Ep #306: Co-Regulation and the Power of Connection



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With Your Host

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This is episode 306 and today we're talking all about the juicy topic of co-regulation.

If you want to do things differently but need some help making it happen then tune in for your weekly dose of coaching from me, Maisie Hill, Master Life Coach and author *of Period Power*. Welcome to *The Maisie Hill Experience*.

Hey, folks, I'm feeling all fired up today for all sorts of reasons, the main one being that I have been in a very concentrated period of working recently. Everything I teach come directly from my clients in the membership by the way. I read through the posts in the community. I look at the submissions we get for one-on-one written coaching. I look through my notes from the coaching calls and just kind of go back through the files of my memory and get a sense of what would be really useful to my clients.

And then I get to work on figuring out how I can use all of my professional knowledge, my coaching skills, and my personal and professional life experiences in order to help. And I love figuring that out. But one way or another, everything I teach is a reflection of my own experiences, the things that I've been challenged by, the things that have held me back in some way. And it's just so much fun to figure all that out and get to share it with you, whether that's a topic here on the podcast or in my books or in the membership.

So thank you for how you show up and experience my work. Because the impact that I want to achieve through doing all these things is what really motivates me. And I appreciate you all sharing the podcast, sharing about my work, and spreading the word. So thank you for that.

I'm also really thrilled because I recently did something that I'm really proud of. And I want to share and celebrate it here with you, because this story also sets the stage for our topic for today, which is co-regulation. In fact, I'm going to explain what co-regulation is first and then share my story. So co-regulation is this beautiful process where someone who's feeling alright-

basically, their nervous system is in a happy place. They share that sense of feeling alright with someone who's feeling a bit all over the place.

So imagine you're feeling super anxious or upset. And then maybe someone that you really care about comes along and maybe they hold your hand, give you a comforting hug or really just simply sit beside you in solidarity. That right there, that is co-regulation in action. So it's not about having someone else swoop in to fix everything for you. It's more about leaning into the strength of relationship to find a space where you can find your own footing and soothe yourself.

So we can experience co-regulation with other humans, and we can also experience it with other species. So if you have a cat or a dog, you probably help them to regulate themselves, and I'm sure they help to regulate you. And when I'm talking about regulating, I mean going from experiencing a stress response in some way to feeling alright again. That doesn't mean you feel completely calm and Zen or that you feel really happy and are just delighted with the world. It just means that you have the capacity to meet situations and challenges that you're experiencing.

And a really good example I can give you of this, which I'm sure you're going to relate to in some way, is if Nelson, my son, tells me that he's hungry or he's asking me what's for dinner and I'm feeling regulated, then that seems like a perfectly reasonable question for him to ask. And it's a request that I can meet. He asks me, I reply, we have a conversation. Might be quite an enjoyable thing to figure out together, and then I can meet his request without any issue. That's what happens when I'm feeling regulated.

If, however, I am already in a stress response of some kind, maybe I've rushed or there's something that I didn't get done that I still want to get done. So there's already that sense of feeling harassed or urgency and kind of struggling to meet the requests/demands of my day. And he asked me the exact same question in the exact same way, then my response is going to be different because I'm already experiencing internal pressure. And a simple, reasonable request about food in the run-up to dinner time is going to be responded to differently, let's say.

But in that same moment, if I can notice what's going on in me, I can notice that happening and actively decide to soften and to connect with him just for 10 seconds for that conversation. Then that connection can be a turning point. And often when I soften for a second, that's enough to create a window of opportunity for me to realise that the only person pressuring me is me. And that it's unreasonable and unhelpful for me to expect to get this work done whilst also cooking dinner and whatever else. And that there's actually no harm in me dropping all of that and just letting it go and doing it tomorrow.

And then sitting down with him talking about our options, what are we going to make? Are we going to do it together, etc, etc. Maybe giving him a cuddle, just being present with him in that moment can help me to regulate. So there are these micro moments of connection that are available to us when we train ourselves to find and create them. But co-regulation is essentially about how we influence each other's emotional and physiological states.

So it's a dynamic process and like a dance, where each person's physiological state affects and is affected by the others. And again, this isn't about calming someone down or getting them into a really good mood. It's just about a mutual exchange, a shared experience that can lead to a more regulated state. And it's a very powerful tool, co-regulation. And sometimes I think we forget about it in the midst of being self-responsible and learning all these tools and using them for ourselves.

Sometimes we can forget about the importance of co-regulation and being in community and being in relationship and using those in a really wonderful way to take care of ourselves and take care of each other. So it is something that we can use consciously to create an environment of support, understanding and empathy that isn't about fixing someone or cheering them up.

