

From Compliance to Connection

Supporting Families Caring for Children
with High Needs and Big Behaviors

Dr. Angela Marx



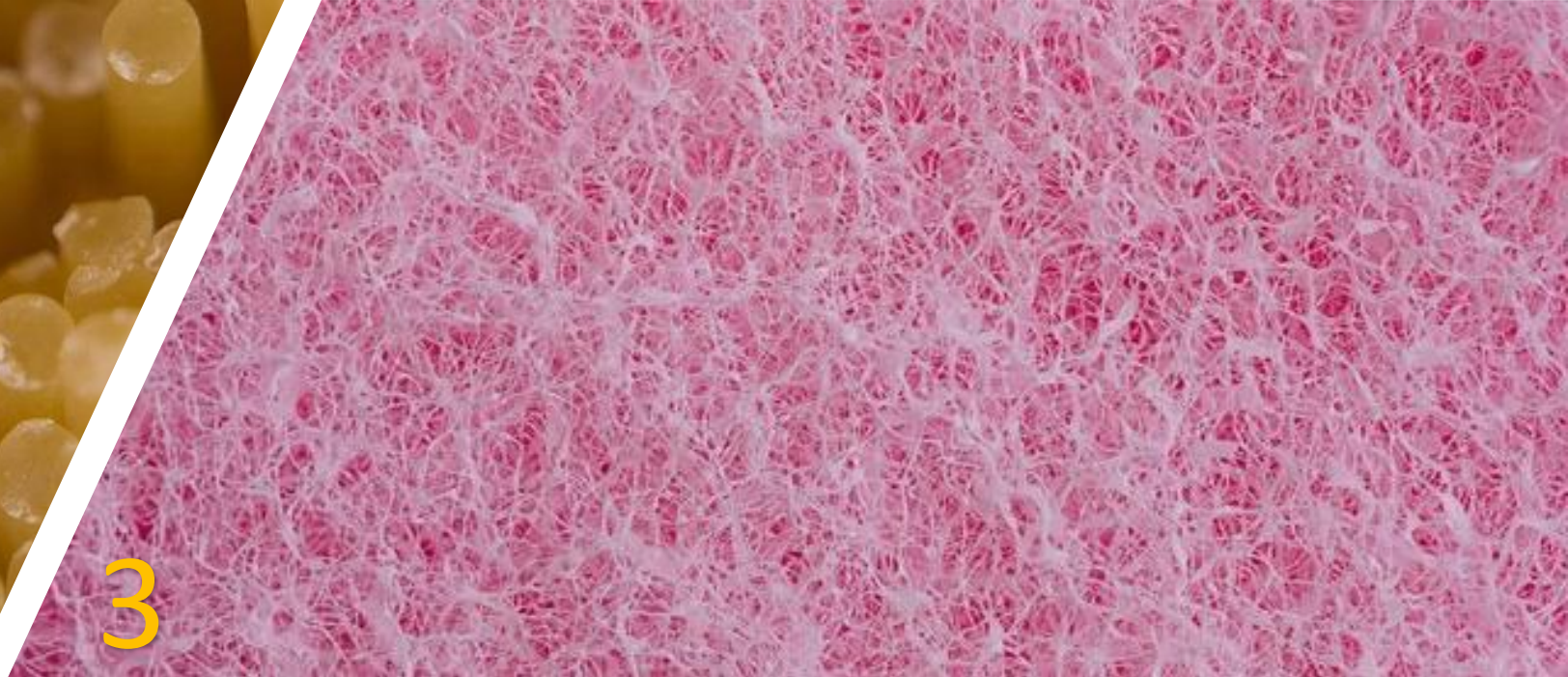
PLACE of MIND

Inclusive Psychological Services

My Lens

- De-pathologize & De-centralize mental health
- Disability informed
- Individualize health and wellness
- Community-Based
- Brain, Human, & Keeping It Real Science







Curious for more? Here's the original article: <https://www.rd.com/list/everyday-objects-close-up/>

“When a flower doesn’t bloom, you change the environment in which it grows, not the flower.”

~Alexander Den Heijer

WHAT WE SEE
(surface-level behaviors)

UNDERLYING REASONS

**What's
Underneath?**

**TEND TO THE ROOTS
BY DIGGING DEEPER**



UNDERSTANDING/ ADDRESSING/ SUPPORTING

What's Under the Surface?

- Unaccommodated differences/ disabilities
- Unmet human needs
- Communication
- Discharging energy
- Physical/ Medical
- Surviving in/ Adapting to the current environment
- **Automatic stress/ trauma reaction**



Two Main Parts of the Brain

• Rational/ Thinking/ Regulating

- Conscious responses
- Long-term advancement
- Takes time
- Organizes and monitors
- Listening and learning are possible
- Consequences= helpful
- Prefrontal cortex

