



# Untangling the Power that Binds: Working with Parents with Histories of Early Childhood Trauma

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# Healthy Families America

- Prevent Child Abuse America
- Primary Prevention
- Infant Mental Health Model
- Trauma Informed



# Our Journey

- Impacts of Early Childhood Trauma
- The Stress Connection
- Therapeutic Approaches



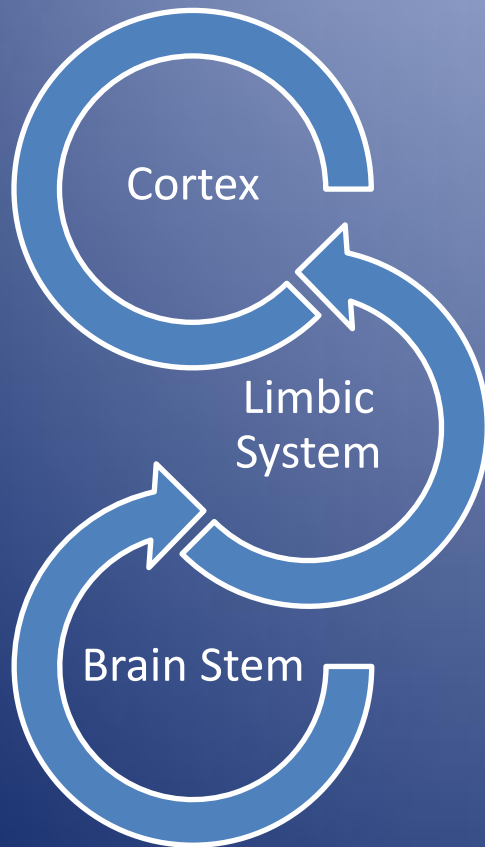
# Early Childhood Trauma

- Separation from attachment figure
- Witnessing Violence
- Severe Neglect
- Physical, emotional, sexual abuse
- Traumatic birth experiences
- Unpredictable and critical parenting
- Raised in homes with substance abuse and/or
- Stress!

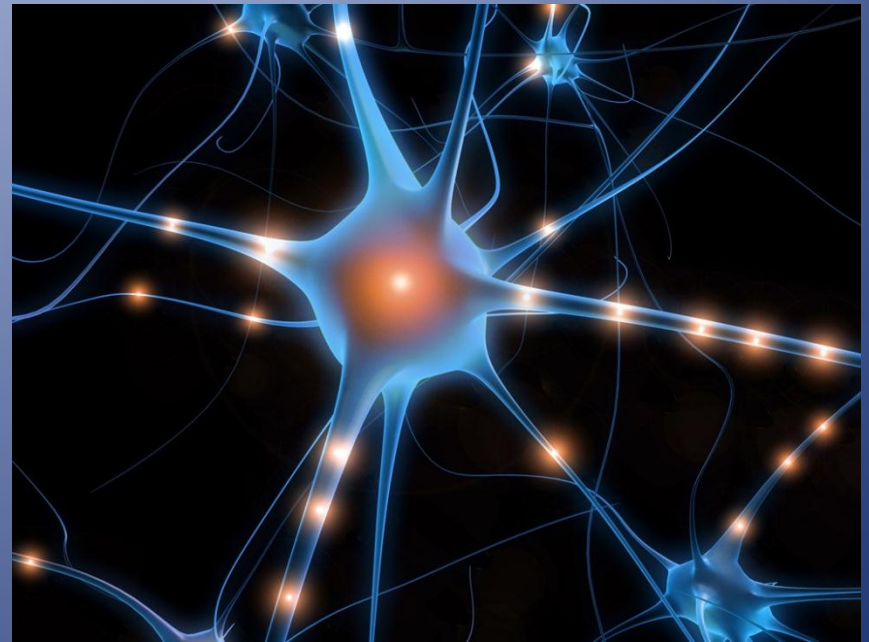
# Before birth: The Impact of Prenatal Stress



# Early Experiences and Brain Wiring



## Experience





# The Lens

- No one will be there for me
- The world is not a safe place
- I am not lovable or worthy of love
- I have to take what I need
- I need to get what I want now
- People are not trustworthy
- I have no control
- I'm not capable



