

Connection Isn't Soft, It's Hard Neuroscience



Katie Francis, Ed.S.





Every day we are faced with situations that require us to decide if we will comply with the beliefs of others or take a stand for what we believe to be right. In those moments, our decisions should be made based on the hill we are going to die on.

We must decide what hill we are going to die on, what battles are worth fighting... what matters the most.

The hill I have chosen to die on is doing what is best for children, regardless of what is comfortable for adults. Those with the privilege of working with children are responsible for ensuring their safety and dignity. Children are first human- then they are students, athletes, scientists, and artists.

A rumble is a **discussion, conversation, or meeting defined by a commitment to lean into vulnerability, to stay curious and generous**, to stick with the messy middle of problem identification and solving, to take a break and circle back when necessary, to be fearless in owning our parts, and, as psychologist Harriet Lerner teaches, **to listen with the same passion with which we want to be heard.**

More than anything else, when someone says, **"Let's rumble,"** it cues me to show up with an **open heart and mind so we can serve the work and each other, not our egos.**

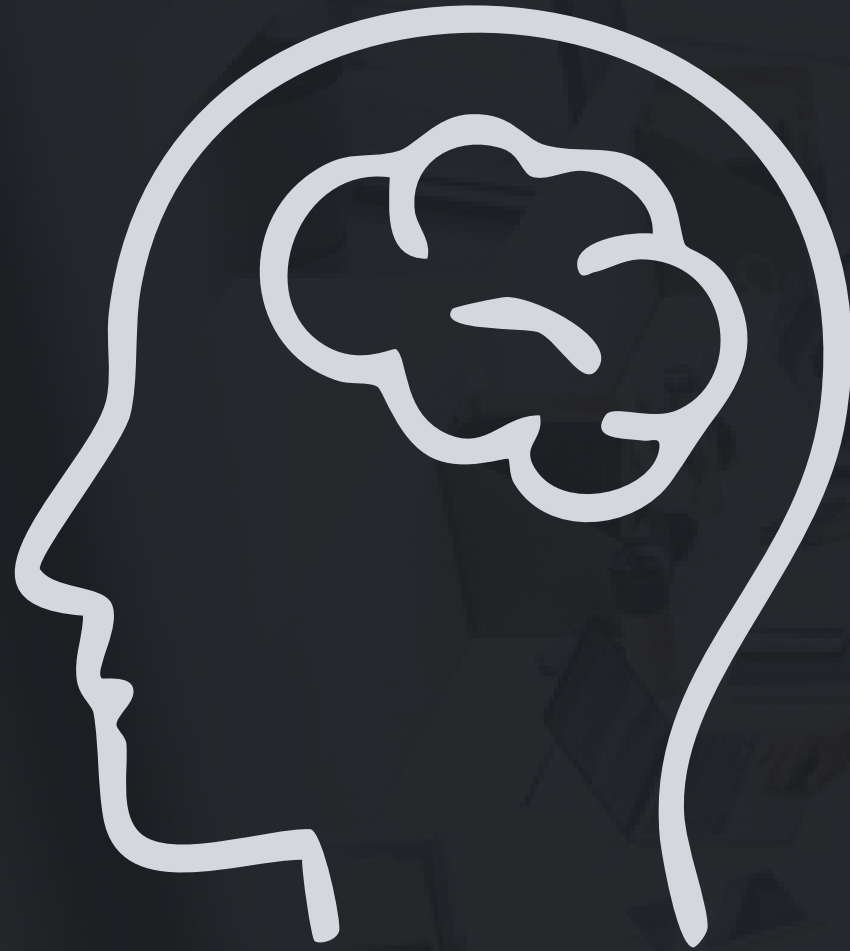
*You can't
get to
courage
without
rumbling
with
vulnerability.*

EMBRACE THE SUCK.

Connection is not a philosophy

- High-pressure environments amplify stress'
- Stress changes how people think, communicate, and respond
- Impact happens through people, not just systems.





Not therapy

Not “soft skills”

