

# The secret of a stress free job at a community legal centre is.....

CLCQ State Conference 11 May 2022

Presenter – Kerriann Dear

# Acknowledgement of Country

I wish to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, our First Nations Peoples and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging. I acknowledge the important role Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to play in our society and the wisdom that they hold.

A warm welcome is extended to any First Nations Peoples listening to this presentation today..



# Stay safe in our session today

- You are warmly invited to participate, join in, and co-create a conversation today about stress and its manifestations and how we can rise to the challenges that too much stress can present to our wellbeing at work.
- Stress and burnout are increasing reasons for people leaving their employment, taking extended absences. Stress and psychological injury claims are the fastest growing workers compensation claims in Queensland.
- You may wish to access more information, resources and support in relation to how you feel about the stress in your life or at work and there is a list of resources and referrals at the end of this presentation.

# Our workshop today will:

- Examine the concept of stress and the neurobiology of the stress state in the human body
- Discuss the negative effects of chronic stress on our bodies and minds
- Build a toolkit of resources, insights and methods that you can use to to mitigate stress before it becomes harmful
- Look at how social connection, meta cognition and self awareness are essential growth and stress busting tools for thriving at work



# Quiz

1. "Its possible to have a totally stress free work-life at a CLC"
1. "Stress is universal, everyone gets stressed under stressful working conditions"
1. "Stress is harmful for our physical and mental wellbeing"
1. "The less hours I work the less stressed I am"
1. "Positive thinking will keep stress at bay"

# Stress

There are varying definitions;

- Experiences that are challenging emotionally and physiologically (McEwen)
- A state of threatened homeostasis that is counteracted by **adaptive** processes involving physiological, biochemical and cognitive-behavioural responses in an attempt to regain homeostasis (Chrousos)
- Stress reactions are followed by recovery processes which are compromised when stressors are severe or prolonged, or recovery is impeded
- Early-life stress can calibrate the brain and body into patterns of stress response in early life (ACE studies)

## The General Adaptation Syndrome by Hans Selye



# Emotional memories

- Our brains and bodies store memories of the of the emotional experiences we encounter each day (food, weather, social interactions ).
- Emotions are a critical source of information for learning." ~ **Joseph E. LeDoux**
- Over time, the way we perceive, think and feel about experiences sets up automatic response patterns or emotional memories, many of which become subconscious.



# Emotional memories



# ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES INCLUDE:



## ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES HAVE BEEN LINKED TO:



Reduces the ability to respond, learn, or figure things out, which can result in problems in school.

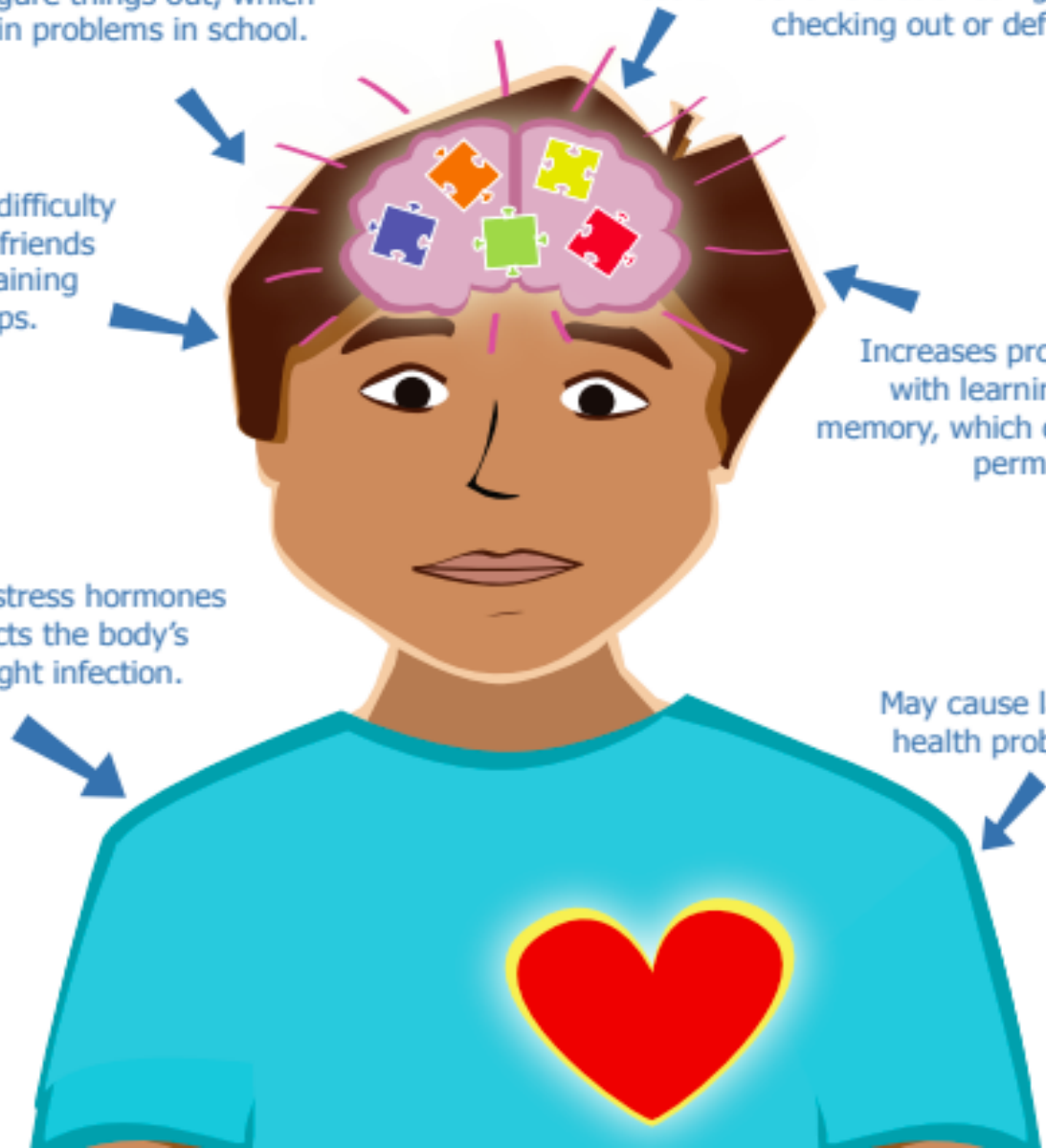
Lowest tolerance for stress, which can result in behaviors such as fighting, checking out or defiance.

