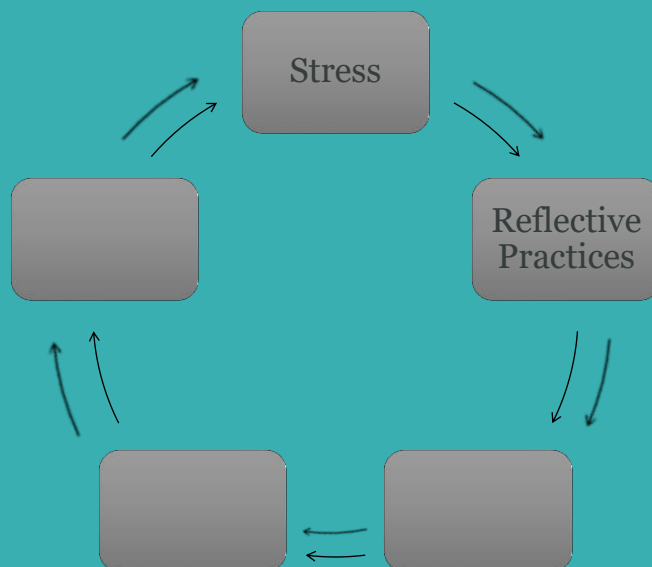


# Transforming Trauma: The School as Healing Community

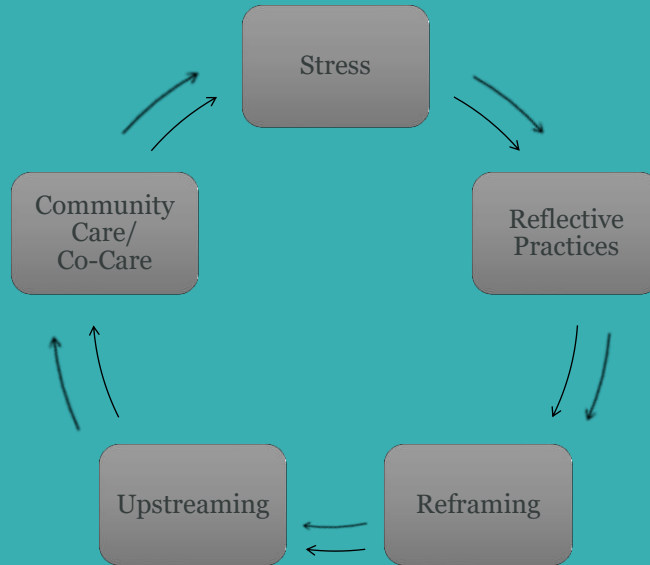
Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board  
Jan 7, 2022

Dave Melnick, LICSW  
Director of Outpatient Services  
Northeastern Family Institute, Vermont (NFI)  
Fellow and Trainer, ChildTrauma Academy

## 5 Key Practices **to** Transform Stress: The Model



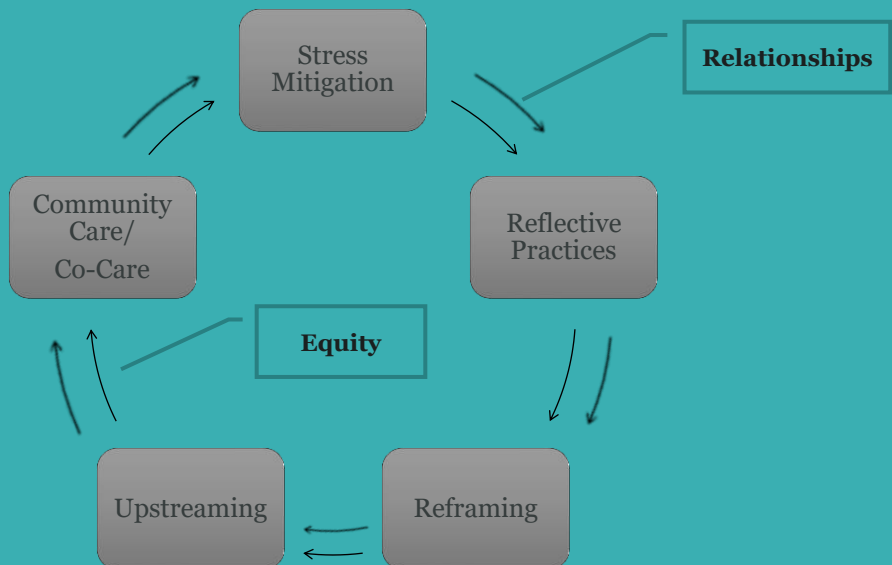
## 5 Key Practices to Transform Stress: The Model



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## 5 Key Practices to Becoming Trauma-informed: Drivers



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## My Biases About Kids & Change

- 1 • Kids change when they feel safe and understood
- 2 • Kids will change faster when we change first
- 3 • When systems change, kids can change the fastest
- 4 • Chronic acting out is a form of protest
- 5 • When a kid acts out, we have choices.



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## My truths about Kids & Change

Your response to a child's behavior is as important as the child's behavior.

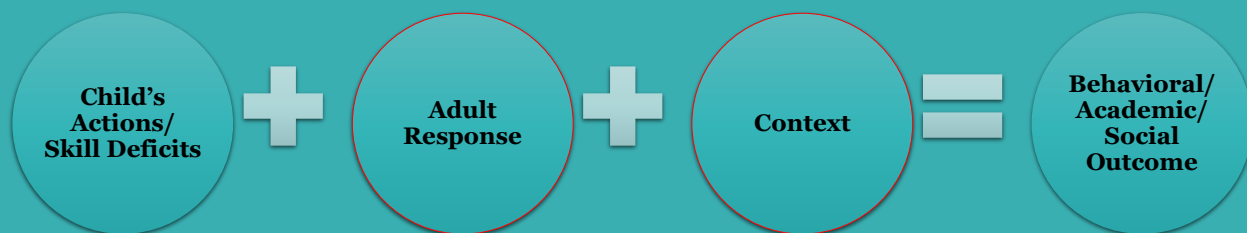
We *surveille* our students a lot, yet we rarely examine our own feelings, thoughts and actions as much



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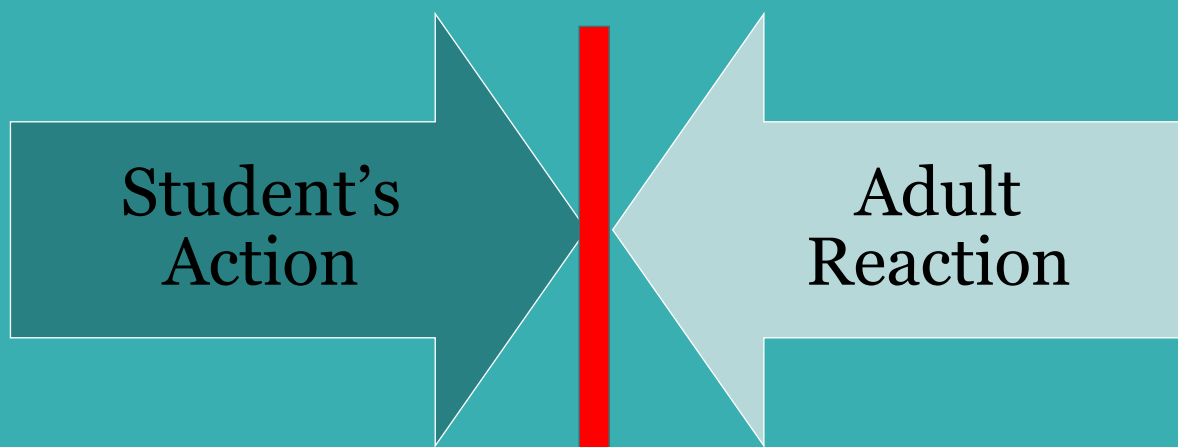
## Outcome Formula



