

LEADING WITH CALM

Emotional Regulation for a Trauma-Responsive Court





This publication and the National Infant–Toddler Court Program was made possible through the support of the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of an award totaling \$7,636,913 with 0 percent financed from non–governmental sources. The contents are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government. For more information, please visit [HRSA.gov](https://www.hrsa.gov).

The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges®(NCJFCJ) provides cutting–edge training, wide–ranging technical assistance, and research to help the nation’s courts, judges, and staff in their important work. Since its founding in 1937 by a group of judges dedicated to improving the effectiveness of the nation’s juvenile courts, the NCJFCJ has pursued a mission to improve courts and systems practice and raise awareness of the core issues that touch the lives of many of our nation’s children and families.

Suggested Citation: Rincón, F. & Livengood, Z. (2026). *Leading with Calm: Emotional Regulation for a Trauma–Responsive Court*. Reno, NV: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

Authored By:

Fabiola Rincón

Site Manager, NCJFCJ

Zoe Livengood, MA

Senior Program Manager, NCJFCJ

For more information about the NCJFCJ or this document, please contact:

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges

P.O. Box 8970

Reno, NV 89507

www.ncjfcj.org

© 2026, National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. All rights reserved.

Leading With Calm

Emotional Regulation for a Trauma-Responsive Court

Safe Babies judges are routinely called upon to manage emotionally charged hearings, absorb the trauma of families, and make decisions that profoundly affect children's lives. A trauma-responsive approach recognizes that emotional responses are normal, and that effective regulation strengthens clarity, fairness, and well-being. Emotional regulation is not about suppressing feelings but about engaging with them in ways that support sound judgment and a stable courtroom environment.^{i,ii}

According to the American Psychological Association, emotional dysregulation is any excessive or poorly managed emotional response. An inability to control emotions can lead to mood swings or emotional lability, defined as rapid and dramatic shifts between emotional states.ⁱⁱⁱ Research shows that emotional regulation and executive function are closely connected. When individuals experience high emotional stress, cognitive processes such as attention, impulse control, and decision-making may become strained because these functions rely on shared cognitive resources.^{iv,v}

FOR JUDGES, THIS COULD LOOK LIKE:

BEHAVIORAL CUES

- ▶ ABRUPT TONE
- ▶ IMPATIENCE
- ▶ WITHDRAWAL

PHYSIOLOGICAL AROUSAL

- ▶ RAPID HEARTBEAT
- ▶ SHALLOW BREATHING
- ▶ MUSCLE TENSION
- ▶ CLENCHED TEETH

COGNITIVE OVERLOAD

- ▶ DIFFICULTY CONCENTRATING
- ▶ INTRUSIVE THOUGHTS
- ▶ IMPAIRED MEMORY

RELATIONAL IMPACT

- ▶ DIMINISHED EMPATHY
- ▶ STRAINED INTERACTIONS
WITH ATTORNEYS,
LITIGANTS, AND STAFF



“Judicial emotional regulation is very important because we are often confronted with dysregulated parents and children in the courtroom. We cannot allow ourselves (as judges) to become dysregulated during these encounters because we may make decisions that are not in the best interest of the children and parents or we may lose our connection with them in the courtroom. Learning the cues is the first step to owning your emotions in the courtroom. When we can stay regulated, we increase our chances of helping those before us emotionally regulate, which often leads to meaningful engagement!”

~ **Judge Trent Favre,**
Bay St. Louis, MS

The courtroom is an emotionally charged environment for all involved. Judges often need to consider the child's needs and circumstances, parental capacity, and legal factors. Judges can also experience a variety of negative emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness due to the emotions exhibited by others in the courtroom. Secondary traumatic stress^{vi} is a significant contributor. Judges exposed to stories of abuse, neglect, and violence may develop symptoms like posttraumatic stress disorder, including sleep disturbances, irritability, and emotional numbing.^{vii,viii}



Secondary traumatic stress

“Secondary traumatic stress is the emotional duress that results when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another...For therapists, child welfare workers, case managers, and other helping professionals involved in the care of traumatized children and their families, the essential act of listening to trauma stories may take an emotional toll that compromises professional functioning and diminishes quality of life. Individual and supervisory awareness of the effects of this indirect trauma exposure is a basic part of protecting the health of the worker and ensuring that children consistently receive the best possible care from those who are committed to helping them.”

