

The River of Wellbeing: a model for managing anxiety and other emotions

Steve Wharmby

Primary Mental Health Worker

July 2022

Aims and learning objectives



- To understand the 'River of Wellbeing'
- To recognise when a child or young person is dysregulated
- To have regulation strategies to support a child or young person
- To explore the cultivation of wellbeing using the Healthy Mind Platter

Pausing for a moment



- **S** – Slow down
- **T** – Take three slow breaths
- **O** - Observe
- **P** - Proceed

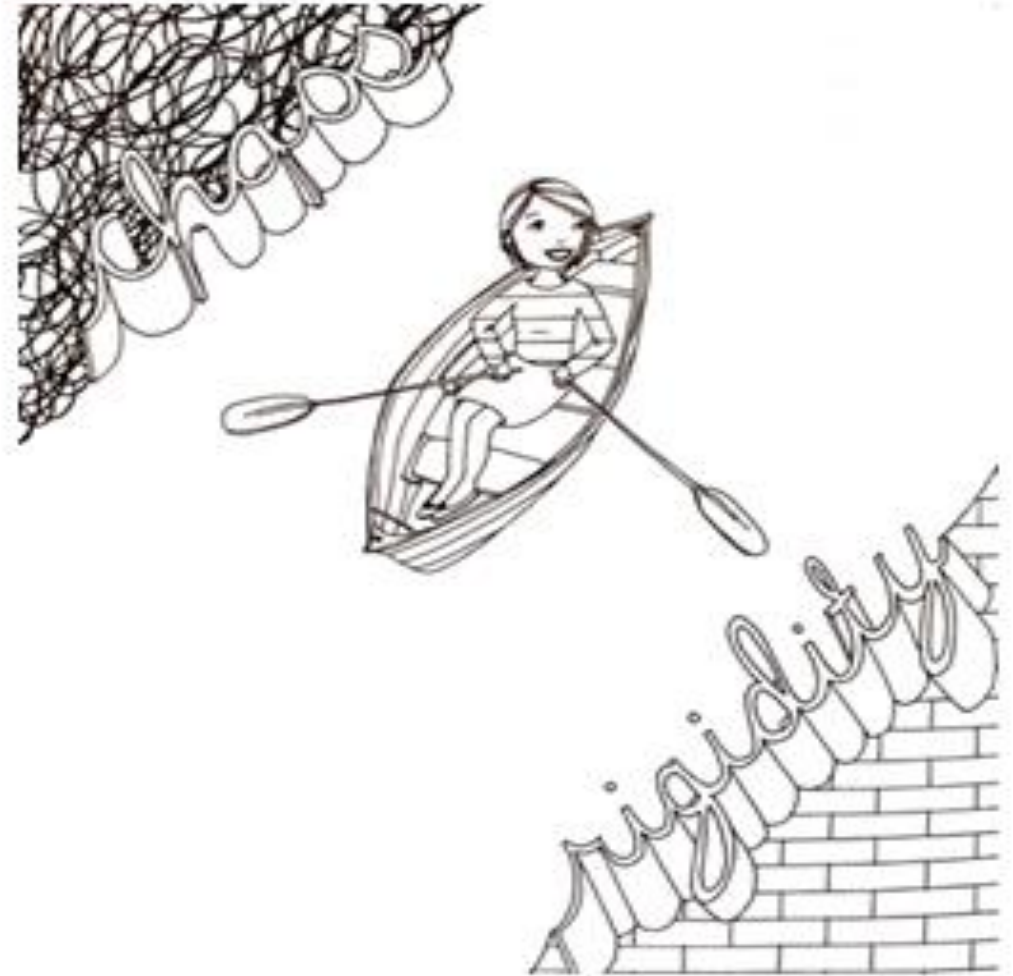


The River of Wellbeing

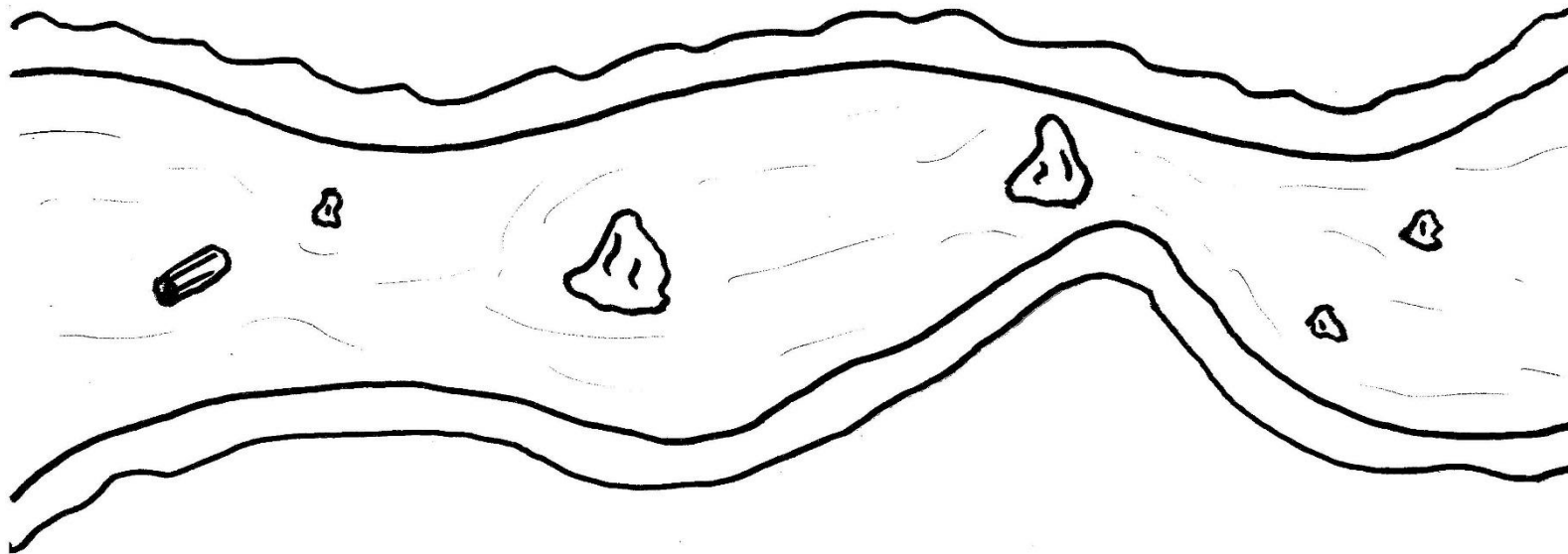


Whilst canoeing down the river of wellbeing, you see on one side of the river is the bank of hyper-arousal / chaos, and on the other side of the river is the bank of hypo-arousal / rigidity.

