

# Reframing Behaviours of Concern through a Polyvagal Lens

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# Learning Outcomes

- Describe levels of reaction to perceived threat using Polyvagal Theory
- Rethink behaviours of concern as an autonomic defensive reaction to perceived threat and lack of connection
- Explain to others concepts involved in safety – that is absence of fear as well as the presence of connection
- Understand how our own arousal levels impact on the arousal levels of others
- Understand why we need to focus on coregulation and not just self or inner regulation

“When our nervous system fails, we use  
behaviour”

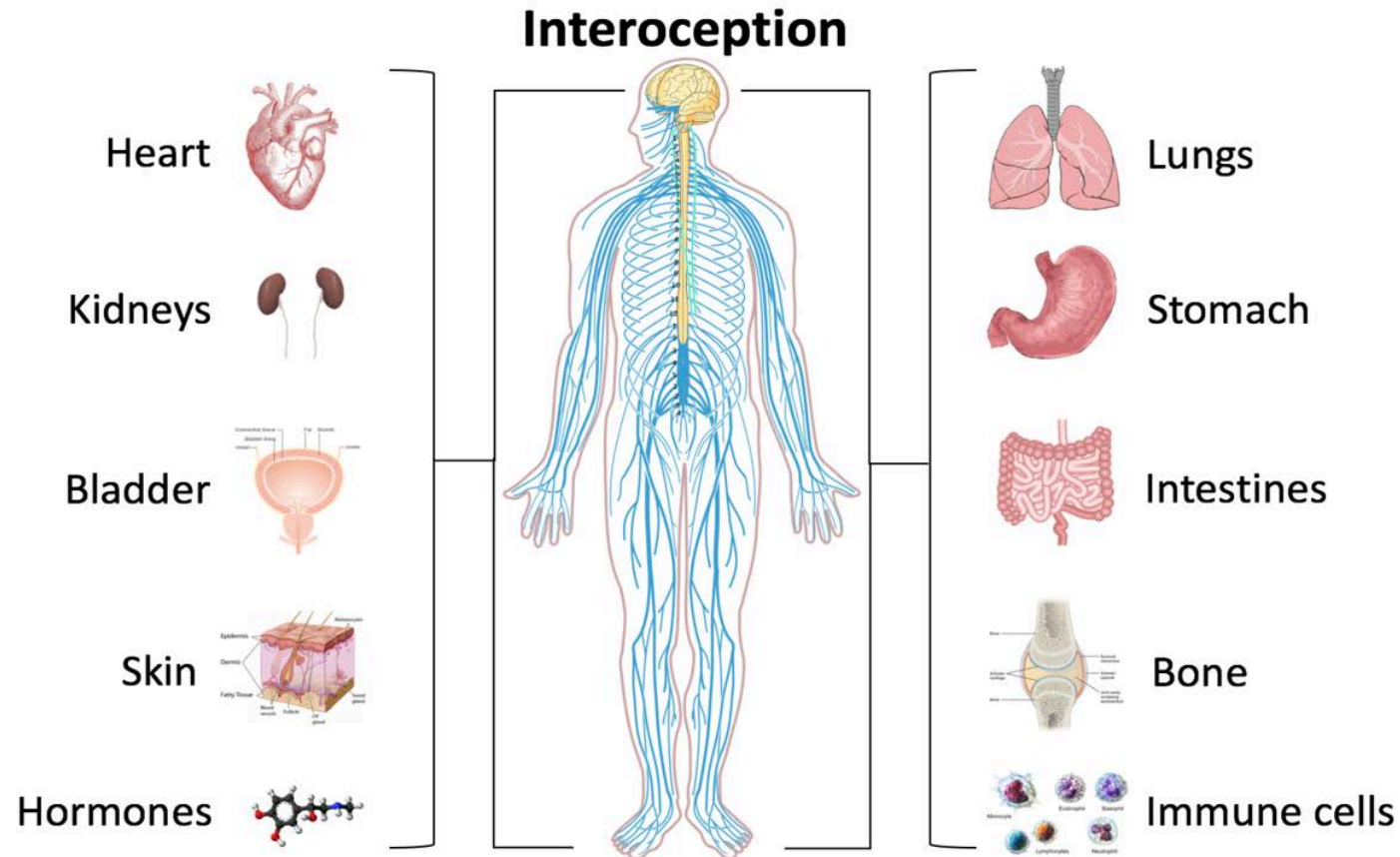
(Porges, 2017a)

