

# Creating Positive Parent Partnerships

**Dr Leonie White**

Psychologist & Clinical Family Therapist

Co-Director Queensland Institute of Family Therapy







## **Acknowledgement of Country**

I am honoured to be on the ancestral lands of the Traditional Owners of the area.

I acknowledge the First Australians as the traditional custodians of this continent, whose cultures are among the oldest living cultures in human history.

I pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging, for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the nation.



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

“Anyone who does  
anything to help a child in  
his life is a hero to me.”

Fred Rogers



[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)

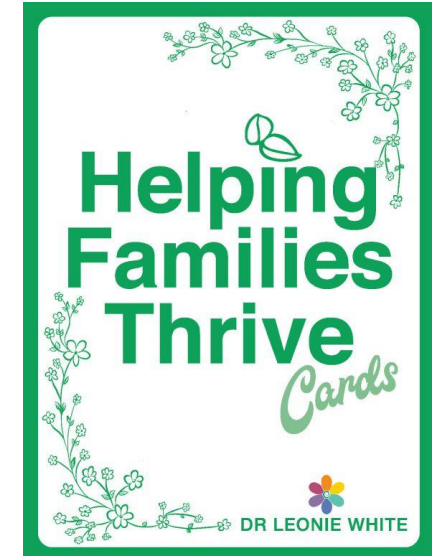


**DR LEONIE WHITE**



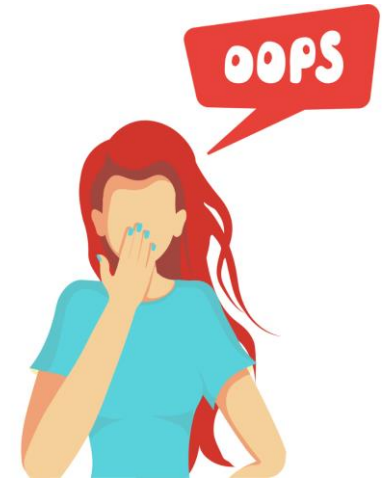
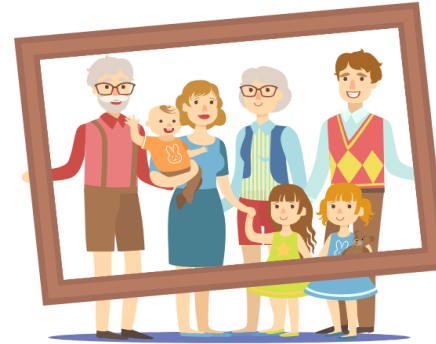
# About the Presenter: Dr Leonie White

- Psychologist & Clinical Family Therapist
- Creator: [Helping Families Thrive Cards](#)
- Co-Director QIFT [www.qldfamilytherapy.com](http://www.qldfamilytherapy.com)
- Background: Education Queensland, Centacare, CYMHS, Evolve Therapeutic Services, Education and Child Protection (Canada)
- Private Practice: Individual, couple and family work; foster, kinship residential care work
- Online courses – [drleoniewhite.teachable.com](http://drleoniewhite.teachable.com)
- Individual and Group Supervision
- Training and Workshops – Professionals & Parents
- Clinical Supervisor: QUT
- Guest Lecturer: USQ & RANZJP

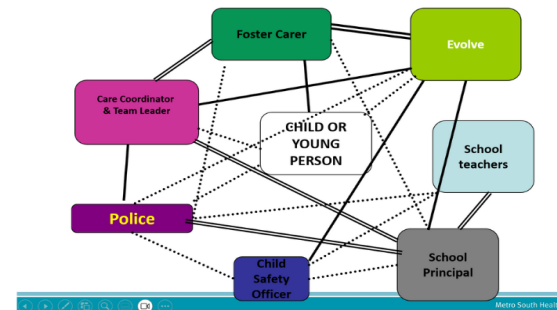




# What Really Qualifies Me for Today?



If we are realistic – this is what can actually happen!



DR LEONIE WHITE

# Plan for Today: A Relational Focus

- Orientation to Relational Focus
- Some Helpful Understandings & Ways Forward
- Tools and Tips
- Questions and Reflections

You have lots of great therapeutic skills for relationships e.g., therapeutic alliance.

Even though parents are not your primary clients, you can still use your therapeutic relationship skills to build positive parent relationships.





# Building Positive Parent Partnerships



## Considerations

### **A Relational Focus**

The relationship we have with parents and carers.

### **Context**

### **Meaning Making**



**DR LEONIE WHITE**



### **Circularity:**

- From Family Therapy
- Each element of a system influences and is influenced by each other in a feedback loop
- Helps conceptualise behaviour and beliefs in interactional terms
- Behaviours and beliefs that are perceived as difficulties will also develop in a circular fashion – behaviour is both cause and effect.
- A change in any part of the system affects all other parts of the system.





# Extra Resource



qldfamilytherapy  
3 days ago · 11 min



## Customers or Window Shoppers? Ideas for Relationship Based Change, for Different...

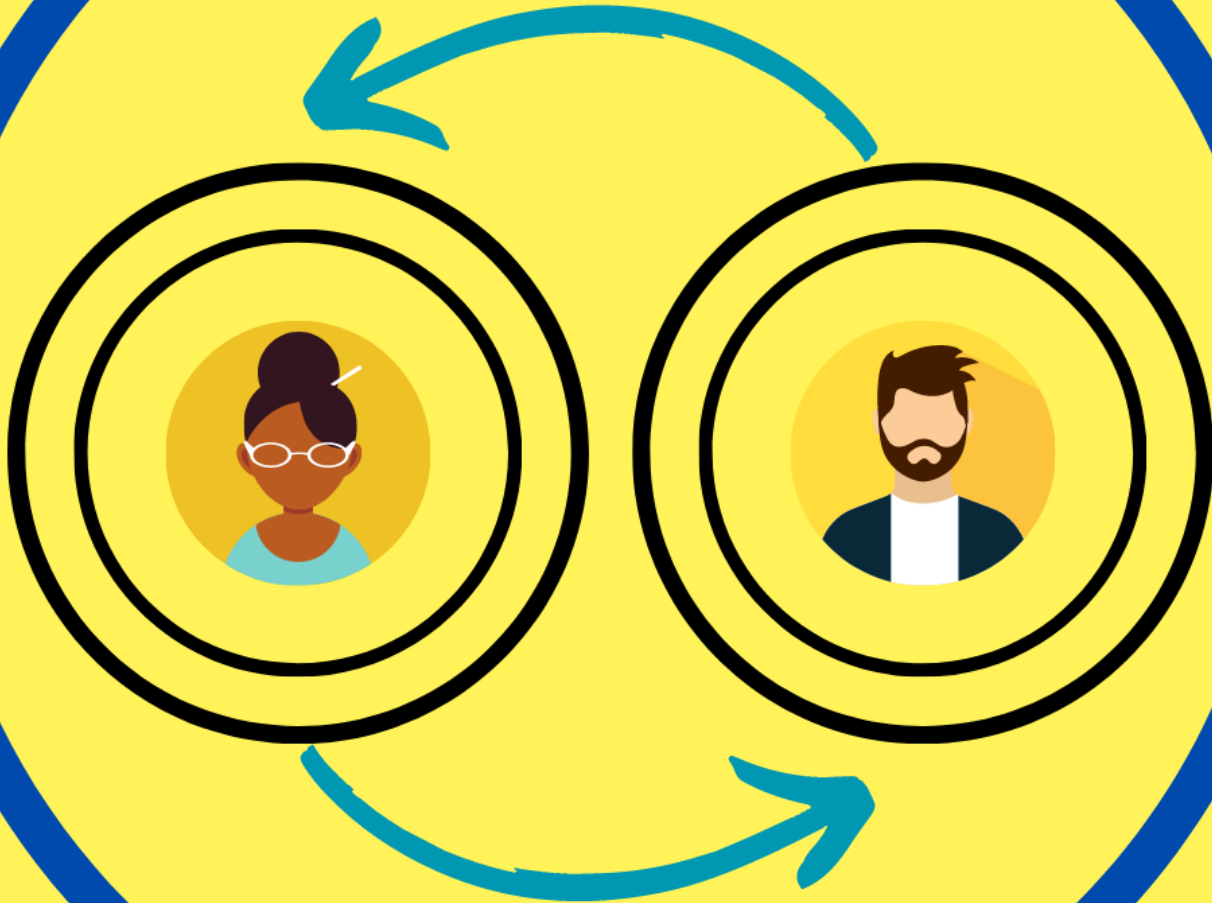
Overcome a common therepeutic challenge to build cooperative, collaborative relationships as a vehicle for change, growth, and healing.

20 views 0 comments



DR LEONIE WHITE

# Context



# Circularity

## **Context:**

“the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” and “change in any one part of the system affects the rest of the system” (Flaskas, 2010).

Let’s consider the multiple layers of context.



**DR LEONIE WHITE**



# Context

Global Pandemic  
Mental Health Pandemic  
Rising Cost of Living  
Natural Disasters



## **Context:**

“the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” and “change in any one part of the system affects the rest of the system” (Flaskas, 2010).

Current big picture contextual stressors:

- For us
- For our clients/parents/families



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

# Context



Work  
Family  
Community  
Historical Influences  
ACES

## **Context:**

“the whole is greater than the sum of its parts” and “change in any one part of the system affects the rest of the system” (Flaskas, 2010).

