

Institute for Social Justice

York St John University

Guidance for facilitating Neurodivergent Cultures of Regulation: An introduction to the Time, Language, Choice lens

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Kay Aldred, Amy Skinner, Angeline Adams, Rachel Burnell, Helen Edgar, Robyn Frances, Jay Levontine, Susan Liverman, Yasmin Rahman, Helen Shaddock, Alice Whiteley and Svetlana Williams

Introduction

This is guidance on how to facilitate neurodivergent cultures of regulation. It is intended for anyone of any neurotype who facilitates any type of group.

Nervous system regulation is our body's ability to respond to stress, change, and everyday demands, then return to a state where we can think clearly, connect with others, learn, make decisions, and recover. Everyone experiences and regulates stress differently. Creating a culture of regulation means creating workplaces, schools, and communities that recognise these differences and provide flexibility, predictability, and support, rather than expecting individuals to cope on their own. When people feel supported, their bodymind can respond and adapt more effectively, making it more possible to be healthy, engaged, collaborative, and able to thrive in ways that work for them.[1]

In cultures of regulation, wellbeing is not an individual responsibility but a systemic priority essential for collaboration, creativity, and resilience across the organisation. Neurodivergent perspectives are not always considered when thinking about cultures of regulation. This means that many groups or spaces are excluding or distressing for neurodivergent people.

In this document, we share learning from our Building Neurodivergent Cultures of Regulation project, a research collaboration between the Institute for Social Justice at York St John University, neurodivergent community researchers and the organisation Neurodiverse Connection. This project explored what neurodivergent cultures of regulation are, and how they can be created.

You can find out more about our project partners here:

The Institute for Social Justice at York St John University:
www.yorksj.ac.uk/research/institute-for-social-justice

Neurodiverse Connection:
https://ndconnection.co.uk

Building Neurodivergent Cultures of Regulation was funded by an Institute for Social Justice Community Research Grant. You can read more about these grants here:
www.yorksj.ac.uk/research/institute-for-social-justice/community-research-grants

Through this project we learned above all that neurodivergent cultures of regulation are about people. How spaces are facilitated matters. In this guidance, we offer some ways to approach facilitation that supports neurodivergent regulation. In particular, we introduce the TLC model: a practical lens for facilitating neurodivergent cultures of regulation.

One of the co-researchers working on our project has explained what we hope this guidance will achieve:

1 Bodymind refers to the idea that the body and mind are interconnected and influence each other. It means understanding our thinking, feelings, senses, nervous system, and physical body as one interconnected whole, rather than treating the mind and body as separate.

"I would love people to know how to facilitate a session just a little bit better than they did before. This means inclusively and with values of acceptance and clear communication."
Project co-researcher

Who is this guidance for?

This guidance is for anyone who wants to create neurodivergent cultures of regulation in their work, community or organisation. It shares what we learned through our project and offers some practical starting points for you to consider. You do not need to be neurodivergent or be familiar with neurodiversity to use this document.

Why this guidance matters

The ideas in this guidance are not simply about making activities run more smoothly. They are about creating environments where people can participate, contribute and feel able to be themselves.

Many of the practices described here are small, simple and practical adjustments. When combined, they can have a significant impact on people's experiences and wellbeing.

"The adjustments really do make a difference. It generally helps people to have a better quality of life in that moment."
Project co-researcher



What does it mean to be neurodivergent?

The word 'neurodiversity' refers to the variety in human neurological experiences. This is a natural, human difference: our brains and bodies work in different ways. For some people, the way that their brain and body work aligns closely with the majority of other people in their culture: we call this being 'neurotypical'. Generally, neurotypical people find it easier to fit into the neuronormative social, cultural and economic expectations of their society.