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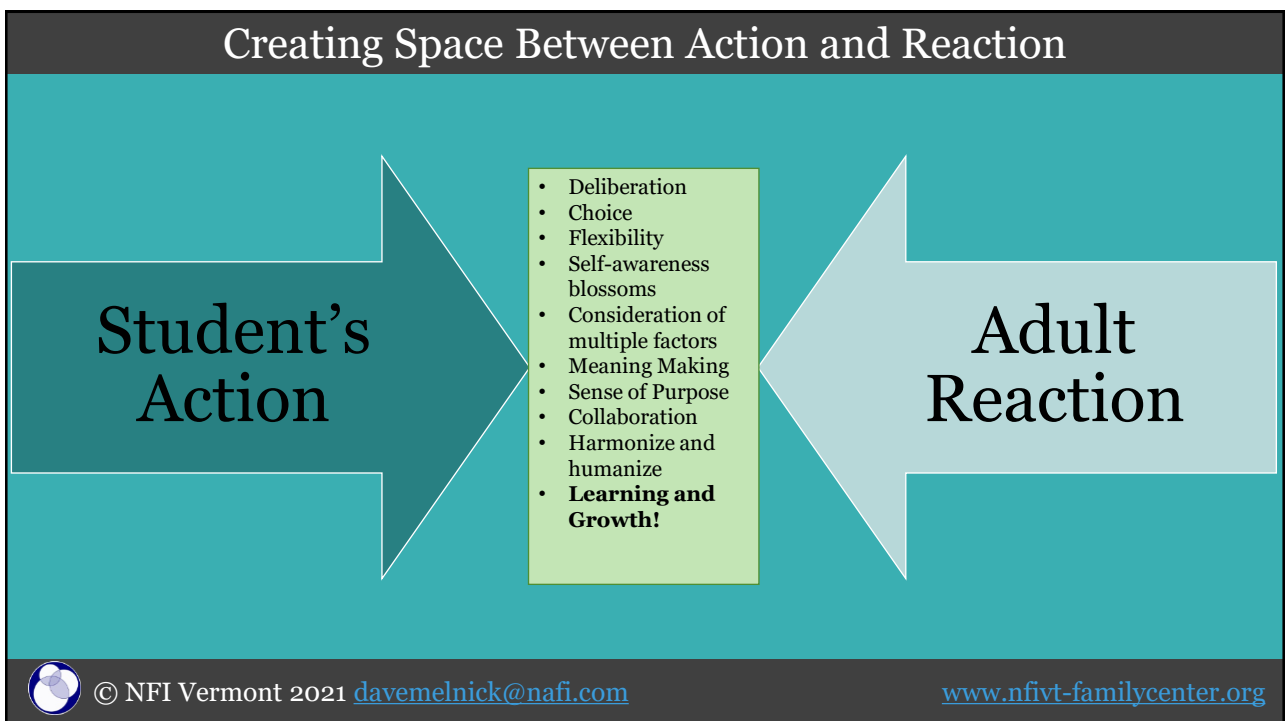
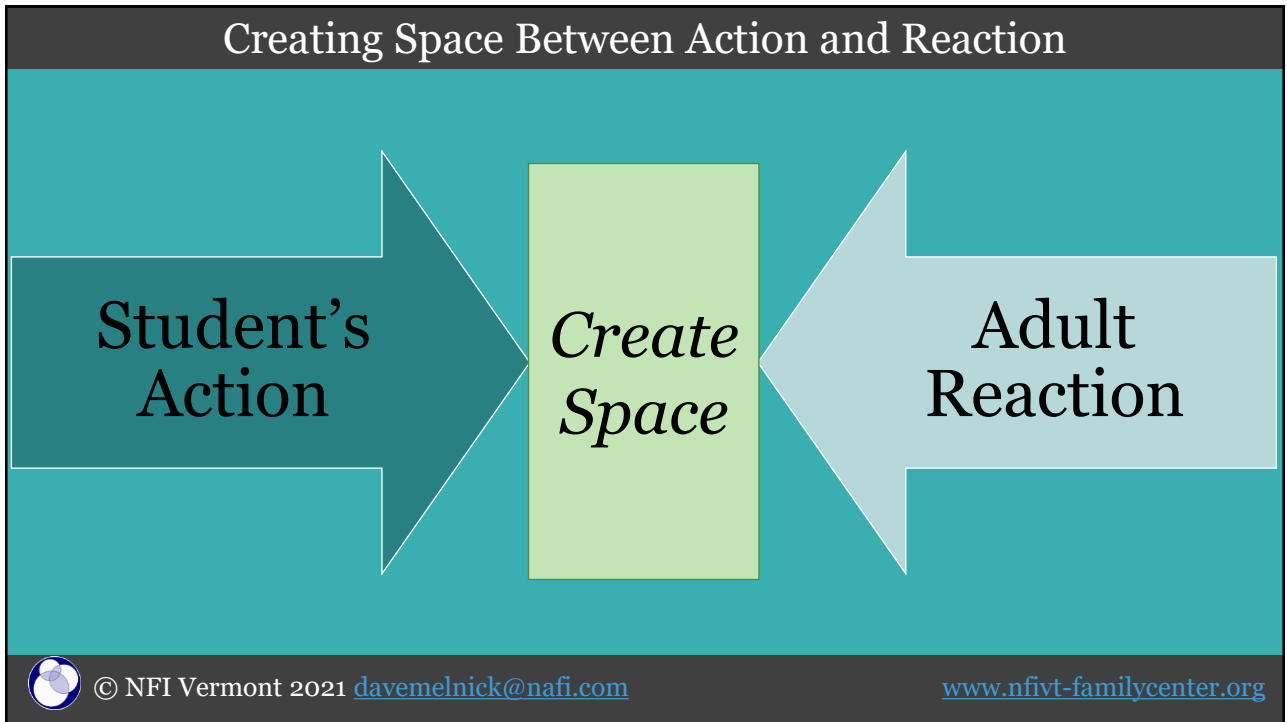
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## Creating Space Between Action and Reaction

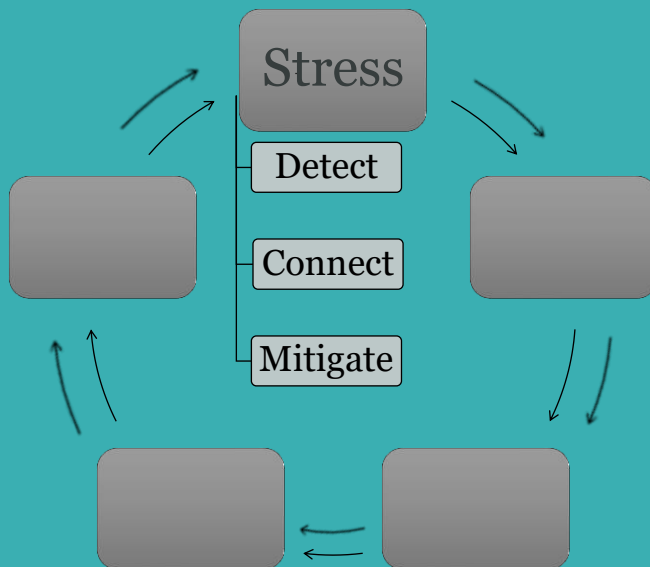


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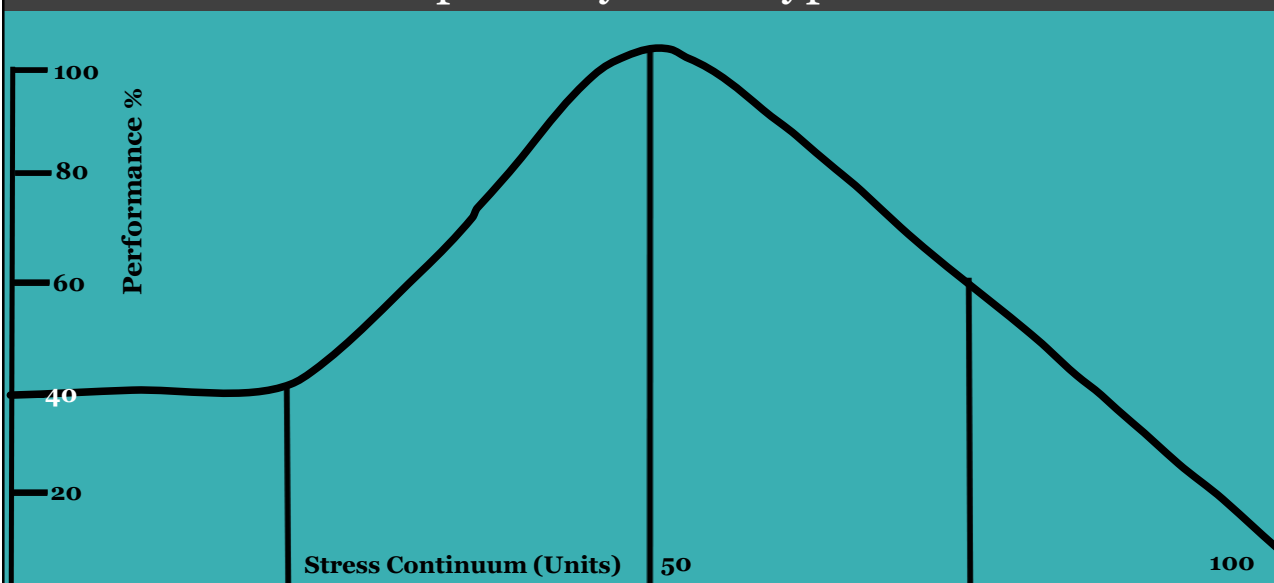
## 5 Key Practices to Transform Stress: The Model