# When the Past becomes Present

## Explicit Memory



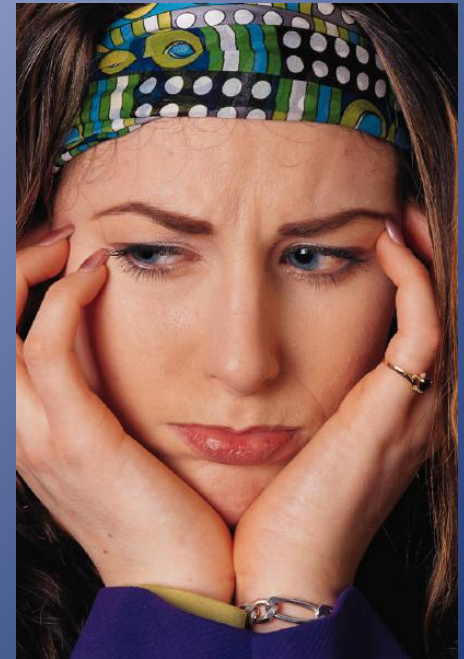
## Implicit Memory





# Limbic System Distortions

- Reaction = memory recall
- Extremes
  - Left brain dominance
  - Right brain dominance
- Amygdala – Controls Emotions
  - 5:1 Negativity Bias
  - Fight, Flight, Freeze



# Overactive Stress Response System

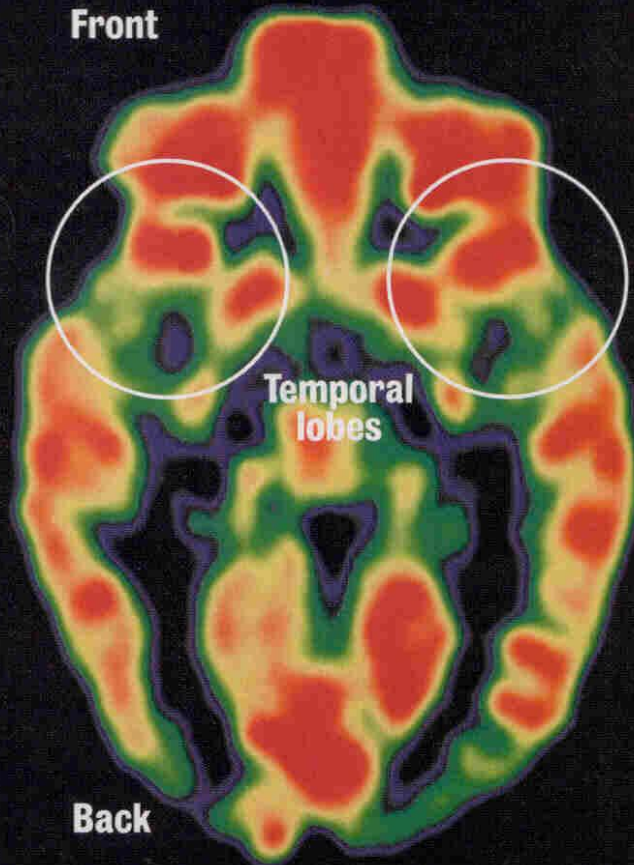
- Impacts Physical Health
- Impacts Brain Functioning/Learning
  - Corpus callosum
  - Hippocampus
- Impacts Mental Health
  - Coping
  - Emotional regulation



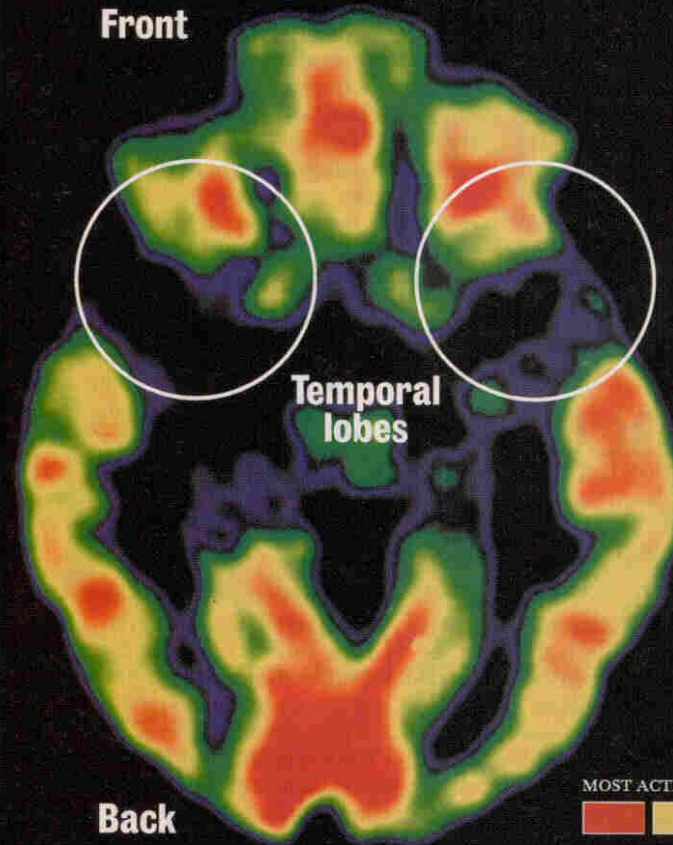
# Adversity Impacts Brain Development

## Healthy Brain

This PET scan of the brain of a normal child shows regions of high (red) and low (blue and black) activity. At birth, only primitive structures such as the brain stem (center) are fully functional; in regions like the temporal lobes (top), early childhood experiences wire the circuits.



