


TEEN ANXIETY AND RESILIENCE

Catherine Korah
Behaviour Consultant
CEBM Coordinator
March 28th, 2023



www.cebm.ca

1



KEY INSIGHT #1

Alarm is a natural and necessary emotion, which protects us from dangers

2



KEY INSIGHT #2

Cannot address anxiety by focusing on the symptoms directly


3

“
Beneath every behavior is a feeling. And beneath every feeling is a need. And when we meet that need rather than focus on the behavior, we begin to deal with the cause not the symptom.”

— Ashleigh Warner
Psychologist

eduroopia

4



KEY INSIGHT #3

Some individuals are more at-risk towards developing anxiety problems

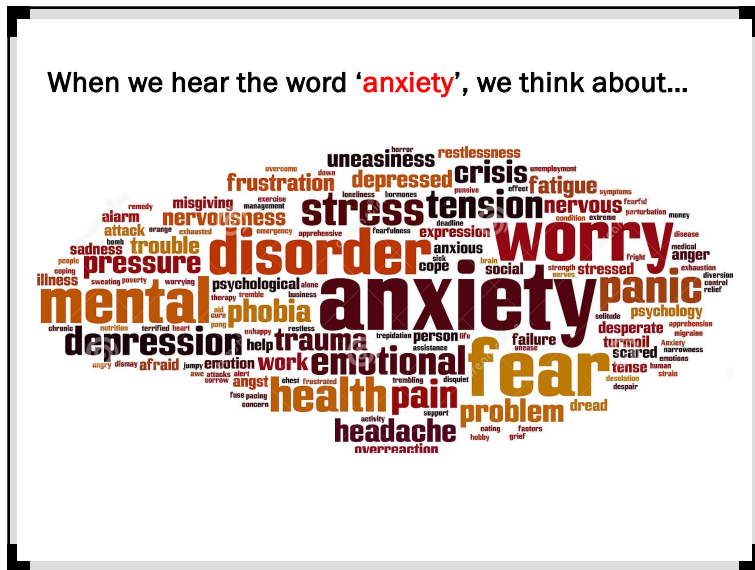
5



KEY INSIGHT #4

Most individuals don't need experts to support and accompany them. Caring adults can be enough to become the teens best bet.

6



7

ANXIETY IN YOUTH: Statistics in Canada

- Just over 40% of Canadian youth aged 15 to 24 reported having excellent or very good mental health in late March and early April 2020, compared with 62% in 2018—the largest drop of any age group.
- In a survey conducted in March and then July 2020:
 - 11.6% of 15- to 34-year-olds reported an increase in cannabis use (higher than any other age group)
 - 18.7% of 15- to 34-year-olds reported an increase in alcohol consumption

Statistics Canada, 2019-2020

8

ANXIETY IN YOUTH: Statistics in Canada

- Over half (57%) of participants aged 15 to 17 reported their mental health as either somewhat worse or much worse than it was before physical distancing measures were implemented.
- Data from 2019 suggest that children already reporting mental health challenges may be particularly vulnerable.
 - 17% (5-17 years) reported having poor or fair mental health
 - 5% (5-17 years) said they had been diagnosed with an anxiety disorder
 - 16% men and 19% women (aged 15-34) said they had seriously considered suicide (however, men were actually more likely to die by suicide)

Statistics Canada, 2019-2020

9

The limbic system

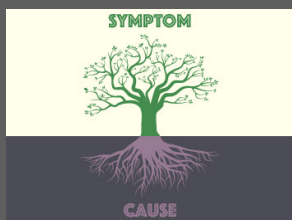
Where does anxiety come from?

BRAIN'S ALARM SYSTEM

- Mediated by the **LIMBIC SYSTEM**
- **Amygdala** registers the threat (like a smoke detector)
- **Hypothalamus** orchestrates the response (it links the nervous system to the endocrine system via the pituitary gland)
- Which triggers the **SYMPATHETIC NERVOUS SYSTEM**

10

WHAT IS AT THE ROOT OF ANXIETY?



11

What is the difference between?

- **ALARM**: instinctive primal emotion in response to a danger or threat
- **ANXIETY**: a vague sense of unsafety and unease, characterized by apprehension and restlessness

12

Defining emotion

We don't choose to be affected emotionally.
Emotion:

- **Stirs us up:**
 - *Happens to us as opposed to under our control;*
 - *Is irrational although the brain has its reasons.*
- **Moves us:**
 - *in ways that would serve us;*
 - *creates an action potential that seeks expression.*

13

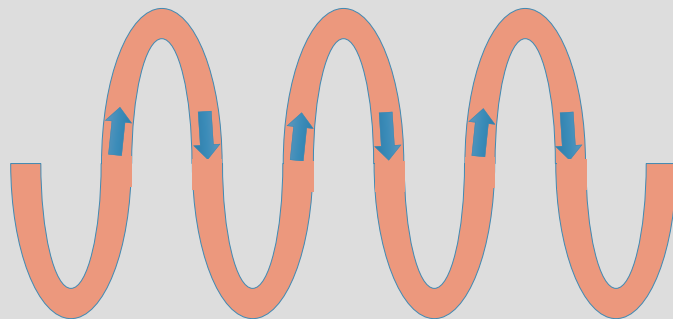
Why is it important to express emotion?

Emotion has work to do

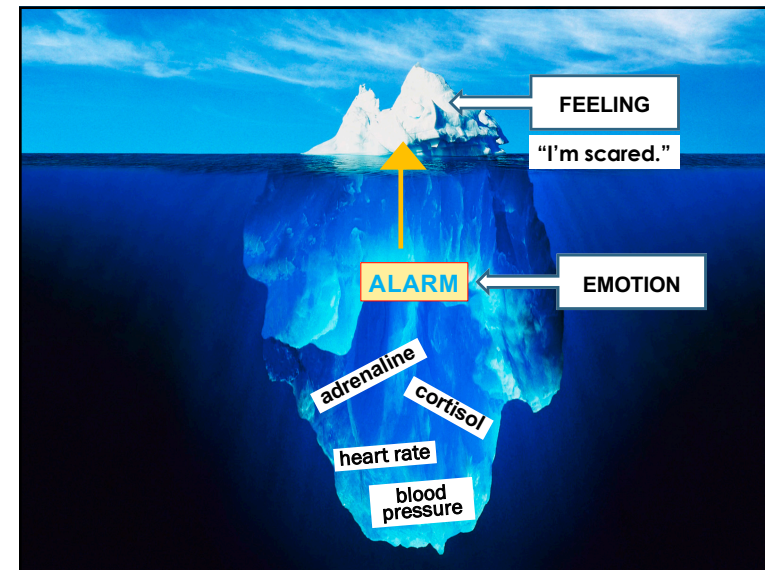
- **Feeling of alarm protects us from danger**
- Feeling of frustration helps us not give up
- Feeling of pursuit allows to preserve our attachments

