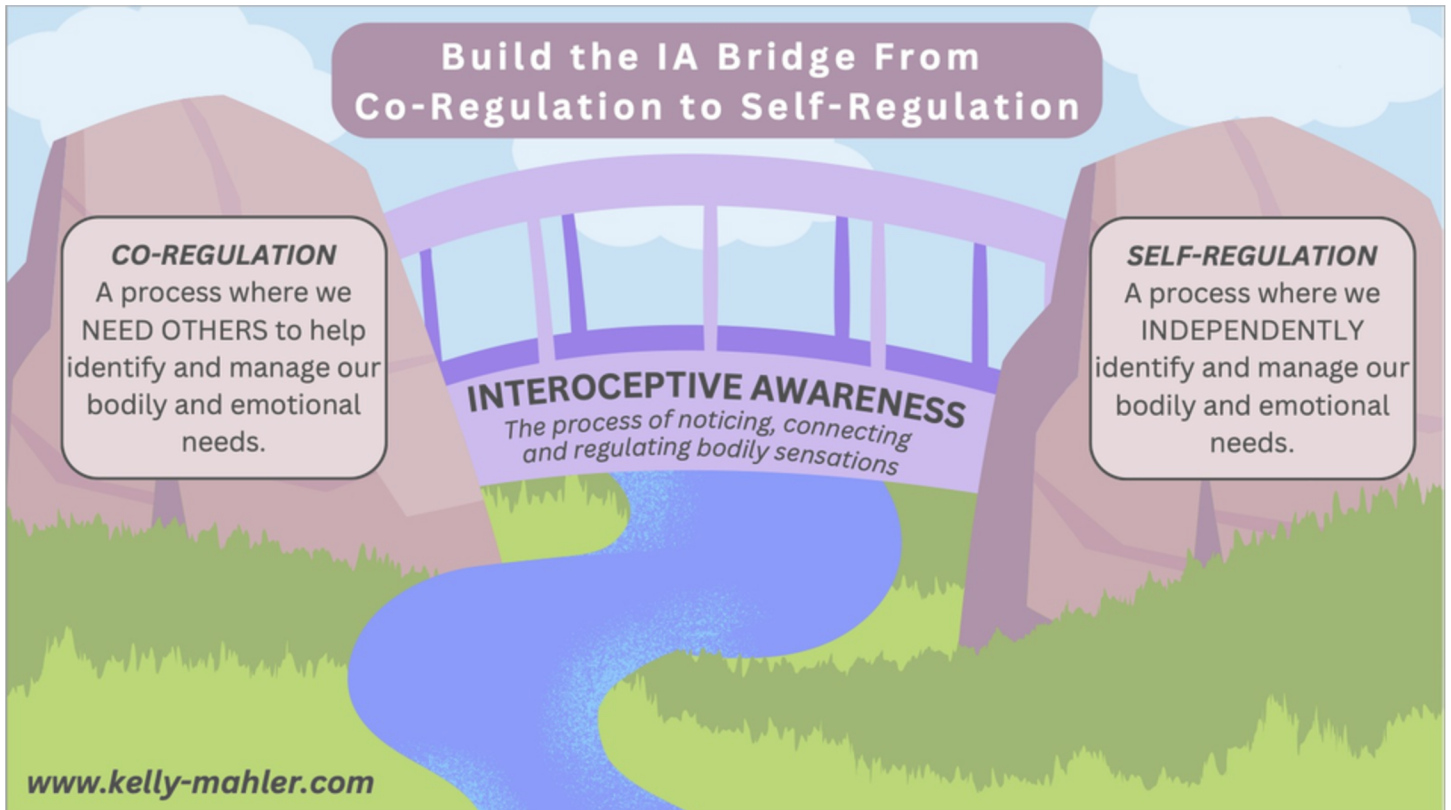


Building the Interoception Bridge: From Co-Regulation to Self-Regulation



A free mini-booklet from Kelly Mahler, OTD, OTR/L

www.kelly-mahler.com

We All Start Here

Every human enters the world needing co-regulation.