Some children and young people can bounce from one bank to the other, finding it difficult to find the middle channel. This then affects their ability to function effectively.



What is the River of Wellbeing?



Hyper-arousal



- Hyper-arousal results from the fight or flight response and is characterised by excessive activation/energy



- It can present as difficulties concentrating, irritability, anger and angry outbursts, panic, constant anxiety, easily scared or startled, self-destructive behaviour, etc.

Hypo-arousal



- Hypo-arousal results from the freeze / flop drop response where there is a sense of shutting down or dissociating



- This can present as exhaustion, depression, flat affect, numbness and disconnection

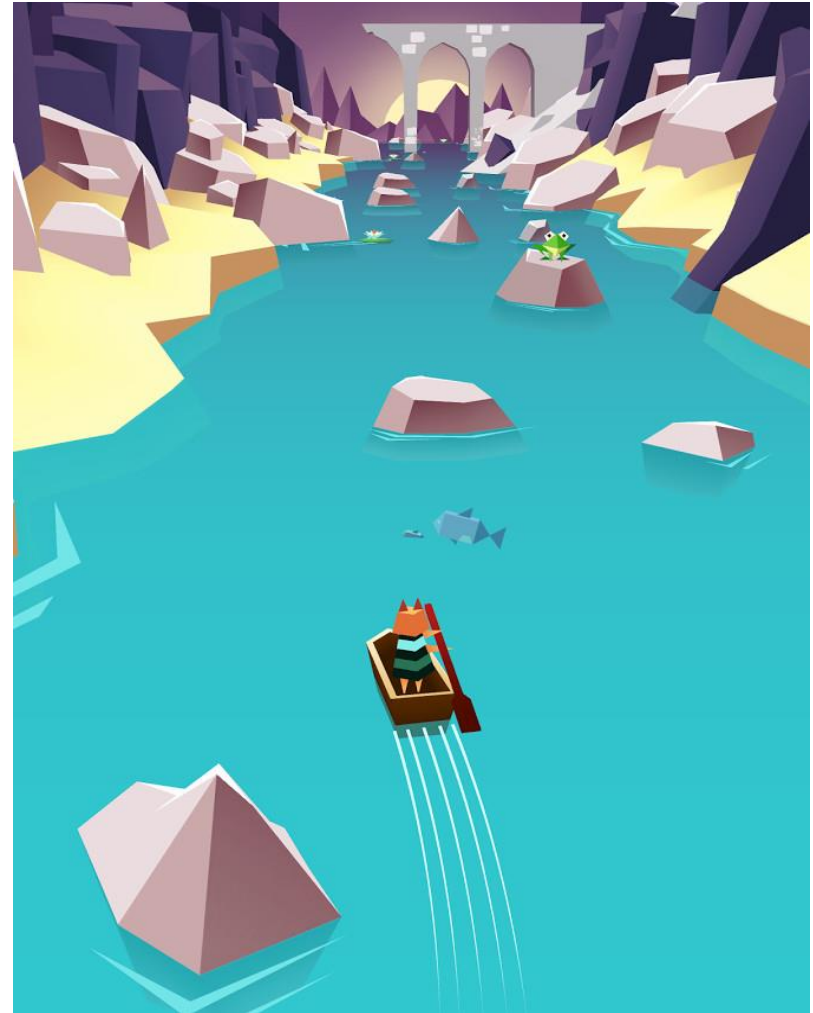
Navigating our way



The wider the river the easier it is to deal with obstacles and challenges that arise.

