The Neurobiology of Self Care

ECTARC

May 6th 2021

Understanding and responding to the impacts of working with traumatised children and families

Australian Childhood Foundation

The Australian Childhood Foundation acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of this land and we pay our respect to their Elders past, present and future.

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Learning outcomes

- ✓ Understand the personal, professional and organisational contributors to vicarious trauma and how we might mitigate these factors
- ✓ Explore strategies and activities that can support staff across a range of environments
- ✓ Utilise tools to assess wellbeing and develop a self care plan

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Safety

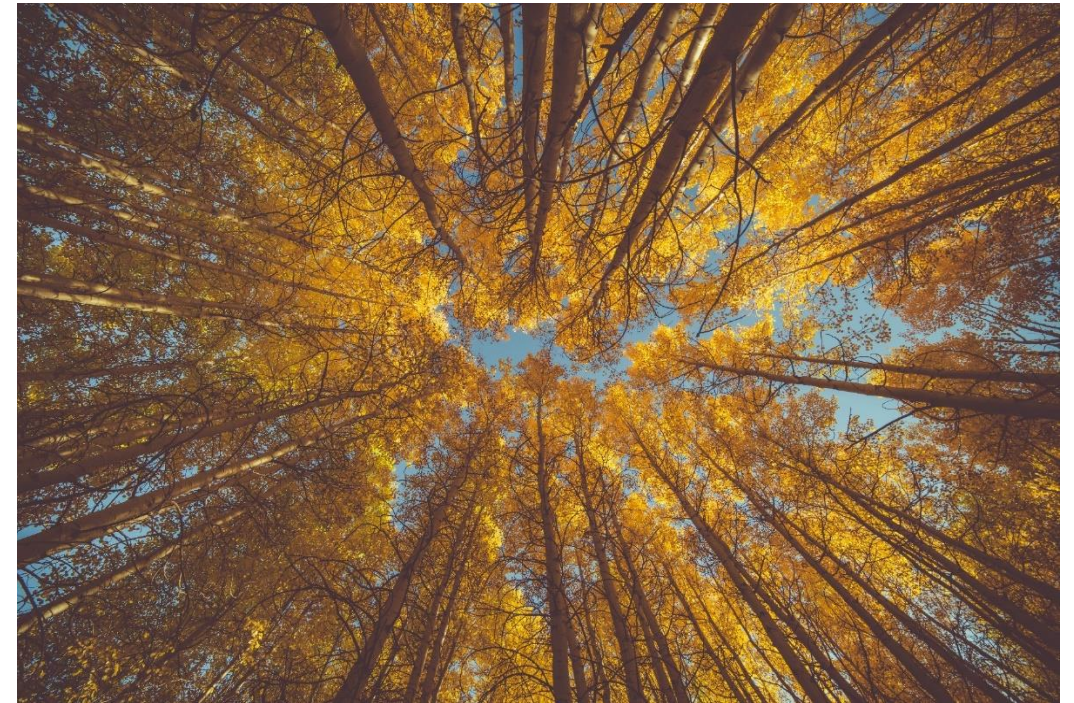The content of this training can evoke strong emotions and may stir up personal experiences of trauma.
Please be mindful of your own wellbeing during this training and if you need support please ask the facilitator.

I NEED TRAUMA INFORMED AND INTEGRATIVE SYSTEMS

I NEED CONNECTION TO MY CULTURE

I NEED PROTECTIVE AND CHILD FRIENDLY COMMUNITIES

Impact of trauma

Healing trauma

I need safe and attuned RELATIONSHIPS

I need to MAKE MEANING of my world

CHILD

I need to feel SAFE

Impact of trauma

Healing trauma

Impact of trauma

Healing trauma

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Self Care Images

Weighing it all up

What brings you to this work?	Why do you do what you do?	What makes it worthwhile?	What makes it feel successful?
What are the benefits of your job?	What are the challenges?	Are there times that feel like it's not worth it?	What are the costs or challenges of your job?
	How do you balance benefits with costs and stay on top?	How do you know when you need a break?	

Levels of Impact

"Caring deeply about others makes us emotionally vulnerable to the catastrophes that affect them" – Charles Figley

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Defining the terminology

Related to a feeling of being overloaded which is primary to client problems of chronicity and complexity, but can occur in any profession

Burnout

Something that challenges our capacity to cope

Stress

Something that overwhelms our capacity to cope

Trauma

Terms

A state of exhaustion & dysfunction – biologically, psychologically, & socially – as a result of prolonged exposure to compassion stress (Figley)

Compassion Fatigue

Vicarious Trauma

Adverse reactions to clients' traumatic material which brings about change in therapist inner experiences, core beliefs.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Adverse reactions to clients' traumatic material with symptoms that parallel PTSD.

'Compassion fatigue', 'Secondary Traumatic Stress' & 'Vicarious Trauma' are often used interchangeably. (Figley 1995; McCann & Saakvitne, 1995)
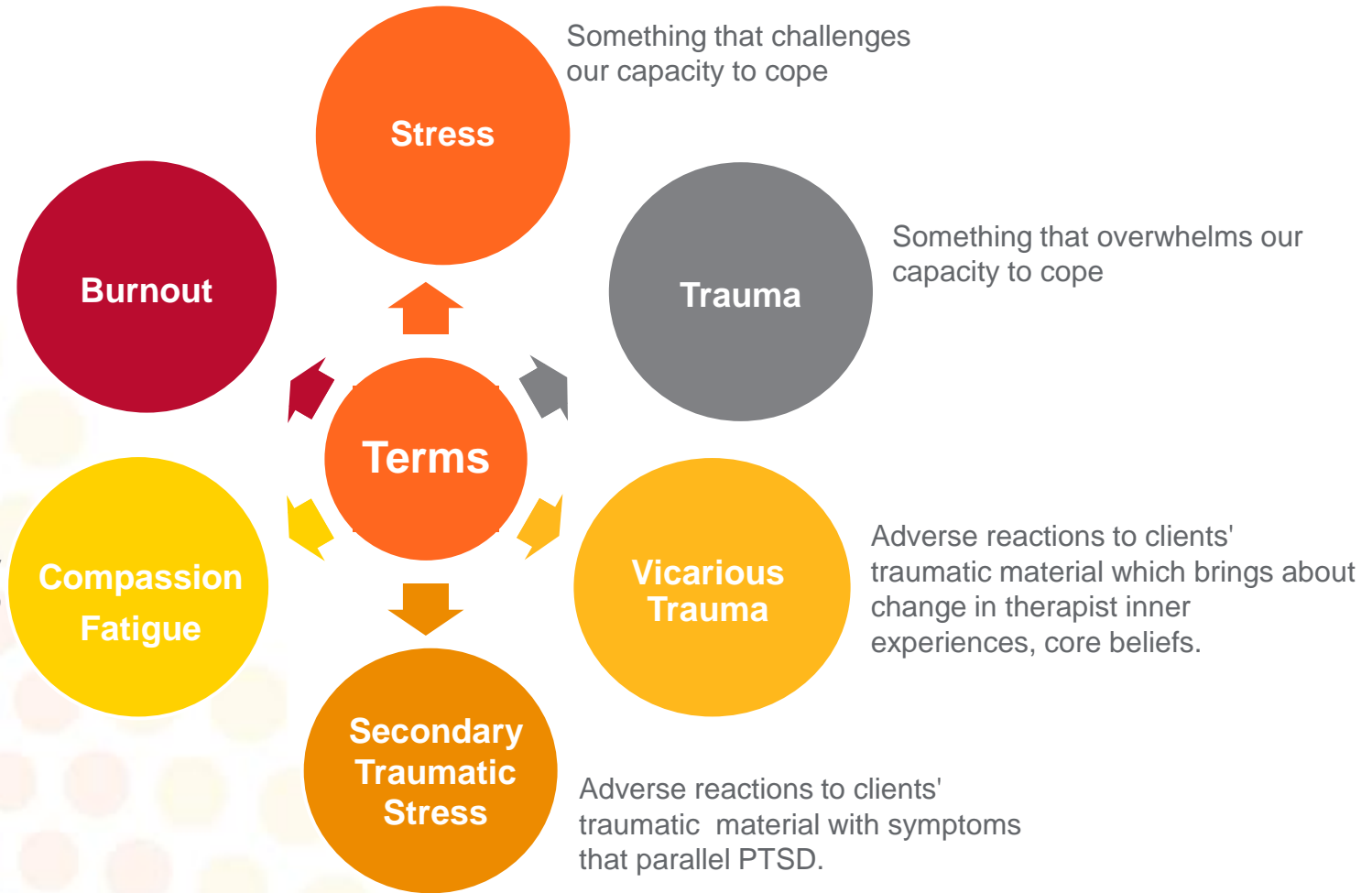
Empathy – a strength and a vulnerability

