

ANXIETY & AUTISM

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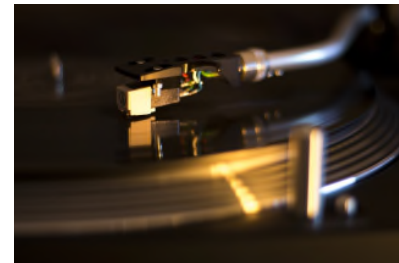
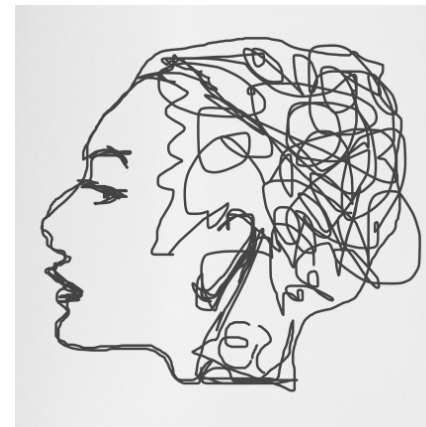
What is anxiety?

“Anxiety is the body’s physical response to a threat or perceived threat. It causes a pounding heart, rapid breathing, butterflies in the stomach and a burst of energy as well as mental responses such as excessive fears, worries or obsessive thinking.”

<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/anxiety>



Anxiety & Autism





So... Anxiety is a biological response...

- Which is controlled by our perception of the world around us and the things/people/places within it.
- “Everyone experiences anxiety from time to time. It helps us to avoid danger by giving us energy and alertness to escape. But for some people, anxious feelings don’t go away. They can see situations as much worse than they really are, and their anxiety affects their ability to concentrate, sleep and carry out ordinary tasks. These feelings can be caused by anxiety disorders.” <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/anxiety>

Common anxious behaviours:

can be categorised in 3 areas:

