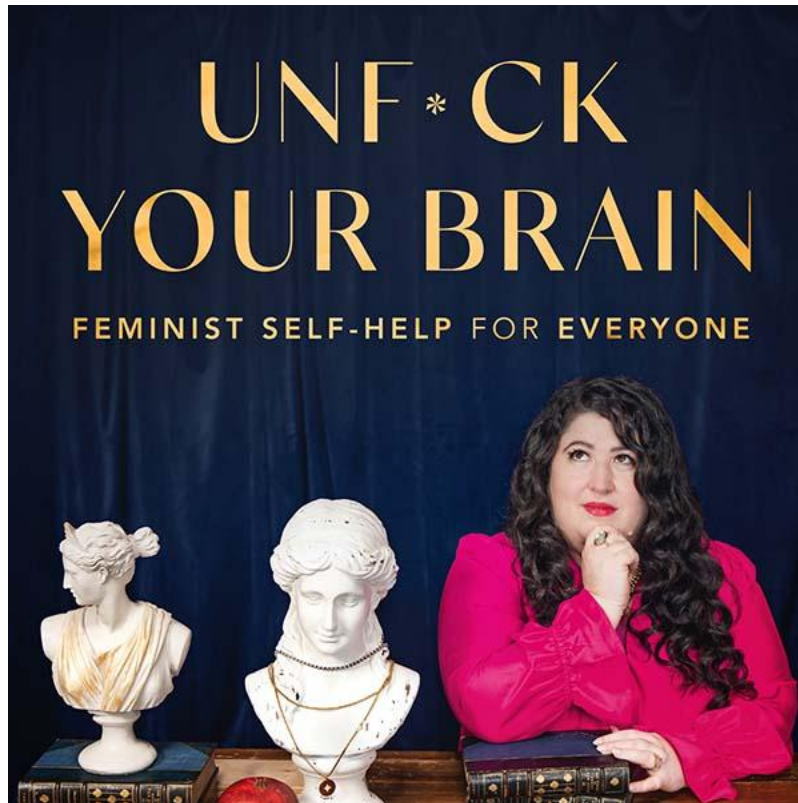


UFYB 537: Coaching Hotline: What Does Nervous System Regulation Actually Mean?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kara Loewentheil

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Welcome to *UnF*ck Your Brain*. I'm your host, Kara Loewentheil, Master Certified Coach and founder of The School of New Feminist Thought. I'm here to help you turn down your anxiety, turn up your confidence, and create a life on your own terms, one that you're truly excited to live. Let's go.

Welcome to this week's coaching hotline episode where I answer real questions from real listeners and coach you from afar. If you want to submit your question for consideration, go to unfuckyourbrain.com/coachinghotline, all one word, or text your email to +1 (347) 997-1784 and when you get prompted for the code word, it's coaching hotline, all one word. Let's get into this week's questions.

"I've heard the term regulation come up in the podcast. Nervous system regulation, dysregulation, etc. What does that mean? How would you characterize it? Can you be regulated and still feel angry or sad or ashamed?"

This is a great question, and I think the truth is, these things are somewhat of a Venn diagram. So, we talk about emotions, we talk about nervous system regulation or dysregulation, and we talk about them like they're completely different things. But of course, they overlap. Because for instance, the feeling of anger can be happening coextensively at the same time as nervous system activation that puts you into fight or flight. For instance, why do we fight, right? Because we feel angry. We feel threatened. Then we want to fight. That's a nervous system response. So, yes, I believe that they can be different and can overlap.

When we're talking about nervous system regulation, it's not a static state. We're really talking about whether your parasympathetic nervous system and your sympathetic nervous system, which one of them you are in.

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Which one of them is running the show at a given moment. When you're regulated, that generally is used to mean that you are in your parasympathetic nervous system. So, essentially you are not in a state of fight or flight. When you are activated, you're in your sympathetic nervous system, that is when that fight or flight reaction is being triggered. And fight or flight is like the classic formulation. Now, people sometimes say fight, flight, fawn, or freeze. So, there's theories that there's more than two states, that maybe there's more like four states.

When you're in, when the sympathetic nervous system is activated, you have physical effects of that, okay? So, the blood flow shifts towards your muscles and away from non-essential functions like digestion. So, if you're stressed, your digestion will be worse because your blood is going to your muscles, because your brain thinks you might have to run away from something that's trying to kill you. Your heart rate goes up, your pupils may dilate. There's a bunch of different kind of things that happen.

That's your sympathetic nervous system. That is what we might call dysregulation. And your parasympathetic nervous system is when that stuff is not happening. So that is your, you are regulated essentially if you are not dysregulated. It's a little bit of a tautology there, but you are more regulated when you are in your parasympathetic nervous system, you are more dysregulated when your sympathetic nervous system is activated.

Now, in terms of the relationship between your nervous system and your emotions, like I said, I think that's really kind of more of a Venn diagram. The way that this is usually explained is the idea that the physical component of an emotion that you're having is happening in your nervous system, right? Your heart rate, your breathing, your muscle tension, your whatever else is happening, your blood flow, your oxygen levels, all that stuff. And then when we use the word emotion, we're talking about a kind of bigger experience that has more psychological elements. So, the

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emotion is physically happening in your body, but your brain is part of both creating and interpreting that experience.

When it comes down to how we use these things in thought work, I don't find it super useful to get really hung up on the intricacies of it. Because really what we're trying to do when we are coaching ourselves is we are trying to develop better awareness of what is happening in our body. Whether it's a nervous system activation, whether it's an emotion, whether both are happening. Sometimes we have a thought that makes us feel angry and then that sets off our sympathetic nervous system because our brain thinks that it's detected a threat, right? That we're angry about, and then we get activated in our nervous system.

When it comes to self-coaching, we're just trying to get better and better at sensing what's happening in our body earlier and earlier in the process so that we can do whatever we need to do, whether that is change our thought to keep it from running away with us or take a moment and try to regulate ourselves without acting out. And so when I talk about regulating yourself, I might be talking about literally trying to calm your nervous system from sympathetic back to parasympathetic. Or I might be talking more broadly about processing an emotion, noticing an emotion is happening in your body, using the tools that I teach in my programs to help you process that emotion, help it move through your body, and help it finish its natural lifespan, its natural course in your body without getting stuck in it, ruminating, repressing it, trying to resist it, all those things that we do with our emotion.

So, it is a good question and if you want to nerd out about it, you can totally go deep in the research on emotions versus nervous system regulation and how they overlap and interact. But for me, it doesn't matter that much ultimately, because what I'm always trying to do with coaching is notice what's happening in my body, give myself whatever kind of support I need

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to have space between that emotion, the story I'm telling about it, the story I'm telling that caused it, and any actions I might take.