

Managing Ongoing Overwhelm and Exhaustion:

Part 2 – Safely Connected: How God Intended

We described the use of the [Autonomic Nervous System \(ANS\) Map](#) last month. Once clients have started to become aware of what state their ANS is in, you can help them move toward the state of safety and connection. This can be accomplished several ways—three of which we outline in this counseling toolkit.

1. Co-regulate with your clients through non-verbal cues of safety

Our Autonomic Nervous System is relational. This lovely aspect of our bodies points toward our godly design to be in relationship with God and others. As our nervous system continuously scans to assess safety or danger, it picks up on subtle non-verbal cues given by people. The language and signals that our nervous system picks up are sensory. We can communicate safety to our clients through a variety of gestures—such as a softer gaze, a warm tone of voice, eye contact, a facial expression that communicates, ‘I see you,’ ‘I hear you,’ ‘you matter.’ Our cue can be an open body posture; it can be a safe touch or even a mirrored touch. For example, if we put our hands on our hearts, we communicate that we are connected to what was shared.

In these ways, we can effectively communicate cues of safety and connection to our clients through our compassionate presence. What we foster with our clients is the chance to borrow felt safety from us. This is co-regulation. Therefore, as caregivers, it is important that we too are aware of and able to regulate our own nervous system. The exercises below can help you regulate your own ANS before you go into a session, in addition to helping your clients.

2. Guide them to experience God as their ultimate source of safety and connection.

Co-regulation can ultimately be found in felt experiences with Jesus. We want to help clients internalize the Gospel—the good news that we are in right relationship with God through the death and resurrection of Jesus and that Jesus himself is always with us. Ultimately, our bodies and nervous systems can fully rest and find safety in the limitlessness of God’s care, compassion, grace, and stability.

As Gospel-centered counselors, we try to reflect the safety and connection found in Christ. But as helpers, we are limited and we want to help clients sense and connect with God themselves through their mind’s eyes. We can ask questions that elicit a sensory experience of the truth of God’s love. We are highlighting sensory rich words. “What does it **look like** if Jesus were to enter into this moment with you?” “What does **he look like**? **How** does he approach you? What is the **tone of his voice**? How does your **body respond** to Christ’s kindness and compassion?” When the client has that *felt-experience* with Jesus in their body, the stories the client starts to tell themselves about who they are and what their world is like begin to change.

3. Have clients experiment with self-regulating exercises

In addition to experiencing co-regulation, we can also introduce clients to various sensory-based exercises that they can use to self-regulate their nervous system's responses and move toward the state of safe connection, regardless of the state they are in at the moment. As we have clients experiment with these simple exercises, it is important that they take a moment to reflect and describe what changes they are noticing in their body sensations, emotions, behavioral urges and internal narratives.

1. **A Sigh of Relief Exercise** - This is an easy way to get clients to move up toward a safer state.

To the client: What we are using here is breathing. It is so helpful if we can notice and regulate our breathing. We want to slow it down, so we will make use of a long exhale. We also want to incorporate the sound of the sigh, which adds another sensory layer and lets your autonomic nervous system relax. Imagine that you are falling on your couch or bed at the end of a long day. Make the sound of the sigh of relief that comes with that. (We try it along with the client.)

2. **Kind Eyes Exercise** - Video Demonstration and Basic Script



To the client: Imagine looking out into the world and seeing kind eyes looking back at you. Whose eyes do you see? It can be God's eyes, a person's, a pet's, etc. How does your body respond to kind eyes that make you feel seen, understood, loved, accepted, wanted, delighted in? I have modeled what the kind eyes exercise can look like when using it in a session in this video. (Exercise created by Diane Poole Heller)

3. **Additional exercises**

1) Imagining a conversation with a safe person. 2) Imagining, describing or drawing a picture of a safe place and visiting that place or picture often. 3) Singing along with or dancing to a song that either energizes or calms you. 4) Looking at or holding an object that represents a sense of safety and connection.