

# FOCUS ON THE NERVOUS SYSTEM *to change behavior*

Melissa Lebling

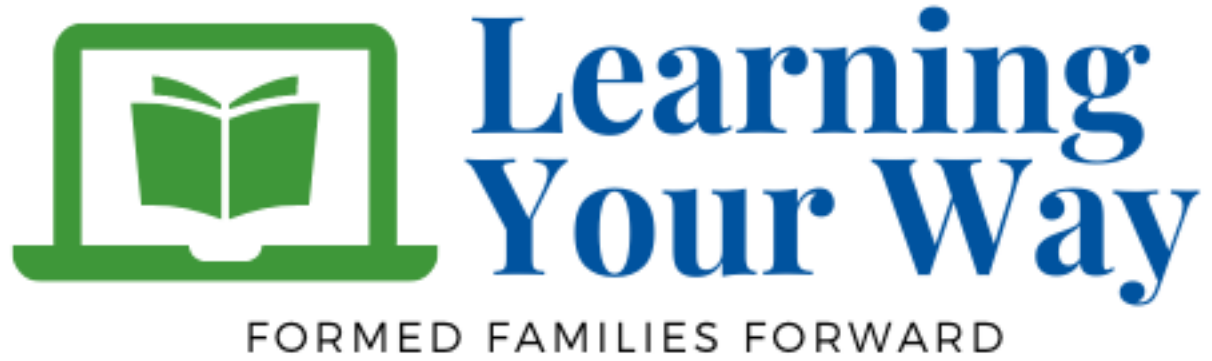
[melissa.lebling@formedfamiliesforward.org](mailto:melissa.lebling@formedfamiliesforward.org)

FORMED  
FAMILIES **FORWARD**



# Formed Families Forward - who we are...

- A family-led nonprofit organization in Northern Virginia supporting foster, adoptive and kinship families who are raising children, youth & young adults with specialized needs, and professionals who work with our families.
- We offer free training, consultations to families, events, resources, and systems navigation. Also - peer support groups; webinars; virtual trainings; videos and other resources.
- Family partner to Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports (VTSS; a VDOE project)



<https://bit.ly/FFFLYWfall24>

**FREE ONLINE COURSES**

**LEARNING YOUR WAY**  
Self-Paced Classes open now!

**FREE access to topics:**

- Special Education 101
- Constructive Communication and Collaboration
- Trauma Basics
- Dispute Resolution
- Kinship Care
- Other Health Impairments: ADHD, FASD, Tourette Syn.
- Positive Parenting

*Now Open!*

## STRIBLING ORCHARD

# Apple Picking

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22, 2024

9 AM - 5 PM

Formed Families Forward is hosting a family apple picking day! Come to Stribling Orchard in Markham, VA between 9AM-5PM on Sept. 22. Receive a 50% discount on the apples you pick. (Be sure to tell the greeters that you are a Formed Family to receive a wristband for the discount at checkout.)

FFF will have a table set up with information about upcoming offerings as well as some outdoor games for the kids!

Check out the website: [www.striblingorchard.com](http://www.striblingorchard.com) for directions and more about the farm. (The orchard is open rain or shine!)

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FAMILIES **FORWARD**

# *Stronger Together* Youth Peer Support Groups

- IN-PERSON for youth and young adults ages 14-22
- Weekly for 8 Tuesday nights, 6:30 – 8 PM, starting October 1. Clinician-led. FREE of charge.
- In Fairfax city
- Register at <https://bit.ly/STgroupfall24>



# Upcoming Offerings

**Sept. 26, 7-8 PM** Together is Better: Collaborative Relationships with School Staff

**Oct. 2, 7-8 PM** Communicating Effectively: The Hard & The Easy webinar

**Nov. 13, 7-8 PM** Functional Behavior Assessments: What Families Should Know



# Starting the School Year Safe and Calm

9/20/2024, Noon - 1:30 pm: Virtual via Zoom

9/23/2024, 6:30 - 8:00 pm: Manassas @ the Pat White Center at Ben Lomond

**Free Training!**  
**STARTING THE SCHOOL YEAR SAFE AND CALM**  
INFO, STRATEGIES, AND RESOURCES TO BOOST KINSHIP AND FOSTER FAMILY SAFETY AND WELLNESS

Register at: [FormedFamiliesForward.org](https://FormedFamiliesForward.org)

EASY STRATEGIES TO REDUCE SAFETY RISKS



EVIDENCE-BASED STRESS MANAGEMENT TIPS & TOOLS

WHERE TO FIND HELP



CONNECT WITH OTHER FAMILIES

Spanish Interpretation available at BOTH in-person events.

