

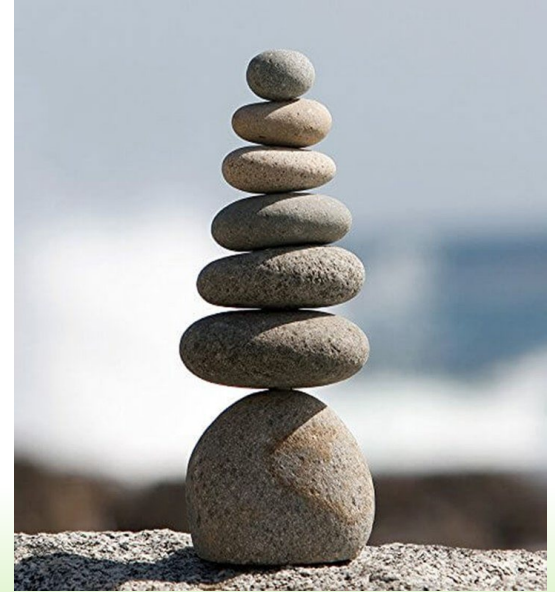


Trauma Informed Leadership for Uncertain Times

**OEO POTF
Compassion in Action
April 9, 2026**

Today's Takeaways:

- What it means to be a trauma-informed organization
- How to lead in a way that fosters a trauma-informed culture, especially amidst the stress of uncertainty
 - The neuroscience of uncertainty
 - Understanding your leadership style and identifying tools to help shift your practice





What is a Trauma-Informed (Resilient) Organization?

A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed

- **realizes** the widespread impact of trauma *and toxic stress* and understands potential paths for recovery;
- **recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma, *burnout, and toxic stress* in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and
- **responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma, *burnout, and toxic stress* into policies, procedures, and practices, and
- seeks to actively **resist re-traumatization**, *prevent burn-out, promote a culture of trust, and build employee well-being.*
- **fosters a culture of safety, equity, and inclusion.**



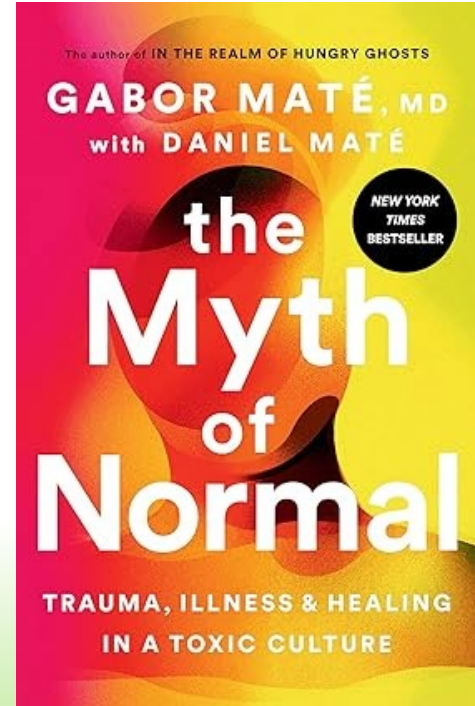
(source: SAMHSA – italics mine)

Trauma is subjective

The root word for “trauma” comes from the Greek word for “wound”.

Trauma is not only what happened to us, it is also the wound that lives on inside us.