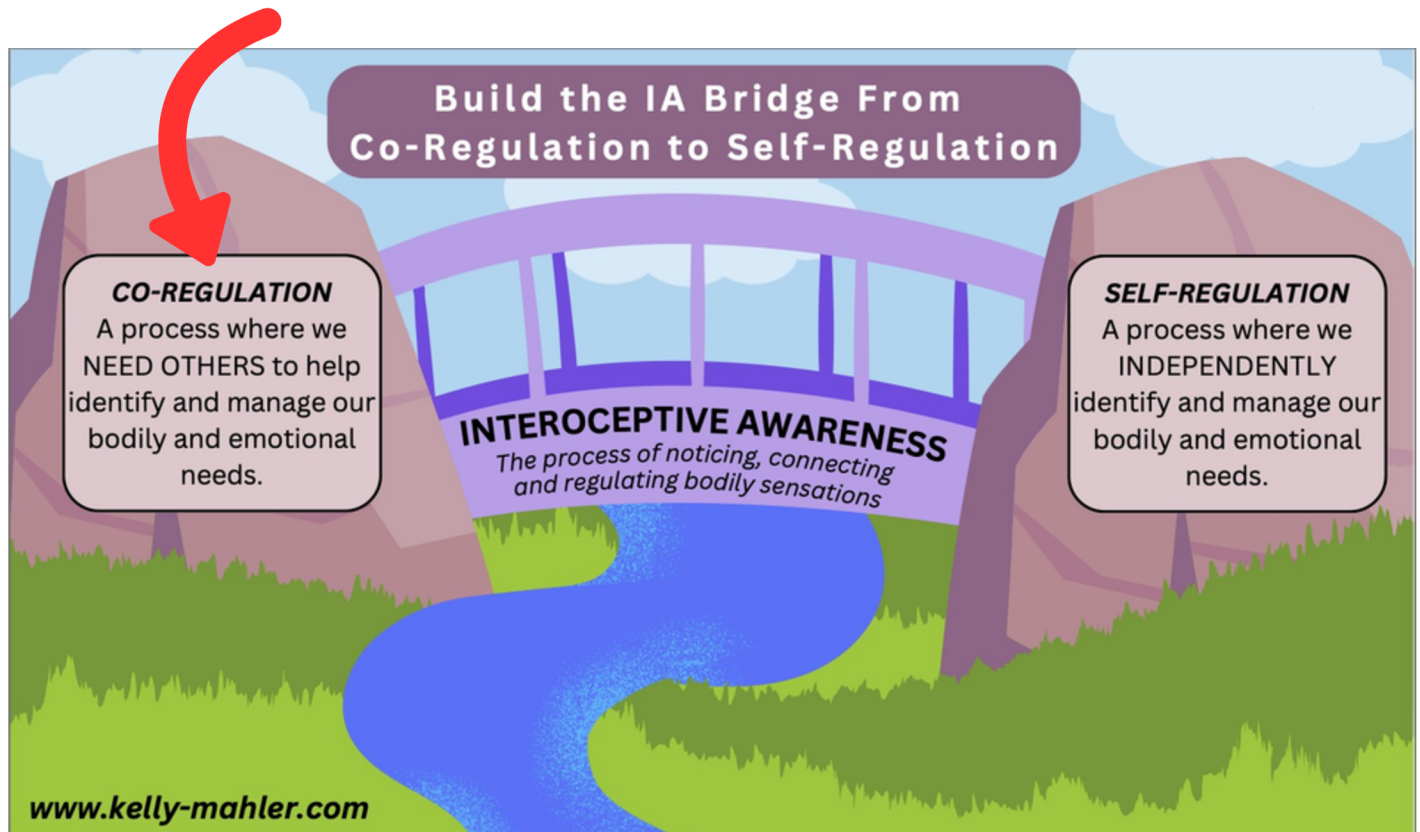
From the very beginning, our bodies are full of interoception signals like hunger, discomfort, warmth, overwhelm, and comfort. We don't yet know what they mean. And we are not yet able to care for these signals.

So we rely on others.

A caregiver notices our expressions of comfort and discomfort, responds, and adjusts. They feed us, rock us, change the environment, stay close, and try again.

This is not just co-regulation.

This is how we begin to learn our bodies.



