

Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools

DR. KAREN BAX, C. PSYCH.

THE MARY J. WRIGHT CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND EDUCATION
FACULTY OF EDUCATION, WESTERN UNIVERSITY

Imagine...

Scenario 1:

- Young girl, 6 years old
- 2 parents
- Comfortable home
- Suburbs
- Good school
- She is white
- Has strengths
- Has vulnerabilities
- LD-diagnosed in Gr. 4

Scenario 2:

- Young girl, 6 years old
- 2 parents, White
- **Family struggles with poverty**
- Apartment in the city
- Father works evenings/nights
- Mother 2 jobs
- Cared for by 10 y old sib in evening
- Same innate strengths/vulnerabilities
- School less resourced
- LD diagnosed in Grade 6
- Loving parents buffer of stress

Scenario 3:

- Young girl, 6 years old
- 2 parents
- Ethno cultural minority
- Family struggles with poverty
- One parent depressed, verbally abusive, angry responses
- Other parent works 4pm-12pm
- Multiple moves
- Unsafe neighbourhoods
- School less resourced
- Cared by older sib in evening
- Same strengths and vulnerabilities
- Undiagnosed LD



Building Trauma Sensitive Schools



BY THE END OF THE TRAINING:

Understand what is meant by trauma and toxic stress

Recognize the risk of multiple adversities in the development of a child

Understand the effect of trauma on the developing brain

Understand what stress behaviour looks like in children

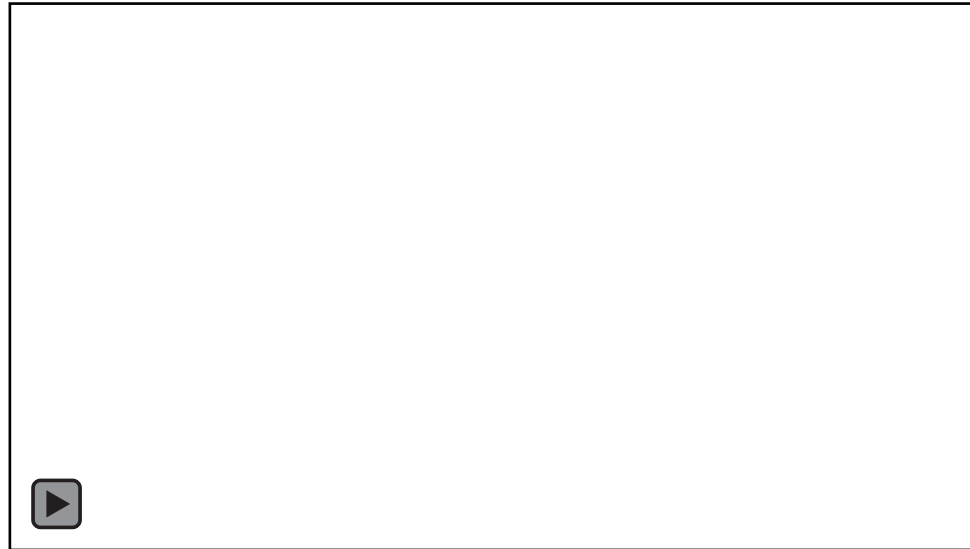
Understand how trauma affects learning in the classroom

Recognize the benefits of trauma-informed practices in a school setting

Learn concrete ways in which you can bring trauma-sensitive practices to the classroom

Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools

BY FIRST LOOKING AT THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE
DEVELOPING BRAIN



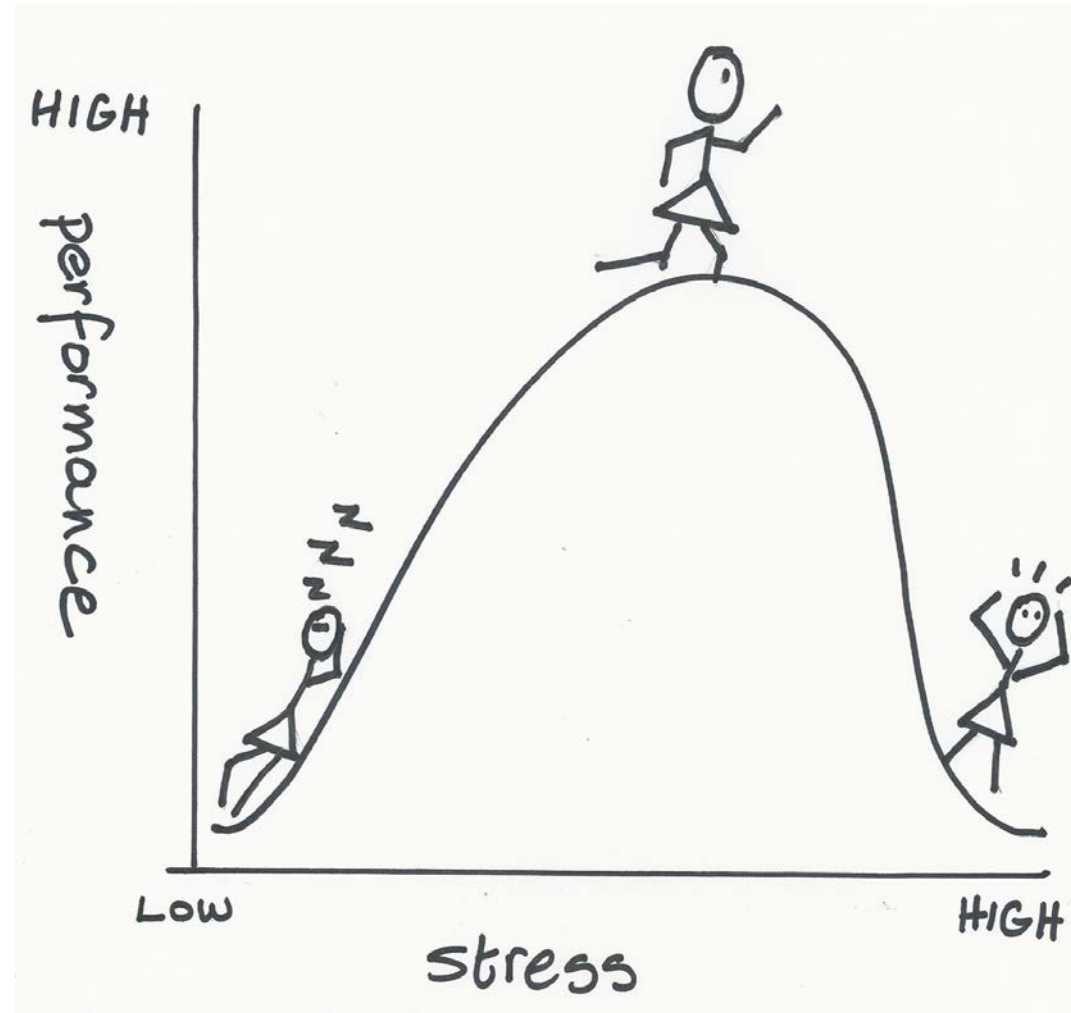
<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

Harvard Center for the Developing Brain

When does an event become traumatic?

When does an event become traumatic?

First lets talk about STRESS



When does an event become traumatic?

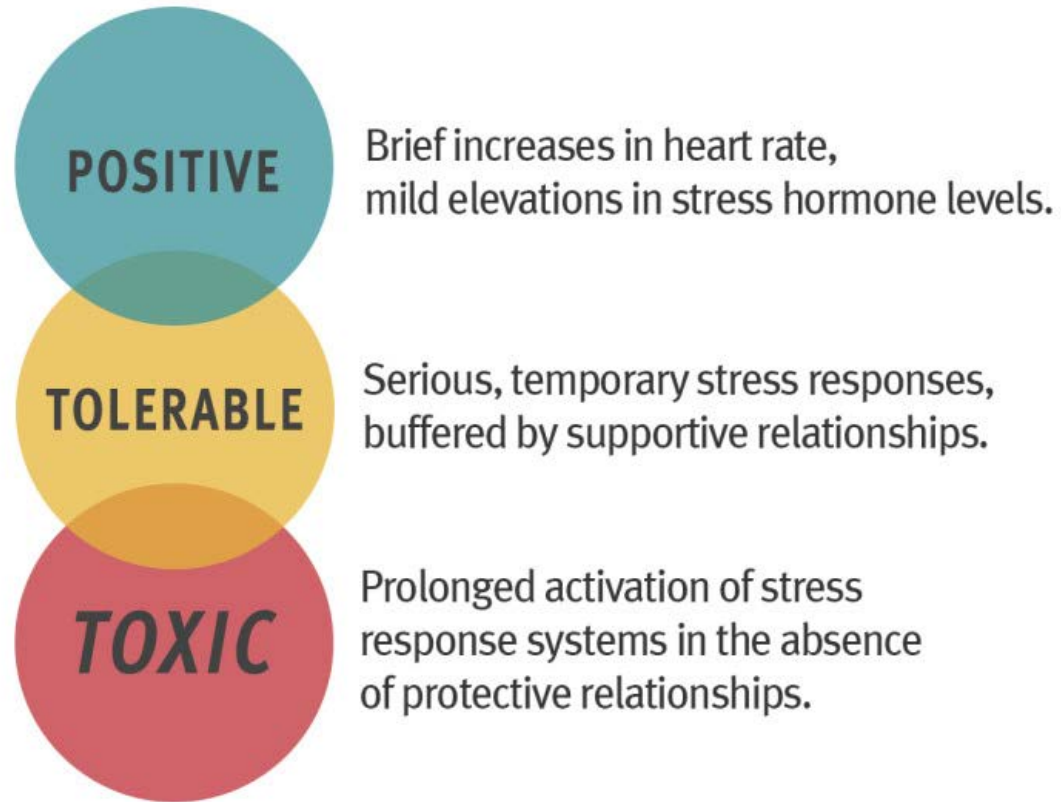
It is the absence of or limited resources available to help a child **respond** to the stressful or traumatic situation, **manage** and **return** to a sense of calmness and control (Susan Craig, 2016)

What is toxic stress?