For other people, key differences in how our brains and bodies work make it difficult to meet those expectations. We call this being 'neurodivergent'. For some people, being neurodivergent means having a formal diagnosis (for example, of autism, dyspraxia or ADHD). For other people, it means experiencing the world in a way that lets them self-identify as neurodivergent. As neurodivergent people, we process the world differently to our neurotypical friends, family and colleagues. This can include experiencing sensory input differently, having different perceptions of time, or processing information differently.[2]

2 For more on different neurodivergent experiences, see Sonny Jane Wise's model of the *Neurodiversity Smorgasbord*: https://www.livedexperienceeducator.com/blog/theneurodiversitysmorgasbord

A note on terminology

Language about neurodivergence is always evolving, and people use different words to describe themselves and their experiences. In this document, we use the terms neurodivergent and neurotypical because these were the terms most commonly used by community co-researchers during the project.

We also recognise the wider term neuronormative, which helps us talk about the norms, expectations, and assumptions that can position one particular way of thinking, feeling, communicating, behaving, and functioning as the 'right' or expected way to be.

We recognise that no single set of words reflects everyone's preferences. Throughout this document, we aim to use respectful and clear language. Language glossaries are provided in the Further Reading section for readers who would like to learn more.



Identity, privilege and intersectionality

There is no single neurodivergent experience. Neurodivergent people have different identities, backgrounds and life experiences that shape how they experience the world.

Neurodivergence intersects with many other aspects of identity, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, disability, culture, religion and socio-economic background. These intersections can influence people's access to support, feelings of safety, and experiences of inclusion or exclusion.

This guidance has been shaped by the perspectives of the people who took part in our project. While we hope it is widely useful, it does not represent every neurodivergent experience. Our group was UK-centred. It was gender-diverse but lacked diversity in terms of race. There was also no representation of adults with learning disabilities.

As such, it is important to acknowledge that this guidance is incomplete. It may also need adaptation to meet individual or group needs. For example, our group did not address Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) or carer support, which may be essential for other groups. We encourage readers to remain curious, learn from diverse perspectives, and adapt these ideas to the communities they work with.



The Research Project

This guidance is based on a creative research project about neurodivergent cultures of regulation, and the ways people, relationships and environments can support emotional and nervous system regulation.

The project had two aims:

- To understand how neurodivergent adults experience regulation and dysregulation, especially in places where there are differences in power, such as healthcare, education and workplaces.
- To explore what neurodivergent cultures of regulation look and feel like, and how they can be created.

To do this, we formed a Neurodivergent Creative Research Community. This was a community of 12 neurodivergent adults, including the two project leads and 10 community researchers. Everyone in the community was a co-researcher on the project. Our aim was to explore neurodivergent cultures of regulation through a combination of discussion and practical experimentation. Over nine months, we met regularly and used creative activities, discussion and reflection to explore our experiences and develop ideas together. Many of our creative activities were facilitated by co-researchers, allowing us to consider building neurodivergent cultures of regulation from both facilitator and participant perspectives.

This guidance shares what we learned. It is organised in three parts. First, we explain the six main things we learned about neurodivergent cultures of regulation. Next, we introduce TLC, our lens for creating neurodivergent cultures of regulation. Finally, we explore some practical steps for creating more regulated and accessible environments.

What we Learned about Neurodivergent Cultures of Regulation

Our Neurodivergent Research Community gathered reflections from our own practice and experiences, as well as from published research into neurodivergence and cultures of regulation. Together, we identified six important things we have learned about neurodivergent cultures of regulation and how they work.[3]

These are:

1. Neurodivergent cultures of regulation are relational and ecosystemic

Regulation does not happen because of policies, buildings or checklists. It happens through people, relationships and the environments we create together: through people, place and space. Co-researchers described neurodivergent cultures of regulation as built on interdependence, in which people support one another rather than expecting everyone to manage alone. Shared experiences, shared purpose, shared ownership and shared agency all help create regulating spaces.



2. Neurodivergent cultures of regulation value identity

People regulate more easily when they feel accepted as themselves.

Co-researchers emphasised that identity matters. Neurodivergent cultures of regulation recognise intersectionality and understand that there is no single neurodivergent experience.

> "Don't presume – we are all different depending on who we are with, where we are and how safe we feel… Meet people where they are. Be curious… be open… be accepting and support people." Project co-researcher

3. Neurodivergent cultures of regulation are important for everyone

Although this project centred neurodivergent experiences, our group believed that neurodivergent cultures of regulation could benefit everyone. While they are grounded in neurodivergent knowledge and experience, they often create environments that are more accessible, flexible and supportive for all.

