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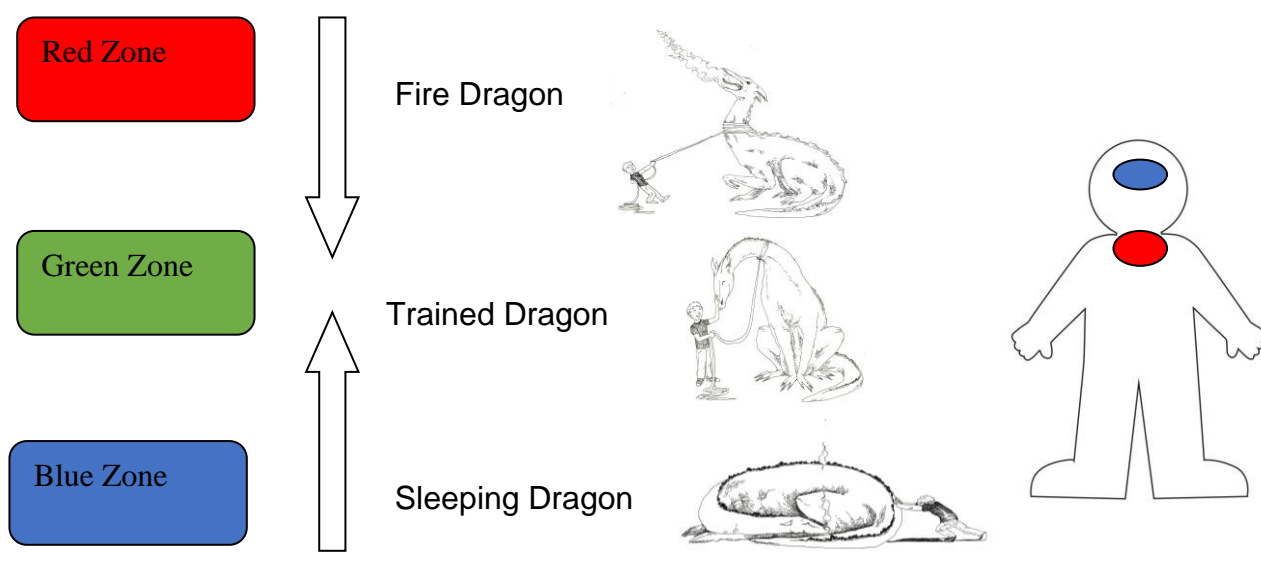
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## Achieving a Sense of Balance

Balance means not too much but just enough. When our emotions, energy or nervous system are out of balance, we don't feel good. Stress is a direct result of poor balance. When we feel too high or too low, we need an opposite force to bring us back to center. The only way to know what we need is to first identify where we are, right now, in this moment, with these people and in this environment. Our nervous system needs balance so we can focus, engage (socially or in an activity) and feel good. Finding Happy requires balance. Every system is different so we often need different ideas or tools to adjust. Every system has a different tolerance and starting point for stimulation so again, we need to try different tools. Every system MUST identify where this starting point is in order to know which tools to try so we must start with self-monitoring.

### Self-Monitoring

There are many programs that help individuals visualize and conceptualize where they are in relation to feeling good. The Zones of Regulation use colors that are highly effective in determining before and after feelings of regulation. Simplified, too much is the Red Zone, too little is the Blue Zone, and the goal is the Green Zone. The Dragon Phenomenon uses a Fire Dragon to indicate too many signals, the Sleeping Dragon who indicates too few, and a trained Dragon which is our goal. So, when we are in the Red Zone, or have too much Fire Dragon, we need tools to bring us down to the Green Zone or to train our out of control Dragon. If we are in the Blue Zone, or if we have too much Sleeping Dragon, we need to add more in so we can come up to the Green zone or again, train the Dragon. Knowing if you need more or less is the critical first step so you can begin to use tools to feel balanced and Happy. The SAM program uses a figure to identify when emotions are out of balance; certain places can feel too loud or too quiet. It doesn't matter what system you use, it matters that you are aware of what you are feeling so tools are easier to find.