6 year old girl living
in suburbs

Same 6-year old girl
struggling with
family poverty

Same 6- year old
minority girl,
parental MH
problems, verbal
abuse, frequent
moves



Why are Trauma Sensitive Schools Needed?

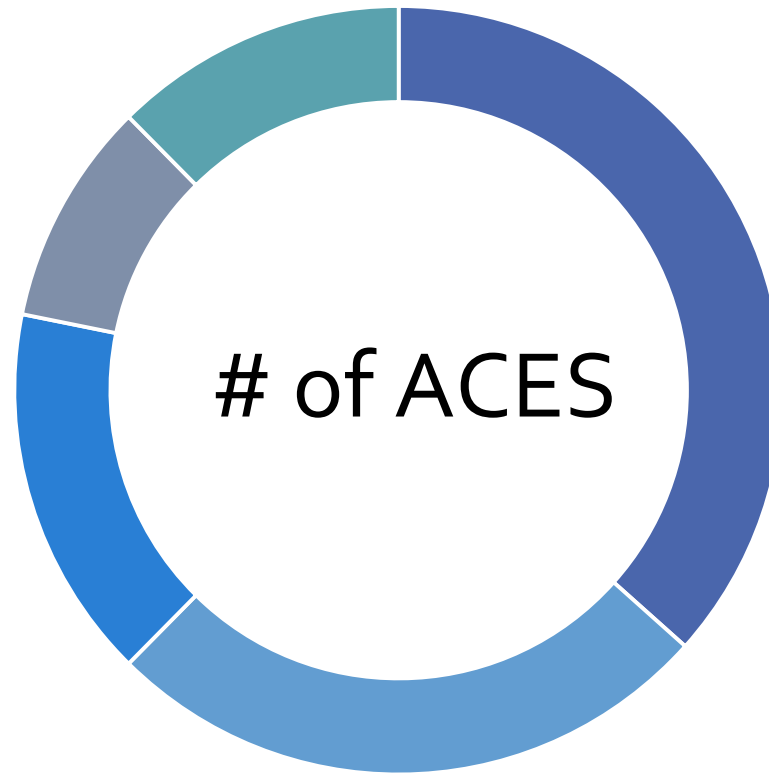
- Children bring their experiences of trauma and toxic stress into the school system
- Aim is to increase teaching and learning time
- Reduce time spent on behavioural management
- To help traumatized children learn resilience
- Because we don't necessarily know who they are...

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

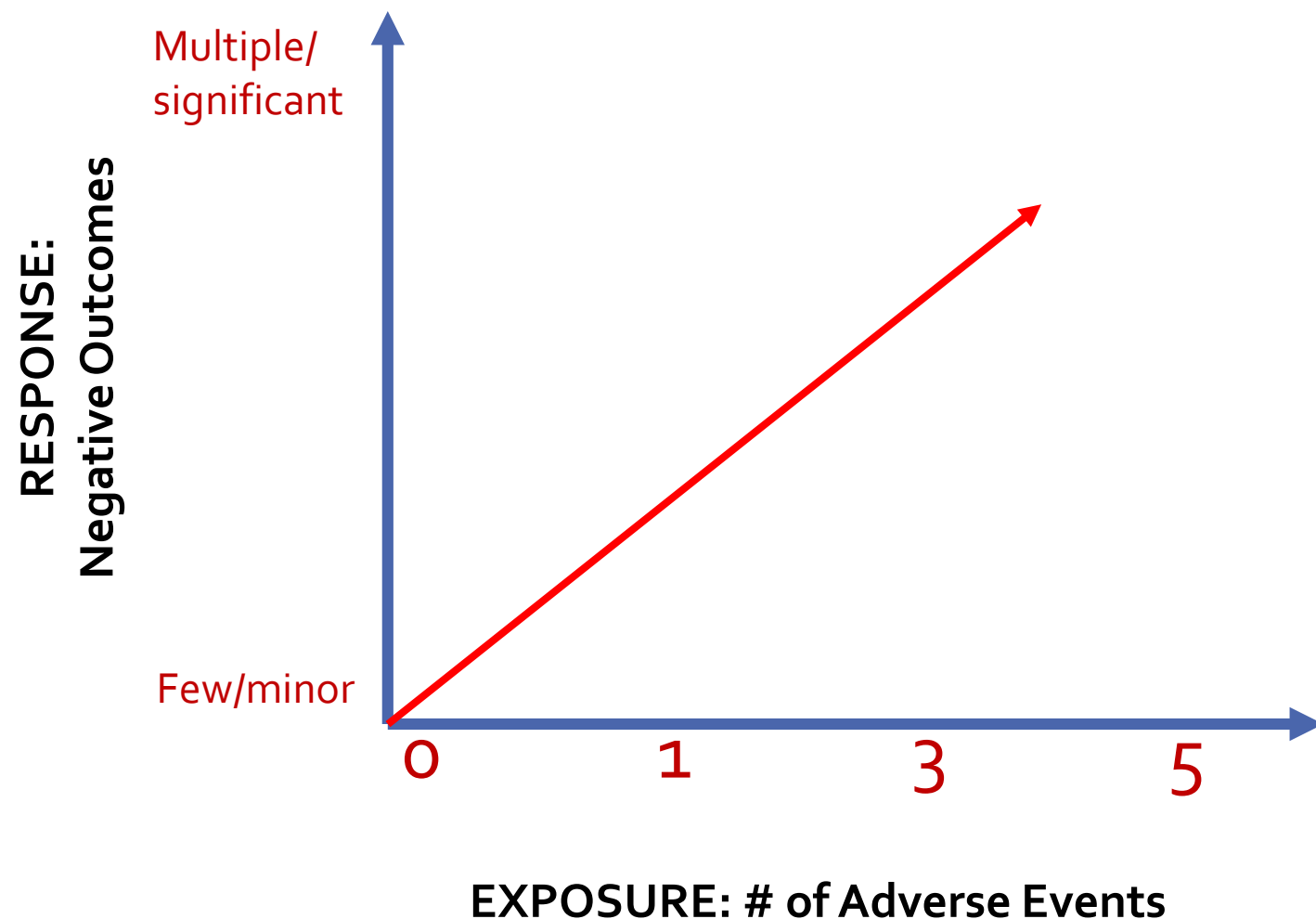
- Recurrent physical abuse
- Recurrent emotional abuse
- Contact sexual abuse
- Living with an adult with addiction problems
- Living with someone incarcerated
- Living with an adult with a mental illness
- Witnessing a mother treated violently
- Parent separation or divorce
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect

US ACES study: Adversity in childhood is much more prevalent than we thought

- 0 ACES (36%)
- 1 ACE (26%)
- 2 ACES (15.9%)
- 3 ACES (9.5%)
- 4 or more (12.5%)