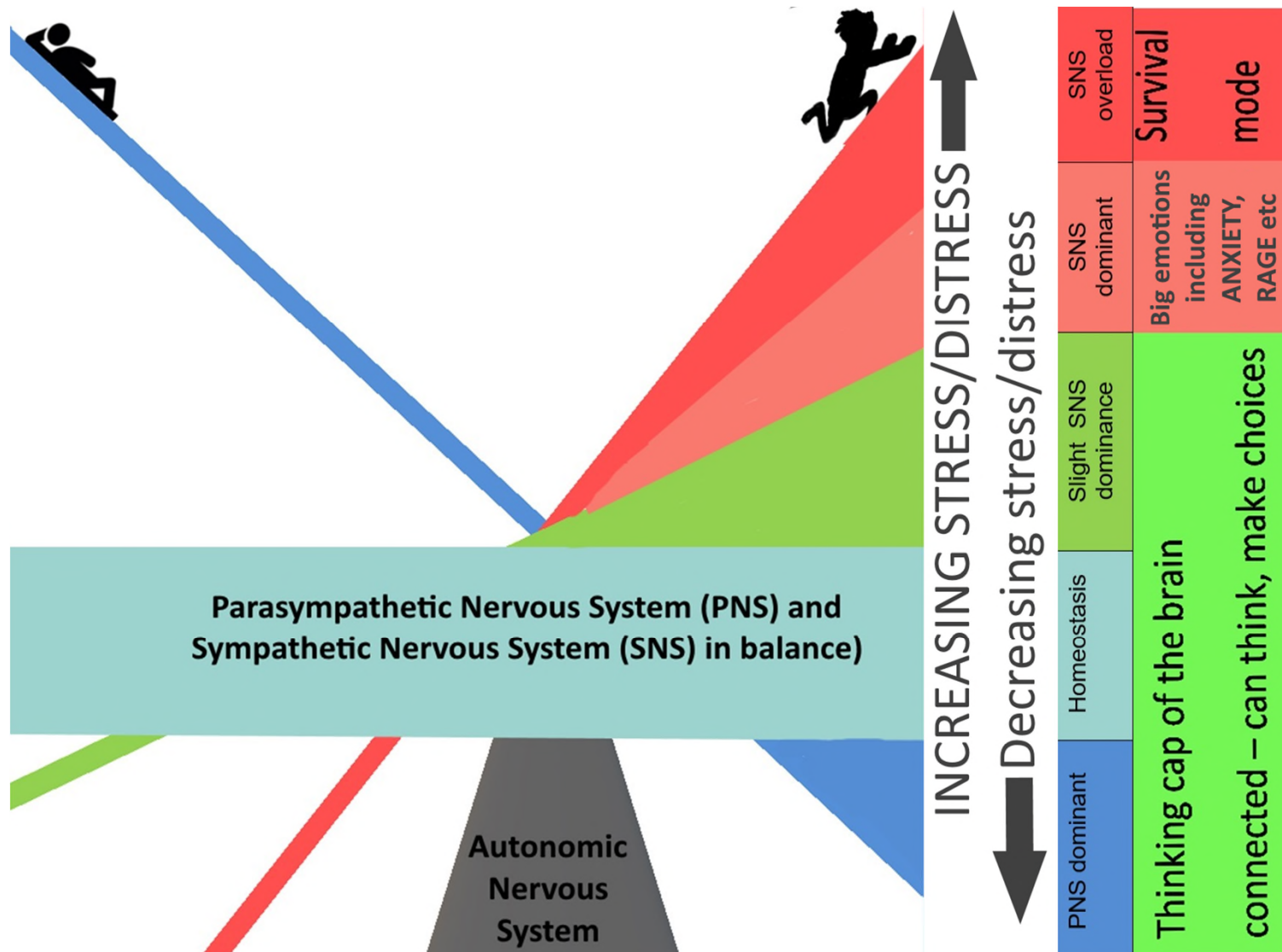
- **Physical:** panic attacks, hot and cold flushes, racing heart, tightening of the chest, quick breathing, restlessness, or feeling tense, wound up and edgy
- **Psychological:** excessive fear, worry, catastrophizing, or obsessive thinking
- **Behavioural:** avoidance of situations that make you feel anxious which can impact on study, work or social life

<https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/anxiety/signs-and-symptoms>