If empathy is to 'walk a mile in someone's shoes' we need to ensure we step out of those shoes at the end of the mile or we will wear those shoes all the time….and that is vicarious trauma.

- Somatic empathy (Rothschild 2004)

- Limbic resonance

- Cortical empathy

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Somatic Empathy – mirroring body states

- An angry parent

- An exhausted Carer

- A frightened child

- A depressed teenager

- A calm, relaxed worker

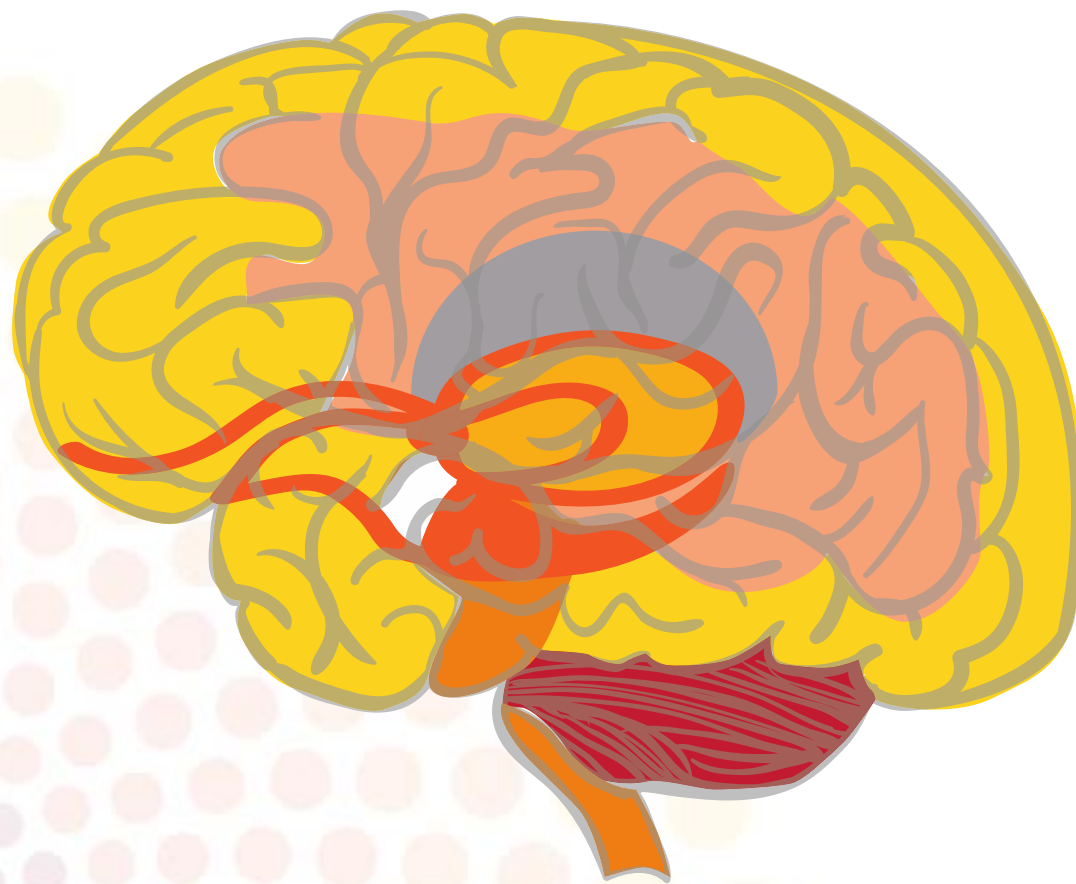# Limbic Resonance & Cortical Empathy

Limbic Resonance

(SUB-CORTICAL)

Our emotional state adjusts to match the emotional state of the person or people we are with

Cortical Empathy

(PRE-FRONTAL CORTEX)

Our attempts to step outside our own experiences and imagine the experience and perspective of others

Stress, trauma and the brain

- 🟡 Neocortex
- 🟠 Limbic
  - 🔴 Hippocampus
  - ⚪ Amygdala
  - 🟠 Diencephalon
    - Hypothalamus
    - Thalamus
- ⚫ Corpus Callosum
- 🔴 Cerebellum
- 🟠 Brainstem

Trauma and the Brain

Hypothalamus

Links the nervous system to the endocrine system via the pituitary gland. It synthesizes and secretes hormones to control body temperature, hunger, thirst, fatigue, sleep, and circadian cycles.

Corpus Callosum

Bridge between the 2 hemispheres. Chronic stress can damage and thin down this bundle of neurons

