

# Communication Safety: Trauma-Informed Language, Tone and Presence

**Dr. Kimberli Porter, LMFT, M.Ed., PhD**

**January 30, 2026**

**9:00AM - 1:30PM**



# DISCLOSURES

- No conflicts of interest to report
- No financial disclosures to report

# AGENDA

- Foundations of Safety and the Nervous System
  - The language of Safety
- Co-Regulation and Relational Repair
  - Integration and Practice

# LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify three ways the autonomic nervous system influences communication.
- List four principles of trauma-informed language that promote safety and regulations.
- Explain two techniques for co-regulation and grounding during client interactions.
- Apply at least three strategies for reducing activation or shutdown in real-time conversations.

# \*Clinical Note on Polyvagal Theory

Polyvagal Theory is used here as a clinical framework for understanding patterns of autonomic experience, not as a definitive map of nervous-system anatomy.

While its original neuroanatomical claims are debated, many of its observations about safety, threat, mobilization, shutdown, and social engagement are supported across multiple models of autonomic regulation.

In this training, Polyvagal language is used as a shared clinical shorthand to support attunement, pacing, and relational safety.

# Foundations of Safety & the Nervous System

Why Safety Comes First

# Why Safety Comes First

Safety is the foundation of all effective therapy because the nervous system assesses threat before cognition, and without regulation, insight and change are neurologically inaccessible.



- The nervous system evaluates safety before cognition
- Dysregulation limits insight, reflection, and change
- Regulation is a prerequisite—not a byproduct
- —of therapy



# The Stress Response (High Level)

- Fight / Flight (mobilization)
- Freeze / Collapse (shutdown)
- Social Engagement (connection and repair)

# More Common than You Think

example of FFF

# Polyvagal Hierarchy

The polyvagal hierarchy describes how the nervous system shifts between connection, mobilization, and shutdown in response to perceived safety or threat.

- Ventral Vagal: safety, connection, curiosity
- Sympathetic: activation, urgency, defense
- Dorsal Vagal: withdrawal, numbness, collapse

