

# Understanding Stress, Trauma, & Resilience

Establishing a shared language and being able to communicate about the key concepts of stress, trauma, and resilience is a key component of a trauma-informed approach.

## What Are The Different Types Of Stress?



Positive stress is a part of healthy development. Body responses include brief increases in heart rate and mild elevations in hormone levels.

Tolerable stress turns the volume up on the body's alert systems. It is brought on by more severe, long-lasting difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one, a natural disaster, or a frightening injury. If the activation is time-limited and buffered by protective factors (often a safe relationship) that help manage the symptoms, the body recovers from what might otherwise be damaging effects.



Toxic stress can occur when there is strong, frequent, and/or prolonged exposure to stressors—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance misuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—without adequate support. In children, this kind of prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt the development of brain architecture and other organ systems. It also can increase the risk for stress-related disease and cognitive impairment well into the adult years.

Adapted from Harvard Center on the Developing Child

## How Stress Affects The Body and The Brain

- Stress impacts a range of biological functions in the body including memory, learning, digestion, the immune system, the cardiovascular system, and the endocrine system. Stress responses in the body can include things such as increased heart rate, increased stress hormones, inflammation, nervous system activation, tense muscles, etc.
- Brain architecture is a reference to how the brain gets built. Toxic stress weakens the architecture of the developing brain and can have long-term effects into adulthood.



HEAD  
IMMUNE SYSTEM  
HEART  
SKIN  
STOMACH  
INTESTINES  
LIVER  
PANCREAS  
REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM  
JOINTS & MUSCULAR

## Definition of Trauma

“Trauma results from events or circumstances that are perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening. Trauma has lasting adverse effects on a person’s functioning and well-being.”

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)

## Historical Trauma

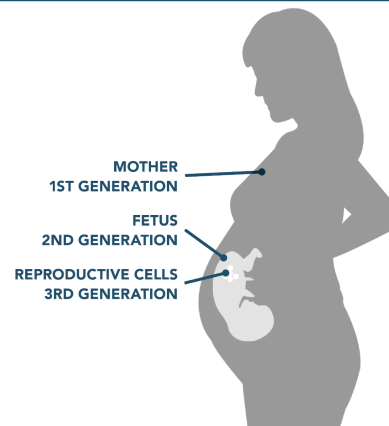


**Historical trauma** refers to a complex and collective trauma experienced **over time and across generations** by a group of people who share an identity, affiliation, or circumstance and who have experienced a **disruption in culture-based grieving** processes resulting in **generations of pain and suffering**.

M.Y.H. Brave Heart, PhD & L. DeBruyn, PhD; historical trauma experts

“We are finally starting to unravel the missing link between nature and nurture; how our environment talks to us, sometimes forever.”

Nessa Carey,  
The Epigenetics Revolution (2012)

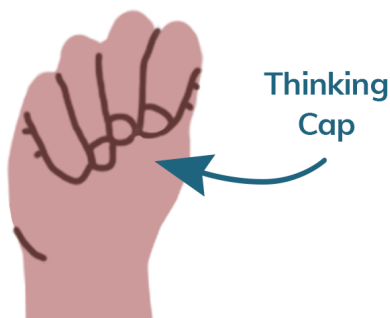


## Creating a Shared Language

The “flipping your lid” hand model from Dr. Dan Siegel can be a helpful way to understand the physiology of the brain when those wounds are bumped and our stress response system is activated.

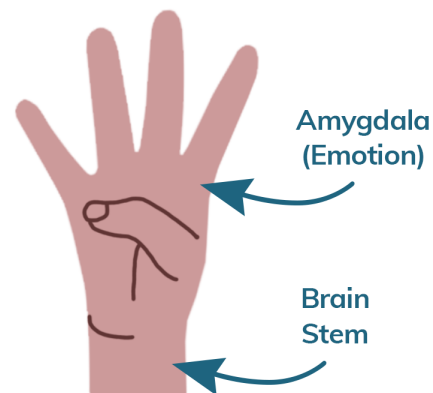
The hand model can help build a shared language (internally with staff and externally with members) around discussing how we (including adults) adapt in times of stress.