– The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Pushing emotions aside may feel effective short-term, but over time it heightens stress, reduces clarity, and increases burnout.^{ix} Judicial officers who attempt to “push through” without acknowledging their emotional state often experience fatigue, irritability, and detachment, which can undermine fairness and presence in the courtroom. The role of judges has expanded, particularly in treatment and problem-solving courts. Judicial officers remain neutral arbiters responsible for ensuring fairness and due process. At the same time, many courts now encourage judges to incorporate trauma-responsive practices, including respectful engagement with families, collaboration with multidisciplinary partners, and the use of evidence-based approaches that support safety, stability, and accountability.

In Safe Babies courts, judges work as part of a collaborative community team focused on the well-being of infants, toddlers, and their families. Because the first three years of life represent a period of rapid development and growth, these cases can be especially complex and sensitive. Judges often facilitate collaboration among multidisciplinary partners while also considering information related to children's mental health, healthy parent-child relationships, co-regulation between the parent and child, child development, trauma, and the needs of families impacted by substance use disorders. Balancing these considerations alongside legal requirements can add emotional and cognitive demands to judicial decision-making.

Skills such as grounding, reframing, and reflection help judicial officers remain steady and fully present. Trauma-responsive practice requires judges to recognize the impact of trauma on themselves and others and to respond in ways that promote safety, agency, and meaningful engagement.^x A regulated, calm judicial officer helps reduce fear, uncertainty, and escalation for children, families, and professionals. Conversely, judicial emotional dysregulation, manifesting as irritability, impatience, or visible frustration, can heighten anxiety among Safe Babies team members and families, erode trust, and create a perception of unfairness.^{xi} Dysregulation often feels like being “flooded” by emotion: racing thoughts, tension in the body, difficulty focusing, and a sense of overwhelm. Families appearing in court may also exhibit behaviors associated with stress or trauma exposure, such as heightened emotional reactions, difficulty concentrating, withdrawal, or challenges with communication.

These responses may occur even in the absence of a formal diagnosis. Recognizing that such behaviors can reflect underlying stress or trauma can help judges approach interactions with patience, clarity, and a trauma-responsive perspective while maintaining fairness and accountability.

Research also suggests that fatigue can influence judicial decision-making. For example, a landmark study of Israeli parole boards found that favorable rulings were more likely in the morning and immediately after meal breaks, but declined as decision fatigue increased.^{xii} More recent analyses of U.S. pretrial release hearings confirm that decision fatigue accumulates over the course of the day, leading judges to rely more heavily on default or status quo choices.^{xiii} These findings underscore the importance of emotional regulation and intentional pauses, as even subtle factors like hunger and cognitive depletion can shape judicial outcomes.



“I kept a snack drawer for attorneys and court staff since breaks were minimal. We had crackers and snacks for families set out. We gave out peppermints to help soothe nerves – the calming scent and having something in your mouth is a soothing outlet for nervous energy and is known to reduce cortisol.”

~ **Kimber Navarrete** (Former General Magistrate),
Newburgh, IN



Practical Strategies for the Bench

Emotional regulation is not only important for the judge and their decision-making, but can shape the environment of the entire courtroom. Use the strategies below to create a courtroom that minimizes stress for all.

1. Use judicial leadership to create an environment that minimizes stress for yourself, the Safe Babies team, and families.