Possible individual contextual stressors:

- For us
- For our clients/parents/families



**DR LEONIE WHITE**



# ACES

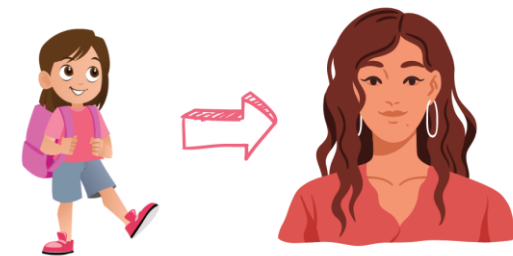


- Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood
- E.g., violence, abuse, neglect, witnessing violence at home, instability due to parental separation or incarceration of a parent.
- ACES may result in stress and trauma
- In Australia 1 in 5 children has been exposed to 3 or more ACES
- AND 2/3 of children will have experienced a potentially traumatic event by the age of 16
- These children become adults who have children

## What are ACES?

Also consider socio-political factors that are not in the ACES like:

- Poverty
- Racism



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

**Context**



**Circularity**

**Contexts interact.**



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

# Context

My context is  
meeting your  
context



# Circularity

**In every interaction my context is meeting your context.**



**DR LEONIE WHITE**



# Context

Patterns  
Emerge



Sometimes  
Unhelpful

# Circularity

## Patterns emerge:

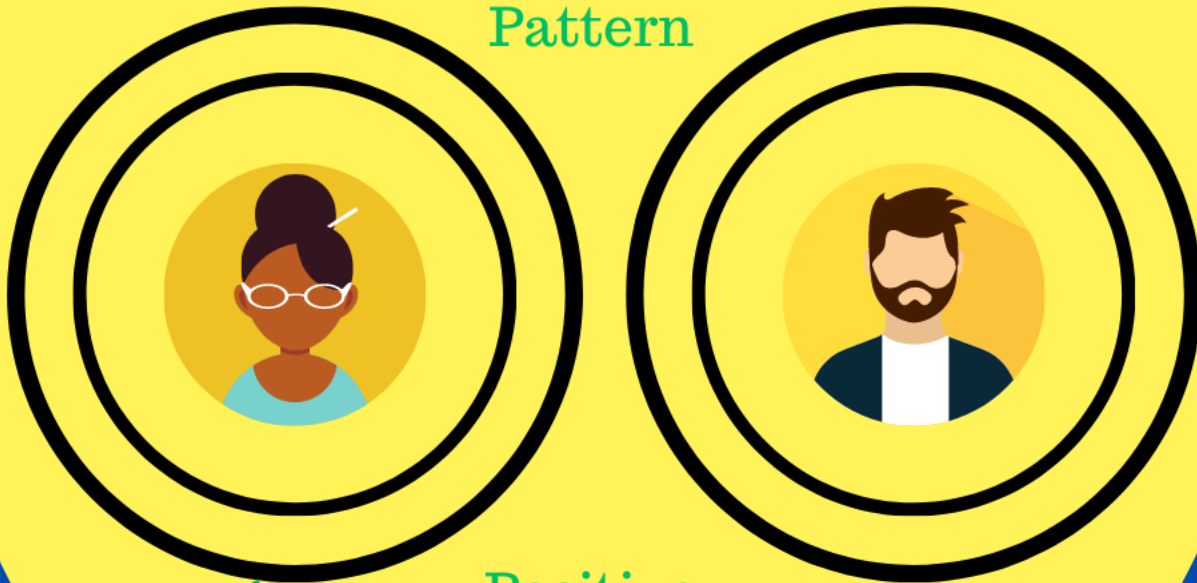
- Sometimes patterns designed to be helpful become unhelpful
- E.g., Common sense but misguided solutions
- Sometimes we become stuck in patterns



DR LEONIE WHITE

# Context

Tools to  
Create a New  
Pattern



Positive  
Partnerships

# Circularity

**Tools for creating new patterns when old patterns aren't working:**

- Today we will look at: "Circuit breakers"
- Ideas for new patterns

Shifting from problem saturated systems to relationship and capacity building systems.



**DR LEONIE WHITE**



Keep today's ideas in mind for any type of interaction.

All points of contact have the potential to build positive parent partnerships.






# Some Helpful Understandings & Ways Forward

- Anxiety in the System & Way of Being
- Polyvagal Theory & ...
  - Becoming Polyvagal informed
  - Brain Based Relationships
  - Mentalization, Curiosity and Communication
- PACE
  - When the going gets tough get ACE interactions
- Tools and Tips
  - Polyvagal tips
  - A Roadmap for Positive Parent Partnerships
- Questions



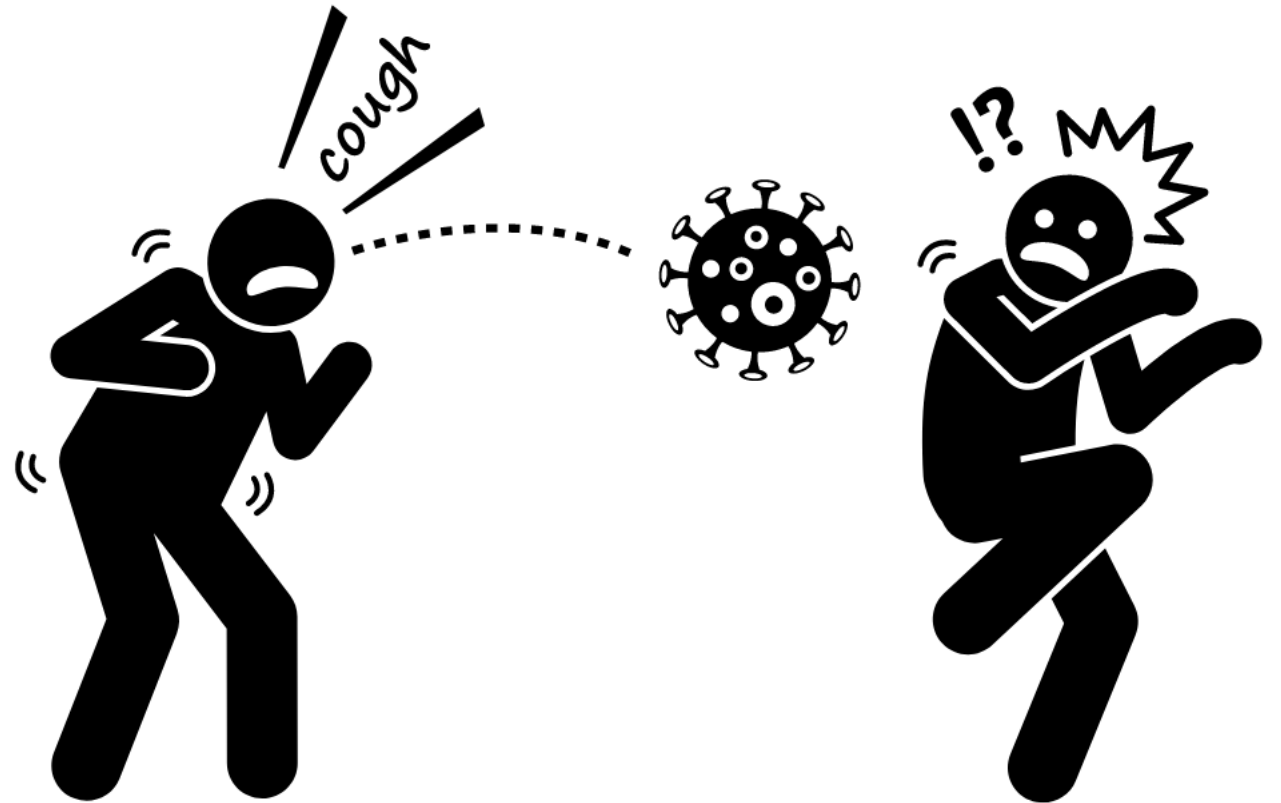


# Some Helpful Understandings

Anxiety in the System

# Anxiety in the System

- Anxiety is in family systems and broader systems
- Anxiety is 'catchy like the flu' and can spread rapidly







# Anxiety in the System

A neurobiological perspective:

- Anxiety can be experienced **emotionally**, **cognitively** and **physiologically** (e.g., amygdala activation, heart's magnetic field)
- Anxiety can be 'caught' **relationally**
  - The heart's magnetic field
  - Mirror neurons
  - Social engagement system

- **So what can help?**

“Relational cues significantly trigger and determine activity of our nervous system”

“Certain transactions between individuals may down-regulate the action of the sympathetic nervous system which is triggered by stress”

MacKay, 2012:234



DR LEONIE WHITE

# Anxiety in the System

## A Systemic Family Therapy Perspective

“Families [all systems] are anxiety-managing machines, and they do this remarkably well most of the time” (Smith, 2020).

Systems are emotional units and systems thinking can help to understand the dynamics of the system, providing ideas on how to build positive parent partnerships.



# Anxiety in the System

- Stress can expose limits of a system's adaptive functioning (tension intensifies)
- When systems reach their "limit" predictable patterns can emerge
- E.g., "Contagious" anxiety, tension, stress, distress
  - Dr Annemaree Bickerton on Jenny Brown's Parent Hope Podcast (Parent-Child Dyad)  
"These things are just normal. They're natural. And it's absolutely predictable that if a child is distressed, the person programmed most sensitive to them will become distressed."
  - Natural evolutionary process, that the parent will catch the distress of their child  
"The problem in that is that then the parent with all their wisdom, their years of experience, their learning, in distress can become as primitively driven and as instinctively driven as the child."
  - Love = closeness – can be beautiful love, angry love, protective love, or frustrated love
- Idea: Parents will likely be distressed if their child is distressed
- Idea: We are also close to our clients and can become distressed
- Idea: Anxiety is contagious
  - e.g., parent, teacher, guidance officer, deputy principal.....



# Anxiety in the System

Anxiety can create  
black/white thinking,  
influence decision  
making and reactivity in  
the system  
This can be contagious  
and rapidly spreading!



Anxiety can invite us to  
withdraw and give up  
(flight response)  
*E.g., "It's no good talking to  
that parent – they won't  
listen anyway."*



Anxiety can invite rigidity  
such as doggedly sticking  
to a position  
(fight response)  
*E.g., "That parent is not thinking  
straight – I will tell them again."*

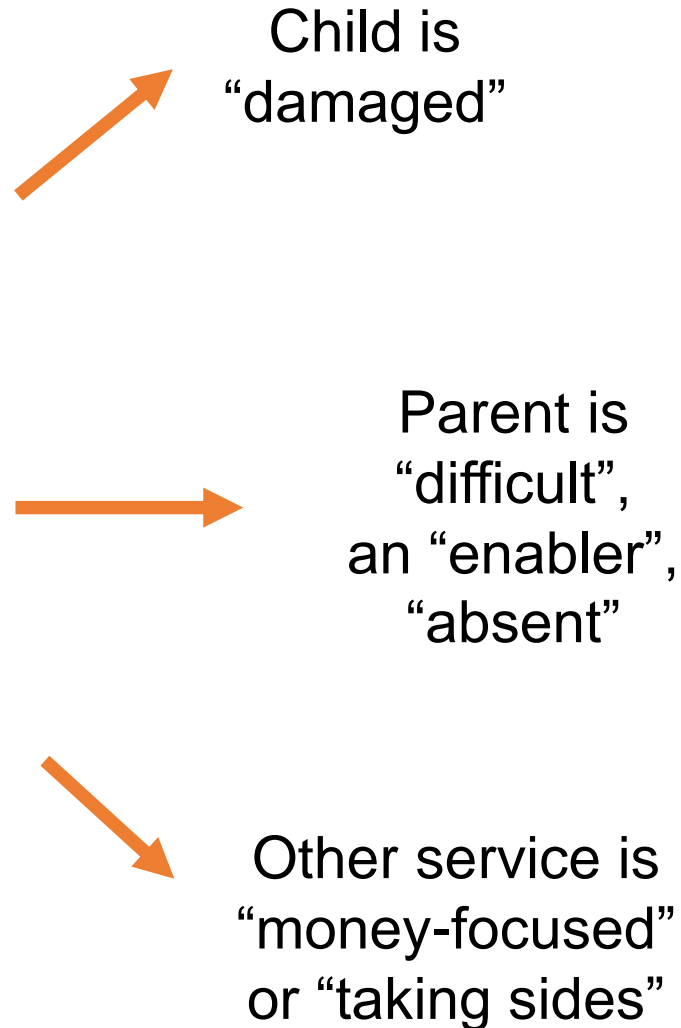




# Anxiety in the System

Anxiety can invite  
unhelpful and  
inaccurate  
characterisation, and  
polarization.