• Feeling/ Emotional

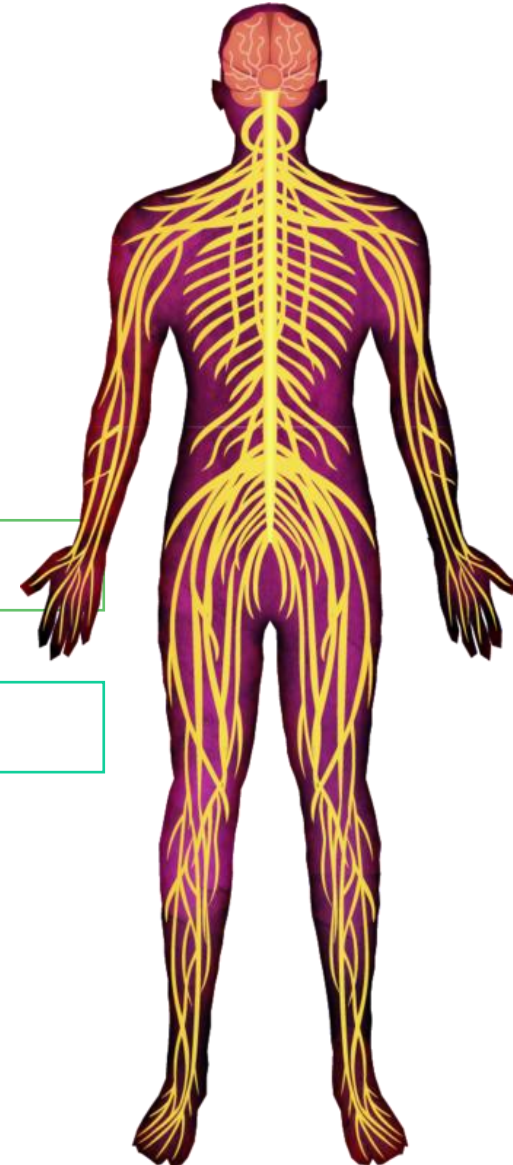
- Unconscious/ automatic responses
- Survival in the moment
- Acts quickly
- Fight, flight, freeze
- Listening and learning are impossible
- Consequences= increased escalation
- Amygdala



Central nervous system

Works with the brain

Keeps us balanced with the environment



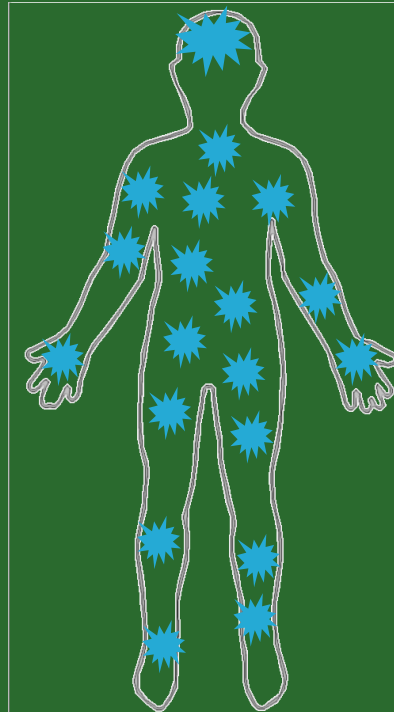
What happens when we experience trauma/ stress?

Perceived threat turns brain's alarm system on



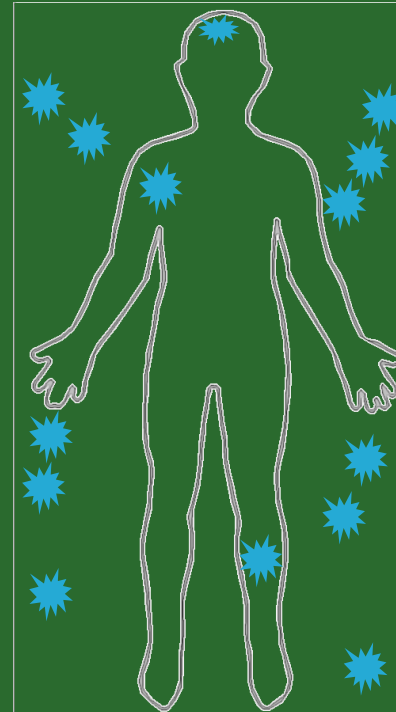
Emotional brain automatically activates
Thinking brain shuts down
Mind sends signals to body to escape threat

Nervous system activates



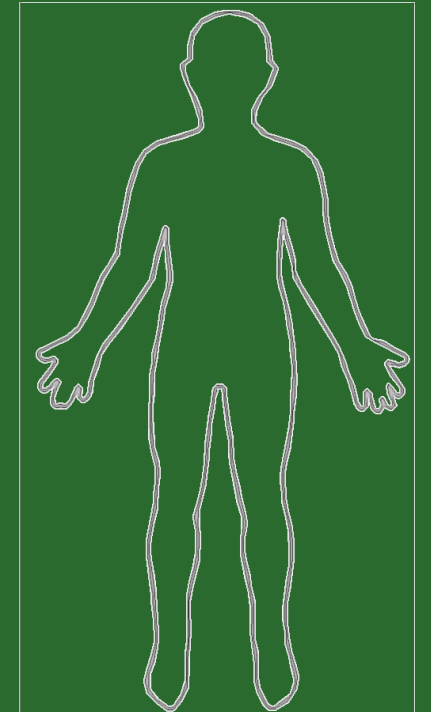
Increase in energy and stress hormones

Active role in getting to safety



Energy discharges

Threat is over



Body returns to normal

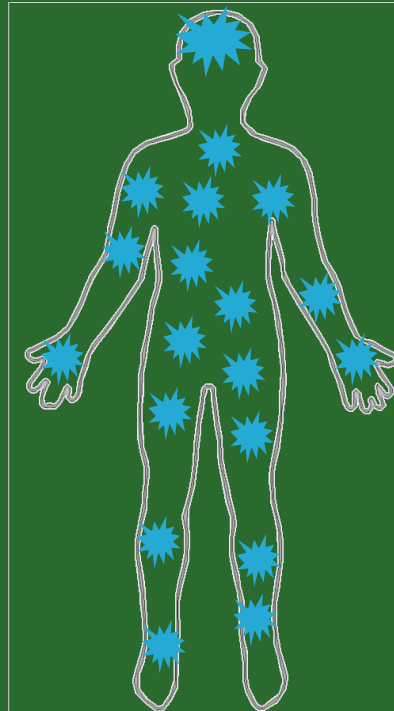


What happens when trauma GETS STUCK/ IS UNRESOLVED?