Made possible through a grant from VA DBHDS



**IN-PERSON AND VIRTUAL SESSIONS**

Choose what works for you:

Zoom: 9/20, 12:00 - 1:30 p.m.

In-person in Fairfax city: 9/9/24, 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

In-person in Manassas: 9/23/24, 6:30 - 8:00 p.m.

Register at: [FormedFamiliesForward.org](https://FormedFamiliesForward.org)

Refreshments, take-away items, and childcare stipend available at in-person sessions!



FAMILIES FORWARD

# Peer Support Groups



Fairfax Kinship Support Group-  
Virtual on first Thursday  
evenings; In-person on third  
Thursday evenings



Formed Families Together  
(foster, adoptive and kinship)  
Support Group- Virtual on first  
Sunday evenings; In-person on  
third Wednesday evenings





**This 12-week hybrid course starts September 21<sup>st</sup>. Course participants will access weekly pre-recorded modules released each Saturday. On Thursdays from noon to 1 PM, participants will attend virtual group meetings to review and discuss the week's content. The sessions conclude Thursday, December 19, 2024. The fee for the entire course, including a comprehensive workbook mailed to you, is \$150. <https://formedfamiliesforward.org/event/big-baffling-behaviors-course/2024-09-26/>**

FOCUS ON THE  
NERVOUS SYSTEM  
*to change behavior*



# Confusing



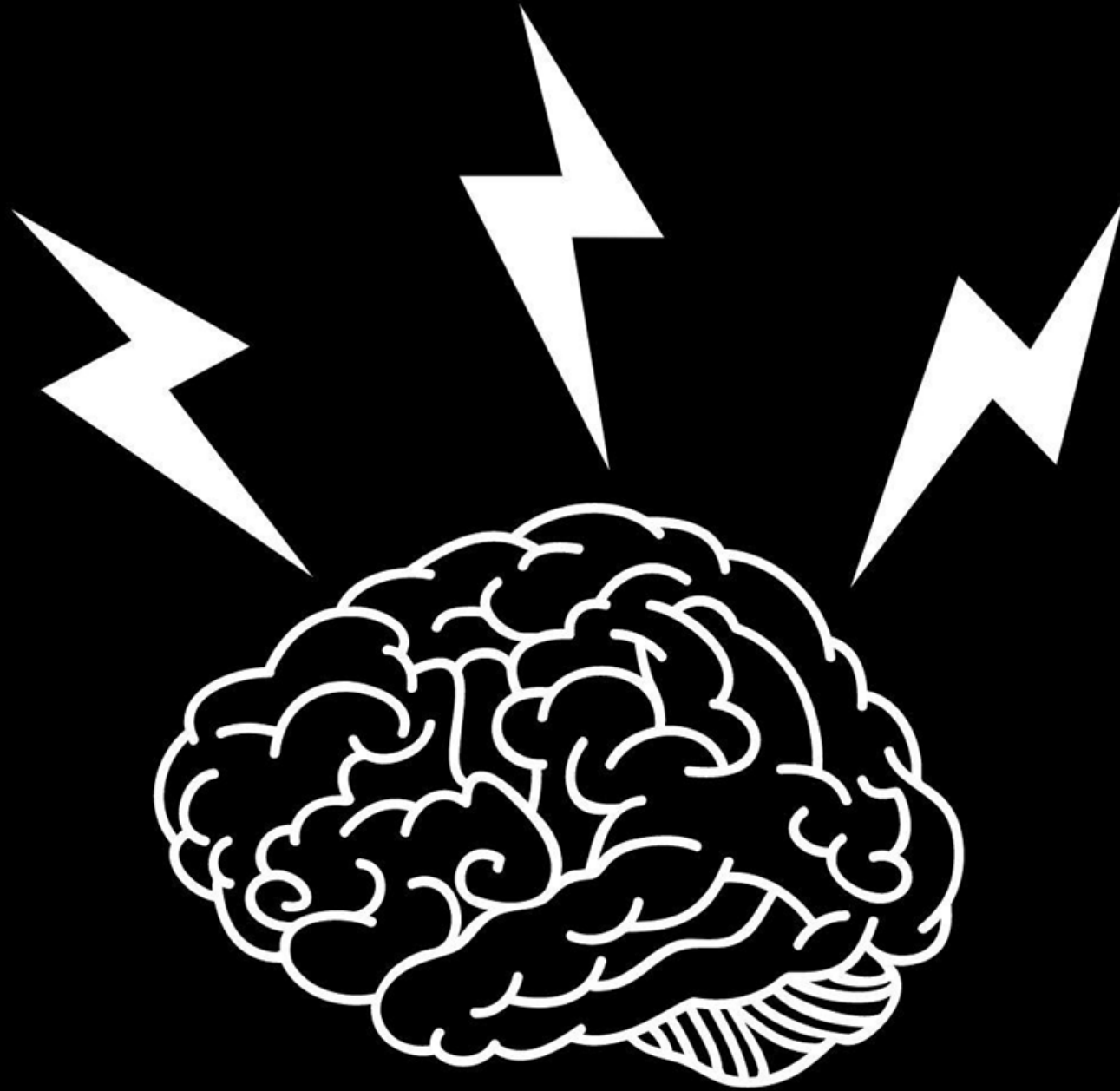
# Confusing Baffling



Confusing  
Baffling  
Overwhelming







First Quarter

GOOD BEHAVIOR



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22

Adam  
Eric B.

Christine  
Kristen

Braidy  
Gregory

Rache





# Focus on the Nervous System

# Focus on the Nervous System

*To change behavior*

# Who I Am...

Melissa Lebling - Mom of 7; Family Support and Outreach Specialist, and a Registered Raising Kids with Big, Baffling Behaviors Course Facilitator. I am a Former foster parent, early childhood educator and am passionate about helping others while helping myself and my family.