Our nervous system is designed to help control our energy, thoughts, movements, and all the automatic functions that keep us alive; it is designed to help us find balance. If there are too many signals or not enough, it is hard for the nervous system to do its job. First, we need to know where we are in this moment, then we need to try tools that either add or reduce the signals. Once you've tried the tools, check back in to see if you feel better: are you in the Green Zone? Did you train your Dragon? This Cycle of Balance should be used whenever things don't feel good.

Often kids will have trouble with regulation or balance. Some are too hyperactive in class to listen, and others may daydream during soccer and miss the ball. Most kids, if not all, have trouble winding down to go to bed. Whether you are a parent or teacher, these techniques, used in the appropriate setting can make a big difference with regulation that the child can begin to independently incorporate into their daily life.

The vagus nerve is key to the strategies we choose. This nerve is the longest one in our body and it connects the brain to really important organ systems like the intestines and stomach (which is why we get a stomach ache when we are stressed). It talks to the heart to increase and decrease heart rate and it even affects how quickly or deeply we breathe through a connection to the lungs. All of this impacts balance, mental health and regulation. When we stimulate the vagus nerve, we tap into the parasympathetic nervous system (the state of rest and digest) which means we can feel regulated but it also helps us to recover more quickly after stress. When we spend too much time in the sympathetic (protective, go mode) state, it can be hard to find balance. Research indicates that stimulation to the vagus nerve creates a positive feedback loop related to good physical health and positive emotions, which means it is decreasing stress. Depression, anxiety and intense emotions such as anger have lower vagal activity and this directly impacts those around us.

Ways to Stimulate the Vagus Nerve (see *How to Stimulate your Vagus Nerve for Better Mental Health*, Jan 2017, Jordan Fallis for resources and more information).

- Acute cold such as with a cold shower, cold pack, putting your face in an ice bath
- Exercise has a huge impact on the brain too so walk, run, lift weights, play sports
- Deep and slow breathing reduces anxiety and increases the parasympathetics. Try taking 6 breaths in one minute (versus the 12-14 we usually do) next time you feel stress. Have your stomach puff out and in with each breath and try to make the exhale longer than the inhale.
- Massage can stimulate the vagus nerve.
- Laughter or being around people reduces your primary stress hormone.
- Meditation provides a mind-body connection and lets you tap into your neurofeedback loop similar to self-monitoring. This can be yoga, breathing, mindfulness or any way to promote relaxation.
- Omega-3 fatty acids come from fish oil and are essential fats the body can't produce; they are critical for the electrical functioning of the brain and nervous system.
- Probiotics improve brain function through addressing gut bacteria. So many of the needed neurotransmitters are actually produced in the gut so digestion is critical to reducing anxiety, and stress to improve mood.
- Singing, chanting, humming and gargling affects your vocal cords which connect to the vagus nerve.

Tools to Increase Signals or to Add Input: These Techniques involve attention to the delivery of stimulation: rapid, uneven, intermittent, higher intensity, or rotational spinning or swinging.

(Ways to add input because you have a Sleepy Dragon or are in the Blue Zone)