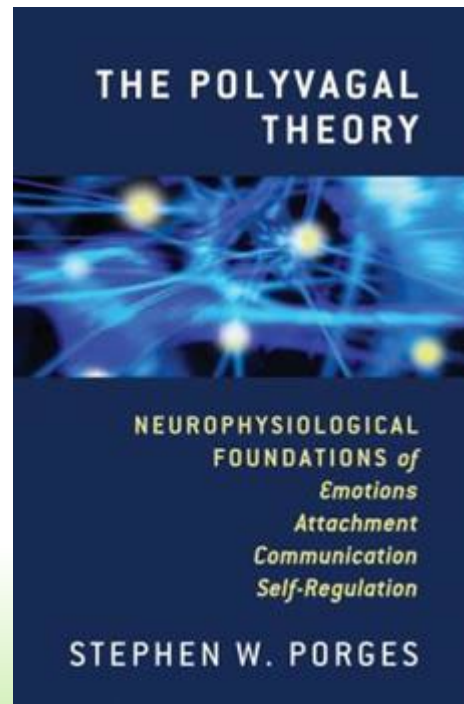
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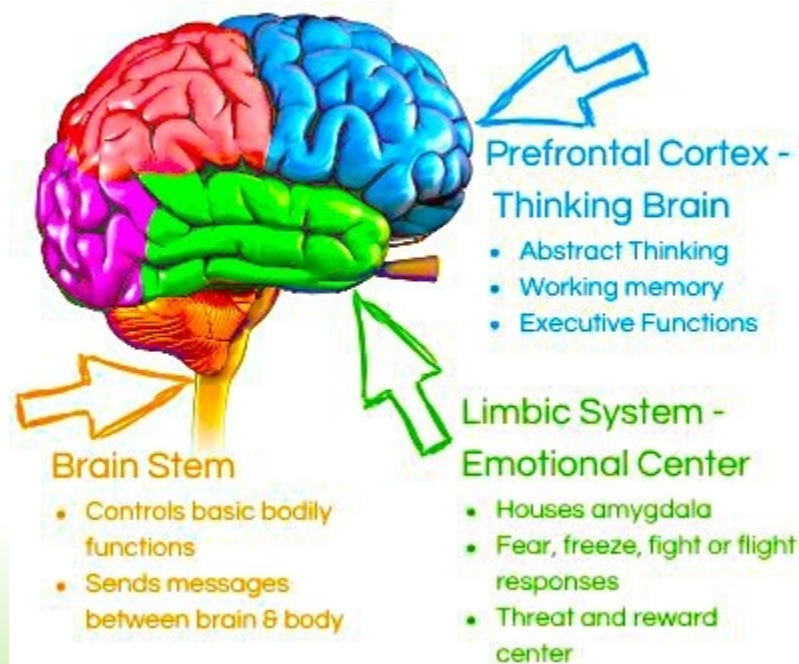
Safety is imperative

“If you want to improve the world,
start by making people feel safer.”

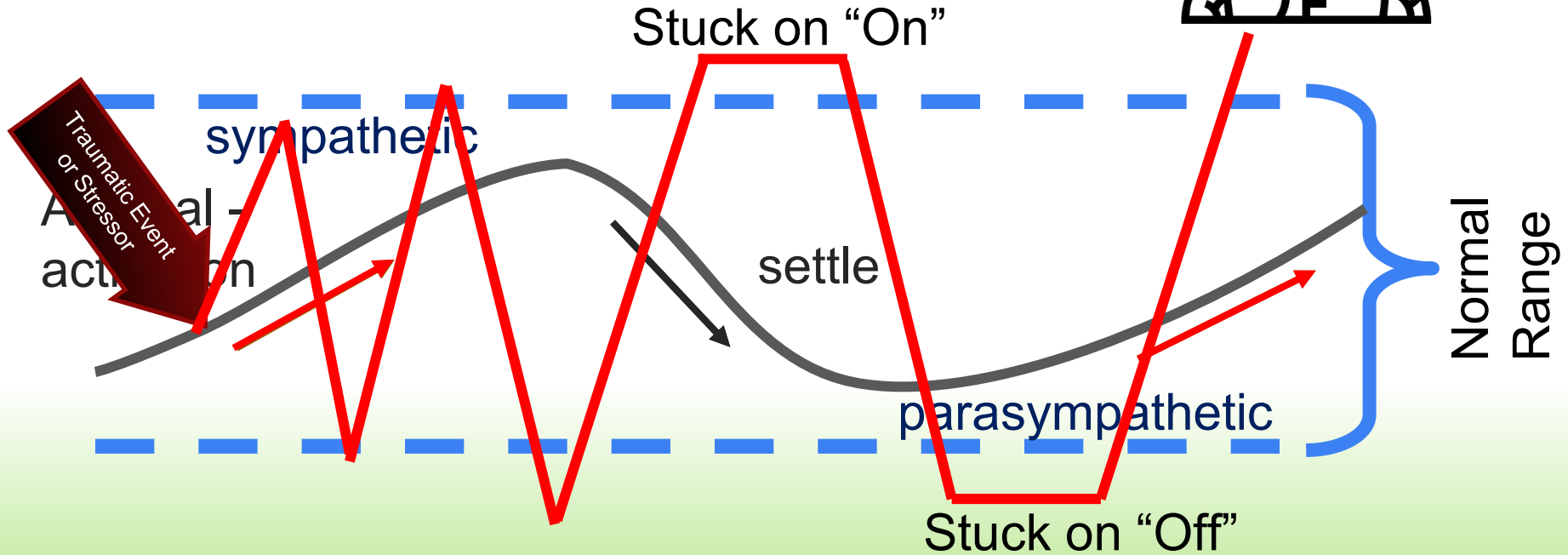
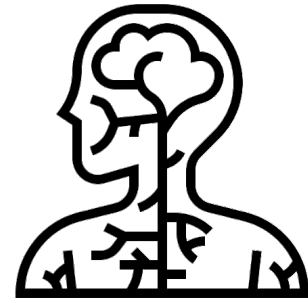
Stephen W. Porges, Ph.D, Scientist, Professor of Psychiatry, founding director of the Traumatic Stress Research Consortium, developer of Polyvagal Theory, the art and science of human connection.



