

We ALL Flip Our Lid Sometimes! Why do we get TRIGGERED?

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Triggered is a term originally used to describe the alarming responses veterans had when they returned to civilian living. When exposed to stimulus that resembled something from the battle field (like a loud bang), the veterans would respond as if they were **reliving** their combat experience. They would **feel all the same emotions and sensations** that would have been present during the actual experience.

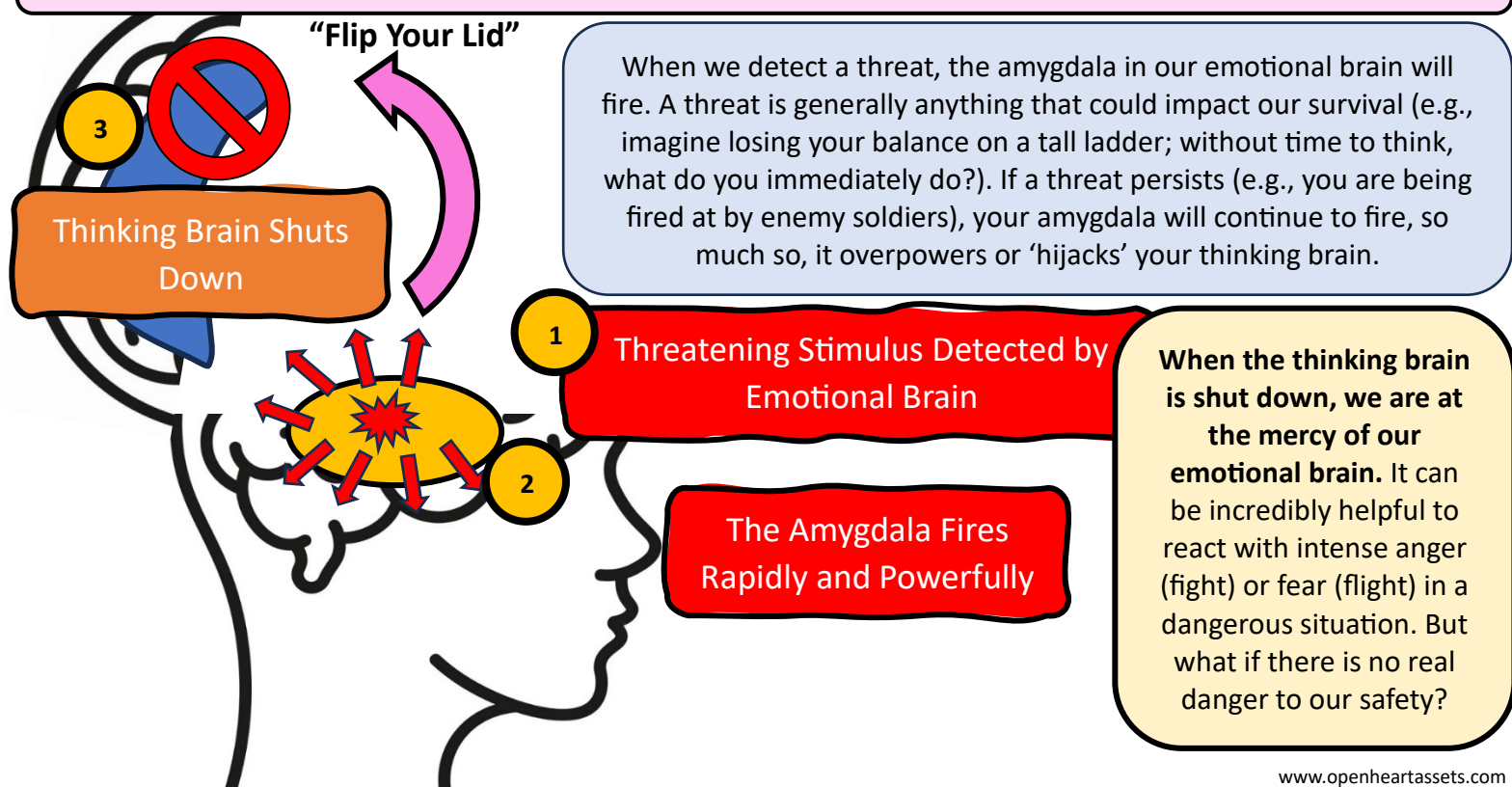
We now know, people with histories of trauma can be 'triggered' in the present moment by traumatic memories of the past. Have you ever reacted with tremendous rage or recoiled in anxiety or shame to an event that didn't demand such an extreme reaction? Do you sometimes wonder why you become highly emotional at times others may consider relatively plain or normal? In order to understand these responses, we need to study the brain. There are two main sections of the brain involved in emotion and the **regulation of emotion**.