- a. Create a calming courtroom and courthouse. Soothing artwork and colors and a non-institutional environment can help reduce stress and makes the courtroom more trauma-responsive.^{xiv} Courts have found simple, thoughtful ways to make their spaces more welcoming for young children and their families. Some judges keep baskets of stuffed animals, books, or bubbles to help little ones stay engaged during hearings. Others offer snacks, set aside a quiet corner for families who need a moment, or provide separate waiting rooms so children are not sitting through stressful proceedings. Creating a calm space for nursing parents or for quiet reflection can also make a meaningful difference, especially for infants and toddlers.
- b. Schedule adequate time for hearings and breaks between hearings to the extent possible. If this is regularly not possible, consider a workload analysis to ensure the court can fulfill its responsibilities effectively.^{xv}
- c. Be aware that the judge's emotions and their indicators, like body language and tone of voice, influence the courtroom environment. Lead by example by showing others how to emotionally regulate through modeling.

2. Prioritize Physical Needs and Mental Health

Judges set the rhythm of the courtroom. When they slow down, take a breath, or call a brief recess, everyone follows their lead. Many judges feel pressure to push through, but they have full authority to pause when they need to. Doing so protects clarity, presence, and fairness.

- a. Come to court prepared by eating healthy meals and keeping high-protein and healthy snacks available.^{xvi}
- b. Prioritize sleep and exercise.^{xvii}
- c. Prioritize mental health by seeking therapy, journaling, and/or meditating.^{xviii}
- d. Take care of yourself when you are not feeling well.^{xix} Judges can not help others when they are not at their best.

3. Reframe Stressors

Judicial officers have different levels of experience, which influences decisions during hearings. Preliminary evidence shows that judges' experience may affect their emotional response, which can influence how they view case factors, such as the abuse or neglect of another child, when making decisions.^{xx} Shifting perspective reduces emotional intensity and supports trauma-responsive engagement. For example, rather than “this case is overwhelming,” a trauma-responsive reframe might be, “this case reflects significant challenges, and my role is to help ensure safety, stability, and fairness.”^{xxi}

4. Prepare & Reflect

Taking a moment before and after hearings to ground and reflect helps prevent “spillover stress” and supports measured, compassionate decision-making. Trauma-responsive practice acknowledges how repeated exposure to trauma material can accumulate and reinforces the importance of intentional reset moments.^{xxii} Reflection prevents spillover stress and reinforces fairness.

5. Practice Mindfulness

Short grounding exercises, controlled breathing, or brief mindfulness pauses can restore clarity and support emotional steadiness. Even 2–5 minutes between hearings can decrease physiological stress, improve attention, and strengthen resilience.^{xxiii} The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges offers judicial mindfulness recordings, Monday Morning Moments, through its Judicial Wellness–Connection–Leadership Initiative.

6. Seek Support

Judicial wellbeing programs, confidential peer support, and collegial consultation are essential components of trauma-responsive practice. Seeking support helps normalize the emotional weight inherent in child welfare and delinquency work and reduces isolation. Judges may also benefit from addressing structural contributors to stress. This may include partnering with court administration to adjust calendaring practices, exploring workload solutions, or working with the Administrative Office of the Courts in their jurisdiction to identify training, coaching, or technical assistance resources. These forms of support reinforce that emotional regulation is not only an individual responsibility; it is a shared organizational commitment to sustainable, high-quality judicial practice.

“Judges have a responsibility to continually nourish their minds, bodies, souls, and spirits to achieve and maintain the emotional resilience required for hearings involving children and families who have suffered trauma. This preparation helps judges regulate and express their own emotions in ways that create a steady, calming, and safe environment where children and families can be heard, respected, and have their cases decided fairly and justly.”