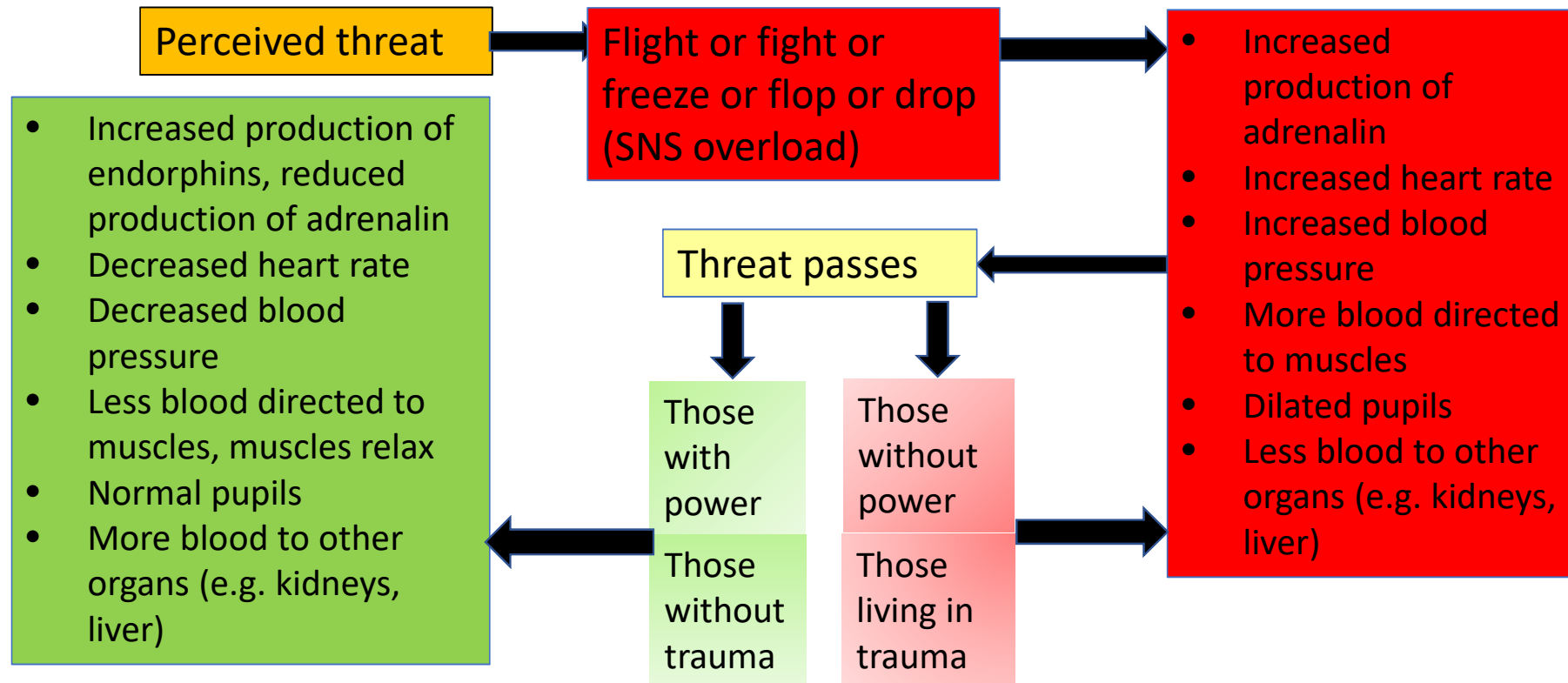
But....

- You may not exhibit any of those behaviours or know that you are anxious if you have poor interoceptive awareness
- Alternatively, you may be very aware that you are anxious, or be worried all the time that you are going to have a panic attack or get overwhelmed
- You may feel fine sometimes, but get very overwhelmed or angry at what other people feel is 'the tiniest thing'
- Understanding the basic biology of overwhelmed/SNS overload can be useful



Understanding stress links to anxiety

Biological pathways – Chronic Stress



Adapted from: PlanHealth – Literacy for Life Presentation, 2016

What contextual factors could be perceived of as a threat?



- External factors

- Overwhelming sensory stimuli
- People threatening/bullying you (or being unkind)
- Danger (fire, flood, earthquake, covid-19, violence etc)



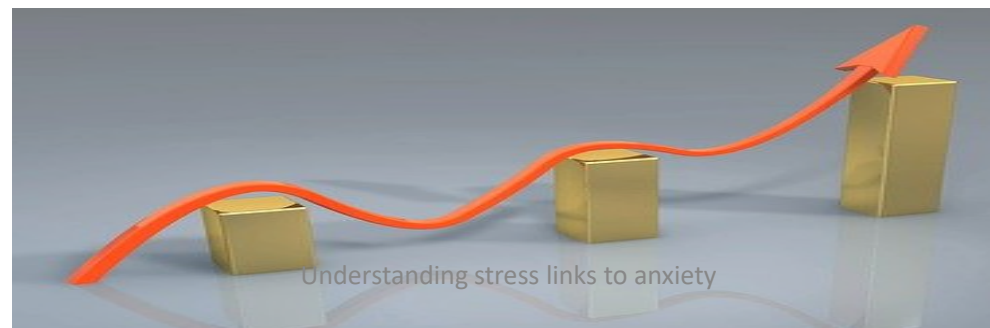
- Internal (inside own body) factors

- Hunger
- Dehydration
- Constipation
- Poor physical health

What other things can you think of?

