



# Planting the Seeds of Self-Reg

by KENDA RIGGS

**“The well-being of children is inseparable from the well-being of all the critical adults in their lives.”**  
~ Dr. Stuart Shanker

As teachers and educators, you are one of the most critical adults in a child’s life. You are the heart of your school, which is why your well-being is of utmost importance. You experience high levels of stress every day in the teaching profession, as you continue to navigate the many uncertainties facing you. Coping with high stress on a daily basis can be energy depleting and exhausting.

Self-Reg is based out of the MEHRIT Centre and founded by Dr. Stuart Shanker. It is not a ‘program’ to be learned, rather a lifelong ‘process’ that develops a whole new way of thinking, feeling, and being. You may wonder how adding additional workload of Self-Reg courses could actually help reduce stress levels? The more you learn about Self-Reg, the more grounded you become. Self-Reg brings you to a place to go deeper and becomes a part of who you are. As I finish up my Self-Reg certification, I would like to share my Self-Reg learning with you by ‘planting seeds of Self-Reg’.

## What is Self-Reg?

Self-Reg is a method for understanding stress and managing energy and tension levels. Stress is anything that requires you to burn energy to maintain some internal balance. A stressor is something that impacts you, and there are two types of stress – overt and hidden. You may be very aware of overt stressors in your life as these stressors are often apparent, like time restraints of getting report cards completed, the stress of a busy morning routine prior to work, or financial stress. However, there are many hidden stressors around that you may not even be aware, such as bright lights or noises, hunger from not eating lunch, overconcentration on a particular situation, or overexposure to technology. A stressor for one person may be different than another person, depending on the individual, hence the importance of ‘Self’ in Self-Reg.

Self-Reg is a process of noticing stressors in your life and then finding a way to manage that stress to experience calm. A main assumption of the Self-Reg approach is recognizing that we all experience stressors, which is anything that causes our body to burn energy to return to that calm, alert state, but we need to find ways to manage that stress. Not all stress is

bad for you, as positive stress creates energy, but it is negative stress that depletes energy. As stress uses high levels of energy, through Self-Reg you learn to become a stress detective to investigate what may be the root cause of your energy depletion. Self-Reg helps you to explore what overt and hidden stressors may be causing your stress behavior, which can often be mistaken as misbehavior (agitation toward others, late for deadlines, disorganization, low motivation). I invite you to think about what are some overt and hidden stressors around you, professionally and personally.

## Allostatic Stress Overload

When many of you contact the Employee Assistance Program, you often describe that your energy feels depleted, along with feeling that you have no work-life balance, with some feeling close to burnout. Most of you have never heard of the term ‘allostatic stress overload’, which essentially means excessive stress loads in different areas of your life. It means that you had to expend too much energy trying to maintain internal balance (homeostasis), and you become depleted. The effects of stress overload can accumulate over time and can lead to poor health situations.

Self-Reg breaks down stress into five domains of experience: Biological, Emotional, Cognitive, Social and Prosocial. Each of these domains has its own unique stressors, but they are interlocked in a way that stress in one domain can exacerbate stress-reactivity in another. When your energy resources are used to cope with stress, you may experience physical or **biological stressors** such as reduced sleep, headaches, poor diet; **emotional stressors** such as anxiety, sadness, or agitation; cognitive stressors such as brain fog, or forgetful memory; **social stressors** such as spending less time with family or friends, feeling alone; or **prosocial stressors** such as tuning in frequently to national or international news, overuse of social media, or compassion fatigue.

When there is stress in one or more of the five domains of experience, there is no longer balance. When you carry chronic negative stress over time, a stress cycle of energy depletion can develop, and you become stuck in a negative stress cycle. When you are overstressed to the point that demands on your

system are so great due to cumulative negative stress, recovery mechanisms become compromised.