# Looking beneath the 5 functions

- BOC a manifestation of the fight/flight response
- Pain – precedent for internally generated dysregulation
- Pain and fight/flight response all part of the interoceptive system

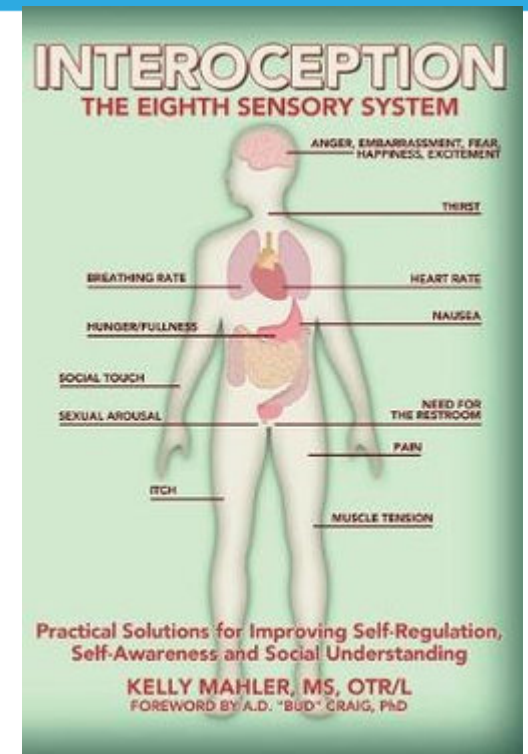
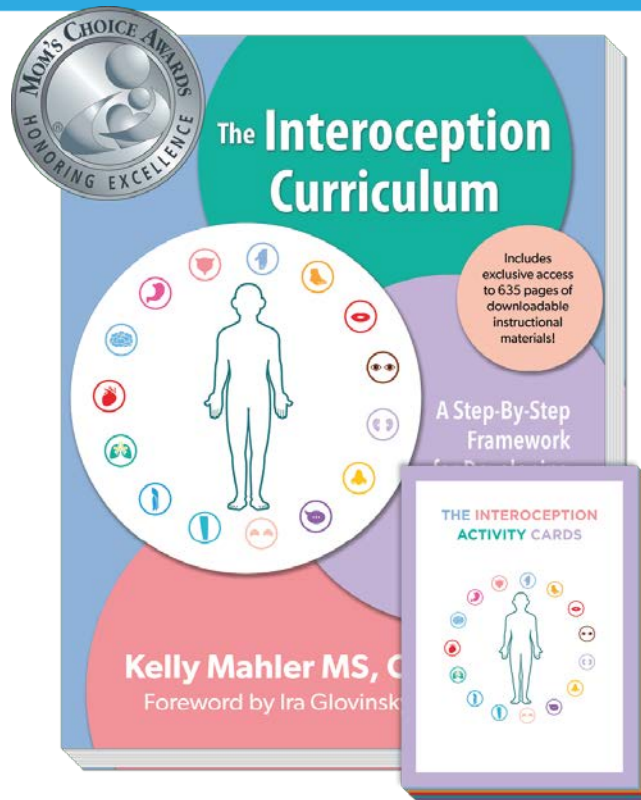
Interoception is the sense of the internal state of the body and refers to the process by which the nervous system senses, interprets, and integrates signals originating from within the body. It gives us clues about our emotional state and is the sensory component of the fight/flight system

# 8th Sensory System



Vagus  
largest  
nerve –  
80%  
sensory

(Craig, 2002; 2015)