Increases difficulty in making friends and maintaining relationships.

Increases problems with learning and memory, which can be permanent.

Increases stress hormones which affects the body's ability to fight infection.

May cause lasting health problems.

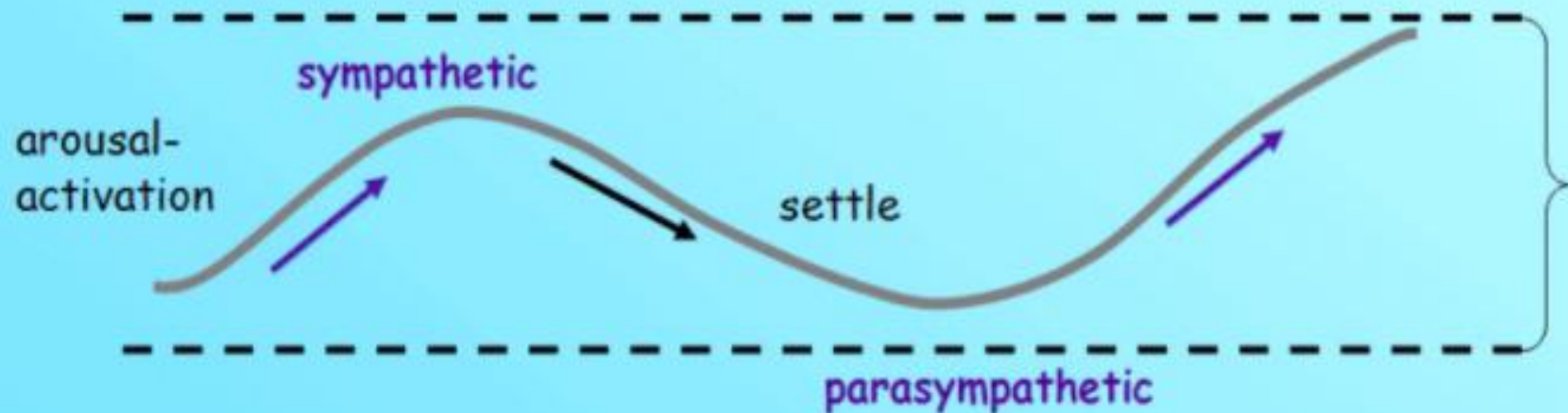


# A child's survival mode response

- A survival mode response to stress increases a child's heart rate, blood pressure and muscle tension.
- A child's rational or thinking brain is knocked off-line and self-protection becomes the priority.
- I can't respond right now – I am trying to be safe
- The foundations of a healthy nervous system arise through attachment to an attuned and nurturing care giver.
- Over time the child learns to self regulate and optimise their ability to tolerate uncertain or stressful things in life

