

Reflective Practice: Building a Culture of Curiosity in High-Stress Human Systems

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Essence

1. Understanding human stress/distress is a precondition for being self-aware: **Stress Response System (SRS)**
2. The more self aware we are, the better we contribute to a healthy relational ecosystem
3. Knowledge of the SRS system **walks** us directly to critical micro-habits that create wellbeing
4. Reflective practice is fundamentally about **co-regulation**
5. We survived (survive) by being curious and by cooperating (interdependence)
6. Language...



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How We Hold Pain: Individually and Collectively

Trauma-Reactive

- We react to other's pain by reciprocating or numbing.
- "There is something wrong with you!"
- Predominant Biological State:
- Predominant Emotional State: FADSS
- Predominant Behavioral State: SMI
- **Disposition:** Hypervigilant, Declarative, Certain, Rigid, Detached, Numb, Hopeless
- Promote Status Quo/Lack Innovation
- Transactional:

Trauma-informed

- We respond to pain by mitigating it, healing
- "Something happened to you"
- We address and reduce harm
- Clinical Model: Downstream
- Predominant States: Expansive
- **Disposition:** Compassion, Empathy
- Embrace the Science of Trauma
- Universal Language
- Cultural/Racial Components of Trauma
- 4 R's

Trauma-transforming

- We work to prevent pain
- "There is something strong about you"
- We prevent harm
- Preventative/Upstream: Social Justice
 - Pro-equity & anti-racist
 - Harm happens here/Collective Healing
 - Assets
- **Disposition:** Disruptive, Challenge Status Quo
- + 3R's:
- Meaning Making



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Introduction

1. The way we **think about** and **talk about** problems impacts the way we **solve** those problems
2. Equity Work/ "Trauma Work" requires that we become **interpreters/translators** of the language of trauma/adversity:
 - a. Systems are designed to produce the outcomes they produce
 - b. We are ambassadors and bridge builders and activists
3. The Same Tree, but we occupy different Branches:
 - Helpers, Healers, Holders



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Role of “Ambassador”

Ambassadors often have a long term, relational presence

They “straddle” or live between two worlds: The clinical/trauma-informed world and the practical classroom world

1. We Bridge and Translate Between Cultures

- Ambassadors help shrink the gap between worlds.

2. We help people see things differently.

- We translate behavior into what’s really going on underneath—distress, need, nervous systems activation.

3. We bring calm into the storm.

- We don’t just talk about regulation—we are regulation.



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Key Practice #1: The Stress Response System

The Science

3 Facts, 1 Fiction

If your system cannot **process** and metabolize stress, it will **perpetuate** it—to staff, then to clients, students, & families.

Before we can reflect, we must regulate

Reflection is biologically impossible in a dysregulated system

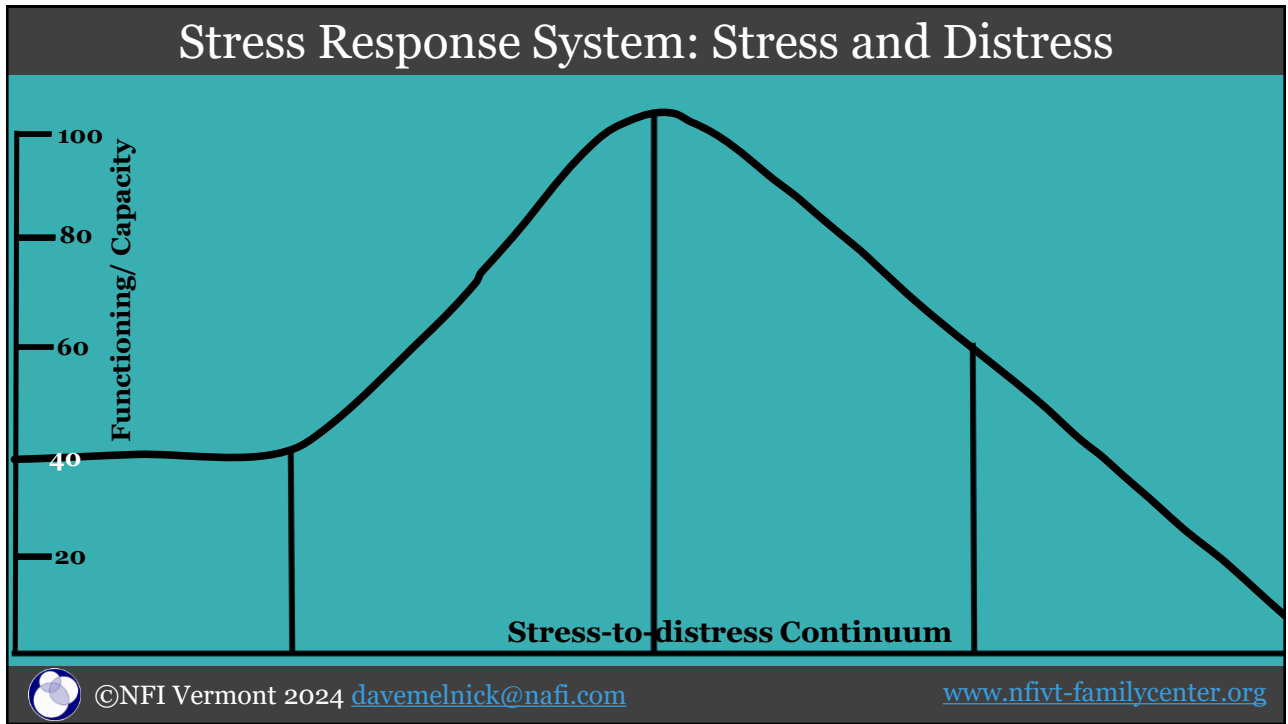
There is no time to reflect in our work
(*it is an instinct*)