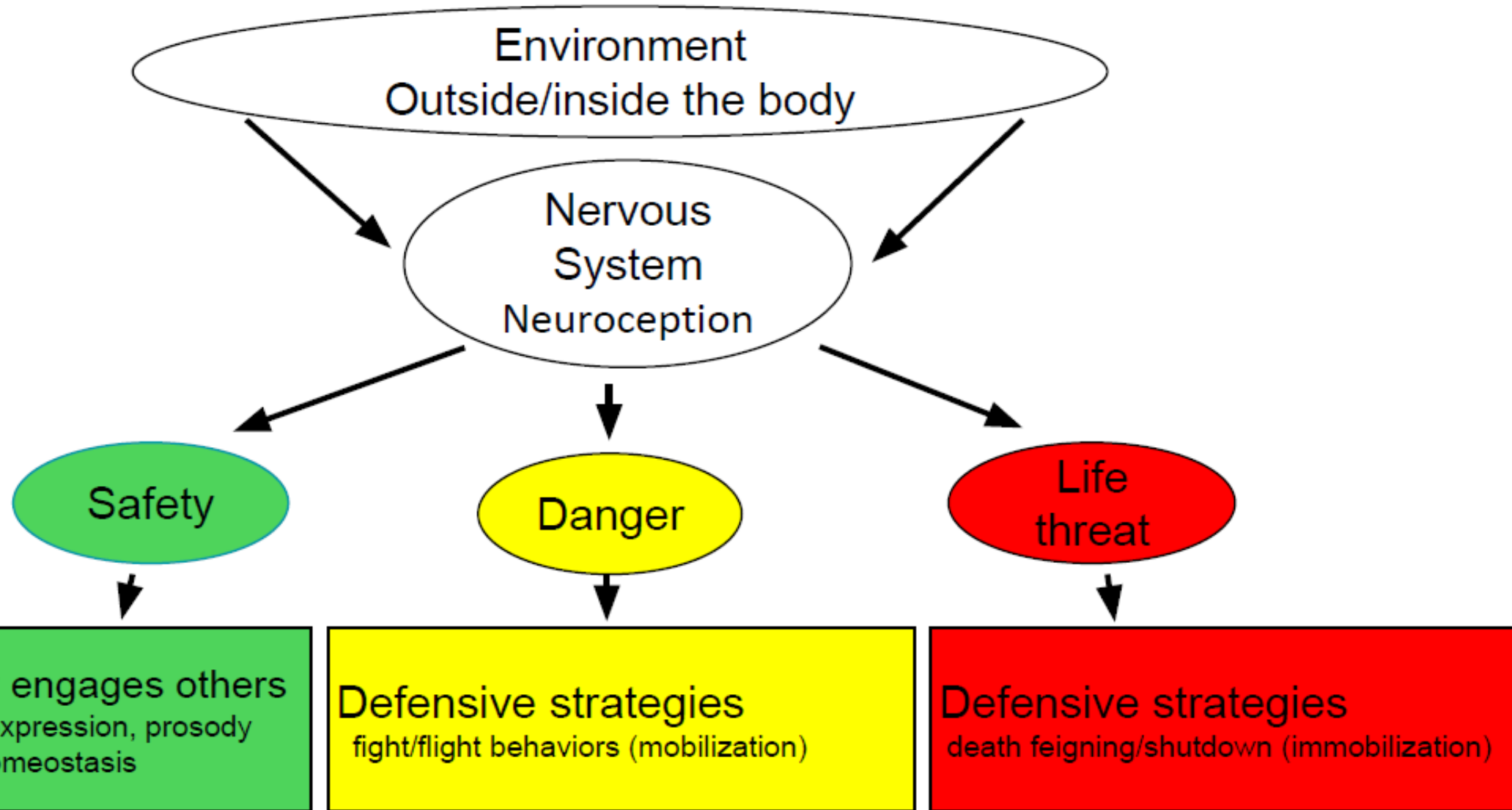


- <https://youtu.be/A0zbCiakjaA>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=To39nUkk2IM&list=PLXTC2Ugaw5-0lh46oXp0BWIHQOXDdL1vU>
- <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCylovxevV3W2l2WXHDBkKxA>

- <https://www.kelly-mahler.com/resources/>
- <https://education.nsw.gov.au/teaching-and-learning/professional-learning/scan/past-issues/vol-39-2020/interoception-as-a-proactive>
- <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/ready-to-learn-interoception-kit.pdf>
- [http://web.seru.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Interoception-101\\_March-2019.pdf](http://web.seru.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Interoception-101_March-2019.pdf)
- [http://web.seru.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Interoception-201\\_March-2019.pdf](http://web.seru.sa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Interoception-201_March-2019.pdf)
- <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/interoception-301-activity-guide.pdf>

# The Quest for Safety:

Emergent  
Properties of  
Physiological  
State



# Misperception of danger – interpret cues as a threat in the absence of clear danger

- Preprogrammed for fear – Prime directive – survival (Perry, 1999)
- Need to be aware of danger to survive (light touch, movement in peripheral vision)
- Uncomfortable but not life threatening if didn't find food
- Negative – Velcro, Positive – Teflon (Hanson, 2019)
- Develop social engagement system to calm the nervous system and build trust and reassurance
- Danger in the modern world – anxiety about being different, embarrassed, part of group to survive, interpreting everyday sounds as threatening