3 For this analysis, we used Best et al.'s (2022) model of Participatory Theme Elicitation, a collaborative and accessible way of approaching thematic data analysis.



4. Neurodivergent cultures of regulation allow us to self-reflect

Creating cultures of regulation is an ongoing process.

Co-researchers described learning about their own regulation and reflecting on how they worked with others. Facilitators also reflected on how this learning changed the way they designed and held spaces.

> "[One thing I have learned from this project is] to be more accessible and accommodating with yourself – unlearning the ableism that you'd internalised. This softens how you see other people." Project co-researcher

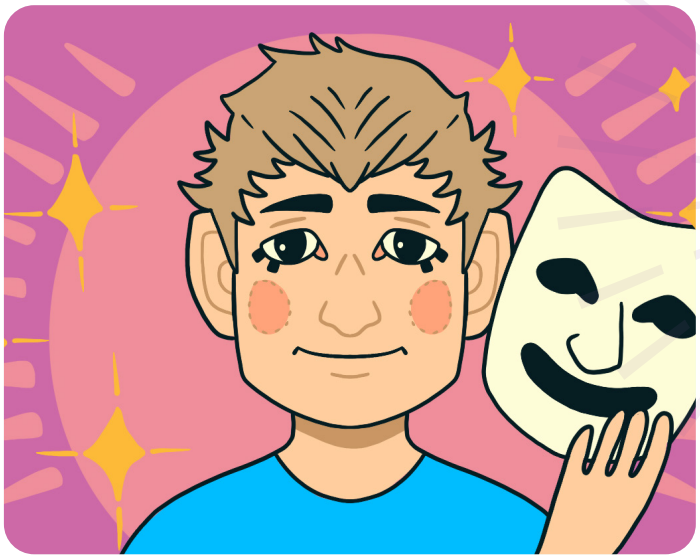
5. Creativity is a meaningful practice for generating neurodivergent cultures of regulation

This project used creative workshops as a starting point for building and discussing neurodivergent cultures of regulation. Co-researchers felt that creative activities, such as writing poetry, journalling, mask-making, crochet and sculpture supported their exploration of their regulation experiences.

6. Neurodivergent cultures of regulation intentionally use practices to make spaces accessible to as many people as possible

Creating neurodivergent cultures of regulation means valuing people's identities, recognising differences in experience, and designing spaces where as many people as possible can participate on their own terms. We identified three things that particularly matter when building neurodivergent cultures of regulation:

- Time and pacing
- Language
- Choice



TLC: a practical lens for facilitating neurodivergent cultures of regulation

As co-researchers shared their experiences, clear patterns began to emerge.



Many of the discussions came back to three things that consistently influenced whether people felt able to regulate, participate and contribute. We group these three factors under the acronym TLC: Time, language and choice. TLC is not a checklist; rather, it represents a mindset that guides our decisions on designing environments, relationships, and activities. We think of it as our TLC lens.

A note on feeling 'safe'

Co-researchers frequently referred to the importance of 'feeling safe' and how perceptions of safety contributed to nervous system regulation.

> "I'm feeling safe to be myself when I'm sharing, I'm not going to the place where I strip out a lot of what I'm saying so others on the call feel more comfortable." Project co-researcher

In the context of this project, 'safety' included feelings of emotional safety, psychological safety and nervous system safety. As a group, we noted that feelings of safety grew when people knew what to expect, understood what was expected of them and felt accepted.

> "[I remember] feeling how we drew together/resonated when someone to took a moment to share some of their emotional world/experience – it was like we co-regulated in those moments. So I learned how valuable it is for neurodivergent regulation to create a space where people feel able to bring and share their emotional worlds" Project co-researcher

We use the word 'safety' very carefully in this document. We are aware that ideas of 'safe space' and 'brave space' have been critiqued, and that 'accountable space' has been proposed as an alternative (Ahenkorah 2020). We acknowledge that no space can be guaranteed as safe for everyone, and that ideas of safety are often accompanied by power dynamics that do not centre neurodivergent or other marginalised perspectives. As such, wherever possible, we choose to use the word 'safer' rather than 'safe'. We also only refer to safety in contexts where we are discussing individuals' experiences of their own feelings of safety or when we are quoting co-researchers who have chosen to use the term.