This can be contagious  
and rapidly spreading!



# A Parent's Experience (some parts)

- Anxious
- At a loss, not confident
- Tired/burdened because other parent works away/long hours
- Anger and resentment, “fighting the system”
- “Parent Guilt” and Shame
- Managing own stressors and wellbeing
- Experiencing domestic violence
- Feeling judged, scrutinized, evaluated
- Standing “alone” in meetings full of professionals

**So what can help to step out of anxious rigidity and polarisation?**

**Avoid anxiety based rigidity with your way of being**



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

# Way of Being

**“People respond primarily to the way we feel toward them.**

**More important than our knowledge, our skills, or our education, is simply our goodness – the quality of our hearts” (p. 31).**

Anderson (2006) uses the term “way of being” to describe how a therapist “conveys to the other that they are valued as a unique human and not as a category of people; that they have something worthy of saying and hearing; that you meet them without prior judgment” (p. 44).

Fife et al., (2014)



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

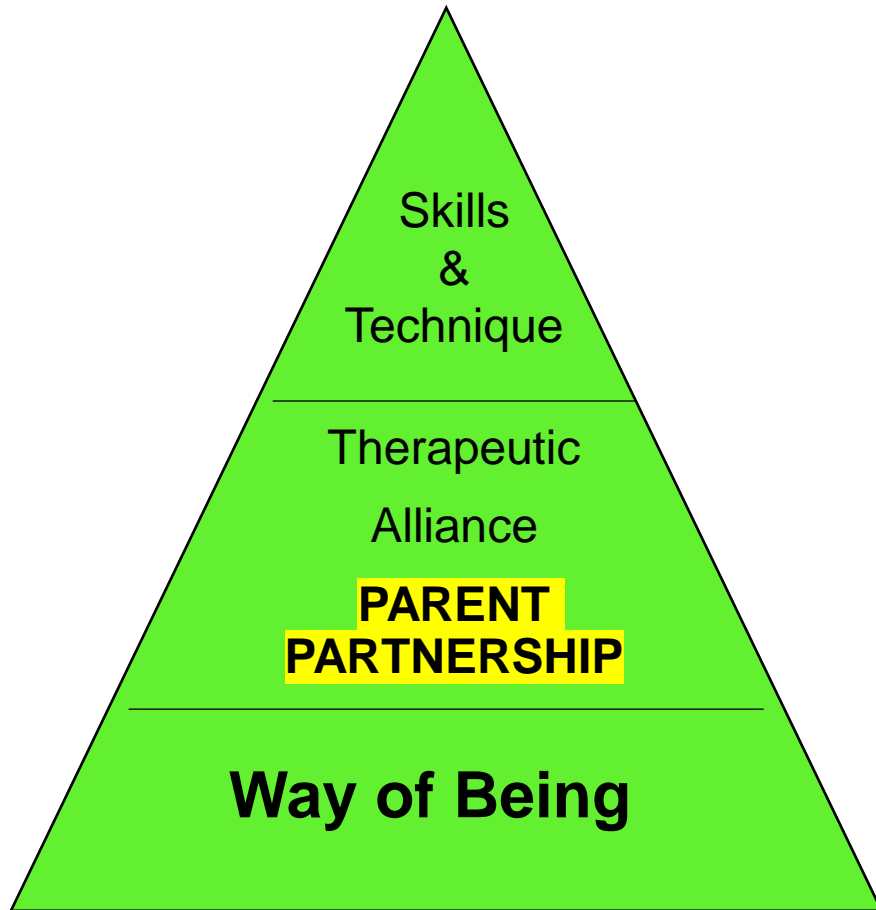
# Way of Being – Experiential Activity (Optional)

- Remember a time when you were treated as (1) an object, (2) as a person.
- Reflection:
  - When you were treated as an object/person, were you more or less open to the other's influence?
  - Were you more or less likely to hear what the other had to say?
  - Was there an increase or decrease emotional closeness or connection?
- “Being treated as an object tends to push people apart, creating emotional distance and closing them off from the influence of the other. Being regarded in an I-Thou way, on the other hand, tends to draw people together and invites openness and mutual respect.”
- Fife et al (2014)





# Way of Being



## The Therapeutic Pyramid

Fife et al., (2014)

Way of being constitutes the foundation of successful therapeutic relationship.

Who we are and how we regard our clients matters as much as what we do, or more.

Our way of being will influence how clients experience us

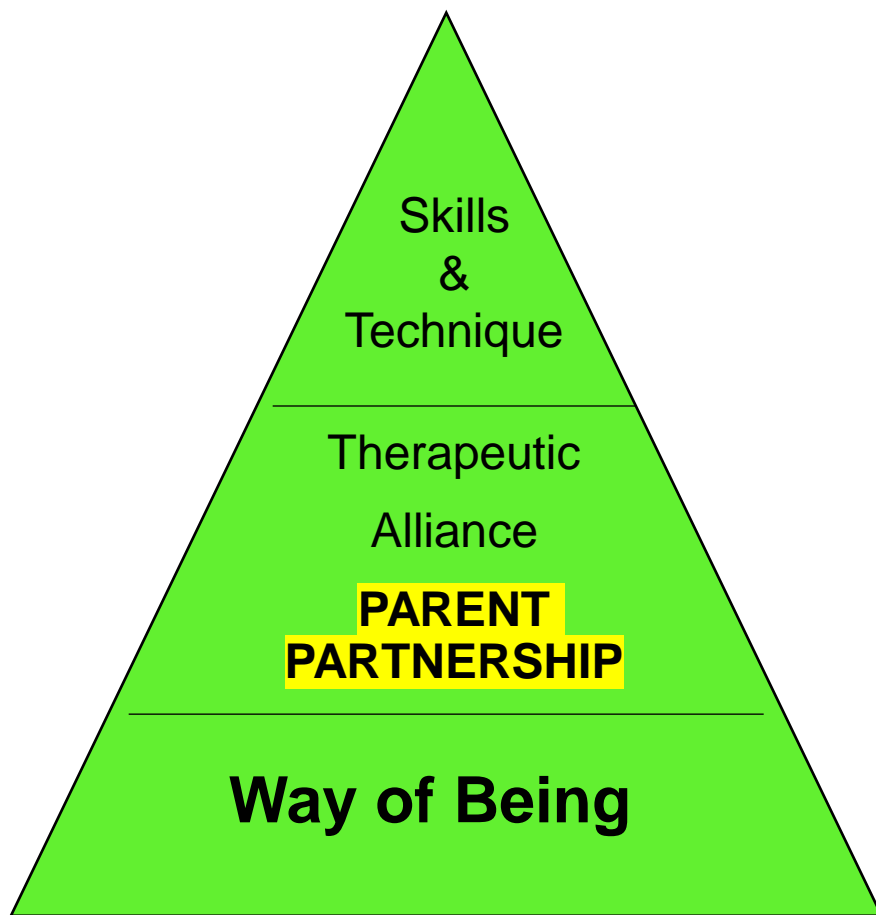
The effectiveness of each level depends on the level below

- Skills and techniques rests upon the quality of the therapeutic alliance
- Skills and Alliance grounded in the therapist's way of being i.e., in the moment stance or attitude to clients



DR LEONIE WHITE

# Way of Being



## The Therapeutic Pyramid

Fife et al., (2014)

Way of being is:

- How clients experience us
- Our humanity
- “I-thou” (genuine, open to humanity of other, compassion for other’s lived experience, )
- Not “I-it” position (impersonal, objectifying)

Way of being is communicated by:

- Attitude
- Tone
- Body language
- Word choice
- Timing



DR LEONIE WHITE

# The I-Thou Position

“I-Thou reflects the attitude in which a person views with compassion the lived experience of another—their needs, hopes, dreams, fears, struggles, and so forth—as vividly as they view their own.” Fife et al., (2014)

- Working towards a continuous I-Thou way of being is considered a lifelong goal.
- **An I-Thou therapist is more likely to evoke an I-Thou way of being in another person**

A graduate student asked Jay Haley:

“What do you think is the most important thing an MFT student should learn during their graduate studies?” Without any hesitation, Haley answered, “Kindness.”

**“Who a therapist is, then, is more important than what they do.”**  
Fife et al., (2014)



## Quick Tip:

Selfcare and collective care are essential.

You can't take a compassionate position if you are feeling overwhelmed or not supported




## Quick Tip:

Imagine a person's context, and actively embody compassion and kindness.







# Some Helpful Understandings

Polyvagal Theory

# Polyvagal Theory & Relationships

- Becoming PVT informed (self-care and grounding)
  - Polyvagal theory & The Ladder
- Harnessing your nervous system: Brain Based Relationships
  - Harnessing your nervous system for effective relationship building for positive parent partnerships
- Mentalizing, Curiosity and Communication



---

**TRAUMA AND THE NERVOUS SYSTEM:  
A POLYVAGAL PERSPECTIVE**

---

***BASED ON STEPHEN PORGES'  
GROUNDBREAKING POLYVAGAL THEORY***



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

# What is Polyvagal Theory?

- A theory developed by Dr Stephen Porges in the 1990s to better understand our nervous system
- Suggests the vagus nerve plays a key role in regulating emotional and physiological responses to stress
- Understanding the different responses of our nervous system responds in different situations enables us to learn to:
  - Better regulate our emotions
  - Improve relationships with others

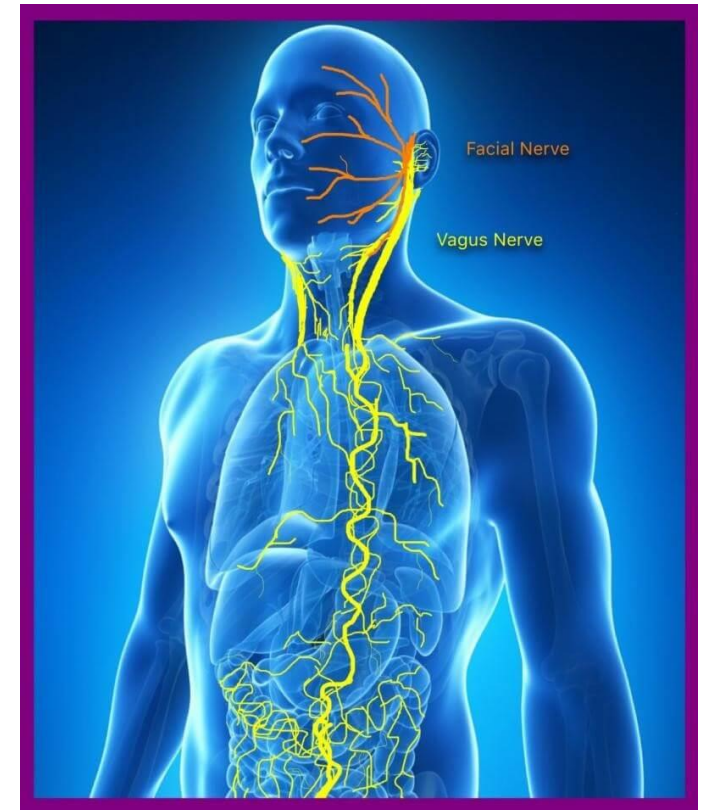


Image Credit:

<http://www.innovativetreatments.co.uk/vagus-nerve/>



DR LEONIE WHITE

# Understanding Neuroception in Polyvagal Theory

**Autonomic Nervous System (ANS):**  
Constantly scanning environment for signs of safety and danger.



ANS scans environment  
**inside** the body  
e.g., heart rate, muscle tension  
&  
and **outside** the body  
e.g., busy environment, loud noises

**Neuroception:** processing information through the senses - evaluating risk & adjusting physiological response (unconscious, automatic, "lightning speed")



The body can be scared without conscious awareness of cues or knowledge of being scared.  
Changes can be instant.  
**Neuroception can be faulty.**

[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)

## Neuroception of Safety

### Social Engagement

Eye contact  
Facial expression  
Voice tone  
Body language relaxed  
Resting heart rate

## Neuroception of Danger

### Defensive

### Mobilized for fight/flight

Pale or flushed  
Muscles tense  
Breathing faster  
Heightened attention  
Elevated heart rate

## Neuroception of Life Threat

### Defensive

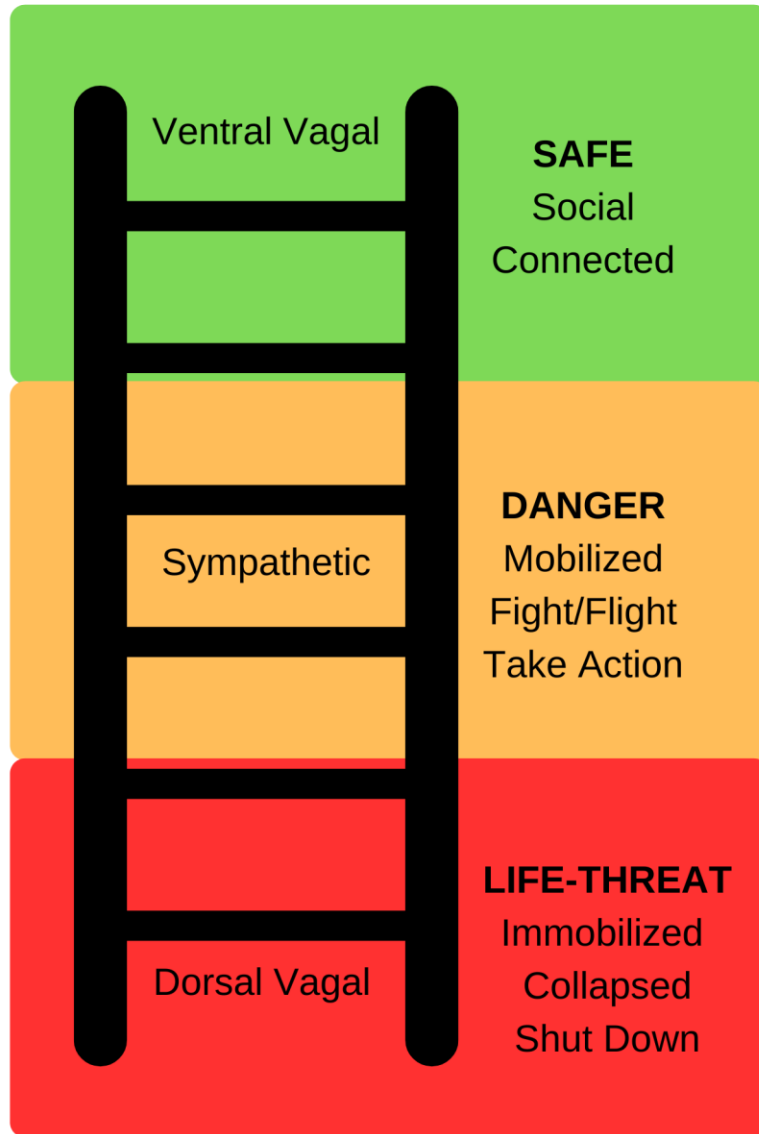
### Immobilised Free/Shut Down

Pale  
Eyes closed  
Lax muscles  
Slow heart rate  
Eyes closed or open+fixed



# Life on the Ladder

From Deb Dana



[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)

## The Importance of Your Polyvagal System:

### Ventral Vagal = Social Engagement:

- Give messages of safety
- Behave in ways that support needs

NB It's unrealistic to be in Ventral Vagal all the time:

- Important to develop awareness
- Important to have strategies to move up the ladder for yourself
- Important to have strategies to support the other's autonomic state



DR LEONIE WHITE

# PVT, Schools, and Parents

## **The Polyvagal Ladder**

Everyone has a “ladder”

People will be at different  
places on the ladder

Young People, Parents,  
Colleagues, & Other  
Professionals, etc,



DR LEONIE WHITE

# The Polyvagal School Counsellor

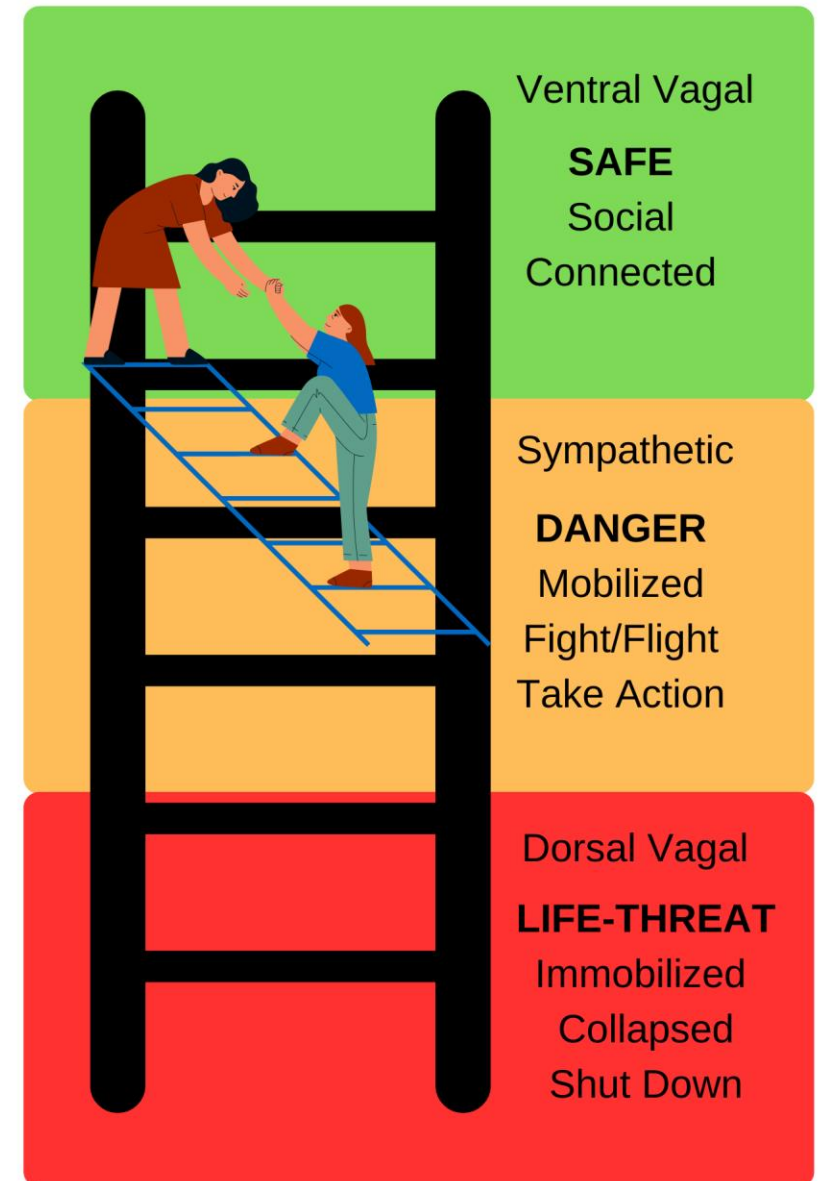
**You can create contagious calm to build relationships and help others meet you in Ventral Vagal – a safe, engaged state.**



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

## Life on the Ladder

From Deb Dana



# The Polyvagal School Counsellor

## The Importance of School Counsellor's Polyvagal System:

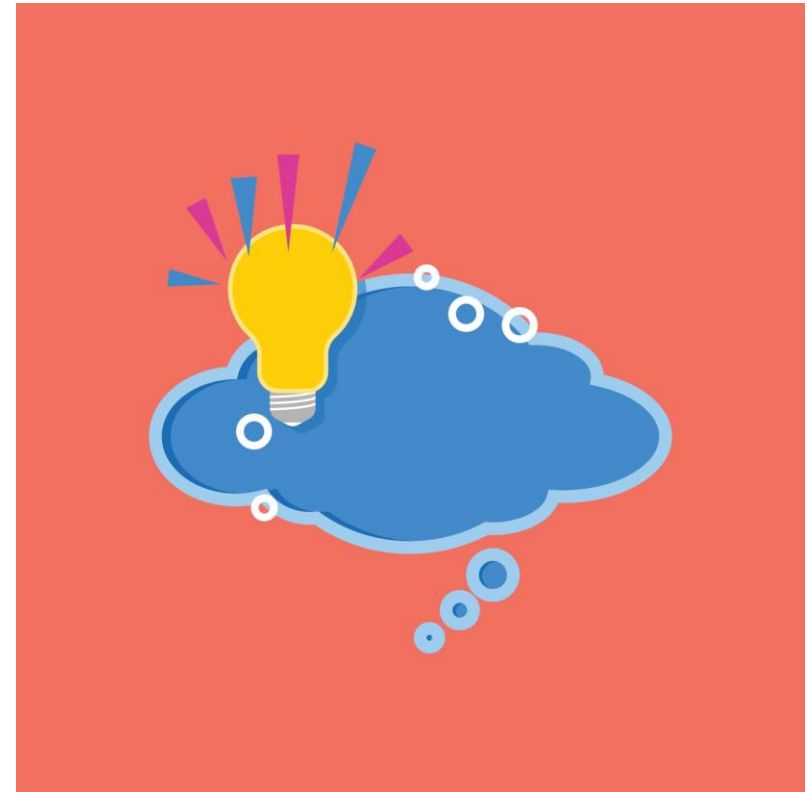
### Establishing a relationship as a social connectedness intervention

- Encourages people to see themselves as valuable and worthy of care.
- Encourages people to see the practitioner as available and compassionate.
- Instills a profound sense of security and potentially alleviates anxiety.
- Helps the professional to manage their own nervous system
  - Better for ourselves if we manage our position on the ladder – Nurture yourself
  - Less triggering for clients if we manage our position on the ladder – Neuroception & Circularity
- Context helps to not take it personally & create a culture of care



## Quick Tip:

If it's important it will still be there when you are back in ventral vagal.