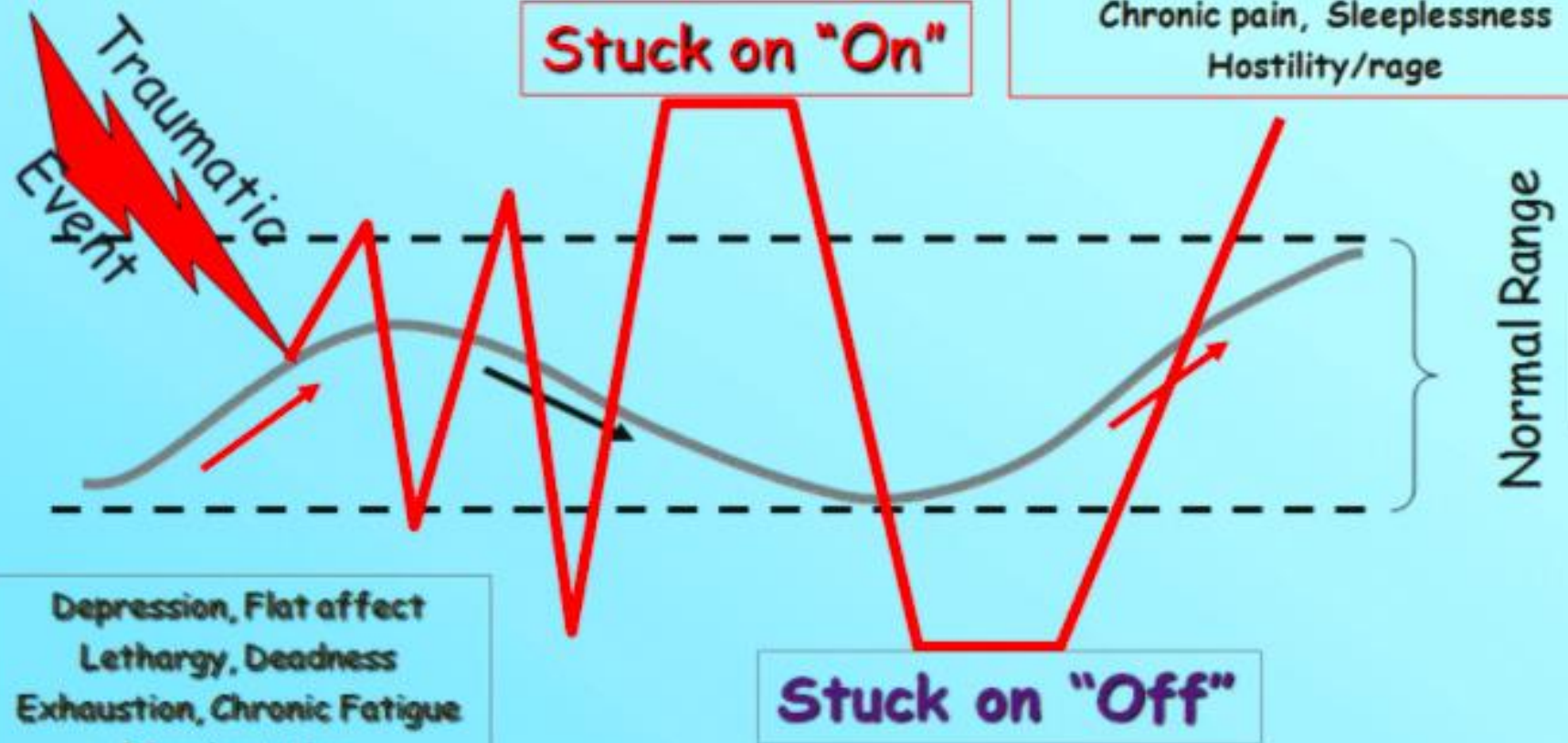


# A Healthy Nervous System



# Symptoms of Un-Discharged Traumatic Stress

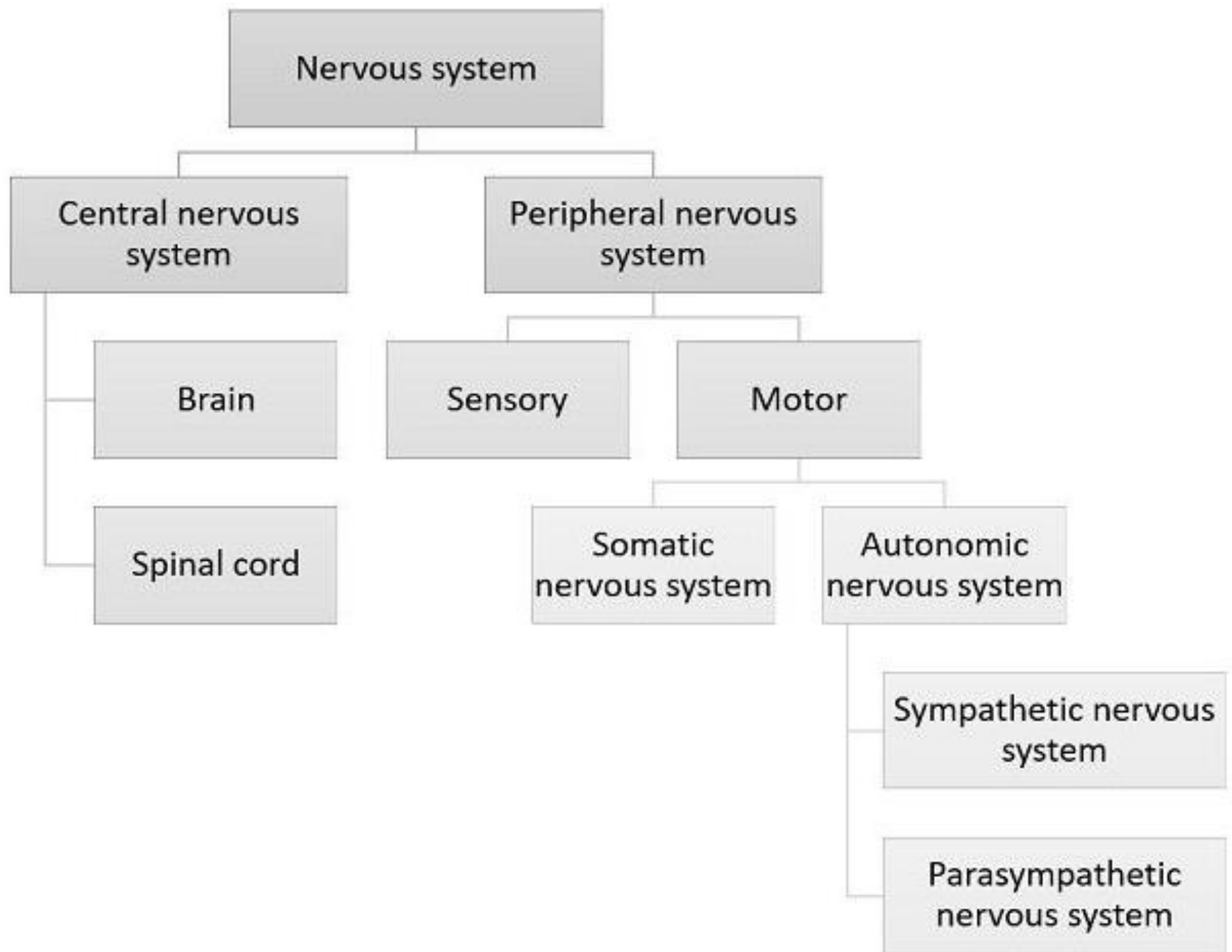
Anxiety, Panic, Hyperactivity  
Exaggerated Startle  
Inability to relax, Restlessness  
Hyper-vigilance, Digestive problems  
Emotional flooding  
Chronic pain, Sleeplessness  
Hostility/rage



Depression, Flat affect  
Lethargy, Deadness  
Exhaustion, Chronic Fatigue  
Disorientation  
Disconnection, Dissociation  
Complex syndromes, Pain  
Low Blood Pressure  
Poor digestion

# The neurobiology of stress

- Although the brain is complex - Stress is a biological survival response to real or perceived “threats”- it helps keep us safe and protected from danger, by keeping us alert and active in certain situations.
- The fight-flight-freeze-fawn responses are known as stress responses or trauma responses. These are ways the body automatically reacts to stress and perceived danger, controlled by your brain's autonomic nervous system, part of the limbic system.





# Autonomic Nervous System

## Sympathetic

- Constant sensory vigilance trying to interpret the external environment as a threat or stressful event – emergency or high level physical activity
- Mobilises the bodies hormones to trigger a “fight, flight, freeze or fawn” response.