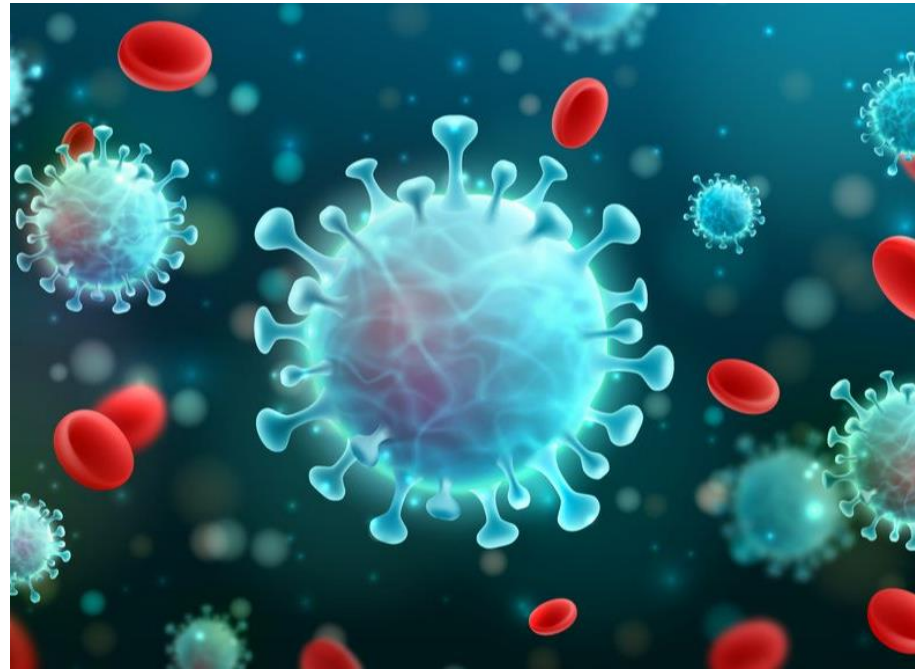
The river of wellbeing is the optimal zone of arousal where we are able to function and thrive in everyday life.

When we are within the river, we are able to learn effectively, play, and relate well to ourselves and others.