# Polyvagal Hierarchy

Our Nervous System's Response to Safety & Threat

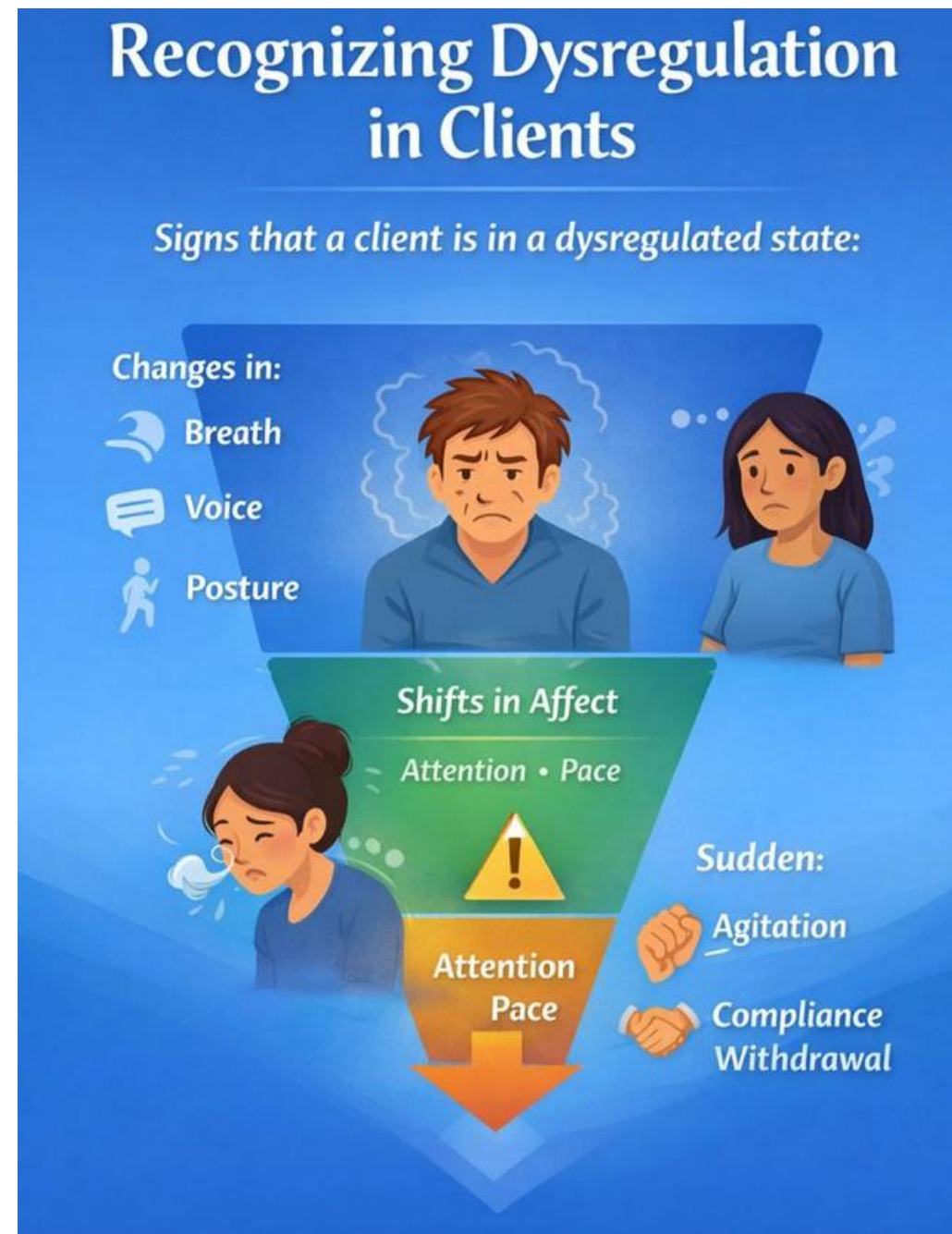


# Vagal Tone & Regulation

Vagal tone reflects the nervous system's capacity for flexibility and recovery, and higher vagal tone supports emotional resilience that can be strengthened through therapeutic regulation over time.

- Vagal tone reflects flexibility and recovery
- Higher vagal tone = greater emotional resilience
- Therapy can strengthen regulation over time