## Para-sympathetic

- The PNS helps to produce and preserve the body's normal homeostasis. Thus, it functions to prepare the body for a ‘rest and digest response.
- Restores and conserves energy and functions (e.g. saliva, tears, healing and anti-inflammatory responses)

# Autonomic Nervous System

## Sympathetic

- Releases adrenaline and noradrenaline
- Increases alertness and focus
- Increases blood-flow, oxygen uptake and energy production
- Shuts down digestion, saliva production and breaks down glycogen into glucose for energy
- When chronic releases glyco-cortisol

## Para-sympathetic

- Counteracts SNS responses
- Releases acetylcholine
- Decreases heart and breathing rates
- Increases digestive stimulation, saliva and urine
- Relaxation and restoration

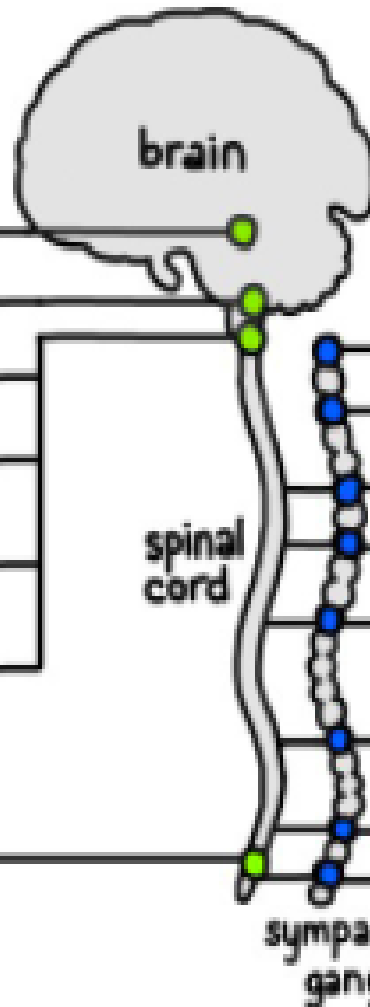
# Autonomic Nervous System

## PARASYMPATHETIC NERVES

- constricts pupils
- stimulates saliva flow
- slows heart rate
- constricts bronchi
- stimulates stomach, pancreas, intestines
- stimulates bile release
- contracts bladder

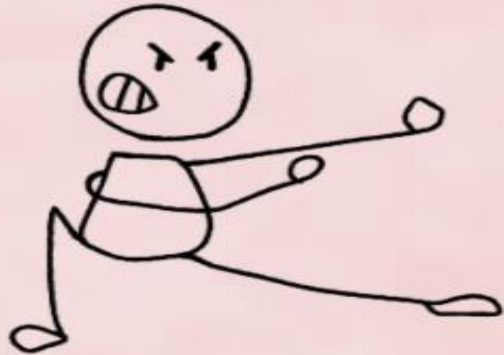
## SYMPATHETIC NERVES

- dilates pupils
- inhibits saliva flow
- accelerates heart rate
- dilates bronchi
- stimulates stomach, pancreas, intestines
- converts glycogen to glucose
- secretes adrenaline
- inhibits bladder contraction