Prefrontal cortex

Responsible for executive functions, such as judgement, reasoning, and self awareness. Final part of the brain to mature in one's mid 20s.
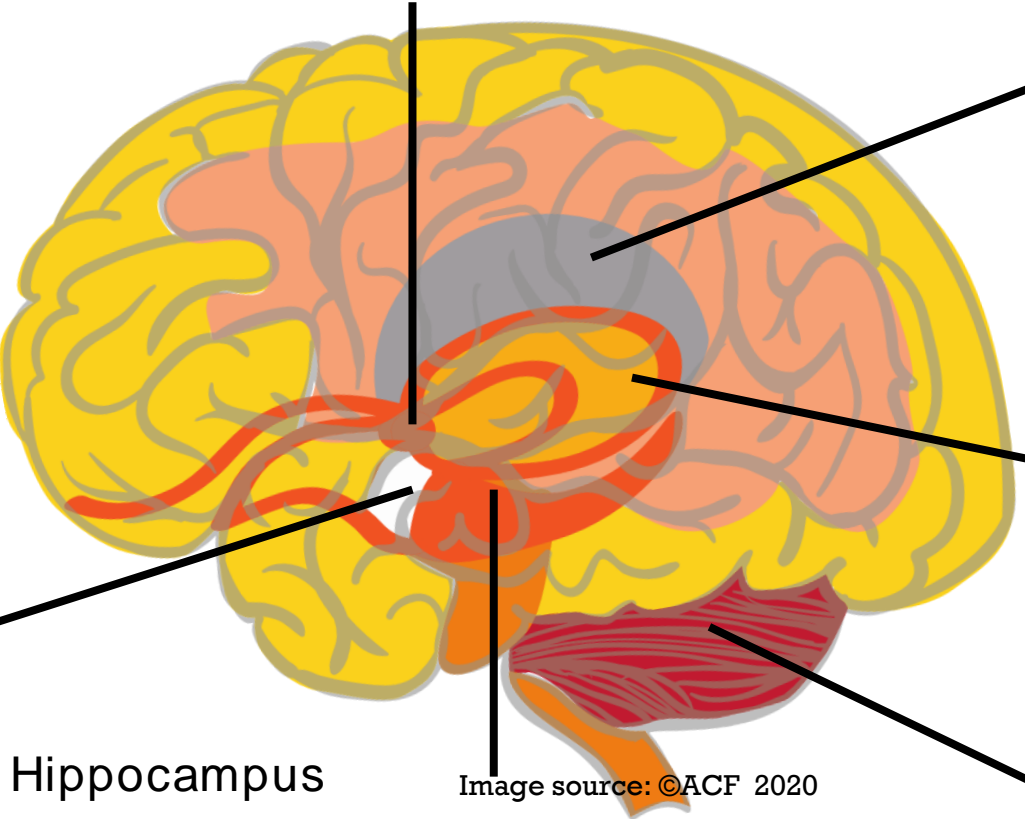
Thalamus

Sensory receptor within the diencephalon. Receives and passes on sensory data to be further processed by other areas of the brain

Amygdala

Survival response centre within the limbic lobe that becomes enlarged and more sensitive the more it is activated through responding to threats

Hippocampus

Consolidates memory by providing the context/ sequential data for episodic memories. Goes offline if trauma overwhelms and disrupts cortex.

Cerebellum

Balance and coordination, motor skills may be impacted by trauma

Image source: ©ACF 2020
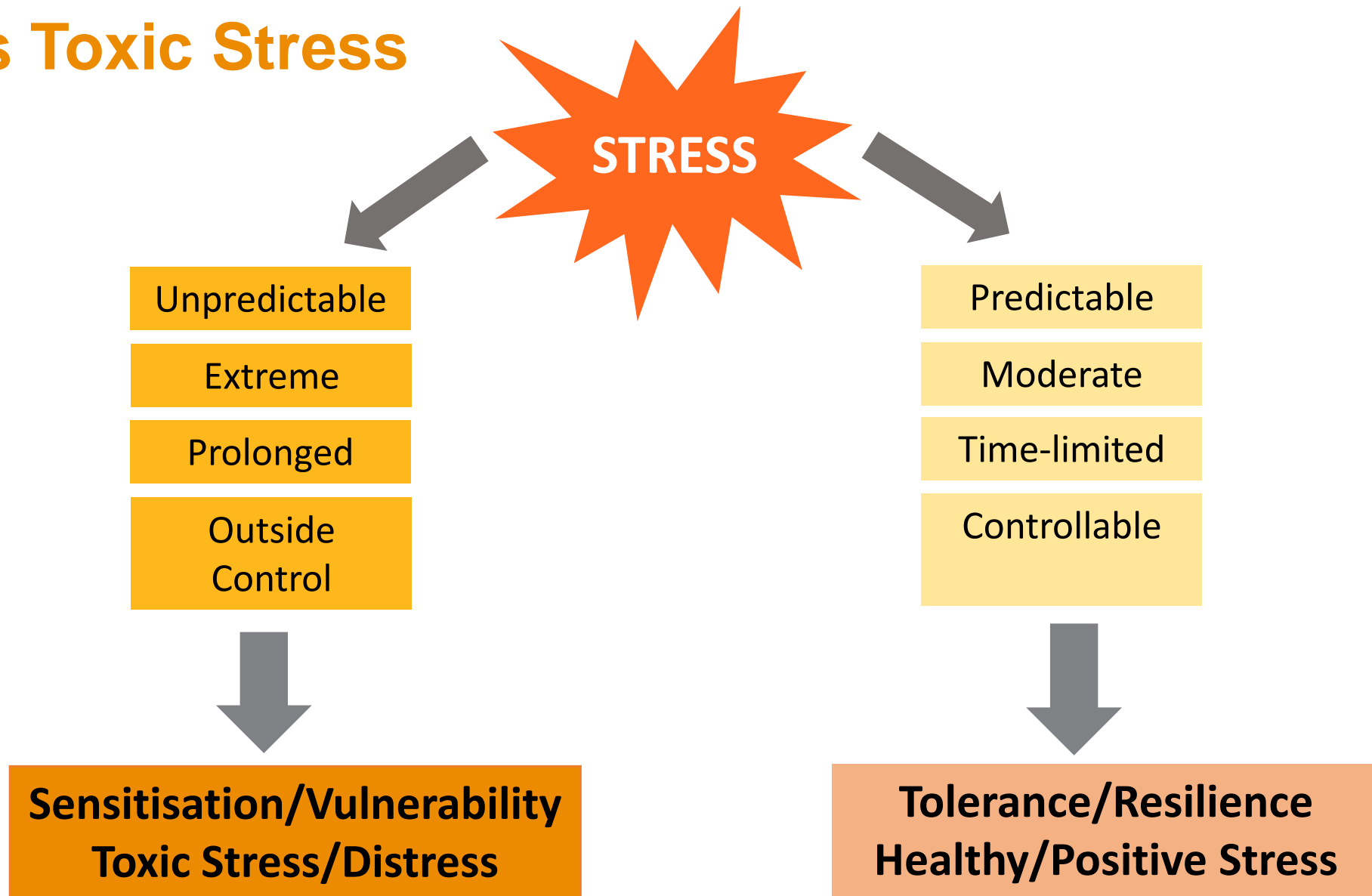
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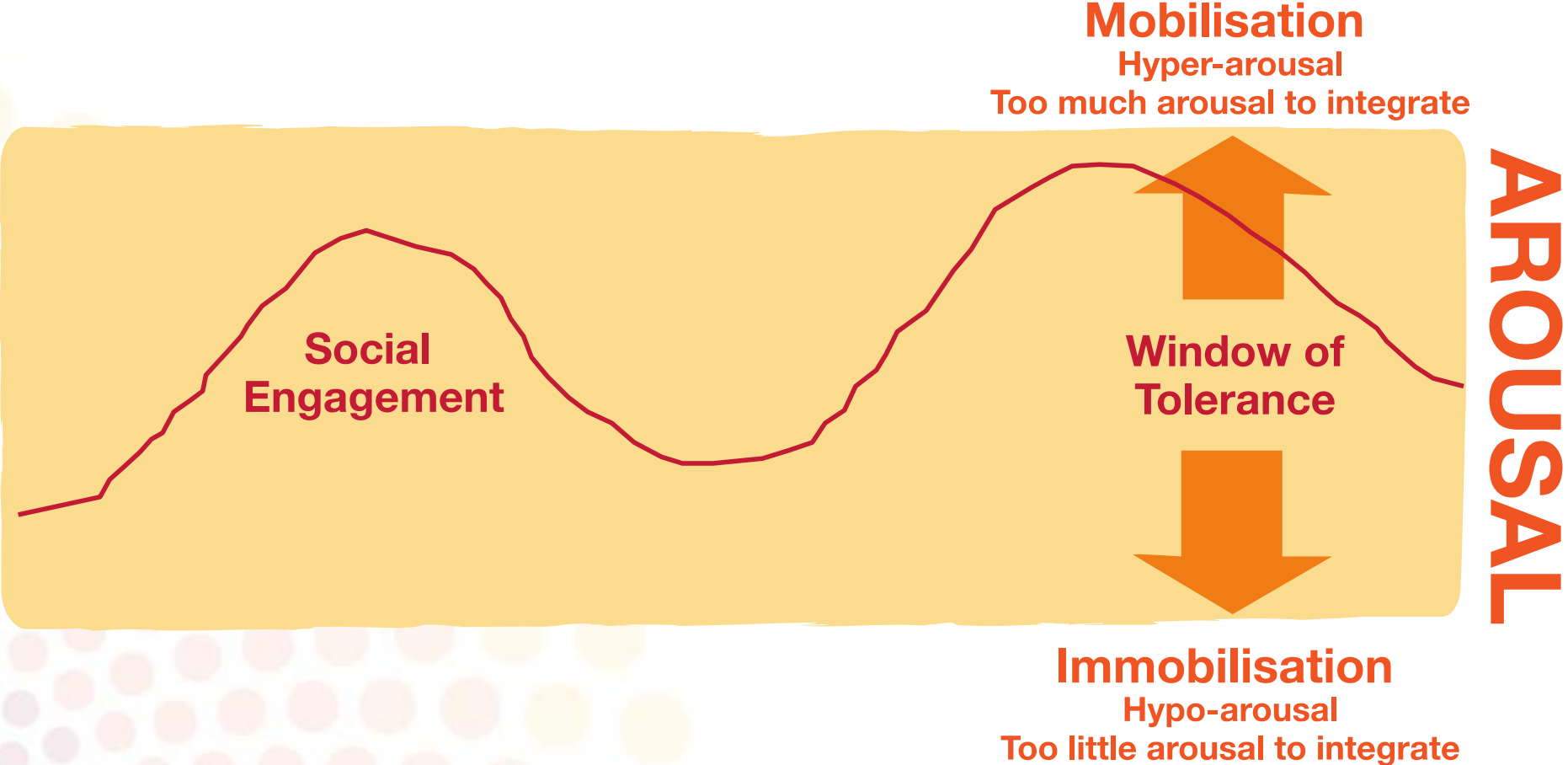
The brain's response to uncertainty