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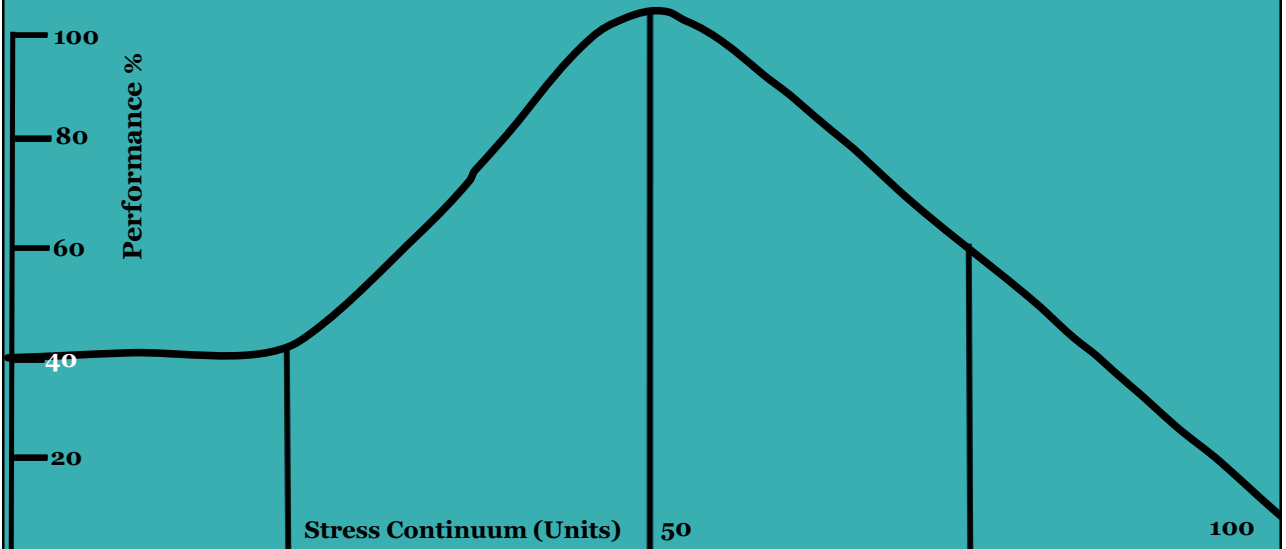
## Stress Response System: Typical Person



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## Stress Response System: Core Concept #1 (Basics)



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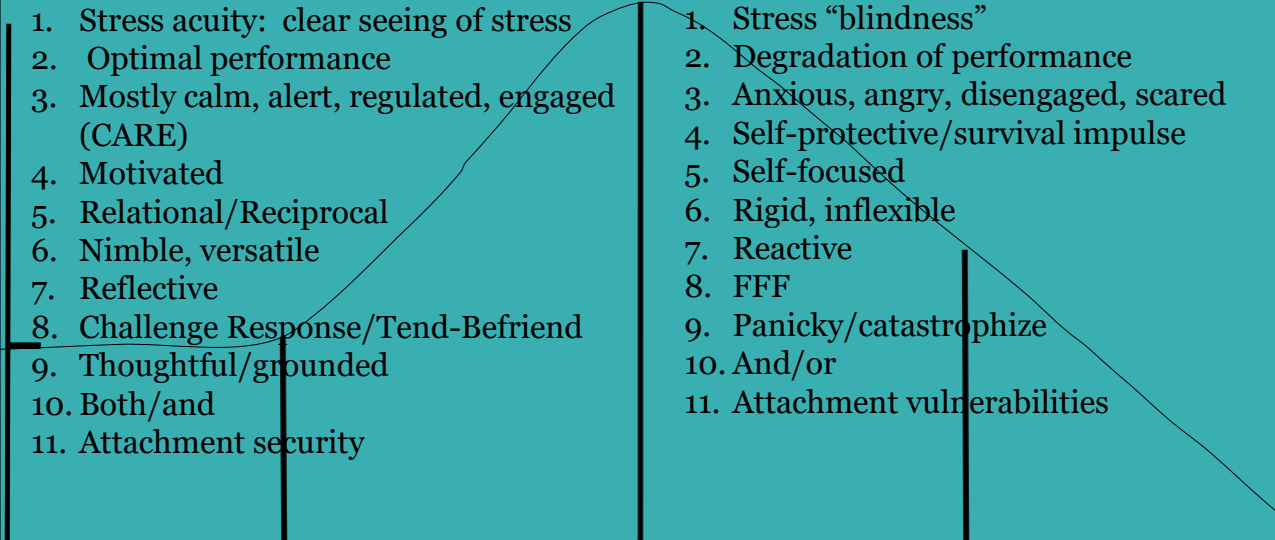
## Stress Response System: Core Concept #2 (States and Traits)



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

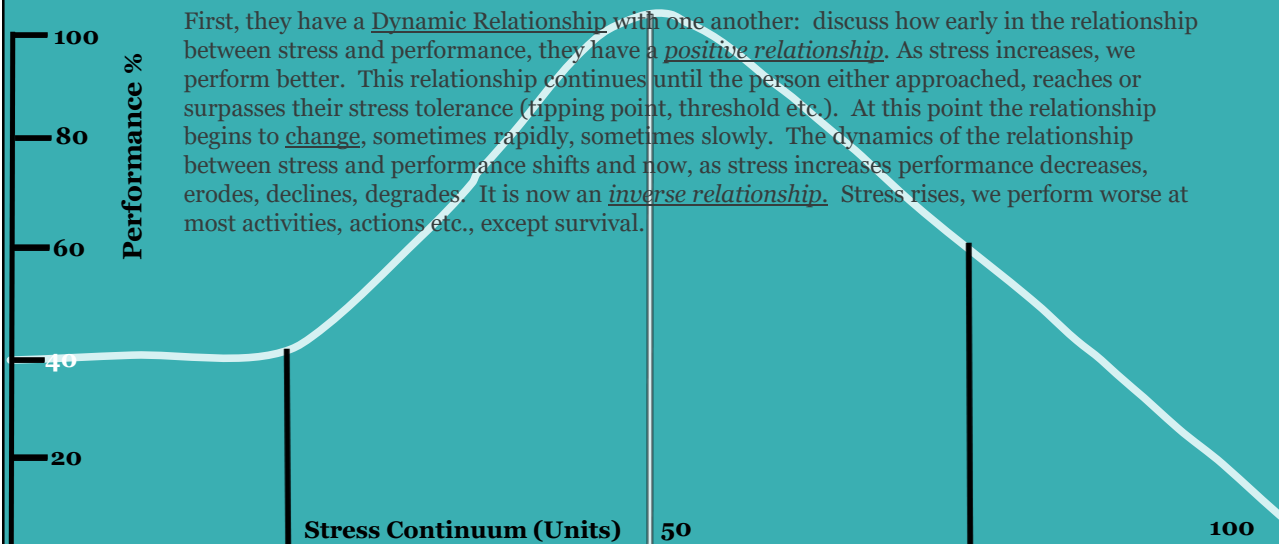
- 
- | States and Traits (Left Side)                    | States and Traits (Right Side)        |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Stress acuity: clear seeing of stress         | 1. Stress "blindness"                 |
| 2. Optimal performance                           | 2. Degradation of performance         |
| 3. Mostly calm, alert, regulated, engaged (CARE) | 3. Anxious, angry, disengaged, scared |
| 4. Motivated                                     | 4. Self-protective/survival impulse   |
| 5. Relational/Reciprocal                         | 5. Self-focused                       |
| 6. Nimble, versatile                             | 6. Rigid, inflexible                  |
| 7. Reflective                                    | 7. Reactive                           |
| 8. Challenge Response/Tend-Befriend              | 8. FFF                                |
| 9. Thoughtful/grounded                           | 9. Panicky/catastrophize              |
| 10. Both/and                                     | 10. And/or                            |
| 11. Attachment security                          | 11. Attachment vulnerabilities        |



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## Stress Response System: Typical Person