The TLC lens

T — Time and Pace matters

Neurodivergent people often experience time differently to neurotypical adults. This can mean needing more processing time, needing to take breaks, experiencing memory differences or differences in the passing of time. To create a culture of regulation, it is particularly important to consider time and pace and to allow for different ways of processing information.

- Give people enough time.
- Allow different processing speeds.
- Build in breaks and be flexible, adding more or less as needed
- Avoid rushing.
- Do fewer things.

"Doing less with more time to reflect was very important and precious! [This] allowed us to properly unpick what we had learned."
Project co-researcher

L — Language matters

Language is an important foundation for how groups function. Co-researchers identified having a shared way of using language as vital to their sense of regulation during the project.

- Use clear, respectful and accessible language.
- Avoid assumptions.
- Explain what will happen.
- Be explicit rather than expecting people to "just know."
- Be willing to repeat what you share as needed and in different ways.

"I think I know what you mean about language - it's like we've arrived at a shared set of points of reference."
Project co-researcher

C — Choice matters

Choice is how we recognise the difference in (neuro) diversity: by making choice a default position, we offer more opportunities for people to take control of their own regulation experience in ways that work for them. Co-researchers observed that choice supported regulation.

Offer genuine choices about how people participate.

- Offer hybrid meetings as standard.
- For online and hybrid meetings, cameras on or off.
- For online and hybrid meetings, speaking or typing.
- Sitting or moving.
- One activity or another.
- Encourage regulation activities like stimming.

"I appreciate being able to have the camera off and not 'perform' while doing the activities as I am hyper self-conscious while I can see myself on screen. Feeling safe is very important for opening up and discussing big emotions."
Project co-researcher

"Having choices and not feeling pressured is something I think can make us want to engage more."
Project co-researcher