# The Polyvagal School Counsellor

## Your Feet Grounding Exercise (Option)

- Scan your body to check how it feels right now. If you are feeling anything, try to identify “where” in your body you feel it.
- Place a hand gently on the body area. Take a breath and exhale slowly, melting into that experience.
- Feel your feet on the ground.
- Gently push into your feet, as if you’re doing a slow walk on the spot. Imagine you are pushing away the floor beneath you.
- Now imagine your feet are planted barefoot in the grass or on the ground. Keep walking and pushing into the ground, and exhaling.
- Now stop, pause, and notice your body. Sense and see with your inner imagination the ground underneath you that is supporting you right now and tune into that. Keep breathing.
- Is there any change? How is your body now?



# The Polyvagal School Counsellor

## 5 SENSES GROUNDING

5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1

5 Things you can SEE

4 Things you can FEEL

3 Things you can HEAR

2 Things you can SMELL

1 Thing you can TASTE

[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)

What  
grounding tips  
do you have  
that you could  
give yourself?



DR LEONIE WHITE

# The Polyvagal School Counsellor

## Self Care Infographic & Breathing Cards

<https://www.drleoniewhite.com/free-resources>

Resources you can share with students and parents too

### Breathing Hacks for Stress & Anxiety



[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)

### Hand on Heart Breathing



Super charge strong steady breathing by placing your hand on your heart. Placing your hand on your heart while doing your strong steady breathing will connect you to the beat of your heart and release oxytocin. Oxytocin is a chemical in the brain and it's very powerful for anxiety because it calms the brain.

[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)

### Longer Out Breath



Take a strong steady inhalation, and then slowly begin to elongate your exhale until it becomes twice as long as your in breath. Counting can help e.g., start with inhaling for 2 and then exhale for 4, then inhale for 3 and exhale for 6, then inhale for 4 and exhale for 8. Practice this for a minute or two and notice what ratio feels right for you. E.g., Some people prefer breathing in for 4 and out for 7. It doesn't have to be exactly double, the out breath just needs to be longer than the in breath.

[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)



# An Extra Resource



drleoniewhite 

Mar 15 • 5 min



## It's Not a Fair Fight for Thoughts! What To Do About It.

Brains are wired to protect us meaning emotions can take over our thinking. Find out more & how to live a calm, thoughtful, connected life.

42 views 0 comments



DR LEONIE WHITE

# The Polyvagal School Counsellor & Language

## Language Matters e.g., “disruptive” or “dysregulated”?

- **Disruptive:**
  - Implies the person has a stable, negative trait unlikely to change; implies a character defect.
  - Doesn't produce any insight into what might be helpful and limits options, creating a negative feedback loop.
- **Dysregulated:**
  - Implies behaviour and emotions are a temporary state that can and will change
  - Implies the person was once regulated and something happened to cause dysregulation.
  - Elicits a sense of curiosity about what happened and open discussion and options.

## TIP: Language, Perspective and Polyvagal Theory

- A shift from disruptive to dysregulated “assists healthcare providers to send more signals of safety and stokes a virtuous cycle, creating a positive feedback loop” (Sanders & Thompson, 2022: 157).
  - Using compassion leads to neuroception of compassion as a signal for safety, supporting regulation.
  - This helps to move up the autonomic ladder together.



# Harnessing Your Nervous System

## Brain Based Relationships

“ The first session in every case is a meeting of survival circuits between the total number of people in the room”

Hanna (2014)

“A neuroception for safety is necessary before social engagement behaviours can occur and the benefits of social support can be utilised”.

Stephen Porges

“it is important to be aware that building rapport takes times, and to be mindful that imposing techniques too soon may activate the client’s stress response, inhibiting the therapeutic process”

Rothschild (2000)





# Harnessing Your Nervous System Brain Based Relationships

Your interpersonal style and approach,  
and your way of being can soothe or  
activate your client.

**“At every moment, we are engaged in  
this brain-to-brain creative dance”**

Badenoch (2008: 21)



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

# Harnessing Your Nervous System

## Brain Based Relationships

**Notice your position on the “ladder” and take steps if needed.**

**Notice the other person’s nervous system:**

- Watch physiology and bodily changes:
  - Body position
  - Shifts in facial expression
  - Shift in eye gaze
  - Eye closure
  - Swallowing
  - Muscle tension
  - Skin flushes
  - Tears



**Notice your nervous system:**

- Changes in your body may indicate that something has shifted in the other.

**Decide how you can support an increased sense of safety.**



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

# Harnessing Your Nervous System

## Brain Based Relationships

### Use your nervous system – show your calm for others to catch:

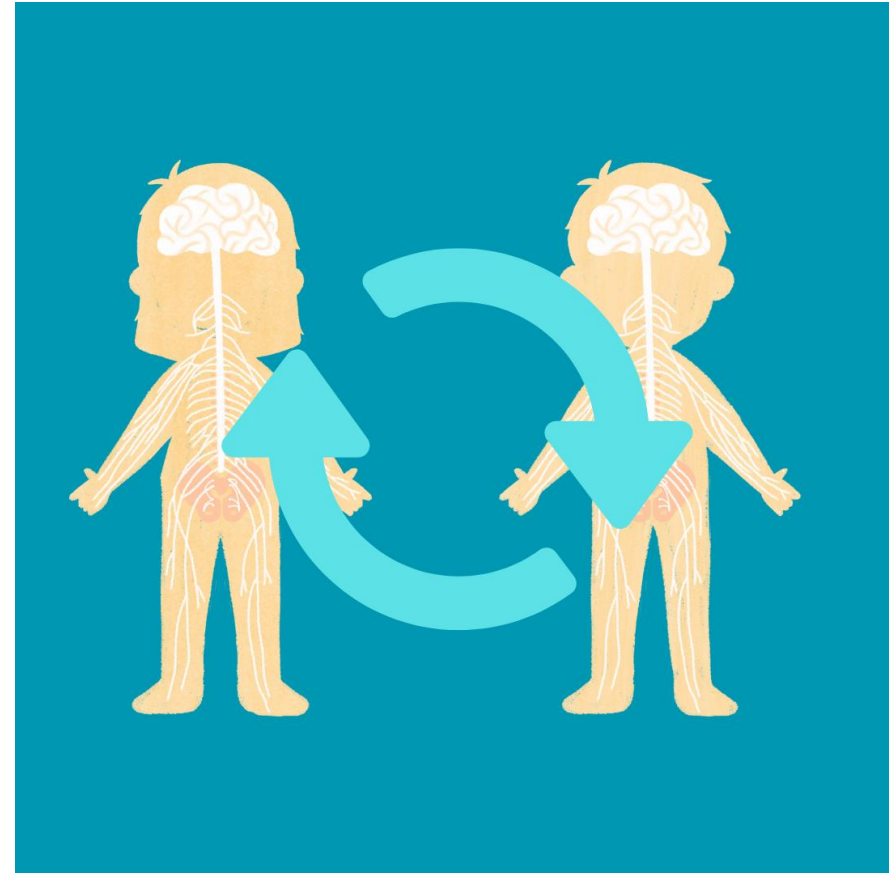
- **Facial Expression:** Remember you “Wear your heart on your face” and smiling eyes can convey safety. Beware the vague and neutral which can be triggering.
- **Speech:** Use pacing, rhythm, intonation, volume, and tone of voice to conveying empathy, building trust, and establishing safety. Avoid using a loud voice or fast, short, and choppy sentences.
- **Congruence:** Clear and congruent verbal and non-verbal communication
- **Positioning:** Stand “shoulder to shoulder” to reduce intensity of eye contact if needed
- Brain to brain communication happens and matters (right brain is dominant in psychotherapy)



## Quick Tip:

Our nervous systems respond to our environment, including other nervous systems in the environment.

You can use your nervous system's ability to "sync up" to co-regulate.



# Harnessing Your Nervous System

## Brain Based Relationships

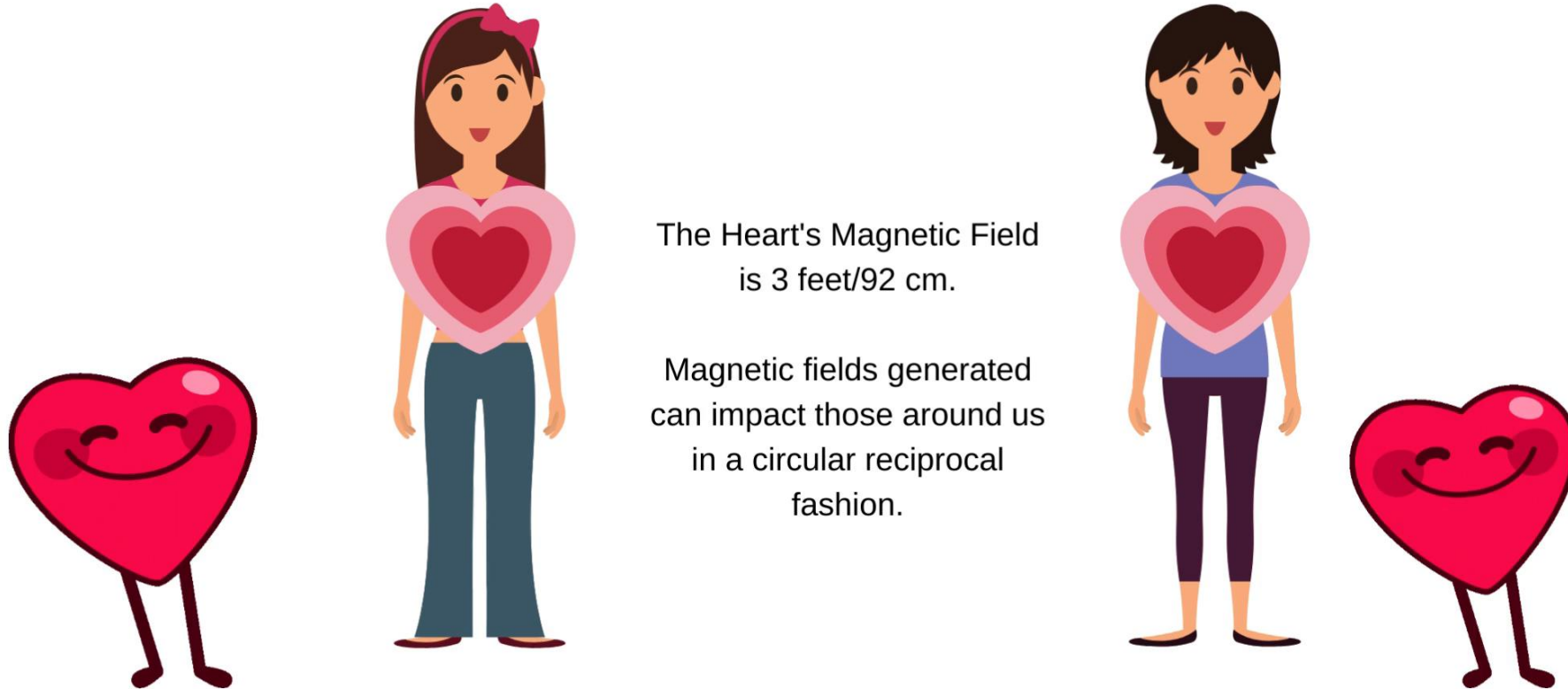
Your calm is contagious

- Heart Magnetic Fields
- Mirror Neurons



DR LEONIE WHITE

# The Heart's Magnetic Field



The Heart's Magnetic Field  
is 3 feet/92 cm.