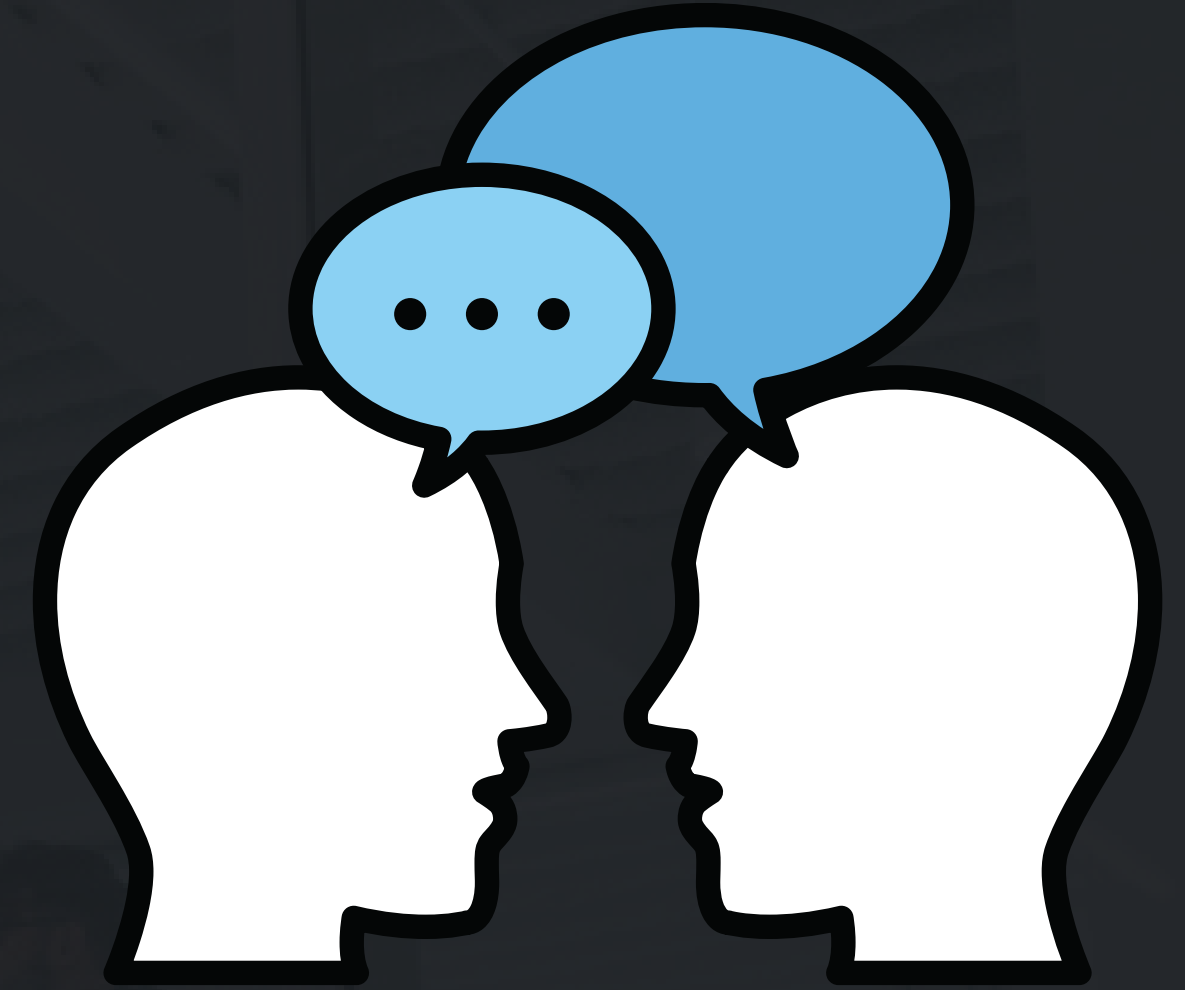
Not about fixing people

Instead:

- Understanding stress responses
- Understand our impact in interactions
- Creating conditions where people can function at capacity.

Trauma-Informed Approaches (Reframed)