- Survival as number 1 priority

- Unknowns are perceived as threats

- The brain activates a negative bias to prepare itself for 'worst case scenario'

- Threat responses are activated

- Explicit memory is compromised

- Executive functions go offline (concentration, rational thinking, problem solving, planning etc)

Healthy vs Toxic Stress

STRESS

| Unpredictable |
| Extreme |
| Prolonged |
| Outside Control |

Sensitisation/Vulnerability Toxic Stress/Distress

| Predictable |
| Moderate |
| Time-limited |
| Controllable |

Tolerance/Resilience Healthy/Positive Stress

Dys-regulated Arousal

- **Fight or Flight** hyper-vigilant, action-orientated, impulsive, emotionally flooded, reactive, defensive, self-destructive

- **Freeze** Physically immobilized, frozen, tense musculature

- **Submit** Collapsed, weak, defeated, flat affect, numb, empty, helpless, hopeless

Ogden, Minton, Pain 2006

Mobilisation

Hyper-arousal

Immobilisation

Hypo-arousal

Fight or Flight or Freeze

Window of Tolerance

Submission/ Collapse

AROUSAL
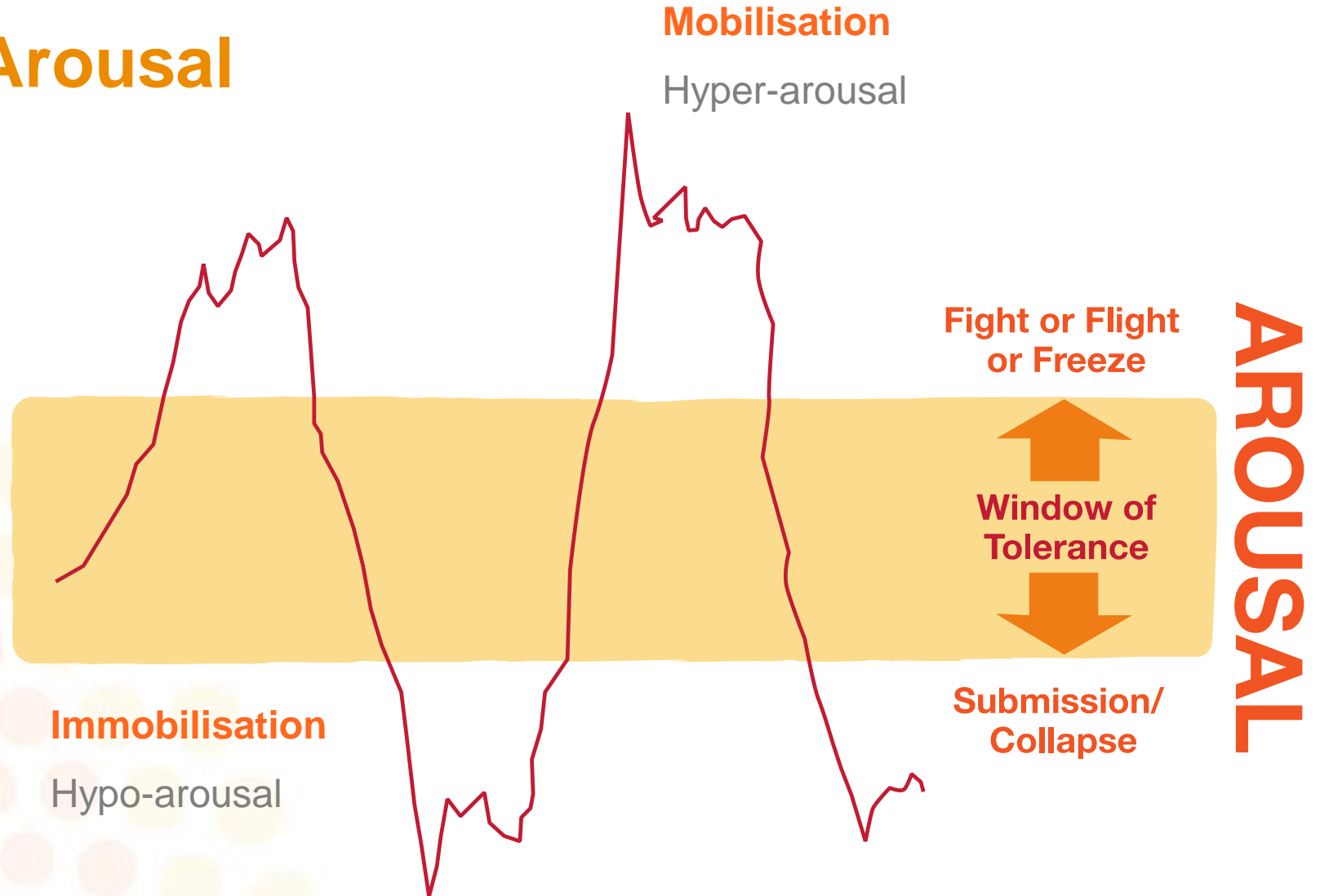
Vicarious Trauma - Possible indicators