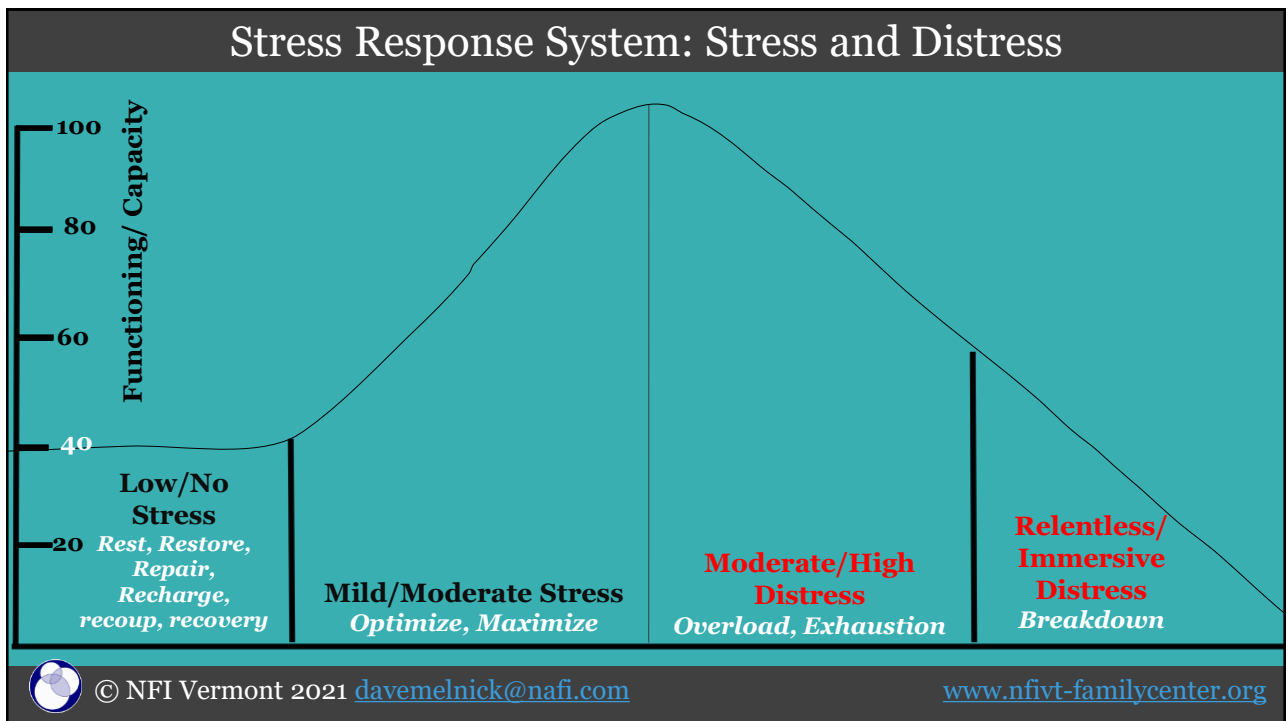
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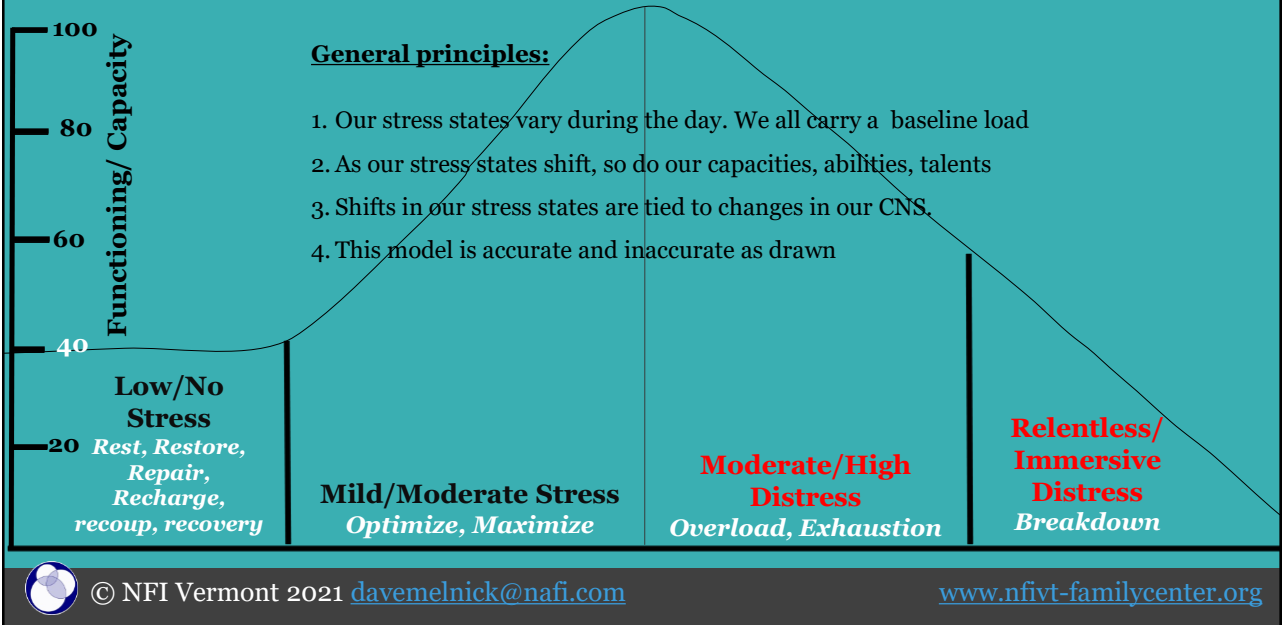


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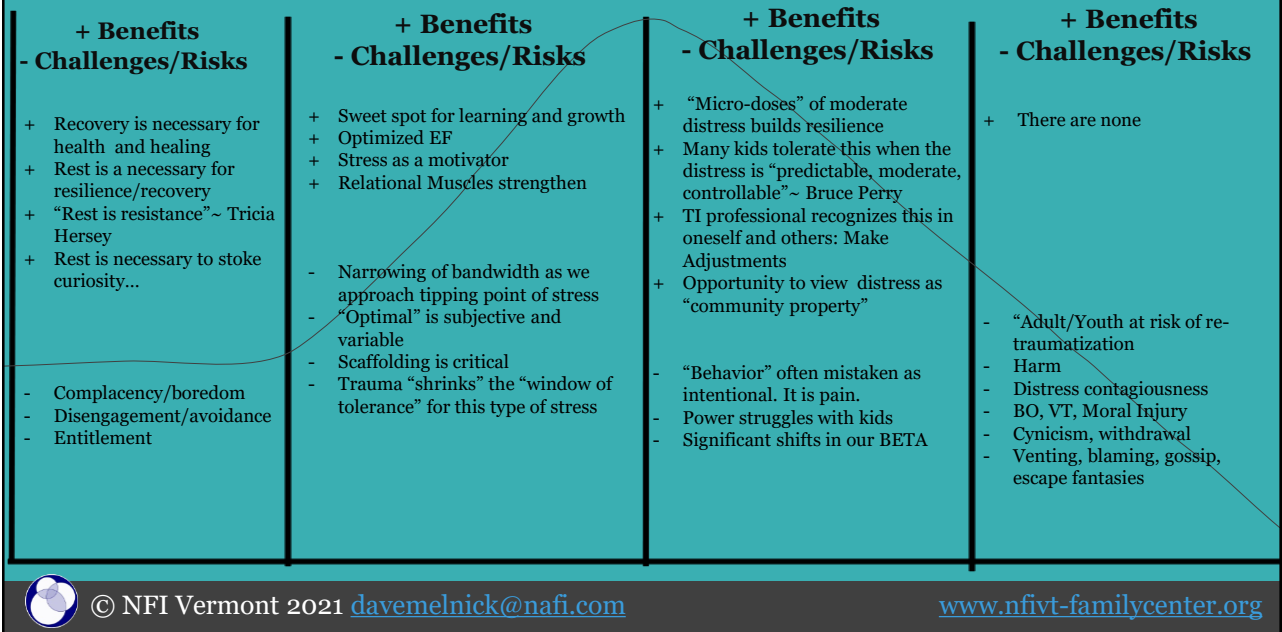
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Stress Response System: Stress and Distress