Co-Regulation: Where Understanding Begins

Co-regulation is a back-and-forth process where another person helps us meet our body's needs.

Through these repeated experiences, something important starts to happen.

These moments do more than meet immediate needs.

They begin to build an understanding that:

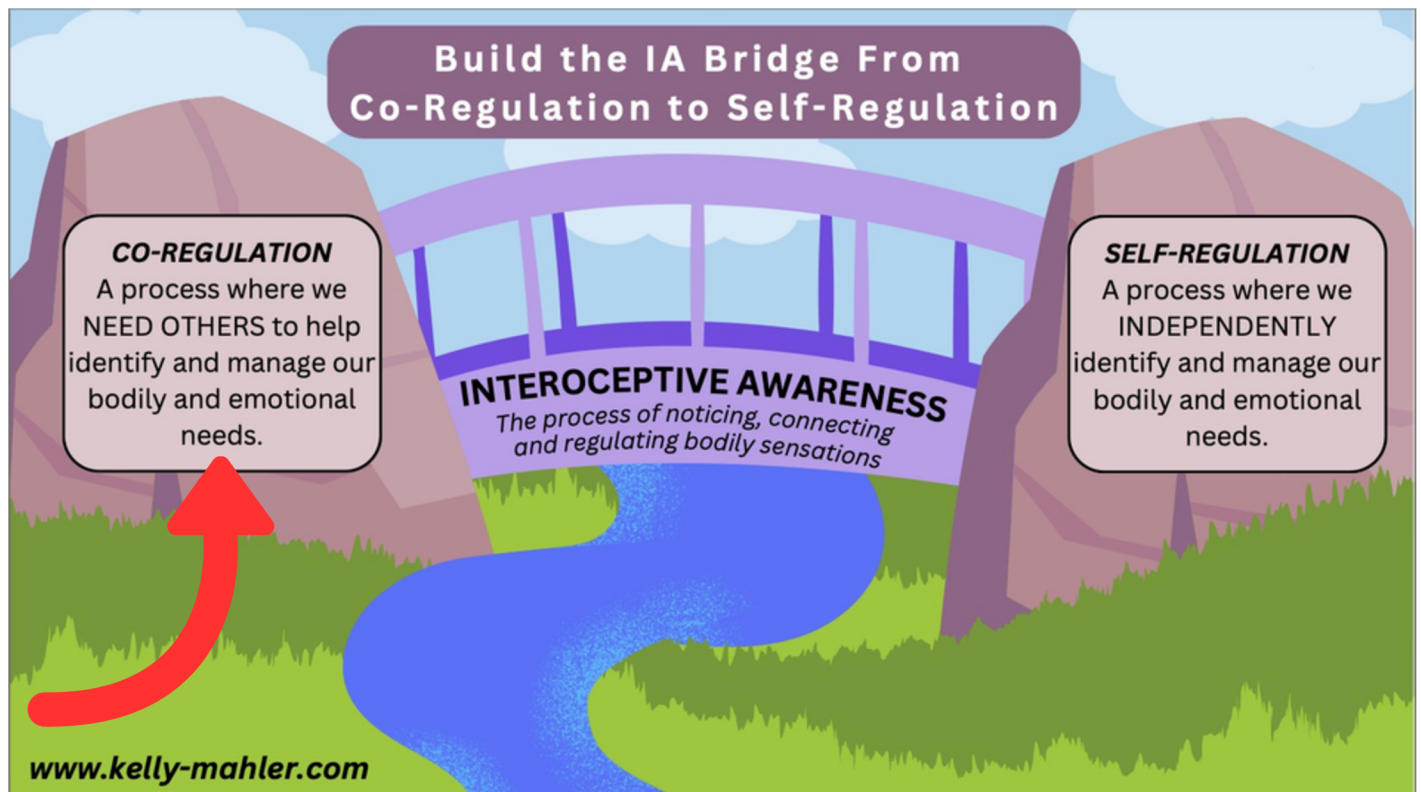
- Body signals matter.
- Those signals will be responded to.
- Certain actions can help the body feel better.

Through repeated experiences of co-regulation, many young people begin to:

- Notice more specific body signals.
- Understand what those signals might mean.
- Discover what helps their body move toward comfort.