Magnetic fields generated  
can impact those around us  
in a circular reciprocal  
fashion.

Source: [www.heartmath.org/research/science-of-the-heart/energetic-communication/](http://www.heartmath.org/research/science-of-the-heart/energetic-communication/)

[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)



# Mirror neurons

- A type of brain cell that fires when:
  - (1) doing a motor act
  - (2) seeing someone else performing the same/similar motor act
- Discovered in the 1990s with monkeys and people picking up food
- A “Mirror” with brain and body reflecting what is seen in the environment
  - E.g., someone eating an icecream, biting into a lemon, yawning, crying

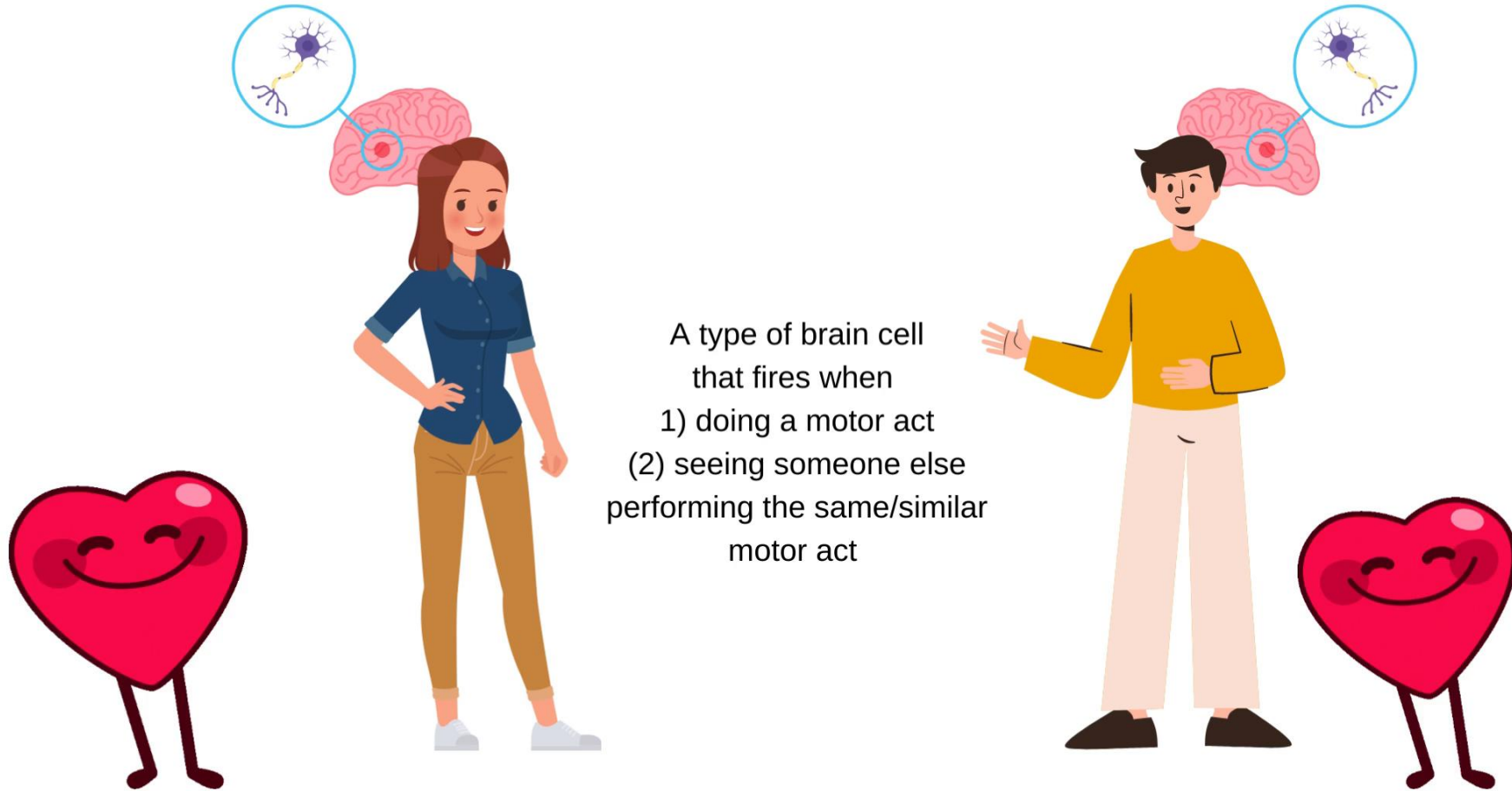


# Mirror neurons

- Implications for Helping Professionals:
  - (1) explains why you can feel distressed in the presence of other's distress
  - (2) harness the power of mirror neurons e.g., facial expression that promotes calm




# Mirror Neurons



A type of brain cell  
that fires when  
1) doing a motor act  
(2) seeing someone else  
performing the same/similar  
motor act

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/>

# Extra Resource




qldfamilytherapy  
Aug 27, 2020 · 4 min

## Creating Relational Safety in an Emotional Storm

“The ability to offer safe sanctuary of presence is central to treating trauma” (Badenoch, 2018) As a Family Therapist and Psychologist,...

---

224 views 0 comments 1 

# Mentalizing

## What is it?

Thinking & Being Reflective  
About Ourselves and Others

## How does it help?

### Problem:

Anxiety/Stress (+Past  
Experiences) = Distrust/Fear

### Solution:

Mentalizing = A Key to  
Development of Trust



# Mentalizing

## What is it?

Thinking & Being Reflective About Ourselves and Others

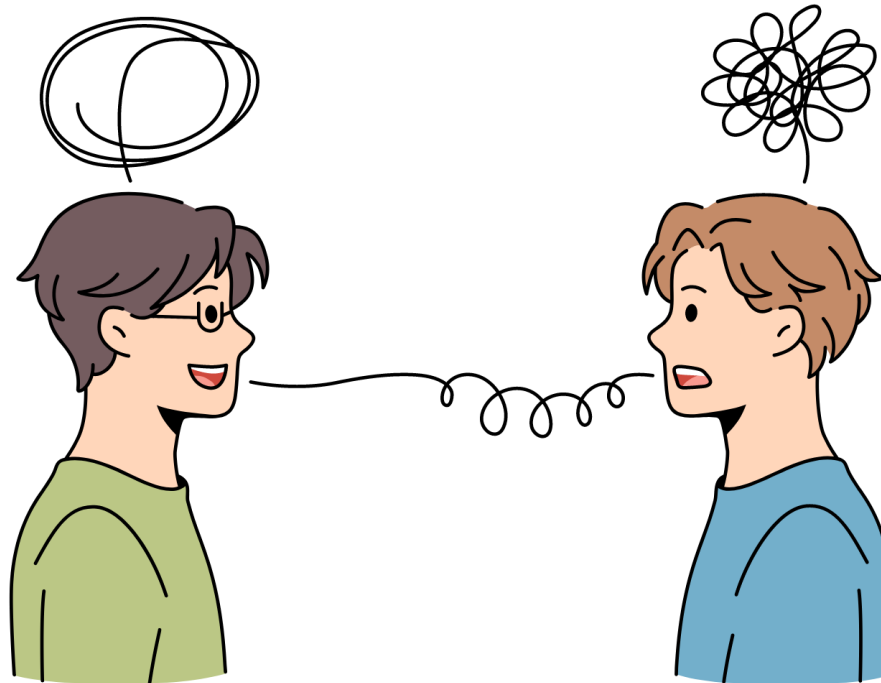
- “Mentalizing refers to **the IMAGINATIVE activity which interprets and predicts human actions by reference to the intentional mental states**”
  - beliefs,
  - desires,
  - needs,
  - feelings, etc)”
- Not the capacity to ACCURATELY read one’s own and other’s inner states
- An **ATTITUDE as much as a SKILL** – attitude of inquiring and respect, awareness and understanding
- Continually fluctuating process, easily disrupted by anxiety and heightened arousal
- Fuggle, 2016





# Mentalizing

## Mentalizing & Communication



How is it that the message we are sending is not always received? Or received as we intended it?



# Mentalizing



We often make assumptions about or think we know what is going on in the mind of another.

But the mind is opaque.

# Mentalizing



A way of approaching relationships with an expectation that our thinking and feeling may be enlightened, enriched, and changed by learning about the mental states of other people.

“..commonly described as ‘seeing oneself from the outside and others from the inside’ ....the activity of ‘understanding misunderstandings’”

Fuggle, 2016



# Mentalizing



We cannot know what is going on in another's mind.

But we can use our imagination, with openness, curiosity, and a non-judgemental stance.



# Mentalizing & Curiosity



"Curiosity is recognizing a gap in our knowledge about something that interests us, and becoming emotionally and cognitively invested in closing that gap through exploration and learning."

Brown, 2021:64

"Curiosity leads to exploration and invention of alternative views and moves, and different moves and views breed curiosity."

Cecchin, 1987: 406



# Mentalizing

## Epistemic Trust: What is it?

- Aim:

**“If you can understand me, maybe you have something worthwhile for me to listen to.”**

- The kind of trust required to allow learning to take place from one person to another
- Unless they trust that what you are doing is worthwhile, possible and can make a difference, they will not be able to shift



## Quick Tip:

Listen for what is  
“absent by implicit”.  
This will help you  
connect with what  
matters to the other  
person.



## Quick Tip:

Pace and lead like  
a horse whisperer.

Pace: Start with where the  
person is at showing  
respect.

Lead: Them towards where  
you'd like them to be once  
you have a relationship.



## Quick Tip:

Broadcast your intentions to assist the other person to know what is in your mind too, to build trust, prevent misunderstandings and engage.



# Mentalizing & Growth



Mentalizing has the power to soothe and to support neuroplasticity.

Do you have a "growth mindset" for relationships?

What would change if you did?



# Mentalizing & Communication

“I see communication as a huge umbrella that covers and affects all that goes on between human beings.