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Stress Response System: Benefits/Risks



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SRS: Trauma-informed Communication Styles

Communication Style	Communication Style	Communication Style	Communication Style
❑ Proactive communication ❑ Curious and nuanced ❑ <u>Language Use:</u> Elaborative ❑ Active listening ❑ Use of "I" statements ❑ Strong capacity for empathy ❑ Strong capacity to "hold pain"	❑ Efficient and task-oriented. ❑ Direct, clear ❑ <u>Language Use:</u> Elaborative ❑ Use of "I" statements ❑ Great for logistics and for attuned listening... ❑ ...but as we approach our tolerance we start losing the "warmth" of the message.	❑ Defensive or Reactive. ❑ We stop "listening to understand" and start "listening to rebut or win" ❑ <u>Language Use:</u> Protective, Sarcastic, Defensive ❑ "Always/Never" statements, and binary thinking (Right/Wrong). ❑ Begin to blame, complain, finger point, gossip, externalize ❑ Rigidity	❑ Non-existent, Weaponized, Protective or Explosive. ❑ <u>Language Use:</u> Mutism (shutting down), shouting, or "word salad" where we can't find the right terms to express our needs. ❑ The "Venting/Gossip" Trap: Communication becomes an "escape fantasy" or a way to discharge pain onto others.

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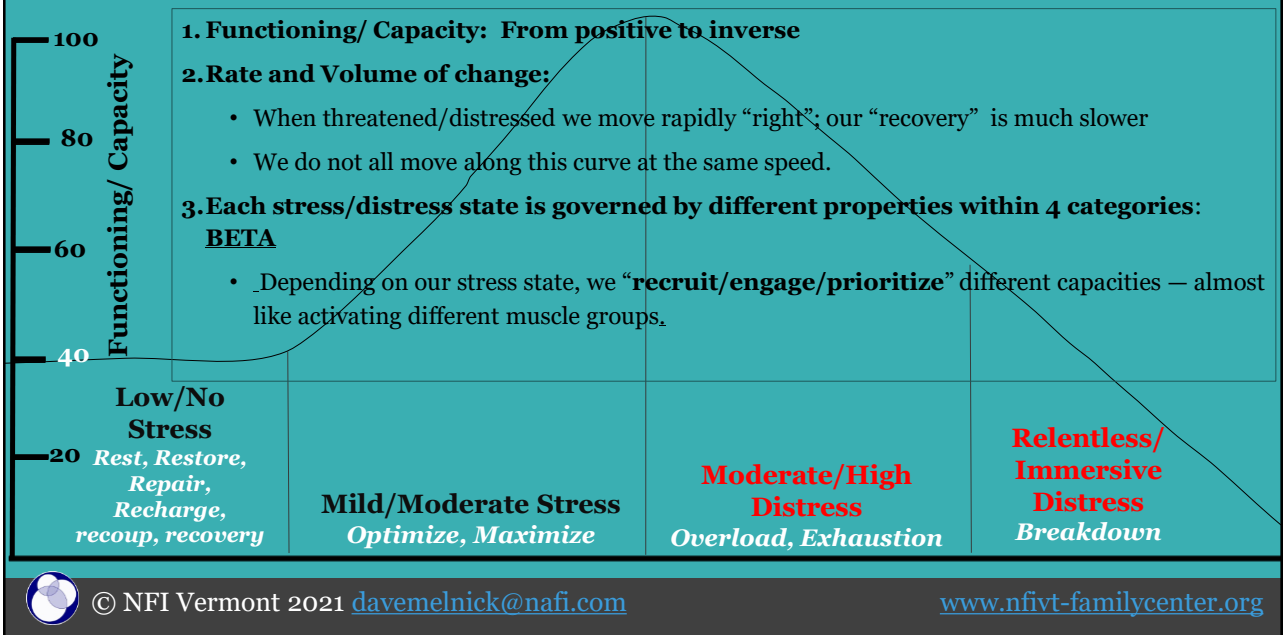
SRS: Trauma-informed Communication Benefits/Risks

+ Benefits - Challenges/Risks	+ Benefits - Challenges/Risks	+ Benefits - Challenges/Risks	+ Benefits - Challenges/Risks
+ High "Relational/ Emotional IQ." + Ability to repair ruptures and hold complex conversations. - Disengagement/avoidance - Complacency; failing to communicate urgent needs because everything feels "fine." - Comfort over discomfort	+ Optimum time for micro-habits and micro-routines. + Bunt Singles": Quick check-ins, huddles, pulse checks and clear "Who/What/When" updates - Narrowing of bandwidth as we approach tipping point of stress - Narrowing of bandwidth; forgetting to include the "Why" behind a decision. - Scaffolding is critical - Trauma "shrinks" the "window of tolerance" for this type of stress	+ Opportunity for Co-regulation/Prevention: + Using calm, transparent language to de-escalate the "vibe" of the office. - The "BETA" Shift: Threat detect - Tone of voice and body language become "threatening" even if the words are neutral. - Interpret worse case scenario - Our attachment circuits are on high alert	+ There are none - The "Venting/Gossip" Trap: Communication becomes an "escape fantasy" or a way to discharge pain onto others.