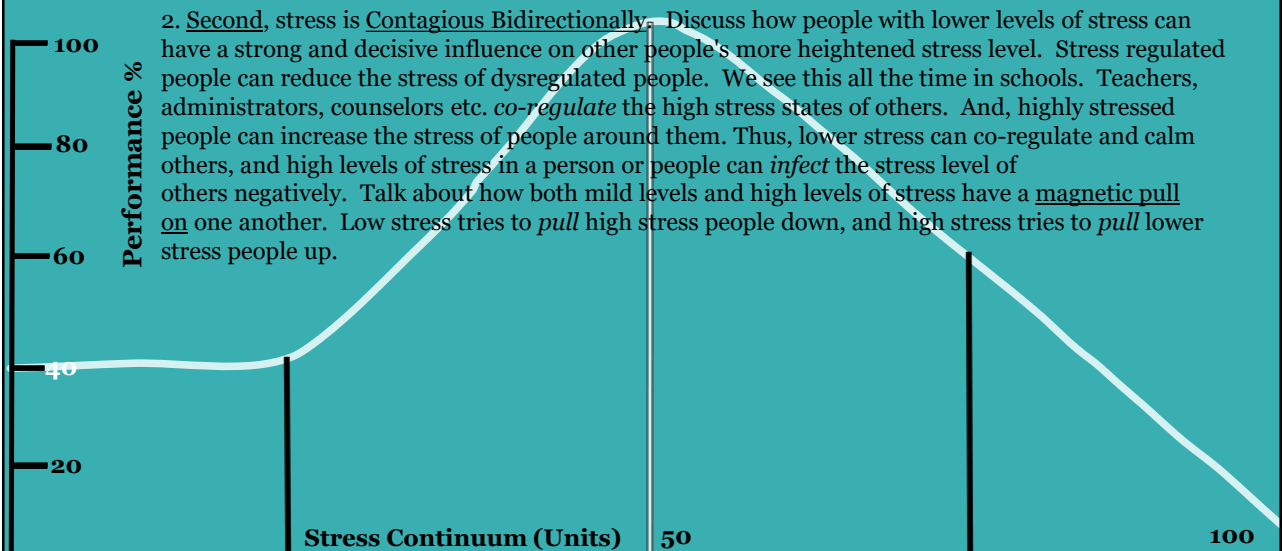


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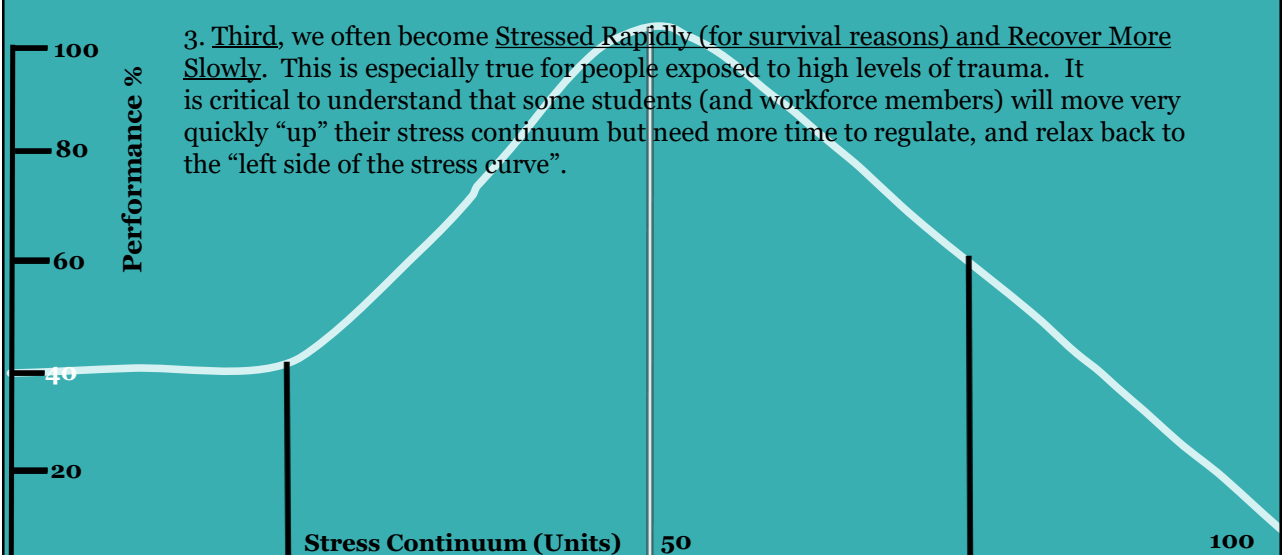
## Stress Response System: Typical Person



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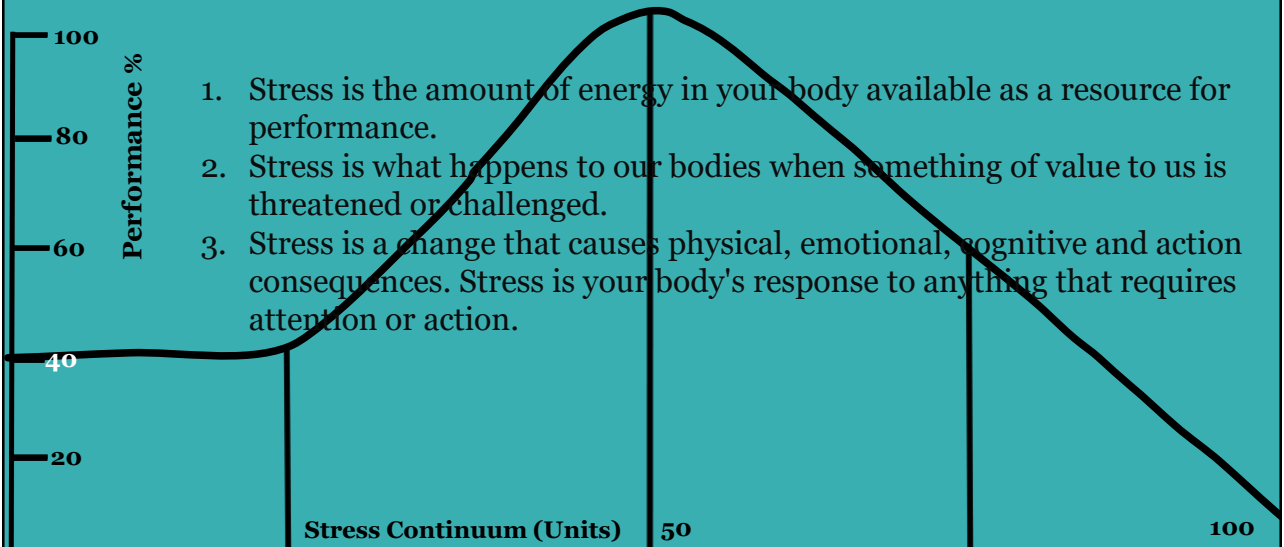
## Stress Response System: Typical Person



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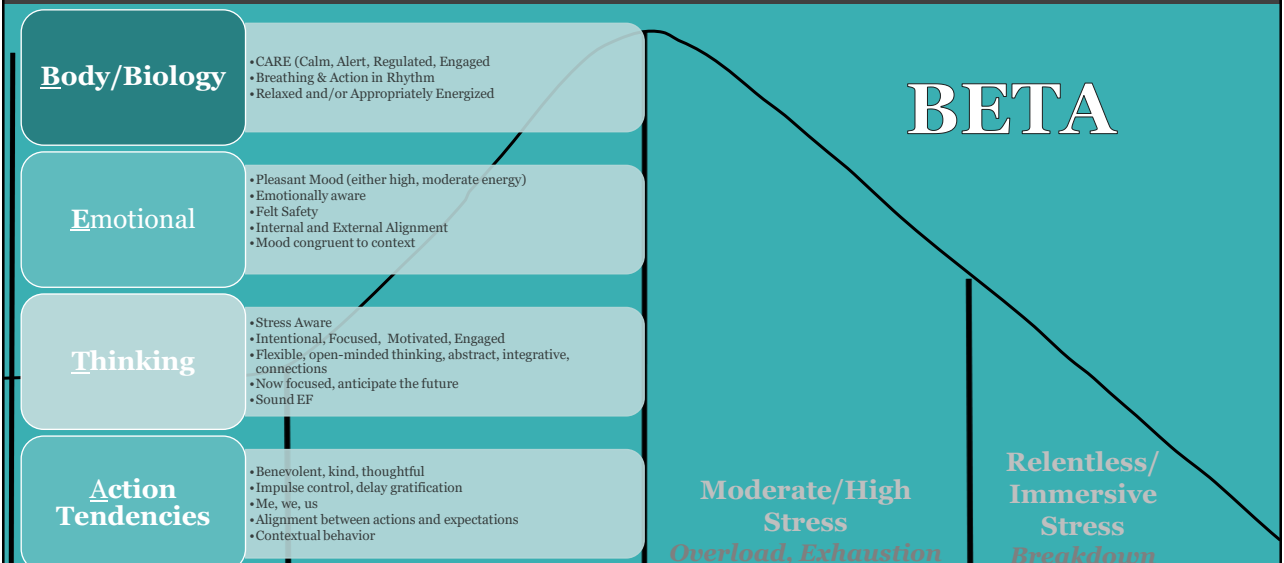
## Stress Response System: What is Stress?