14

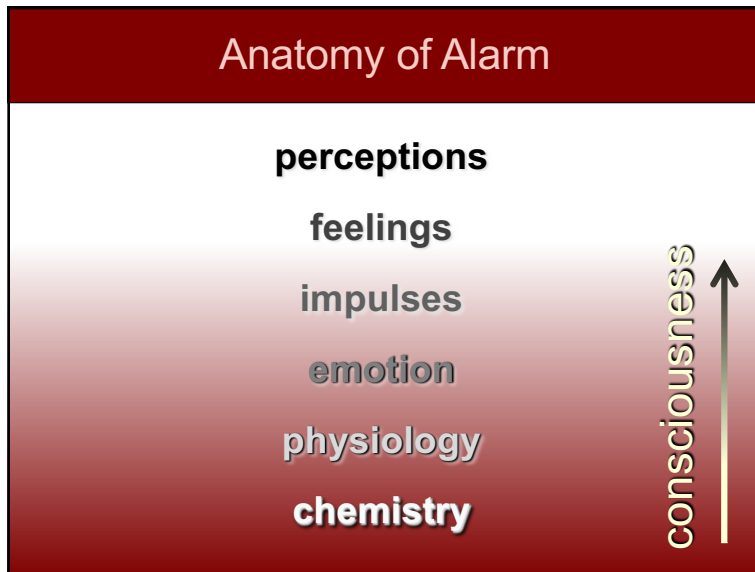
Emotion MOVES us



15



16



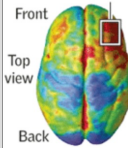
17

Impact of immaturity on alarm

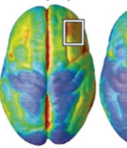
Immaturity of the brain = Emotions **not tempered** by the prefrontal cortex

Alarm comes out very **INTENSELY & UNFILTERED**

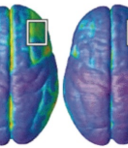
5-year-old brain




Preteen brain



Teen brain

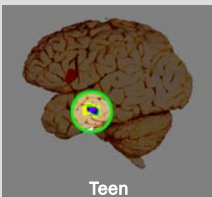


20-year-old brain




Dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex ("executive functions")

Red/yellow: Parts of brain less fully mature Blue/purple: Parts of brain more fully mature



Teen



Adult

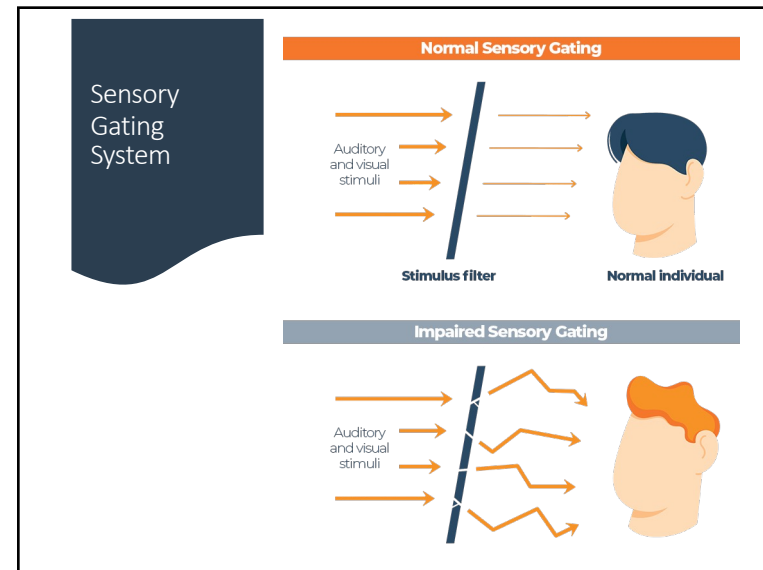
18

IMPACT OF Sensitivity and EMOTIONAL intensity ON ALARM & ANXIETY

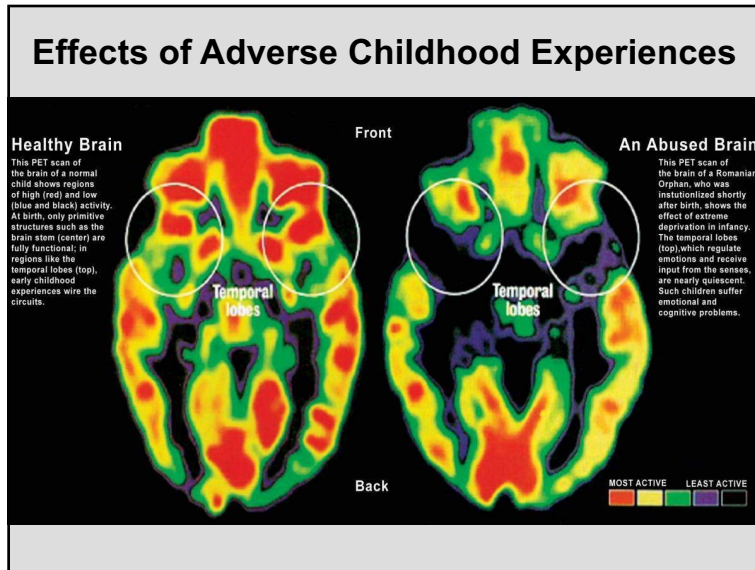
Greater individuals are hypersensitive and emotionally intense:

- More easily they are affected and moved by their emotions
- More easily they are overwhelmed by their emotional experience
- More likely they are to be "stuck" emotionally:
 - Emotional intensity evokes more defenses
 - Intellectualization of experiences (escape of emotions)
 - Loss of tears necessary for adaptation
- More adults attempt in calming the person in order to avoid emotional eruptions, which doesn't help the situation