- Wall sits- pretend like you are sitting on an invisible chair with your back being the only thing touching the wall
- Chair pushups- sitting in a chair, put your hands beside your legs and push to lift your butt and feet up off the ground/chair and hold as long as you can
- Vibration into muscles such as legs, jaw muscles or other body parts
- Ice therapy- suck on ice cubes/pop, put an ice pack to the back of the neck, or submerge face or hands into ice water
- Intense vestibular movements- swinging, jumping, postures with quick up and down, jumping jacks
- Intense proprioceptive input or heavy work- pushups, carrying heavy objects, any weightlifting, exercise, squeezing squishy balls and weight bearing activities.
- Activities that involve quickly changing between fast and slow, stop and go, cold and hot
- Use a multiple sensory approach: music or noise *with* writing, full body movements to form letters with associated noises (say “zip” whenever you make a vertical line, “zoop” for horizontal lines, etc.)
- Heavy massage, deep breathing (alter speed, depth, and time in inhalation versus exhalation), cold and fast rubbing
- Food or Smells- crunchy, intense, strong flavors or smells such as citrus, eucalyptus or mint essential oils
- Yoga that encourages head down and up postures, shifting, and various breathing patterns
- Timers and creating games that are fun can help to increase the signals and help with focused attention, regulation and balance. Cortisol is a neurotransmitter released when we are stressed and it can be used to help increase the intensity or motivation when it is hard to get started. Many kids procrastinate, which instantly allows for more cortisol to flood their system because now they have a fast-approaching deadline and they need this to start. The timer and games related to creating pretend deadlines through a set speed can also increase amounts of appropriate cortisol without parents stressing over actual deadlines
- Motivators can help increase the amount of Dopamine, which is a neurotransmitter we need to be able to DO. Initiation, or starting something, requires signals and Dopamine can help
- Inversion over therapy ball- symmetrical over ball on stomach no longer than 1.5 min. If done on their back it can promote chest expansion but is more threatening so must be done with assistance and caution.
- Stretch pressure: this activates muscle spindles and pressure must be enough to move skin so muscle underneath will stretch
- Joint compression when done quickly and irregularly
- Intermittent touch: use fingertips or hand to lightly touch hand/arm while they are working. Can be done at trunk to facilitate better posture
- Intermittent compression into shoulders, hips, or any joints

Tools to Decrease Signals or Input: These techniques have a slow rate of stimulation with slow, even, rhythmic and linear input.

(Ways to decrease input because you have a Fire Dragon or are in the Red Zone)

- Slow stroking for 3-5 minutes down spine with one finger on each side of spine until one hand reaches waist, then other hand starts, slowly at base of neck, down to the waist
- Linear movement- sit on the floor, grab your knees and squeeze for 10 seconds, then rock in a slow, linear movement back and forth
- Slow, rhythmic joint compression or deep pressure into the shoulders
- Maintained pressure- weighted blankets, vests, lap pads; this is especially powerful over the stomach, palms of hands and soles of feet
- Calming down time before bed or focused activity: marching slowly, stopping to be waving trees very slowly: create calming, consistent routines
- Sucking yogurt or thick food slowly through a straw
- Rocking in rocking chair
- Quiet space or tent play before focused activity or bed time
- Eye yoga- close eyes and gently inhale. Move eyes (with eyes closed) to look up and down. Open your eyes and put your arm in front of your face. Make your eyes follow your hand as it moves slowly in all directions (even toward your nose). Try not to move your head or eyes while breathing slowly and deliberately
- The ears can affect the vagus nerve. Cross arms in front of the body and hold the lower half of the ear lobe (thumbs in front), gently pull down on your lobes counting to 10. Do this three times
- Trumpet blowing: put the tip of your thumb in your mouth and without letting any air escape, fill your cheeks and blow holding for 5-10 seconds, repeat x3.
- Eyelid massage: take two fingers, close your eyes and gently press and move in a circular pattern 5 times in each direction while counting and breathing slowly.
- Inversion also helps the immune system, blood flow and oxygen to the brain. It increases relaxation and improves sleep. Make sure there are no fears with having the head lower than the body as this can make things worse, but rolling on your tummy over a large therapy ball is an easy and safe way to invert the head. For kids who don't mind rolling on balls, they can be on their back and roll backwards but this might be more alerting so check how they respond before trying before bed.
- Sensitivities to foods or smells can be decreased if you prep the system with smells like lemon or start with ice stimulation or vibration. Any time you pair a tool with slow, rhythmic breathing it will decrease input even more.
- The use of a metronome can introduce rhythm and speed that you can adjust for them to follow. It can be used with movement and breathing activities to adapt the amount of input produced.
- Prepare an over-stimulated nervous system with visuals that can be discussed, a schedule that can be created to see what is coming and any other methods to increase the perception of control over a situation or an environment.
- Environmental changes that involve dim light, calm music or a noise-maker (with nature sounds or heartbeat), warmth, comforting textures, or smells like lavender. Avoid screen time at least one hour before bed for kids who struggle with sleeping. Create habits through adjusting the environment
- 1:4:2 breathing. Breathe in for one second, hold your breath for 4 seconds, exhale for two seconds