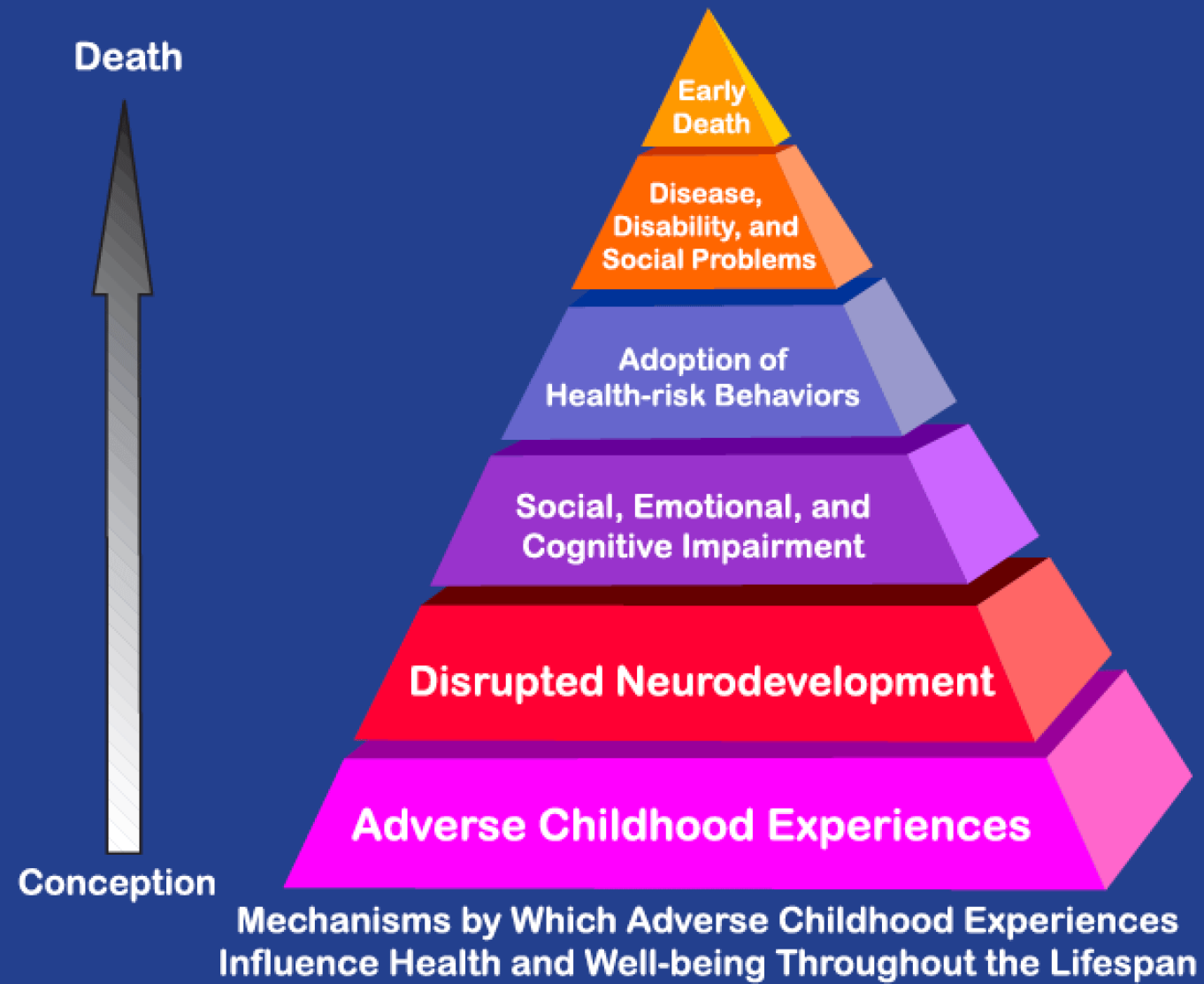
ACES: Exposure-Response Relationship



There is a strong relationship between adverse childhood events and health and well-being

Probability of Outcomes

0 ACES	3 ACES	4-8 ACES
1 in 16 smokes	1 in 9 smokes	1 in 6 smokes
1 in 69 are alcoholic	1 in 9 are alcoholic	1 in 6 are alcoholic
1 in 480 uses IV drugs	1 in 43 uses IV drugs	1 in 30 uses IV drugs
1 in 14 has heart disease	1 in 7 has heart disease	1 in 6 has heart disease
1 in 96 attempts suicide	1 in 10 attempts suicide	1 in 5 attempts suicide

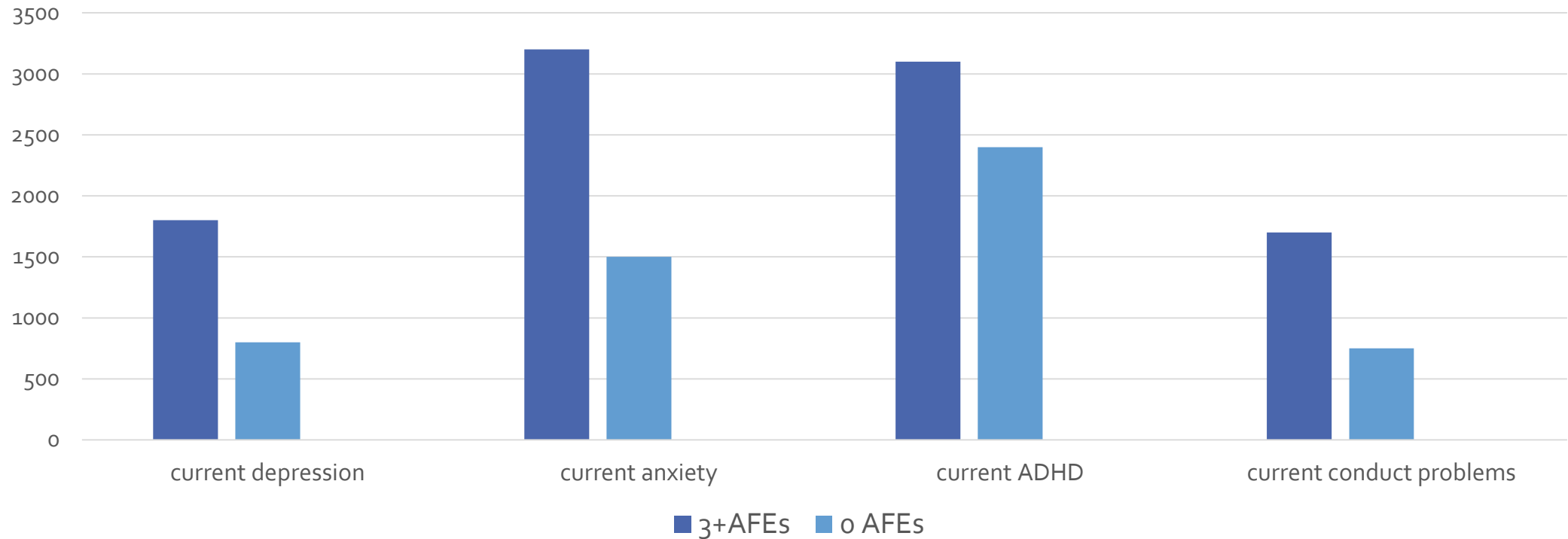


Adverse Family Events (AFEs)

- Exposure to poverty
- Not having stable housing
- Separated/divorced parents
- Seeing/hearing physical violence in the home
- Living with an adult with mental illness
- Living with an adult with addiction problems
- Exposure to neighbourhood violence
- Racial-ethnic discrimination
- Having a parent who died or went to jail

Impacts of Cumulative Stressors

CHILDREN WITH 3+ AFES COMPARED TO CHILDREN WITHOUT AFES



Vermont Department of Mental Health

Impacts of Cumulative Stressors-Educational Outcomes

Adverse Family Experiences, Child Mental Health and Educational Outcomes

- Negatively associated with **school engagement**
- Positively associated with **repeating a grade** and **being on an IEP**
- 2.5 times more likely to **fail a grade**
- Have more **receptive and expressive language difficulties**
- **Suspended or expelled** more often
- Score lower on **standardized achievement test** scores



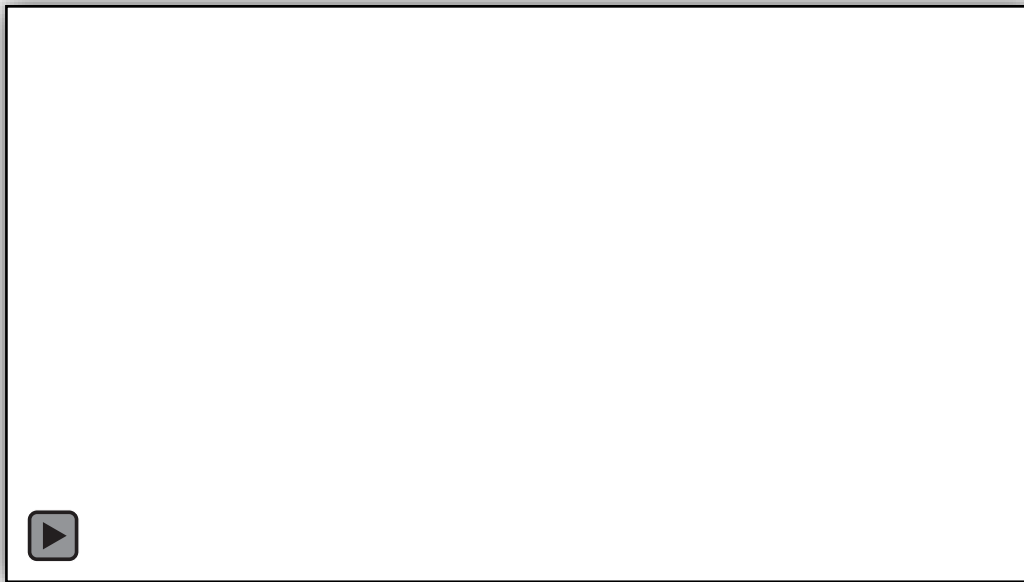
Porche, Costello, Rosen-Reynoso (2016).
Grevstad (2007)

AFE Stressors

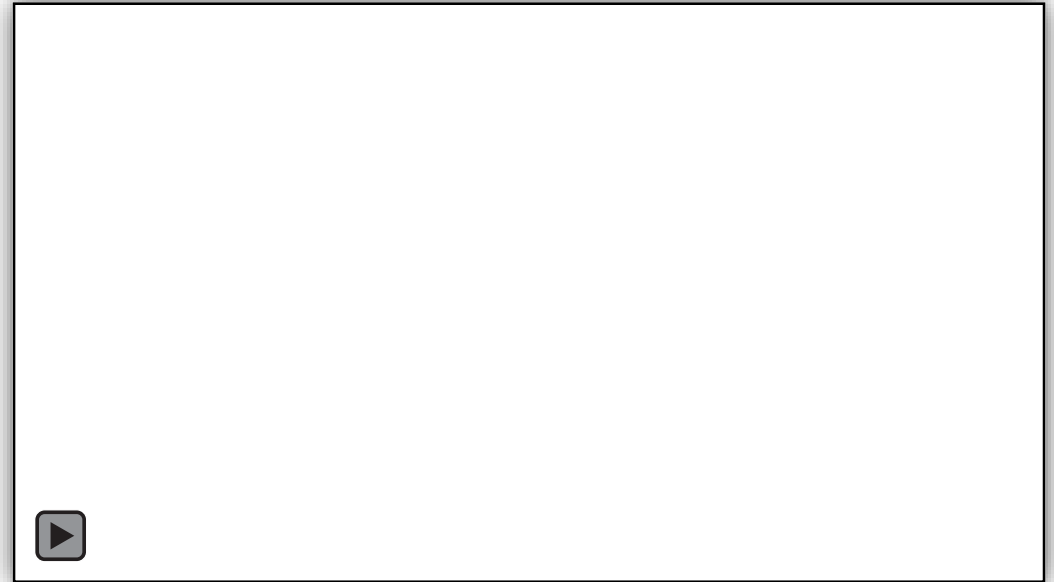
Given our definition of trauma, review the original list of AFE stressors... what would you add to the list? What do you see significantly affecting students today?