### Whole Brained



When we are whole-brained, we can remain calm, think clearly, make intentional choices, use words to express ourselves, and connect with others. **We are in our connection zone!**

### ‘Flipped Lid’ Brain



When our lids are flipped, we have adaptive stress responses (i.e., fight, flight, freeze, and fawn) and move outside of our connection zone.

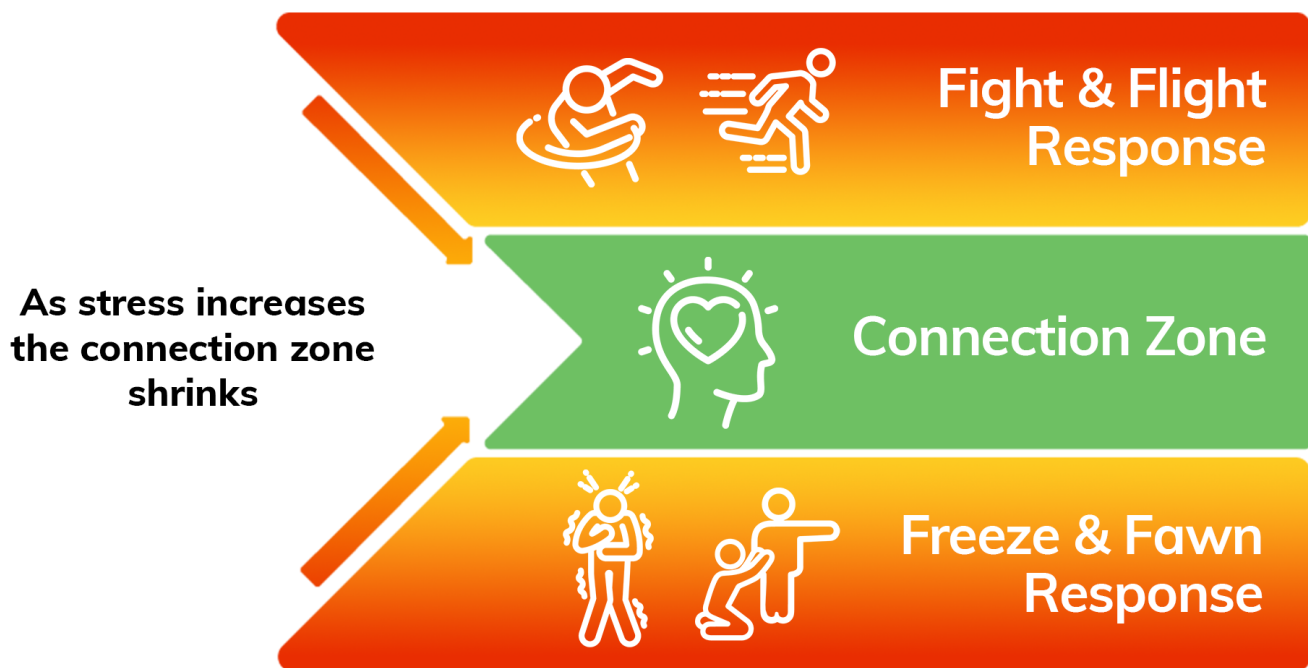
Adapted from Dan Siegel (2012)



## What Does a Flipped Lid Look Like?

- Rushing to “fix” it
- Anger or resentment
- Defensive
- Try to control
- “I can’t do anything right”
- Shutting down
- Crying
- Impulsive
- Irrational
- Passive aggressiveness
- “They are against me”
- Teeth grinding
- Impatience
- Sleep disturbances
- Tantrums
- Name calling
- Tense muscles
- Irritability
- Feeling suspicious
- Lack of trust/doubt
- Feeling stuck
- Racing thoughts
- Obsessiveness
- “They shouldn’t be...”
- Passive aggressiveness
- All or nothing thinking
- Bottling up emotions
- Taking things personally
- “I give up”
- Listen to respond

- The connection zone is where we are whole-brained, feel safe, and can connect with others.
- When we flip our lids, we have adaptive stress responses (i.e., fight, flight, freeze, and fawn) and move outside of our connection zone.