### Understanding the Brain When Stressed

In Self-Reg, you learn about the Triune Brain model by Dr. Paul McLean. The reptilian (brown) brain, or brain stem, is responsible for your survival functions such as regulating digestion and heart rate, but tries to keep you safe when under severe threat. The limbic (red) brain known as the emotional brain, is also designed to keep you safe. This part of the brain triggers a fight or flight reaction as it scans for threats through neuroception, whereby neural circuits distinguish whether situations are safe, dangerous, or life-threatening. When excessive chronic stress occurs, neuroception can become distorted, and your limbic system can perceive threats that do not exist, resulting in negative bias. The limbic system can become stuck in this negative stress cycle, whereby your brain senses threats when there are none. You enter a constant state of low energy/high tension in your body. Finally, the neocortex (blue) part of the brain is for conscious thinking, and is responsible for rational thoughts, planning, working memory, speech, and problem solving.

When you are calm, your thinking brain is alert and working strong; however, it is difficult to access the neocortex when experiencing excessive levels of stress. When you are overly stressed, it is difficult for you to think clearly as your limbic brain is in constant action. The Self-Reg approach highlights that having blue brain-red brain balance is of utmost importance, because energy expenditure and recovery are counter-balanced, and this leads to a healthy 'self'.

### Be Your Own Gardener

When you experience increasing levels of stress, the cumulative effects of depleted energy due to being stuck in a negative stress cycle can have serious health impacts. Dr. Shanker discusses a five-step process to managing stress: Reframe the Behaviour; Recognize the Stressors; Reduce the Stress; Reflect; and Respond. The 'Respond' step of Self-Reg requires soothing the limbic system with a conscious effort on reducing stress. The focus is on restoring your own energy by weeding your own garden. As gardens need care and maintenance, and weeds need to be pulled for good healthy growth, that is the same for you. You need to nurture yourself with self-love, compassion, and care. You need to devote time to yourself, examine what stressors (weeds) are in your own garden adding to your negative stress cycle. The goal is to break the negative stress cycle and restore you to a state of experiencing calm, to establish homeostasis through awareness.

Through the process of restoring your energy through Self-Reg, this balance should begin to bring your energy expenditure and energy recovery in sync. The restoration time frame will be different for people because this is your individual journey. Self-Reg is about restoring self, and you can change your trajectory through this Self-Reg process. You must view yourself with compassion known in Self-Reg as "soft eyes".

As this is your Self-Reg journey, you must find restorative strategies that work for you. Some restorative practices to consider:

- Relaxing experiences such as meditation, spiritual practice, yoga nidra, relaxation massage, listening to calming music
- Embracing strategies that activate the senses of nature such as visiting the park or beach, gardening, bird watching, trail walking, berry picking, fishing, or try aromatherapy
- *Listening to ice cracking under your feet, rain on the windows, or watching the sunset*
- Resume or trying activities such as dancing, playing music, knitting, hiking, drawing, swimming, kayaking, pottery, painting, reading, baking, geocaching, flying a kite, biking...be creative!
- Rest, sleep, prepare healthy planned well-balanced meals/snacks, replenish
- Create time to spend and be with your family and friends
- Cry, allow yourself to release deep emotions, laugh from your soul, and allow yourself to feel genuine happiness
- Limit technology, media exposure, time spent watching television
- Be kind, give to others, experience the helpers high, release negative energy
- Explore Self-Reg journaling
- Calm. The essence of homeostasis is feeling calm. Take time to breathe deeply, relax, and be. Allow yourself to be grounded in this moment.

It is never too late to learn and practice Self-Reg. Every person can embark on this lifelong Self-Reg journey. If you would like to explore more about Self-Reg and the work of Dr. Shanker and his team, please visit [www.selfreg.ca](http://www.selfreg.ca).

.....  
Kenda Riggs is a Coordinator with the Employee Assistance Program for Teachers. For confidential assistance contact Kenda (ext. 265) or Kathy Taylor-Rogers (ext. 242).

### References

Shanker, S. & Barker, T. (2017). *Self-Reg: How to Help Your Child (And You) Break the Stress Cycle and Successfully Engage with Life*. Toronto, Ontario: Penguin Canada

**“Self-regulation is how well we manage stress, how much energy we expend, and how well we recover.”**

**~ Dr. Stuart Shanker**