# Ladder of arousal (Polyvagal ladder)– reaction to perceived threat

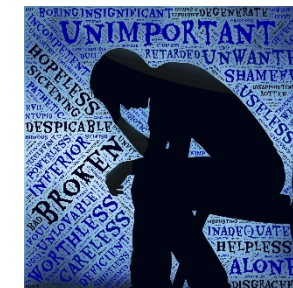
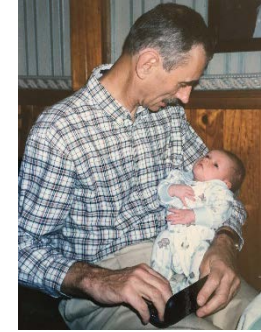
*Where are you on the ladder?*

Safe and connected – Social engagement System

Mobilise – fight/flight

Immobilise – collapse, shutdown, feigned death

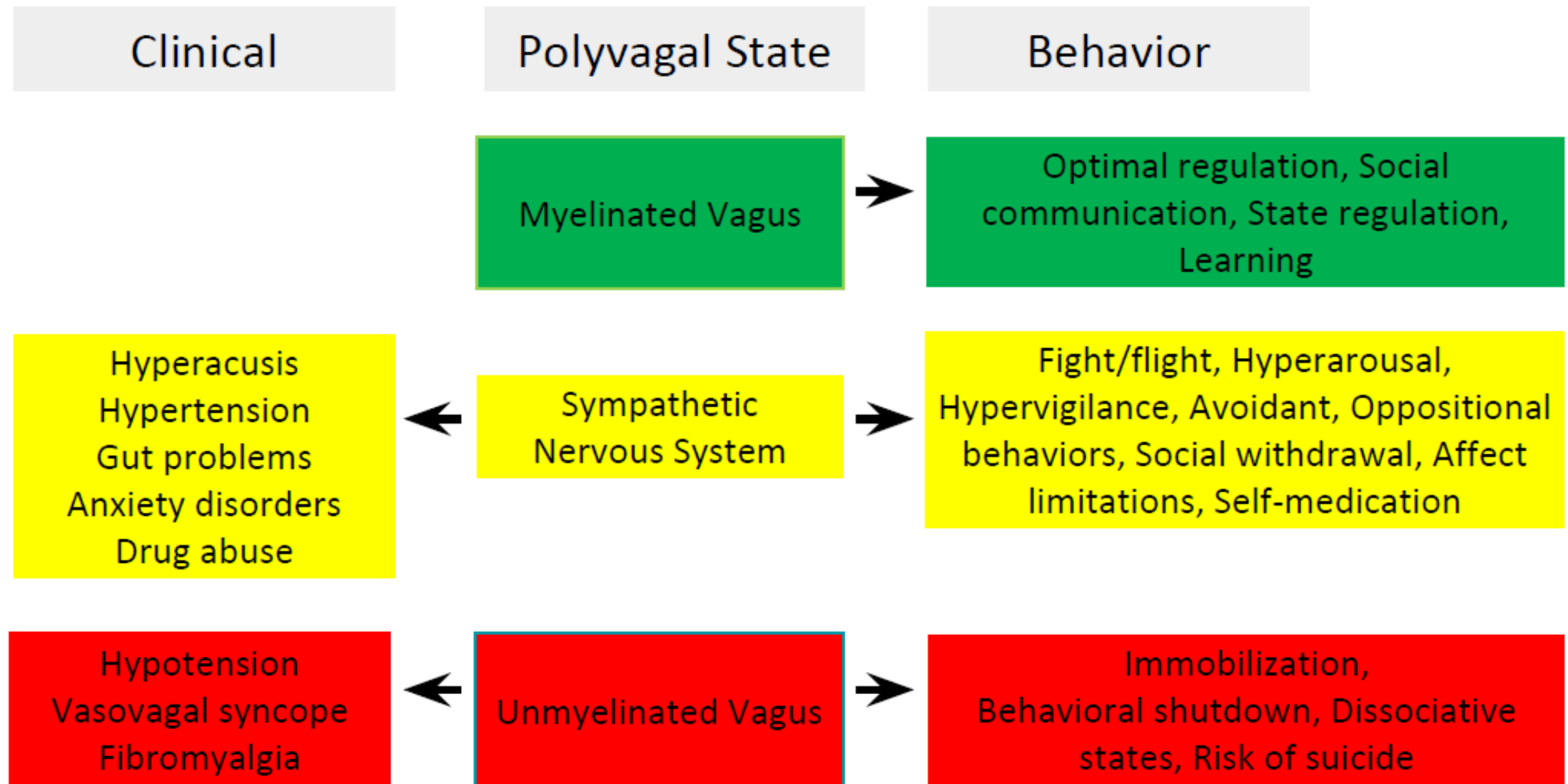
*Where are others on the ladder?*

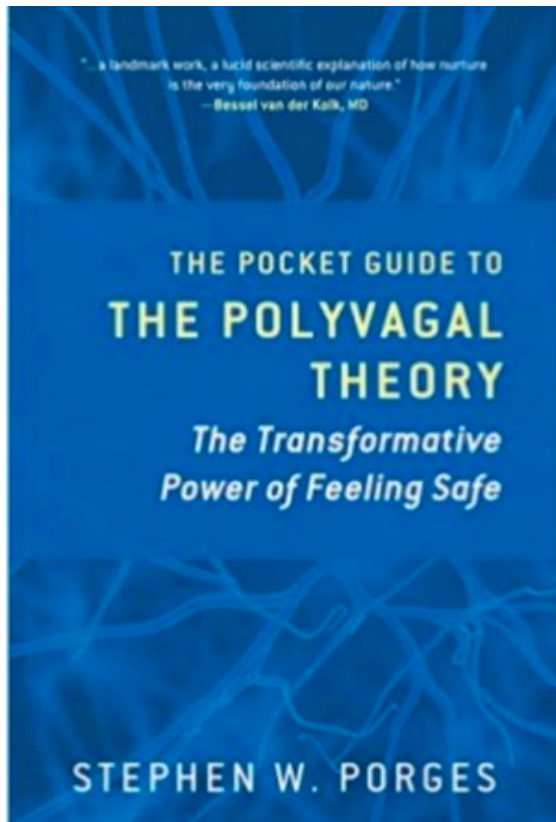


Ladder analogy developed by Deb Dana (©2018 Deb Dana)