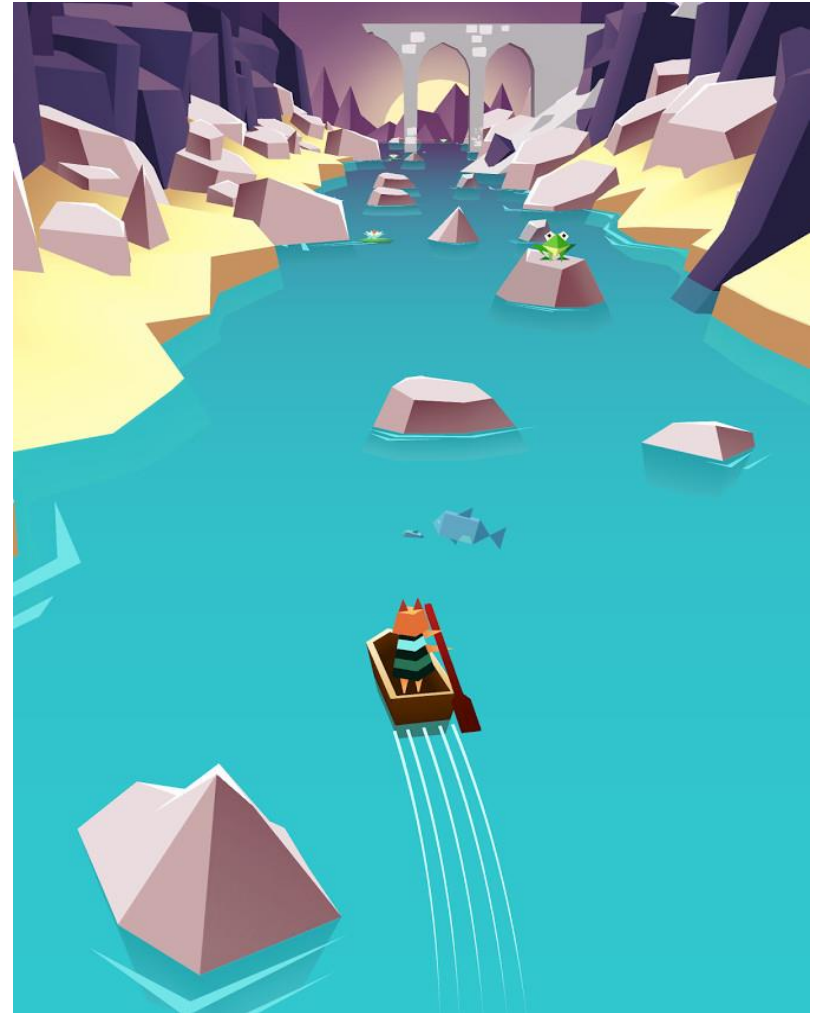
Rumblings

Volatility
Uncertainty
Complexity
Ambiguity



Other problems

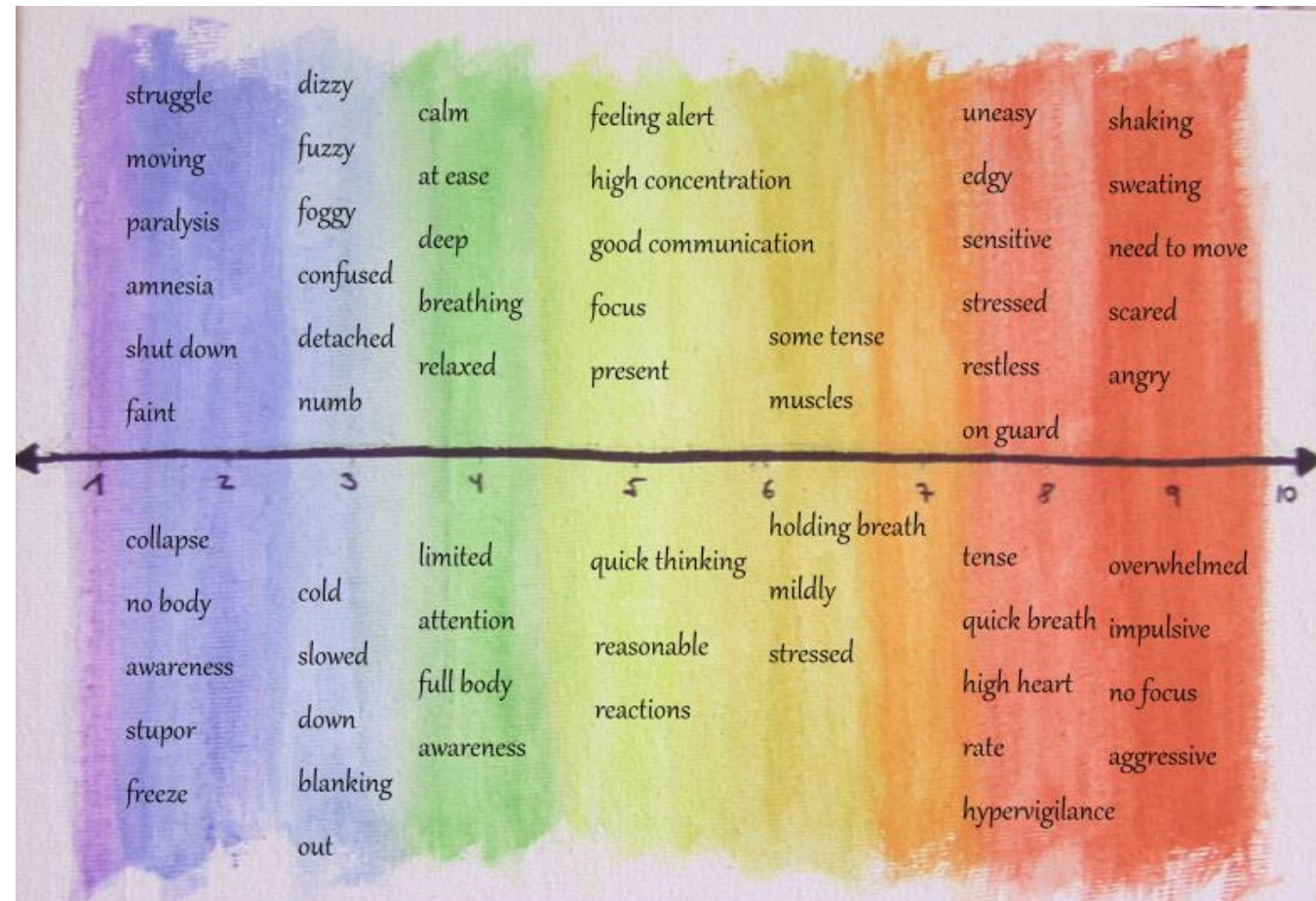
- Friendship issues
- Family conflict
- Health
- Feeling unsafe
- Learning
- Sensory sensitivities
- Identity
- Expectations
- Body image
- Loss



How wide is the river?



One of the challenges is to develop awareness of our position in the river; the width of the river; and the obstacles that tend to push us into overwhelm / dysregulation (i.e. the banks of chaos or rigidity)



Widening the River



- What do you do that makes you feel uplifted?
- What are you really interested in?
- What makes you feel calm / relaxed?
- What other things help to widen the river?

Supporting a child or young person to stay in or return to the river of wellbeing



1. Be aware of where you are in your own river of wellbeing. If you are out, on either bank you are not going to be able to effectively support them to be in theirs. If outside of your river use strategies for yourself firstly



‘a dysregulated adult cannot regulate a dysregulated child’

Dr Lori Desautels

Keeping calm in the midst of chaos



“When the crowded Vietnamese refugee boats met with storms or pirates, if everyone panicked all would be lost. But if even one person on the boat remained calm and centered, it was enough. It showed the way for everyone to survive.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

Being present



- In their new book 'The Power of Showing Up', Dan Siegel and Tina Bryson use the acronym **PEACE**

- **P**resence
- **E**ngagement
- **A**ffection
- **C**alm
- **E**mpathy



Empathy



“

"In order to empathize with someone's experience, you must be willing to believe them as they see it, and not how you imagine their experience to be."