~ **Judge Joyce Williams Warren (Ret.)**
Little Rock, AR

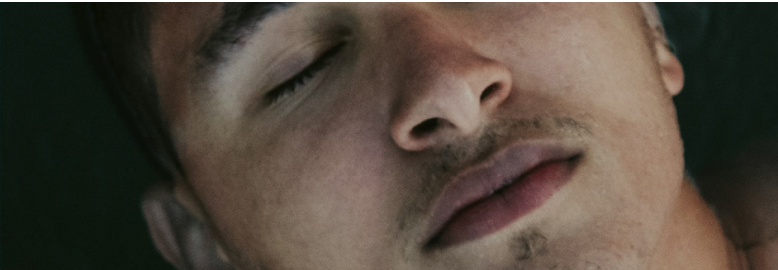


Mindfulness in Practice

Quick Tools for Judges

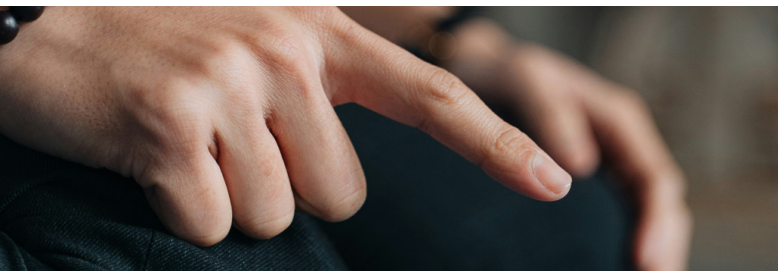
*“You can’t stop the waves,
but you can learn to surf.”*

— Jon Kabat-Zinn



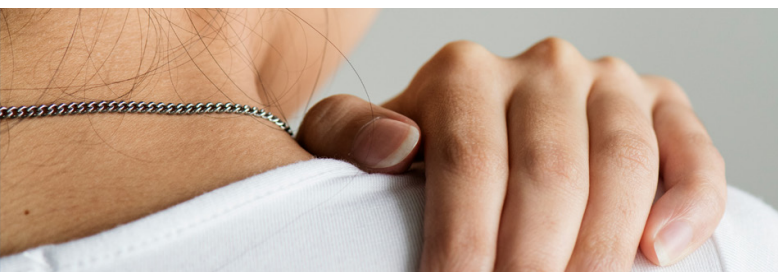
BREATH WORK

Take three deep breaths before calling a case.



GROUNDING EXERCISE

Notice five things you see, four you feel, three you hear, two you smell, one you taste.



MINI BODY SCAN

Starting at your feet, move attention up through the body to release tension.



MINDFUL PAUSE

Between cases, close your eyes and focus on your breath for two minutes.

Further Reading:

1. [The NCJFCJ's Judicial Wellness-Connection-Leadership Initiative](#)
2. [The Price I Paid for Being a 'Good Judge' – The National Judicial College](#)
3. [Judges and Stress: An Examination of Outcomes | Judicature](#)
4. [Mindfulness and Judging: Resources for Judges – Federal Judicial Center](#)
5. [American Bar Association Judicial Assistance Program – Resources for Judges](#)