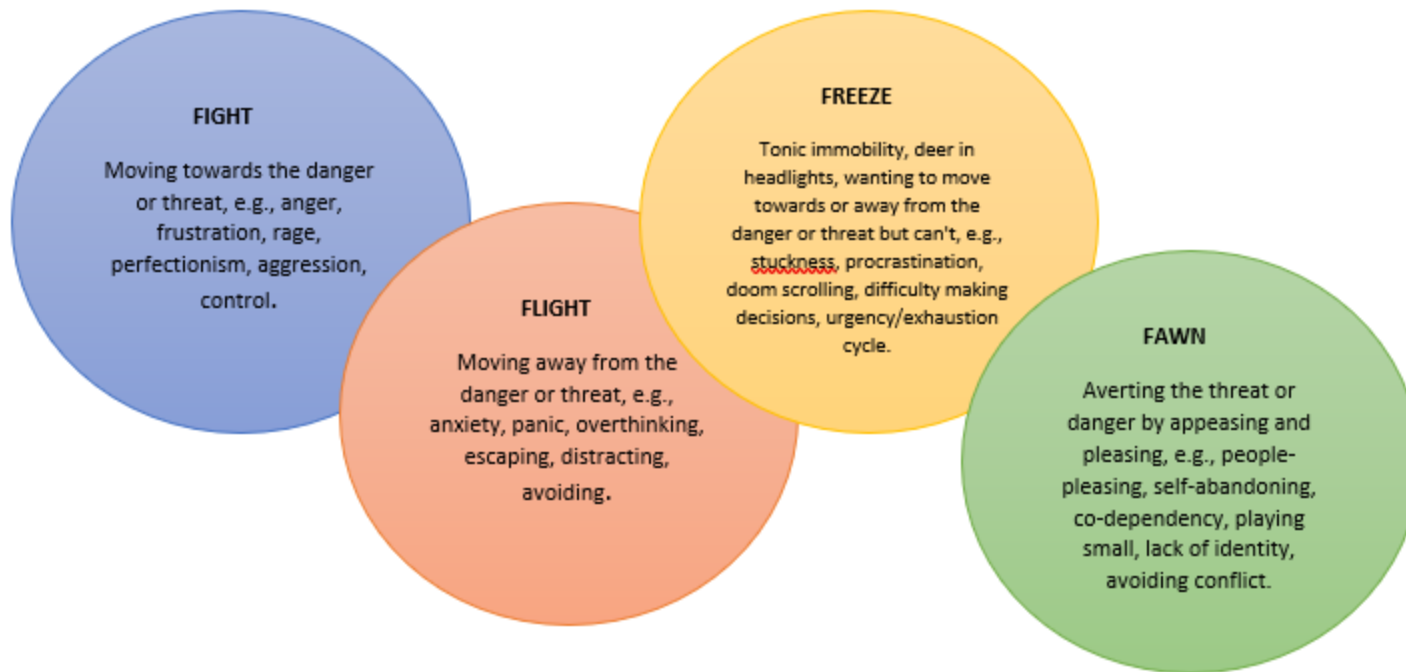
The Neuroscience of Resilience - Brain



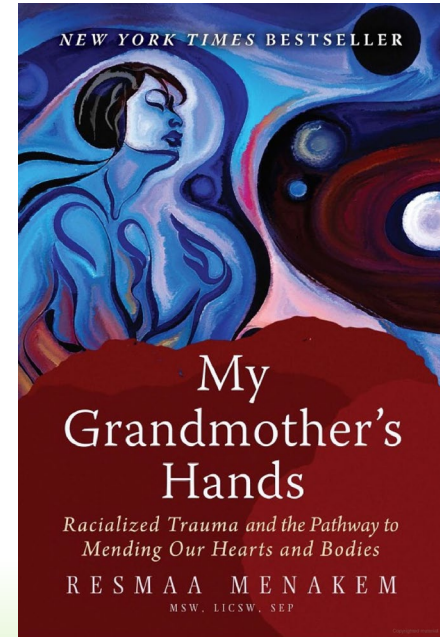
The Neuroscience of Resilience - Nervous System



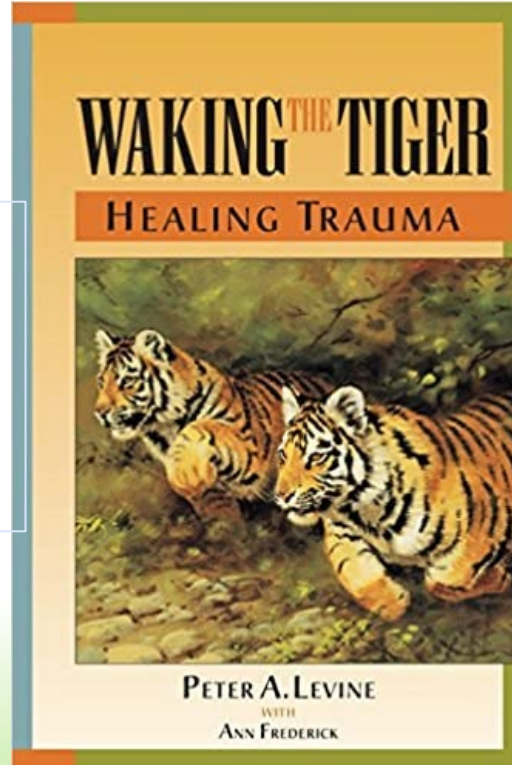
How does our stress response show up?



The way we typically respond to a stressful situation (our “default stress response”) often first appeared in response to our own past trauma.



When experiencing excessive stress and secondary trauma - our nervous systems react as though responding to a threat.



In our brains and nervous systems, **UNCERTAINTY** reads as though we are in danger or under threat.

Regulation: completing the stress response

- **Discharge and reset the nervous system** by using somatic practices like yoga, tai chi, stretching, running, dancing, cold showers/ice swim.
- **Practicing restoration, regulation, and presence:** taking deep breaths, mindfulness, meditation, relaxation techniques
- Trying stimulating the **vagus nerve** – which is located in the neck and associated with the parasympathetic nervous system – by singing, humming, rocking, or gently tapping on areas of the body.

All of these practices remind your body that it is a **safe place to live** – and your energy can return to your window of tolerance. It moves you from being stuck on “on” or stuck on “off”.

What happens when we are NOT regulated (when we are not in our “window of tolerance”)?