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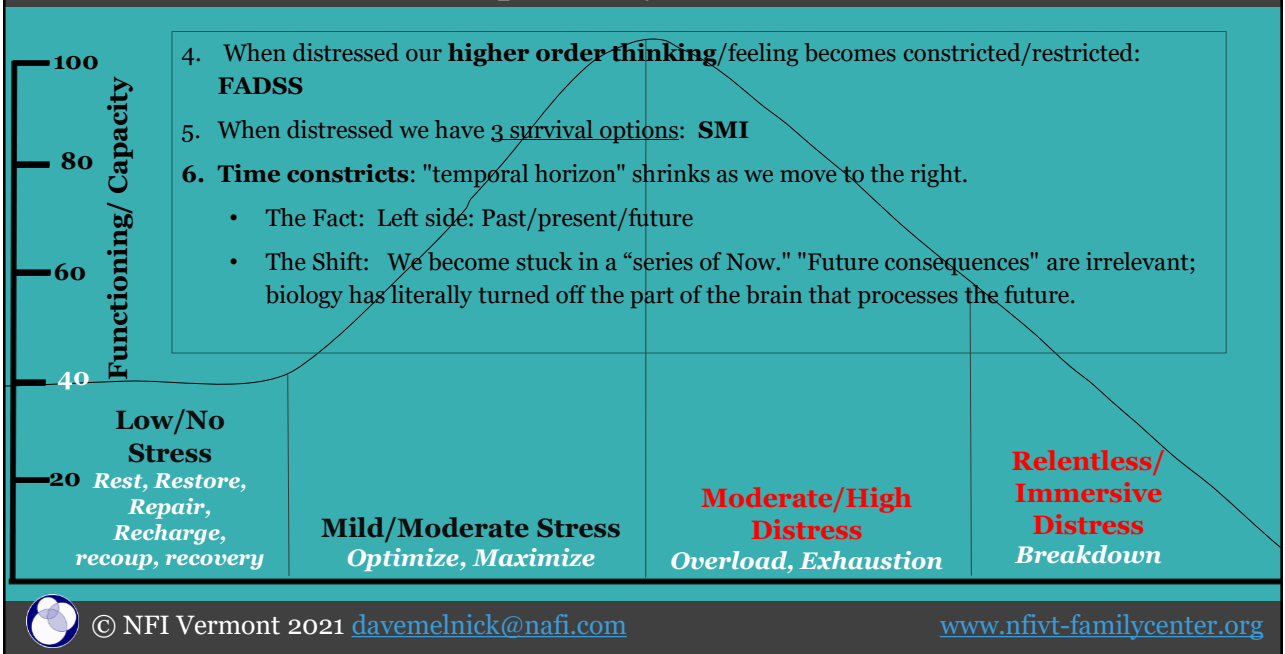
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Stress Response System: Facts #1-3



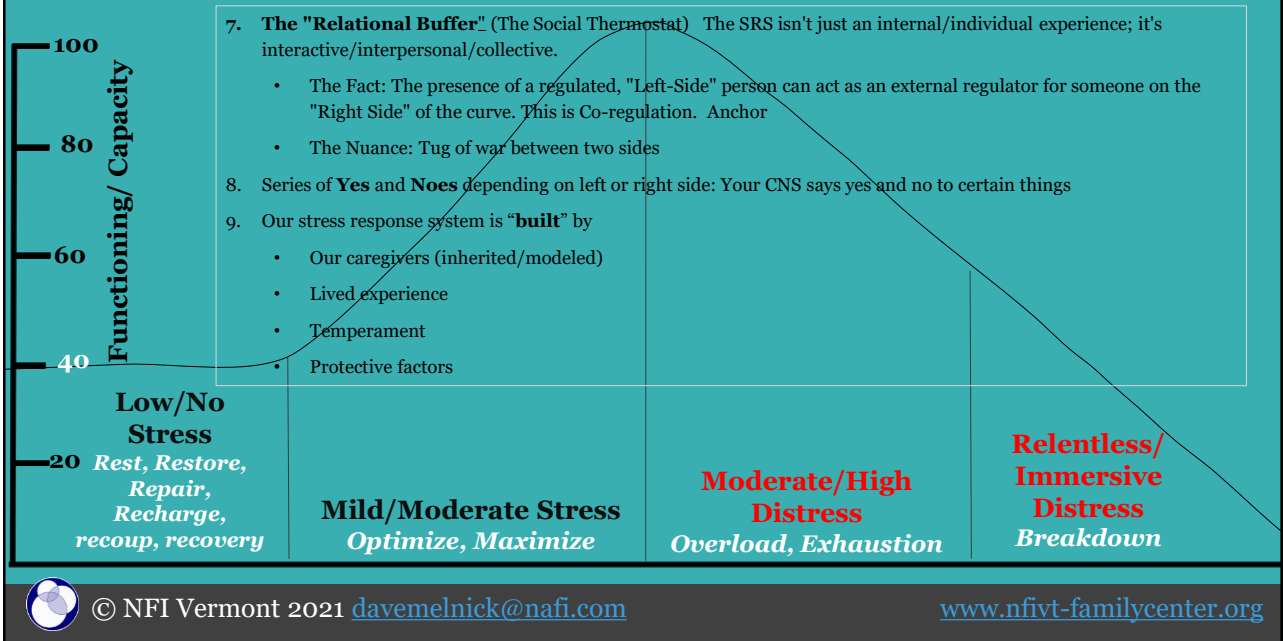
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Stress Response System: Facts #4-6



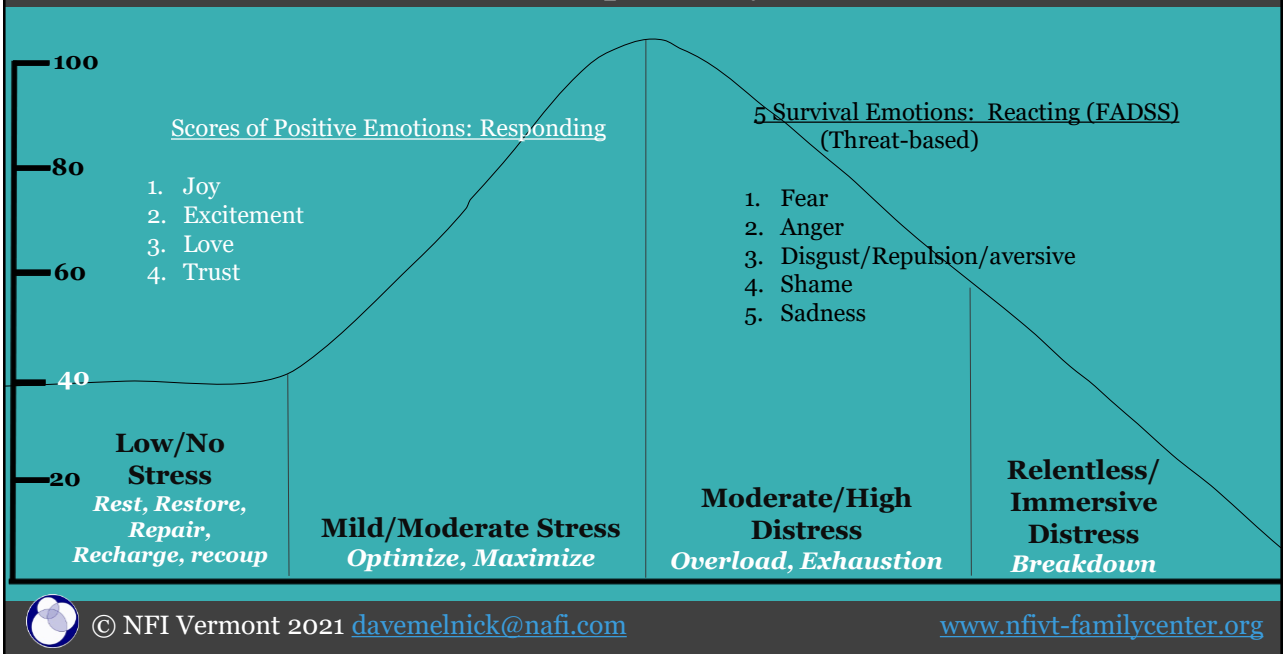
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Stress Response System: Facts #7-10