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



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

# BETA

**Low/No  
Stress**

*Rest, Restore,  
Repair, Recharge*

**Mild/Moderate Stress**  
*Optimize, Maximize*

### Body/Biology

- THUD (Tense, Hyper/hypo, Uncomfortable, Dys.)
- Breathing & Actions Arrhythmic
- FFFF
- Regulatory problems

### Emotional

- Unpleasant Mood
- Unsafe and insecure
- Variability, overwhelming
- Emotions govern actions

### Thinking

- Stress Blindness
- Motivated by survival, appear selfish
- Inflexible, rigid, close minded
- Poor EF

### Action Tendencies

- Mean, uncooperative, demure, yielding
- Impulsive
- Me
- Aggressive, threats, avoidant, collapse, competitive



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## Stress Response System: Core Concept #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

### Body/Biology

- THUD (Tense, Hyper/hypo, Uncomfortable, Dys.)
- Breathing & Actions Arrhythmic
- FFFF
- Regulatory problems

### Emotional

- Unpleasant Mood
- Unsafe and insecure
- Variability, overwhelming
- Emotions govern actions

### Thinking

- Stress Blindness
- Motivated by survival, appear selfish
- Inflexible, rigid, close minded
- Poor EF

### Action Tendencies

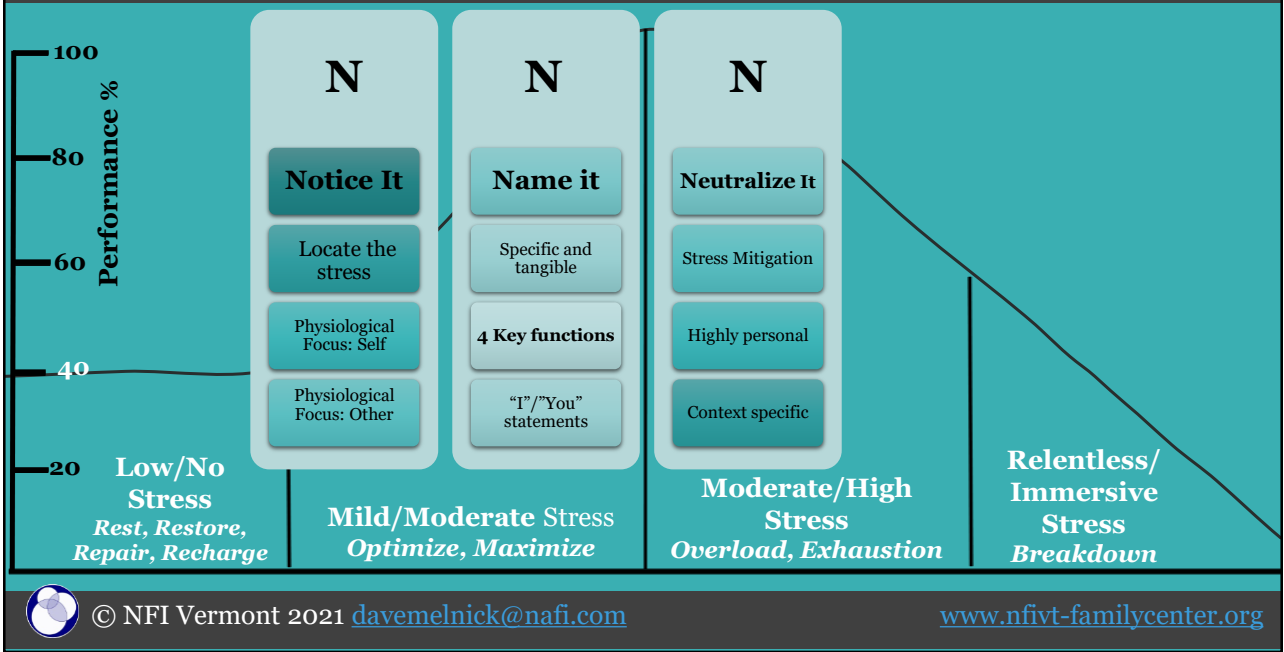
- Mean, uncooperative, demure, yielding
- Impulsive
- Me
- Aggressive, threats, avoidant, collapse, competitive



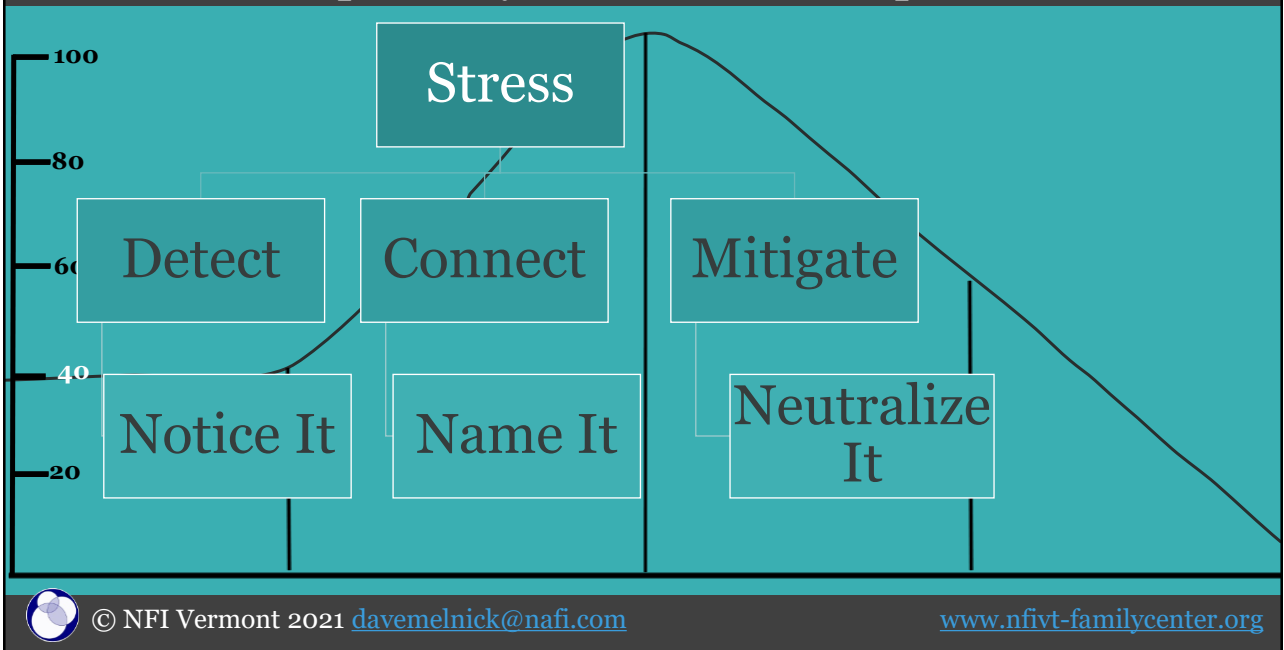
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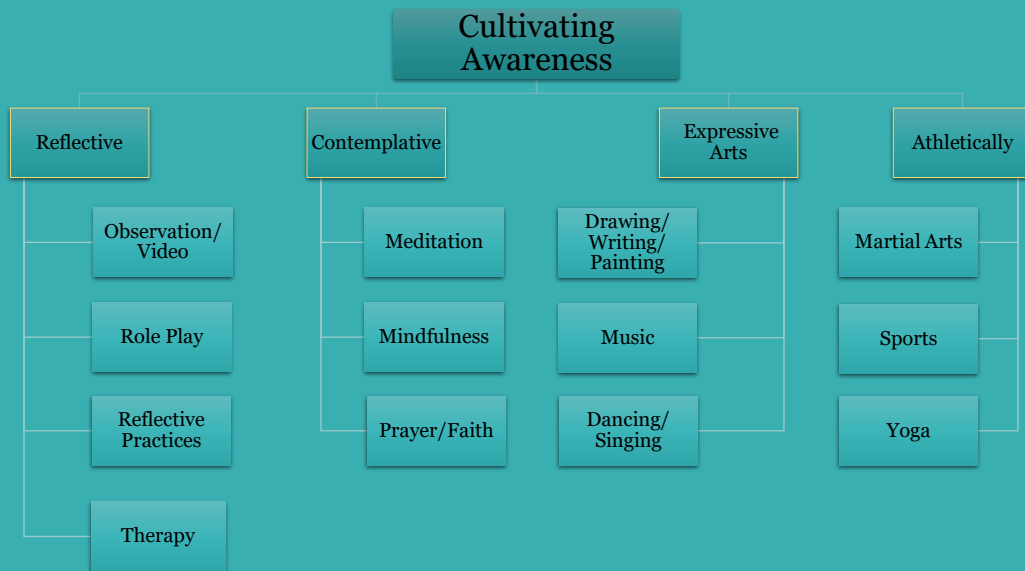
## Stress Response System: Core Concept #4 (NNN)



## Stress Response System: Core Concept #4 (NNN)



## “Noticing” Practices



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## Stress Response System: Core Concept #4 (NNN) Power of “Naming”

### Organizing Function

When we speak it we can change it

Move from suppression to expression

Self-Agency

### Meaning Making Function

(Negative) Emotions need air

“Living entity”

Find our purpose

### Relational Function

Builds intensity, intimacy, authenticity

Fosters Interconnection/ Interdependence

Builds resilience (which is primarily a relational experience)