— Brené Brown

”

Animal metaphors



Supporting a child or young person to stay in or return to their river of wellbeing



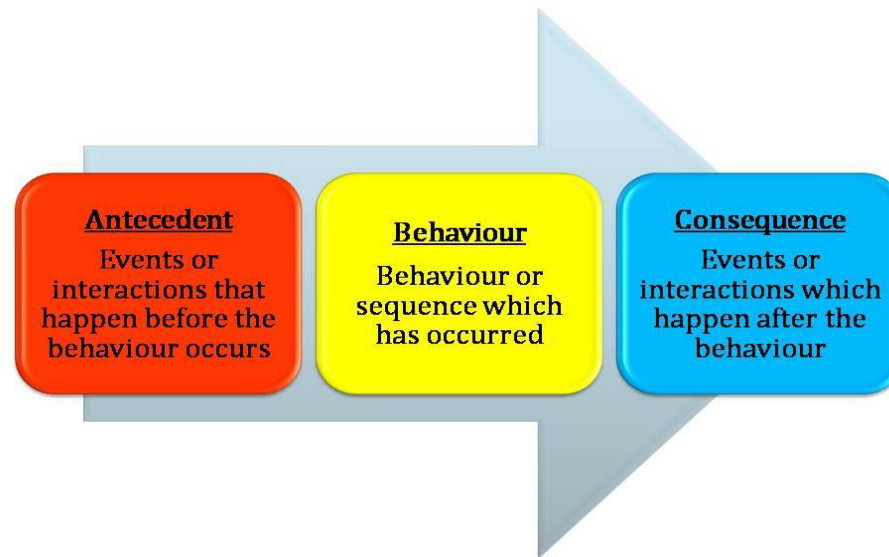
2. Explore the foundations. Sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, lack of exercise, physical pain or illness, substance misuse, underlying neurodevelopmental condition/s, sensory sensitivity and / or underlying stress (e.g. from being bullied) are all likely to narrow the river within particular contexts



Supporting a child or young person to stay in or return into their river of wellbeing



3. Understand their triggers. What tends to move them outside of their river? Examples include sensory overload, peer problems, difficulty with written work or sustaining attention for long periods. ABC charts can be helpful for identifying themes and patterns. Are there any adaptations that can be made?



Supporting a child or young person to stay in or return into their river of wellbeing



4. Understand what helps. What works to return someone to their river may not work for someone else. As you explore and identify what helps, make a list that can then be shared with the child or young person and their family / school. Also some strategies may help to move from a hyper-aroused state as well as hypo-aroused depending on individual need

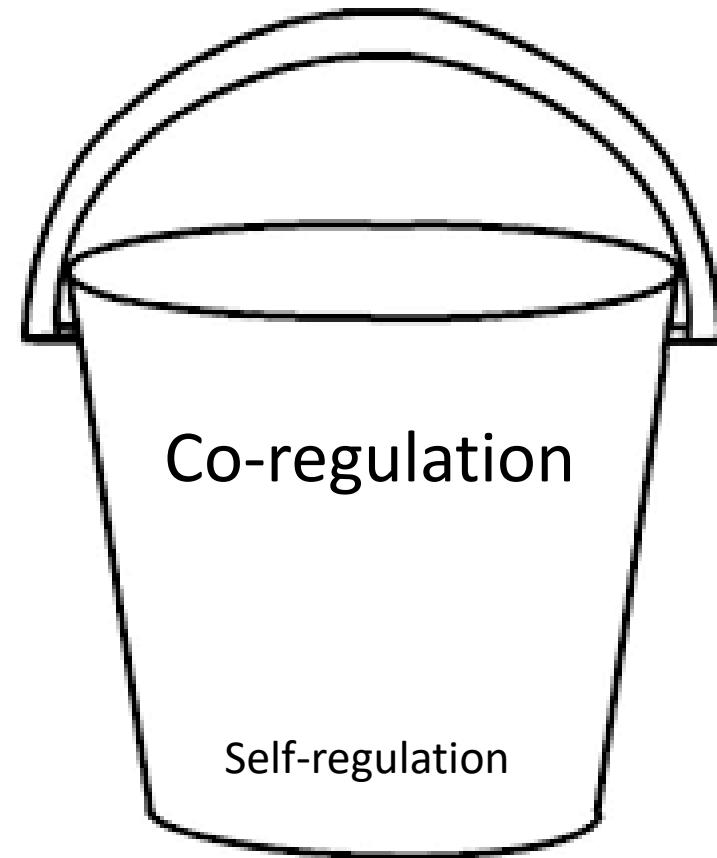


Co-regulation and self-regulation



Co-regulation – The supportive, interactive process of regulatory support that can occur within the context of caring relationships across the lifespan – a warm, responsive relationship; structuring the environment; and teaching and coaching skills