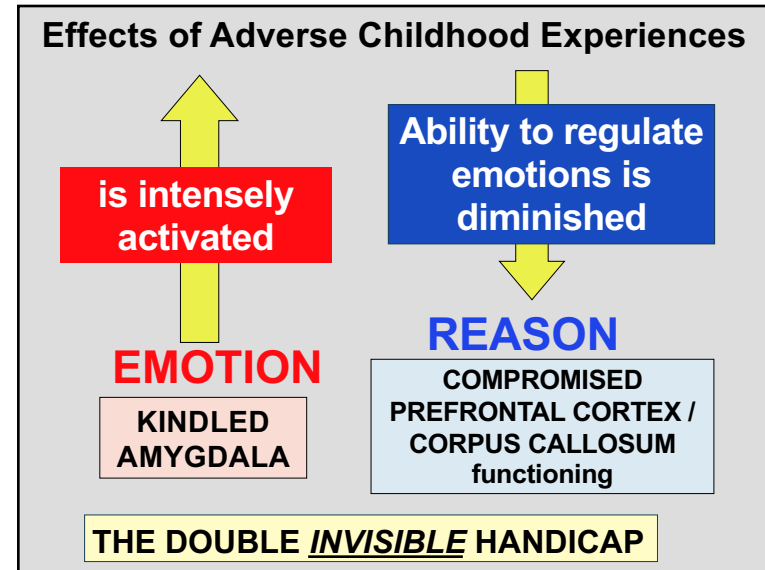
19



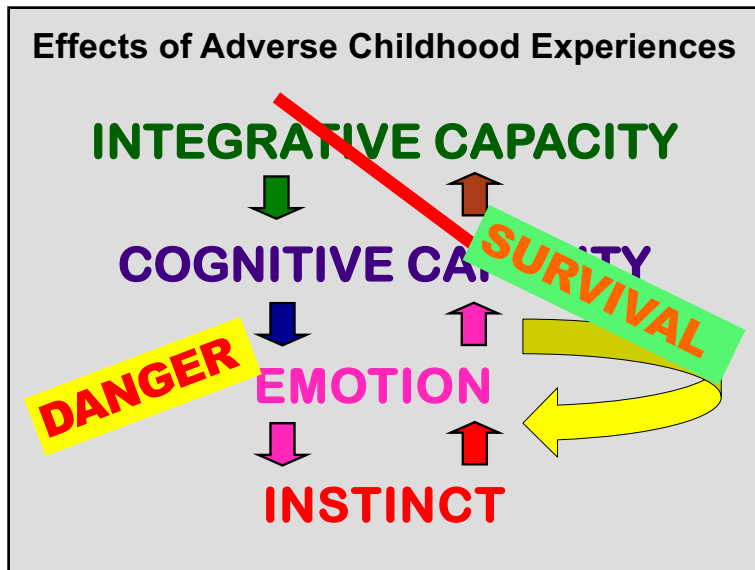
20



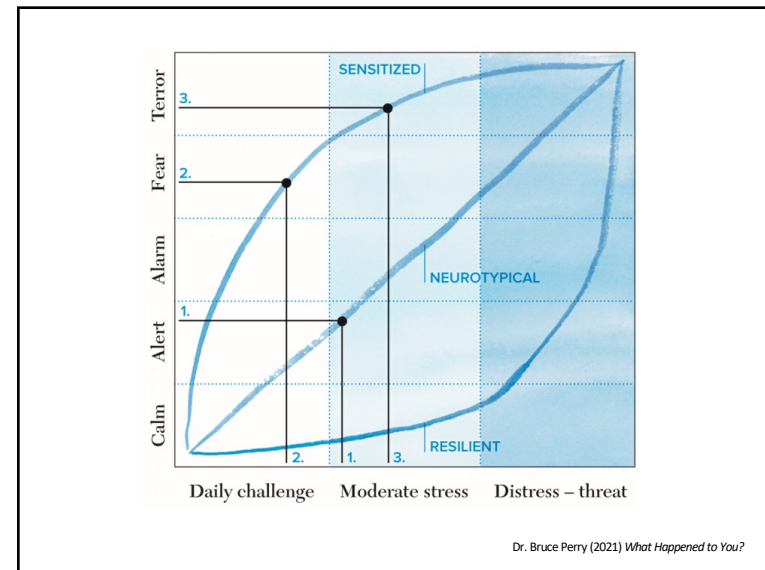
21



22



23



24

WHAT TRIGGERS EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION?

25



26

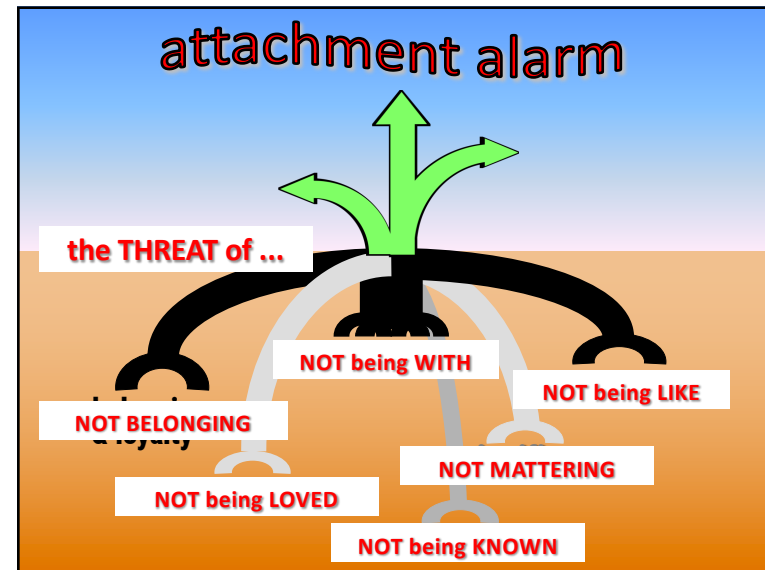
ATTACHMENT ALARM

ATTACHMENT = SURVIVAL

Attachment is people's most preeminent need, but also their biggest threat.