Multidimensional:

- Physical
- Sensory
- Emotional
- Cognitive
- Relational

Can include:
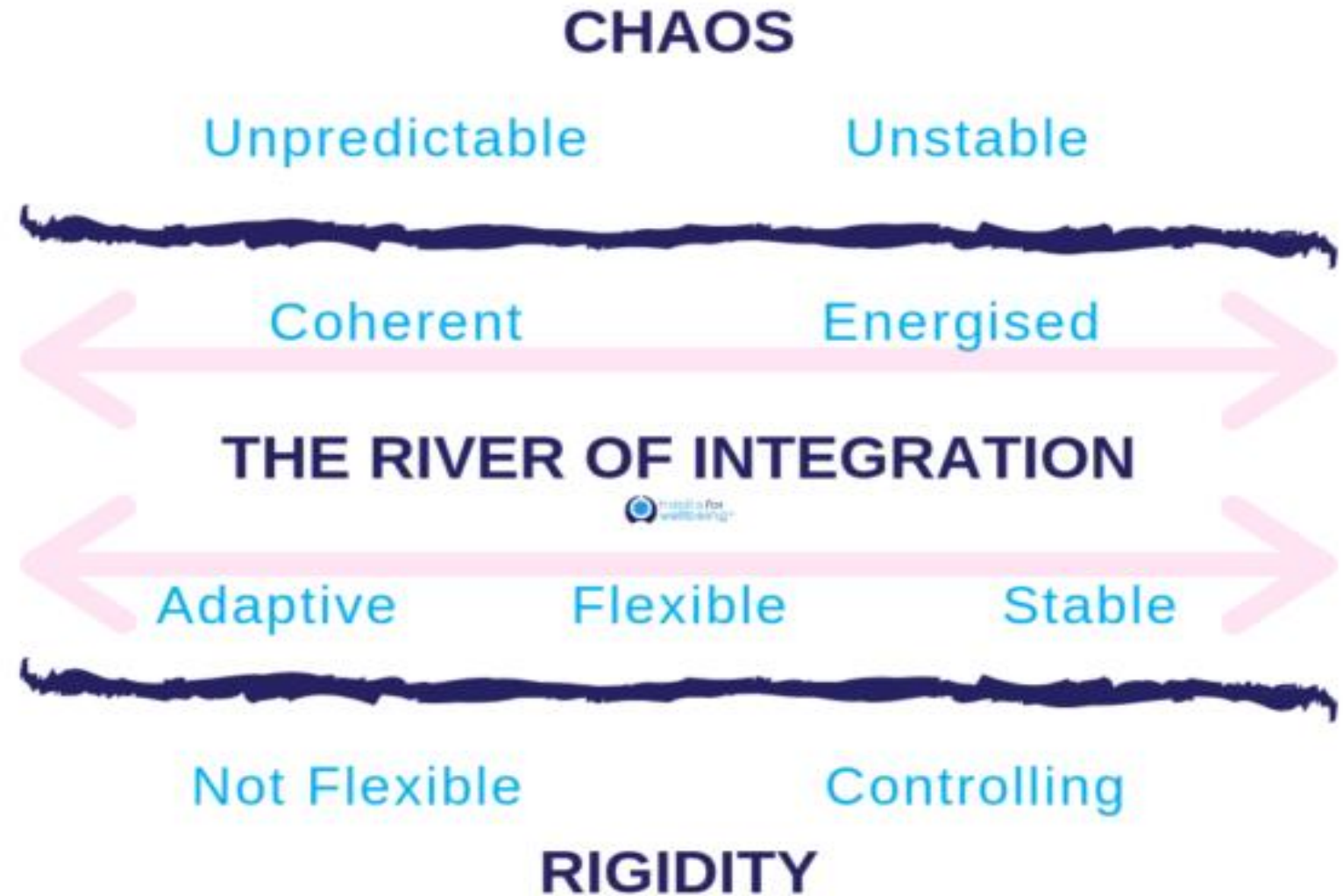- Fatigue
- impaired immune system
- sleep and appetite disturbances
- Anxiety
- hyper vigilance/control issues
- decreased self esteem
- loss of interest in tasks
- Avoidance – avoiding client contact or supervision

Not all indicators in isolation will determine vicarious trauma. However, experienced collectively, these can have a significant impact on the individual, the team and organisation.

Wellbeing – The River of Integration
(Dan Seigel)

CHAOS

Unpredictable   Unstable

Coherent   Energised

THE RIVER OF INTEGRATION

Adaptive   Flexible   Stable

Not Flexible   Controlling

RIGIDITY

Adapted from - Siegel, D. (2009). Mindsight - The New Science of Personal Transformation. NSW, Australia: Scribe Publications.

Self assessment

- Useful to monitor impact on the practitioner

- E.g. tools: **Self Assessment Tool** and **ProQol**

- (Professional Quality of Life)

https://www.proqol.org/

- NB. These provide a **snapshot in time** of how a worker

 is travelling re their sense of self in the work.
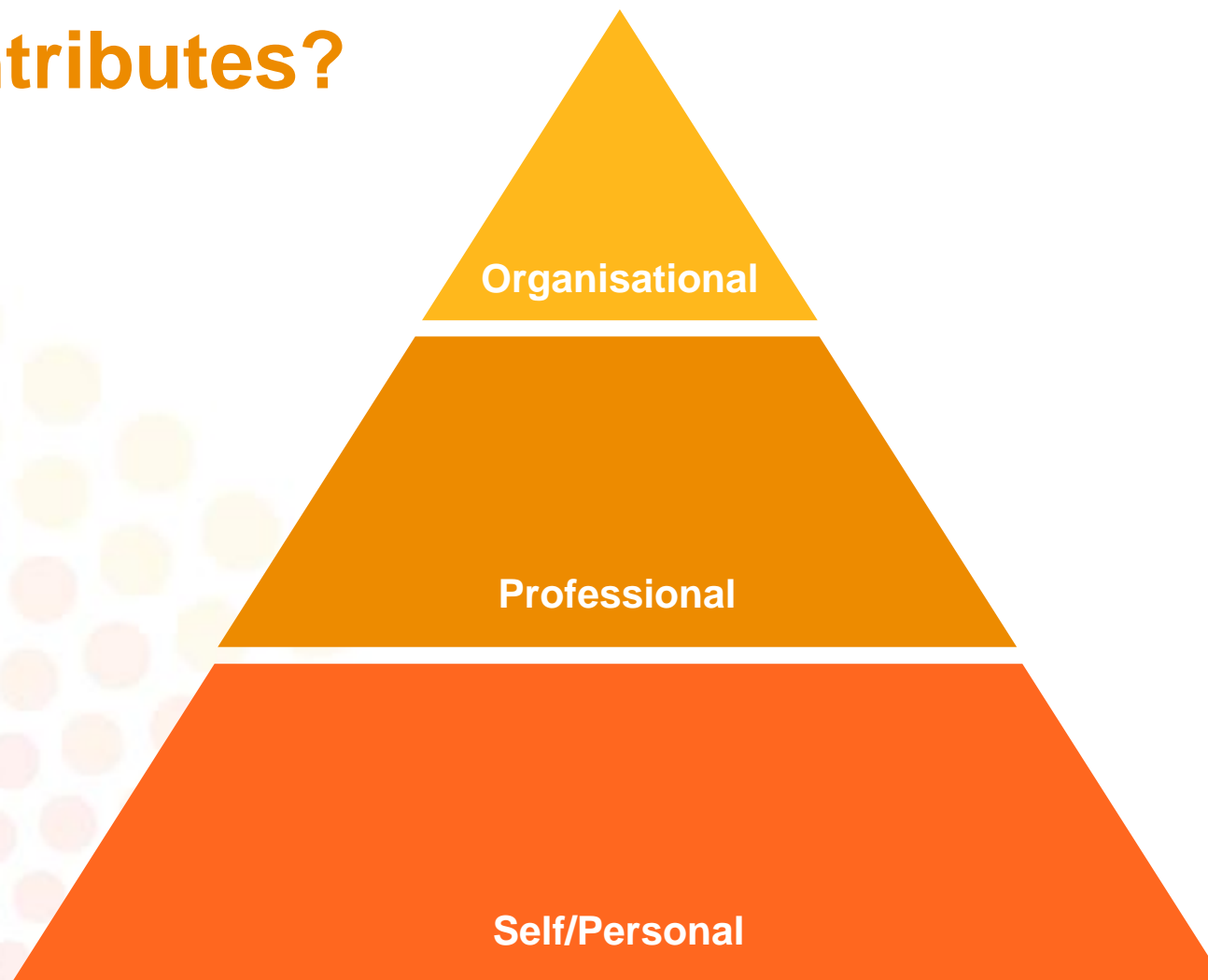
Consider ways you might use these in your own workplace and/or practice