Exposure to poverty	Racial/ethnic discrimination
Not having stable housing	Living with an adult with addiction problems
Separated/divorced parents	Exposure to neighbourhood violence
Seeing/hearing physical violence at home	Living with an adult with mental illness
Having a parent who died or went to jail	

Videos: Brain Architecture

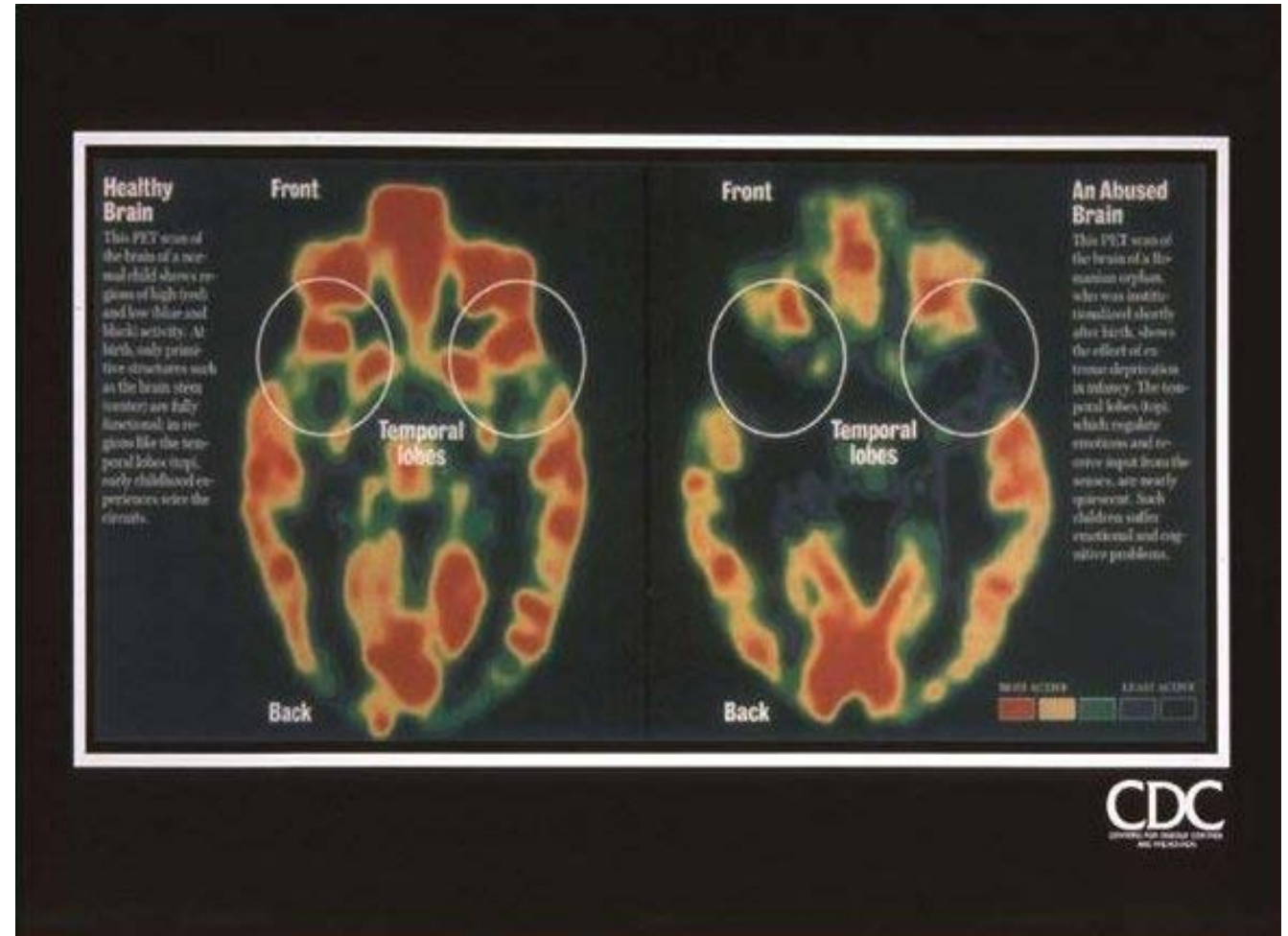


<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>

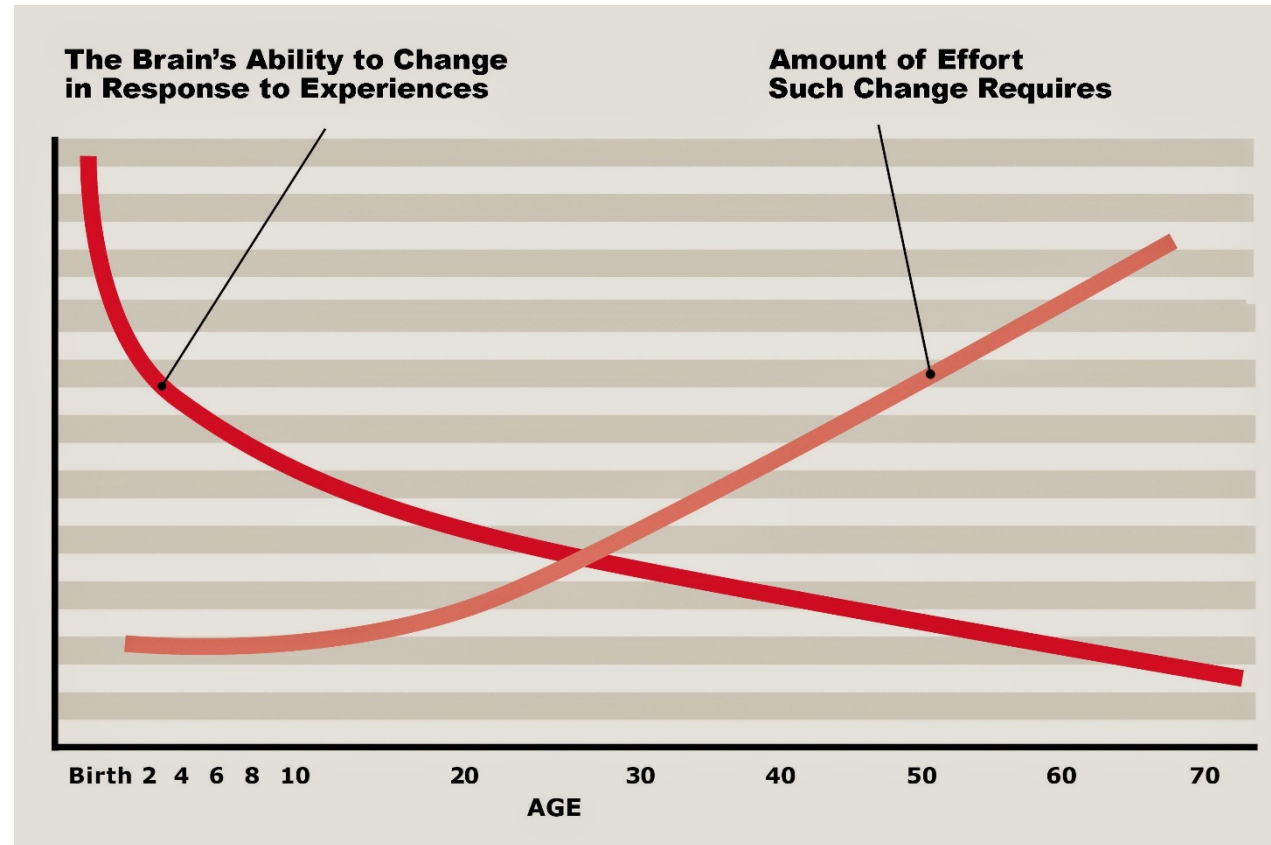


<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/>

The negative impact of neglect on the developing brain



You can make a difference!



Pat Levitt (2009);
developingchild.harvard.edu

How does trauma affect the brain and behavior of children?

UPSTAIRS BRAIN

Thinking,
reasoning,
language

PREFRONTAL CORTEX

Center of executive functions; regulates thought, emotions, and actions. Especially vulnerable to elevation of brain chemicals caused by stress.

AMYGDALA

Triggers emotional responses; detects whether a stimulus is threatening. Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can affect activity.