Self-regulation - Managing thoughts and feelings to enable goal-directed actions

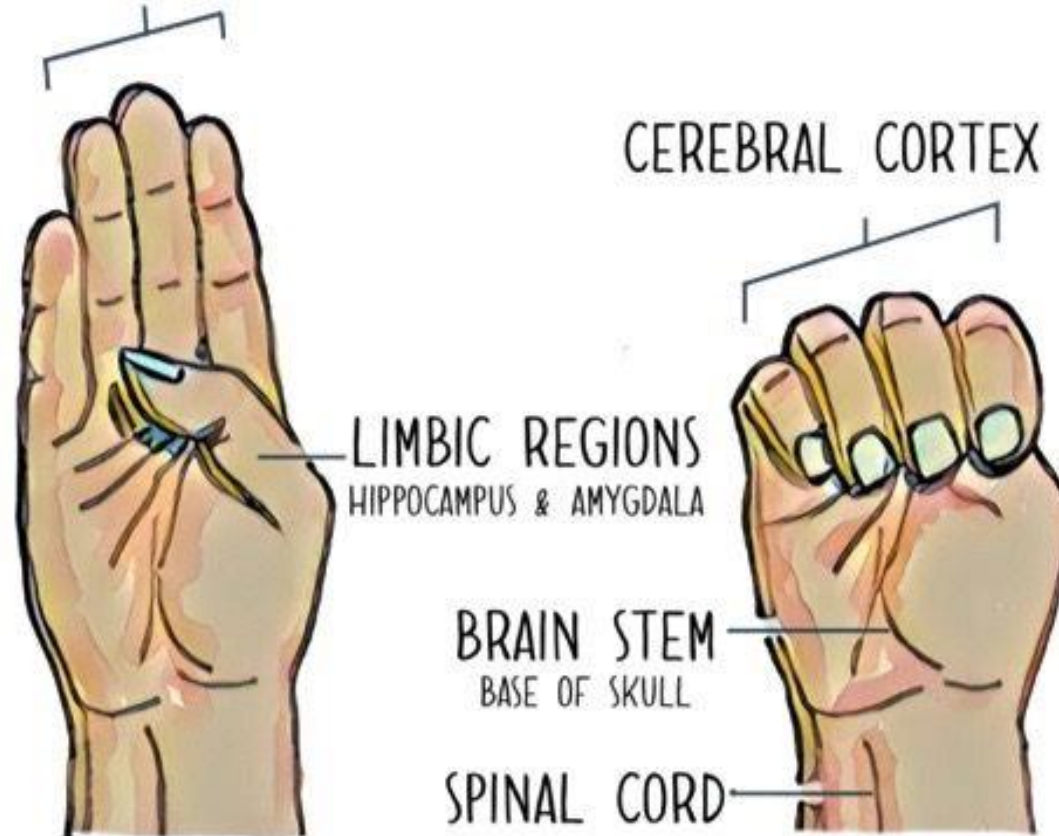


Dr Dan Siegel's Hand Model of the Brain



PREFRONTAL CORTEX

CEREBRAL CORTEX



Ideas for moving from chaos / hyper-arousal back within the river of wellbeing



Remember they will be cognitively 'offline' so begin with validation; co-regulation; self-soothing or self-regulating behaviours before overly talking or sense-making of the situation. Allow for choice and control. The person needs to feel safe and 'feel felt' (emotional resonance)

Also, remember what helps someone will be unique and individual

Skills need to be practiced regularly and when calm. When skills are familiar they are easier to employ at times when outside of the river

Ideas for moving from chaos / hyper-arousal back into the river of wellbeing



1. Diaphragmatic breathing
2. Square breathing
3. 7/11 breathing
4. Progressive muscular relaxation (PMR)
5. Finger breathing
6. Visualisation
7. Jumping on a trampoline



Ideas for moving from chaos / hyper-arousal back into the river of wellbeing



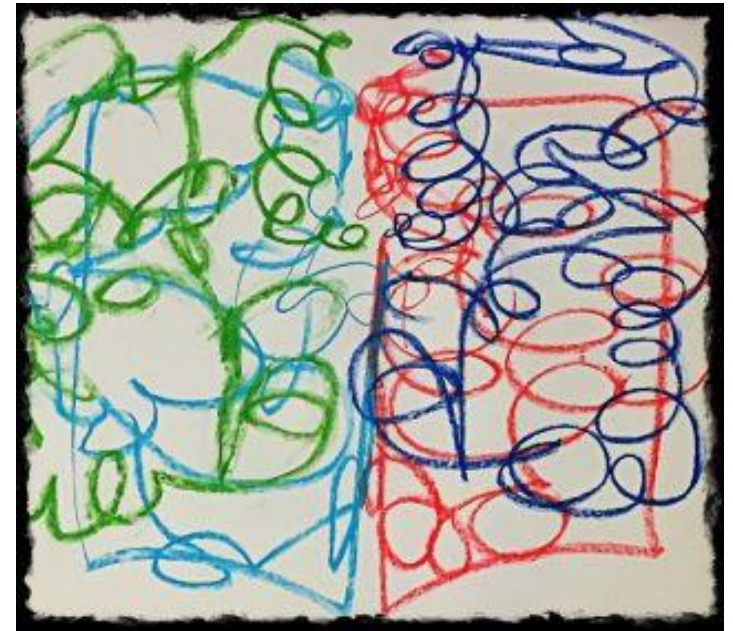
8. Kicking a ball or bouncing a ball
9. Brisk walking / marching on the spot
10. Star jumps
11. Large bilateral motor movements
12. Playing the drums
13. Stress / squeeze balls
14. Heavy work (risk assessed) such as lifting, pulling, crab walking
15. Weighted blanket



