluating the effectiveness of somatic experiencing (SE), an integrative body-focused therapy for treating people with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There were 63 participants meeting *DSM-IV-TR* full criteria for PTSD included. Baseline clinical interviews and self-report measures were completed by all participants, who were then randomly assigned to study ($n = 33$) or waitlist ($n = 30$) groups.... This randomized controlled study of SE shows positive results indicating SE may be an effective therapy method for PTSD.”

A Randomized Controlled Study of Neurofeedback for Chronic PTSD

“Brain/Computer Interaction (BCI) devices are designed to alter neural signals and, thereby, mental activity. This study was a randomized, waitlist (TAU) controlled trial of a BCI, EEG neurofeedback training (NF), in patients with chronic PTSD to explore the capacity of NF to reduce PTSD symptoms and increase affect regulation capacities.”

COVID-19 and Teachers' Somatic Burden, Stress, and Emotional Exhaustion:
Examining the Role of Principal Leadership and Workplace Buoyancy

“The role of two leadership factors (autonomy-supportive and autonomy-thwarting leadership) and one personal resource (workplace buoyancy) were examined as predictors of three teacher outcomes: somatic burden, stress related to change, and emotional exhaustion. Data were collected from 325 Australian teachers in May, 2020 during the first wave of COVID-19. During this time, many Australian children were being taught remotely from home, while other students were attending schools in-person. Findings showed that autonomy-supportive leadership was associated with greater buoyancy and, in turn, lower somatic burden, stress related to change, and emotional exhaustion (while controlling for covariates, including COVID-19 work situation). Autonomy-thwarting leadership was positively associated with emotional exhaustion. In addition, autonomy-supportive leadership was indirectly associated with the outcomes. The findings provide understanding of factors that may be harnessed to support teachers during subsequent waves of COVID-19 and other future disruptions to schooling that may occur.”

Books on Equitable Leadership

Dare to Lead: Brave Work. Tough Conversations. Whole Hearts

“When we dare to lead, we don’t pretend to have the right answers; we stay curious and ask the right questions. We don’t see power as finite and hoard it; we know that power becomes infinite when we share it with others. We don’t avoid difficult conversations and situations; we lean into vulnerability when it’s necessary to do good work. But daring leadership in a culture defined by scarcity, fear, and uncertainty requires skill-building around traits that are deeply and uniquely human. The irony is that we’re choosing not to invest in developing the hearts and minds of leaders at the exact same time as we’re scrambling to figure out what we have to offer that machines and AI can’t do better and faster. What can we do better? Empathy, connection, and courage, to start.”

Equity Visits: A New Approach to Supporting Equity-Focused School and District Leadership

“Why are equity visits such a critical first step to increasing opportunity and access for our under-served students? Because they take instructional rounds to a new level, providing a powerful lens for investigating the intersections of equity and instruction. After all, how can we possibly deliver equitable learning experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for our students, without first pinpointing problems of practice? That’s

where Equity Visits will prove absolutely indispensable to district and school administrators. It details how to combine a strong focus on instruction with explicit, intentional efforts to address systemic inequities.”

Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation

“Education can be transformed if we eradicate our fixation on big data like standardized test scores as the supreme measure of equity and learning. Instead of the focus being on ‘fixing’ and ‘filling’ academic gaps, we must envision and rebuild the system from the *student* up—with classrooms, schools and systems built around students’ brilliance, cultural wealth, and intellectual potential. Street data reminds us that what is measurable is not the same as what is valuable and that data can be humanizing, liberatory and healing. By breaking down street data fundamentals: what it is, how to gather it, and how it can complement other forms of data to guide a school or district’s equity journey, Safir and Dugan offer an actionable framework for school transformation.”

Books on Healing Racial Stress and Trauma

My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies

“In this groundbreaking book, therapist Resmaa Menakem examines the damage caused by racism in America from the perspective of trauma and body-centered psychology. The body is where our instincts reside and where we fight, flee, or freeze, and it endures the trauma inflicted by the ills that plague society. Menakem argues this destruction will continue until Americans learn to heal the generational anguish of white supremacy, which is deeply embedded in all our bodies. Our collective agony doesn’t just affect African Americans. White Americans suffer their own secondary trauma as well. So do blue Americans—our police. *My Grandmother’s Hands* is a call to action for all of us to recognize that racism is not only about the head, but about the body, and introduces an alternative view of what we can do to grow beyond our entrenched racialized divide.”

Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma

“*Waking the Tiger* normalizes the symptoms of trauma and the steps needed to heal them. People are often traumatized by seemingly ordinary experiences. The reader is taken on a guided tour of the subtle, yet powerful impulses that govern our responses to overwhelming life events. To do this, it employs a series of exercises that help us focus on bodily sensations. Through heightened awareness of these sensations trauma can be healed.”

Restorative Yoga for Ethnic and Race-Based Stress and Trauma

“Presenting ways in which Restorative Yoga can contribute to healing emotional wounds, this book invites yoga teachers, therapists and practitioners to consider the psychological impact of ethnic and race-based stress and trauma. It aids in the process of uncovering, examining, and healing one’s own emotional wounds and offers insight into avoiding wounding or re-wounding others.”

Transforming Ethnic and Race-Based Traumatic Stress With Yoga

“*Transforming Ethnic and Race-Based Traumatic Stress with Yoga* is a self-care study guide where each chapter includes a reading for contemplation on an area of ethnic and/or race related traumatic stress, an illustration of a Restorative Yoga pose with instructions on how to get into it and accompanied by positive affirmations to repeat while in the pose. This is followed by a therapeutic journal writing instruction with blank pages for journal entries to reinforce the affirmations and to identify the psychological, mental, emotional, and spiritual benefits of the posture presented.”

Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others

“This book is written for anyone who is doing work with an intention to make the world more sustainable and hopeful—all in all, a better place—and who, through this work, is exposed to the hardship, pain, crisis, trauma, or suffering of other living beings or the planet itself. It is for those who notice that they are not the same people they once were, or are being told by their families, friends, colleagues, or pets that something is different about them.”

It Didn’t Start with You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle

“*It Didn’t Start With You* shows how the traumas of our parents, grandparents, and even great grandparents can live in our unexplained depression, anxiety, fears, phobias, obsessive thoughts and physical symptoms—what scientists are now calling ‘secondary PTSD.’ Documenting the latest epigenetic research—how traumatic memories are transmitted through chemical changes in DNA—and the latest advances in neuroscience and the science of language, *It Didn’t Start With You* is an accessible and pragmatic guide to breaking inherited family patterns.”

Blogs

[The Four Parts of Accountability: How to Give a Genuine Apology Part 1](#)

“This write-up primarily focuses on apologizing to people that we care about; people with whom *we want to continue to be in relationship*; people who are already in our lives and with whom we have loving or caring relationships. There are many different factors in apologizing and everything cannot be covered here. Here, we will focus on conflict, hurt, misunderstandings, small breaks in trust, and low-level harm. We begin with these because most of us do not know how to navigate these smaller experiences and our relationships suffer or even end because of it. We stress relationship building in transformative justice work because without strong relationships, we will not be able to respond effectively to harm, violence and abuse within our own communities.”

Videos

[Polyvagal Theory and Trauma](#)

“A Polyvagal approach uses an updated map of the autonomic circuits that underlie behaviors and beliefs so clinicians can reliably lead their clients out of adaptive survival responses into the autonomically regulated state of safety that is necessary for successful treatment. Polyvagal Theory gives clinicians a guide to help clients safely tune into their autonomic states, reshape their nervous systems, and rewrite the trauma stories that are carried in their autonomic pathways.”

Transformative Training and Support

[Lumos Transforms](#)

“Lumos Transforms is a social enterprise founded in 2015 to shepherd individuals, communities, and organizations through positive change. Whether people are dealing with unpleasant symptoms, overwhelming stress, difficult past experiences, or unjust circumstances, we meet clients exactly where they are—providing responsive solutions that help people feel better, prepare for change, and unlock their inner potential. By empowering individuals to access wellness, grow resilience, and cultivate beneficial behaviors, we initiate a transformation process that ripples outward. The ultimate goal? Creating socio-cultural systems that are healthy, balanced, interdependent, sustainable, and equitable.”

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Equity Accelerator Project

Funded by the S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation as part of the COVID Education Equity Response Collaborative, the [Equity Accelerator](#) project provided state-wide professional learning sessions and a fellowship program for staff from select county offices of education (COEs) from January through November 2021. The project supported California's COEs to improve how their whole-child and whole-school efforts align with each other and cohere with a vision of cultivating fundamental and sustainable change toward more equitable education systems. Equity Accelerator Fellows participated in an intensive, cohort-based experience in 2021 focused on leveraging existing agency efforts and priorities to dismantle biased and oppressive systems, cultivate healing and resilience, and ensure equity across their counties. They learned technical skills and adaptive strategies for creating systemic and sustainable change.

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