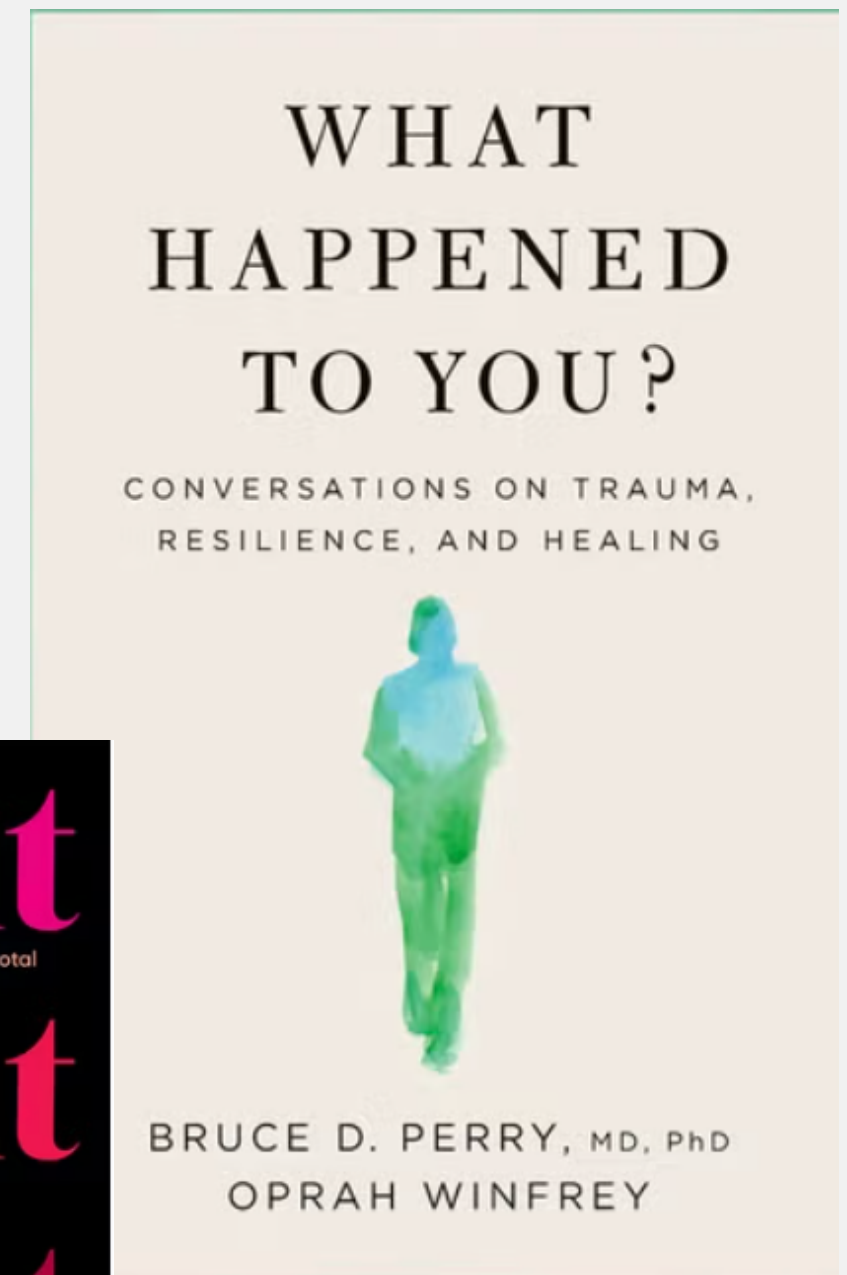
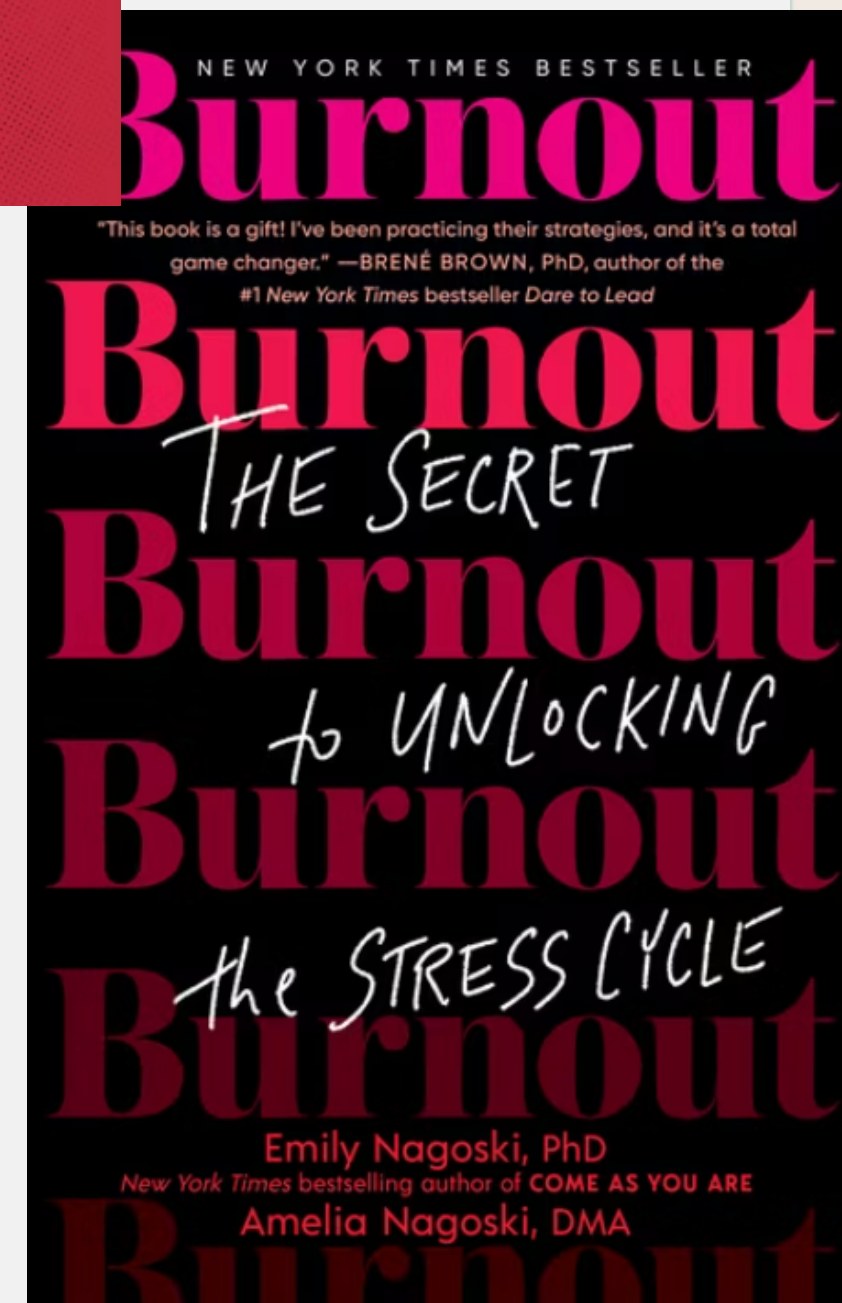