"The Thinking Brain" – The prefrontal cortex is responsible for analyzing situations rationally. It allows us to make sense of the world around us. We can think about whether a situation is dangerous, or what the intentions, desires or feelings of others may be. This enables us to make rational and balanced decisions. We can **choose how to respond** and **regulate our emotions**.

'The Emotional Brain' – The mid-brain is involved in generating **emotions**. It contains the amygdala which is responsible for the fight, fight or freeze response. The amygdala acts as an alarm system and controls our emergency reactions when we detect danger or high stress.

When both parts of the brain are working together, we can remain calm and connected and manage our emotions. **We can decide how to respond.**

What happens during a traumatic event.

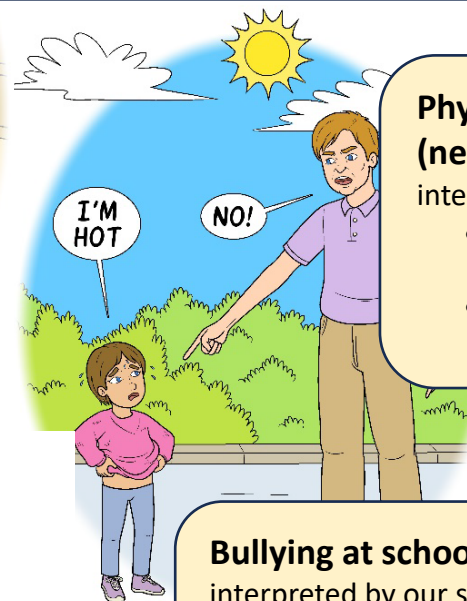


When young, we are particularly vulnerable. We rely on our caregivers for survival. We need them to shelter us, feed us, protect us, and nurture us. If we are exposed to abuse or neglect, our young brains will interpret threat. Let us consider being harshly criticized as a young child. If our caregiver condemns or disapproves of us in a way that is scary (e.g., a father unexpectedly snaps at a child "Why are you so stupid?"), we will likely feel frightened. We may fear losing our caregivers love, a threat which is terrifying as a child. We may even unconsciously fear abandonment, a danger to our very survival. Our amygdala will fire, shutting down the thinking brain, as we enact the flight, flight, or freeze response. Some may react in anger, others may cry and retreat, while others may freeze in fright (not knowing what to do). If this event is **extremely distressing** or **consistently repeated**, we may develop a trauma response. A trauma response may also arise when exposed to domestic violence, bullying, or other interpersonal situations which are perceived as threatening (e.g., a 'scary' boss).

Let us consider some examples where a trauma response may develop.

Emotional Unavailability may be interpreted by our system as:

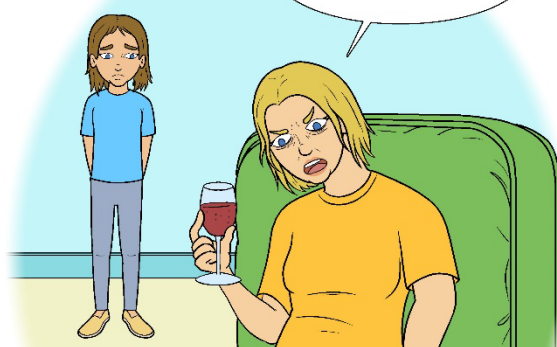
- Abandonment (understood as **DEATH to an infant** and extremely distressing)
- A threat to attachment (experienced as a danger to our survival)
- Unlovable (or a threat to connection which is needed to feel safe)
- Unimportant, Unworthy (rejection or a threat to receiving adequate care)