Adapted from Dan Siegel

These responses can be activated by sensory memories and are normal biological responses. Over time, they can become habits. With practice, we can observe them non-judgmentally and decide whether they are helpful or not helpful. Awareness is the first step.



## What Can Flip a Lid?

- Activators of stress can threaten us physically or emotionally (like a bear). Sometimes, these are threats to take away connection. Connections can help people feel safe.
- These activators are often based on fear from a threat that was real at some point in the past but that is not accurate in the moment. It is a connection back to “what happened” in the past.

## What Can Flip a Lid?

A stress response is activated by sensory memories.

Examples of common stress activators/lid-flipping experiences include:

- Having unmet basic needs
- Feeling disconnected from others
- Feeling self-defective
- Feeling unsafe/vulnerable
- Not having control/choice/predictability
- Being told what to do
- Being interrupted
- Being given advice or direction
- Having a mistake pointed out



## Resilience and Protective Factors

“Resilience is . . . a combination of protective factors that enable people to adapt in the face of serious hardship and is essential to ensuring that children who experience adversity can still become healthy, productive citizens.”

Source: Center on the Developing Child, Harvard

Protective factors turn potentially toxic stress into tolerable stress.

Examples include:

- Facilitating supportive adult-child relationships
- Building a sense of self-efficacy (belief in capacity to achieve goals) and perceived control
- Providing opportunities to strengthen adaptive skills and self-regulatory capacities
- Mobilizing sources of faith, hope, and cultural traditions

Adult relationships are sources of resilience too!

Source: Center on the Developing Child, Harvard

*Resilience is a muscle that we can build, even as adults!*



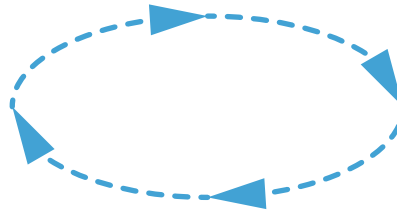
- **Neuroplasticity** is defined as the ability of the nervous system to change its activity in response to intrinsic or extrinsic stimuli by reorganizing its structure, functions, or connections after injuries, such as a stroke or traumatic brain injury (TBI).
- Neuroplasticity allows us to carve **new neural pathways** in our brain, create new habits, and expand our connection zone.

# Ways To Build Our Resilience Muscle



## MINDFULNESS

- Mindfulness is an overarching theme when we talk about practical tips for building the resilience muscle.
- The tools that help us achieve mindfulness can look like different things to different people—it can be meditation or yoga, but it really can be anything that helps you stay in the moment.
- Mindfulness, like all the tools for building the resilience muscle, is a practice!



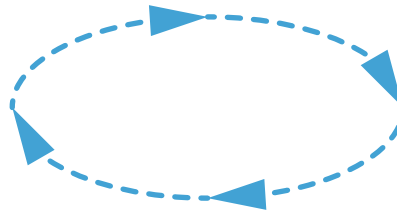
## AWARENESS

- Building the resilience muscle starts with awareness and paying attention to your body, emotions, thoughts, and behaviors when your lid has flipped.
- We often focus on behaviors, but if we slow down and pay attention to what's happening with our bodies, emotions, and thoughts, those can be clues before flipped-lid behaviors even happen.
- These are all normal responses to perceived threats



## INTERVENTION

- Refers to tools to help us regulate in the moment when our lids are flipped. (This is why awareness is so important!)
- Once we recognize that our lids are flipped and we are outside of our connection zone, we can intervene to help us regulate and get back inside our connection zone.
- Don't forget: If someone is having a freeze or fawn response, they may need to upregulate to get into the connection zone.



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### 5 Tips

1. Pause, breathe, and acknowledge
2. Integrate movement
3. Count backward from 10
4. Notice the texture of an item (shirt, pen, etc.)
5. Relax muscles/stretch

### 5 Tips

1. Sleep
2. Nutrition
3. Physical activity
4. Nature
5. Supportive relationships



Origins Training & Consulting helps educators, health care professionals, social service workers, and other leaders integrate a trauma-informed approach into their work so they can build resilient organizations and communities.

[originstraining.org](http://originstraining.org)