Front



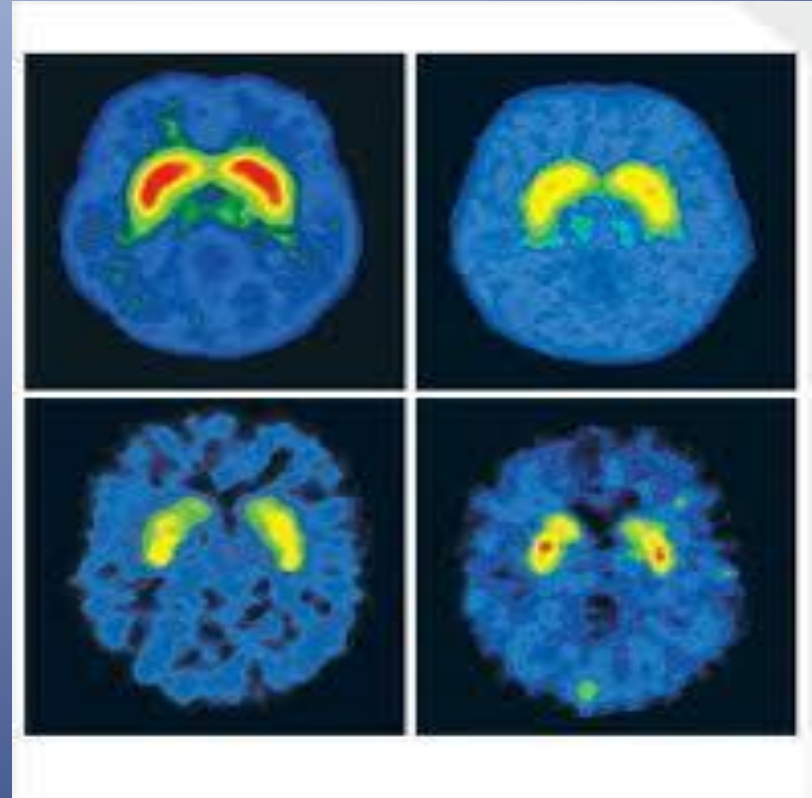
## An Abused Brain

This PET scan of the brain of a Romanian orphan, who was institutionalized shortly after birth, shows the effect of extreme deprivation in infancy. The temporal lobes (top), which regulate emotions and receive input from the senses, are nearly quiescent. Such children suffer emotional and cognitive problems.



# Impact of Stress on Dopamine Receptors

- Decrease in pleasure
- Increase in addictive behaviors
- Reduced Motivation





# Addictions are Coping Strategies

## Addiction

- Drugs
- Violence
- Alcohol
- Smoking
- Eating
  - Overeating
  - Sugar and carbs
- Excessive television
- Video games
- Shopping

## Why?

Attempt to bring the body into balance

- Improve mood
- Feel pleasure
- Decrease/avoid pain
- Release anxiety
- Increase Calmness
- Increase motivation

# Consequences of Early Childhood Trauma for Adults:

- Disrupted Stress Response
- Learning/memory difficulties
- Emotional Regulation
- Capacity for empathy
- Higher level thinking
- Physical health problems
- Mental health struggles
- Relationship problems



# Mary Ainsworth: Attachment concepts

- All people attach – survival depends on it
- 4 types of attachment
  - **Secure**
  - **Avoidant**
  - **Ambivalent**
  - **Disorganized**