Physical or Emotional Neglect (needs consistently denied) may be interpreted by our system as:

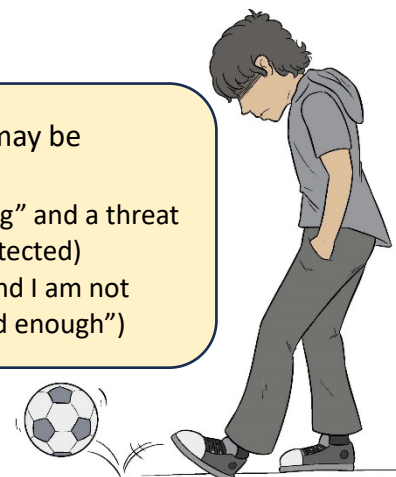
- Unworthy (or a sign we may be rejected by our caregiver)
- Underserving, Unimportant (or a threat to connection with our caregiver)

YOU MAKE ME LIKE THIS.



Bullying at school/work may be interpreted by our system as:

- Rejection ("I don't belong" and a threat of isolation/being unprotected)
- Defective ("I am alone and I am not wanted."; "I am not good enough")



Emotional abuse may be interpreted by the system as:

- Unworthy or a sign we may be rejected by our caregiver ("I'm not safe"; "I'm not loved")