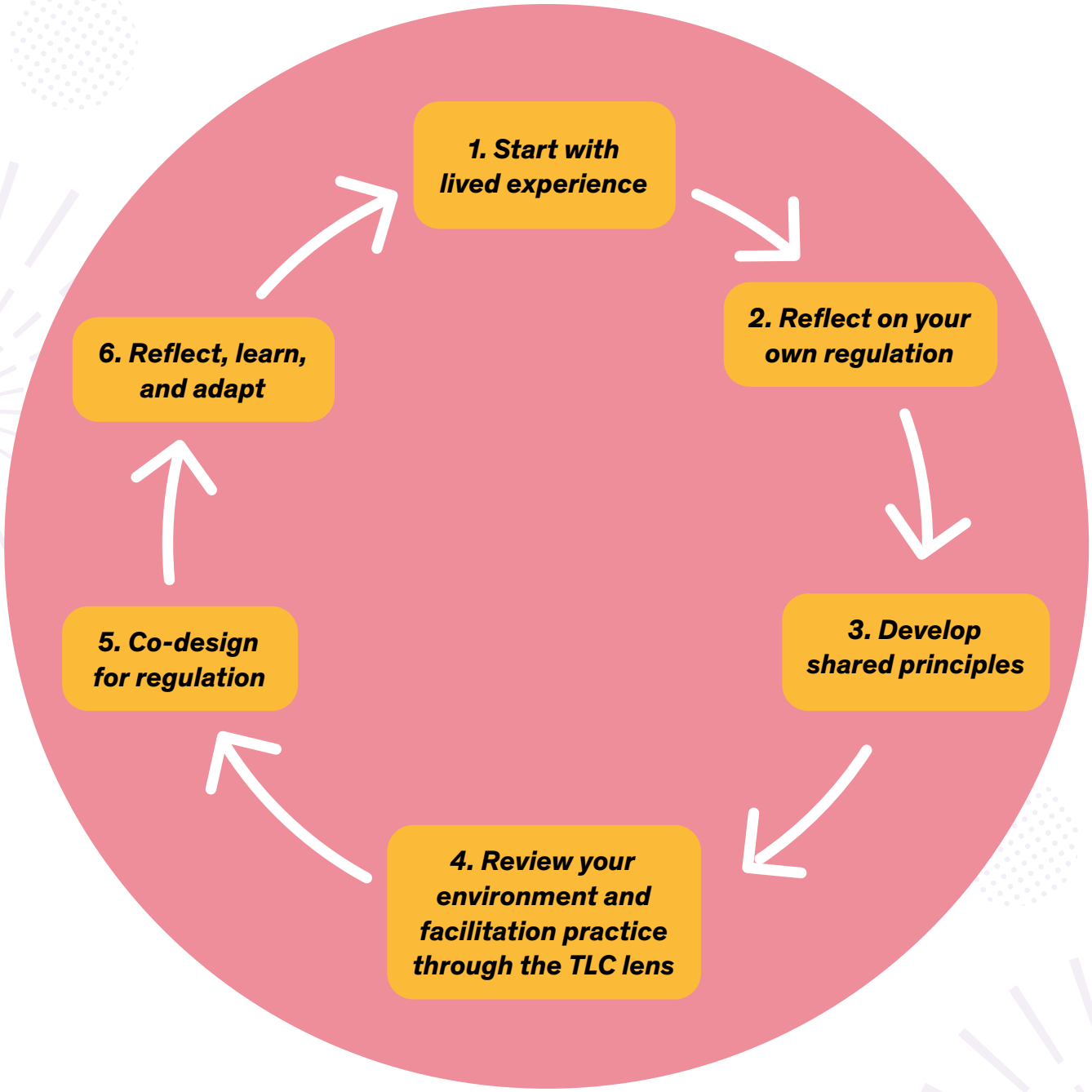


Putting it into practice

In this section, we share some resources to support anyone who wants to build a neurodivergent culture of regulation in their own practice.

Steps for Creating Neurodivergent Cultures of Regulation in Your Organisation

There is no single correct way to create a Neurodivergent Culture of Regulation. Every organisation, team, and community is different. These steps offer a sequence to help you build a culture where regulation is recognised, supported, and shared.





1. Start with lived experience

Begin by listening to the people who will be part of the culture you are creating. Recognise that everyone experiences stress, regulation, communication, and participation differently. Create opportunities for people to share what helps them feel safer, included, and able to thrive. Value lived experience as expertise and avoid making assumptions about what people need.



2. Reflect on your own regulation

Before changing systems or practices, consider your own experiences of regulation. How do you respond to stress, uncertainty, or change? What helps you regulate? How might your own expectations about communication, participation, or productivity influence others? Leaders and facilitators play an important role because regulation is relational; how we show up can shape how others experience a space.

3. Develop shared principles

Work together to identify the values and principles that will guide how people work together. This might include respect, flexibility, predictability, psychological safety, choice, and a commitment to learning and adapting. Develop a shared group agreement that can be revisited and refined over time.



4. Review your environment and facilitation practice through the TLC lens

Use the TLC approach to reflect on how you and your organisation current support regulation.

Time and Pace – Are people given enough time to process information, contribute, and take breaks?

Language – Is communication clear, accessible, and explicit, without relying on hidden expectations?

Choice – Are there meaningful options for how people participate, communicate, and engage?

The TLC lens can help identify barriers to regulation and opportunities for improvement.

5. Co-design for regulation

Embed regulation into everyday practice rather than treating it as an individual responsibility. Collectively discuss and decide how you can design for regulation. Plan, share information in advance, make expectations clear, build in breaks, offer genuine choices, value different ways of participating, and be prepared to adapt. Small changes can make a significant difference to people's experiences. For example:

- start by prioritising regulation
- make regulation visible
- value every way of participating
- always include breaks
- design for choice
- be responsive
- return regularly to your group agreement
- remember that facilitators matter
- if you say you will listen and adapt, make sure you do

On pages 12 and 13, you can find more details about each of these suggestions.

6. Reflect, learn, and adapt

Creating a Neurodivergent Culture of Regulation is an ongoing process, not a one-off achievement. Regularly seek feedback, revisit your shared principles and agreements, notice what is working well, and be willing to make changes. Regulation needs will change over time, and cultures become stronger when they continue to learn alongside the people within them.