# Fight Flight Freeze Fawn

**FIGHT**



attack the threat

**FLIGHT**



escape the threat

**FREEZE**

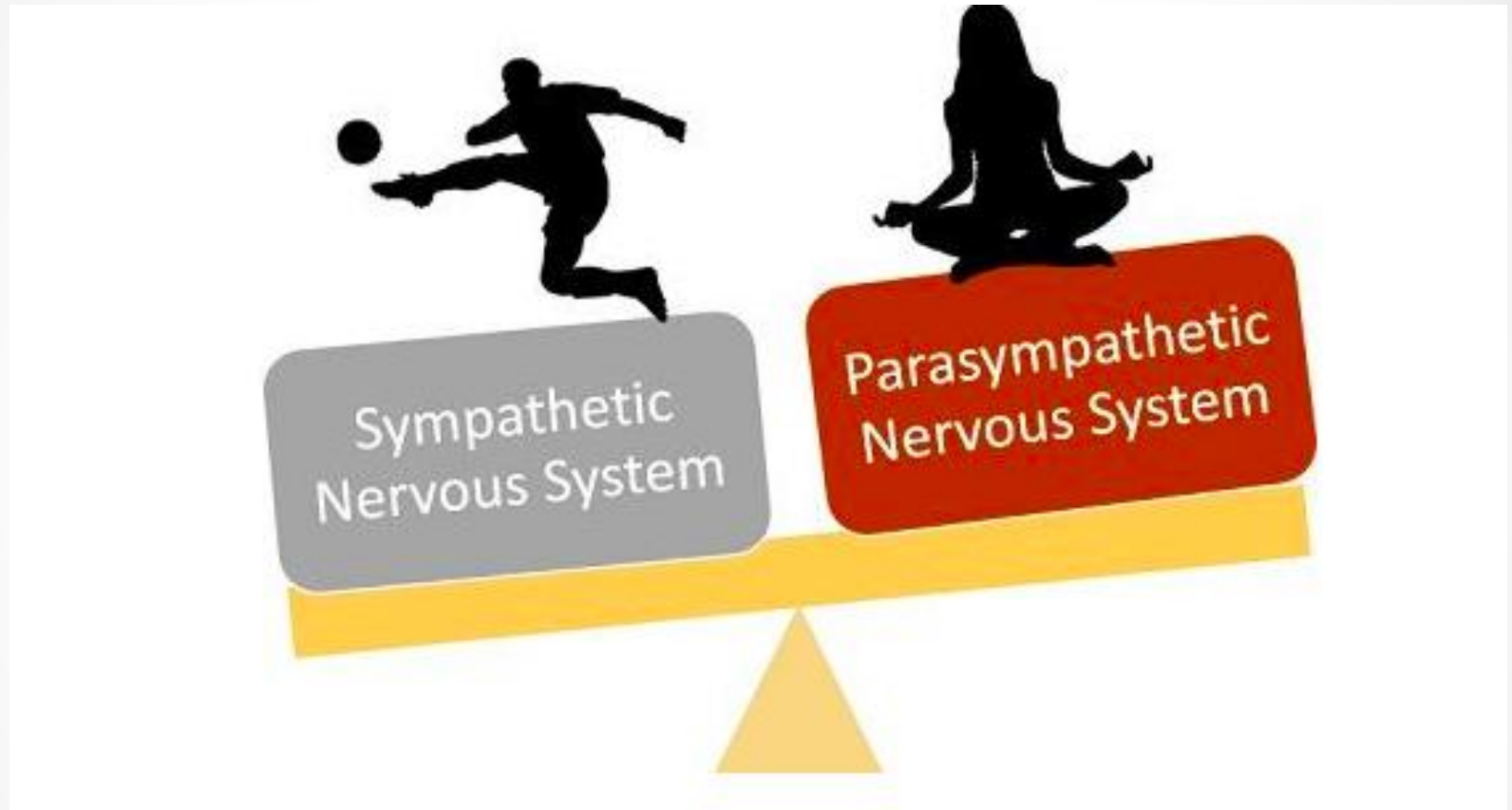


avoid provoking the threat

**FAWN**



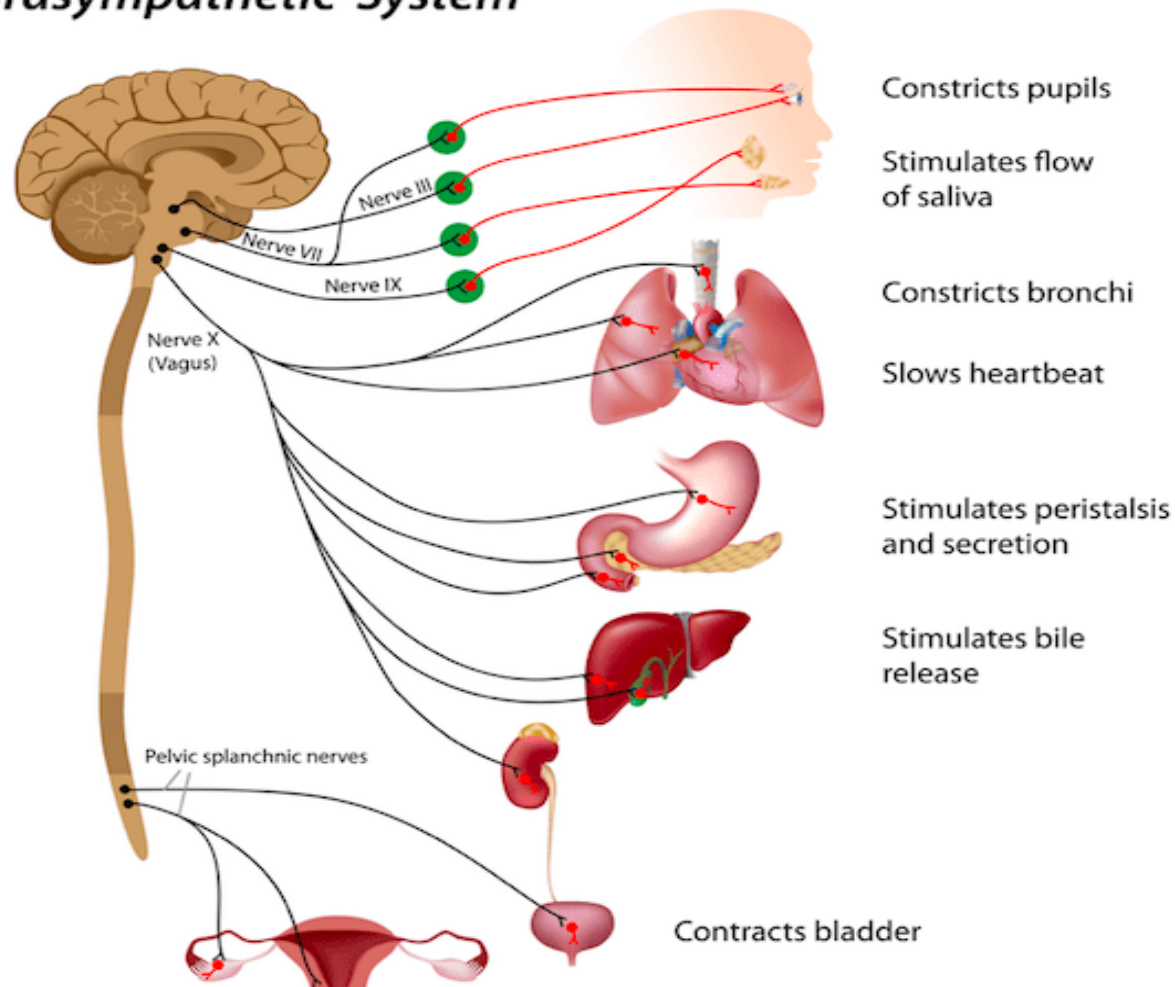
placate the threat



The two systems work to maintain a state of homeostasis or relative equilibrium within our body ●

# Nerve x – Vagus

## *Parasympathetic System*



# Porges polyvagal theory

- When we positively connect with other people, we trigger neural circuits in our bodies that calm the heart, relax the gut, and turn off the fear response.
- Remember – that the role of the **Vagus Nerve** is a sophisticated pathway that carries messages quickly from the brain stem to the heart, lungs, and intestines and **also** to facial expressive muscles and ears. It influences heart and breathing rates influencing how we perceive and respond to stressors.
- When we feel safe and confident with people around us, our heart rate and breathing slows and our stress response switches off and we feel calm.

# Test your knowledge

Place the activities described into any of the following autonomic nervous system states that might be present



# The stress tunnel



Exhaustion happens when we are stuck in the tunnel – our body can not complete the biological stress process and return to balance. This can happen when stressors are chronic or we carry too much for too long or we are stuck in maladaptive patterns to stress. ●

Photo Aaron Burden - unsplash

# TRAUMA (PTSD)

The term “trauma” is used to describe experiences or situations that are painful, shocking and distressing, and that overwhelm people’s ability to cope, leaving them powerless.

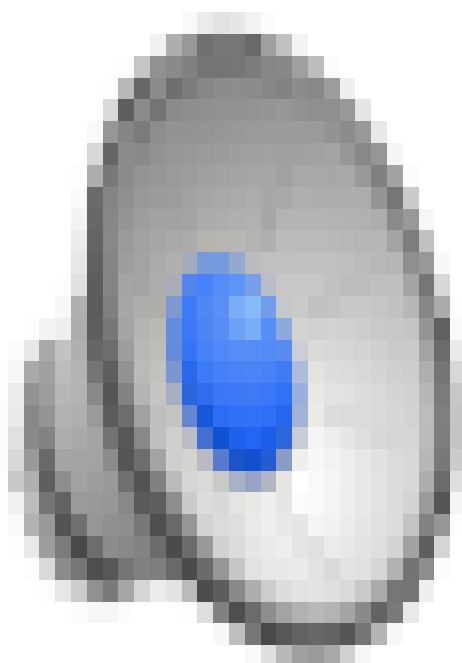
Trauma has sometimes been defined in reference to circumstances that are outside the realm of normal human experience but not always.

Traumatic events can be one off or involve a series of distressing experiences over time.