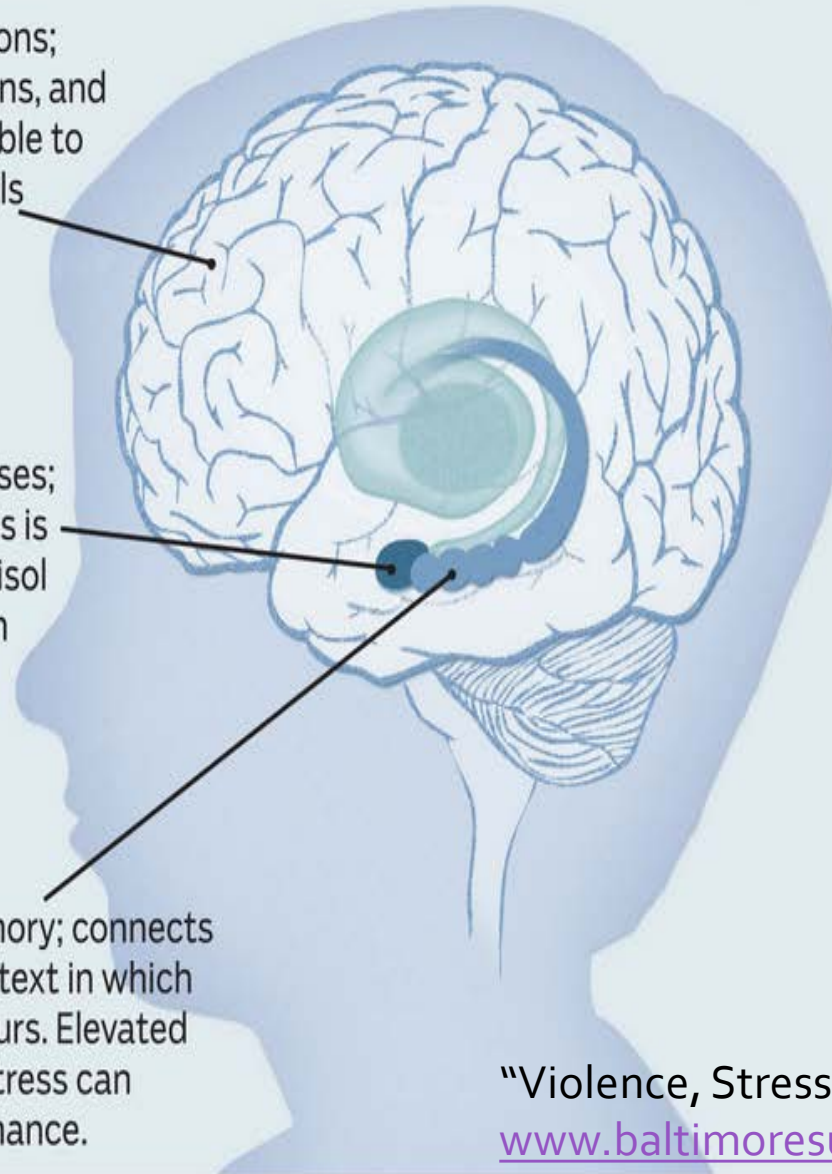
HIPPOCAMPUS

Center of short-term memory; connects emotion of fear to the context in which the threatening event occurs. Elevated cortisol levels caused by stress can affect growth and performance.

DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN

Fight, Flight
Freeze
Response

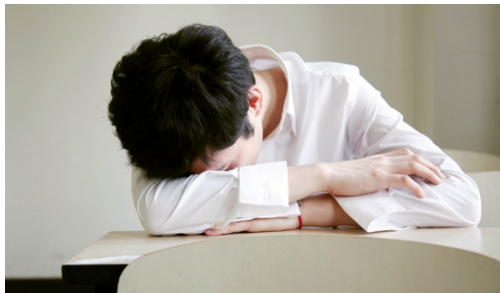
Holds fear
memories in
relation to
context



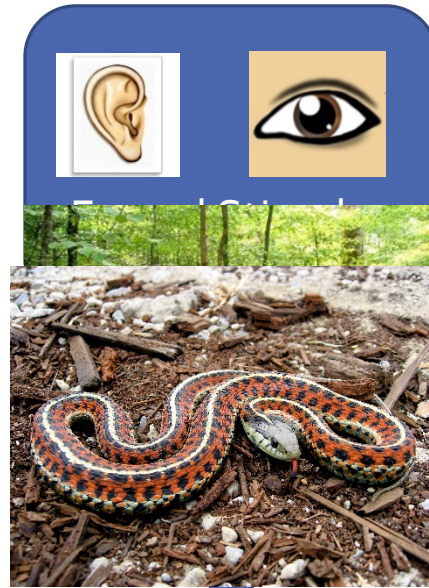
"Violence, Stress and a Child's Brain

www.baltimoresun.com

The Amygdala



The Amygdala



Amygdala

Emotional/physical
response

What do you see in a classroom when a child's amygdala is activated?

The Amygdala: Our Fight, Flight and Freeze Centre

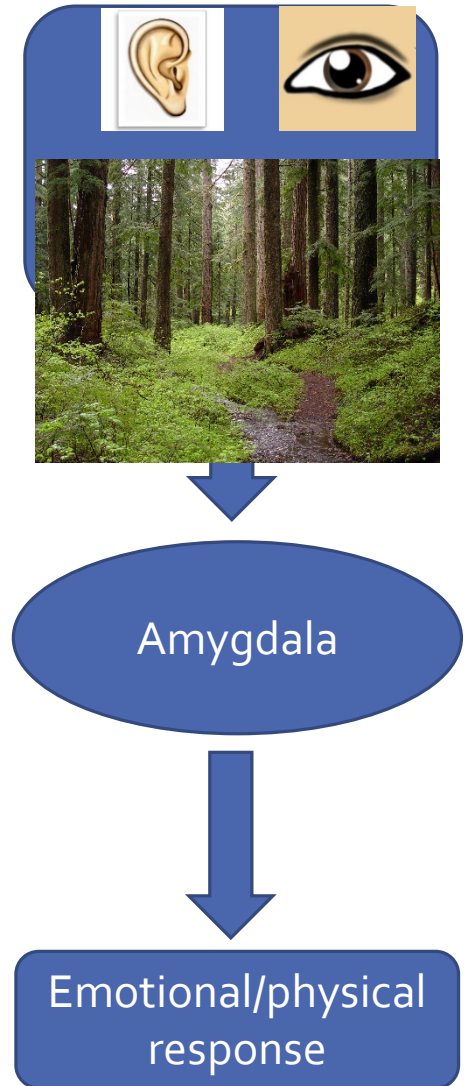
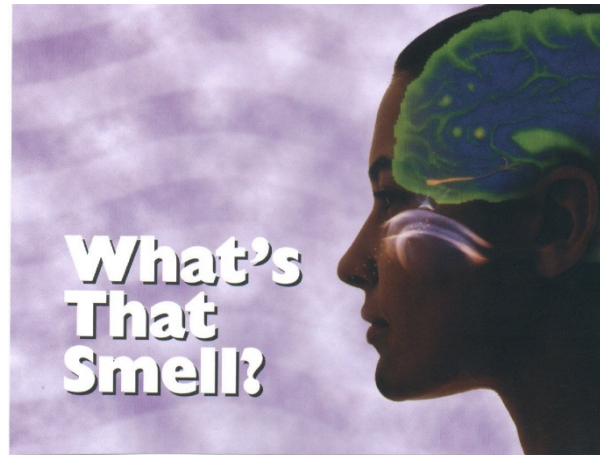
What this looks like in the classroom:

FLIGHT	FIGHT	FREEZE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Withdrawing▪ Fleeing the Classroom▪ Skipping class▪ Daydreaming▪ Seeming to sleep▪ Avoiding others▪ Hiding or wandering▪ Becoming disengaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Acting out▪ Behaving aggressively▪ Acting silly▪ Easily frustrated▪ Defiant behavior▪ Hyperactivity▪ Arguing▪ Screaming/yelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Exhibiting numbness▪ Refusing to answer▪ Refusing to get needs met▪ Giving a blank look▪ Feeling unable to move

The Hippocampus

Playing
touch
football just
doesn't feel
right...

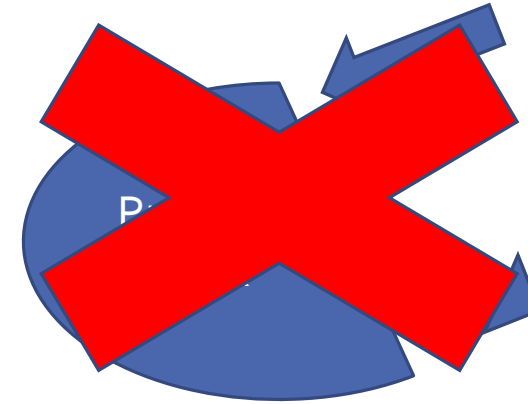
Those loud, chaotic
noises remind me of
home...