Designing for regulation: Suggestions from a neurodivergent creative research community



Start by prioritising regulation

Ask yourself:

How can we prioritise regulation before people even arrive?

For example, you could:

- send information in advance
- share agendas before meetings
- share information and agendas in different formats, for example video, text and pictures
- explain what people can expect
- provide resources beforehand
- be clear about timings
- explain how people can participate
- make it clear that flexibility is welcome

Being prepared reduces uncertainty and supports regulation.

It's also important to retain choice. Do not assume that everyone will want or be able to engage with everything you send in advance, but by making the information available you are offering everyone involved an opportunity for choice.

Make regulation visible

Talk openly about regulation. Commit and explain that creating a culture of regulation is an intentional part of the space. Be explicit. Don't assume people know what is possible.

> "[Make] explicit invitations before and during activities outlining the degree to which it is okay for participants to (for example) move out of their seats, take breaks, do handcrafts, etc."
> Project co-researcher

Value every way of participating

Not everyone communicates in the same way. Treat speaking, writing, drawing, making and thinking as equally valuable. Set up ways of working that make the most of chat opportunities in online meetings.

Do not assume in-person participation is always best. Do not assume cameras on means someone is more engaged. Sometimes the opposite is true.

Slow down and allow time to think. Allow silence. Build in processing time and consciously plan fewer activities.

> "Not having to do too many things in one session helped with regulation." Project co-researcher

Always include breaks

Breaks are not optional extras; they are part of regulation and vital for processing time, so don't let the group opt out of them. Encourage a screen break, movement, and hydration during a break.



Design for choice

Whenever possible, use the word "or." Offer different ways to participate so people can choose what works best for them. Explicitly allow people to do things in their own way or do something different while still participating.

"[In one workshop, I was] feeling dysregulated and having an alternative [activity that] used the same materials so I didn't feel othered or like I was not participating [really helped]."
Project co-researcher.

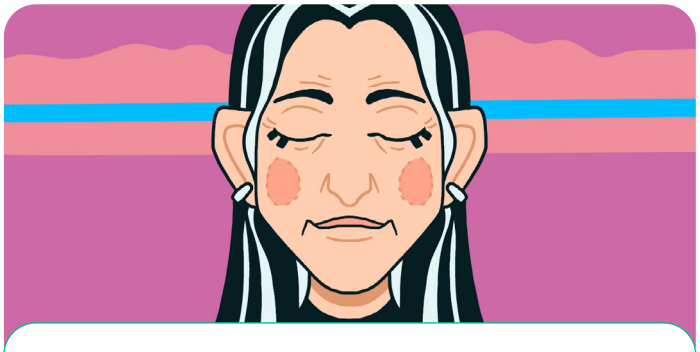
Be responsive

No plan is perfect. Make it clear from the start that activities can be adapted or changed in response to people's needs.

Return regularly to your group agreement

Create a group agreement that expresses how you, collectively, want to work. Refer to the agreement every session, making space to adjust or update it as needed.

"Having a shared code of conduct at the beginning was crucial to set up the ethos/vibe of the group."
Project co-researcher



Remember that facilitators matter

People regulate with people. Keep in mind that your own regulation influences the group. Being self-aware, patient and responsive makes a difference.

"[The facilitator's] calmness also helped me, and I managed to learn something I'd failed at before because she repeated it over and over patiently."
Project co-researcher

If you say you will listen and adapt, make sure you do

Consistency builds trust, and trust supports regulation.

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Illustrations

The illustrations used in this guide are by Catya Ledezma. Catya produced the illustrations in collaboration with members of the Neurodivergent Research community, to represent experiences of regulation and dysregulation. The illustrations are also used in 'Regulation Realities', our neurodivergent-affirming regulation card game. More of Catya's work can be viewed at www.catyaelise.com

RaYDaR

A publicly available summary of the final dataset for this project can be accessed through the York St John University open data repository, RaYDaR: https://doi.org/10.25421/yorksj.33974632. It includes project metadata, workshop overviews and details of the process of identifying themes from project data.





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