Rates of anxiety in autistic individuals

- Are difficult to achieve consensus on. Measures range from 42%-79%. Researchers and clinicians disagree on whether anxiety is part of autism or a co-morbid condition.
- “Recent estimates suggest lifetime **rates of anxiety** to be between 50% and 65% for autistic individuals of all ages” Hwang, et al (2019)
- “It is estimated that just under half of all autistic people have experienced a **comorbid anxiety disorder** at some point.” Jenkinson, R., Milne, E., & Thompson, A. (2020)
- In autistics the “overall prevalence rates for **anxiety disorders** as an aggregate group range between 42% and 79%.” Kent, & Simonoff, (2017).



Why does anxiety occur so much in autism?

- The contextual factors that drive stress/distress or are perceived threats occur at much higher levels for autistics; e.g. intolerance of uncertainty
- Our repetitive thinking style and perfectionist traits drive anxiety
- A sense that others see us as 'less than' or 'defective' or 'not acceptable' drives distress and anxiety
- Masking is exhausting which can increase anxiety
- Sensory stress/distress can be pervasive
- Self-calming activities/actions may be unavailable or not allowed



Neurodivergent brains

- Are wired differently and function differently
- May not filter input or output
- May not notice input or produce output
- Look different in different contexts

Perceive, *Process*, Produce ATYPICALLY

This means they may **perceive and or experience threats/extreme stress/distress more frequently**



Intolerance of uncertainty

“The only two certainties in life are taxes and death”

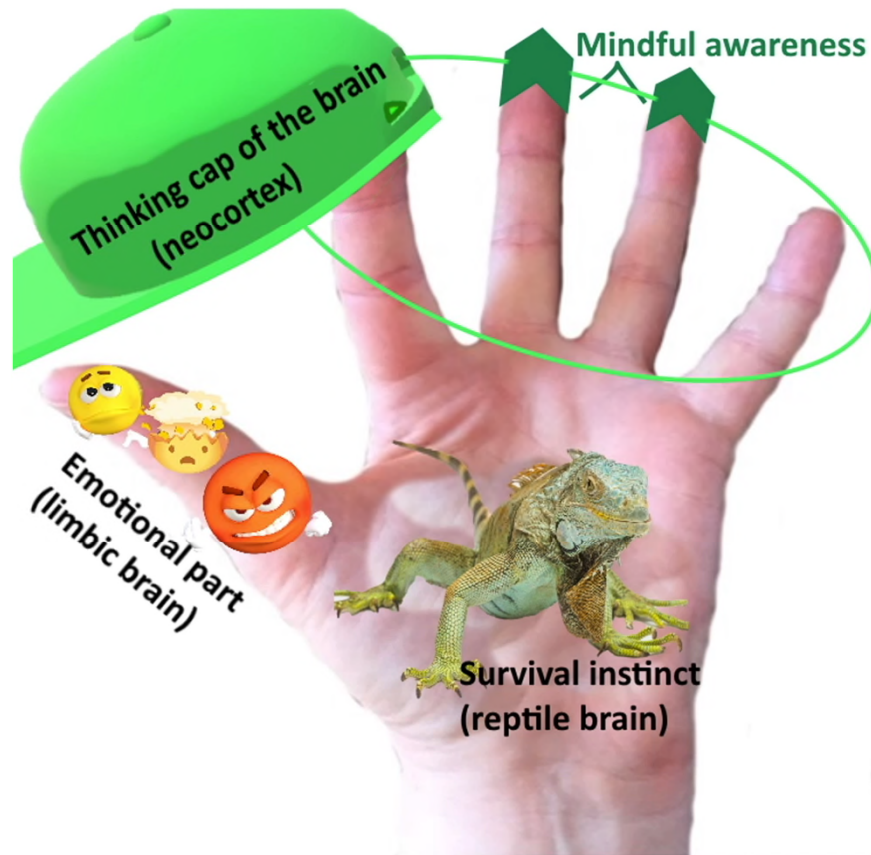


- Surprises
- Changes, delays or breaks in routine
- Unexpected events or sensory inputs
- Unexpected behaviours or responses from others