It can also be vicarious

“Trauma has become so commonplace that most people don’t even recognize its presence. It affects everyone. Each of us has had a traumatic experience at some point in our lives, regardless of whether it left us with an obvious case of post-traumatic stress. Because trauma symptoms can remain hidden for years after a triggering event, some of us who have been traumatized are not yet symptomatic.”

— **Peter A. Levine**, [Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma](#)



# Memories, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs and perceptions

“Your thoughts and feelings come from your past memories. If you think and feel a certain way, you begin to create an attitude.

An attitude is a cycle of short-term thoughts and feelings experienced over and over again. Attitudes are shortened states of being.

If you string a series of attitudes together, you create a belief. Beliefs are more elongated states of being and tend to become subconscious.

When you add beliefs together, you create a perception.

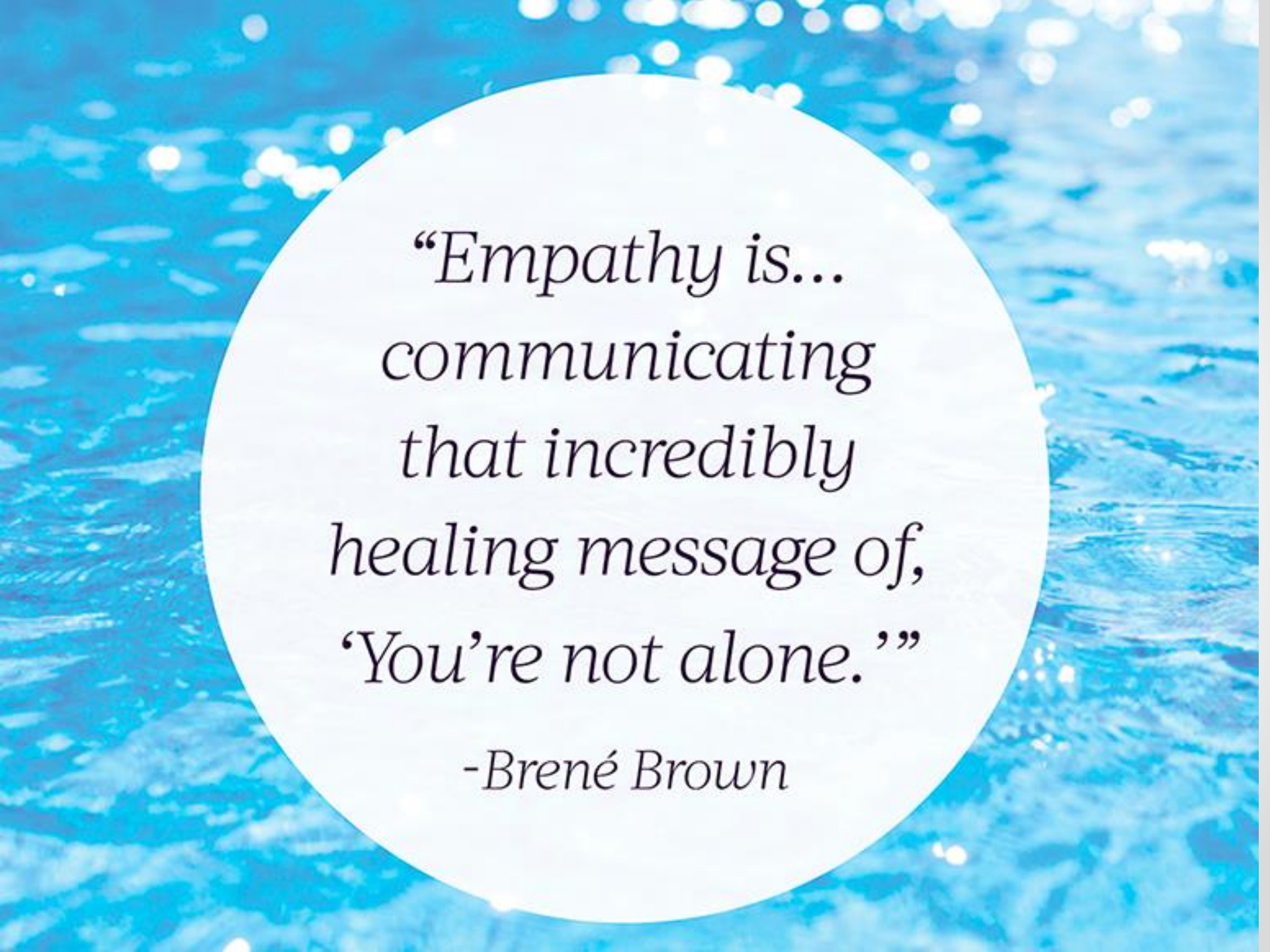
Your perceptions have everything to do with the choices you make, the behaviours you exhibit, the relationships you chose, and the realities you create.”

# Case study – psychological safety

Team psychological safety involves but goes beyond interpersonal trust; it describes a team climate characterised by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves. **Professor Amy Edmonstone 2019**

If you want to improve the world, start by making people feel safer. **Stephen Porges**





*“Empathy is...  
communicating  
that incredibly  
healing message of,  
‘You’re not alone.’”*

*-Brené Brown*

# Empathy

Empathy is connecting with people to reassure them they are not alone

Empathy is a way to connect to the emotion another person is experiencing; it doesn't require that we have experienced the same situation they are going through.

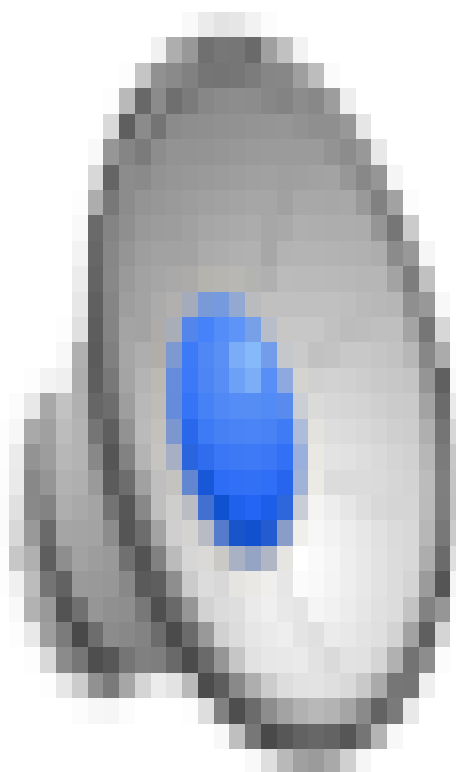
It can be achieved through a few basic steps:

- Be kind and curious (ask some basic questions – don't pry).
- Try to understand how the person is feeling (not how you might feel in the same situation).
- Let people know that you are grateful they shared with you.
- Allowing opportunities for second chances. When we miss the opportunity to show empathy or when we would like the opportunity to do it better, we can say, "I'd like to circle back."