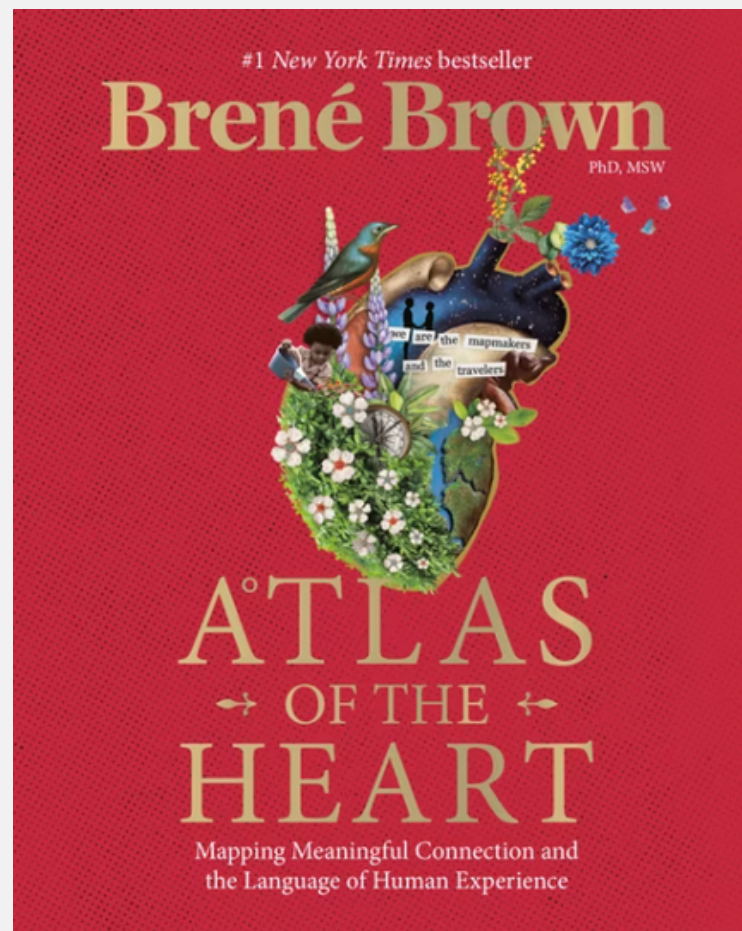
Behavior is communication.