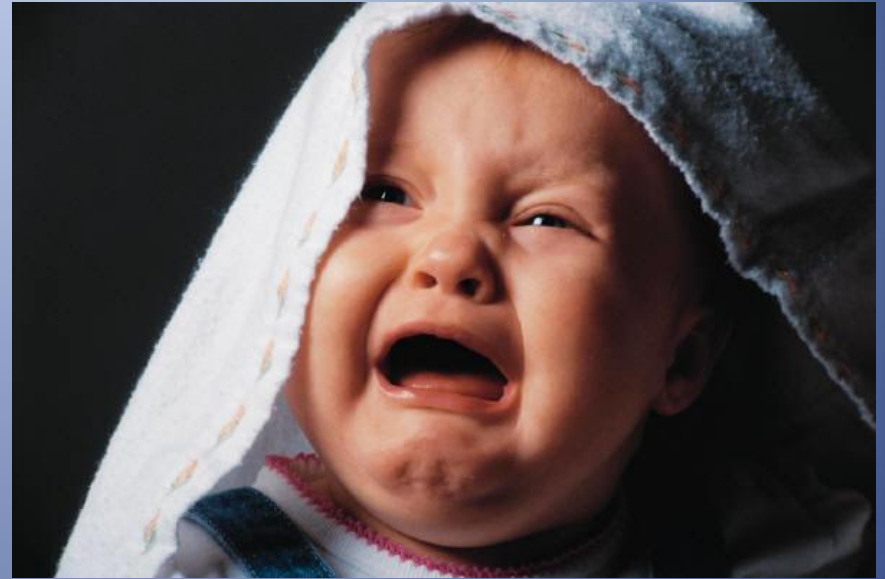
# Goals of the attachment system

- ❖ To ensure survival and safety
- ❖ To develop a sense of “felt security”
- ❖ To use this secure base to support effective exploration and learning



# Impacts Attachment:

- Child's needs experienced as threats
- Child's needs are experienced as rejection
- Parent emotionally unavailable
- Children who receive little face time grow up to be adults who have difficulty reading their child's cues




# The Stress – Oxytocin Connection

- Early Childhood Trauma lowers oxytocin levels
- Impacts relationships
- Impacts attachment
- Impacts health
  - Anti-inflammatory



# Common Life Struggles

- Difficulty keeping employment
  - Difficulty maintaining healthy relationships
  - Addictions (smoking, drugs, alcohol, food...)
- 
- Difficulty budgeting
  - Difficulty planning ahead
  - Difficulty controlling anger or expressing feelings

# What you Might See on Home Visits



- Restricted ability to use cognitive, teaching, content-based material
- Lack of “performance” and “consistency” (no follow-through, no show)
- Viewing relationships through the lens of survival.
- Content derived Kenny Miller



“Trauma-informed care is an approach to engaging people with histories of trauma that recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges the role that trauma has played in their lives.”

**THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR TRAUMA INFORMED CARE**



# Trauma Informed Practice

- Safety
- Trustworthiness
- Choice
- Collaboration
- Empowerment
- Strength-based Approach



# Principles: Working with families with Early Childhood Trauma

- Success of your role depends on your relationship
- Unmet relationship needs from early years prevent access to higher developmental process.
- Respond to the early childhood wounds within a healthy relationship, higher functioning comes naturally.

# Our Focus: Dyadic Approach

Connection

**Healing takes time**

Exercising the Cortex

Emotional Regulation



# Encourage Connection





# The Power of Routine & Traditions

- Lowers household stress
- Child adjustment  
– resiliency
- Stronger family relationships





# Touch: A Basic Need

- Infant/Child massage
- Holding and Hugging
- Proximity



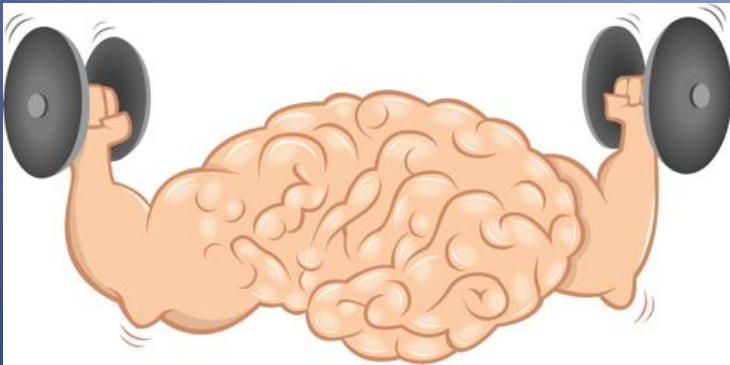
# The Need Behind every Behavior

**“At the root of every tantrum and power struggle are unmet needs”**

Marshall Rosenberg

# Exercise the Cortex

## Neuroplasticity!



- Experience verses teaching
- Problem solving questions verses advice
- Impact statements verses praise
- Wondering verses telling

# Brain Wise Programs

- Movement
- Breath
- Hydration
- Sunlight



# Emotional Regulation

- Expand the Feeling vocabulary
- Acknowledge feelings and act from values
- Acknowledge the positive intent behind the behavior



# Bring Joy into the Work

- Smiles = serotonin
- Something joyful about every family
- Fun activities
- Celebrations
- Attitude of Gratitude
- Humor



Pleasure chemicals!



# Trauma Stewards

- Stay present when it's painful
- Believe in another's ability to heal and grow
- Practice Self-Reflection
- Prioritize self-care



"Too often we underestimate  
the power of a **touch**, a **smile**,  
a **kind** word, a **listening** ear,  
an **honest** compliment, or  
the smallest act of **caring**,  
all of which have the potential  
to turn a life around."

~Leo Buscaglia