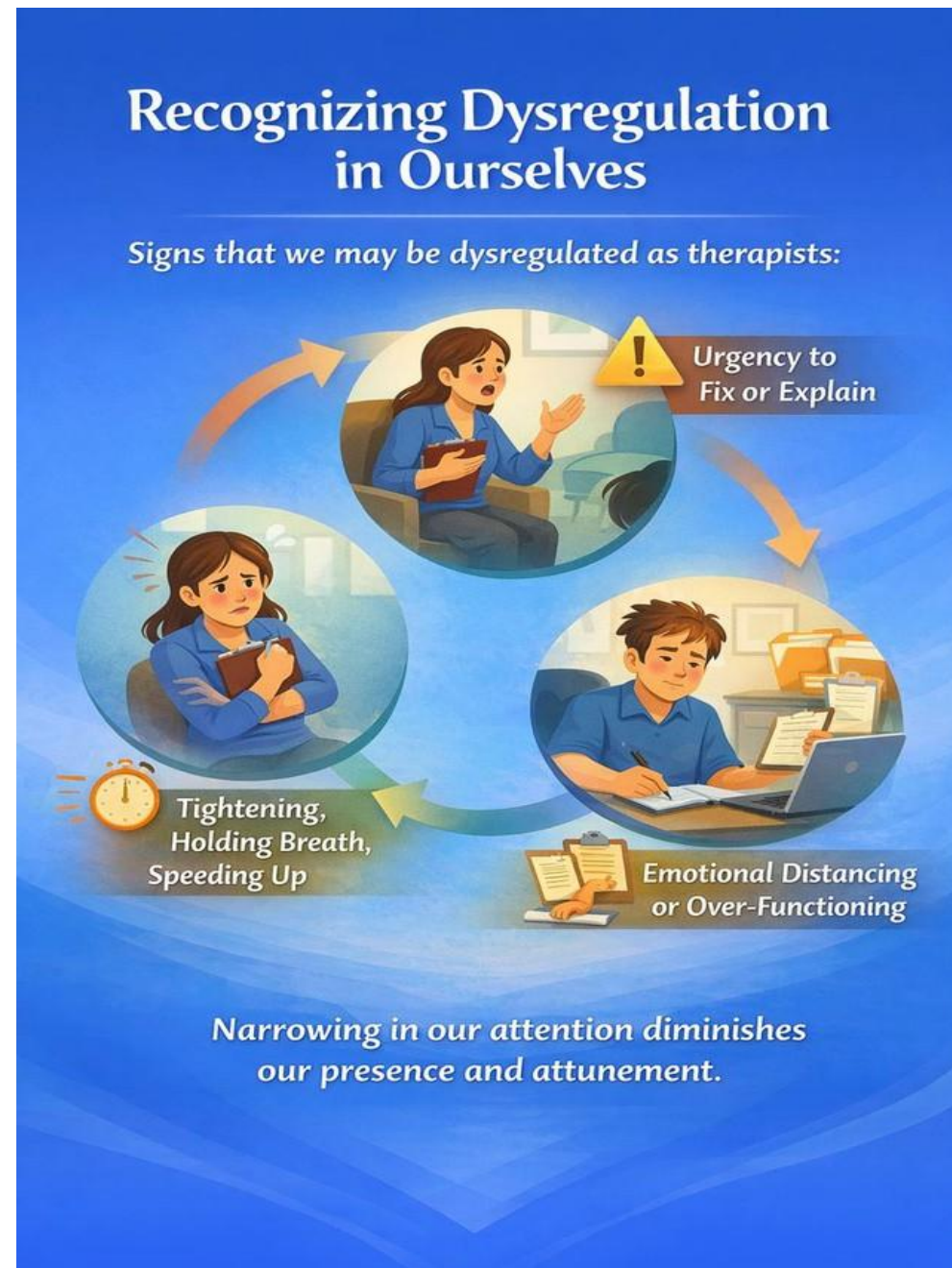
# Recognizing Dysregulation in Clients



Client dysregulation often shows up through subtle shifts in breath, voice, posture, affect, attention, pace, or abrupt changes such as agitation, withdrawal, or sudden compliance.

- Changes in breath, voice, posture
- Shifts in affect, attention, or pace
- Sudden compliance, agitation, or withdrawal

# Recognizing Dysregulation in Ourselves



Therapist dysregulation often appears as a subtle shift into urgency, bodily tension, or emotional over-functioning that narrows presence and attunement.

- Urgency to fix or explain
- Tightening, holding breath, speeding up
- Emotional distancing or over-functioning

# Reflection Prompts

(please place  
response in chat)

What are your personal signs of activation?

How do they show up in sessions?

# The Language of Safety

Language as a Nervous System Cue

# Language as a Nervous-System Cue



Language functions as a rapid nervous-system signal, shaping regulation and connection through delivery rather than meaning alone.

- The nervous system responds to how, not just what
- Words can signal safety or threat instantly
- Tone and pacing often matter more than content

# How Language Reinforces Threat

Language reinforces threat when it conveys urgency, interrogation, or control rather than curiosity and collaboration

- Rushing or urgency
- “Why” questions during activation
- Over-directive or corrective phrasing

# Trauma- Informed Communication Principles

Trauma-informed communication prioritizes curiosity, consent, collaboration, and choice to support safety, agency, and relational trust

- Curiosity over certainty
- Consent over control
- Collaboration over authority
- Choice over compliance

# Examples: Shifting Language

“Can we slow down and explore this together?”

“Why did you do that?”

“Would it be okay if we tried...?”

“You need to...”

“Let’s pause for a moment.”

“Calm down”

# Tone, Pace and Timing

Tone, pace, and timing shape nervous-system safety with warmth, slowness and intentional silence supporting regulation and ventral engagement

- Slower pace communicates safety
- Warm tone supports ventral engagement
- Silence can regulate when used intentionally

# Practice Prompt (pairs)

- Practice rephrasing a directive statement into a consent-based one
- Notice body response while speaking and listening

# Practice Scenario

A client is becoming visibly activated during session. Their speech is speeding up, their body is tense, and they are jumping between topics. You notice an urge to slow them down and regain structure.

## Prompt for Participants:

- What directive language might you instinctively use in this moment?
- How could you rephrase that into consent-based, regulating language?
- As you say each version out loud, notice what happens in your body and breath.
- As you listen to your partner, notice what feels settling versus activating.