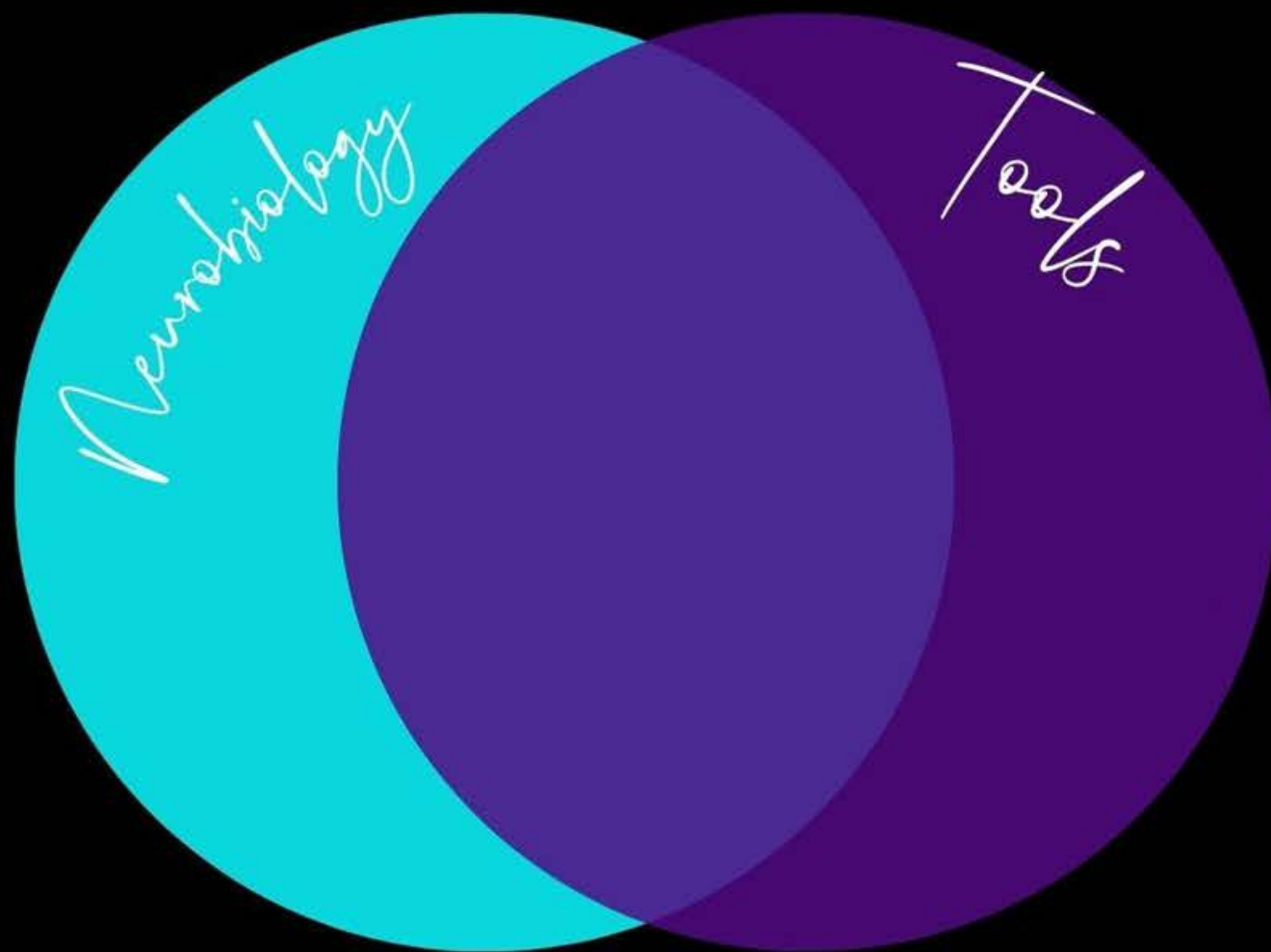


FORMED  
FAMILIES **FORWARD**