Common triggers for children who have experienced trauma:

- Unpredictability or change
- Transitions
- Loss of control
- Feeling vulnerable
- Feeling rejected
- Loud voices/yelling
- Physical touch
- Confrontation
- Loneliness
- Sensory overload
- Being told “no”
- Being denied something
- Peace/calm/quiet
- Any sensory cue to previous trauma

The Prefrontal Cortex



Amygdala and Hippocampus



Pre-Frontal Cortex





Fast, relayed through the senses

Thanks to the Hippocampus-Has an incredible memory for contexts of situations

Can over-ride the Prefrontal Cortex

You need to activate to generate-learns through experience

Self-regulation through sensory experience and physiological strategies works best when activated

Used best if Amygdala is not fully activated

Under extreme stress, PFC not very activated

Replace because you can't erase-can't tell yourself not to think about something-you need to replace the thought with something else

Teaching self-regulation strategies through logic or arguments works best when Amygdala not very activated

Trauma's Effect on Students

Known Effect of Trauma	Behavioural Manifestation	Relation to Social-Emotional Skills	Consequence or Outcome
Social, emotional and/or cognitive impairment	Over-reacting, aggressive behavior, yelling, withdrawing	Inability to self-manage/regulate	Sent out of classroom (further isolation and feelings of failure)
Disrupted developmental stages	Carrying a "safety" blanket, ...	Lack of social-awareness	Teased by others, ostracized
Severe/persistent behavioural, social, physical health problems	Stress related illness: headache, stomach ache, fatigue, depression, anxiety	Lack of self-awareness Lack of self care	Compounded symptoms of trauma; failing grades in school
Decreased ability to trust or attach to others	Acting unusually withdrawn, aggressive, lacking appropriate boundaries	Poor, immature relationship skills	Social isolation from peers, school suspension
Adoption of risky behaviours as coping mechanism	Substance use, risky sexual behavior, self-harming	Irresponsible decision making skills	Court involvement, hospital stays, unintended pregnancy, suicide

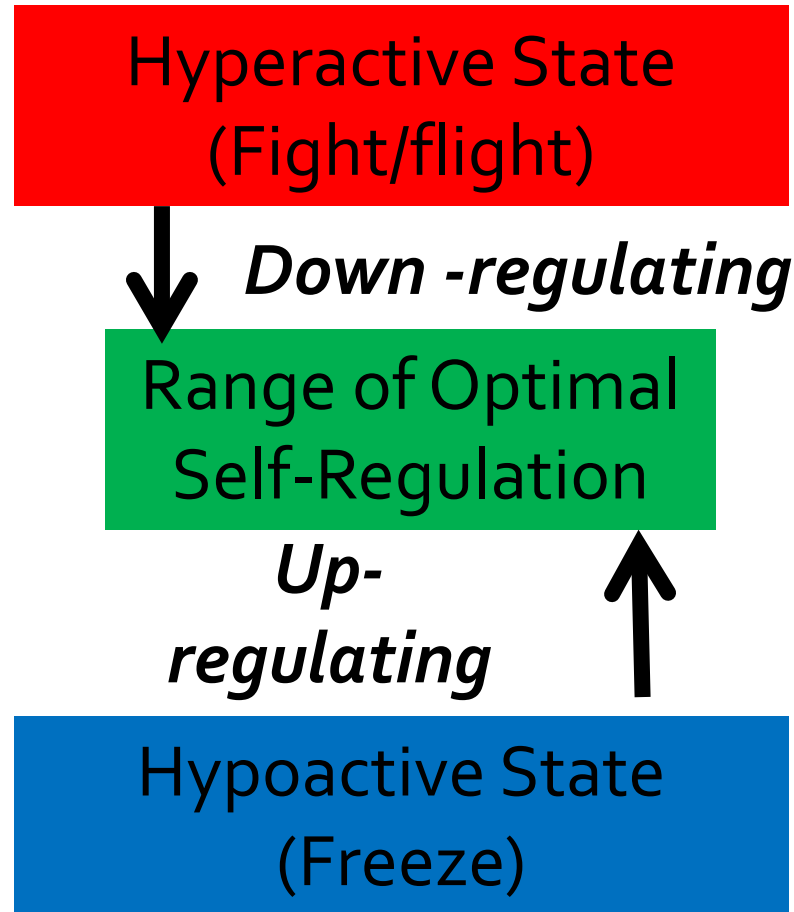
Known Effect of Trauma	Behavioural Manifestation	Missing Social-Emotional Skills	Consequence or Outcome
Social, emotional and/or cognitive impairment →	Over-reacting, aggressive behavior, yelling, withdrawing →	Inability to self-regulate →	Sent out of classroom (further isolation and feelings of failure)
Decreased ability to trust or attach to others →	Acting unusually withdrawn, aggressive, lacking appropriate boundaries →	Poor, immature relationship skills →	Social isolation from peers, school suspension



TEACH SEL SKILLS

Trauma's Effect on Students

Self-Regulation




What does self-regulation look like?

- When feeling calm, the ability to recognize you are calm and alert
- When feeling unregulated, the ability to recognize that state
- When stressed, the ability to recognize what is causing the stress
- The ability to recognize stressors both within and outside of the classroom
- The desire to deal with those stressors
- The ability to develop strategies to self-regulate
- The ability to recover efficiently and effectively from stressors

How do we help children learn to be calm and alert for learning?

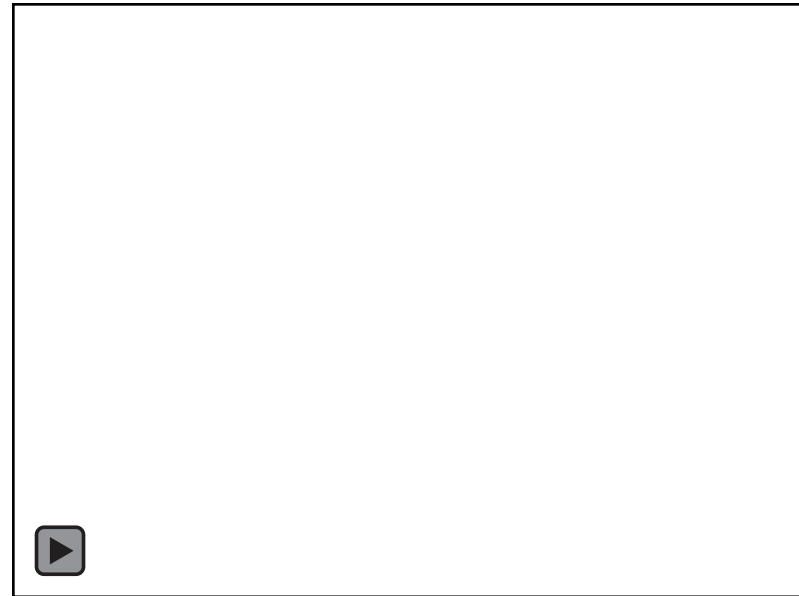


Supporting children to re-experience relationships differently is the key to trauma recovery and change.



Self-regulation starts with you

- Co-regulation
- Serve and return



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZhto>

Understanding Triggers to Dysregulation

FLIGHT	FIGHT	FREEZE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Withdrawing▪ Fleeing the Classroom▪ Skipping class▪ Daydreaming▪ Seeming to sleep▪ Avoiding others▪ Hiding or wandering▪ Becoming disengaged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Acting out▪ Behaving aggressively▪ Acting silly▪ Easily frustrated▪ Defiant behavior▪ Hyperactivity▪ Arguing▪ Screaming/yelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Exhibiting numbness▪ Refusing to answer▪ Refusing to get needs met▪ Giving a blank look▪ Feeling unable to move▪ Seem bored

■ WHAT TYPES OF EVENTS COULD TRIGGER A CHILD'S AMYGDALA AT SCHOOL?

Leaving home Arriving at School In the Classroom On the School yard

Souers & Hall, 2016

Responsive Not Reactive



STOP As long as no one is in danger, STOP , take several deep breaths. Ask yourself, “What am I feeling right now?” and name your feeling. Accept it as yours, not the child’s.

DROP Now respond by decreasing any threat you may be posing by getting lower than the child, even kneeling or sitting down. Acknowledge the child. “I see you,” “I hear you,” or “I’m feeling you.” Support the child self-regulation through co-regulation and allowing her/him to have her/his feelings -until her/his level of regulation begins to come down to yours. Listen and relate; **don’t advise or correct.**

ROLL When we are regulated we can roll with the needs of children and remain responsive, not reactive.

Ask yourself: **Why this child? Why now?**

It is the end of the school day and you need to leave by 3:45 for a 4:00pm appointment.

You help your young Kindergarten kids get out the door—it is 3:38 and you look behind you and see that Colin is standing in the middle of the hallway, no winter gear on, papers everywhere, not moving at all...

You feel panicky, you know you need to get yourself organized and out of the school in 6 minutes...



Ask yourself:

Why this child? Why now?

Almost the end of the day

The child is tired

Getting packed up and dressed is hard work

This child had a lot to pack up—the pile on the floor and in the locker must have seemed overwhelming

Everyone was ready to go, but this child hadn't started yet—this must have felt stressful

Colin tends to get overwhelmed by a lot of noise and activity



Why this child? Why now?

Why this child? Why now?	A non-trauma-informed approach
Smiled	I would have been firm
Does this go home or stay here?	I would have talked way too much
Given positive reinforcement: Good.	Ultimatum: Get ready or you are going to the office
Calmly place papers in back pack	Gathered them up-probably not so neatly
Child put on outside clothes	Begrudgingly pick up the clothes to go to the office
We both went home happy	Child and I would have left angry and upset

A time for reflection

Think of a recent experience where a child in your classroom demonstrated a lot of problems with behavioural/emotional regulation and answer these questions:

Why this child?