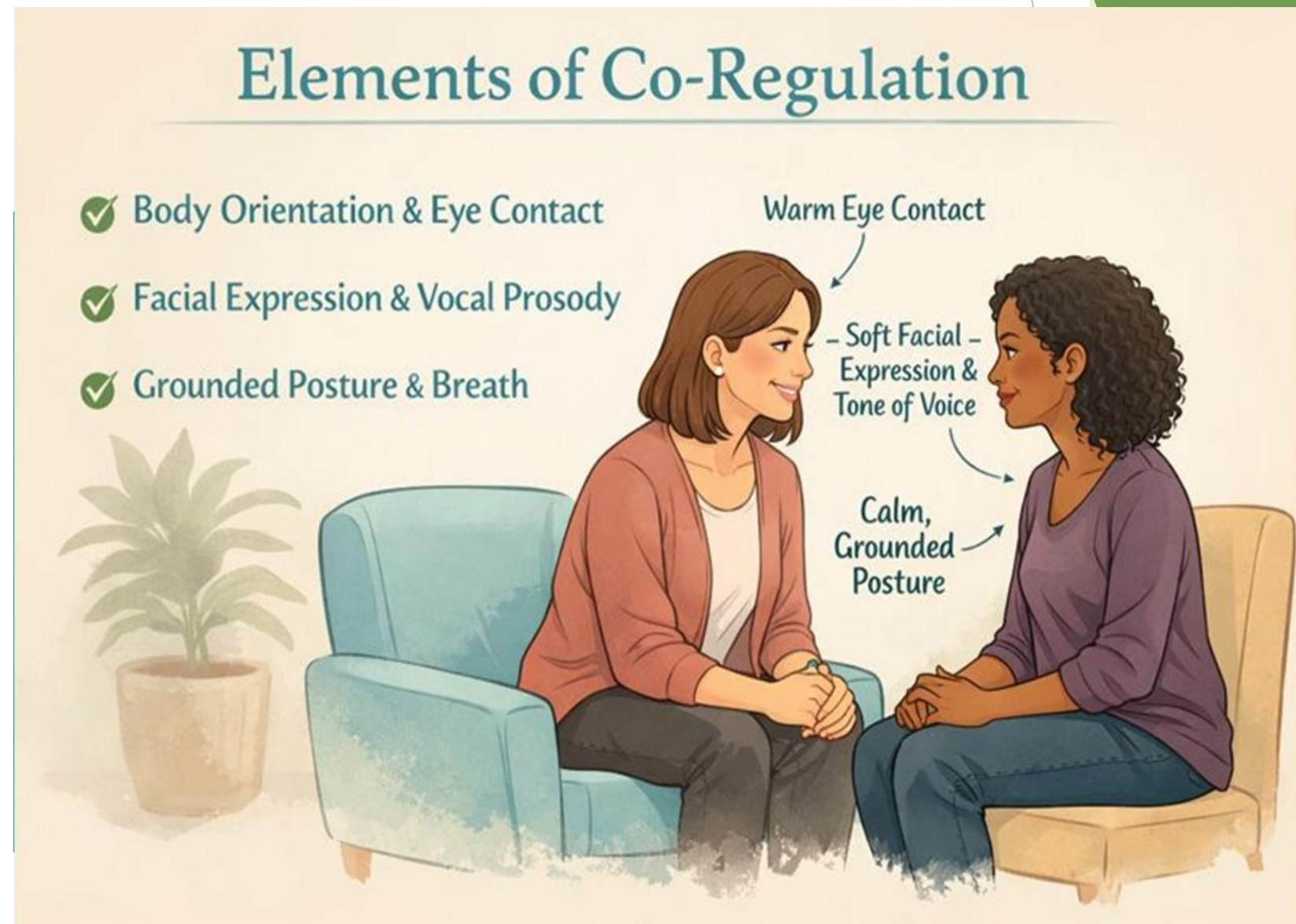
# Co-Regulation & Relational Repair

# What is Co-Regulation

Co-regulation is the process by which one person's calm; grounded presence helps another person's nervous system settle and return to a state of safety and connection

- Regulation occurs in relationship
- Nervous systems influence each other
- Therapist presence matters as much as technique

# Elements of Co-Regulation



# Mico- Interventions for Re-Centering

## Micro-Interventions for Re-Centering

- ✓ Naming the present moment
- ✓ Inviting breath or sensory awareness
- ✓ Slowing pace without explanation

Let's notice the here and now.

Let's breathe together  
for a moment.

...Let's slow  
down for a bit.



# Relational Repair

Rupture is a natural part of relationship, and intentional repair - especially when mis attunement is named- restores safety, trust and regulation.

- Rupture is inevitable
- Repair restores safety and trust
- Naming mis attunement can be regulating

# Example: Repair Statements

- “I think I moved too fast - can we pause?”
- “I have missed something important.”
- “Let’s reset together.”

# Integration & Practice

**Putting it all  
Together/  
Guided Practice  
Exercise  
(for later use)**

- Notice activation.
- Adjust language and tone.
- Offer co-regulation.
- Repair when needed.

# Guided Practice Exercise

## Directions (for later use)

- Pair up and decide who will begin as the speaker and who will be the listener.
- The speaker shares a mildly activating experience (nothing overwhelming) for 2-3 minutes.
- The listener practices tracking activation cues in themselves and their partner (breath, pace, tone, posture).
- The listener responds using consent-based language and a slower tone and pace.
- If activation increases, the listener offers co-regulation through presence, breath, and attuned language—without problem-solving. Switch roles and repeat.
- Briefly reflect together on what supported regulation and what did not.

# Group Reflection/ Case Discussion (for later use)

- What felt different in your body?
- What language shifts were most impactful
- Where might this be challenging in real work?

# Post-Test & Key Takeaways

- Safety is communicated moment-to-moment
- Language, tone, and presence shape regulation
- Co-regulation is a clinical skill—not a personality trait  
Small shifts can change outcomes