References

- ⁱ Maroney, T. (2012, April). Emotional regulation and judicial behavior. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228194361_Emootional_Regulation_and_Judicial_Behavior
- ⁱⁱ Gross, J.J. (2002). Emotion regulation: Affective, cognitive, and social consequences. *Psychophysiology*, 39, 281–291. <https://doi-org.unr.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/S0048577201393198>
- ⁱⁱⁱ American Psychological Association. *Apa Dictionary of Psychology*. American Psychological Association. <https://dictionary.apa.org/dysregulation>
- ^{iv} Seymour, K. E., Chronis-Tuscano, A., Iwamoto, D. K., Kurdziel, G., & Macpherson, L. (2014, May 1). Emotion regulation mediates the association between ADHD and depressive symptoms in a community sample of Youth. *Journal of abnormal child psychology*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC4207628/>
- ^v Povroznik, J. M., Ozga, J. E., Vonder Haar, C., & Engler-Chiurazzi, E. B. (2019, October 1). Executive (dys)function after stroke: Special considerations for behavioral pharmacology. *Behavioural pharmacology*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC6152929/>
- ^{vi} National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). Secondary traumatic stress. <https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/secondary-traumatic-stress>
- ^{vii} Chamberlain, J., & Miller, M. K. (2009, February). Evidence of secondary traumatic stress, safety concerns, and burnout among a homogeneous group of judges in a single jurisdiction. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/26300552_Evidence_of_Secondary_Traumatic_Stress_Safety_Concerns_and_Burnout_Among_a_Homogeneous_Group_of_Judges_in_a_Single_Jurisdiction
- ^{viii} Grinsteiner, J., Meyer, B. L., & Clevenger, C. (2025, June 24). Resources for judges. American Bar Association. https://www.americanbar.org/groups/lawyer_assistance/articles_and_info/resources_for_judges/
- ^{ix} Richards, J. M., & Gross, J. J. (2000). Emotion regulation and memory: The cognitive costs of keeping one's cool. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(3), 410–424. <https://doi-org.unr.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.3.410>
- ^x Trauma-informed courtroom practices: A bench card for judges. NCJFCJ. (2025, August 5). <https://www.ncjfcj.org/publications/trauma-informed-courtroom-practices-a-bench-card-for-judges/>
- ^{xi} Anleu, S. R., Rottman, D., & Mack, K. (2016). The emotional dimension of judging: issues, evidence, and insights. *Ct. Rev.*, 52, 60.
- ^{xii} S. Danziger, J. Levav, & L. Avnaim-Pesso, Extraneous factors in judicial decisions, *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A.* 108 (17) 6889–6892, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1018033108> (2011).
- ^{xiii} Shroff, R., & Vamvourellis, K. (2022, November). Pretrial release judgments and decision fatigue. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/366206699_Pretial_release_judgments_and_decision_fatigue
- ^{xiv} DeVault, A., Helfrick, V.A., Marsh, S.C., & Snider, K.M. (2018). Environmental considerations for trauma-responsive juvenile and family courts: A review of the literature with recommendations for practice. *Juvenile & Family Court Journal*, 69(2), 5–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jfcj.12109>
- ^{xv} Gatowski, S., Miller, N., Rubin, S., Escher, P., & Maze, C. (2016) Enhanced resource guidelines: Improving court practice in child abuse and neglect cases. Reno, NV: National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.
- ^{xvi} Allott, Kristen (n.d.). High Stakes Events: Tips for Being at Your Best When it Counts the Most. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/6716ae38304fe5564a1933e7/t/67713b18daa88536477fa825/1735473945262/High%2BStakes%2BEvents_5-12-2021.pdf
- ^{xvii} Rolston, A. & Lloyd-Richardson, E. (n.d.). What is emotion regulation and how do we do it? <https://selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/perch/resources/what-is-emotion-regulationsinfo-brief.pdf>
- ^{xviii} Rolston, A. & Lloyd-Richardson, E. (n.d.). What is emotion regulation and how do we do it? <https://selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/perch/resources/what-is-emotion-regulationsinfo-brief.pdf>
- ^{xix} Rolston, A. & Lloyd-Richardson, E. (n.d.). What is emotion regulation and how do we do it? <https://selfinjury.bctr.cornell.edu/perch/resources/what-is-emotion-regulationsinfo-brief.pdf>
- ^{xx} Richards, T., Summers, A., Gatowski, S., Fromknecht, A., & Ruben, J. (2021). Conceptual model of judicial decision-making and hearing quality in child welfare (OPRE Report 2021–86). Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.
- ^{xxi} Richards, J. M., & Gross, J. J. (2000). Emotion regulation and memory: The cognitive costs of keeping one's cool. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 79(3), 410–424. <https://doi-org.unr.idm.oclc.org/10.1037/0022-3514.79.3.410>
- ^{xxii} Maroney, T. (2012, April). Emotional regulation and judicial behavior. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/228194361_Emootional_Regulation_and_Judicial_Behavior
- ^{xxiii} Jha, A. P., Krompinger, J., & Baime, M. J. (2007, July). Mindfulness training modifies subsystems of attention. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/6167711_Mindfulness_training_modifies_subsystems_of_attention



ZERO to THREE