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Stress Response System:



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Survival Emotions: FADSS (A lens to understand humans)

Fear

- Alerts us of possible danger and likely to lead to flight, freeze flock or fawn
- Escape, endear

Anger/Rage

- Sense of injustice, being controlled/ignored often leading to a fight response
- Rage: Cumulative and suppressed. When feeling degraded and devalued

Disgust (Aversion)

- Normal reaction to something unpleasant or harmful
- Health and wellness risk
- Behavior that does not match expectations/communal norms

Sadness

- Experience of loss, disappointment, despair, self-esteem, mattering, being neglected

Shame

- Feeling flawed, less than, irrelevant, unimportant
- Humiliated
- Negative self-evaluation



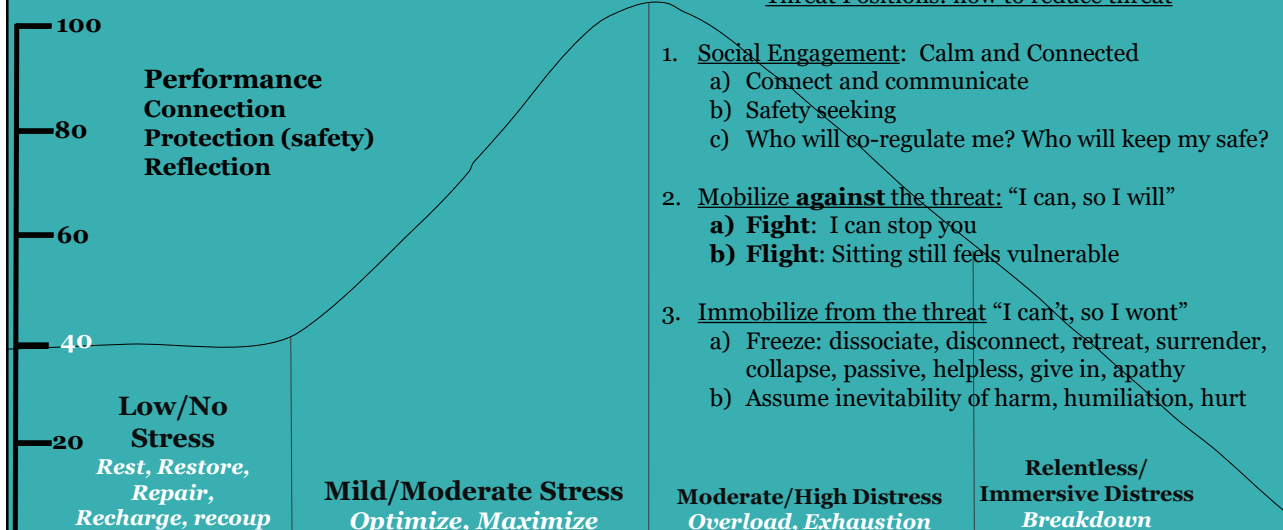
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Threat Response: 3 Options-Individual Level (Polyvagal)

Threat Positions: how to reduce threat

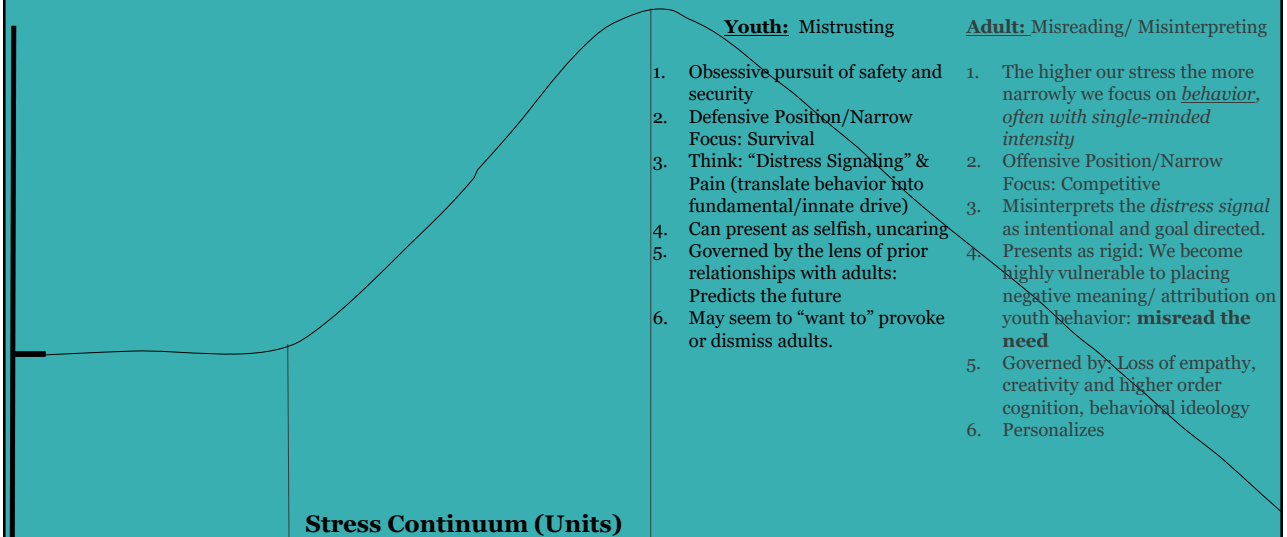


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Stress Response System: What Stress Can Do to Attachment