The impact of separation is more studied in research than any other single phenomenon (e.g. isolation research across species, human loneliness research, analysis of different population groups suffering loss and lack, longitudinal studies, etc.)


27



28

ATTACHMENT THREAT	ALARMING FEELING
Not being with	I'm alone, nobody is paying attention to be, no one wants to be with me, I feel rejected, etc.
Not being like	I'm different, I have nothing in common, I'm not normal, I feel prejudice against me, etc.
Not belonging	I don't feel included, Nobody is taking my side, no one has my back, people are against me, etc.
Not mattering	I don't feel noticed or listened to, I don't feel useful or important, people don't respect me, I don't feel esteemed or admired, my opinion doesn't count, my role doesn't matter, etc.
Not being loved	I don't feel taken care of, I don't feel warmth from anyone, I feel unlovable, etc.
Not being known	I don't feel truly seen or heard, I don't feel understood, I cannot share my secrets, I cannot truly be myself, etc.

29



Performance anxiety

- Focused on doing well
- Needing to 'win'
- Cannot make mistakes
- Trying to be perfect

30

EXPLOSION OF AWARENESS

- **Self-concerned**
 - *Me, me, me! It's all about me!*
 - *Everybody is so hard on me!*
 - *It only matters what I think*
- **Self-conscious**
 - *Everyone is looking at me!*
 - *I can't do that - I'll look dumb!*
 - *I can't wear that to school, everyone will laugh!*

31

MANY INTENSE FEELINGS

- **Feelings of separation, separateness & changes in relationships**
 - *Everything is changing around me*
 - *I'm not as close to my parents anymore*
 - *I can't tell them what is inside me anymore, because I'm not even sure how I feel*
- **Feelings of alarm, fear.... the world is opening-up and becoming larger**
 - *Everybody is looking at me! everybody is judging me!*
 - *I feel anxious about everything happening around me! This is too much!*
 - *I'm critical about everything because I can imagine how it should be...so why isn't it!*
 - *I'm so frustrated and irritated with everybody around me!*

32

MANY INTENSE FEELINGS

■ Feelings of **loss and grief**

- *Nothing is the same anymore... I want to be a child again*
- *I want things to slow down, things are becoming too complicated*
- *I want things to be easy like they were before, I don't want to grow up*

■ Feelings of **sadness and aloneness**

- *I feel so alone*
- *No one understands me*
- *No one gets me*
- *I am the only one going through this*

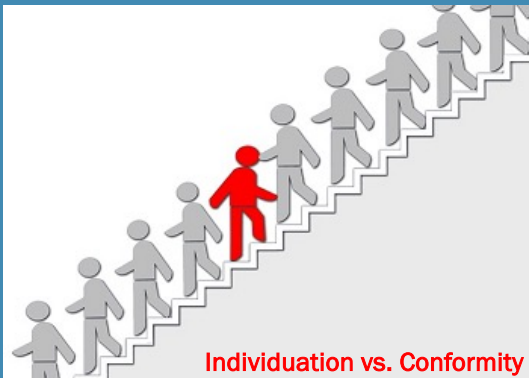
33



WHO AM I?

- Discovering the sense of SELF
- Making room for ALL parts of one's self

34



Individuation vs. Conformity

35

Navigating Conflict

- Learning to manage conflict leads to being able to navigate differences, learn to effectively communicate difficult emotions, develop moral frameworks, and overall build social skills and competency, including empathy.
- Still, these fights can cause a lot of emotional distress for the teens involved and are not always handled in a manner that gracefully resolves the conflict.



36

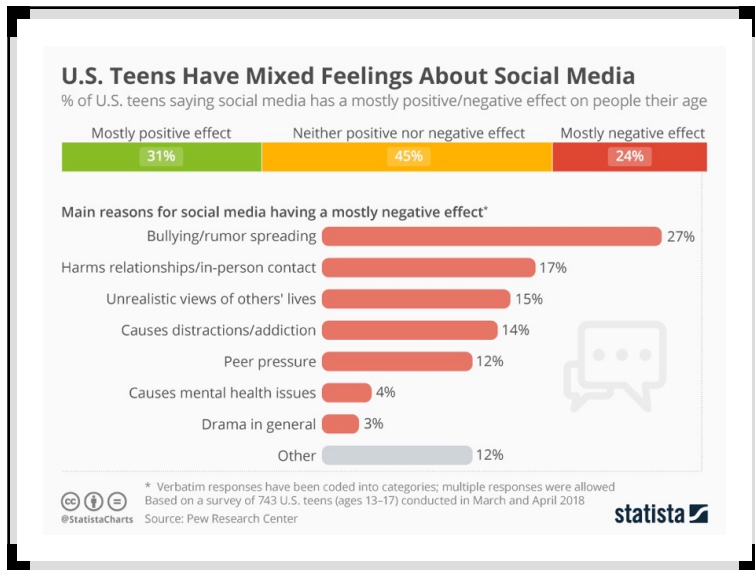


37

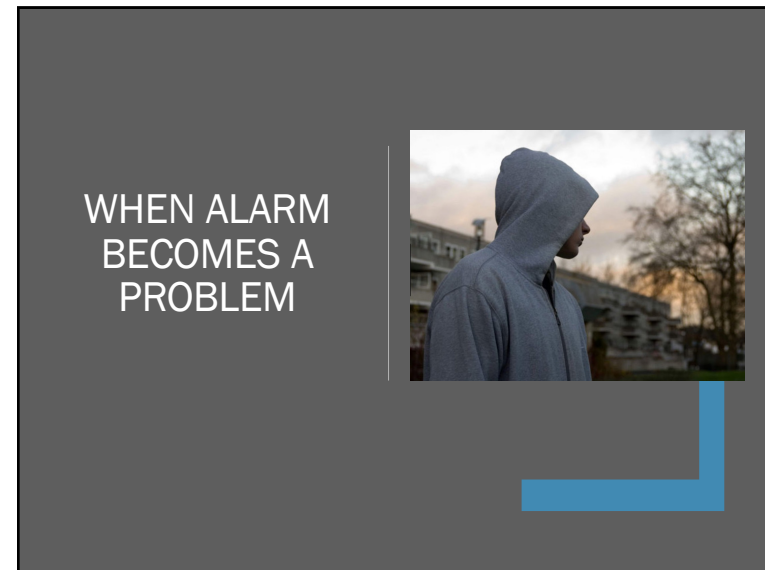
Impact of social media

- Social etiquette is not always as well respected online as it may be in person (easier to be mean to someone through typing than by speaking to them face-to-face)
- Social Media App functions (likes, followers, comments, etc.) increase negative emotional impact.