- ✿ Stress responses are adaptive
 - ✿ What we see at work often makes sense under pressure
- ✿ Behavior gives us information about capacity and threat. Our response determines what happens next.

- Humans adapt to environments
- Stress responses are survival strategies
- The question is not “What’s wrong with you?”
- The question is “What might have happened and what’s being activated?”

We Are Not Broken



“Flipping Your Lid”

A Simple Model for Understanding Stress and Performance

Brain systems respond
differently under stress

High stress = reduced
access to reasoning
and regulation

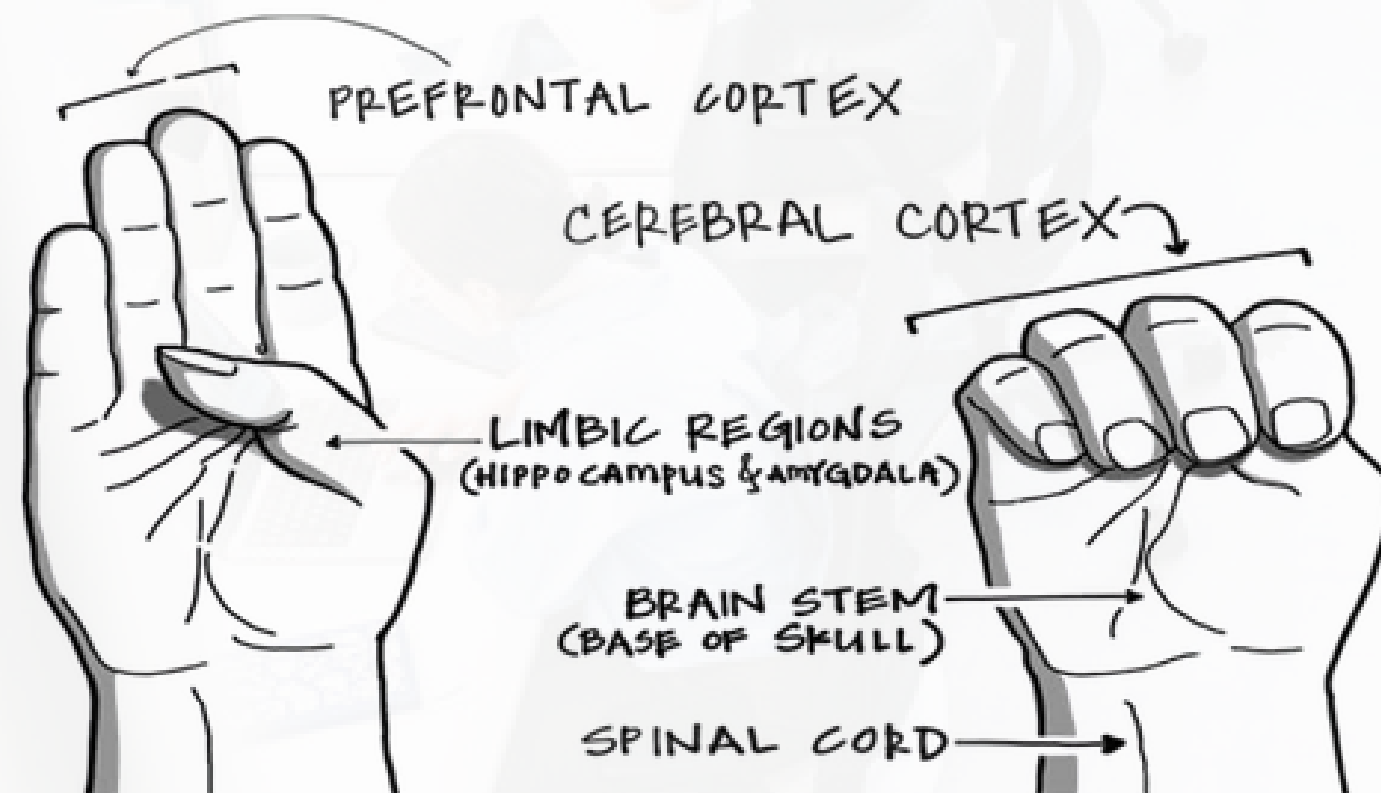
This affects
communication,
decision-making, and
behavior



What Happens When We “Flip”

Flipping Your Lid

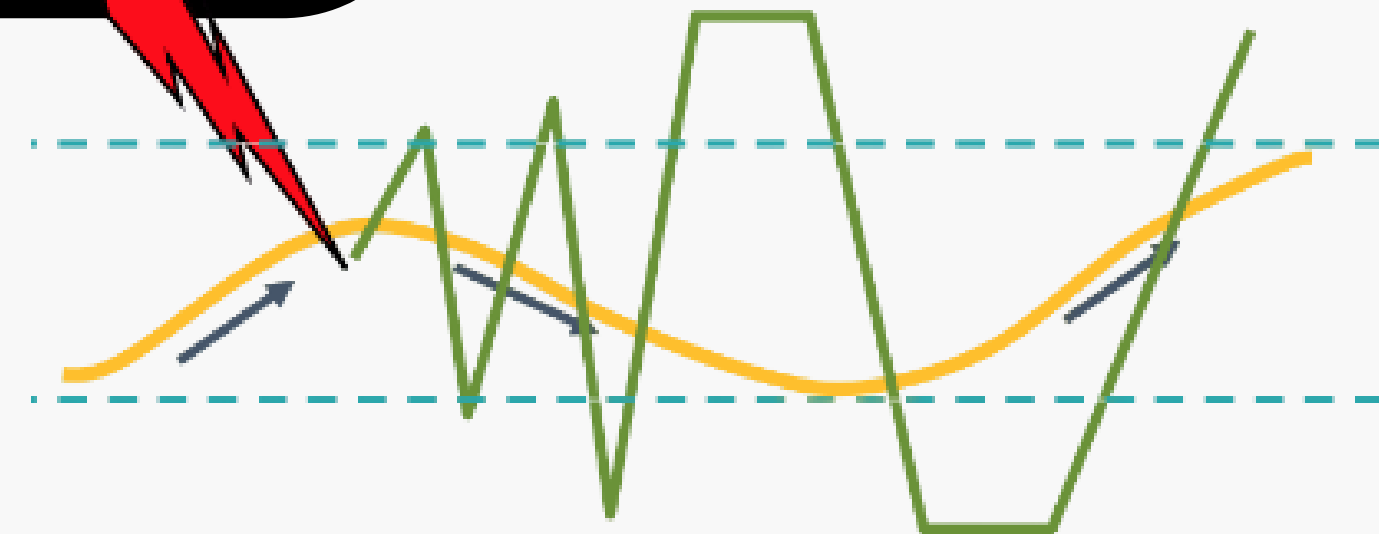
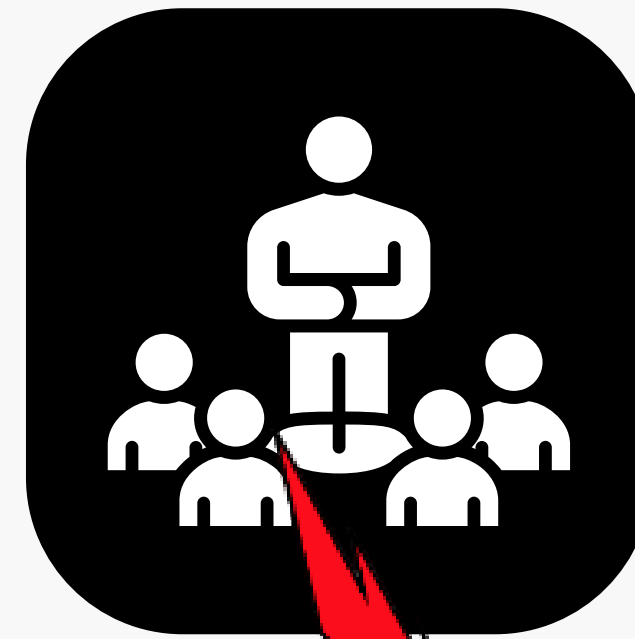
Hand Model of the Brain