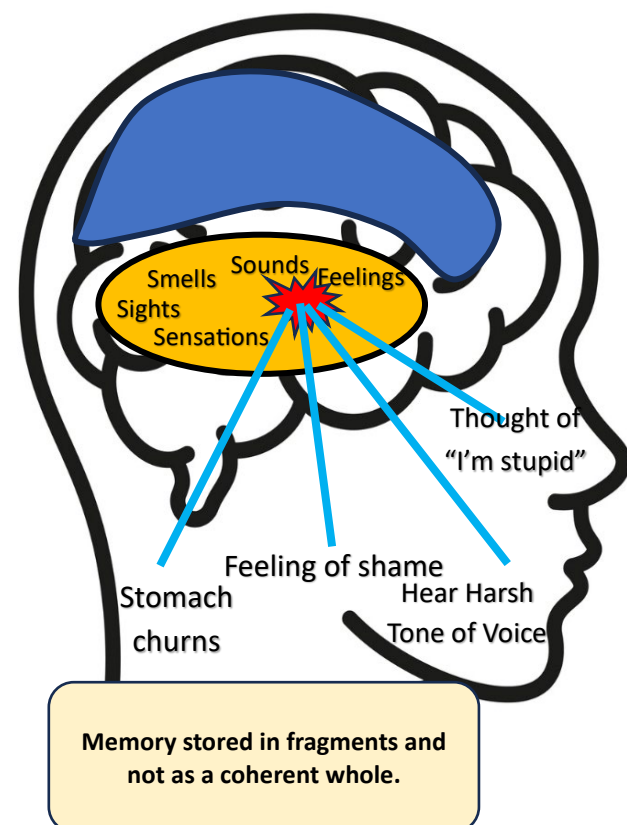
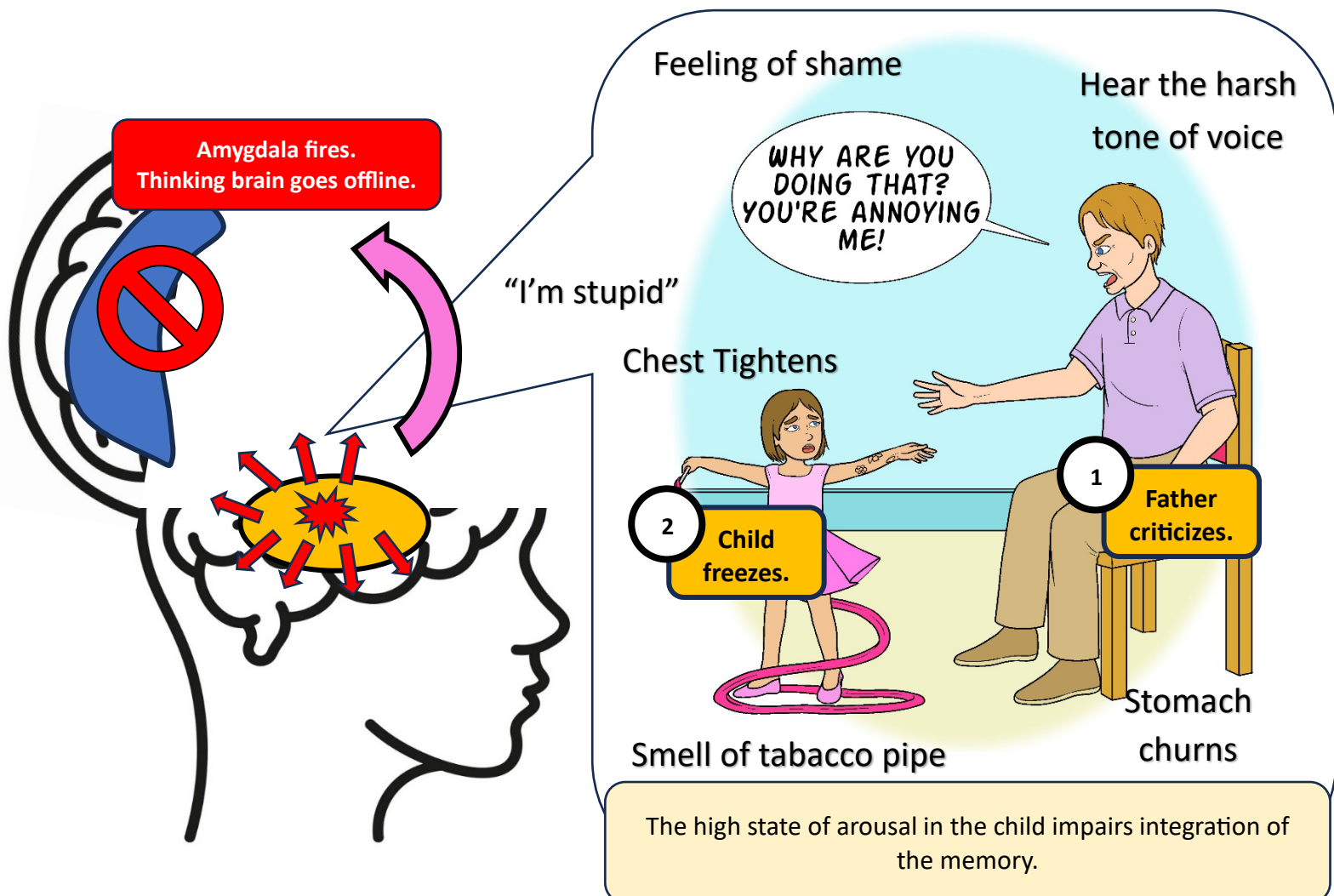
Physical Abuse/Domestic or Sexual Violence may be interpreted by the system as:

- Danger (or a threat to physical and/or emotional safety)



The internal world of the child collapses due to the unresolvable war between the two impulses of attachment (I need my caregiver) vs survival (my caregiver hurts me). The system (the mind and body) is overwhelmed and the thinking brain shuts down.

When we **perceive overwhelming threat** (including interpersonal danger, like the risk of being rejected by a parent), our amygdala will fire, hijacking our thinking brain. Without the functions of our thinking brain, events cannot be processed or stored in a coherent manner. Instead, memories for events may be stored as fragments in our emotional brain. Consider the little girl's distressing experience below.