Why now?

Other questions to consider:

- What need is this behavior communicating?
- What can be done to address this need?
- What is the healthy message intention behind the behavior?

Self-regulation versus compliance



Take caution: Cues to when a trauma-sensitive lens is especially needed:

- There is a known history of potential traumatizing or adverse events
- The behavioural responses are rapid
- The behavioural response is disproportionate in intensity to the situation or trigger
- The trigger or antecedent to the behavior is not clear
- Traditional approaches or responses do not work
- Rewards or consequences are activating
- The function of the behavior may be neurological not observable



Trauma Sensitivity ➡ SEL = Behavioural & Academic Success

Providing a safe and comforting environment

Showing empathy and understanding

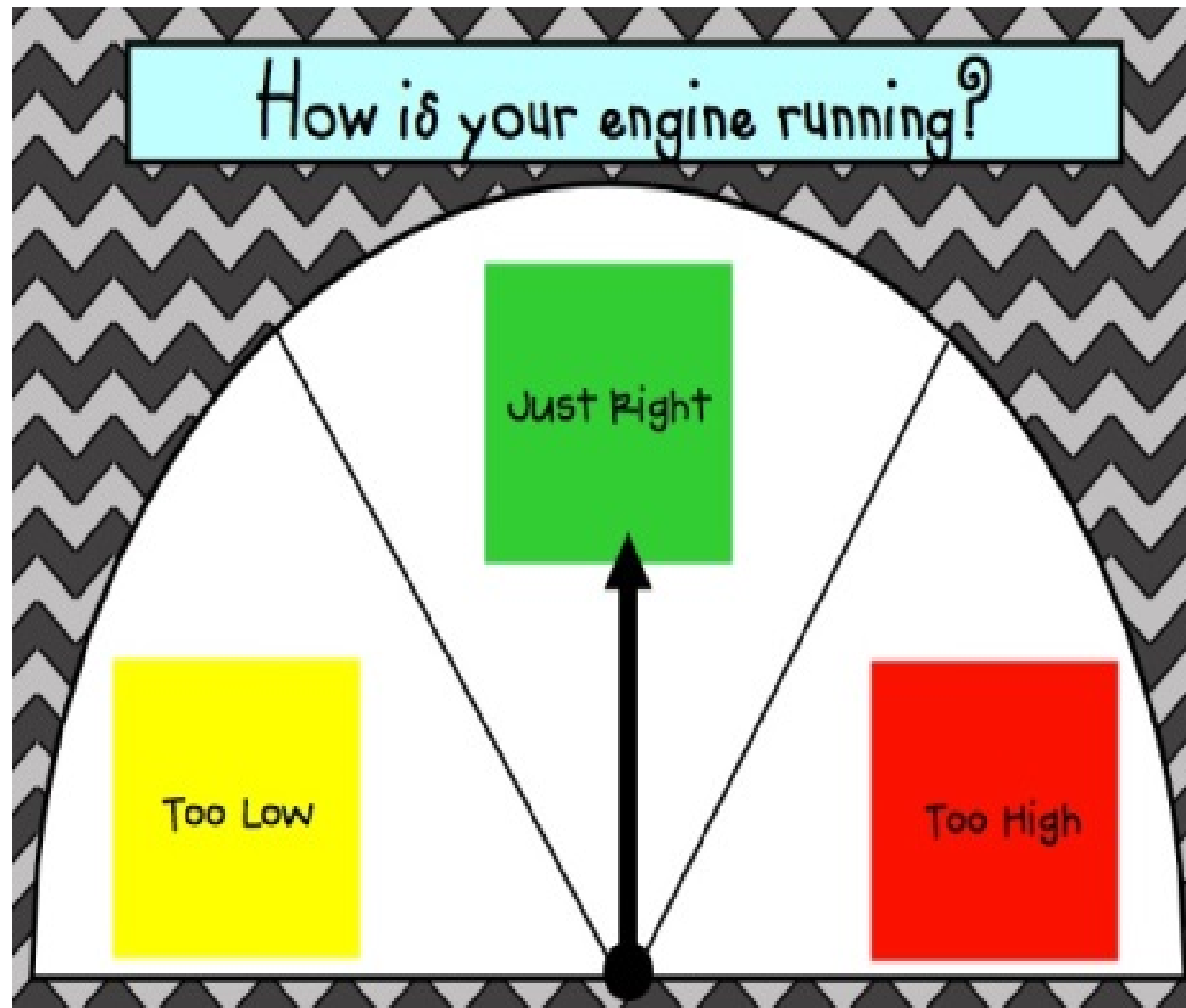
Knowing that children (and adults) are internally driven to be their best self

Focus on partnership, not control/authority

Focus on the child's strengths

Understand how trauma responses happen





"How Does Your Engine Run? A Leader's Guide to the Alert Program" Williams and Shellenberger, 1996

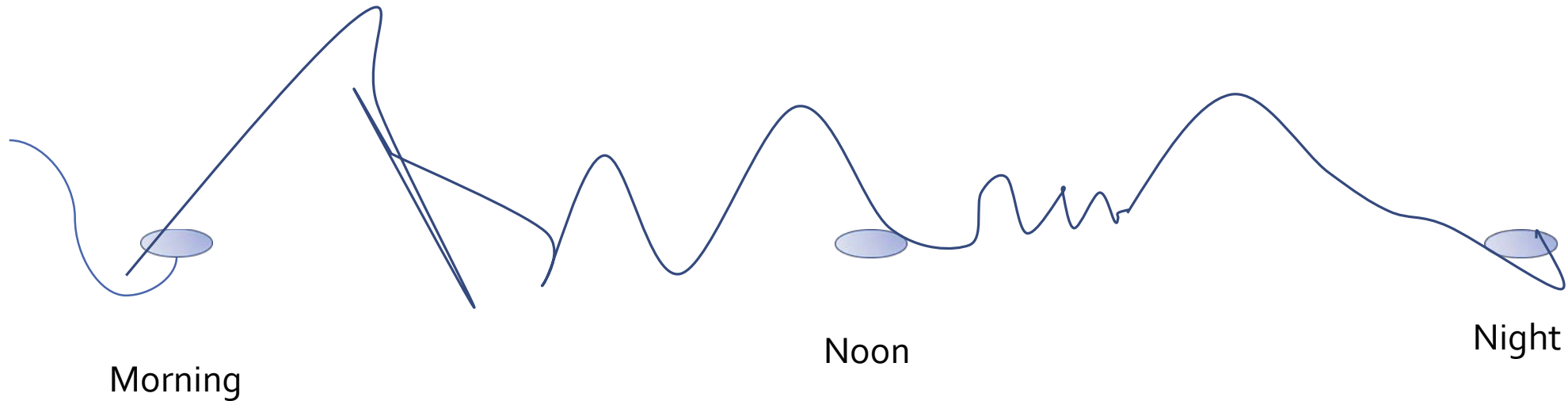
Classroom self-regulation ideas

- Provide quiet, calming areas where children can go when they need to regulate
- Use breathing, meditation or yoga
- Use chime or music rather than the bell to signal school transitions
- Use drums, singing bowls or music (or hand clapping) to signal in-class transitions
- Keep classroom schedule predictable
- Choose neutral classroom colours, minimal visual stimuli and “things”
- Consider using fidget toys, exercise bands or worry beads to help students stay focused and alert
- Provide activities that allow for student choice
- Make your own self-regulation techniques obvious to your students
 - Use a calm voice
- Share classroom self-regulation strategies with the parents



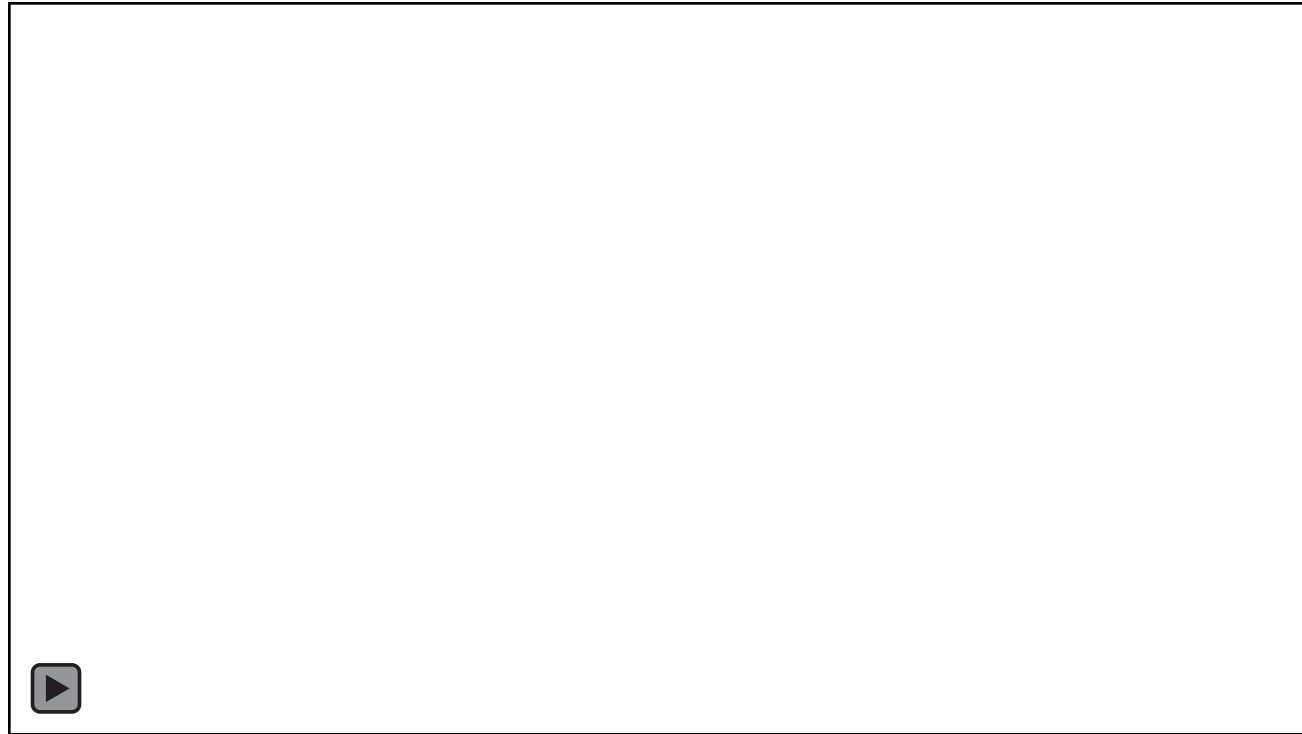
If you were to draw your day, in one continuous line, what would it look like?