Contributing and Protective Factors

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# What Contributes?

Organisational

Professional

Self/Personal

Organisational

- Poor caseload management
- Lack of reflective supervision
- Organisational culture that is not trauma-informed (impacts are not understood or acknowledged)
- Workplace culture promotes ineffective coping strategies such as minimising, denial or 'competitive stressing'
- High level unpredictability or inflexibility

Professional

- Nature of work
- Complex client relationships
- Poor boundaries
- Not accessing or making the most of supervision
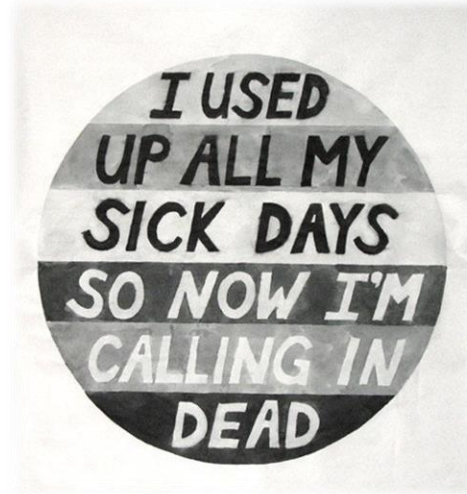
Personal

- Lack of self-awareness (re levels of anxiety, stress and fatigue)
- Poor work-life boundaries and balance
- Ineffective coping strategies
- No built in self-care/wellbeing activities
- Unresolved or non-integrated personal trauma experiences
- Lack of social support
- Additional personal stressors such as health, family or finances

What Protects?

Organisational

Professional

Self/Personal

Organisational

- Effective caseload management

- Regular and effective reflective supervision

- Trauma-informed organisational culture

- Workplace culture promotes effective coping strategies such as self-care and honest debriefing

- Workplace characterised by predictability and flexibility

Professional

?

Personal

?

Why does it matter?
The impacts of vicarious trauma

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Why does how I'm doing matter?

In relationships, one's ability to regulate one's window of tolerance will affect the other's ability to regulate their own window of tolerance

Child's movement in her/his window

Movement in my window

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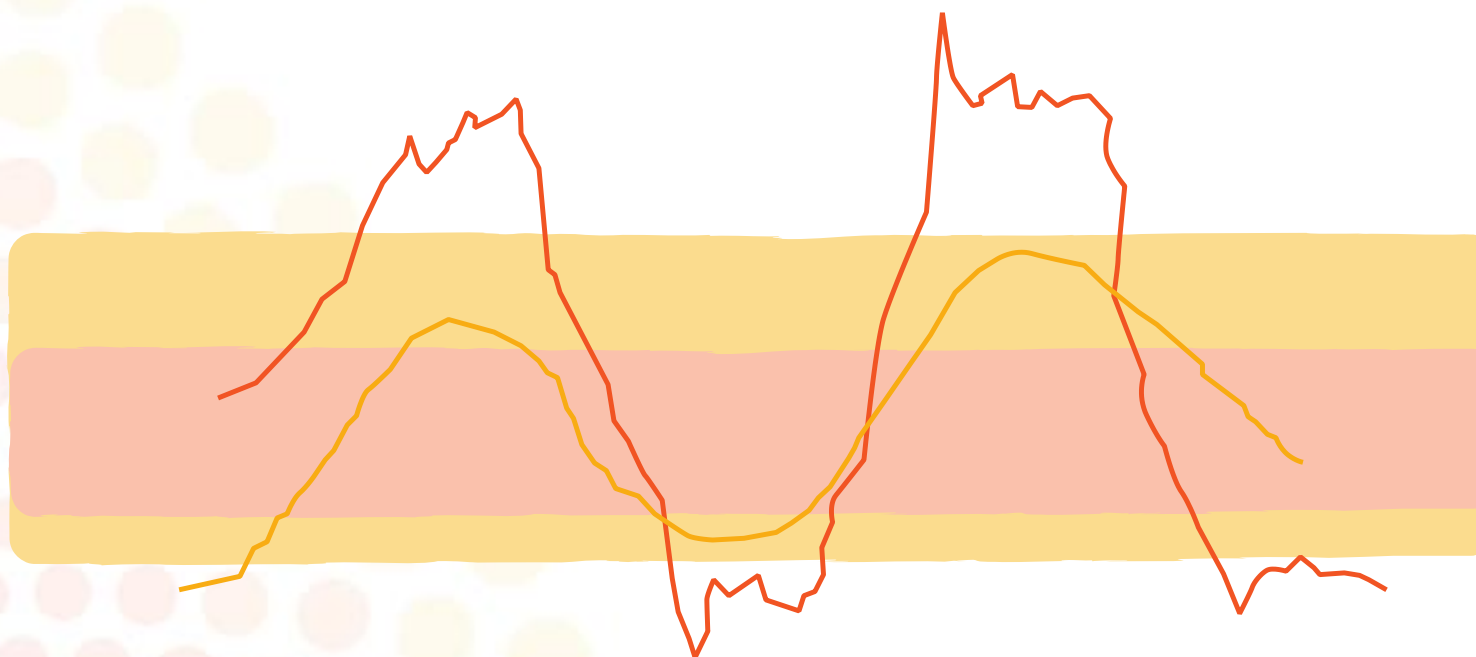
The impacts of vicarious trauma in the workplace

- Impacts of protective/defensive responses in the office – reduced team cohesion, poor morale, less collaboration

- Impacts for clients: staff have reduced capacity for attunement, tolerance, problem solving. Clients stop experiencing safety in therapeutic relationship. 'Blocked care'

- Impacts of rigidity – resistance to any changes (staff meetings changing format, new policies re room or car bookings, etc)

- Impacts of chaos – paperwork not completed, meetings missed, 'contagious anxiety'

- Reduced productivity, increased sick leave, poor client outcomes

Personal and Organisational Responses

- **Prevention**
- **Management**
- **Repair**

Prevention
Reducing the risk of vicarious trauma

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Prevention: Personal level

- Maintaining self care and prioritising healthy lifestyle/personal wellbeing

- Life outside of work incorporates: social, relaxing, spiritual, fun aspects

- Supportive and healthy relationships

- Work-life balance : maintaining healthy boundaries

- Personal & professional values align with the work

- Personal wellbeing plans are well-integrated & effective

Staying regulated during client work

- **IN THE MOMENT:**

- Physically (regulate our body systems)

- Mentally (keeping our cortex online)

- **AFTER THE MOMENT:**

- Debrief (social engagement system!)