Perceived threat turns brain's alarm system on

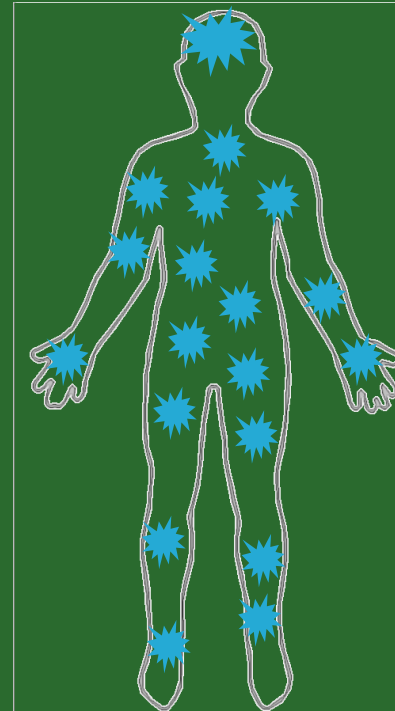


Nervous system activates



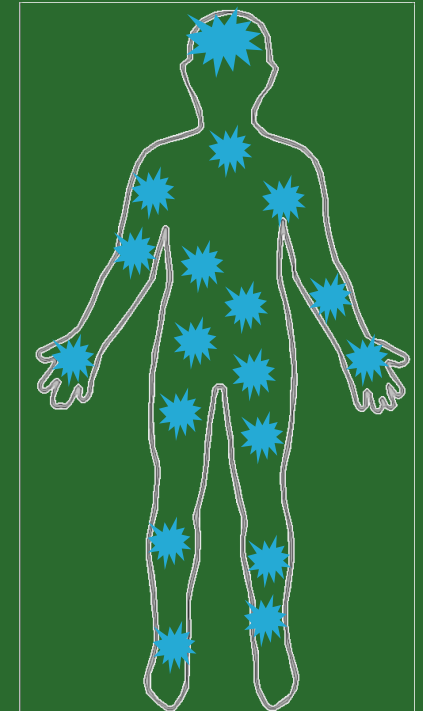
Increase in energy and stress hormones

Not able to actively get to safety



Excess energy does not discharge

Concludes still in danger



Body cannot regain balance

Emotional brain automatically activates
Thinking brain shuts down
Mind sends signals to body to escape threat





Impact:

Sensitized nervous system

- Stress hormones spike easier and take longer to return to baseline
- Influences neurological, biological, psychological, and social development and functioning





Neurological Impact

- Neuroplasticity
 - Brain structure and functions are altered by trauma
- Critical time period- first 6 years (and especially the first 2 months)
 - Frontal lobes develop differently



Behavioral Impact

- Behavior as a result of not feeling safe/ communicating distress
- Behavior coming from feeling/ emotional brain
 - Automatic and unconscious responses out of person's control
- Behavior may serve no useful function in the moment
 - Reaction based on altered stress-response



Flip the Lid (Hand Model of the Brain)

Make a **Fist** with your thumb tucked inside your fingers. This is a model of your brain.

Thumb = Midbrain (Stem & Limbic) = Emotional Brain. This is where emotions and memories are processed. This is where the fight, flight & freeze is triggered.

Fingers = Cerebral Cortex = Rational Brain. Houses our ability to think and reason.

Fingernails = Prefrontal Cortex = Problem-Solving

When something triggers us, we are prone to “**Flip our Lid**” which means the Prefrontal Cortex (Fingernails) have a very poor connection with the Midbrain (Thumb), and we’re not able to access the logical, problem-solving part of our brain. Our emotions are overriding our ability to think clearly.

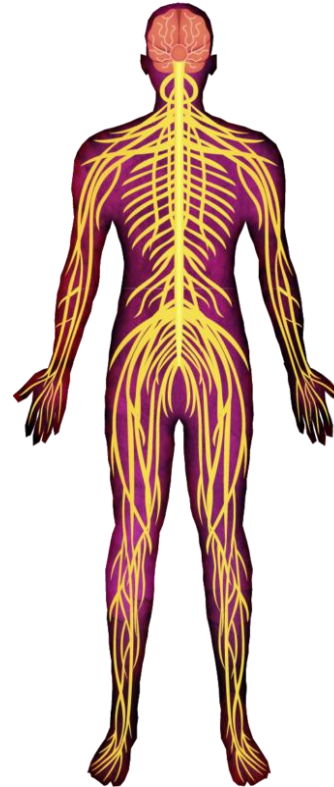
-Dr. Dan Siegal



Where are Behaviors Coming From?