Once a human being has arrived on this earth, communication is the largest single factor determining what kinds of relationships he or she makes with others and what happens to each in the world.

How we manage survival, how we develop intimacy, how productive we are, how we make sense, how we connect with our own divinity – all depend largely on our communication skills”.



Satir, 1988: 51



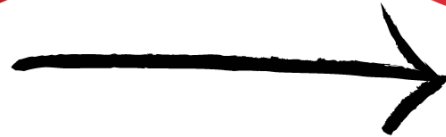
# Mentalizing & Communication



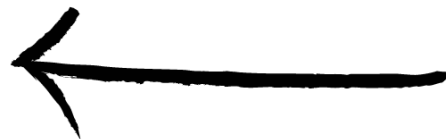
**Sensory Inputs**  
**Thoughts**  
**Feelings**  
**Body Responses**



**Sensory Inputs**  
**Thoughts**  
**Feelings**  
**Body Responses**



**Dialogue**



Virginia Satir  
My "self-worth pot"  
is communicating  
with your "self  
worth pot".

+

Bodies  
Values  
Expectations  
Sense Organs  
Ability to Talk  
Brains





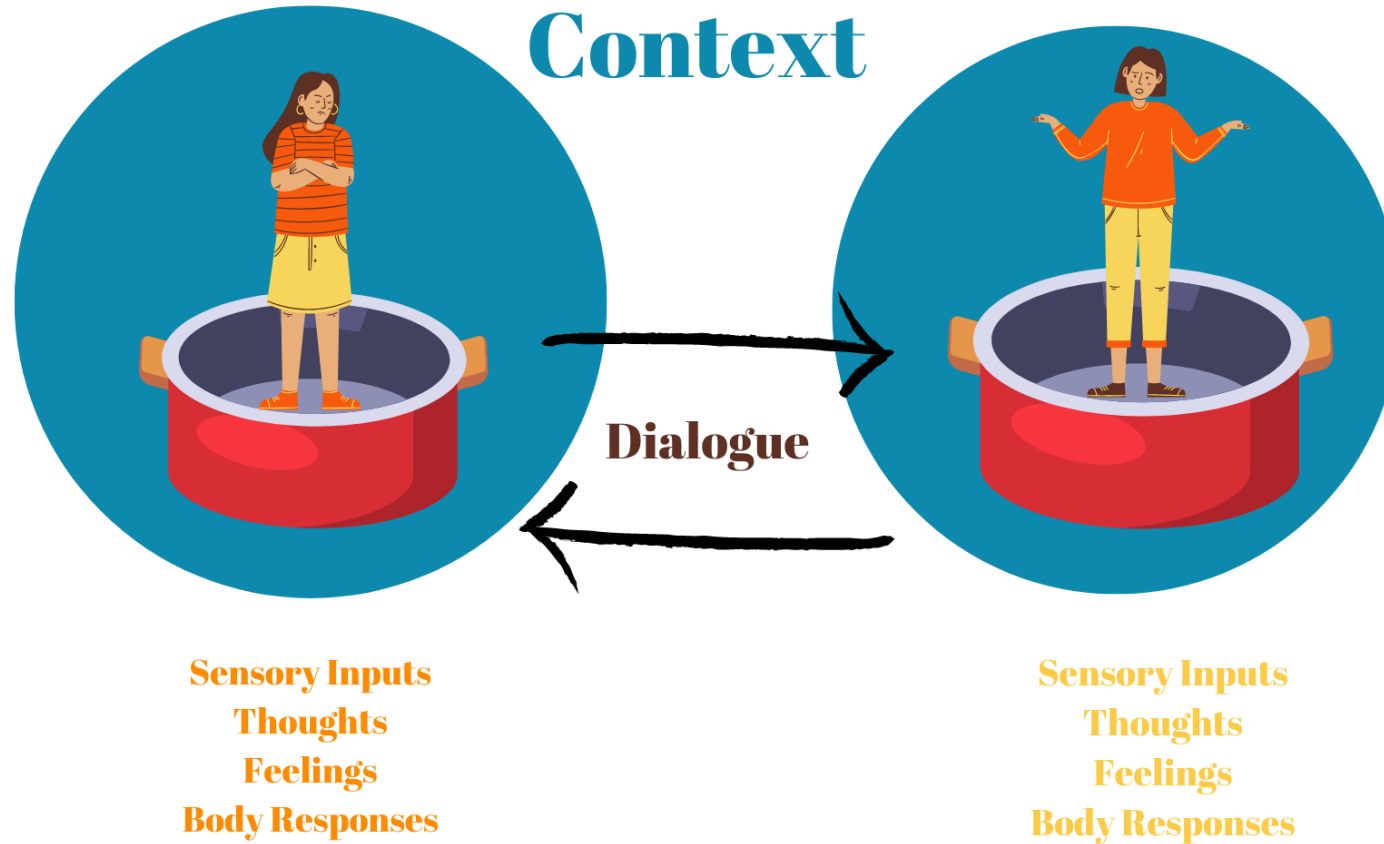
## Quick Tip:

If a parent reminds you of someone and that reminder is unhelpful, actively imagine ways in which they are different from that person.

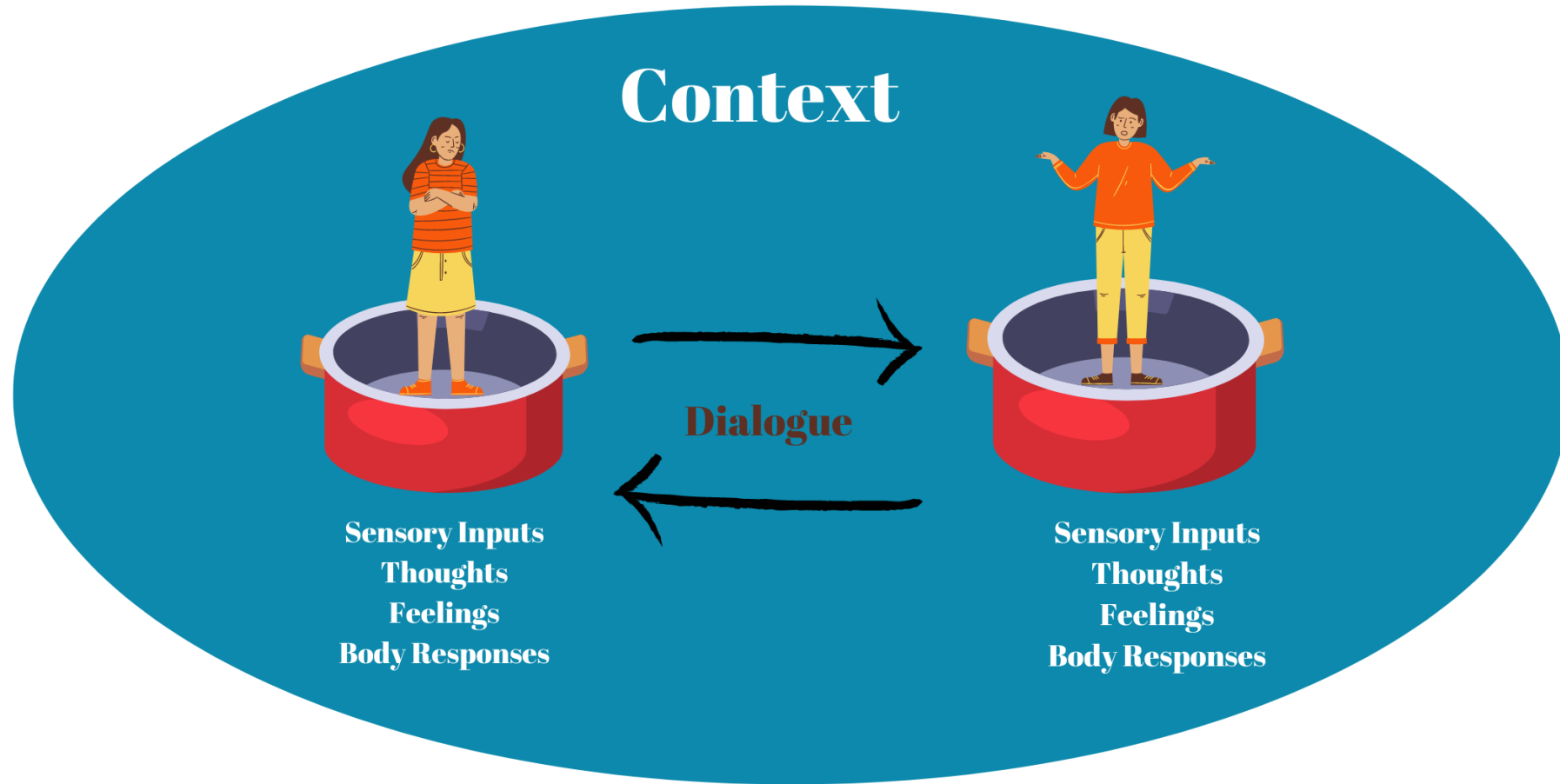
This will help you “climb back up the ladder”.



# Mentalizing & Communication & Context



# Mentalizing & Communication & Context



# Harnessing Mentalizing for Positive Relationships



Being curious about what is happening for another person, and where they are coming from can help to unravel barriers and build positive relationships.  
Curious reflection leads to exploration and creates maneuverability.





# Some Helpful Understandings

When the going gets tough, get PACEful

# What's PACEful?

- From Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy
- What is PACE?
  - Playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy
  - A way of **thinking**, **feeling**, **communicating** and **behaving** that aims to make the child feel safe.
  - Increases sense of safety and trust.

<https://ddpnetwork.org/about-ddp/meant-pace/>





# PACEful Relationships

- PACE focuses on building trusting relationships, emotional connections, containment and a sense of security.
- A way of relating to others or 'a way of being'.

Who wouldn't want this???

- A great template for all relationships
- Facilitates relationships for all ages and of all types
- Especially helpful for ...  
when the going gets tough ... A & E



DR LEONIE WHITE

# Being PACEful in High Emotion Situations

## Validation: The A & E

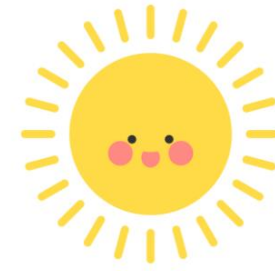
- Accepting thoughts, feelings and perceptions without judgement
- You don't have to agree with their interpretation to accept their feelings about it.
- Empathy gives a sense of compassion.
- Empathy is essential in helping a person feel understood.
- Great modelling for parents and carers.
  
- What does it look like in conversation?