- **Narrowed thinking**
- **Reactivity**
- **Defensiveness or withdrawal**
- **Reduced problem-solving**
- **Communication breakdowns**

What This Looks Like in REAL Moments

- Stress changes how people hear, think, and respond.
- What we bring into the interaction matters.
- Reactions are often about accumulated load, not just the moment.
- Our response can escalate or regulate what happens next.



When the reaction doesn't match...

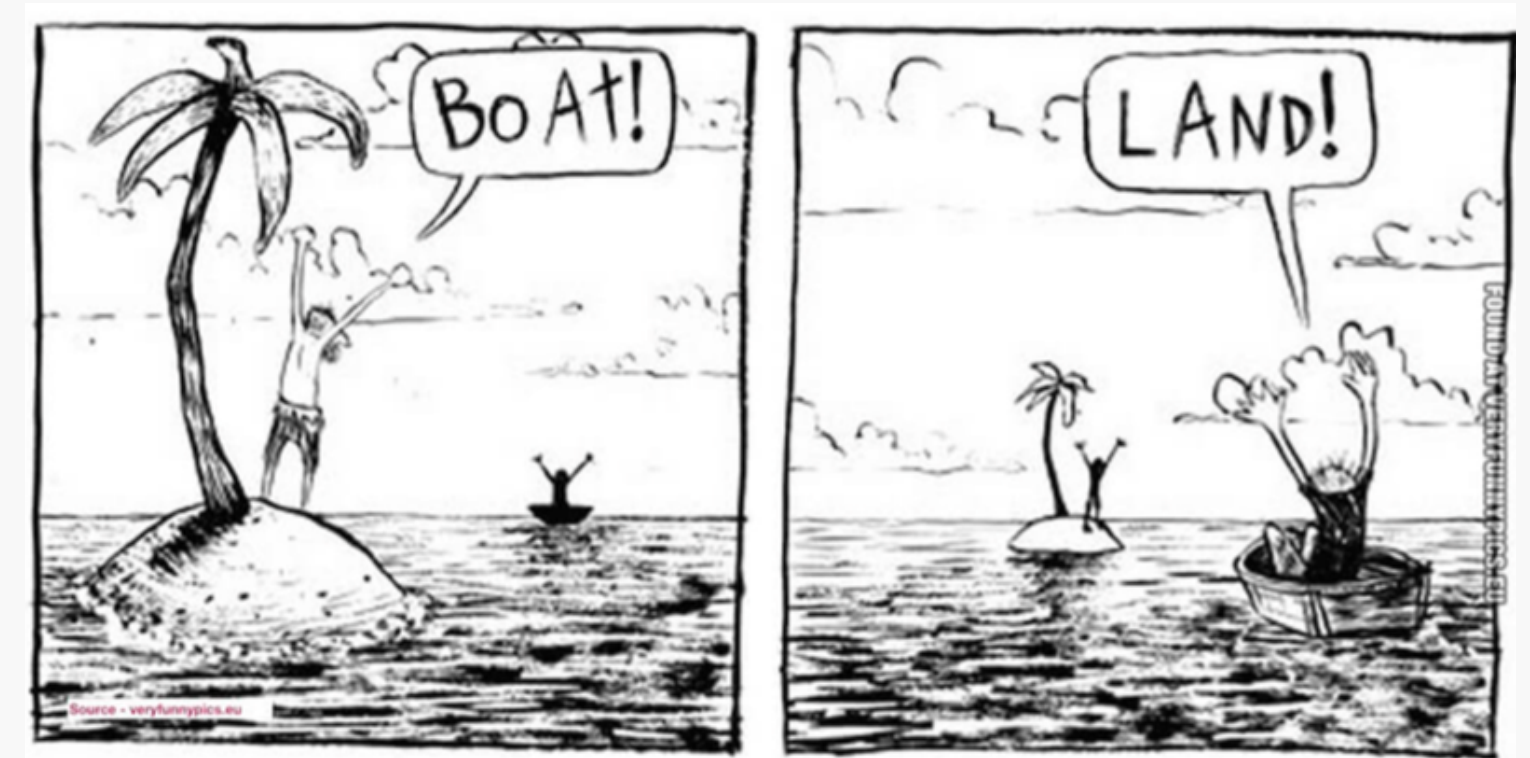
People don't go from 0 to 100. They walk in at 80.