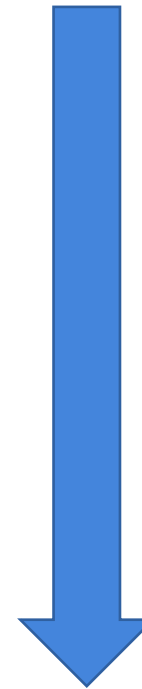
BOTTOM UP

- Instinctual/unintentional
- Survival-based stress responses
- Come from cues in the body and areas of the brain that are driven by instincts



TOP DOWN

- Deliberate/intentional
- Develop over many years through connection with prefrontal cortex
- Driven by executive functioning



"Concerning" Behavior Default











~~Exhibits challenging behavior~~
Experiences concerning behavior



REFRAMING "CHALLENGING BEHAVIOR"

CHALLENGING BEHAVIORS	VS	EXPERIENCING BEHAVIORS
Attention seeking		Connection, attunement, and/or attachment seeking
Agitation		A natural human emotion
Aggression		Discharging energy and/or communicating distress
Elopement		Automatic flight response
Manipulation		Masking or confusing/contradictory expectations
Non-compliance		Self-advocacy

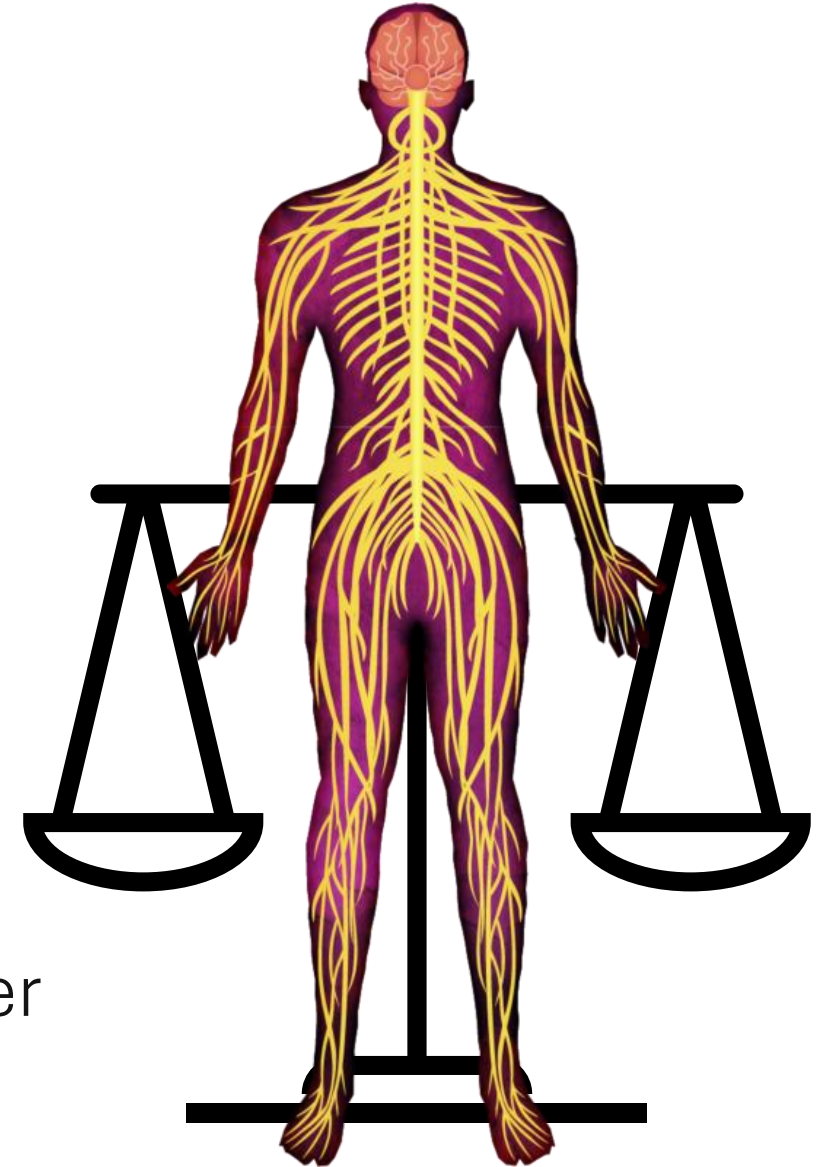
Opposition is recalibration

The nervous system trying to correct an imbalance

Goal is to create conditions where the nervous system can actually rest

Reduce threat- not care

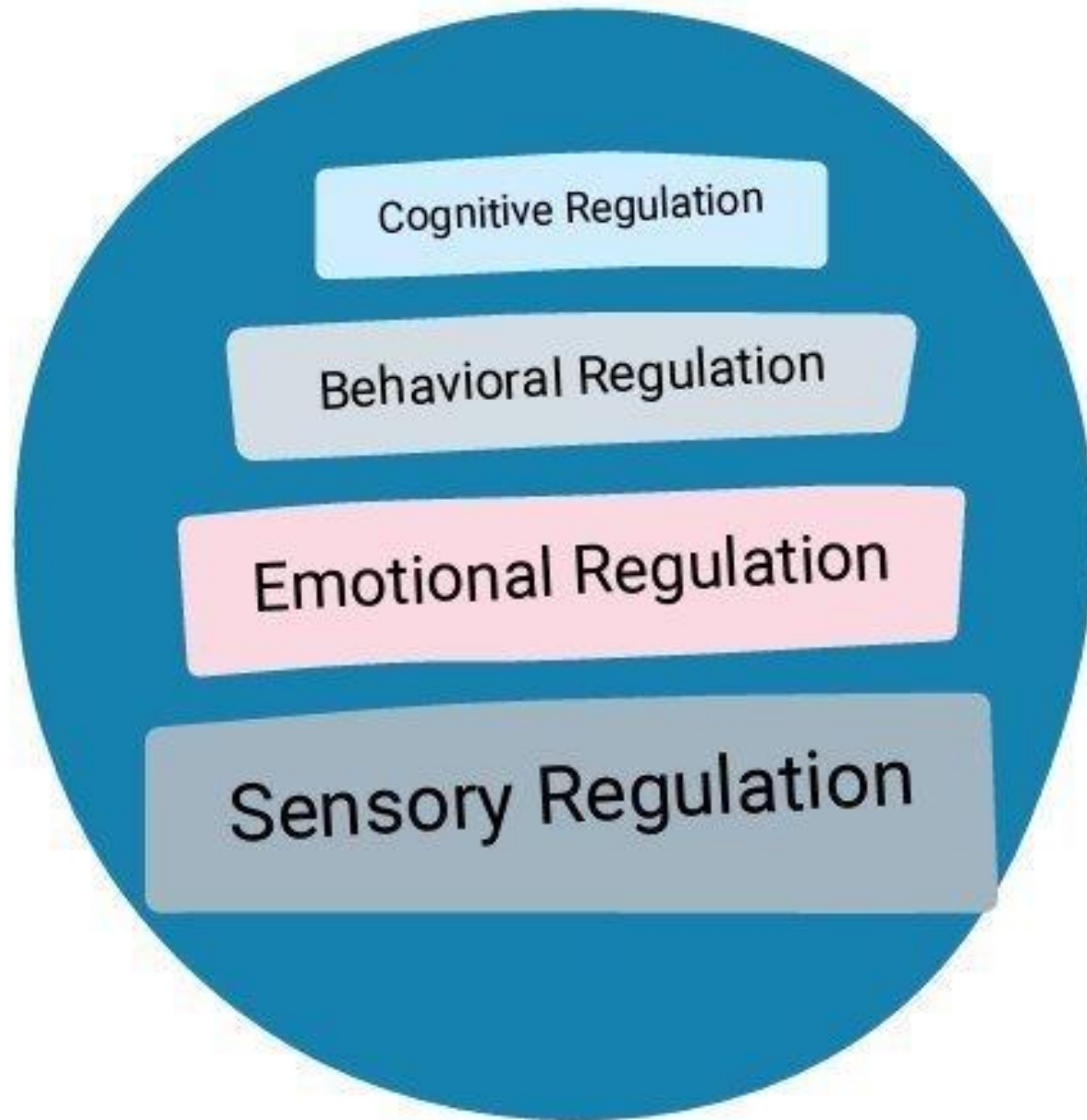
Collaboration & choices over bribes & power struggles





PRIORITIZE REGULATION & CONNECTION OVER COMPLIANCE





When my thinking brain disconnects, so does the ability to:

Plan ahead

Make decisions

Control impulses

Regulate emotions

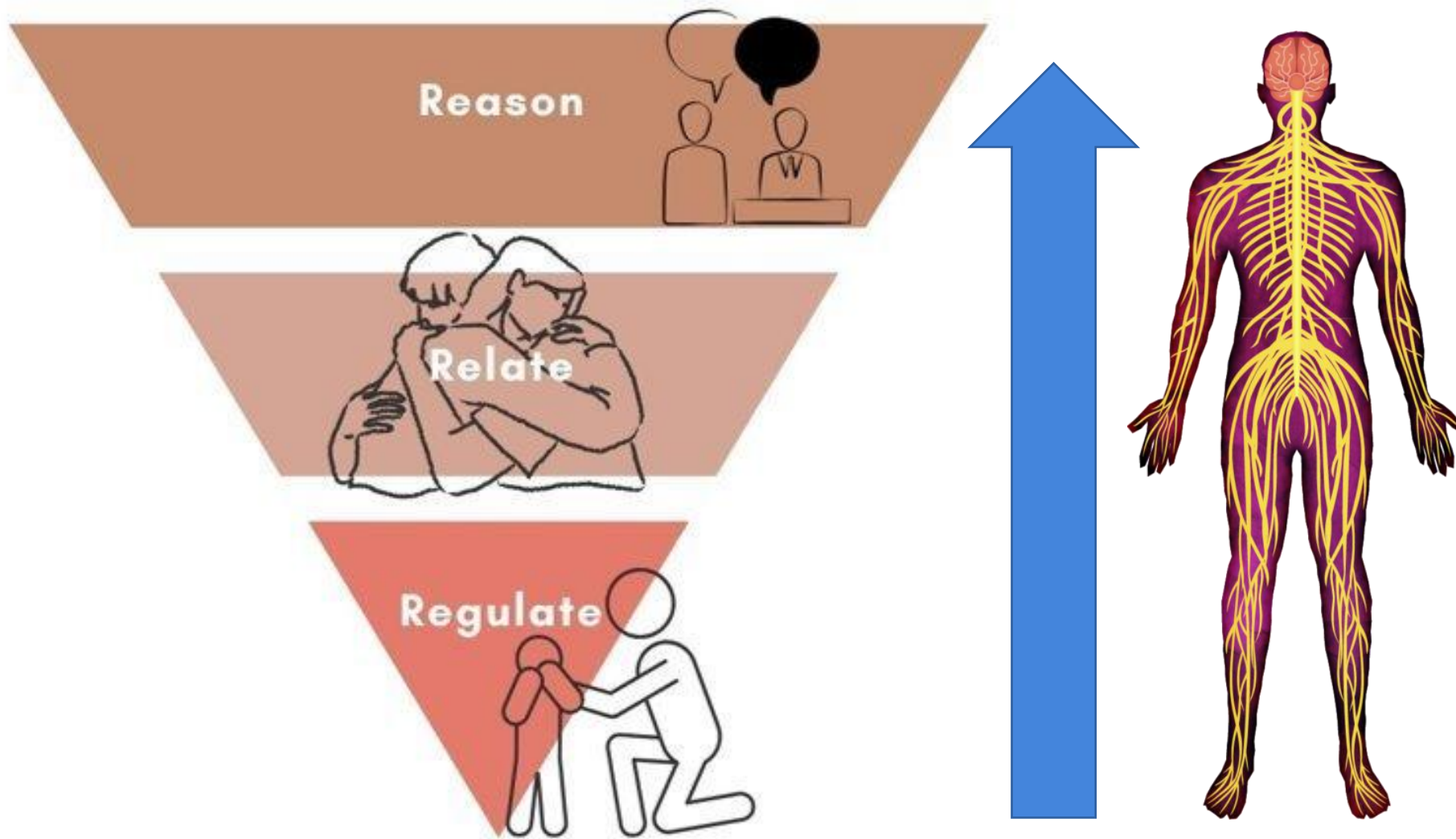
Follow through

Shift focus

Hold another's perspective

Stay calm on request





Bruce Perry: Neurosequential Model



Self-regulation

Body-based
Self-discovered
Never imposed

- Sense of safety tailored to each person's brain, body, and experience
- Regulating activities that activate the calming nervous system
 - Repetition and rhythm
 - Vagus nerve





Self-regulation

Small physical options, made in a regulated moment, with no external pressure

- Deep, slow breathing
- Visualization
- Singing, Humming, Chanting, Gargling
- Meditation/ Mindfulness
- Exercise
- Massage
- Socializing & Laughing
- Cold exposure
- Listen to your favorite music
- Dancing
- Gentle stretching (even if it's for just a couple minutes)
- Watch something funny (laughter)
- Hug your kid or dog (Affection)
- Pressing hands on wall
- Chewing gum
- Weighted blanket
- Strong scents
- Stimming
- White noise
- Dim lights
- Hot tea





Two nervous
systems
regulating
together

- Happens automatically because of mirror neurons
- Not a technique but a biological need
- The foundation that self-regulation grows from





How can we help
the person to
achieve a
sense of safety
and well-being?

- Commit to safe, predictable relationships
- Predictable transitions over sudden demands
- Use time-in instead of time-outs, punishment, incentive programs, shame/ blame, seclusion
- Don't be overly frightened or impressed by concerning behaviors or emotions
- Match energy first, then gradually lower it



An Invitation, Never a Demand

Co-regulation

LANGUAGE SHIFTS

From correction to connection.

✗ "Stop yelling"	✓ "Wow, that's a big feeling. I hear it."
✗ "That's not okay"	✓ "This seems really unfair. I'm here."
✗ "You're safe"	✓ Quiet presence. No extra input.
✗ "Calm down"	✓ "Is it okay if I sit here?"

KRISTY FORBES

<https://www.facebook.com/inTunePathways>

Examples of Coregulation

- Gentle eye contact
- Feeling someone's heart beat
- Hearing a calming voice
- Getting on the same level
- Meeting someone in their world
- Preparing someone for the next experience
- Sitting in supportive silence
- Doing tasks alongside each other
- Repeating back what someone's sharing
- Wanting to understand and validate

Chanelle Gowden



<https://www.facebook.com/synergygentleparenting>



Co-regulation

Things that Help

- Bring back to present moment
- Validate state and not try to change or convince to be another way
- Self-soothing
- Limit verbalizations, demands, questions, expectations ("I'm here if you need me")
- Feeling safe in body/ mind again
- Focus on regulation

Things That Make it Worse

- Demands
- Verbalizations, questions, extra noise/ stimulation
- Saying "No," "Stop," or "Calm down"
- Unrequested physical touch
- Coming towards/ stance
- Forced seclusion
- Requiring to calm before providing access to things that help regulate/ calm
- Threatening to take/ Taking away items and events