### Social Justice Function

See people as multi-dimensional

Humanizes our struggles

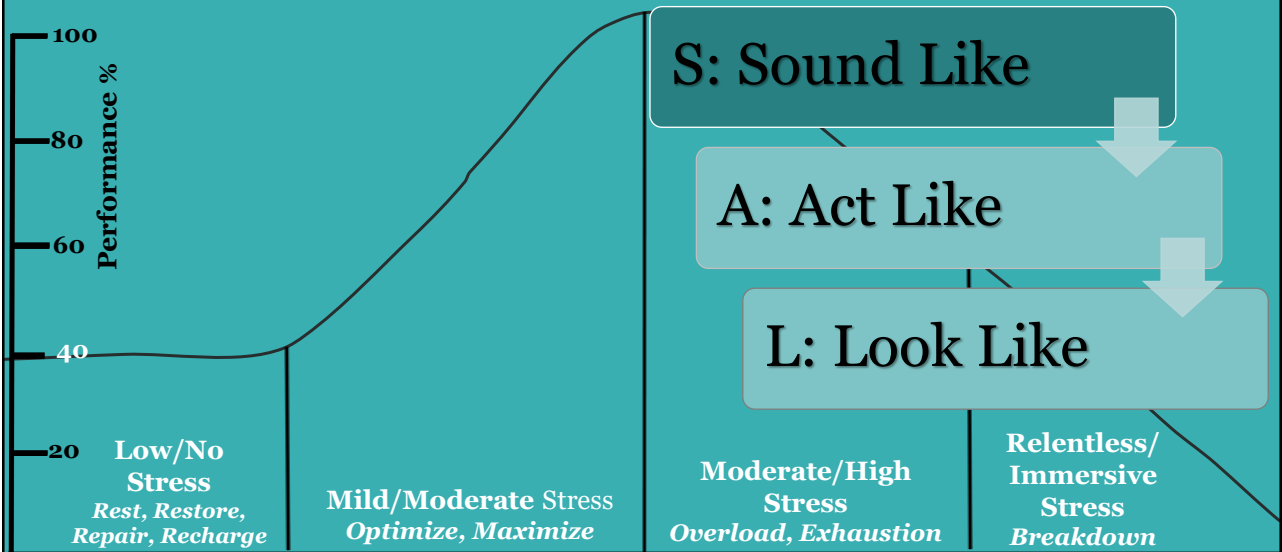
Liberatory: “Speak the Unspeakable”



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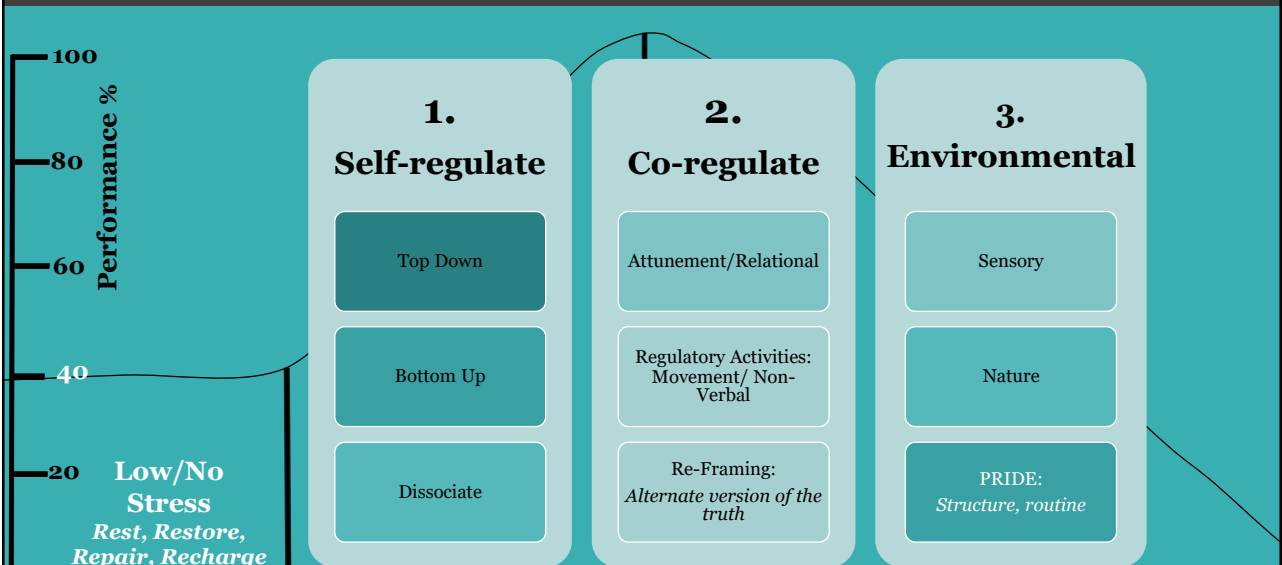
## Stress Response System: Core Concept #4a (SAL)



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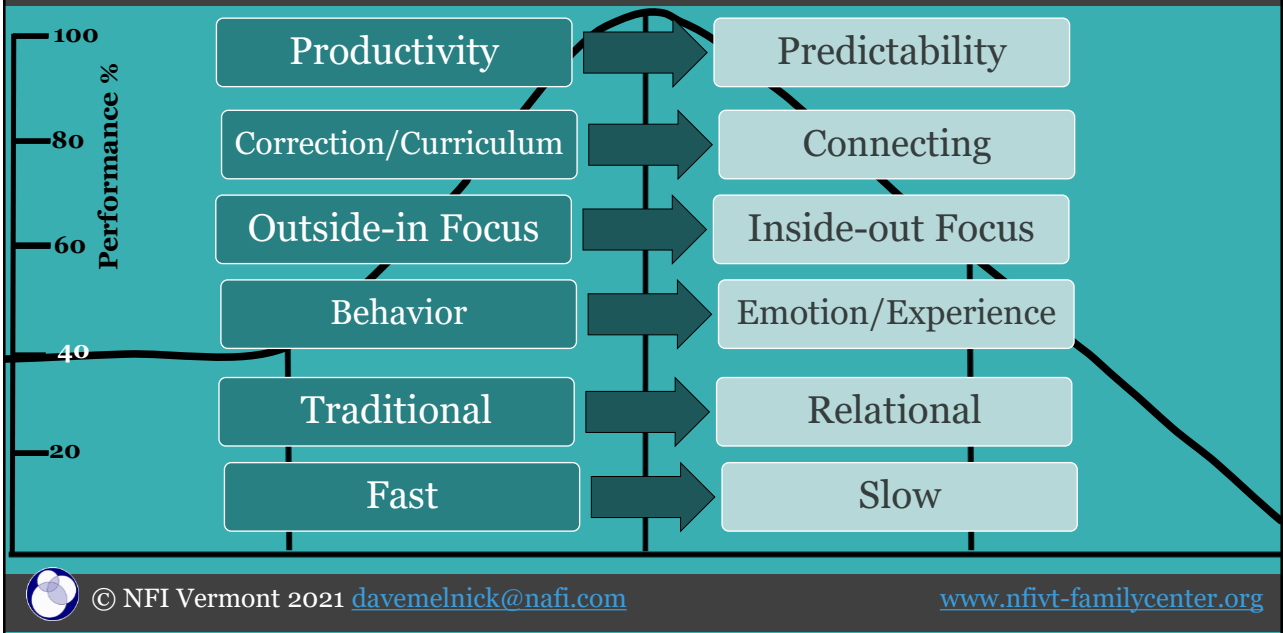
## Stress Response System: Core Concept #5 (Regulating Emotions/Affect)



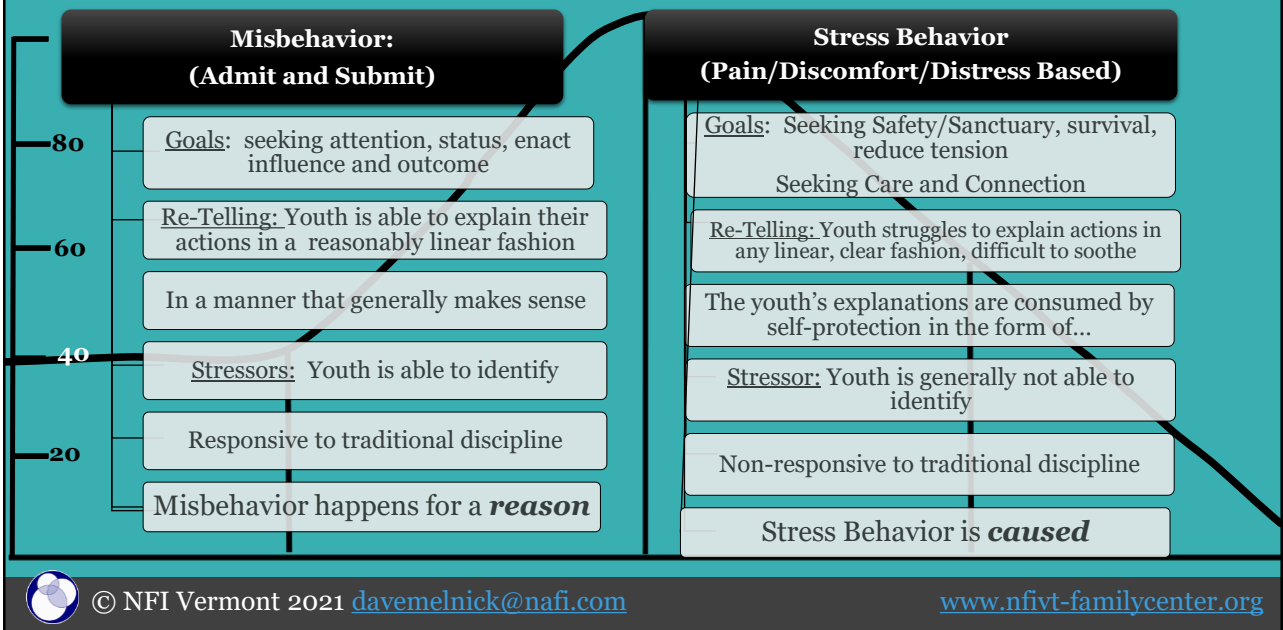
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## Stress Response System: Core Concepts #5a