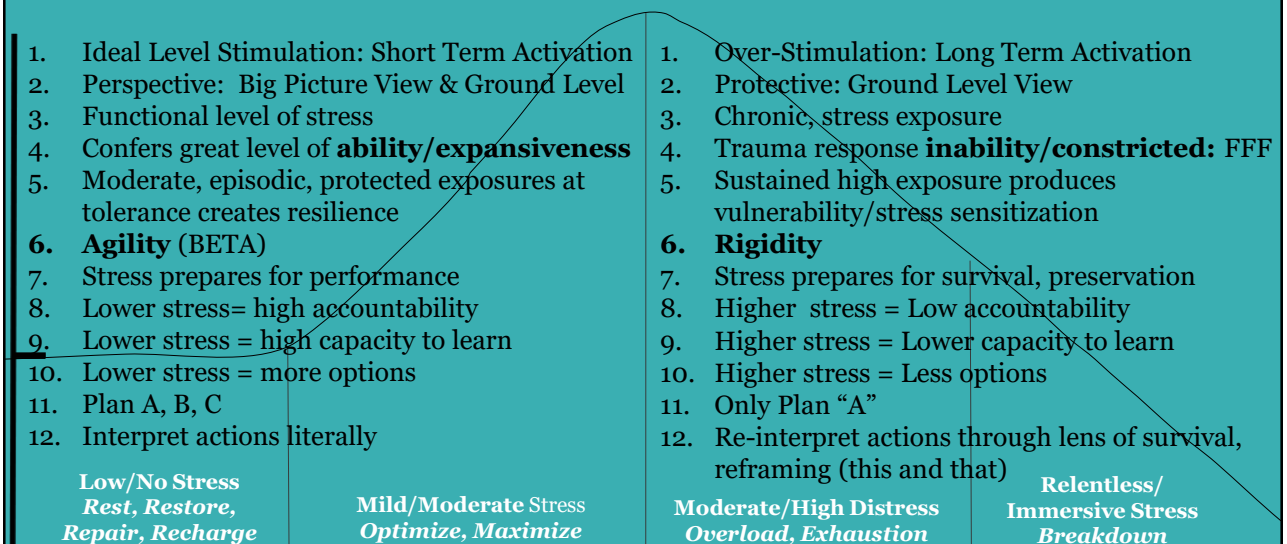


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Stress Response System: Core Concepts



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Stress Response System: Core Concept #2 (States and Traits)

1. Stress acuity: clear seeing of stress
2. Optimal performance
3. CARE: calm, alert, regulated, engaged
4. Motivated
5. Relational/Reciprocal
6. Nimble, versatile
7. Reflective
8. Challenge Response/Tend-Befriend
9. Thoughtful/grounded
10. Both/and
11. Attachment security

1. Stress “blindness”
2. Degradation of performance
3. FADSS: Fear, Anger, Disgust, Sad, Shame
4. Self-protective/survival impulse
5. Self-focused
6. Rigid, inflexible
7. Reactive
8. FFF
9. Panicky/catastrophize
10. And/or
11. Attachment vulnerabilities



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Stress Response System: Core Concepts #3 (Abilities/Vulnerabilities)

Body/Biology

- CARE (Calm, Alert, Regulated, Engaged)
- Breathing & Action in Rhythm
- Relaxed and/or Appropriately Energized

Emotional

- Pleasant Mood (either high, moderate energy)
- Emotionally aware
- Felt Safety
- Internal and External Alignment
- Mood congruent to context

Thinking

- Stress Aware
- Intentional, Focused, Motivated, Engaged
- Flexible, open-minded thinking, abstract, integrative, connections
- Now focused, anticipate the future
- Sound EF

Action Tendencies

- Benevolent, kind, thoughtful
- Impulse control, delay gratification
- Me, we, us
- Alignment between actions and expectations
- Contextual behavior