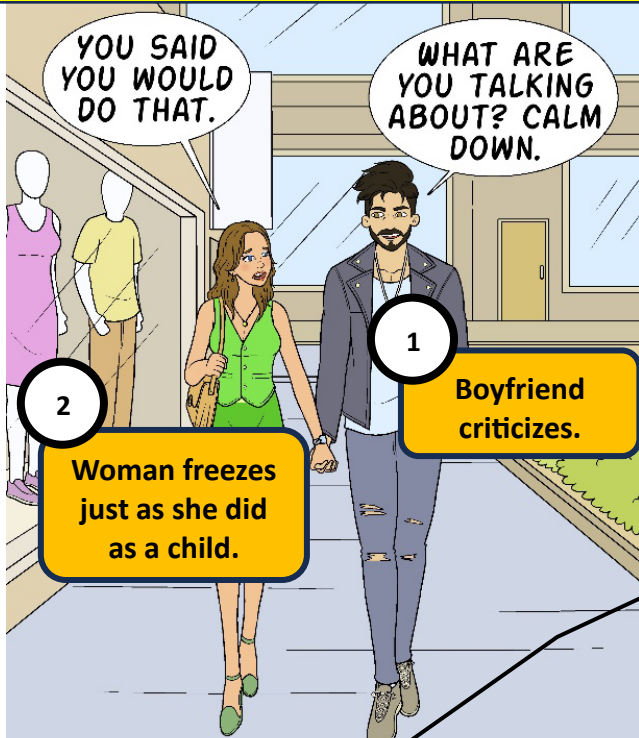
When a memory is not processed by the thinking brain and is stored in the emotional brain it is:

- Stored in fragments (e.g., a smell, a feeling, a thought) and it not understood as a coherent whole event that can be explicitly (openly) talked about.
- Not time stamped. In other words, when the memory fragments are activated (or 'triggered') they are experienced as occurring now and not an event that has happened in the past.
- Unconscious, i.e., can be activated by 'triggers' in the environment without any conscious understanding of why.
- Extremely rigid and difficult to reason with.
- Lacks a coherent meaning (often poorly understood and readily projected onto someone else as their fault).
- Causes repetition of events that feel the same. Are there patterns and situations that continue to occur?

Memories stored as fragments in our emotional brain can be activated by **cues in the environment that resemble the original memory**. For example, when ex-veterans hear a car backfire, their emotional brain may recognize the loud noise as the same as when they heard a bomb exploding. If this traumatic memory has not been processed accurately by the thinking brain, the emotional brain will activate the old memory causing the mind and body to respond as if the trauma were occurring now. Their body and mind will react with all the same thoughts, feelings and behaviors as when the original trauma occurred. They may duck for cover with blood rushing to their chest in preparation to fight or flee. There is **no sense this is a past experience** and they are not in actual danger.

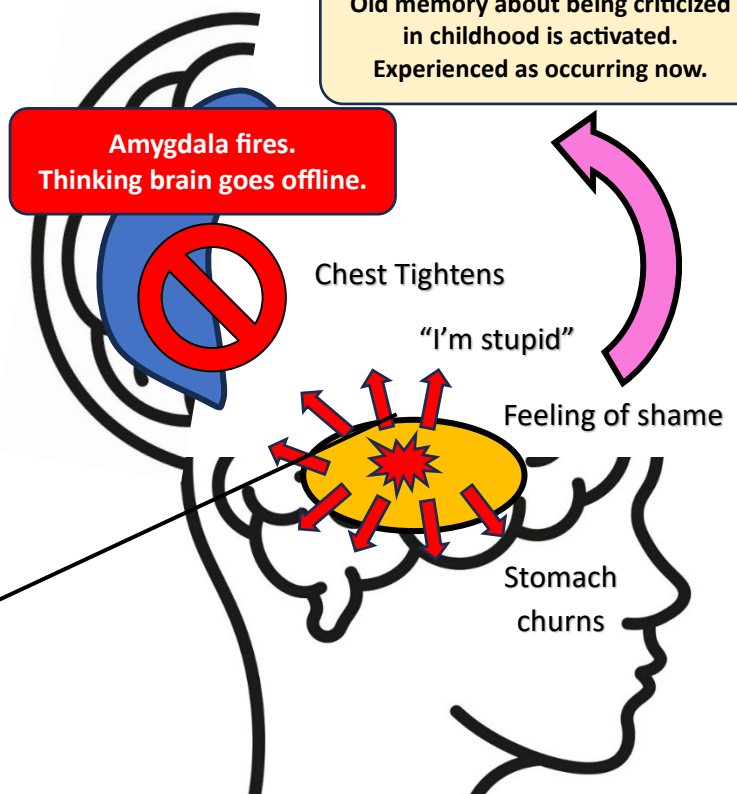
What about relational trauma? Let's consider the little girl who was repeatedly scolded and shamed by her father in the previous example. She is now a grown adult in a relationship.