“For many autistic individuals, even slight uncertainty is reported to lead to distress and anxiety, which exacerbates difficulties with social interaction”

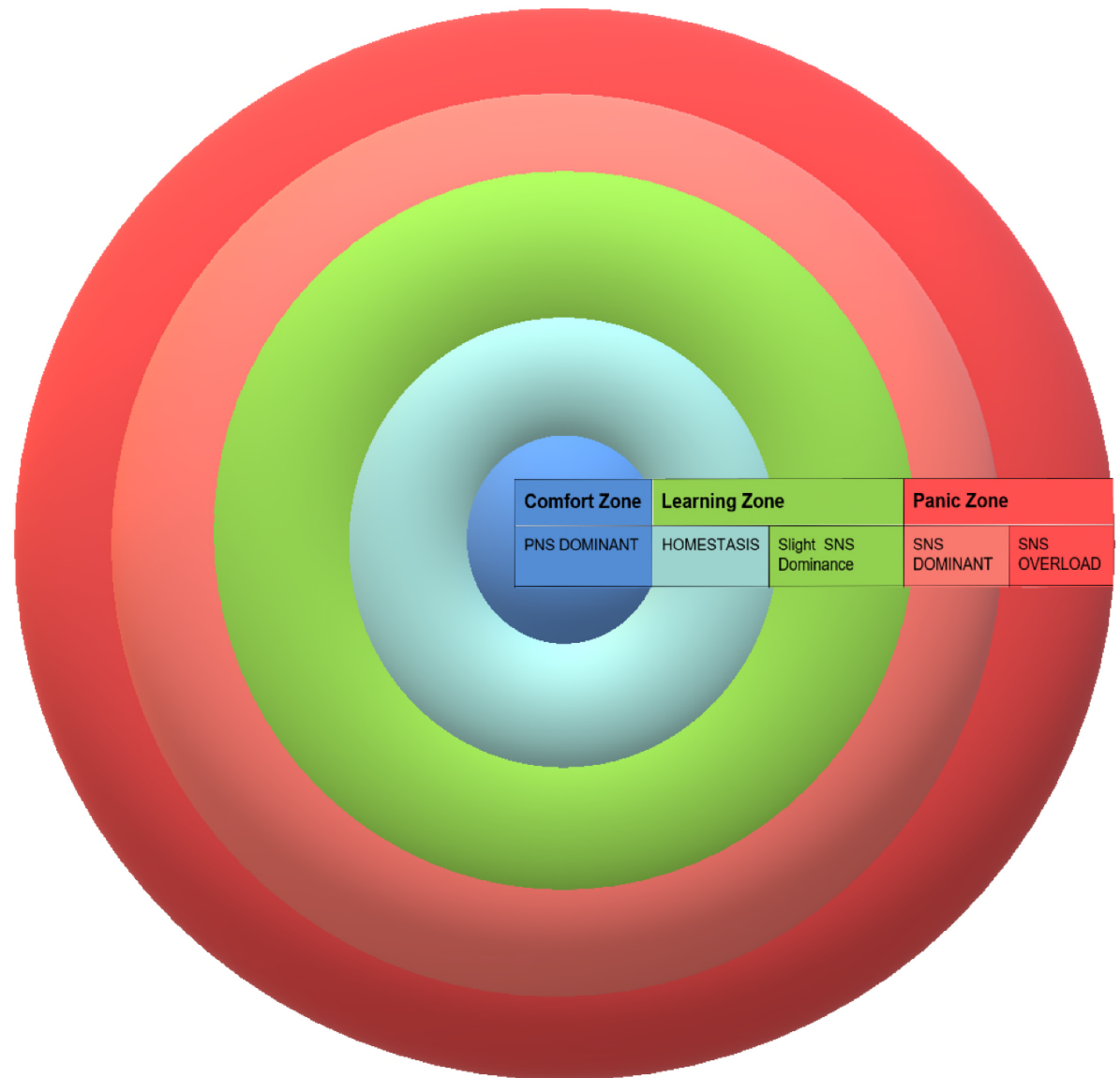
Jenkinson, R., Milne, E., & Thompson, A. (2020).