BETA

Moderate/High Distress
Overload, Exhaustion

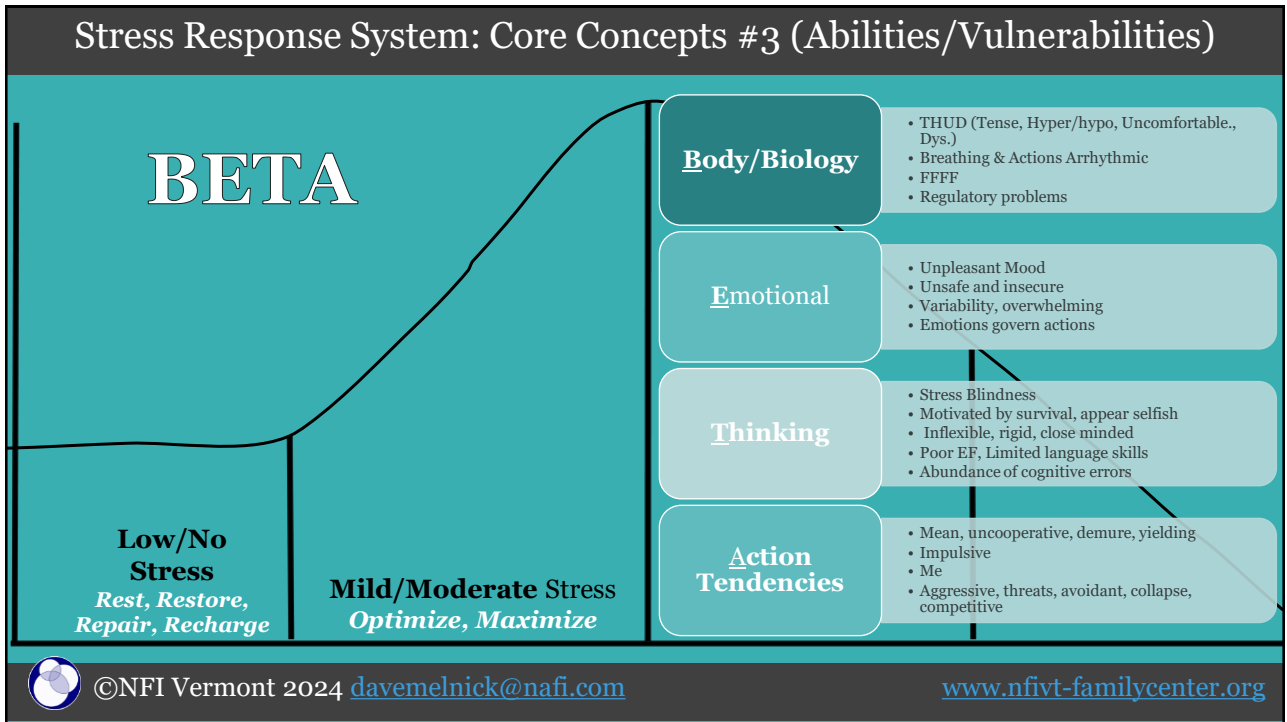
Relentless/Immersive Stress
Breakdown



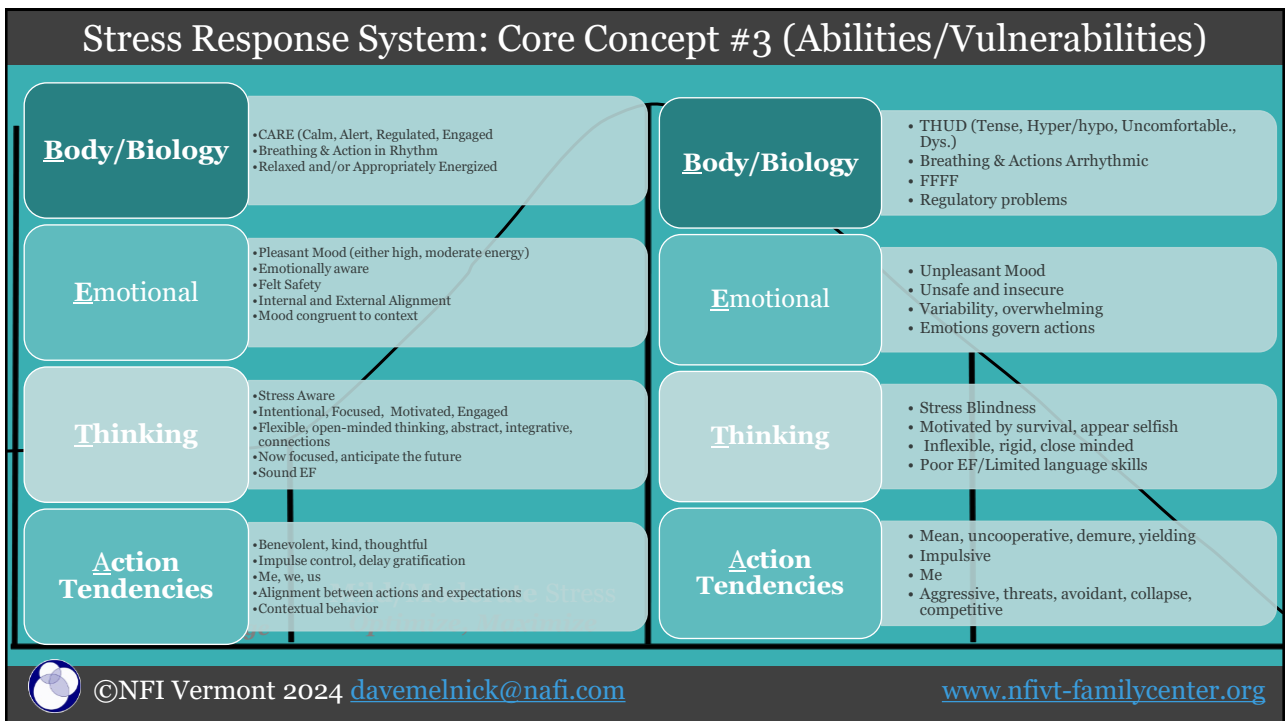
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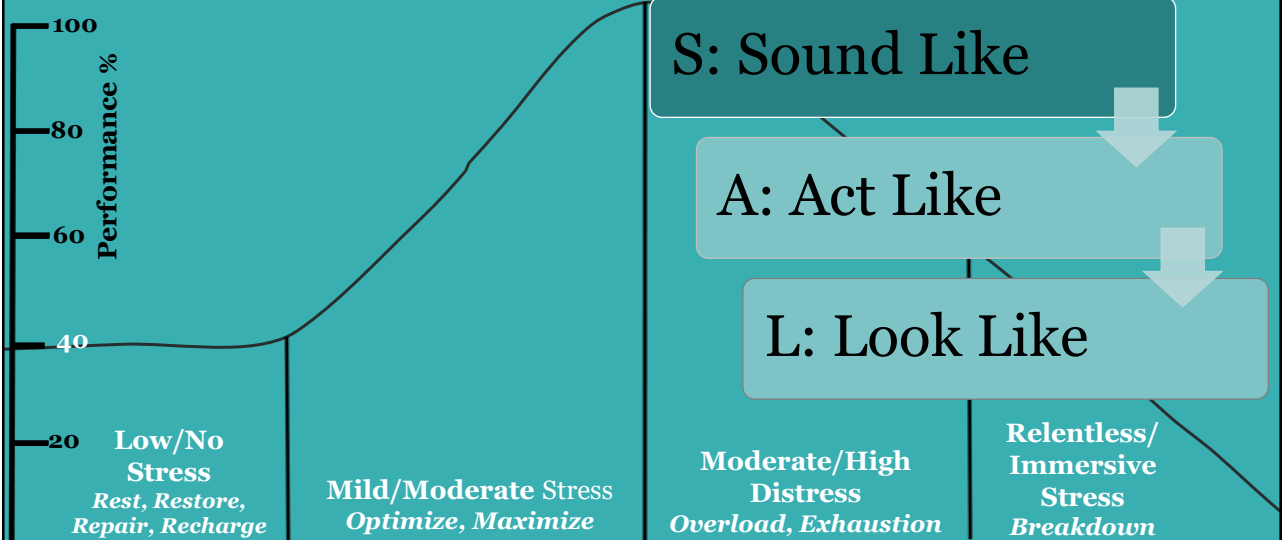


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Stress Response System: Core Concept #4a (SAL)



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Stress Response System: Stress and Distress

Mirrors then Lens

1. Mirror:

- Before we interpret others, we ask: **"Where am I on the curve?"**
- Self-awareness becomes one of the greatest causalities of prolonged distress. Then, we can become dangerous.

2. Provides us with "Universal Language" and "Joint Attention"

- This builds community and connection (protections)

3. The "Emotional Thermostat"

- We use knowledge about the SRS to influence ourselves then other people
- Calm is as contagious as chaos

4. The "Reflective Pause"

- SRS literacy allows us to see how stress states impact us.
- Name your state: what capacities am I recruiting?

The Application



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Stress Response System: Stress and Distress

Now as a Lens:

5. **Here we read others through the curve.** It becomes an assessment/diagnostic tool!
 - From “**What is wrong with them?**” we ask: “**Where are they on the stress curve?**”
 - Naming creates distance, and understanding, and perspective
6. **We locate the pain, and we can reframe.** We notice cues, signs, distress signals and symptoms through the lens of stress-to-distress
7. **We adjust expectations....in the moment.**
 - At different stress/distress levels different **instincts** arise and different **skills** are available.
 - We have different access/entry points.
 - At different stress levels people are not being difficult — they are **recruiting** different capacities.

The Application



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Stress Response System: Stress and Distress

Now as a Lens:

8. **Matching Response to State.** Once we know where someone is, the next question becomes: “What does this state need?”