This is how interoception develops.

Not through instruction. Through experience.



Interoception: The Bridge

Over time, these co-regulation experiences build something powerful:

Interoceptive awareness – the ability to notice, connect, and respond to body signals.

This is the bridge.

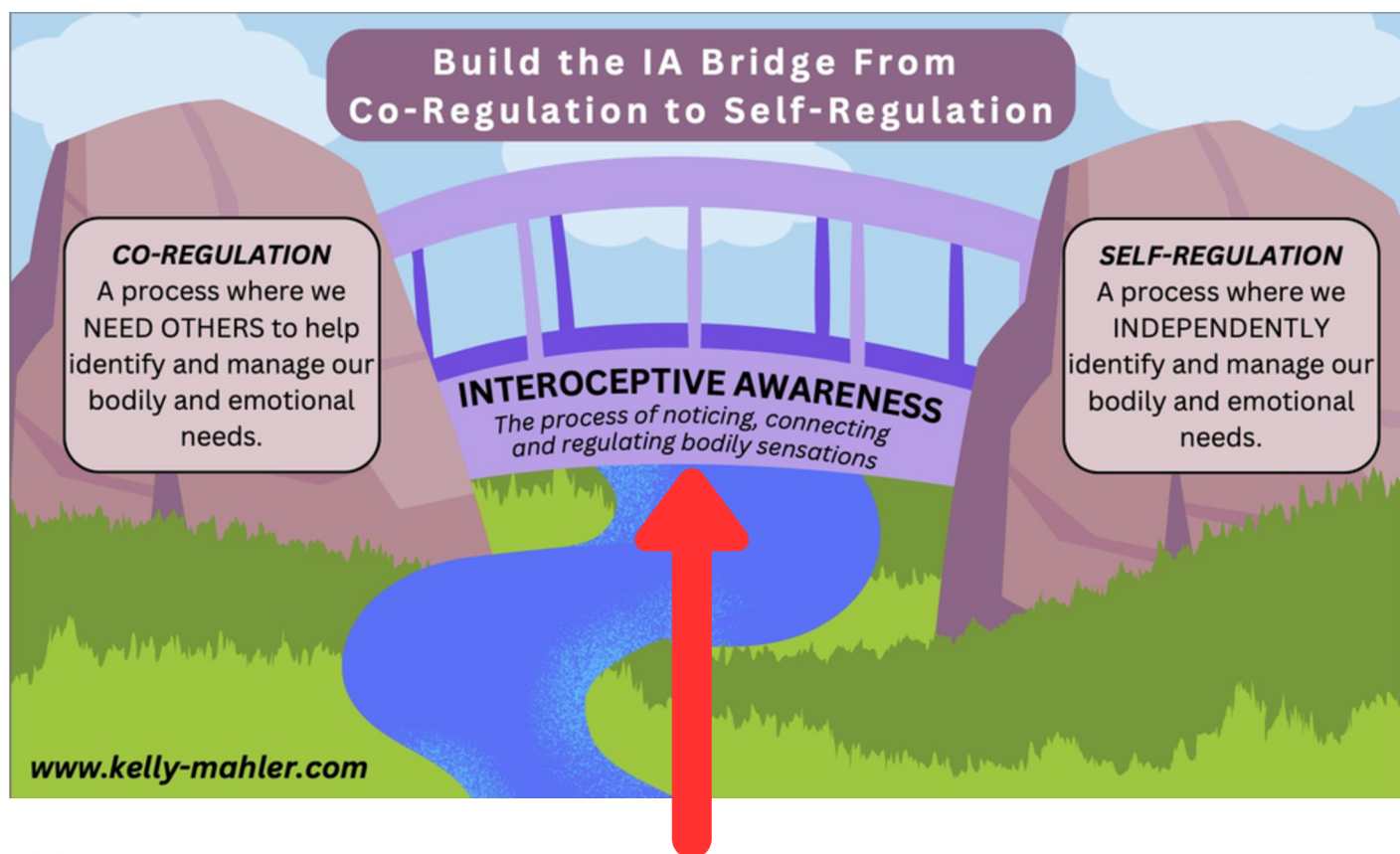
It's what allows someone to move from:

“I need someone to figure this out for me”

to

“I’m starting to understand what’s happening inside my body.”