So I often find that this is what happens on our coaching calls in the membership and in our community and through Ask a Coach. Is by us as coaches and as a community holding space for one another, where you get

to be you and we're not trying to change you and make you feel better. But in that space, when that space is held for you, that that is very regulating in and of itself, even before we get on to the actual coaching.

And you can reflect on this in your own life and think about, well, when someone is upset around you, your presence can help them find a place of safety and connection within themselves and with you. Your body language, your tone of voice, even your breath, that's all sending signals of safety to the people around you.

And in my experiences of parenting with Nelson, I have definitely found that my physical, my emotional state directly influences him in all sorts of ways. So when he's upset, and I consciously soften my body so that I can be open to his experience. It helps create a space where he feels held and supported and heard. Not trying to change his experience or dismiss his emotions, just about being present with him in that moment offering a sense of stability that may not be available within himself. He's just a kid. Kids don't have this. It's something that they build as they get older.

But we need this as adults, it's not just a kid thing. It's not just a parenting thing. So this concept of co-regulation is there in our personal relationships. It's also in our interactions at work and even with complete strangers. So being aware of this dynamic can help us to navigate relationships more effectively. And then we can be more intentional in our interactions and create deeper connections with those around us.

Now, I told you I had a story. It's about horse riding, surprise, surprise. And horse riding is a profound exercise in co-regulation. So being around horses really regulates me a lot, so does riding them. And horses feel everything. So they pick up on all the calming signals that we're giving them, as well as any stress signals that are likely to trigger their flight response. They are primed to take flight and they do that. And you can really see how someone riding a horse is feeling simply by how the horse is behaving.

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Now, the backstory to this is that I'm autistic and I have a history of really struggling in the wind. I would get really dysregulated on windy days. I live in a seaside town in the UK where it gets windy. But I didn't realise I had this sensitivity to the wind, but once I realised what was going on and understood it through the lens of knowing that I'm autistic. I would then often state internally and out loud to other people on a very regular basis, "I really struggle in the wind.

I have such a hard time in the wind. The wind really dysregulates me." And all of those things are true. But what I noticed is that it was getting worse. And the wind, windy days was limiting me even more. So in the autumn of 2022, I set a goal of changing my relationship to the wind. That didn't mean I had to love it or force myself to endure it or be mean to myself. I just thought it'd be a cool experiment to do, so I did it using all the tools that I teach in the membership. I just used those and changed my relationship to the wind.

So since then I've become a lot more resilient to the wind. I still struggle, though. I want to be really clear about that. It's not that it's gone away. I still make choices based on how windy it is because, of course, I'm going to be kind to myself. But I do have more capacity for it now. And when I set that goal, I had no idea that six months later I would fall in love with horse riding and, of course, be in situations where I'm riding in the wind. Even when I'm riding inside and undercover, I can still feel the wind against the building, still hear the wind, and the horses do as well.

We have had some storms recently in the UK, we've had a whole bunch. And I don't know how, but literally every time there's been a storm, it's when I've had a horse-riding lesson booked, but most of those have been indoors, indoor lessons. But I'd booked a hack in for the Sunday thinking, you know what a nice thing to do. And a hack is just where you go down the road out into the fields, etc.

And on that Sunday, there was a storm working its way across the UK. So we had an amber weather alert for gale-force winds. And I really thought about cancelling; I really did. My instructor actually messaged me to say,

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“Are you going to be okay in this wind?” And I love my instructor, but she pushes me through things. She’s not one to let me off. She does recognise when I’m nearing my limit and when I say no, most of the time she’s really good. I love her to bits, but 99% of the time when I express doubt or say I can’t, she just tells me to get on with it.

So she’s very good at knowing when there’s something I need to ride through versus when I truly, I’m not going to do that. And when it is the latter, she does recognise that, and we don’t do it. But I love that she’s just like, “Just get on with it.” And I’m like, “Okay.” And I do it and it’s fantastic. So just the fact that she asked if I was going to be okay, that’s quite significant, but I’d already decided that I was in because I know that one day I will be out riding on my own and it will get windy, and I’d rather do that in company with my instructor first.

So off we went, there was three of us. And it was so windy. There was rubbish blowing around in the roads, and any of you who have ridden horses will know that they usually react to that. And the youngest horse that was three and a half, out in front, just kept spooking and reacting or not wanting to go past a plastic bag or things like that. And I was on this much older horse who rarely reacts to anything, but even he jumped forward at one point.

And there were just these various points throughout the hack where it felt like he was ready to take off, which of course feels alarming to me. It feels alarming to my body. But when you’re horse riding, you have to go against those natural reactions and soften so that the horse doesn’t get tense. Because they’re incredibly sensitive creatures, they pick up on our emotional cues, our physical cues, and they mirror them. So when I’m riding, if I’m tense, I’m anxious or not breathing properly, the horse senses that.