## Stress Response System: Core Concept #6 (Misbehavior or Stress Behavior) (Adapted from Shanker, Ph.D.)



## Stress Response System: Core Concept #6 (Misbehavior or Stress Behavior) (Adapted from Shanker, Ph.D.)

Misbehavior:  
(Admit and Submit)

Traditional discipline was never designed f youth at risk

Punishment and the threat of punishment activates the **stress response system**—the very system that likely causes the acting out

External Rewards decrease intrinsic reward

Conventional discipline creates an “us versus them” feel and increases stress

Conventional discipline focuses on the negative attributes of the child, again increasing stress and alienation

Stress Behavior  
(Pain/Discomfort Based)

Focuses on the importance of co-regulation, connections, and calming strategies

Focuses on intentional use of language, and what certain words mean to the youth exposed to trauma

**Prioritizes the preservation of the relationship (worth with)**

Tries to work with instead of opposition to the youth

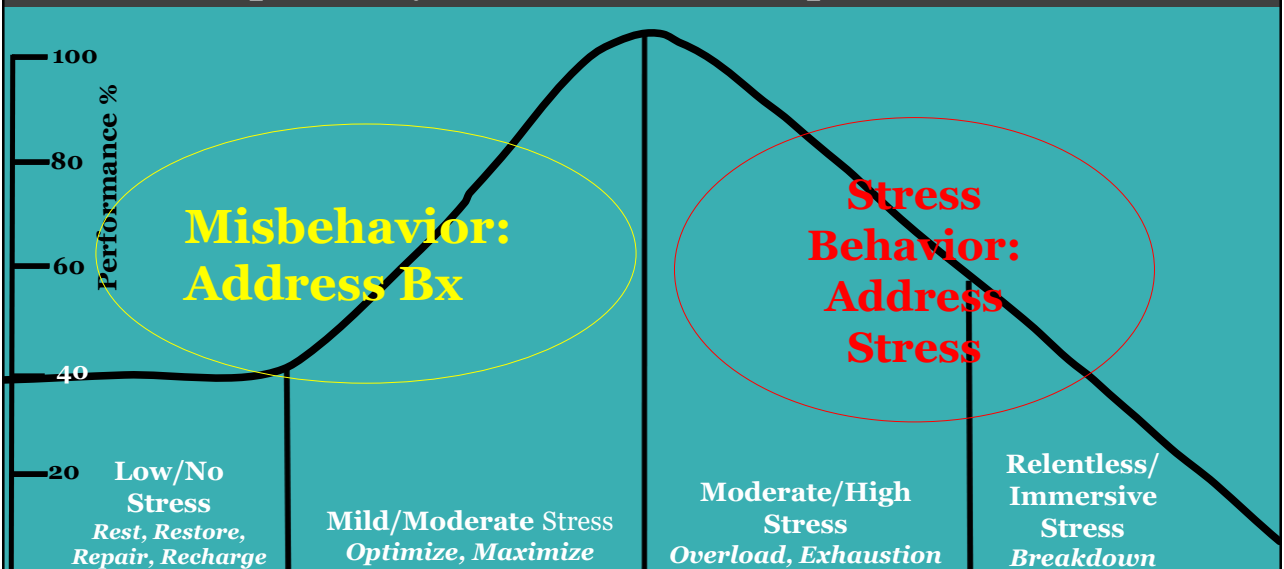
Examines deficits in skill and unmet needs, not lack of will or negative intention



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## Stress Response System: Core Concepts #7 (Intervention)

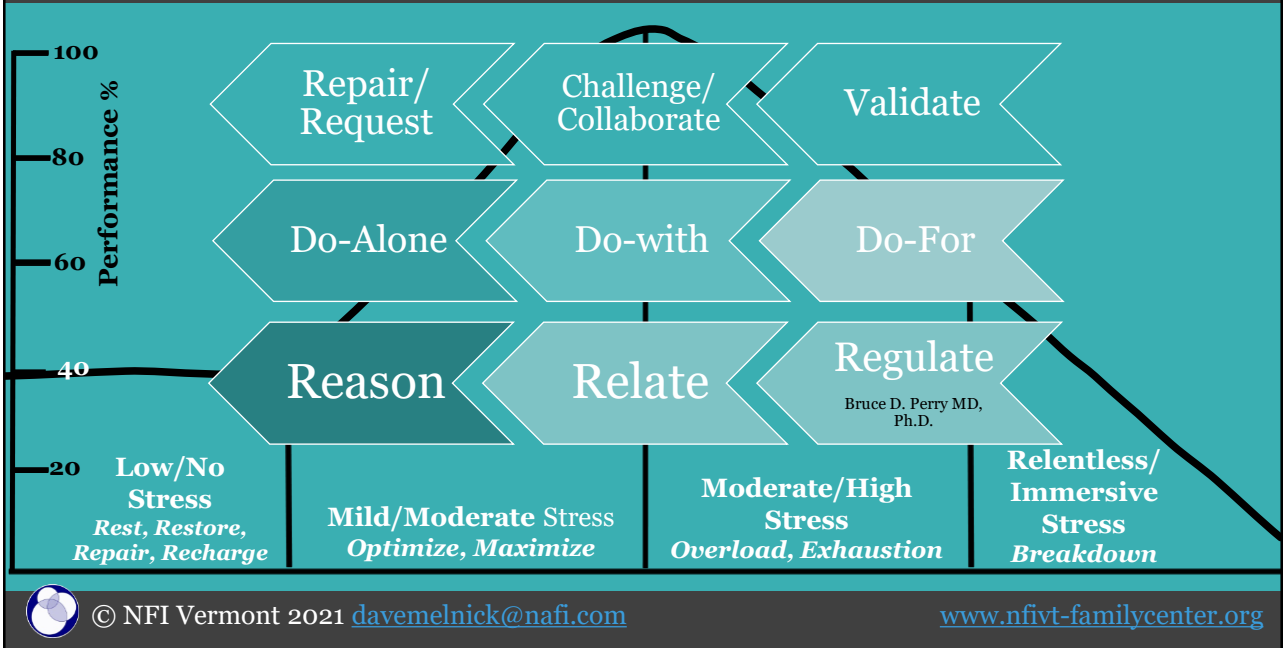


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## Stress Response System: Core Concepts #7 (Intervention)



## Stress Response System: Core Concepts #7 (Intervention)

1. Try to ignore the behavior but not the child: Point of Intervention is the Person. When in a heightened stress state, the most relevant issue is that student is in pain, not that he/she/they are "naughty". Circle back to the problematic behavior once student has become re-regulated. Reestablish bond. Priority is humanity. Maintain/preserve/ sustain the relationship. Humanize stress. Extract the child from the perils of the behavior and all its temptations.
2. Connect before you Correct: Communicate regard for and connection with student: when she acts out, she is scared. She needs adults to align with her, to see her suffering and to connect with her as a person, not as a person that committed a certain action.
3. Consequences are critical, but not when a child is dealing with excessive stress. You cannot effectively consequence a child out of a high stress state. You cannot consequence stress, you can try to limit it, moderate it, reduce it, accompany it but you cannot consequence a kid out of stress. We cannot consequence our way out of this.
4. How adults react to a child's acting out is as relevant as the child's acting out. Our response often shapes and strongly influences the outcome of the interaction.
5. Reinterpret and Recognize that every chronic stress behavior has an alternate explanation. Yes, child is defiant, but we can see student as "tenacious", "protective", and "setting a limit" when student feels anxious.
6. Listening, Empathy and Validation: we often influence children very powerfully when we listen to and validate their experience. Trauma is the ultimate invalidation; it ignores the child's feelings, invalidates their needs and dehumanizes their right to decency and regard. When a child makes self-disparaging comments, the understandable impulse from adults is to provide reassurance (as in, "No I don't hate you", "I don't think you are dumb"). While understandable, reassurance often has little effect on a child with attachment challenges. It both negates the child's experience and assumes that reassurance is credible to the child, which it often is not. In order for reassurance to really work, a child must trust the adult and deem them reliable, otherwise they just dismiss what we say as inaccurate or as a manipulation. Instead, student needs adults to respond to the self-critical comments with care, validation and curiosity. We cannot simply fix low self-esteem; building student's sense of self is an arduous task that requires that we demonstrate to student that we "get" their experience and the reasons why they feels as they do.
7. Focus on "we" solutions: Frame challenges/problems as emerging from interaction not residing within student/child. Since trauma is isolating and shame inducing, we don't want to further isolate and shame child. Don't separate, work towards integration/connection. The student/child actions were caused by others.



