

SELF-REGULATE, THEN FACILITATE

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This activity was developed through a collaboration between Restorative Teaching Tools, Leah Landry Consulting, and Restorative Justice Practice.

OBJECTIVE

As restorative practitioners, we will inevitably hear statements that frustrate, upset, or anger us. We may feel activated by harmful language, or experience intense emotions in response to someone else's story and beliefs.

If we respond from the height of that activation, we risk shutting others down, escalating conflict, or acting from our own unexamined bias. If we suppress our reactions entirely, we may disconnect from ourselves, others, and the process.

This activity helps practitioners build embodied awareness and regulation skills so they can tend to big feelings without being controlled by them. Learners will practice:

- Identifying sensations and emotions in real time
- Expanding emotional vocabulary
- Applying regulation strategies intentionally
- Responding after self-attunement rather than from reactivity

Note: This activity is best suited for groups of practitioners who already have group norms and relational trust established. It invites vulnerability and internal awareness.

Preface: Why Embody?

This activity is informed by somatic awareness, nervous system science, and restorative principles that emphasize dignity, agency, and relational accountability. It can be paired with other Restorative Teaching Tools activities that focus on deep listening such as What I Hear You Saying Is; and activities for addressing systemic harms such as Viewing History through a Restorative Lens; Identifying, Navigating, and Transforming Racial Harm, and Inclusive Facilitation: Increasing LGBTQ+ Awareness in Restorative Justice.

For people new to embodiment work or those who want to understand why it is an essential practice for RJ practitioners and other facilitators, read more about the intelligence of our bodies, and how that intelligence is communicated through sensation, in this blog post by Erica Lee, informed by *The Neurobiology of Connection* by Natureza Gabriel: "[Why Embody?](#)"

MATERIALS

- **Scenarios:** 3-8 scenarios or statements that may evoke disagreement or activation. Ideas for gathering scenarios:
 - Develop scenarios based on experiences with your community
 - Reference the Restorative Teaching Tools activities listed under “Why Embody” for example scenarios and statements
 - Advanced version: Ask participants to bring their own examples of when they felt activated while facilitating
- Slides
 - Slides with one scenario or statement per slide
 - Slides with each of the three primary Regulation Strategies listed in Round 2
- Optional
 - Feelings Wheel and/or Sensations Vocabulary List
 - Music for movement portion

Consent and Cultural Context

Offering participants choice around how they want to participate in this activity is essential. Remember that each person brings their own beliefs, culture, faith, and personal history to this experience. Don't assume that all participants will be comfortable with each self-regulation strategy, or respond similarly when trying them out. They may need to opt out of some or all strategies. As the facilitator, it's important to make space for that choice.

Before beginning the activity, inform participants about the structure and purpose of the activity. Why is it important to you, and why do you believe it is important for them to explore self-regulation strategies more broadly? Where did the activity come from, and how did you prepare to facilitate it?

During the activity, remind participants that you are offering each strategy as an invitation, and they can choose to try that strategy, or do something different. For example, structured breathing may not be accessible for some people due to cultural, religious, or health reasons. You can invite participants to insert their own practice for grounding and regulation instead of structured breathing, or they can sit quietly as others practice.

We found these guidelines helpful for setting up an inclusive environment when introducing self-regulation strategies: [8 Tips and Scripts for Trauma Informed Mindfulness Teaching, by Christopher Willard.](#)

Neurodivergence Consideration

Some participants may struggle to identify emotions through traditional language. Offer alternative entry points. Participants could describe their experience in the following ways instead of naming emotions, or along with naming emotions:

- Colors / Images or scenes / Sounds / Temperature or texture words

Provide multiple pathways for accessing and expressing internal awareness.

INSTRUCTIONS

Divide participants into groups of 3 people. Invite the whole group to:

- Take 3–5 slow breaths
- Feel their feet on the ground
- Engage in gentle stretching, noticing sensations in the body

This helps participants settle and prepare to notice sensations and emotions.

Round 1: Naming Sensations & Emotions

It is helpful to demonstrate this process first as the facilitator before giving the participants their first prompt. In your demonstration, model pausing and slowing down, you can close your eyes and take some breaths, to tune in to your sensations and emotions before naming them out loud.

Read a scenario or statement out loud. Show that scenario on a slide as well, for visual learners.

Instruct participants to silently notice their internal reactions by focusing on sensations and emotions. Give them time to notice. Then ask participants to share in their small groups:

- 1–2 sensations in their body (for example, “I feel tightness in my chest and my heart is beating faster.”)
- 1–2 emotions present (for example, “I feel panicked and overwhelmed.”)

Repeat these steps with 2-3 more scenarios before moving on to Round 2.

Be aware of the common tendency to share a thought instead of a feeling (e.g., “I just think that’s ridiculous”). In this case, gently invite participants to focus on the feeling or sensation embedded in the thought. Use a feelings wheel or sensations list if helpful.

Purpose:

- Increase vocabulary for sensations and emotions
- Normalize bodily reactions
- Build awareness before attempting regulation

Optional trust-building variation:

One participant names a sensation (e.g., “tight,” “sharp,” “heavy”), and others mirror it briefly through posture or subtle movement.