Without this bridge, self-regulation isn't a skill, it's an expectation placed on a body that does not yet have the information it needs.



Self-Regulation: More Than It Seems

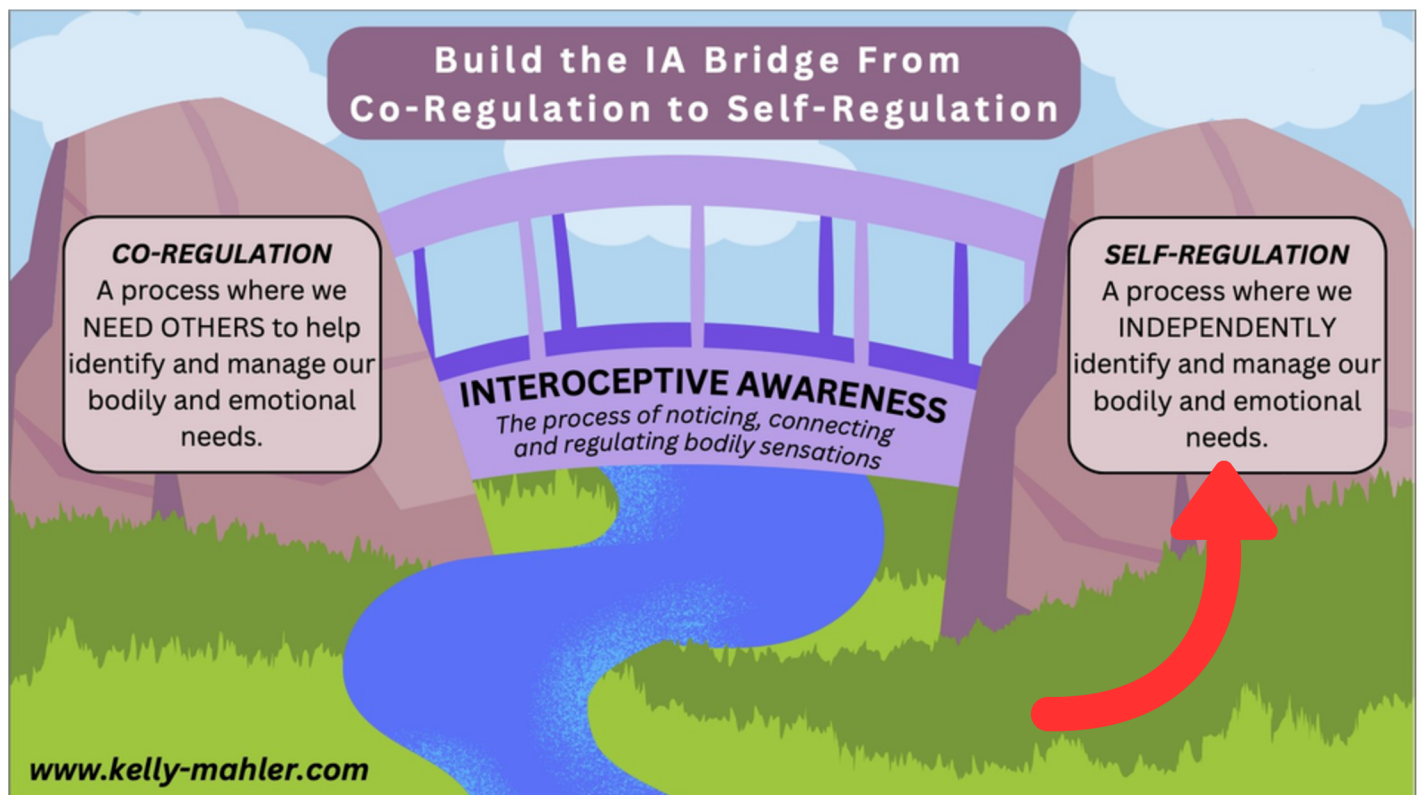
Self-regulation is often described as “managing emotions” or “staying calm.”

But it is not that simple.