38



39



40

Just because you've dealt with the stressor doesn't mean you've dealt with the **stress** itself.

41




WHEN DEFENDED AGAINST VULNERABILITY

Being exposed to:

- Overwhelming sensitivity
- Wounding environment

It could lead to defendedness and stuckness

42



BRAIN Defense system

Our brain protects us by:

- ✓ **NUMBING OUT** feeling that are too much
- ✓ **TUNING OUT** from seeing things that would be too hard to see
- ✓ **BACKING OUT** of relationships where you might get hurt

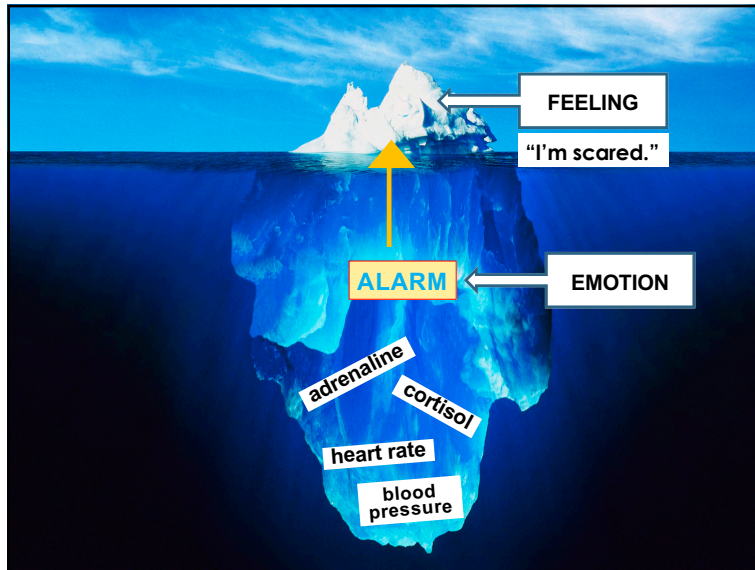
43



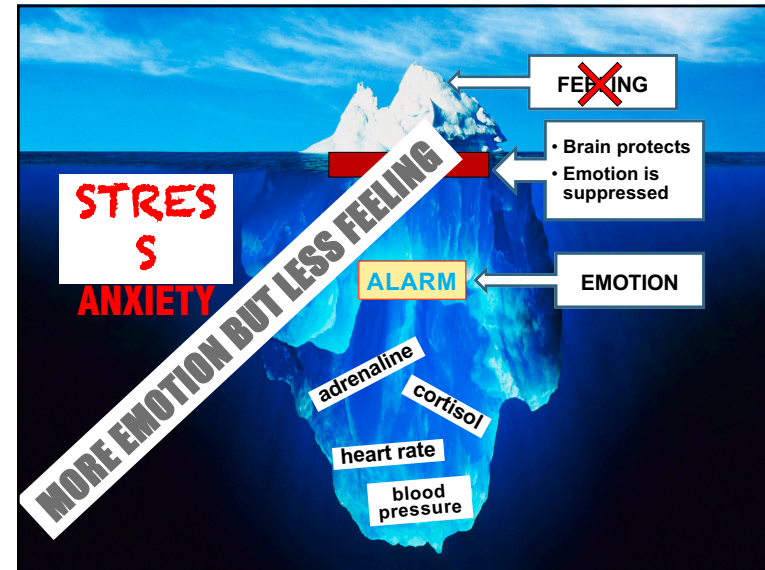
A TIME FOR TEMPTATION

- To fill the void rather than feeling it
- The challenge is to make room for all emotions, including sadness