What we see may have very little to do with us.

Think of a recent interaction where someone had a reaction that didn't "fit" the situation.

Reflect:

1. *What did you observe?*
2. *What might they have been carrying into that moment?*
3. *Did your response escalate or regulate?*





EXTERNAL REGULATION: when someone can only find and maintain regulation with direct intervention from an outside person



CO-REGULATION: when someone can find and maintain regulation with the support and assistance of an outside person



SELF-REGULATION: when someone can find and maintain regulation by themselves, as a result of countless co-regulating experiences

External Regulation

Co-Regulation

Self-Regulation

Self-Regulation Is a Human Skill

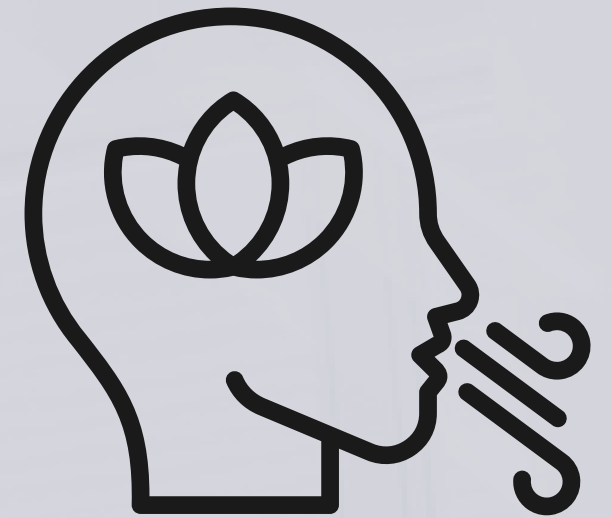
- Awareness before action
- Pausing under pressure
- Separating urgency from threat
- Responding vs reacting

Managing Our Responses

You cannot regulate someone else

In the moment, simple language can help:

1. How can I help?
2. What do you need?
3. Let me know when you are ready?



RELAX

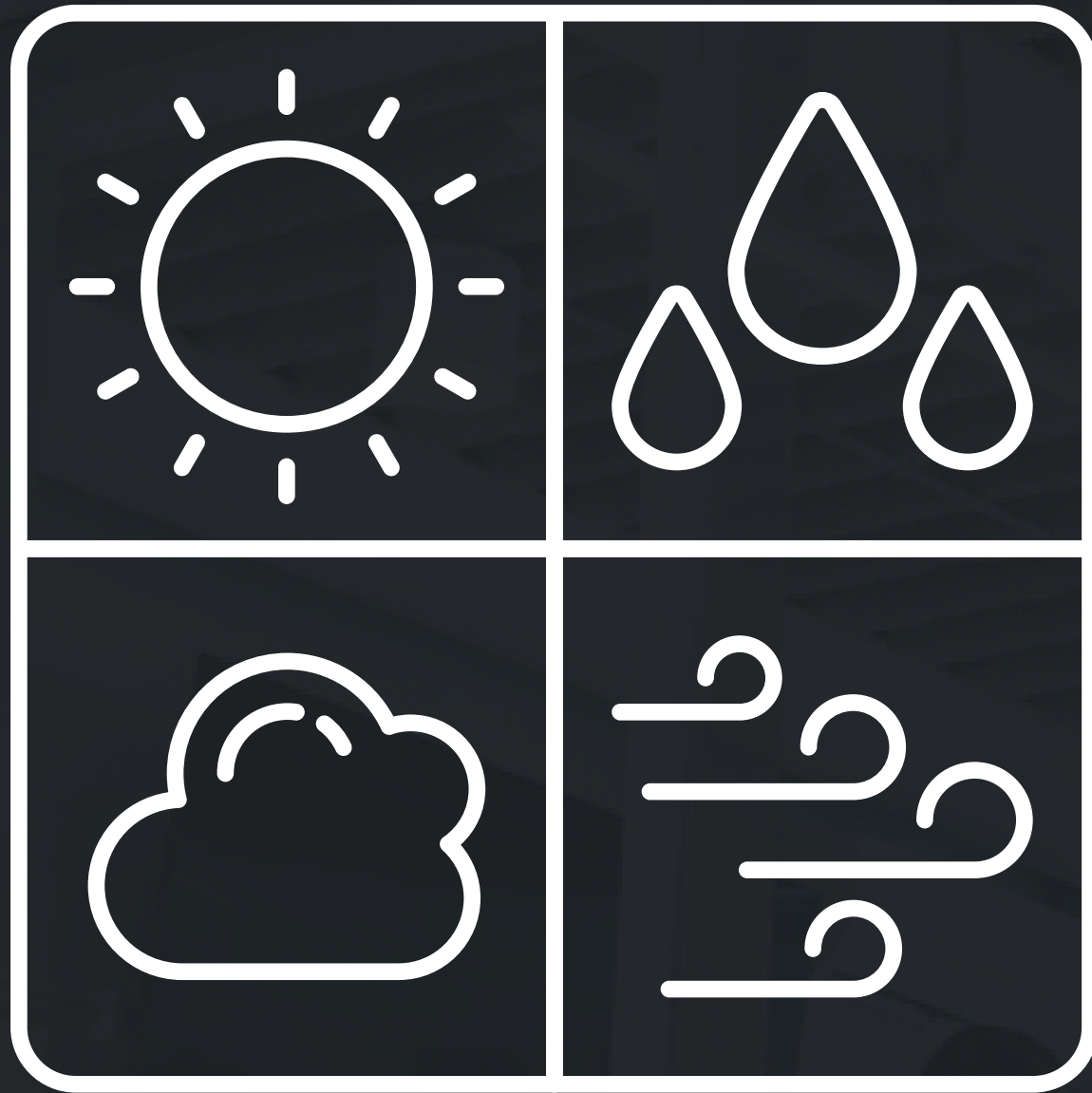
Humanizing Without Lowering the Bar

Humanizing people does not mean excusing behavior.



This work is not about controlling people—

it's about creating conditions where people can function well.



Repair after rupture.

Consistency before escalation.

Check yourself first.

Regulation before problem solving.

Humans shape conditions.

How do we support regulation?

What happens when I tell you to calm down?

- Remove the audience/stimulus
- Offer quick HELP NOW!
- Cold drink
- Pushing into the floor
- Smell, fresh air, ICE CUBE, walking together (DON'T TALK), drawing, low lightings, music without words
- We rock babies for a reason.

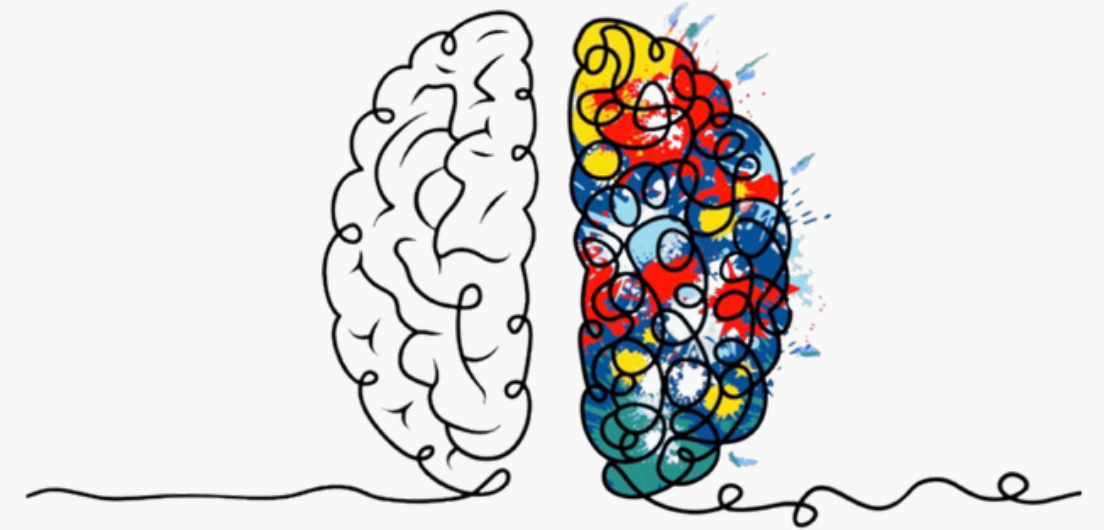


What is one small shift you will carry into your next interaction?

With yourself

With others

In a moment of stress?



***Thank you for the work you do every day.
It matters more than you know.***



Questions or follow-up:

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