What is 'flipping your lid'



Dan Siegal's (2010)
Hand Model
of the Brain

Stress or distress
can push us into
overload/
overwhelm which
is our panic zone.



Strategies to prevent and manage anxiety for autistics



- Prevent

- Eat a healthy diet and exercise
- Environmental strategies
- Sensory strategies
- Building self-worth
- Positive interpersonal connections
- Long-term interoception activities



https://youtu.be/MQ_Napa80ro

- Manage

- Interoception activities
- Self-calming activities
- Sensory management

Environmental strategies

1. Let people know what adjustments they can make to the environment to minimise stress/distress
2. Minimize time spent in stressful/distressing environments &
3. Utilise distraction techniques when in stressful/distressing environments, such as focusing on the most fascinating aspect of the environment
4. Avoid stressful/distressing environments

Understanding stress links to anxiety



Sensory strategies



- Spend time getting to know what sensory input you really enjoy and what sensory input you find calming.
- Develop strategies to access those enjoyable and/or calming sensory inputs over a typical day and in stressful situations
- Engage in interoception activities daily (2-3 times a day) to help you know when you are getting anxious and to decrease anxiety
- Avoid sensory stimuli that will trigger anxiety and/or mask those stimuli with other sensory input; eg use noise cancelling headphones with your own music, use a favourite essential oil on your clothing when travelling or out and about.



Building self-worth

- When we matter to ourselves and to others, people accept our experiences as valid and real.
- Both we and they respond to these experiences with kindness and compassion.
- This means we worry less what other people think and other people are more likely to make the adjustments we need.



Positive interpersonal connections

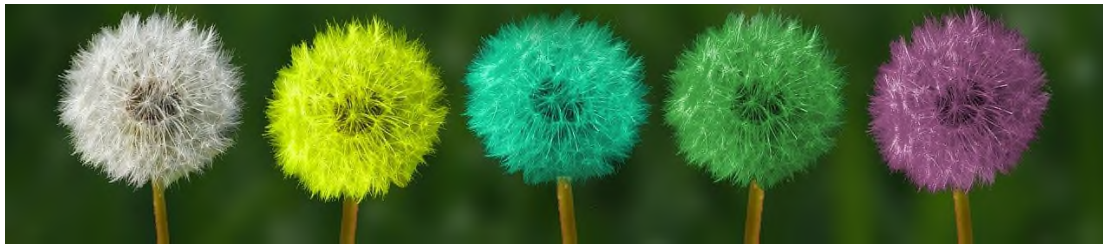
- Are one of the biggest protective factors in terms of mental health and well-being
- When we care and are cared about, it *can* decrease both frequency and intensity of anxiety
- People who care about us are more likely to treat us with respect, kindness and compassion which *can* minimise anxiety and uncertainty



Understanding stress links to anxiety

Managing anxiety in the moment

- Do what works for YOU
- We are all different
- Belly breathing has scientific evidence for calming
- Mindful body awareness/interoception activities of all kinds are calming IF you are not in total overload/overwhelm
- Time, space and safety will all support a return to calm
- Remember it is ok to experience anxiety and that it will pass – nothing is forever



Understanding stress links to anxiety

Pitfalls for professionals and families

- Routine versus predictability (i.e. certainty)
- ‘We know what is best for you’ versus agency (i.e. self-determination)
- Misunderstanding triggers
- Not noticing anxiety or assuming other reasons for behaviours
- Co-regulating too late or too soon – we need to learn to understand our own anxiety and be able to respond helpfully to it....





References

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