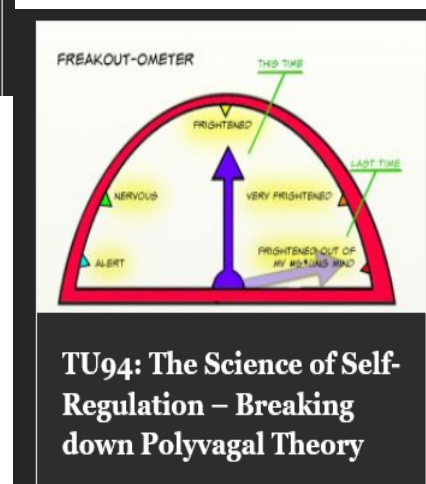
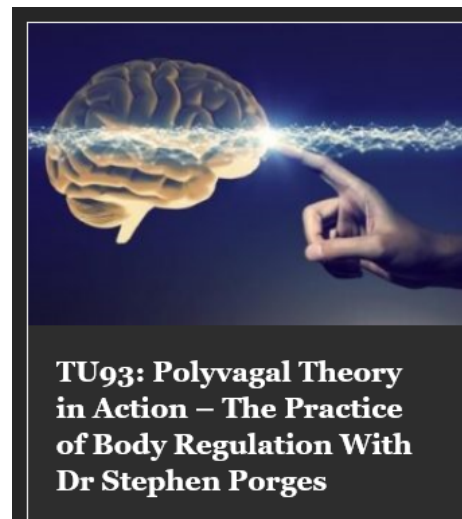
scope

# New Model: Polyvagal state





Safe & Sound Protocol (SSP) Podcast  
A Polyvagal Informed Therapy



“Neuroception is the process by which the nervous system evaluates risk without requiring awareness”

(P19,Porges 2017b)

# Importance of social interaction

Social engagement is the vagal brake on fight/flight

Tony Attwood and Michelle Garnett say:

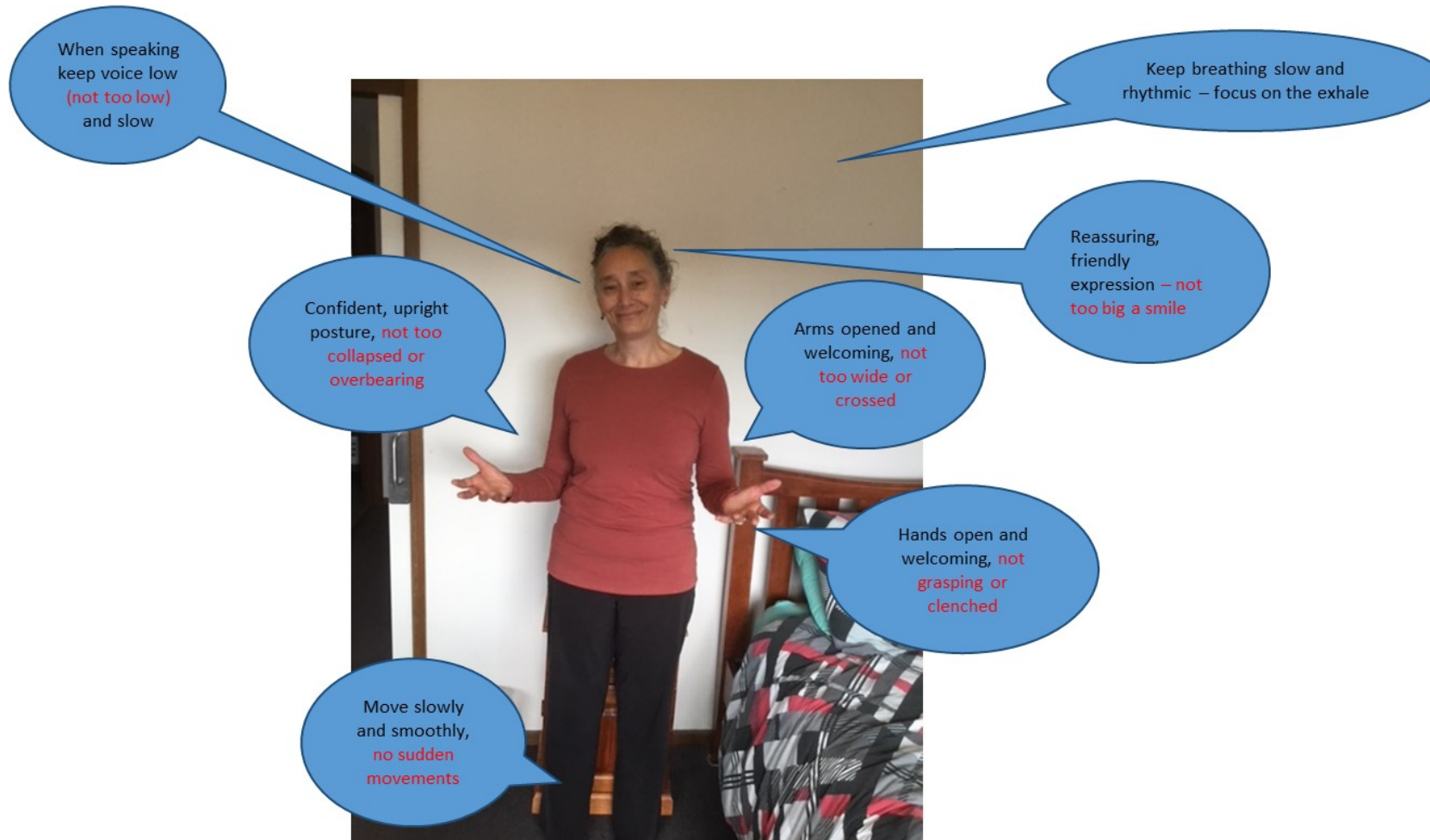
*“If someone approaches me for a conversation and they are full of worry, fear or anger, I find myself suddenly in the same state of emotion” (Empathic Attunement)*

Attwood, T. & Garnett, M. (2016).

Behaviours don't happen in a vacuum –  
people need to feel safe



# Using your nonverbal cues to help a person feel safe and calm and connected



# Social Engagement System

*“Safety is not just the absence of threat, but the presence of connection where people feel seen, heard and accepted without judgement”*



# How will you help a person feel safe and connected?

- Think about body language
- How will you engage with the person?
- What are the person's likes and interests
- How will you practice disconnection and reconnection?

Focus on coregulation rather than self regulation

Consider inner regulation as we all rely on others to help regulate our arousal levels

