



March 2020

## The Importance of Relationships during COVID-19

Human beings are social by nature and we need social connections to function at our best. Perhaps most noteworthy as a theorist on this topic is Abraham Maslow who created *Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs* and conceived that after basic physiological and safety needs are met, loving connections to others is most important to the human being. In fact, compelling studies show that social connections with family, peers, and community are significant protective factors in other crisis contexts such as war and natural disasters. Children in particular cope largely through their relationships.

### Nurturing Important Relationships through COVID-19.

We can shift to the positive during this time when we focus our attention in our relationships. For many, the COVID-19 pandemic is reminding us of the importance of family and home life. Social distancing does not have to mean being disconnected. Reach out to friends and loved ones and anyone else you can reach out to. For those who have more time on their hands, use it as an opportunity to reconnect with important connections you may have lost touch with due to life demands.

### What is Co-regulation?

Self-regulation has become recognized for its role in well-being across a person's lifespan. While it may sound like something one does alone, self-regulation develops mostly through interactions. Steven Proges PHD, proposed the Polyvegal theory that includes the concept of co-regulation that is "when a person's nervous system sensitively interacts with another person's nervous system in a way that facilitates greater emotional balance and physical health". Porge's posits that: "As we co-regulate together we feel safer in the space and time that we are in".

To co-regulate, he suggests to bring awareness to your body as you begin to connect with someone. Feel energy calming down and feel more settled with a sense of grounding, then acknowledge the feelings of the person you are talking to. What comes across is: "I am present and I am here with you". This is having a sense of what connection is about. I think we can all relate to the experience of talking with a trusted friend for example after a difficult day.



### Here are some ways we can practice co-regulation in our important relationships:

**Relationship with self:** We can help others by first taking care of ourselves. Healthy thinking, self-compassion, and self-care practices are all keys to wellness. A person can co-regulate independently by going to a person they keep inside. Bring a special memory to mind of someone who is calming and sweet. Look around in your own life to someone who has been there for you, who has helped you through a difficult time. This practice can be your internal regulatory system.

**Relationship with a partner:** Take time with your partner to join with them in what they enjoy. Be present and sit and talk about what they might enjoy talking about so you can be in their world in a nonjudgmental and receptive caring way. See if you can get in touch with positive feelings they have about their lives. This way of interacting can help soften worry and big emotions that occur in response to the pandemic.

**Relationship with children:** Provide a warm and present relationship by showing care and affection; recognize needs and provide caring support in times of stress. Caregivers can build strong relationships with children of all ages by communicating through words and actions, interest in the young person's world, and respect for the young person as an individual.

**Relationship with others:** During self-isolation, reach out to friends and family outside your home through telephone and online video. This is much more effective than email because it is reassuring to hear a loved one's voice and, even better, to see the person over video. While it doesn't beat in-person, it is much better than not having contact at all.

As we all adjust, living in close quarters and practicing social distancing can take a toll on relationships.

**Here are a few practical tips to help nurture our relationships every day:**

1. Allow yourself to acknowledge this is tough.
2. Recognize and communicate with loved ones when you're overwhelmed.
3. Bring more kindness to anxiety; it will help bring more to your partners as well.
4. Set up a routine for yourself and your family and include exercise and fun activities too.
5. Remind yourself that you are all doing your best and this is temporary.
6. Practice gratitude and acts of kindness.
7. Take some time alone when needed and give each other space.
8. Continue to do the things you enjoy if you can.
9. Spend time outside.
10. Set aside dedicated time with a partner and for each family member. Even if it is just a few minutes.

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**Port Alberni    250 723 7001**

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