Ideas for moving from chaos / hyper-arousal back into the river of wellbeing



- 18. Opposite sides – blinking and finger clicking
- 19. Bilateral scribbling to beat of music
- 20. Comforting food or drink (e.g. hot chocolate)
- 21. Warm water
- 22. Music (soothing and calming music and sounds)
- 23. Capturing sound
- 24. 54321



Ideas for moving from rigidity / hypo-arousal back into the river of wellbeing



1. Anything that stimulates the senses
2. Chewy, crunchy food
3. Use of a sensory shaker
4. Small movements gradually getting bigger (wiggling toes)
5. Gently sitting or bouncing on a trampoline or yoga / therapy ball
6. Rocking chair
7. Weighted blanket



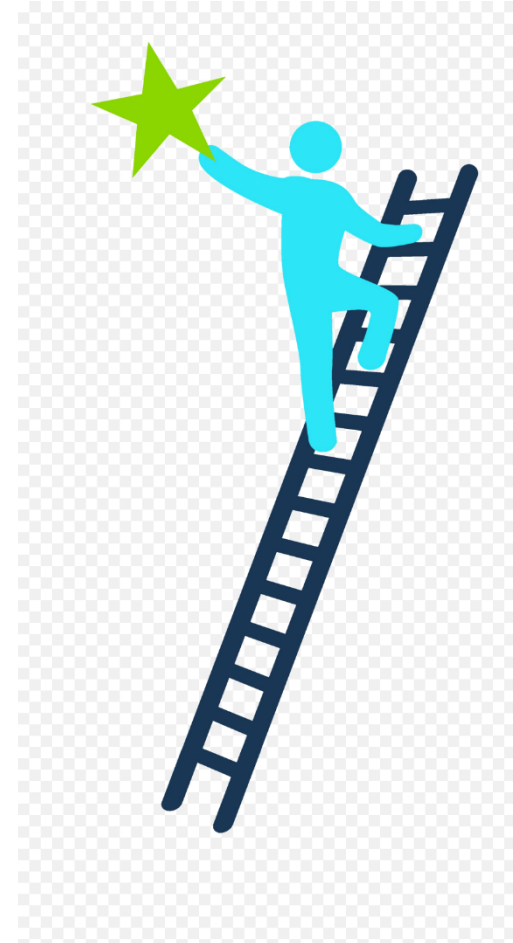
Ideas for moving from rigidity / hypo-arousal back within window of tolerance



- 9. Stress / squeeze balls / slime
- 10. Finger painting
- 11. Finger tracing
- 12. Water play with a straw
- 13. Dancing and music
- 14. 54321
- 15. Rolling a pencil between palms
- 16. Hand washing / massage



Grading the attitude of approach



Reframing fear and courage



Befriending emotions



- Where in the body is the emotion felt?
- How big is this feeling?
- What shape would it be?
- Does it change in size?
- Does it move or is it still?
- What would its edges be like?
- What colour would it be?
- Give it a [neutral] name



The Healthy Mind Platter



So far we have discussed strategies and approaches for supporting children and young people (as well as ourselves) to return to the river of wellbeing. The Healthy Mind Platter is a framework that can be used to help maintain the river.

The Healthy Mind Platter



Developed by David Rock and Dan Siegel, the Healthy Mind Platter is based on neuroscience, clinical practice, behavioural research, and psychology.

It identifies 7 areas which strengthen the brain's internal connections; strengthens connecting with other people; and improves integration, which leads to a healthy mind.



The Healthy Mind Platter



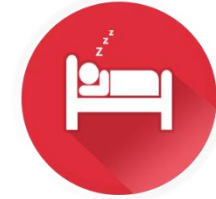
Everyone is different so the balance will differ, but we need...

- Sleep
- Physical time
- Focus time
- Play time
- Connecting time
- Down time
- Time in





Sleep



When we give the brain the rest it needs to consolidate learning and recover from the experiences of the day. Sufficient sleep helps concentration, emotional well being, learning and behaviour

Physical time



When we move our bodies, aerobically if possible, which strengthens the brain in many ways. Exercise improves mood, reduces stress and anxiety and increase focus



Focus time



When we closely focus on tasks in a goal-orientated way, taking on challenges that make deep connections in the brain. Concentrating on solving problems, writing essays, studying, etc.