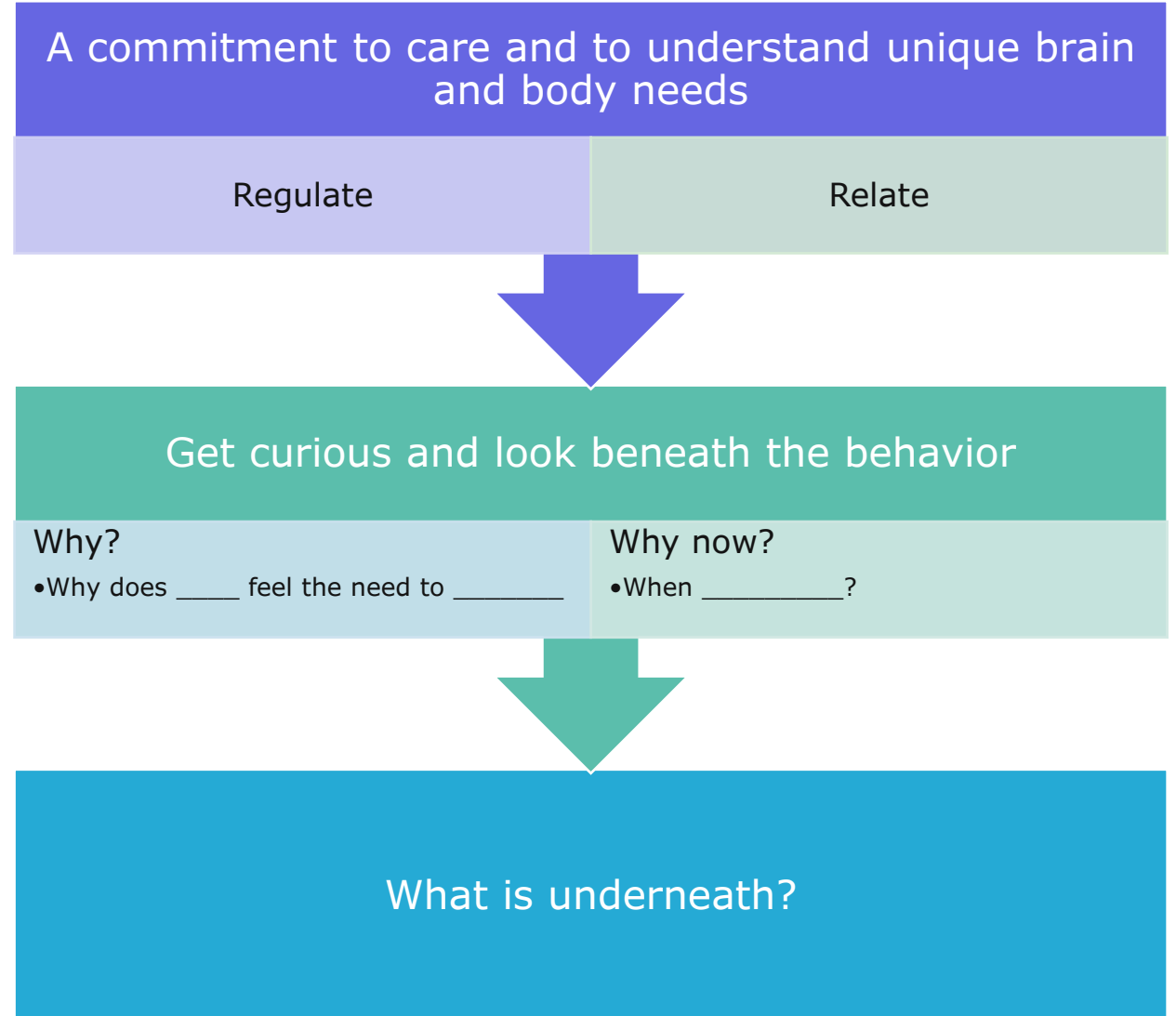
Co-regulation

My support is
not contingent
on your
behavior and I
will accept you
no matter what

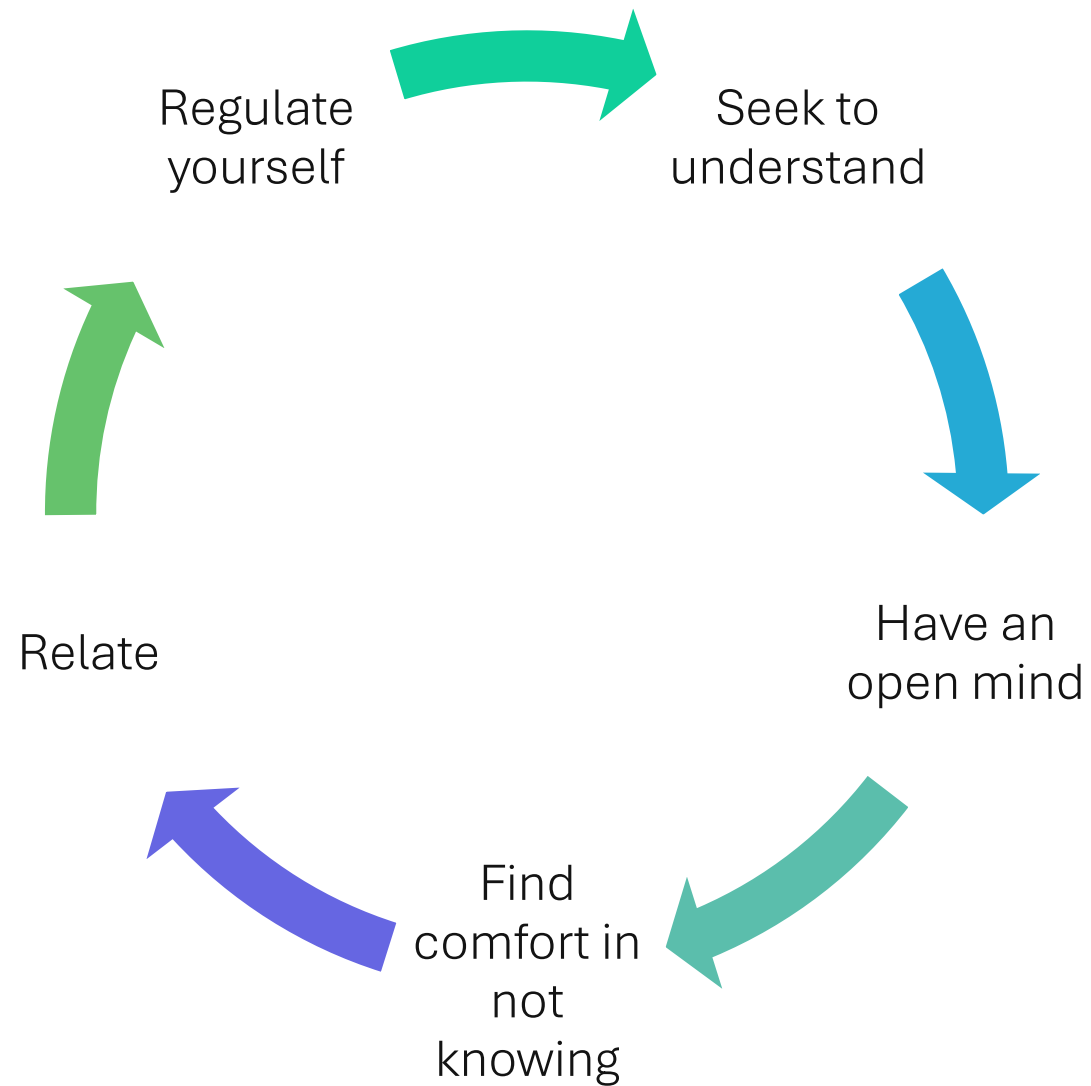
- Infuse all help with hope
- Emphasize "It's not your fault"
- Try not to take things personally
- Appreciate that the person has a warrior personality
- Keep promises
- Get to know the person
- Have fun!



