

Compensate for my Brain State: Dr Bruce Perry's Arousal Continuum

"I feel safe and comfortable. The top part of my brain is working well to keep a lid on my feelings. I'm able to think in more abstract and rational way. I can consider the past, present and future".

"My thinking is more concrete and less creative. I now perceive time in terms of hours and days. I may be a little nervous about new or unfamiliar things, but I can be reassured by structure, routine and connection".

"I'm struggling to process what you are teaching and stay focused. My breathing and heart rate have changed. I'm more sensitive to the way you look and move. The present is just hours and minutes to me".

"I'm feeling overwhelmed. I'm more reactive to my surroundings and more prone to fight, flight or freeze. My sense of time is restricted to minutes and seconds. I won't easily trust you. I'm just trying to survive".

"The bottom part of my brain is completely in charge. I have no sense of time. I'm not really thinking any more. You're seeing my reflexes. I may want to move or stay still; lash out or run away. I need you to keep me safe. It will take time for my terror to subside".

CALM

ALERT

ALARM

FEAR

TERROR

All functioning is "State-Dependent". Prolonged stress or traumatic experiences will heighten a child's sensitivity to demands and changes - some may have an "Alarm" baseline and quickly become emotionally dysregulated.

All teaching of new concepts and skills elicits some stress. We need to aim for the arousal sweet-spot between Calm and Alert - content which is engaging, challenging but not overwhelming. Increased structure, repetition and time for reflection will help it reach the top of the brain.

Rewards and sanctions will be of little use when the child can't make connections between actions and consequences. We need to focus on regulating the lower parts of the brain - using movement, dance, art, music, breathing and grounding - and providing healthy relational experiences.

Teaching children about feelings and how to express them - through words, gestures and visuals - is important in helping them to notice changes in their state and seek support before they fall down the arousal continuum.

In order to be a source of safety, comfort and reassurance, we need to keep track of our own brain state. Prioritising self-care will enable YOU to stay regulated.