Play time



When we allow ourselves to be spontaneous and creative, playfully enjoying novel experiences, which helps make new connections in the brain. Joking, being silly, having fun



Connecting time



When we connect with other people, ideally in person, or take time to appreciate our connection to the natural world around us, richly activating the brain's relational circuitry. Gratitude, generosity and giving back

Down time



When we are non-focused without any specific goal, and let our mind wander or simply relax, which helps our brain recharge. Chilling out. An important part of consolidating learning



Time in

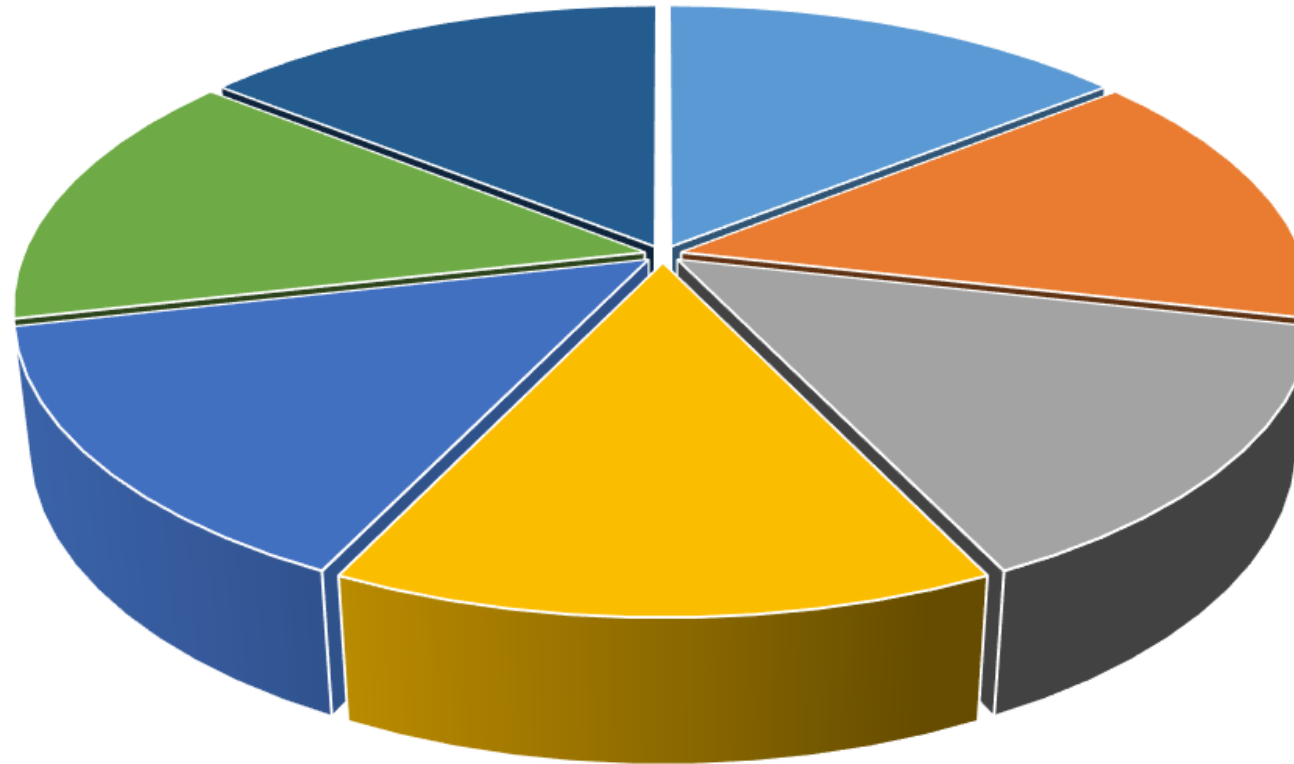


When we quietly reflect internally, focusing on sensations, images, feelings and thoughts, helping to better integrate the brain. Mindfulness and self-awareness activities

How is your time spent?



Healthy Mind Platter Areas



■ Sleep ■ Physical ■ Focus time ■ Down time ■ Time in ■ Play time ■ Connecting

Summary



- We all have a 'river' in which we are able to function effectively with focused work, play and within relationships. This is different for each of us and can change from day to day.
- Importantly, we can become more aware of our river and our edges, and we can develop greater space.
- When we notice we have moved into a dysregulated state, we can use strategies to bring us back into the river.

Summary



- When supporting someone else, we need to start with ourselves. When we are regulated we are then able to support the regulation of another.
- Our ability to be truly present is crucial for the other person to feel safe and connected.
- When dysregulated we want to focus on 'bottom up' (i.e. senses, movement, rhythm, breath) rather than 'top down' approaches
- When involved in structuring their time, whether at home or school, we can consider the Healthy Mind Platter for balancing activities to promote wellbeing.

References and resources



- Bryson, T. & Siegel, D. (2012) The Whole Brain-Child
- Desautels, L. (2017) Brain Aligned Strategies: Addressing the emotional, social and academic health of all students
- Rock, D. et al (2012) 'The Healthy Mind Platter' in NeuroLeadership Journal (Issue 4)
- Siegel, D. (2015) The Developing Mind
- Siegel, D. & Bryson, T. (2020) The Power of Showing UP
- Treleaven, D. (2018) Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness



Questions

Comments

Feedback