## 3 Components of Discipline



**Expectation/  
Rule/Law**

**Reminder of  
expectation  
or Set limit**

**Consequences**



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## Discipline Rules

1.

- Discipline is not punishment
- Discipline is a teaching tool

2.

- Discipline must follow the rules that govern good teaching: safe, caring, respectful, and
- Developmentally sensitive

3.

- Discipline is enhanced relationally. The stronger your ties to the youth, the more effective the discipline

4.

- Discipline must not replicate any of the conditions of trauma.
- Beware of impulses to counter-aggress, enact revenge, intimidate

5.

- Discipline is best metered out by a well-regulated adult



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## Steps for Successful Discipline for Youth Exposed to Trauma

1.

- The youth must be regulated.
- The adult must be regulated.

2.

- The focus must be on helping the youth address/repair the harm and the harmed. Often have to *change the timeline not the expectations*.

3.

- Consequences must be 'action oriented' and developmentally focused

4.

- Consequences have to be "right sized"; just the right amount to "get the youth's attention" and to have them "fix what they broke."

5.

- Sometimes...you must address the youth as victim before they can be accountable.



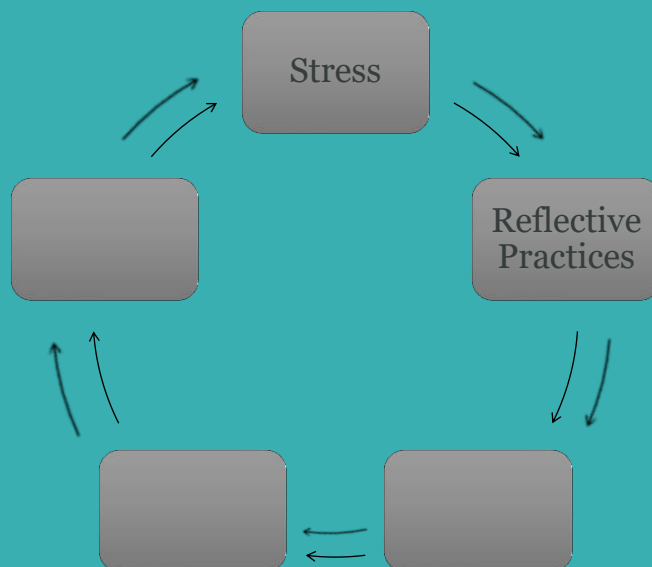
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## Key **Practice** #2 Reflective Practices

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

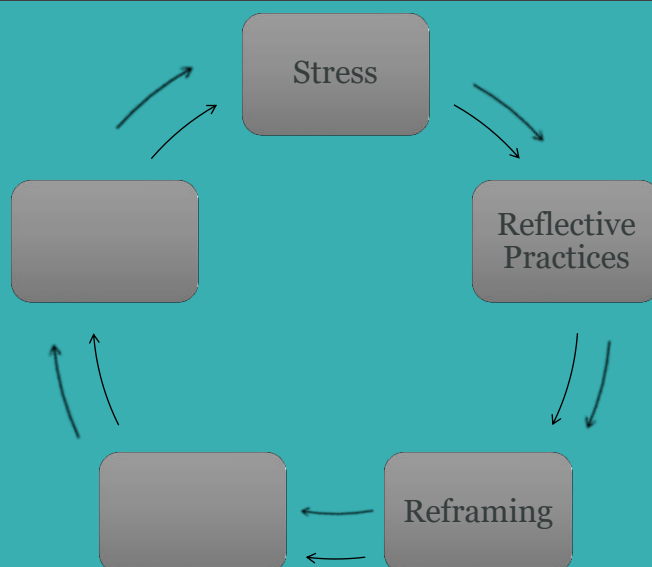
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## 5 Key Practices to Transform Stress: The Model



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## Key Practice #3 Reframing

“What else could this be?”

I sometimes hold it half a sin  
To put in words the grief I feel;  
For words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within. In Memoriam A. H. H., Alfred Lord Tennyson

We are neurobiologically wired to label things we see.

We **depend** upon frames, frameworks, categories, classification, and labels to group and understand our world. But, we also have the ability to re-label, re-classify, re-categorize and reframe what we see, hear, feel, think and experience. One of our many cognitive gifts and responsibilities is our ability to challenge and overcome our fixed, static and rigid beliefs about what we are seeing, especially when outcomes with our children/youth who struggle. We have choice. Mindset

Reframing challenges the **epidemic** in our schools/agencies of using singular, unidimensional descriptions of very complex behaviors and interactions. This is marginalizing. Reframing fundamentally relies on our ability to consider multiple truths, embrace many possible descriptions and multiple versions of an event, an action, a behavior, an experience and a child.

There are **multiple** explanations for what we see, hear, feel, and experience. **Both/and**. Chronic acting out always has multiple explanations and labels

Reframing is the ability to replace one frame, label, name, category or descriptor with another. We entertain that what we see can have multiple “names”. We don’t have a monopoly on what we label, name, categorize or call what we see. A defiant child can also be seen as a determined, self-protective, tenacious or mistrusting and fearful child.

If you give a different label, name, descriptor, if you describe the behavior differently, then you might see a different child. We don’t feel the same about a **scared** child then we do a **defiant** child. Yes chronic defiance is always about fear and mistrust. If you “**See a Child Differently and You’ll See a Different Child**”

“What else can this be?”

**Reframing is a way to counter-message and counter-signal a youth.** It signals a much more deeper understanding (compassion) for the survival and self-protective impulse they are following.

## Examples of Reframing



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**Defiance.** Our students are often defiant, resistant, uncooperative, ignore us.

- You can both look at the negative value, the problematic behavior, the disruptive quality of defiance, and see that being defiant feels powerful, tenacious, self-protective, self-determining, involves self-agency, standing ground/setting a boundary, would rather be in control that trust those in control. It feels as though you are disarming and deconstructing someone else's power. I am trying to diminish your power with my power.
- Who says that defiance is just about resisting authority? It can be a way of setting a boundary, self-protecting, being hesitant or protecting one's interests in world where authority figures are not trustworthy.
- Defiance is relational and thus subject to prior relational experiences with people in authority.
- Children are defiant against a perceived threat, not just a person
- If you accept your role as an authority figure/position of power, you have to accept your role as a symbol of the misuse of power

For instance, **Avoidance:** Our students do avoid, detach, become passive, defeated, helplessness. Avoidance is often a form of dissociation or freeze response. Their stress, in the moment, feel inescapable.

- Avoidant children avoid adults because they have dealt with unbearable disappointment/ harm from those with power (why is that so scandalous, not an excuse, an explanation
- Avoidant children/teens avoid adults to creates distance, because that feels safe, Creating safety and seeking sanctuary.
- Avoidant kids avoid us because their attempts at closeness, during childhood, were thwarted, rejected, humiliated, uncertain, shaming and they were ill-equipped to deal with it.
- Avoidant children/teens avoid adults because they decide not to expose themselves to the pain associated with connections. **Why don't we call avoidance self-care?** They become too scared to stay around.
- Avoidant children avoid us because they don't see us as safe, reliable, or dependable.
- Stop focusing on the kid's behavior, focus on what we represent to them!
- Avoidant people are also good at creating distance, they are self-aware, self-protective/preserving, good body readers, good at assessing power, watchful, decisive, know their limits, observant, use their resources well (for survival), silence is the language of the harmed/marginalized (you can't take silence away).
- When we change our perception, we change our experience of the child, when we change our experience, we change our actions. Kids will even feel a different from us when we experience them differently, they will feel it in their bodies.



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## Reframing Steps

1. You see a child/teen act out or “behave” in a certain way
2. You feel something and the child/teen feels something
3. You categorize it & attach meaning
4. Catch and Release. Reassign meaning.  
What is good/adaptive about this behavior?
5. Reengage student: With a new meaning onboarded you can then shift the interaction



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## Practice #2: Reframing in 3 steps (adapted from Adapted from Shanker)

### 1. Perceptual Shift

- Re-categorize what you see. Call it something different. Re-interpret. Re-label. See it differently!

### 2. Experiential Shift

- Experience the behavior differently and feel differently about what you see

### 3. Action Shift

- If you feel differently, you will think differently and take different action.



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## Reframing



**“See a child differently and you see a different child”**

(Stuart Shanker)



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## Reframing

**“See a Child Differently and You’ll See a Different Child”**

(Stuart Shanker, Ph.D.)



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