Line of my day activity



Draw the day of a child in one
continuous line

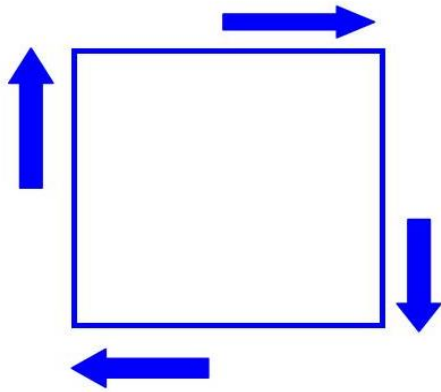
Video: Just Breathe



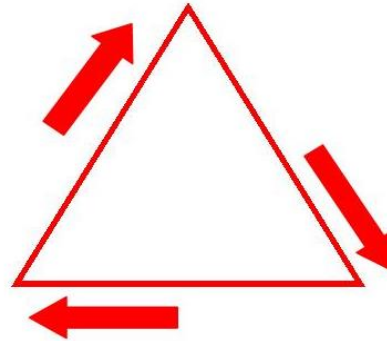
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVA2N6tX2cg>

Mindful Breathing

Breathing is a powerful strategy for relieving stress and anger. It can calm the mind and body,



Follow the arrows through the breathing pattern, inhale 1...2...3..., hold 1...2...3..., exhale 1...2...3..., hold 1...2...3...

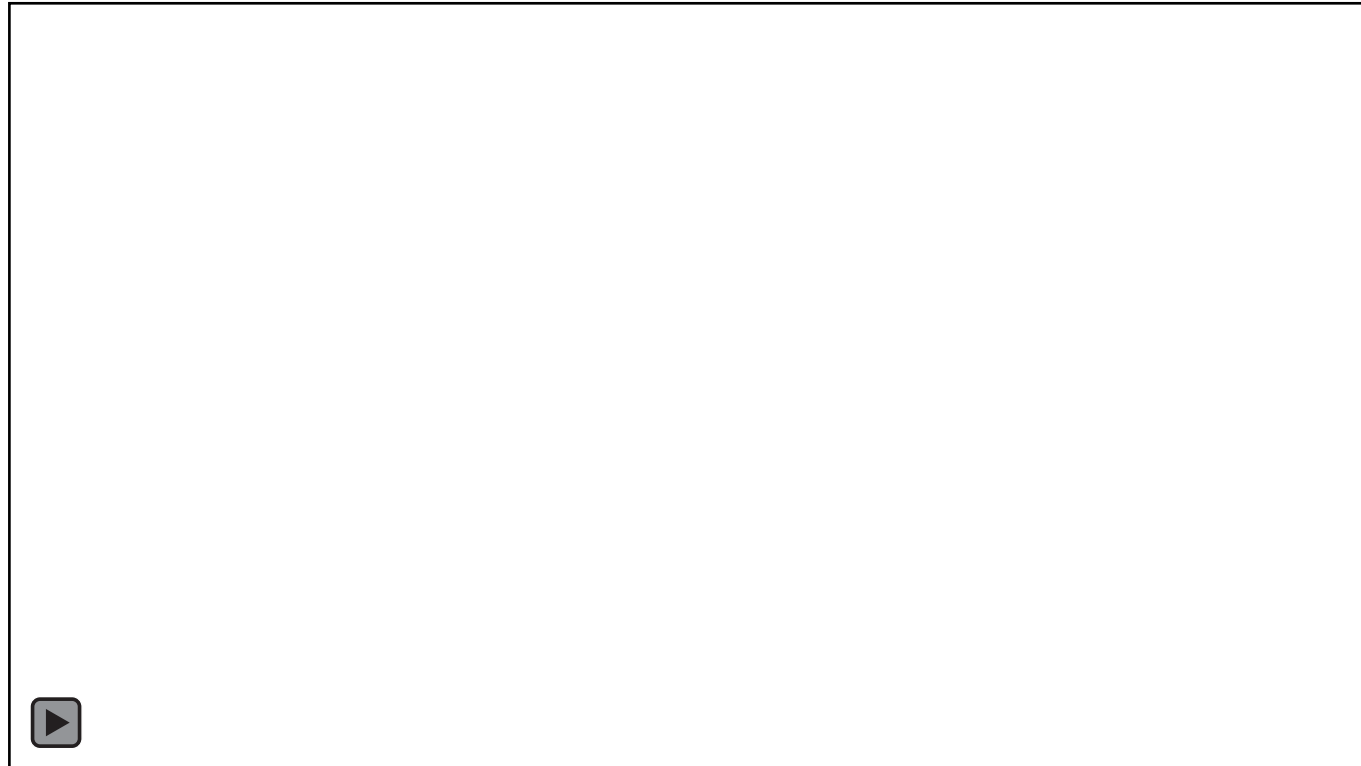


Follow the arrows through the breathing pattern, inhale 1...2...3..., exhale 1...2...3..., hold 1...2...3...



Follow the arrows through the breathing pattern, inhale, exhale...

Leah Kalish... Animal breathing



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OaVB7j4BJnY>

Use physical activity like walking to match the emotional state of a student at a particular time and join them in slowing them down or creating alertness to get where their energy needs to be



Increasing energy

Copying Game

Stretches and Jumps

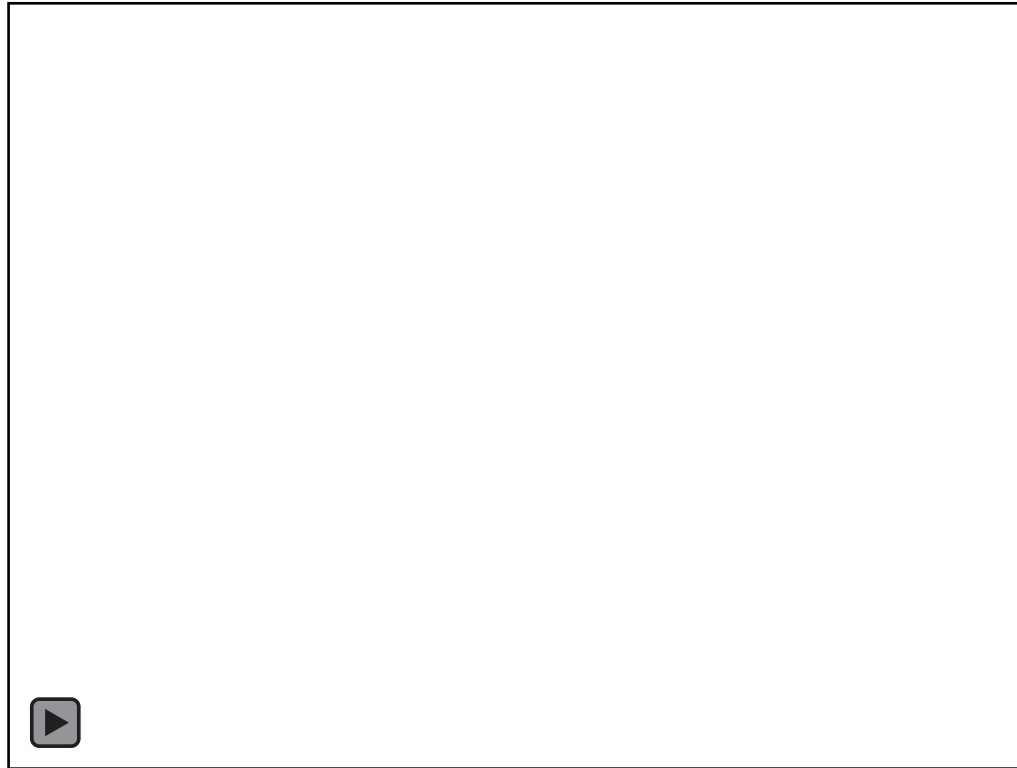
Head and Shoulders

3 minute Dancing

Doing a “task”



Self Regulated Behaviour in Friends



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qcSN49G1D>

A

Thank you!

kbax@uwo.ca