And it’s a feedback loop where my state influences the horse and the horse’s response in turn affects me. And the scariest ride I’ve ever had was on a pony that was only 14.2 hands, which is piddly for me because I’m 5 foot 10. But I was in an environment that I hadn’t ridden in before. There

were pillars in the arena that I wasn't used to having to navigate and the lesson was being run completely differently to what I was used to at that point.

So I was already a bit on edge and then the pony sped up because it's just thinking my rider is on edge, so there must be something that we've got to run away from. And then because the pony sped up in response to me, I went from being on edge to being scared. So then my hands got tight as well as my breath, and then the pony just took off. So that's how this exchange of information flows between me and the horse and then determines what's going to happen next. And this all happens within seconds.

The same thing happens in human-to-human interactions. So let's say you're at home in a fairly neutral state, you're just chilling. Then your housemate, your partner or your child gets home, and they are not chilled. They're stressed and experiencing some emotions along with that, and that's conveyed in their facial expression, their posture, their behaviour. So you're rapidly taking this information in and reacting. And it really is reacting because this is happening before you have conscious thoughts about what's going on, before you realise these thoughts.

And then you're possibly going to switch to being on guard in some way, the defensive fight response or you'll want to get away from it, the flee response, or you'll freeze. And then they're responding to your reaction and vice versa. And this is how situations can escalate very quickly. But they can also go the other way. We can send out signals that say, "Hey, I'm here. I'm here with you in this and we're okay." That doesn't have to be about changing that person's experience.

Doesn't have to be the intention of making them okay in order for us to be okay. It's just about being able to be there with them, to hold space for their experience because that will affect them. So when Nelson is upset or angry about something, I can affect him through my physiology and response. The same way I did on the horse ride.

And I used to do this with him when he was a baby. As soon as he would cry, I would exhale, soften my body, drop my shoulders, my chest, my insides and just find ways to be open. That meant I wasn't approaching his crying as something that needed to be stopped, but more like something to support him through whilst taking care of his needs. And I still do that to this day if I'm in, let's call it a parenting moment, I try to do the same thing.

And when I was out on this hack in the wind, I was actively soothing myself using those same softening techniques, softening my pelvic floor, breathing and singing. I was singing this song out loud. Thank goodness it was windy because no one else had to listen. But I was singing this song that Nelson loves at the moment, and so we listen to it a lot in the car, and it was just lodged in my head that day. Because if you're singing, then you're breathing. And horses are very aware of your breath, it's giving them information, either providing a calming signal if you're breathing nicely.

Or if you're holding your breath and tensing up, it's going to communicate to them that there's something to be worried about and be ready to take flight. This is why in my previous work as a doula, I would often recommend to my clients that they sing. And singing to a baby is lovely, benefits them in lots of ways when they hear it. But one of the biggest ways is that ability to regulate yourself, regulate your breath, which then keeps you open to connection, connection to yourself, connection to others. And through that we can soften and come out of stress responses.

And on that hack, it helped me to stay centred. That had a direct impact on the horse. And by maintaining that steady, rhythmic breathing pattern through singing, I was communicating to the horse that we were okay, that there was no need for panic. So this is co-regulation in action. And in singing that song specifically, I wasn't just regulating my breath. I was also thinking about my son, which brings me into more connection, helping me to regulate. We can all experience regulation that way.

So it can be through an actual hug from someone else, for example, but it's also available through the memory of one or by imagining the experience of one. So these micro moments of connection are always available. We just

need to build the practice of accessing them. So my efforts to regulate my own state then had a direct effect on the horse, that co-regulating effect between species, which then had a co-regulating effect on the other horses within their species.

And when the young horse in front would encounter something in the environment that was new to it, and it wanted to turn away and get away from the object. I would get the horse I was on to keep walking so that the younger horse would get that reassurance that everything was okay. Horse riding and just being around horses is incredibly regulating to me. And I really think in part that's why I've been able to ride in the wind because the horse helps to regulate me through that process of co-regulation.

It was the most challenging hack I've ever been on and I'm so stinking proud of myself for doing it, and for all the work that I have done on increasing my ability to be out in the wind. And I would just love for you all to reflect on your experiences of co-regulation with creatures, furry creatures around you, maybe even not furry creatures, who knows, but also with the humans in your life. And if you're in the membership, please feel free to share your reflections in the community. I would love to read them.

Okay, folks, I hope as you've been listening to me, you have experienced some co-regulation in your day through hearing my voice and hearing me share my story and all the takeaways from it. I will be back next week, catch you then.

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