Consider the *whole* person *in* *context*



If We Don't Know...





When I get it wrong...

1. Repair!
2. Genuine, specific, non-defensive acknowledgement from a regulated place without an agenda
3. "I wish I'd responded differently. I'm sorry"
4. One of the most regulating things & Strengthens the relationship
5. Co-regulation and trust build slowly, across hundreds of small moments



Opposition is recalibration

The nervous system trying to correct an imbalance

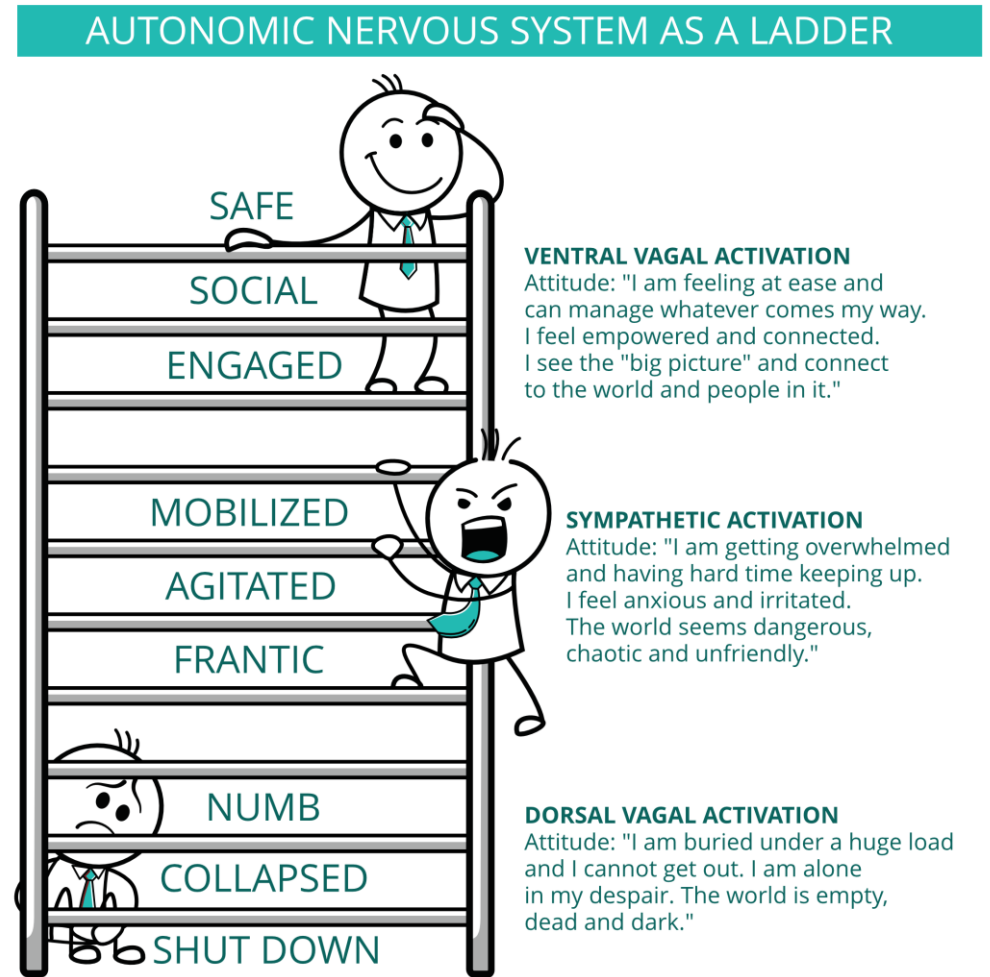
Goal is to create conditions where the nervous system can feel safe and actually rest

Reducing threat increases capacity over time- From sensitized to flexible/resilient



Some Reminders About Healing...

- It might not always look/ feel pleasant
- More might emerge
- It takes time



Adapted from *The Polyvagal Theory in Therapy* by Deb Dana



Resources & References

- Alfie Kohn: <https://www.alfiekohn.org/>
- Ross Greene: <https://drrossgreene.com/>
- Bruce Perry: <https://www.neurosequential.com/>
- Dan Siegel: <https://drdansiegel.com/>
- Mona Delahooke: <https://monadelahooke.com/>
- Stephen Porges: <https://www.stephenporges.com/>

[Supporting Someone Who Experiences Concerning Behaviors & Trauma/Stress](#)

[Safety is Treatment \(Polyvagal Theory\) \[VIDEO\]](#)



Books

- The Explosive Child- Rosse Green, PhD
- The Whole Brain Child- Dr. Daniel Siegel
- Brain-Body Parenting- Mona Delahooke
- Beyond Behaviors- Mona Delahooke
- The Power of Showing Up- Dr. Daniel Siegel & Tina Bryson, PhD
- Self-Reg- Dr. Stuart Shanker
- Punished by Rewards- Alfie Kohn
- Unconditional Parenting- Alfie Kohn
- What Happened To You?- Bruce D Perry & Oprah Winfrey
- It Didn't Start With You- Mark Wolynn