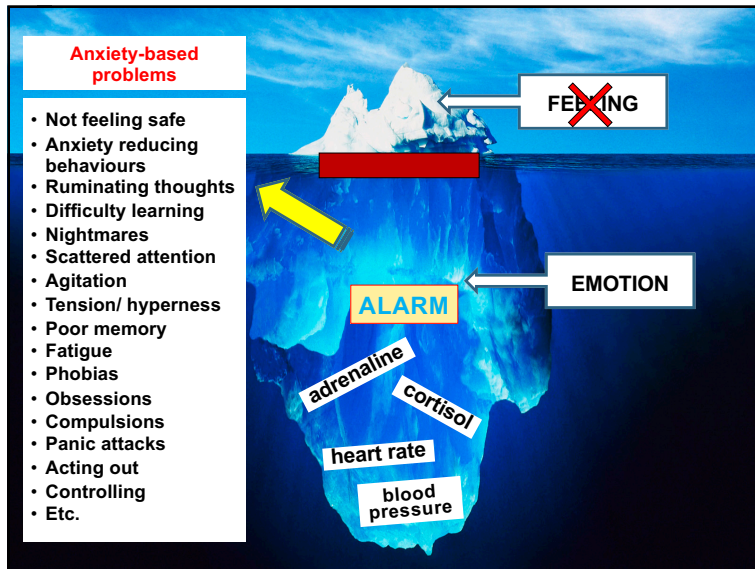
44



45

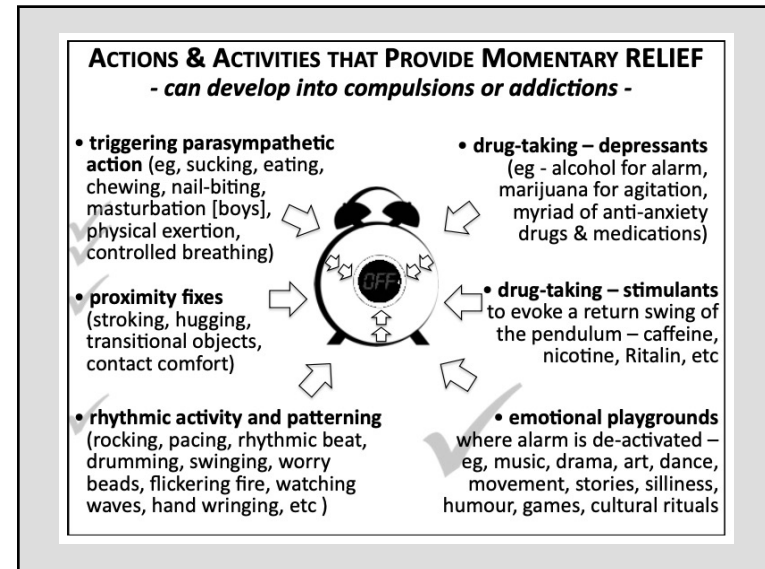


46



47

- Anxiety-based problems**
- Not feeling safe
 - Anxiety reducing behaviours
 - Ruminating thoughts
 - Difficulty learning
 - Nightmares
 - Scattered attention
 - Agitation
 - Tension/ hyperness
 - Poor memory
 - Fatigue
 - Phobias
 - Obsessions
 - Compulsions
 - Panic attacks
 - Acting out
 - Controlling
 - Etc.



48

Can anxiety cause self-harm?

- Not all or even most people who experience anxiety will have urges to self-harm. However, studies have shown people who engage in self-harm are more likely to experience anxiety.
- Self-harm is frequently associated with a sense of release from overwhelming emotions or situations in those who engage in the behavior.
- Since anxiety is characterized by a sense of feeling overwhelmed or worried about not being able to handle life situations, self-harm acts can bring relief from anxious feelings.

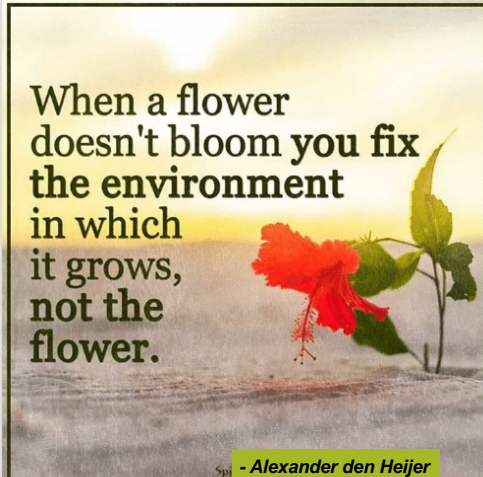
49

HELPING TEENS COPE



50

When a flower
doesn't bloom you fix
the environment
in which
it grows,
not the
flower.



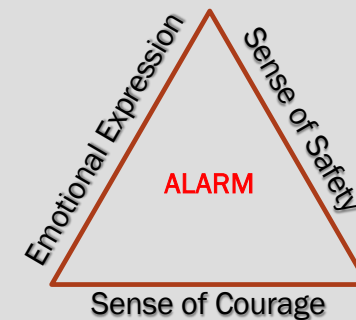
Spj - Alexander den Heijer

51

Addressing anxiety

Natural solution to anxiety is building:

RESILIENCE = CAPACITY TO BOUNCE BACK



52

The natural solution to anxiety is...

RESILIENCE
which is the capacity to 'bounce back', to return to optimal functioning or to thrive under duress

53

1st key towards cultivating resilience:
 The sense of SAFETY

Sense of SAFETY
 When being faced by adversity

Helps when feeling accompanied and supported

54

Sense of SAFETY

How can we help a student feel SAFE enough when faced with stressful and wounding situations?

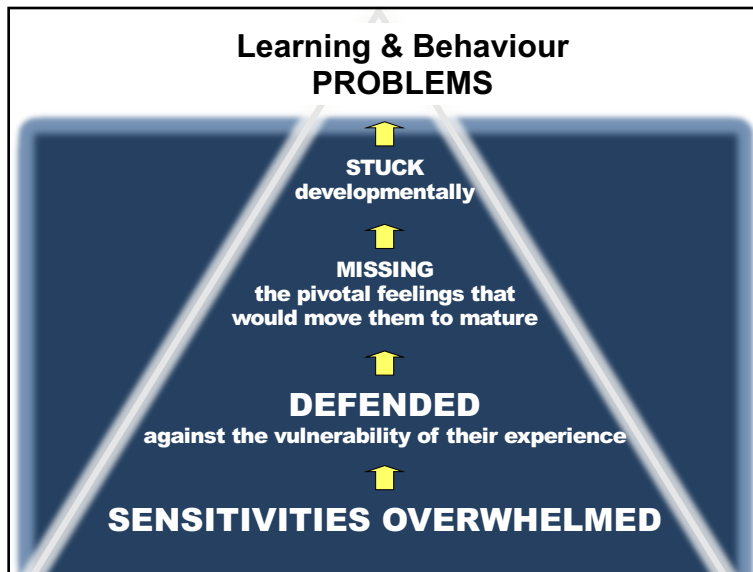
- Through the presence of a warm and trusting adult, which allows the teen to experience some **EMOTIONAL REST**
- Through the experience of well-being in a safe place
- Through the experience of safety when pretending/imagining to face something stressful or dangerous (emotions at play)

55

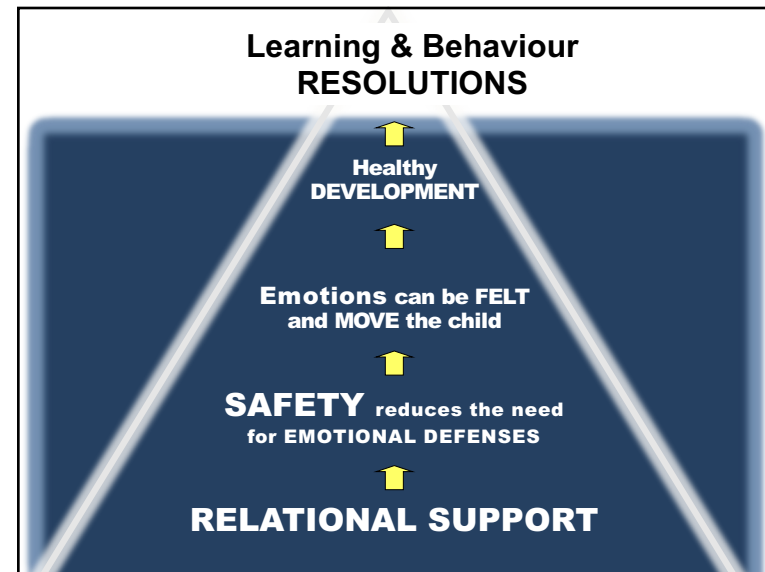
SAFETY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Not whether we (adults) think that the student is in a safe place or whether we believe they should be feeling safe, but rather it's the teen's own subjective experience and interpretation (feeling "Brain-Safe")