- Physically - regulate body systems

- **BEFORE THE MOMENT** (and all the time)

- Effective self care

- Organisational culture
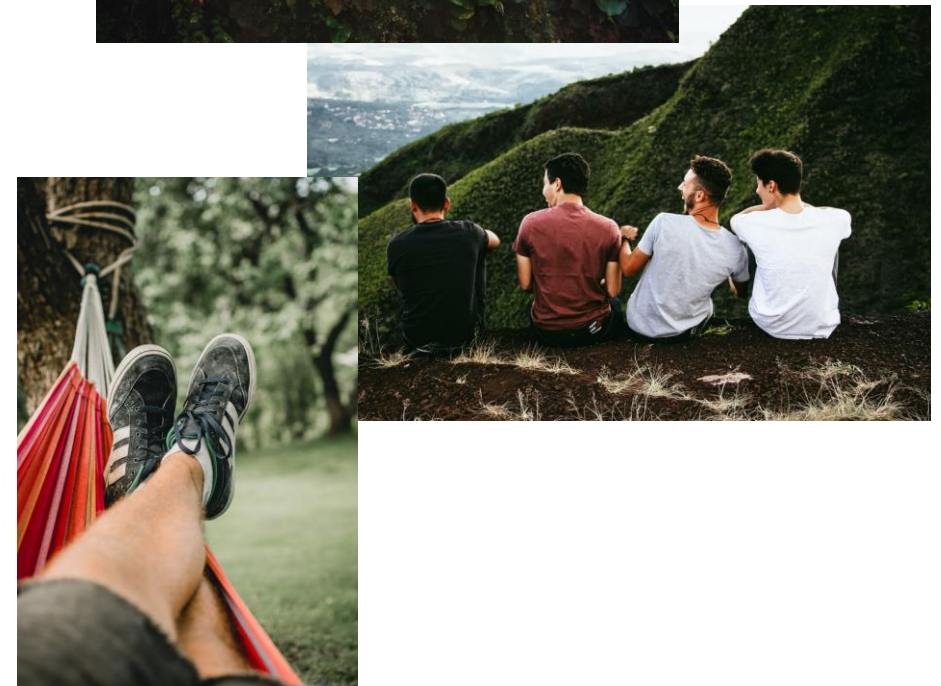
Prevention: Organisational Level

Factors that contribute to an effective organisational culture:

- Clear organisational purpose

- Focus on empowerment

- Participation in decision making

- Promote sense of belonging

- Have trust and confidence in workers

- Recognition and reward

- Caring attitude

- Emphasize integrity

- Provide diversity

- Promote excellence

Organisational factors

- Humour and fun

- Predictability and Flexibility

- Shared vulnerability – vicarious trauma is understood and acknowledged

- Acceptance rather than judgement

- Reflective supervision – accessible, regular and effective

- Supportive environment with shared goals and meaning

- Policies & procedures – protect workers, allow for flexibility, support healthy boundaries

Management
Responding to vicarious trauma

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Management: Personal level

- Maintain self care routine and increase activities that promote wellbeing where possible

- Acknowledge impacts and practice self compassion

- Utilise leave entitlements, supervision, de-briefing

- Review boundaries and consider any changes that need to be made

- Regular mindfulness practice (set realistic goals for implementing this if not already part of daily routine)

The role of Mindfulness in Self Care

Deactivation

Medial Pre-Frontal Cortex
the centre of Mindfulness/ Self-awareness.

Mindfulness deactivates the Amygdala
(the 'smoke-detector' of the brain) helping us to calm.

Mindfulness
also develops the Medial Pre-Frontal Cortex, helping us to develop reflection and empathy for others.
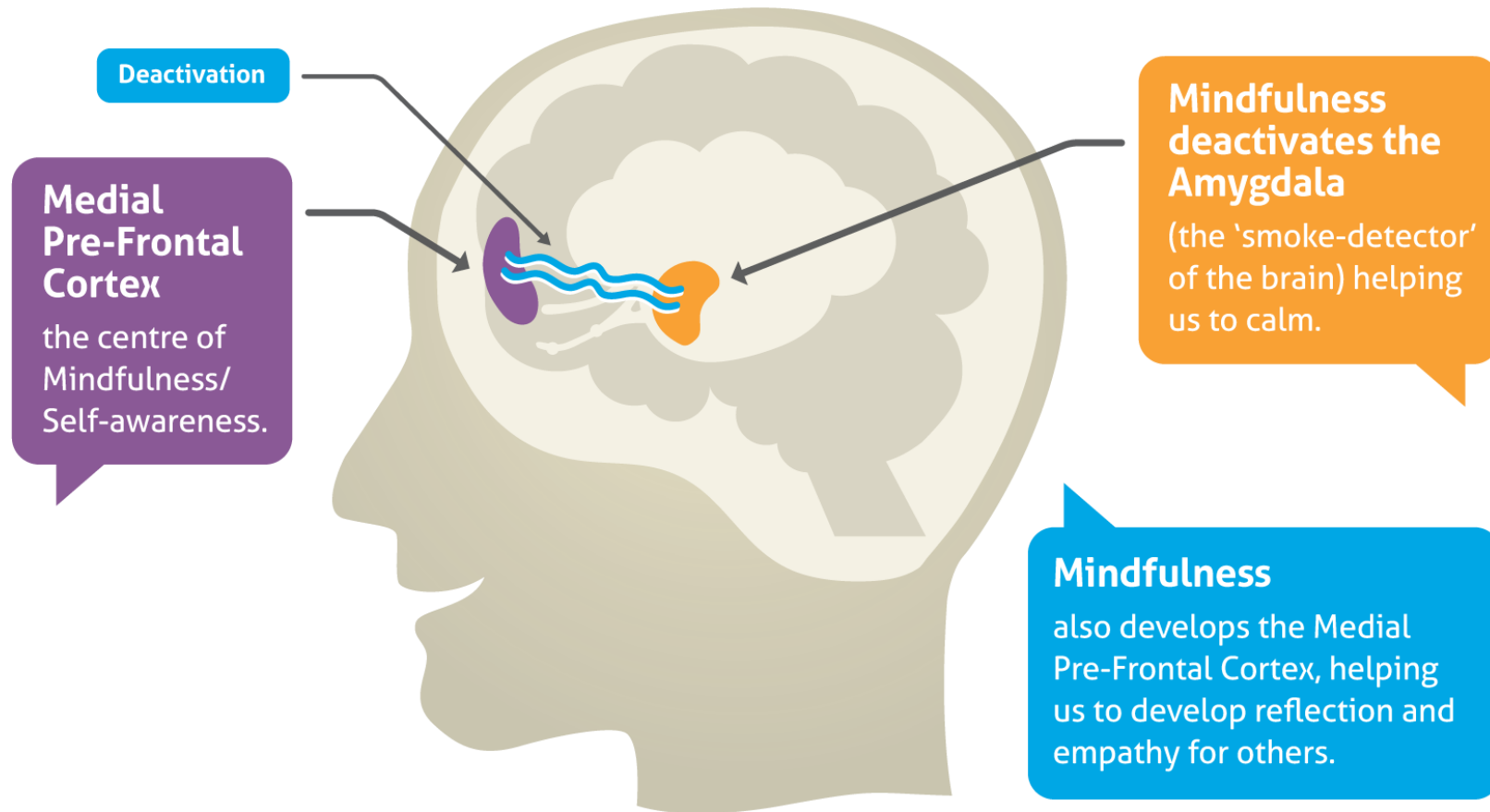
Management: Organisational Level