Underneath it, a person needs to be able to:

- Notice body signals.
- Understand what those signals might mean.
- Explore what actions might help.

In many ways, self-regulation is interoception in action.



Self-Regulation and Co-Regulation Are Not Opposites

Self-regulation does not mean independence from others.

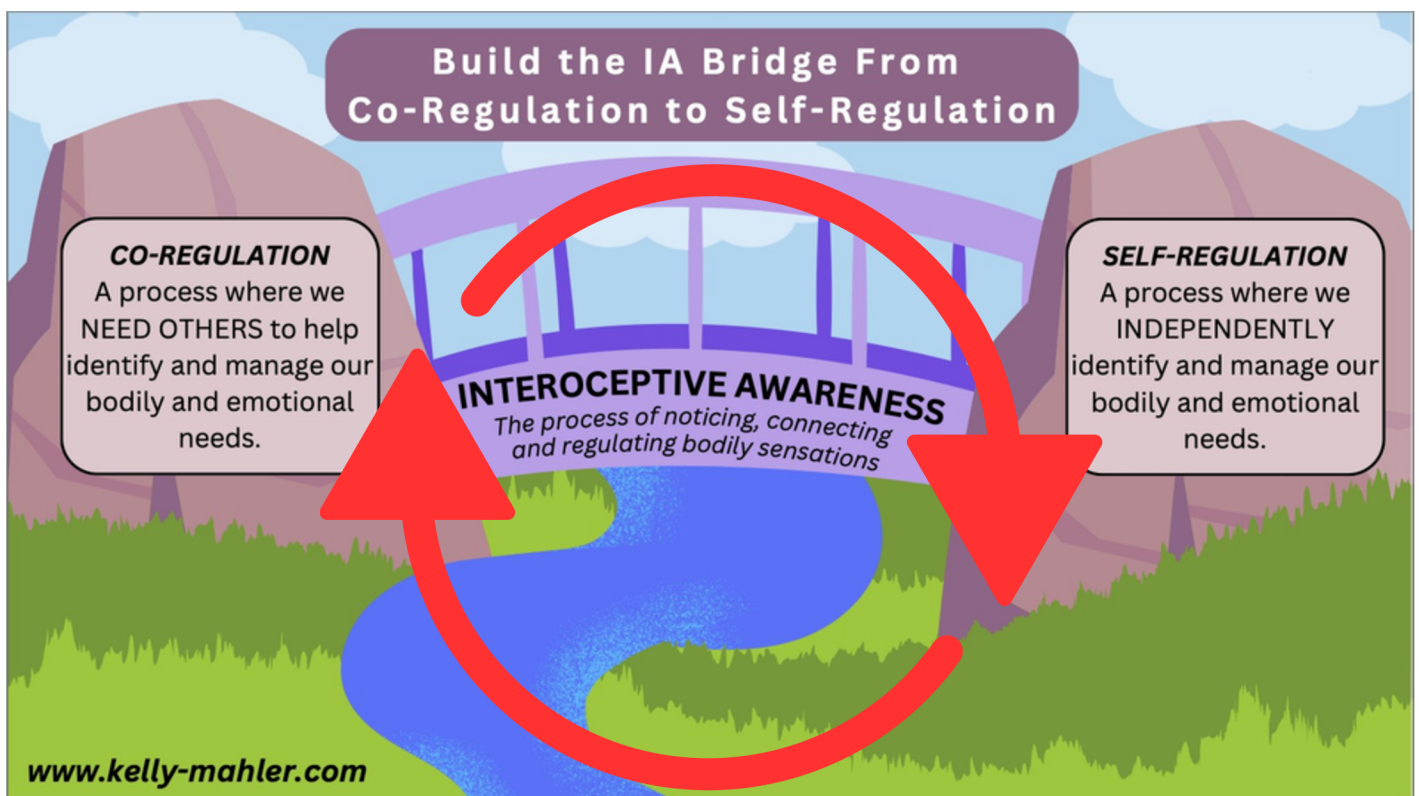
Even as adults, we continue to seek co-regulation:

- A conversation.
- A hug.
- Quiet presence.
- Someone who understands.

Self-regulation and co-regulation are not opposites.

They are partners.