56



57

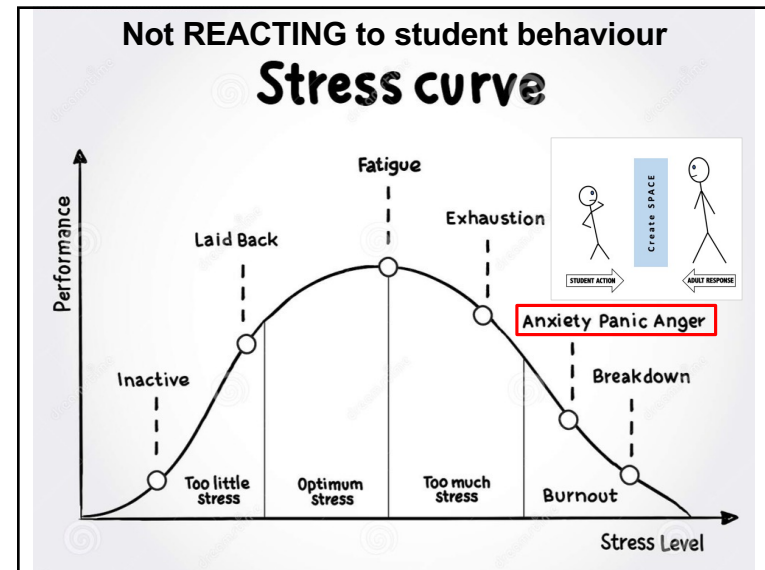


58

It's about Prevention

- Students typically don't respond well in crisis intervention and it is quite difficult to make headway in those circumstances, because they are:
 - ✓ Indisposed and not receptive when under stress
 - ✓ Not accessible when disengaged/disconnected from the adult(s) intervening.
- A student's success depends on:
 - ✓ Sense of safety, building attachment (requires conducive conditions)
 - ✓ Structure, routine and predictability
 - ✓ Introduction to tools/supports, exploration and practice
 - ✓ Growth happens in moments of rest

59



60

2nd key towards cultivating resilience:
EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION

Recognizing one's
EMOTION
Sense of
VULNERABILITY

Helps when being invited to express and feeling comforted



61

Emotional expression

How can we provide opportunities for emotional expression when a student is up against that which one cannot change?

- Through adult warmth and comfort
- Through inviting the teen to express and name their feelings
- Through emotional playgrounds that are one-step-removed from the situation

62

To come alongside a person's feelings is to...

- a) accept their existence regardless of how irrational and unreasonable they may seem;
- b) normalize the feelings rather than treat their existence as a problem;
- c) Make room for the feelings rather than try to get rid of them.

63

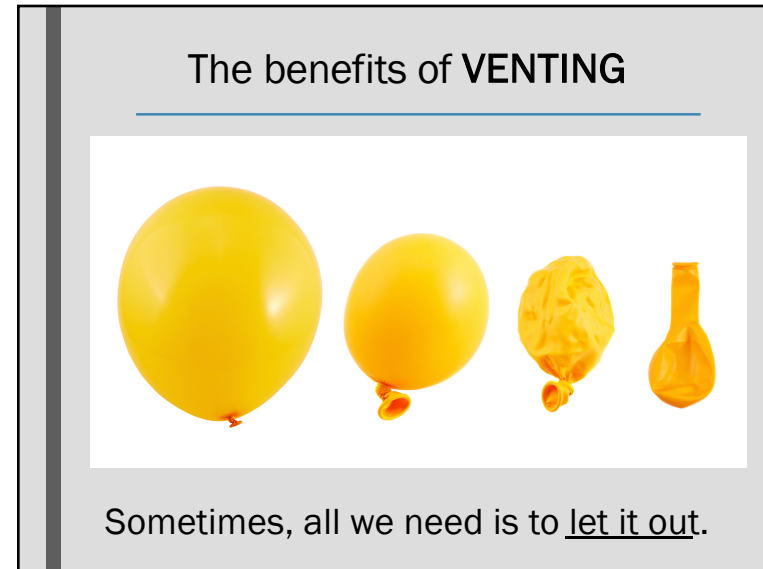
To come alongside a person's feelings is to
Refrain from:

- Judging feelings
- discounting/negating/countering feelings
- conveying that they are too much to handle
- focusing on 'solving the problem'

64



65




66

Adaptation - Resilience

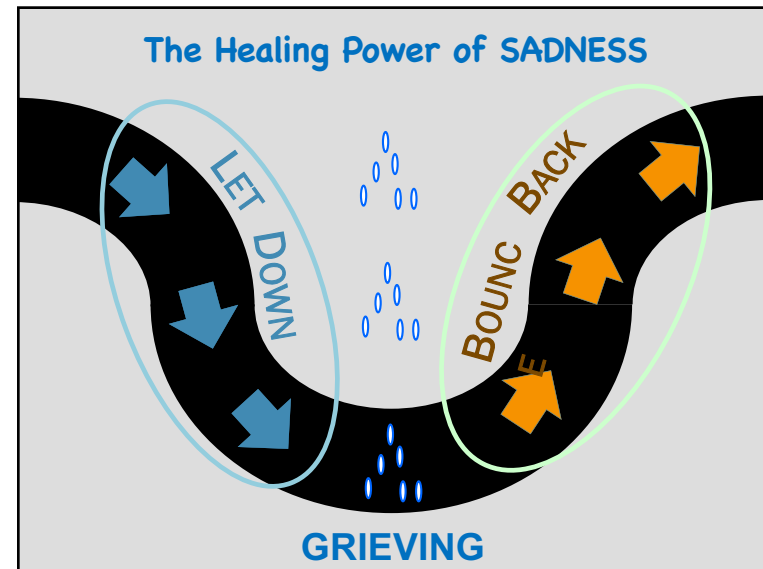
The **EMOTIONAL PROCESS** whereby we are changed by that which we cannot change