# ACE Tricky Interactions



# ACE Tricky Interactions

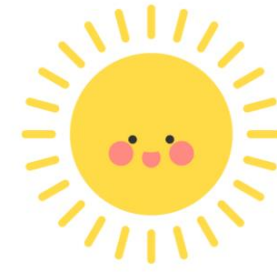


**Acceptance**  
**Empathy**



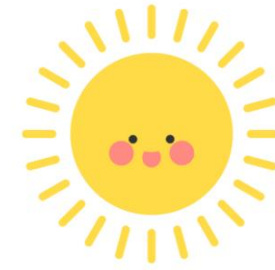


# ACE Tricky Interactions



**Curiosity**

# ACE Tricky Interactions



**Acceptance**  
**Empathy**



# ACE Tricky Interactions



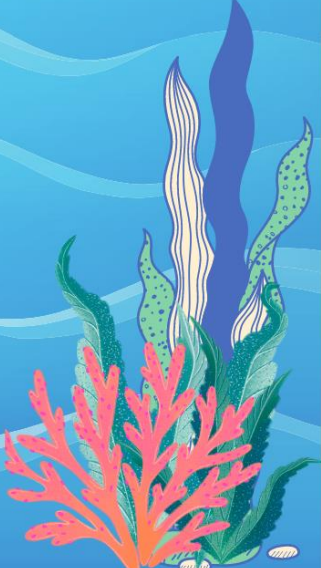
Light

A & E

C

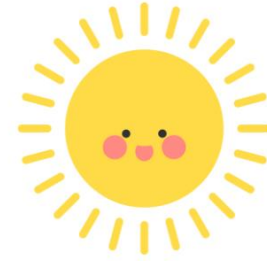
Deeper

A & E





# (P)ACE Tricky Interactions



Light A & E

P → C ← P



Deeper A & E



# Polyvagal Tips for Positive Parent Partnerships

- Develop awareness of your central nervous system and ability to tune into your position on the Polyvagal Ladder.
- Practice what you teach and have a toolkit to alter your position on the ladder as needed.
  - e.g., breathwork, grounding.
- Have a toolkit of strategies to support another's autonomic state
  - e.g., mirror neurons, brain-based relationships.
- Don't take it personally - everyone exists in context and contexts interact.
- Prioritise your language - it impacts you and the person you are interacting with.
- Establish a relationship as a social connectedness intervention.
- Consider your own social connectedness and self care.

## **Polyvagal Theory** **Practical Tips for Positive Relationships**

1. Develop awareness of your central nervous system and ability to tune into your position on the Polyvagal Ladder.
2. Practice what you teach and have a toolkit to alter your position on the ladder as needed. e.g., breathwork, grounding.
3. Have a toolkit of strategies to support another's autonomic state e.g., mirror neurons, brain based relationships.
4. Don't take it personally - everyone exists in context and contexts interact.
5. Prioritise your language - it impacts you and the person you are interacting with.
6. Establish a relationship as a social connectedness intervention.
7. Consider your own social connectedness and self care.



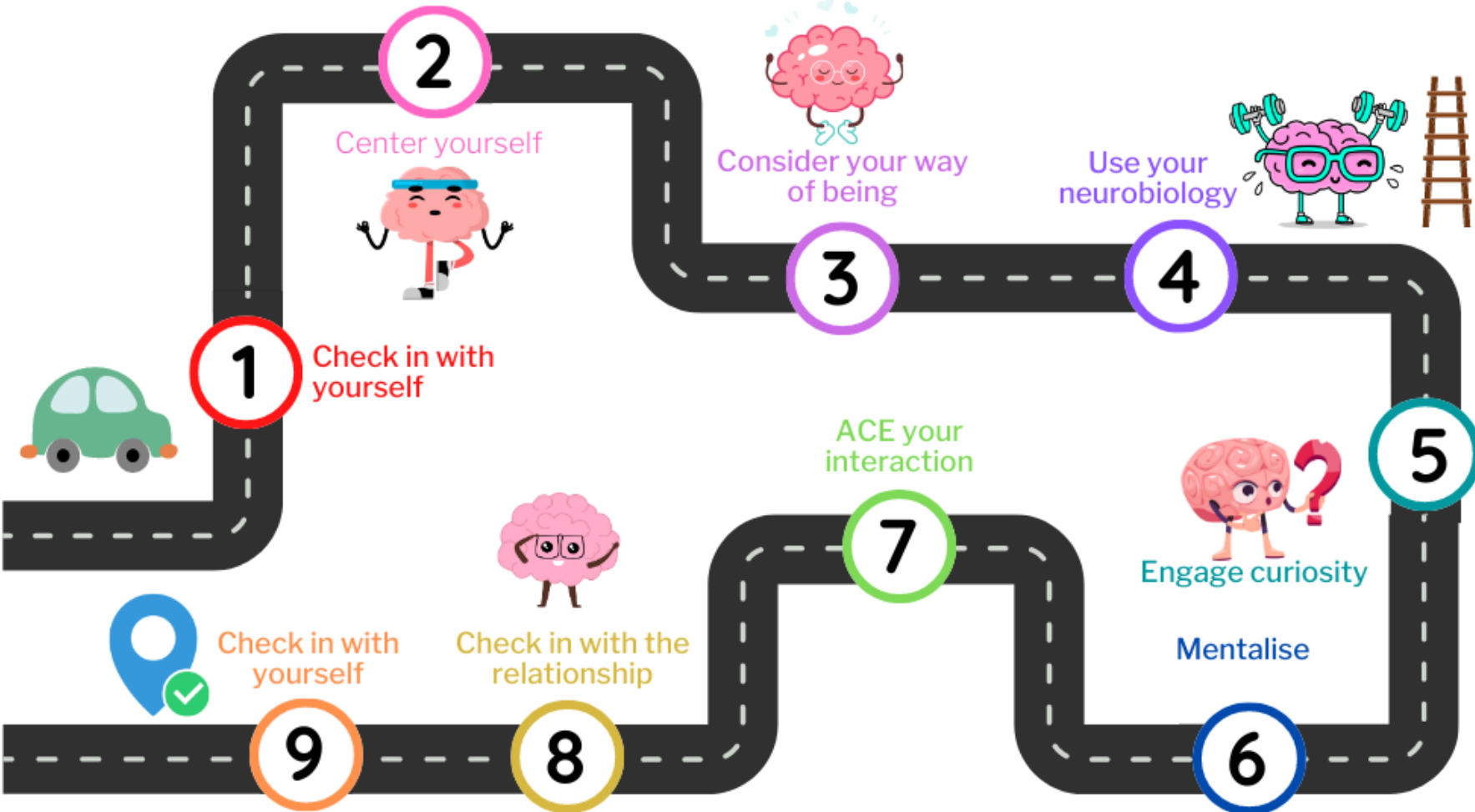
[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)

Downloadable



**DR LEONIE WHITE**

# Positive Parent Partnership Roadmap





Reflections?

Questions?



DR LEONIE WHITE



# Thank You & Please Stay in Touch & Discount



SAVE10  
Discount Code  
First 35 HFT Card  
Sets (to individuals)  
Ends 30<sup>th</sup> June  
<https://www.compassaustralia.com.au/>



[www.drleoniewhite.com](http://www.drleoniewhite.com)  
[www.qldfamilytherapy.com](http://www.qldfamilytherapy.com)  
**NEWSLETTER Mailing List & Free resources**

# References

Asay, T. & Lambert, M. The empirical case for the common factors in therapy: Qualitative Findings.

Mental Health Services in Australia: Stress and Trauma (July 2022). Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/stress-and-trauma>

Badenoch, B. (2008). *Being a Brain-Wise Therapist: A Practical Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology*. WW Norton and Company: New York.

Badenoch, B. (2018). *The Heart of Trauma: Healing the Embodied Brain in the Context of Relationships*. WW Norton and Company: New York.

Bambling, M. & King, R. (2001). Therapeutic alliance and clinical practice. *Psychotherapy in Australia*, 8(1), 38 – 43.

Bordin, E. S. (1979). The generalizability of the psychoanalytic concept of the working alliance. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 16, 252 – 260.

Becvar, D. & Becvar, R. (2013). *Family Therapy: A Systemic Integration (8<sup>th</sup> Ed)*. Pearson Education Inc: Boston.

Campillo, M. (2011). Keys to a subjugated story: My favorite narrative therapy questions. *The International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, 35 – 39.

Dana, D. (2020) *Polyvagal Flip Chart: Understanding The Science of Safety*. W.W. Norton & Company.

Garven, R. & White, H. (2009). Key systemic ideas as seen through the eyes of first year trainees. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy*, 30(3), 196 – 215.

Golding, K. S. (2008). *Nurturing Attachments: Supporting Children who are Fostered or Adopted*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers



# References

- Gurman, A. & Kniskern, D. (1981). Family therapy Outcome research: Knowns and Unknowns, in Gurman, A. & Kniskern, D (eds), Handbook of Family Therapy. Brunner/Mazel, New York.
- Hanna, S. (2007). The Practice of Family Therapy: Key Elements Across Models (4<sup>th</sup> Ed). Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning: Australia
- Hanna, S. (2014). The Transparent Brain in Couple and Family Therapy: Mindful Integrations with Neuroscience. Routledge: London.
- Hoffman, L. (1990). Constructing realities: An art of lenses. Family Process, 29(1). - 12.
- Nichols, M. P. (2010). *Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods* (9<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Nichols, M. P. & Schwartz, R. C. (2005). *The Essentials of Family Therapy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). USA: Pearson Education Inc.
- Porges SW. (2004). Neuroception: A subconscious system for detecting threat and safety. Zero to Three: Bulletin of the National Centre for Clinical Infant Programs 24:5,19-24.
- Porges SW. (2003). Social engagement and attachment: A phylogenetic perspective. Roots of Mental Illness in Children, Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences 1008:31-47.
- Porges, S. (2007). The polyvagal perspective. Biol Psychol, 74(2), 116 – 143.
- Porges, S. (2022a). Polyvagal theory: A science of safety. Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience, 16, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fnint.2022.871227/full>
- Porges, S. (2022b). Autonomic state: A neurophysiological platform for feelings, emotions, and social engagement. Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development. Trauma Research Consortium, Kinsey Institute, Indiana University Bloomington and Department of Psychiatry, University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, USA





# References

Sanders, M. R. & Thompson, G. S. (2022). *Polyvagal Theory and the Developing Child: Systems of Care for Strengthening Kids, Families, and Communities*. W.W. Norton and Company: London.

Satir, V. (1988). *The New Peoplemaking*. Science and Behaviour Books Inc: Mountain View.

Scott, J. G., Malacova, E., Mathews, B., Haslam, D. M., Pacella, R., Higgins, D. J., Meinck, F., Dunne, M. P., Finkelhor, D., Erskine, H. E., Lawrence, D. M., & Thomas, H. J., (2023). The association between childhood maltreatment and mental disorders in the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. *The Medical Journal of Australia*, 218 (6).

Siegel, D. (1999). *The Developing Mind*. New York: Guilford Press.

Wilhelm, K. & Tietze, T. (2016). Difficult doctor-patient interactions: Applying principles of attachment-based care. *Medicine Today*, 17 (1 – 2), 36 – 44.

<https://www.heartmath.org/research/science-of-the-heart/energetic-communication/>