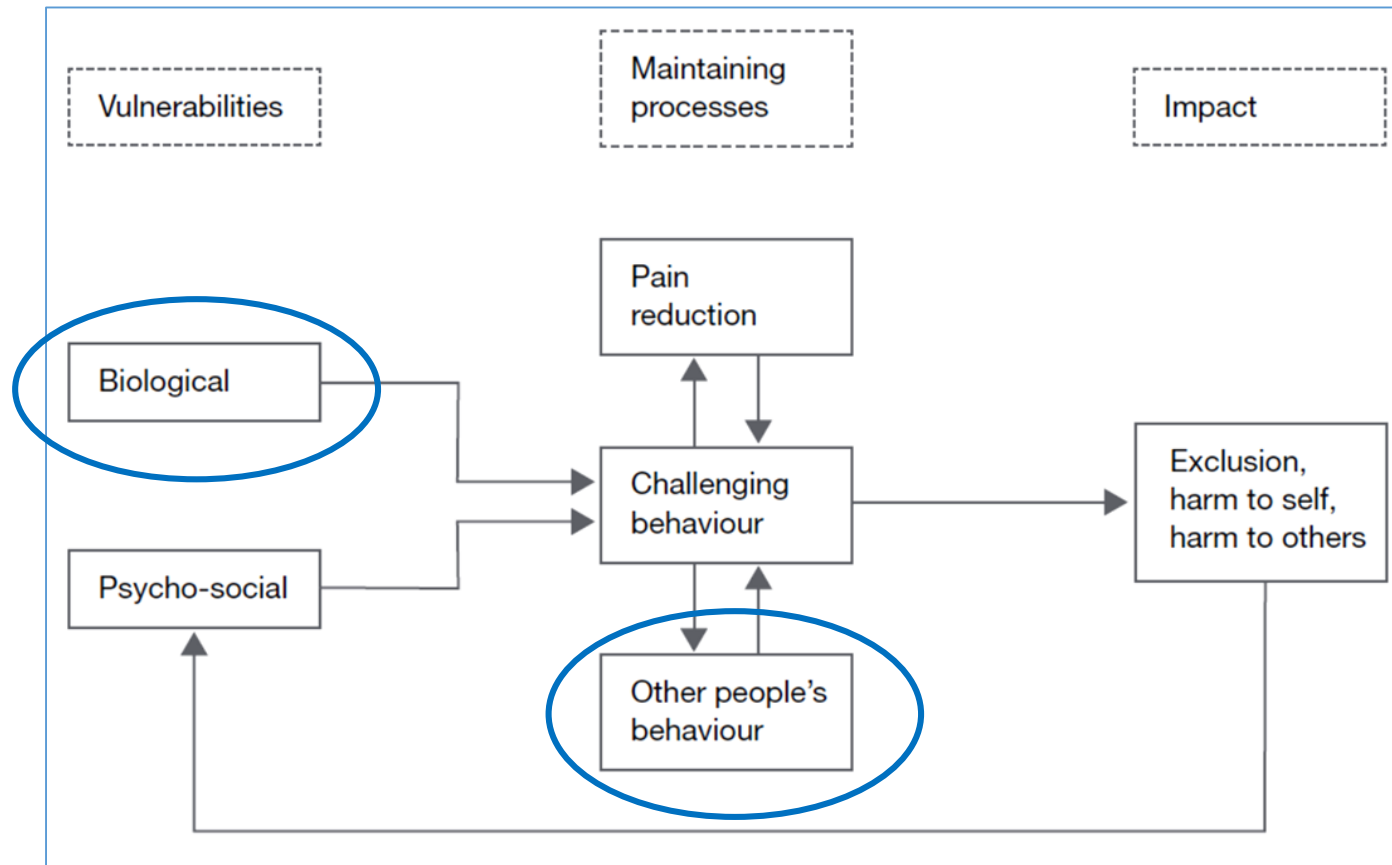
Dan Siegel

Ref: Kuypers, 2011

## Zones of Regulation

Zone	What looks and sounds like	What feels like (interoception)	What others can do to help (Coregulation)	What I can do (self/inner-regulation)
Green Zone (Calm, alert and ready for learning and engagement Challenge and teach new skills)				
Yellow Zone (starting to get upset, giggly, lack focus – intervene now)				
Red Zone (crisis disconnect between thinking and emotional brain. Acting in fight, flight, freeze)				
Blue Zone (sick, tired, under aroused or shut down)				

# Hastings et al Model



# Social connection (Social Engagement System) gives us proactive and reactive strategies when working with people who display behaviours of concern