Left Side Use:

- Reason/Rationales
- Questions
- Perspective taking
- Inquiry
- Collaboration
- Reference Points
- Consequences

Middle of Curve:

- Relationships
- Structure/Routine
- Reassurance
- Shorter language
- Humility
- Humor
- “We” language
- Novelty

Right side of Curve:

- Regulation
- Safety
- Presence
- Calm, clear
- Less words
- Self-regulate
- CNS role model

9. Notice the shift: The moment something changes
10. Predict stress points
11. Language audit

The Application

The SRS is not just a theory of stress.
It is a map of human behavior under pressure.



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Key Practice #2 Reflective Practices: Introduction

“Take a look at yourself and you can look at others differently”
~Ocean

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Key Practice #2: Reflective Practice



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Key Practice #2: Reflective Practice

The Science



We all work with people who know things about us that we do not know about ourselves.



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Reflective Practices: Definition

Reflective Practice is curiosity, directed inwardly. It is a process of self-inquiry and self-interrogation designed to improve practice, reveal blind spots and build more equitable systems.

Reflective Practice is an issue of culture. How are we thinking about ourselves and our experiences with students/clients/patients as essential to improving outcomes.



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Challenging Identity: What kind of system are we trying to be?

Reflection ≠ strategy

Reflection = identity | “How we do business around here” |

From preferencing Speed → Meaning-making

Our Emotion → Data, critical information

Our Mistakes → Learning opportunities

Safe. Integrated. Necessary.

What do we celebrate? What do we pay attention to?

What do we ignore?

What do we value? What do we malign?

The question is simple: “What kind of system do we want to be?”



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Reflective Practice: 8 Core Literacies

1. **“Locate Yourself” Under Stress** – notice your reactions and position in shifting stress states.
2. **Redistribute Emotional Labor** – hold pain collectively and share the burden equitably.
3. **Curiosity as Culture (Non-Negotiable)** – sustain tireless inquiry and wonder.
4. **Meeting Core Attachment Needs** – foster workplaces where people feel safe, seen, secure, valued, and free to make mistakes.
5. **Meaning Making** – create coherent narratives and learn from experience. (threat: “venting” which is not a change strategy)
6. **Wisdom Over Expertise** – prioritize insight and judgment over authority or technical knowledge.
7. **Invitational Stance** – engage others with questions, openness, and genuine curiosity.
8. **A Container for Challenge** – hold moderate-to-significant stress and pain safely.



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Suggested Reflective Practice Group Norms

1. Safety First, Not Always Comfortable

- We honor emotional and psychological safety, while recognizing that growth often requires discomfort.

2. Confidentiality & Support

- What is **said** here **stays** here, what is **learned** here **leaves** here. Care for one another: have a plan if discussions become difficult or triggering.

3. Curiosity Over Judgment

- Mistakes are data, questions are valued, and we embrace “one more step, one more question” as a practice

4. Role Model Reflective Practice

- Be the change: model openness, transparency, and thoughtful reflection in your own words and actions.

5. Equity & Inclusion of All Voices

- Every perspective matters. We intentionally make space for diverse voices and experiences.

6. Consent & Choice

- Participation is voluntary. Challenge by choice: you engage at a level that feels safe and sustainable.



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Implementation Steps: Turning Reflection into Organizational Culture

1. Built Through Durable Micro-Habits (Mechanics of change)

- Reflective Practice grows through small, repeated actions.
- These micro-habits quietly reshape norms, expectations, and power dynamics over time.

2. Culture Change Happens in All Directions

- Top-down: Leadership Engagement which reinforces reflective norms.
- Lateral: peers support, challenge, and hold each other accountable.
- Bottom-up: All staff shape practice through lived experience, role modeling.

3. Right-Size the Work (Pacing of change)

- Transformation is not a dramatic/seismic event—it's relational, consistent, and lived daily.
- Focus on what's sustainable: small, deliberate practices that compound into real change.
 - Look for opportunities, 'bunt singles'



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Implementation Steps: Turning Reflection into Organizational Culture

1. **Leadership Engagement (Power-Focused):** *Reflective Cultures Require Leadership Courage*

Leaders must model reflection as being necessary, relational, and free

Leaders do this by:

- Publicly reflecting on their own thinking, missteps, and blind spots
- Embedding reflection into organizational structures and processes
- Protecting time for reflection—explicitly and unapologetically
- Inviting imagination, innovation, and countercultural thinking
- Distributing power and authority rather than hoarding it

Culture Impact:

- Leaders set the tone: “*Do as I do.*”
- This shapes how the organization works and how people engage.



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Implementation Steps: Turning Reflection into Organizational Culture

2. **Lateral Work (Interpersonal-Focused):** *Not All Culture Change Requires Positional Authority*

- We can insert reflective practice into everyday spaces: meetings, consults, supervision, hallways.
- This is **micro-dosing curiosity**—small, repeated invitations to reflect.

Examples of Reflective Questions: Invitational

- “Can you say more about that?”
- “What was that like for you?”
- “How is this impacting you most right now?”
- “What is the heart of the matter for you?”

Over time:

- These questions soften defensiveness and stretch imagination.
- Reflection begins to show up—even before it has a name.

Culture Impact:

- Meetings feel different.
- Curiosity becomes a lived norm.



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Implementation Steps: Turning Reflection into Organizational Culture

3. Bottom-Up Work: Frontline Staff Shape Culture Through Lived Practice

- Staff can model reflective habits in real time, during everyday interactions:
 - "I noticed I got tight when..."
 - "I'm wondering why this hit me so hard..."
 - "I'm on the right side of the stress curve"
 - "I keep getting activated when..."
 - "I have such a strong reaction when a client _____, I need to sort this out."

Other Practices:

- Embed reflection in meetings, consults, supervision, and hallway interactions
- Pause before reacting; notice assumptions
- Invite colleagues: **"What's another way we might see this?"**

Culture Impact:

- Reflection shows up naturally—even before it has a name
- Micro-habits at the frontline reinforce lateral and leadership modeling



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Stress Response System: Misbehavior and Pain-based Behavior (Adapted from Shanker, Ph.D.)

Misbehavior:

- Downstream/Observable=Function
- Goals:
 - Escape/Avoid,
 - 60 Seek Attention,
 - 40 Access /Status/Influence/Power,
 - 20 Sensory Needs

Pain-Based Behavior:

- Upstream/Observable=driver
- Goals:
 - Reduce a threat
 - Moderate CNS activation
 - Reduce distress/tension
 - Connection/Attachment
 - Self Protection/Feel Safe
 - Pain Management/Relief
 - Protest



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