We may become more independent in understanding our bodies, but we never outgrow the need for connection.



When the Bridge Is Missing

Here's where things often go off track.

We expect self-regulation...without enough co-regulation.

We say things like:

- "Use a coping strategy."
- "Calm down."
- "Make a good choice."

But if the bridge is not in place, these expectations can be unfair, and often impossible.

When someone can't meet those expectations, they may be labeled as:

- Defiant.
- Oppositional.
- Challenging.

But what may actually be happening is this:

The body does not yet have the information it needs.

Even the most loving co-regulation cannot fully buffer environments that expect compliance before understanding.

When expectations for self-regulation come before these foundational skills are in place, compliance culture can begin to creep in.

The focus shifts toward controlling behavior rather than understanding the body experience underneath it.

When Compliance Replaces Understanding

This is where compliance often takes over.

Instead of building understanding, we start asking for behavior.

Compliance can look like:

- Stopping the behavior.
- Following directions.
- Meeting expectations.

But compliance does not build the bridge.

In many cases, it can pull someone further away from their body:

- Ignoring signals.
- Overriding discomfort.
- Prioritizing external demands over internal needs.

Over time, the body learns:

“My signals don’t matter as much as what others expect.”

A Different Path Forward

When we shift from compliance to co-regulation, everything changes.

Instead of asking

“How do I stop this behavior?”

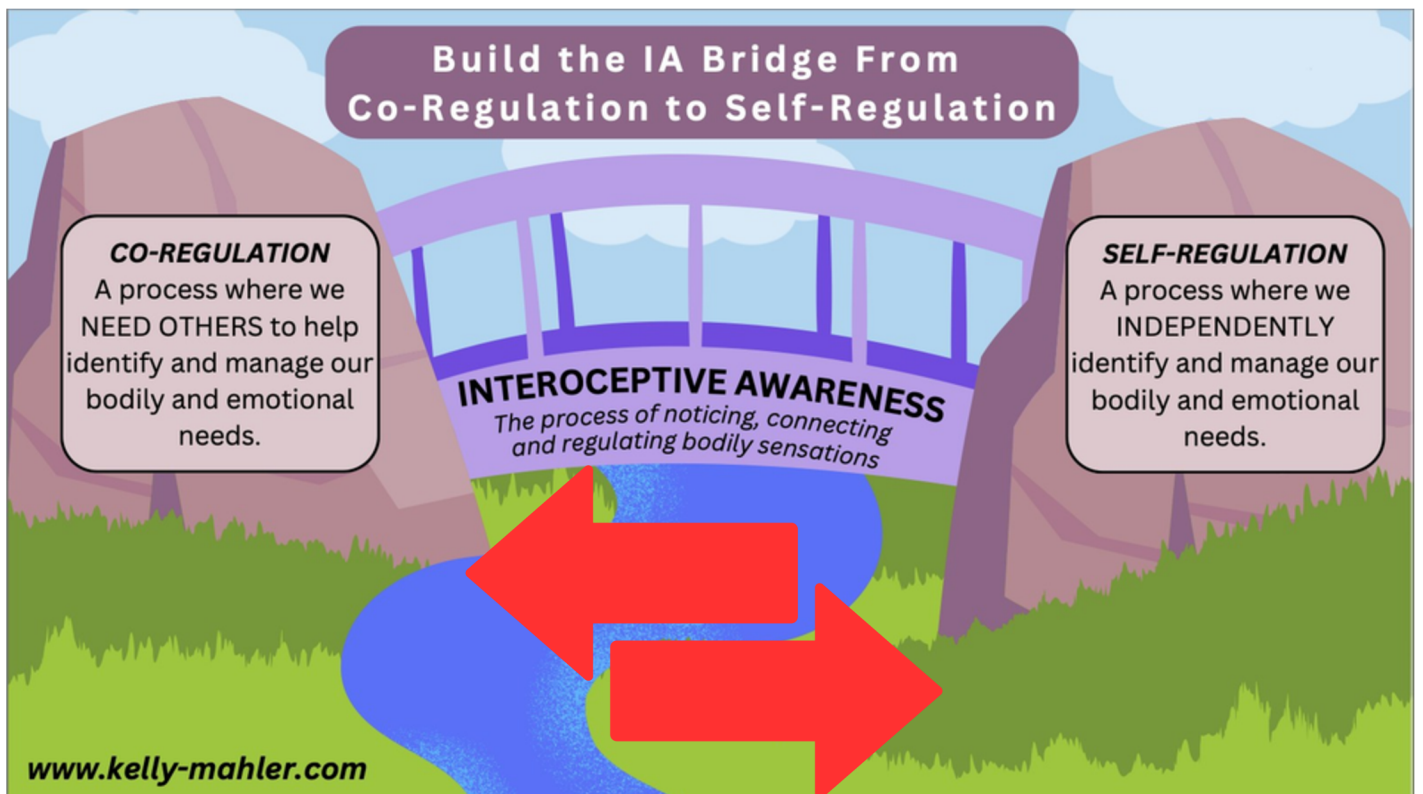
We begin to wonder:

“What might this body be experiencing right now?”

“What might help it feel safer or more comfortable?”

This shift brings interoception back online.

And this is how the bridge gets built.



What This Can Look Like in Real Life

Co-regulation might look like:

- Noticing body signals without judgment.
- Validating what you see.
- Offering support (movement, pressure, quiet, connection, space).
- Repairing when something doesn't help.
- Staying curious and trying again.

It is not about getting it right.

It is about staying in relationship while the body figures it out.



Key Takeaways

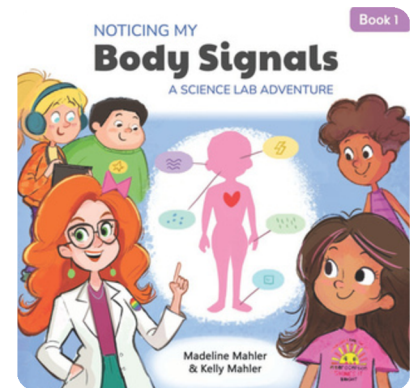
- We all start life needing co-regulation.
- Co-regulation is how we learn about our bodies.
- Interoceptive awareness is the bridge to self-regulation.
- Self-regulation without the interoceptive awareness bridge is an unfair expectation.
- Even strong, loving co-regulation at home cannot fully buffer environments that prioritize compliance before understanding.
- Compliance focuses on observable behavior, not body understanding. Often, body understanding is what a person needs in order to access more regulated behavior.
- Co-regulation builds safety, trust, and body awareness.
- We all continue to need co-regulation throughout our lives.

If You Want to Go Deeper

If this way of thinking resonates with you, here are a few ways to explore further:

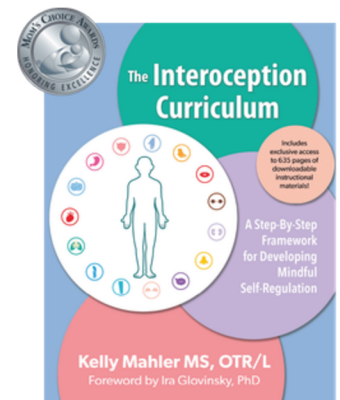
Noticing My Body Signals: A Science Lab Adventure

A playful way to explore body signals through curiosity and experience. [Click to LEARN MORE](#)



The Interoception Curriculum®

A structured framework for building interoceptive awareness step by step. [Click to LEARN MORE](#)



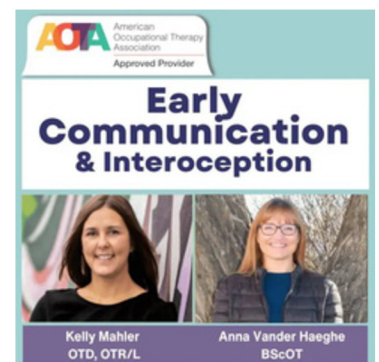
Co-Regulation & Sensory Safety Course

A deeper dive into supporting nervous systems through connection and environment. [Click to LEARN MORE](#)



Early Interoception Communication Course

Learn how to recognize and respond to body-based communication, especially for non-speaking or early communicators. [Click to LEARN MORE](#)



Explore courses and resources: www.kelly-mahler.com