Invite a collective breath, or some physical movement like stretching or shaking, to reset before moving on to the next round.

Round 2: Exploring Regulation Strategies

This round will introduce three primary regulation strategies. Facilitator modeling is powerful during this round as well.

Strategy 1: Structured Breathing

Reread a scenario from Round 1 while presenting it on a slide.

Introduce Strategy 1: Structured Breathing

Inhale for a count of 4, hold your breath in for a count of 4, exhale for a count of 4, hold your breath out for a count of 4. Repeat 3 times.

Ask participants to share in their small groups: How do you feel now? Name emotions and sensations.

Strategy 2: Movement

Reread a different scenario from Round 1 while presenting it on a slide.

Introduce Strategy 2: Movement

Play a song. Invite participants to sway, stretch, dance, or simply listen.

Ask participants to share in their small group: How do you feel now? Name emotions and sensations.

Strategy 3: Verbal Self-Validation

Reread a different scenario from Round 1 while presenting it on a slide.

Introduce Strategy 3: Verbal Self-Validation

First, ask participants to notice the emotions and sensations present.

Then, invite participants to say a phrase aloud to their own emotion, using one of the following options:

- "It makes sense to feel [x emotion] right now."
- "I see you."
- "You get to be here."
- "We are safe."

Ask participants to share in their small group: How do you feel now? Name emotions and sensations.

Repeat each strategy 2 more times, guiding participants through each of the regulation strategies and giving them time to feel what's happening and notice shifts.

More Regulation Strategies:

- Gentle self-touch where sensation is strongest (chest, jaw, shoulders, belly)
- Humming, singing (even a simple children's song), or audible sighing
- Ask yourself: "What does your body want to do right now?"

Purpose:

Build multiple options for tending to activation rather than suppressing or discharging it outward. Some strategies suggested above can be done in the moment without anyone noticing. For some options, you may invite the whole group to do them with you or give the group a break so you can tend to your own emotions.

Round 3: Responding After Regulation

In this round, participants will use the skills they practiced in rounds 1 and 2. After using one of the three primary regulation strategies, they will add a verbal response. Once again, facilitators should demonstrate first.

Instruct participants to find a partner and assign Person A and Person B.

Reread a scenario while presenting it on a slide.

Prompt Person A to:

- Name their sensations and emotions to their partner
- Choose a regulation strategy (make the 3 primary regulation strategies available on a slide)
- After using a regulation strategy, share the next sentence you would say, question you would ask, or thing you would do in response to the scenario.

Repeat the steps above for Person B, using a different scenario.

Debrief in Pairs:

- How did it feel to respond after regulating?
- Did your response differ from what you might have said or done if you responded before regulating?

Supporting Big Emotions

Sometimes when we invite people into their bodies, strong emotions arise. Tears, shaking, anger, or visible distress may surface.

If this occurs:

- Normalize it: "Strong emotions are welcome here. This is part of being present."
- Encourage noticing sensations without judgment
- Offer grounding (feet on floor, slow breath, gentle self-touch)
- With permission, invite others to silently or verbally hold space using phrases like:
 - "We see you."
 - "It makes sense to feel that."
- Avoid rushing to fix or minimize. The goal is containment, not suppression.

- Movement and sensory stimulation help to discharge the energy of the emotion so it does not accumulate as stress in the body. Encourage participants to be with their big emotions when they have space and time. This could look like running, dancing, yelling into a pillow, watching trees sway or clouds move.

This models emotional compassion and demonstrates that intensity can be witnessed without escalation.

DEBRIEF

- Which regulation strategy felt most natural to you?
- Which felt hardest or most unfamiliar?
- What changed between when you noticed your reactions in Round 1 and your final response after regulating in Round 3?
- What could you do to improve your ability to access these strategies in difficult moments? What could you do proactively, for example before you begin facilitating, to practice these techniques?
- How might this practice support your facilitation of restorative processes?
- (For integrating big emotions) Imagine your strong emotion as a trusted messenger. What did the strong emotion come to tell you?

LESSON

We cannot prevent strong emotions from arising. However, by strengthening our capacity to notice, validate, and process them, we increase our ability to respond rather than react. The more we practice tending to big emotions in low-pressure situations, the easier it will be to tend to them during stressful moments.

Embodied awareness allows us to stay connected to ourselves while remaining in relationship with others – even when we strongly disagree. Developing these skills helps restorative practitioners hold space when tension arises, reduce harm, and engage with greater integrity and care for the group and themselves.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This activity is informed by restorative practice, somatics, and community-based justice traditions. We extend gratitude to Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) for the Feelings Wheel and Sensations Chart, which support emotional literacy and embodied awareness. This work is also shaped by training through the Strozzi Institute and Embodying Racial Justice, whose teachings on somatics, leadership, and racial justice inform the regulation practices included in this activity.

ADVANCED VERSION

Instead of using prewritten scenarios and statements, ask participants to prepare for this activity by bringing several of their own examples of when they felt activated while facilitating. It will be important to indicate the range of intensity of their activation. For example, on a scale of 1-10, we are looking for times you were activated between a level 2-5. Asking participants to work with personal experiences increases the risk and vulnerability in the activity, so make sure you have built a foundation of trust through connection and relationship-building first.

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