It's a **TRANSFORMATION**



The journey of adaptation is a journey of **SADNESS** and **TEARS**

67



68

THE PROBLEM WITH "RIGHT" THINKING

- *focusing just on being positive*
- *pursuing happiness*
- *resisting the 'let-down'*
- *pursuing calmness & tranquility*

69

Pseudo-resilience

70

COPING IS NOT ADAPTATION

- **Coping** is about MANAGING in the situation (Powering through)
- **Adapting** is an EMOTIONAL JOURNEY

If we allow ourselves to pass through sadness, it results in RESILIENCE

71

Emotions AT PLAY

Here are a few examples of outlets that help teens stay engaged on their emotional journey:

- Dancing and movement
- Journaling/poetry
- Sketchbook
- Musical instrument
- Voice/song
- Photography
- Any hobby
- Etc.

72

PLAY and RESILIENCE

PLAY AS A NEURAL EXERCISE

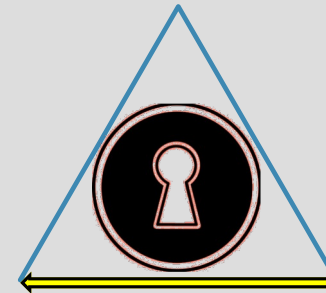
Dr. Porges describes the play mode as a “neural exercise” healing behavioral and emotional dysregulation.

It’s a neural exercise in that it flexes the “muscle” of emotional regulation through reciprocal interactions under conditions of safety with others.

Stephen Porges, The Polyvagal Theory, 2011

73

3rd key towards cultivating resilience: The sense of COURAGE



Sense of **COURAGE**

Find strength and confidence in the face of adversity and discomfort

Helps when it's being reflected back

74

Sense of COURAGE

How can we help a student feel STRONG & CONFIDENT enough in the face of adversity and discomfort?

- Through normalizing the alarm and conveying to the student your belief in their capacity
- Through helping the student discover their **COURAGE**
- Through experiencing some sense of control in the play mode (e.g. role playing)

75

ACCOMPANYING with empathy

- Typical examples that dismiss and invalidate:
 - ✓ *Don't be silly*
 - ✓ *There's nothing to be scared of*
 - ✓ *You see, everything turned out fine, all that worrying for nothing*
- Empathic acknowledgements:
 - ✓ *Wow, that was really scary*
 - ✓ *Everyone gets scared at times, even grown-ups.*
 - ✓ *Even though everything worked out, I know you were really worried*

76

ALARM

- to be away from home
- to be laughed at
- to appear stupid
- to lose popularity
- to be seen as different
- to not be interesting
- to meet disapproval
- to have to let go
- to not measure up
- to be alone

Being anxious pushes towards **AVOIDANCE**

- Running away from
- Hiding from
- Not trying
- Not taking risks

77

The natural solution to avoidance is **COURAGE**

COURAGE IS NOT THE ABSENCE OF FEAR:

Courage is about focusing on your **desire** to give you the strength to face your fear.

DESIRE

- to engage in an activity
- to take part in some fun
- to ask one's question
- to stand up for a friend
- to wear what one prefers
- to share one's story
- to express one's opinion
- to get attached & involved
- to pursue a passion
- to be oneself

78

DESIRE

- to engage in an activity
- to take part in some fun
- to ask one's question
- to stand up for a friend
- to wear what one prefers
- to share one's story
- to express one's opinion
- to get attached & involved
- to pursue a passion
- to be oneself

Cultivating Courage

ALARM & DESIRE

ALARM

- to be away from home
- to be laughed at
- to appear stupid
- to lose popularity
- to be seen as different
- to not be interesting
- to meet disapproval
- to have to let go
- to not measure up
- to be alone

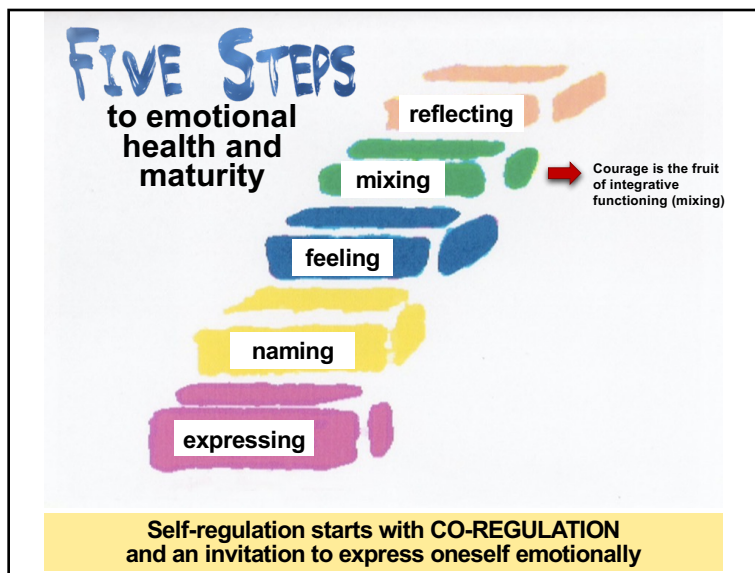
79

COURAGE requires Prefrontal cortex development

Youth rely more on the **Amygdala** (limbic system)

Adults rely more on the **Prefrontal Cortex**

80



81

Our ROLE as the adult

teacher
Educator
Parent
COACH
Technician
Principal
counsellor

Adjusting our VIEW

- Understanding that alarm is a universal emotion we all contend with.
- Acknowledging that alarm happens to us as opposed to under our control.

Adjusting our STANCE

- Not alarming our teen with our own fears, frustrations or disapproval.
- Normalizing the experience of alarm and avoiding trying to 'fix' it.

Making ROOM for

- Teen's thoughts and feelings around their experiences of anxiety.
- Various types of creative expression and emotional release.

...even the uncomfortable stuff.

82

Catherine Korah and Martine Demers
Centre of Excellence for Behaviour Management
www.cebm.ca

Also visit the CEBM Resource Center
<https://www.cebmmember.ca/frustration-and-aggression>

83