Current experience contains element/s that resembles unconscious childhood memory.



Amygdala fires.
Thinking brain goes offline.

Old memory about being criticized in childhood is activated.
Experienced as occurring now.



The emotional brain detects a familiar situation:

- The emotional brain hears a harsh tone of voice and activates the memory fragments associated with this childhood traumatic memory.
- The emotional brain (amygdala) fires a threat-based response.
- The thinking brain goes offline.
- The woman experiences the same fright as she did when her father criticized her as a child.
- The woman responds with the **same unconscious freeze response** she did as a child. In other words, instead of being able to choose her behavior, she is 'triggered' into an old pattern of responding. This may have been helpful and protective as a child, but it now keeps her in unhealthy relationships. Without the coordination and emotional regulation capacities of the thinking brain, we will feel, think and act as we did during the original trauma event.

We can be 'triggered' into **three main threat-based reactions**. Do you identify with any of these?

FIGHT	FLIGHT	FREEZE
Rage Physical Fights Anger towards others Blame/Criticize Cling to others Seek reassurance	Escape Leave immediately Ghost Disappear Devalue Others Importance Use substances	Collapse Surrender Intense shame Immobilize Stay even when dangerous Become passive/comply

Are there any patterns of behavior that continue to cause you problems in relationships? Can you identify what 'triggers' the behavior?

Triggers Can Be: Feelings, Sensations, Sounds, Smells, Thoughts, Situations

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To identify your triggers, it is helpful to look for patterns. Can you identify a feeling, a physical sensation, a sound/smell or a particular situation that causes you to lose control over your reactions? Maybe you notice you become extremely fearful when you feel someone is judging you, or perhaps you rage in uncontrollable anger when someone cuts you off in traffic? Can you identify times when you 'flip your lid' or lose control over how you react?

When I'm Feeling:

Excluded
Powerless
Unheard
Scolded
Judged
Blamed
Disrespected
Uncared for
Lonely
Ignored
Unsafe
Forgotten
Like the bad guy
Like I couldn't be honest
Unloved
Like it was unfair
Frustrated
Trapped
Disconnected
Like I couldn't speak up
Manipulated
Controlled
Wronged
Different
Guilty

A certain time of day

Feeling Incompetent

Feeling Unattractive

Being Told I'm Wrong

Feeling Pressured or Time Poor

Lack of personal space

Certain smells

Not being the best

Others doing the wrong thing

When I feel crowded

When people disagree with me

When I'm touched

When I hear yelling

Noisy children playing

Feeling Left Out

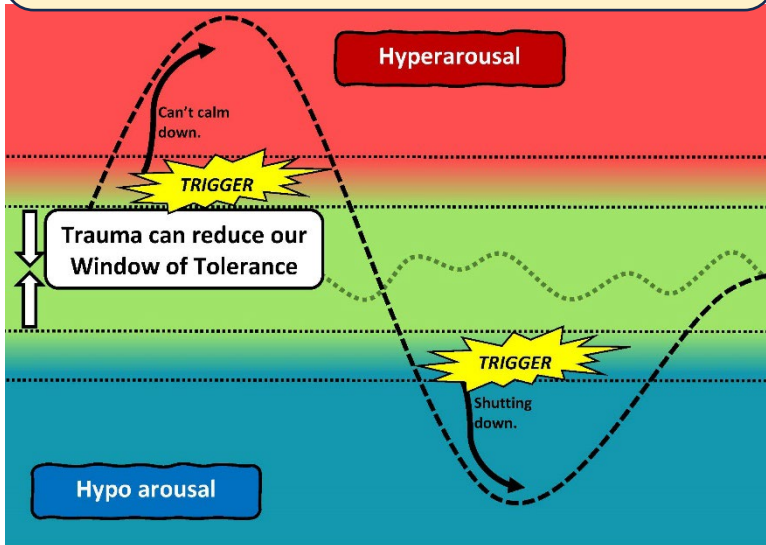
When I break something

Types of Situations:

Performance
Social
Busy places
Authority figures
Deadlines
New People
Finances
Rules
Guidelines are not adhered to.
Dangerous situations
Unpredictable situations
Having to wait (or que)
Things going wrong (or not to plan)
When others are distressed or angry.
Conflict
Not enough attention
Being alone
Being asked for an opinion
Making a decision
When people are drunk

Trigger (Situation, feeling, sound, smell, thought?)	Trigger Reaction Fight (Anger, Rage) Flight (Avoid) Freeze (e.g., feel intense shame, dissociate or shut down)	Is there a pattern/theme?
e.g., had a work deadline that was approaching	Fight – went into a rage	I get triggered when I think I won't get something done on time.
e.g., my partner said the steak was overcooked	Freeze – shut down and felt shame, cried	I get upset when I think others are not happy.
e.g., I just noticed an uneasy feeling	Flight – I grabbed a wine	I get an uneasy feeling when the sun starts going down.

The Window of Tolerance Model (Dan Siegel) shows how triggers can send us into hyperarousal (fight or flight) or hyporarousal (freeze). In these states our thinking brain is offline. So how do we bring our thinking brain back online?



Step 1

Recognize you are triggered!

We cannot choose how to respond when our thinking brain is offline.

Step 2

Take steps to regulate!

Once you realize you are dysregulated and 'triggered' you must focus on self-soothing.

Mindfulness	Name it to tame it – "I am feeling rejected right now. What I need is....."
Breathe	Talk to someone you trust
Take a time-out	Engage your Healthy Adult (see below)

What is the unmet need? Re-parenting our old wounds.

Identify you are triggered

Breathe and scan your body mindfully. What do you notice? Where do you hold the tension. Is it in your chest, your stomach, your head? Is it moving, tense, heavy, hot, sharp? **Remain curious.**



When did you first notice this feeling?

Is this feeling familiar? What age were you when you first had this feeling? Where were you? Describe the situation. Who was there? Can you see yourself at that age. **Take your time.**



What is your unmet need?

What did you need at this time? Think about your age at the time. Validation, connection, warmth, care, to be held, encouragement, patience, freedom to express one's needs, understanding, appropriate limits, structure, a sense of safety, play and spontaneity, protection, choice, encouragement to explore, praise, support, help...



What would your healthy adult (wise self) say?

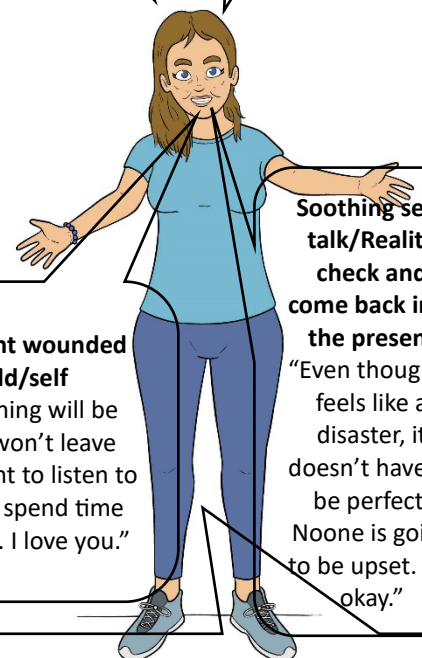
Imagine you are with this younger part of self. Can you see the look on your younger face? What would the most compassionate, caring, considerate, calm, warm adult say to comfort and care for you?

Re-parent wounded child/self

"I know you're trying so hard. I think you're wonderful just the way you are. You don't need to impress me."

Reparent wounded child/self

"I can see you feel frightened. I am here to protect you. I won't let anyone hurt you. I've got this."



Soothing self-talk/Reality check and come back into the present

"Even though it feels like a disaster, it doesn't have to be perfect. Noone is going to be upset. It's okay."

Re-parent wounded child/self

"Everything will be okay. I won't leave you. I want to listen to you and spend time with you. I love you."

Soothing self-talk/Reality check and come back into the present

"I know you feel criticized right now. This feels really painful. But it is okay. The people around you love you and they are not going to reject you."