**Empathy is a practice that grows over time**

Adapted from Brene Brown, Dare to Lead notes





# Reflective Exercise

- Think of a time when you were witness to a strong expression of emotion...
- What was your cognitive reaction (thoughts) about this experience.....what story did you tell yourself/or hear from the other
- Was it easy or difficult to be with the other person (or yourself) at this time
- What were some of the resources you had that enabled you to stay there and cope

# What has got to do with it?

“Contrary to the earlier belief that a steady heart rate was an indicator of health, we now know that a loss of the naturally occurring variability in heart rate is actually a sign of disease and a strong predictor of future health problem”.

“HRV is a measure of the flexibility of our heart and nervous system, and as such reflects our health and fitness.”

— **Doc Childre**

The HeartMath Solution: HeartMath Institute

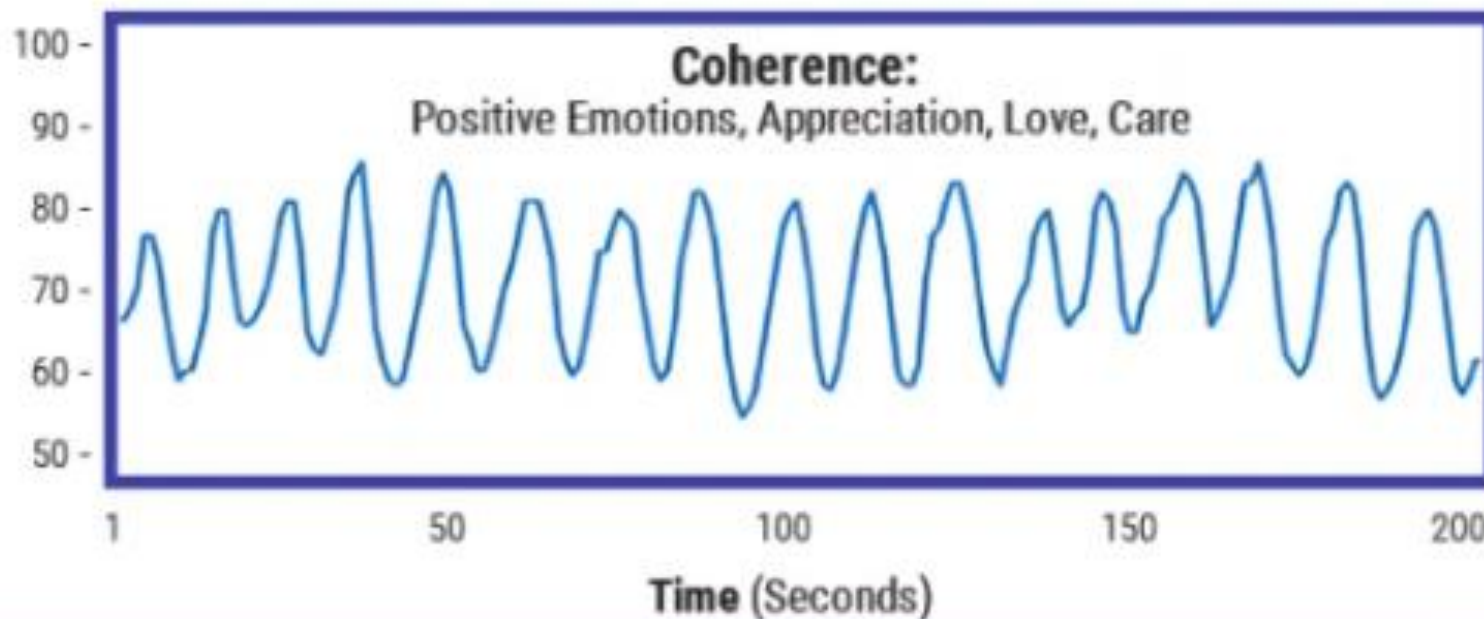
# Heart-Rhythm Patterns

Heart Rate



**Impairs  
Performance  
(Incoherence)**

Heart Rate



**Promotes Optimal  
Performance  
(Coherence)**

# Stress resilience

- The capacity to prepare for, recover from, and adapt in the face of stress, adversity, trauma or challenge [HeartMath Institute](#)
- Resilience and the management of emotions associated with stress are integral to many important physiological processes involved in how our bodies regulate themselves.
- Stress resilience is correlated with our adaptive patterning – how we have coped with stress in the past

# Building emotional resilience

- We are constantly in transaction with our environment (including the way we think and feel)
- How we respond to the emotions and feelings of stress can be essential to our wellbeing.
- Learning to recognise when they are not serving us can improve resilience

Emotional intelligence is **the ability to recognise, understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathise with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict.**

Based on the teachings of Daniel Siegal

# Physiological coherence

## **A state characterized by:**

- High heart-rhythm coherence (sine-wave-like rhythmic pattern).
- Increased parasympathetic activity.
- Increased entrainment and synchronization between physiological systems.
- Efficient and harmonious functioning of the cardiovascular, nervous, hormonal and immune systems.

Heartmath Institute

# Meta cognition (thinking about thinking and the aware self)

- When we can **observe** our own thinking and ways of being in the world – it is possible to have better cognitive control and **awareness** of how our bodies are **responding** to stressors.

“Understanding your brain increases your effectiveness at work. This happens because with knowledge of your brain, you make different decisions moment to moment” **David Rock**.

- Staying grounded, open and **flexible** to what you encounter.
- If a mood starts to dominate your day, use the awareness you have to be **curious** about it.
- When you **care** about others, you **listen** and **respond** with **empathy**, while keeping good **boundaries** about what you can and can't do while caring also for yourself.