- Default to our stress/trauma response
- We “flip our lids”
- We become more reactive than responsive



The difference between reacting and responding is regulation.

Trauma Informed Leadership

In order to create a “felt sense of safety”, TIL must include:

- Relationship
- Communication
- Vulnerability
- Action



Trauma Informed Leadership

RELATIONSHIP:

How we're doing something is
AS IMPORTANT AS
what we're actually doing.

Safety starts here.



Psychological Safety

Teams need “Psychological Safety”: where “team members feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of each other”



Trauma Informed Leadership

COMMUNICATION:

1. Transparency: shared decision making and emotional presence
2. Authenticity: seeing and being seen by others
3. Humility/Curiosity: learning from rather than all-knowing
4. Acceptance/Kindness: openness to difference, empathy



Trustworthiness starts here.

Trauma Informed Leadership

VULNERABILITY:

- Makes mistakes, names them, and moves through
- Shows emotion – within regulated presence
- Practices curiosity and openness to learning from others
- Balances empathy and accountability



Trauma Informed Leadership

	Guarded	Vulnerable
1	Being a "knower" and being right	Being a learner and getting it right
2	Tapping out of hard conversations	Leaning into vulnerability and skilling up for hard conversations
3	Using shame and blame to manage ourselves and others	Leading ourselves and others from a place of empathy, accountability, and learning
4	Getting stuck in and owned by failures, setbacks, and disappointments	Owning our failures, setbacks, and disappointments through open discussion, learning from them, and embedding the learning in our work and our teams
5	Perceiving leadership as "being served by others"	Understanding leadership as "serving others"

Trauma Informed Leadership

ACTION:

- Boundary setting
 - Creates Clarity
 - Supports Accountability



TIL and Boundary Setting

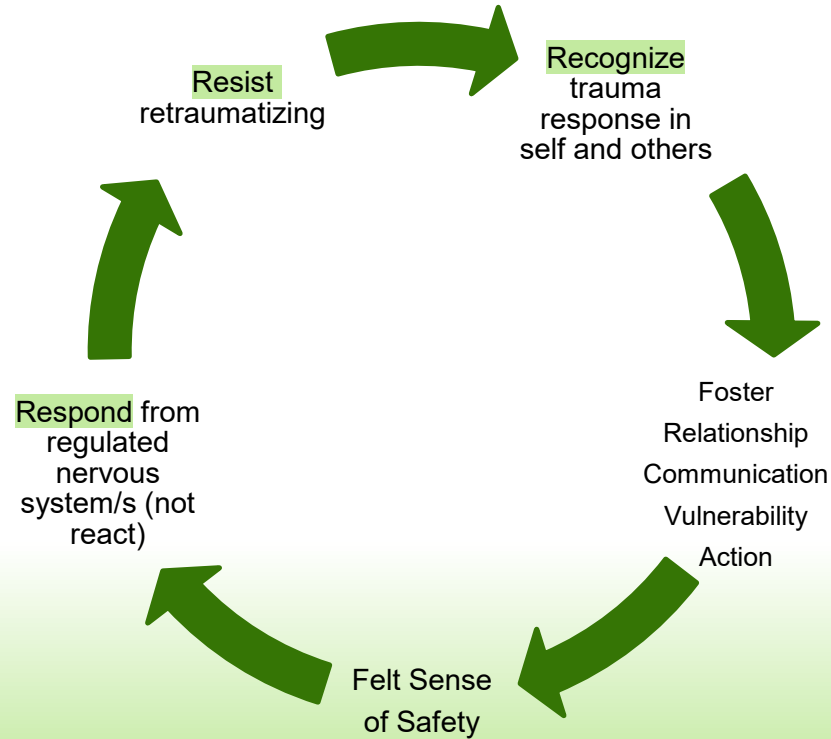


TIL and Boundary Setting

- ❖ Align
- ❖ Regulate
- ❖ Communicate



Trauma-informed leadership looks like this:



Trauma Informed Resilience Development

1:1 Coaching

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