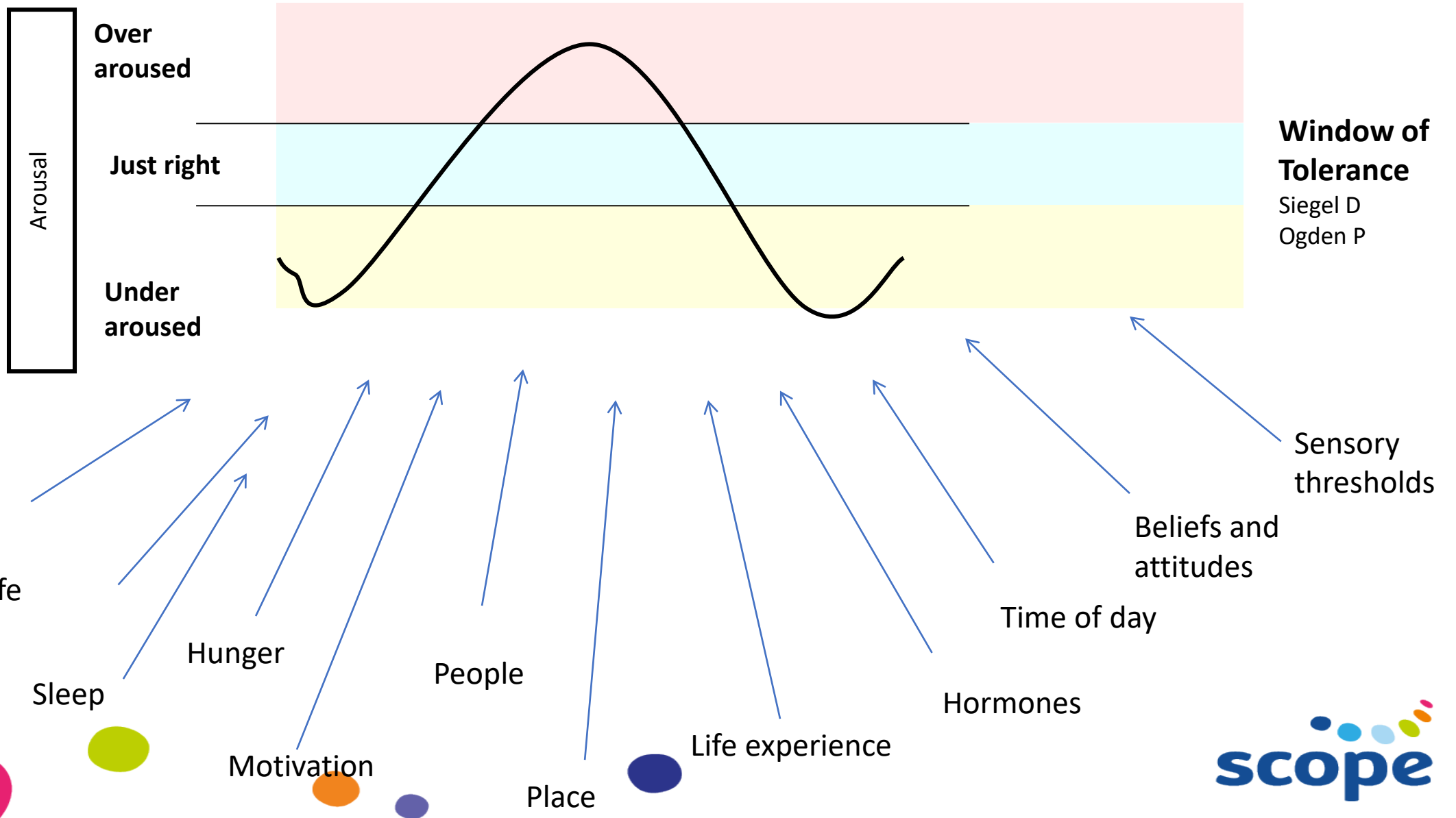
## Proactively:

- Be present
- Engage in back and forth interactions
- Help people to reconnect when they disconnect to build frustration tolerance

## Reactively:

- Calm posture
- Slow breathing
- Focus on the exhale
- Project a sense of safety
- Validate emotions (non verbally demonstrate compassion)

# Level of arousal affects ability to cope



# Influences on arousal

- **Quality of life**
  - Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaningful activities, Achievements , choice and control
- **Vulnerabilities**
  - understanding communication, knowing what is happening ,robust social network, negative life events, vicarious trauma, physical/mental health, sleep, poor interoceptive awareness, capabilities (resources/skills),
- **Beliefs and attitudes**
  - Controllability, optimism, reputation, work place culture, self/criticism, judgement, sense of belonging, internal resources, knowing the person
- **Sensory thresholds**
  - Physical environment, reaction to touch, others, within window of tolerance

# Take home messages

- Polyvagal Theory – autonomic reaction to perceived threat
- Our nervous system responds in a hierarchical way
- The importance of connection as part of safety
- Impact of our own arousal levels
- Focus on coregulation



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