# Domains of Resilience

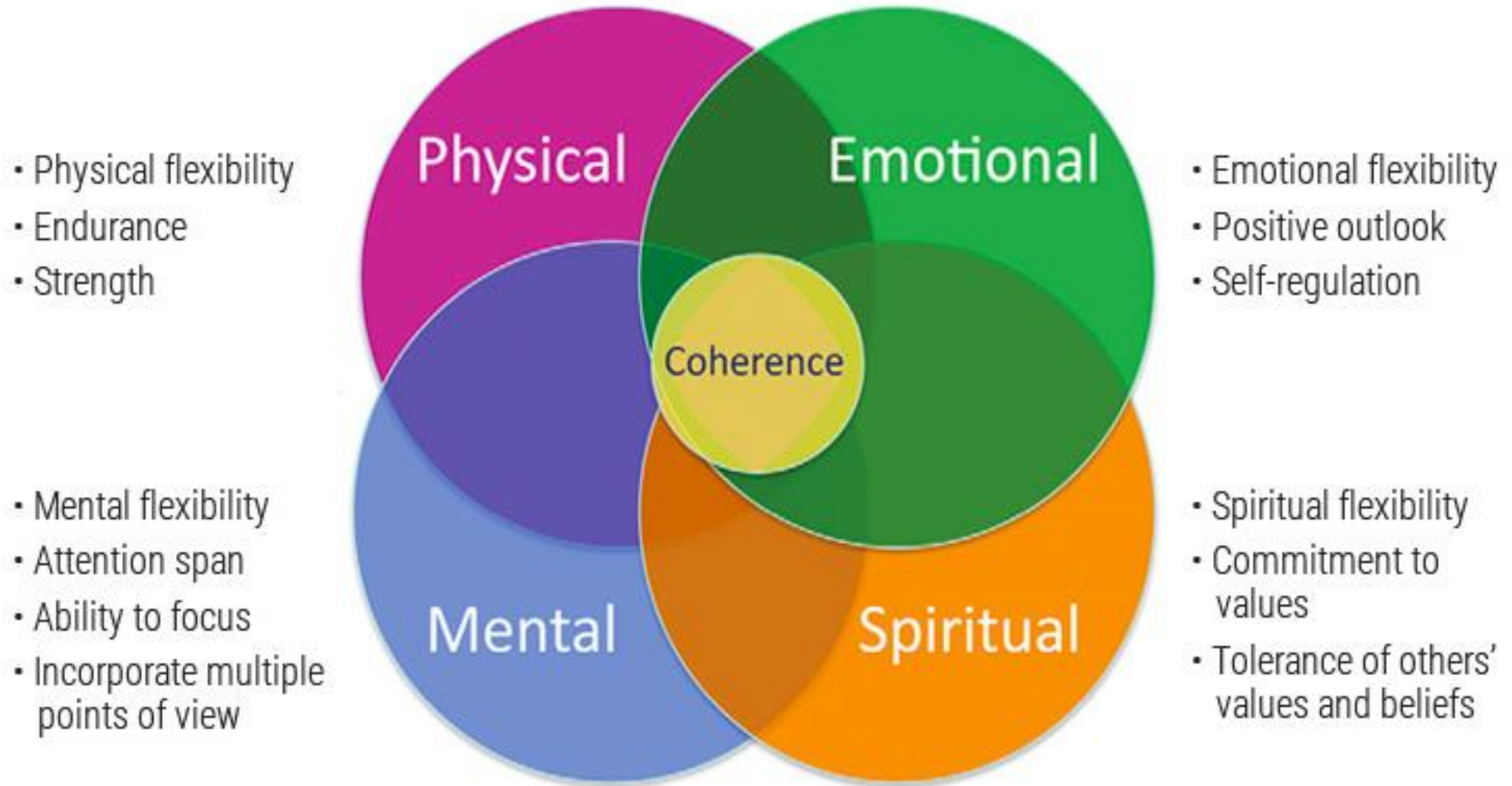


Diagram from Heartmath Institute

- Have a think about your fitness in these areas – make a few notes about where you are now and what you would like to grow or achieve in terms of your resilience capacity.

# Test your knowledge

"It's not stress that kills us, it is our reaction to it."

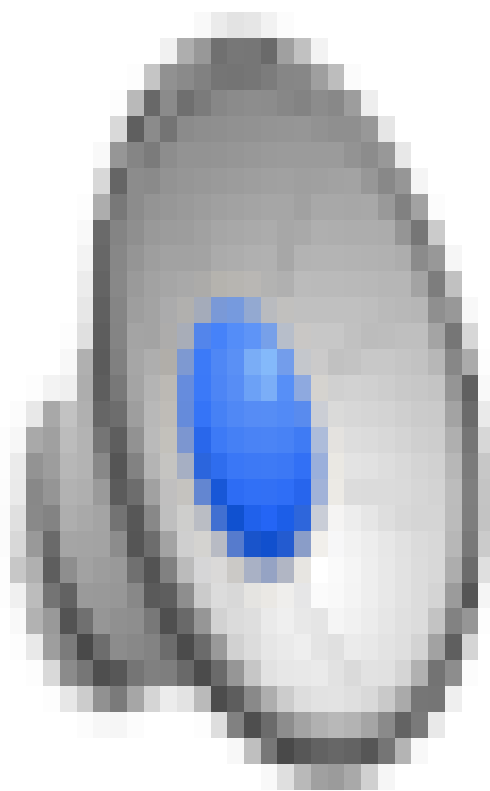
"Every stress leaves an indelible scar, and the organism pays for its survival after a stressful situation by becoming a little older."

"Adopting the right attitude can convert a negative stress into a positive one."

"To remain healthy a man must have some goal, some purpose in life that he can respect and be proud to work for."



• Hans Selye – Time Magazine March 2016 •



# Map your resilience resources

# References

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- Dr Joe Dispenza [Becoming Supernatural: How Common People Are Doing the Uncommon](#)  
Carlsbad, California : Hay House, Inc., 2017. ©2017

# Resources

## **Brene Brown**

<https://brenebrown.com/podcast/brene-with-emily-and-amelia-nagoski-on-burnout-and-how-to-complete-the-stress-cycle/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Ewgu369Jw>

## **HeartMath Institute**

<https://www.heartmath.org/research/science-of-the-heart/coherence/>

## **Stephen Porgues overview of Vagal Nerve**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ec3AUMDjtKQ>