- Consider staff needs for: Trust/Dependence and Control
- Ensure access to supports: TIL, Annual Leave, Supervision, De-briefing
- Encourage self-care and support this however possible
- Create/maintain an environment of safety, predictability, openness

Repair
Promoting recovery from vicarious trauma

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Repair: Personal level

- Utilise leave entitlements
- Access therapy/counselling and/or external supervision
- Remember that VT is diagnostically almost identical to PTSD, so consider what you would recommend for a client with PTS response
- Activities/strategies that promote nervous system regulation
- Prioritise sleep, rest, healthy lifestyle (reduce/avoid alcohol, caffeine, etc)
- Remain socially connected

Repair: Organisational Level

- Ensure access to leave – be flexible where possible or necessary
- Support access to external counselling and/or supervision
- Consider temporary changes to case load or work role
- Create and support opportunities for staff member/s (individual or team) to practice self-reflection

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SELF-CARE WHEEL

Physical
Safe housing
Regular medical care
Eat Healthy • Exercise
Be sexual • Get enough sleep
Take vacations • Take time off
Massages • Acupuncture
Bubblebaths • Kiss
Ask for nurture
Take a walk • Turn off
cell phone
Get "me" time

Psychological
Self-reflection
Self-awareness • Therapy • Journal
Awareness • Sensory engagement
Paint • Go to symphony or ballet
Aromatherapy • Draw
Relax in the sun • Garden
Read a self-help book • Join a
support group • Think about
your positive qualities
Practice asking and
receiving help

Emotional
Affirmations
Self-love • Self-compassion
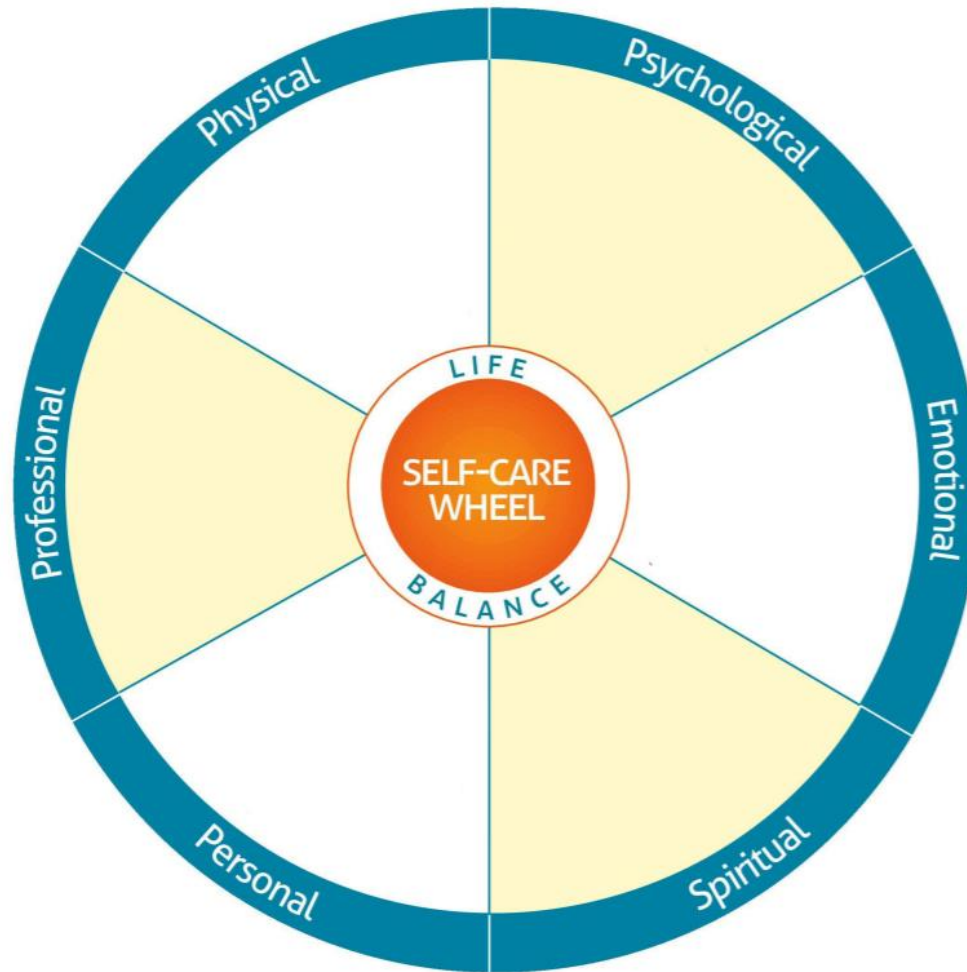Cry • Social justice engagement
Laugh • Say "I Love You"
Watch a funny movie
Find a hobby • Flirt
Buy yourself a present
Cuddle with your pet
Tell yourself
"You are gorgeous!"
Practice Forgiveness

Spiritual
Self-reflection
Go into nature
Find spiritual
community • Self-cherish
Meditate • Sing • Dance
Play • Be inspired
Take yoga • Play with children
Bathe in the ocean • Watch sunsets
Pray • Find spiritual mentor
Volunteer for a cause
Foster self-forgiveness

Personal
Learn who you are
Figure out what you
want in life • Plan
Short and Long-term Goals
Make a Vision Board
Foster friendships • Go on dates
Get coffee with a friend
Get out of debt • Just relax
Write a poem or a book • Spend time
with your family • Cook out
Learn to play guitar

Professional
Take time for lunch
Set boundaries • Do not work overtime
Leave work at work
Do not work during your time off • Get
Get regular supervision • Take mental
support of colleagues • Take
health days • Learn to say NO
Plan your next career
move • Take a class
Take all vacation
and sick days

SELF-CARE WHEEL

LIFE BALANCE

This Self-Care Wheel was inspired by and adapted from "Self-Care Assessment Worksheet" from *Transforming the Pain: A Workbook on Vicarious Traumatization* by Saakvitne, Pearlman & Staff of TSI/CAAP (Norton, 1996). Created by Olga Phoenix Project: Healing for Social Change (2013). Dedicated to all trauma professionals worldwide.
www.OlgaPhoenix.com

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Professional Education Services
professionals.childhood.org.au

SELF-CARE
WHEEL

Physical
Psychological
Professional
Emotional
Personal
Spiritual

LIFE

SELF-CARE WHEEL

BALANCE

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Thank you for your participation today

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