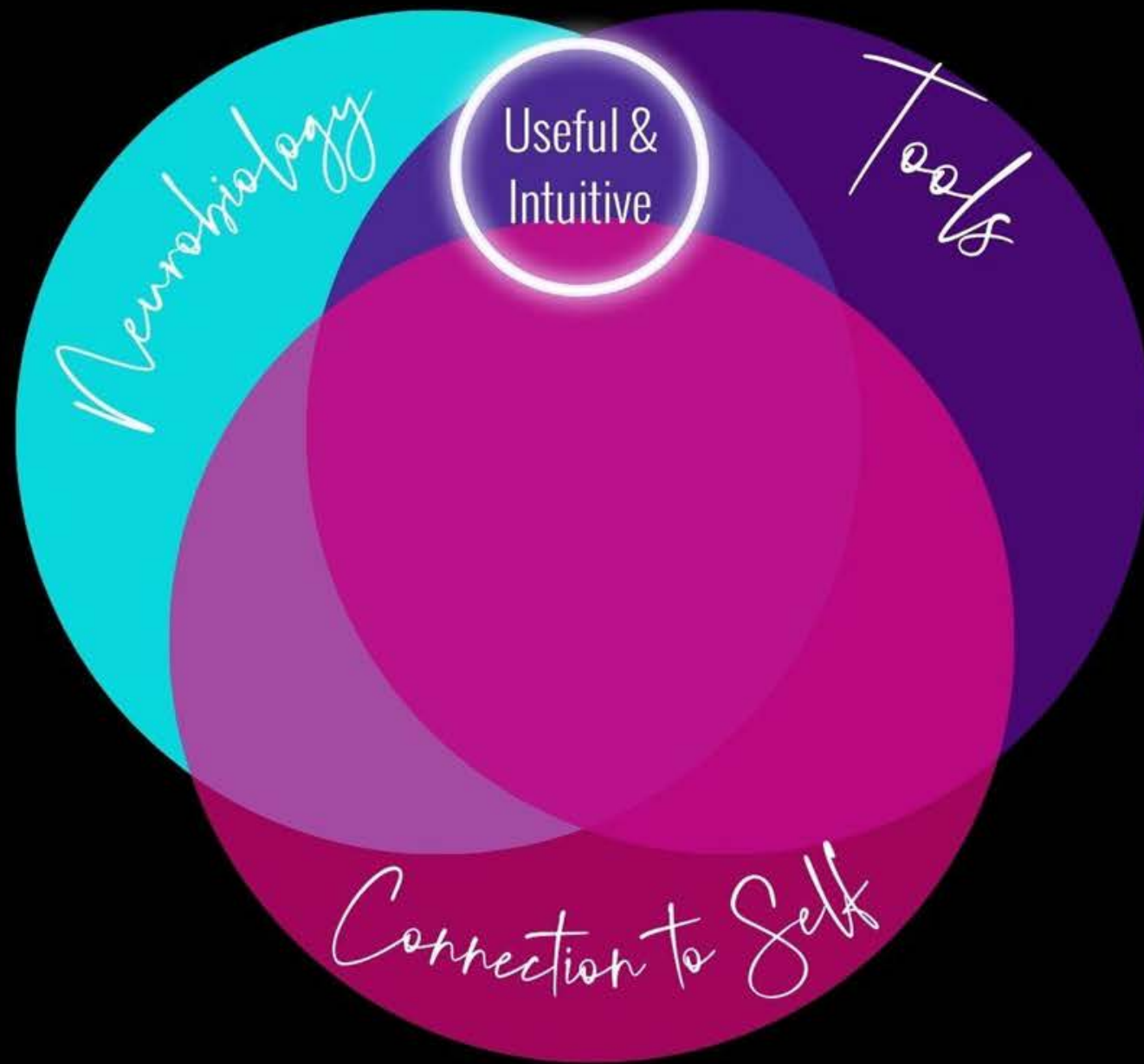


Our core  
beliefs  
about being  
**HUMAN**

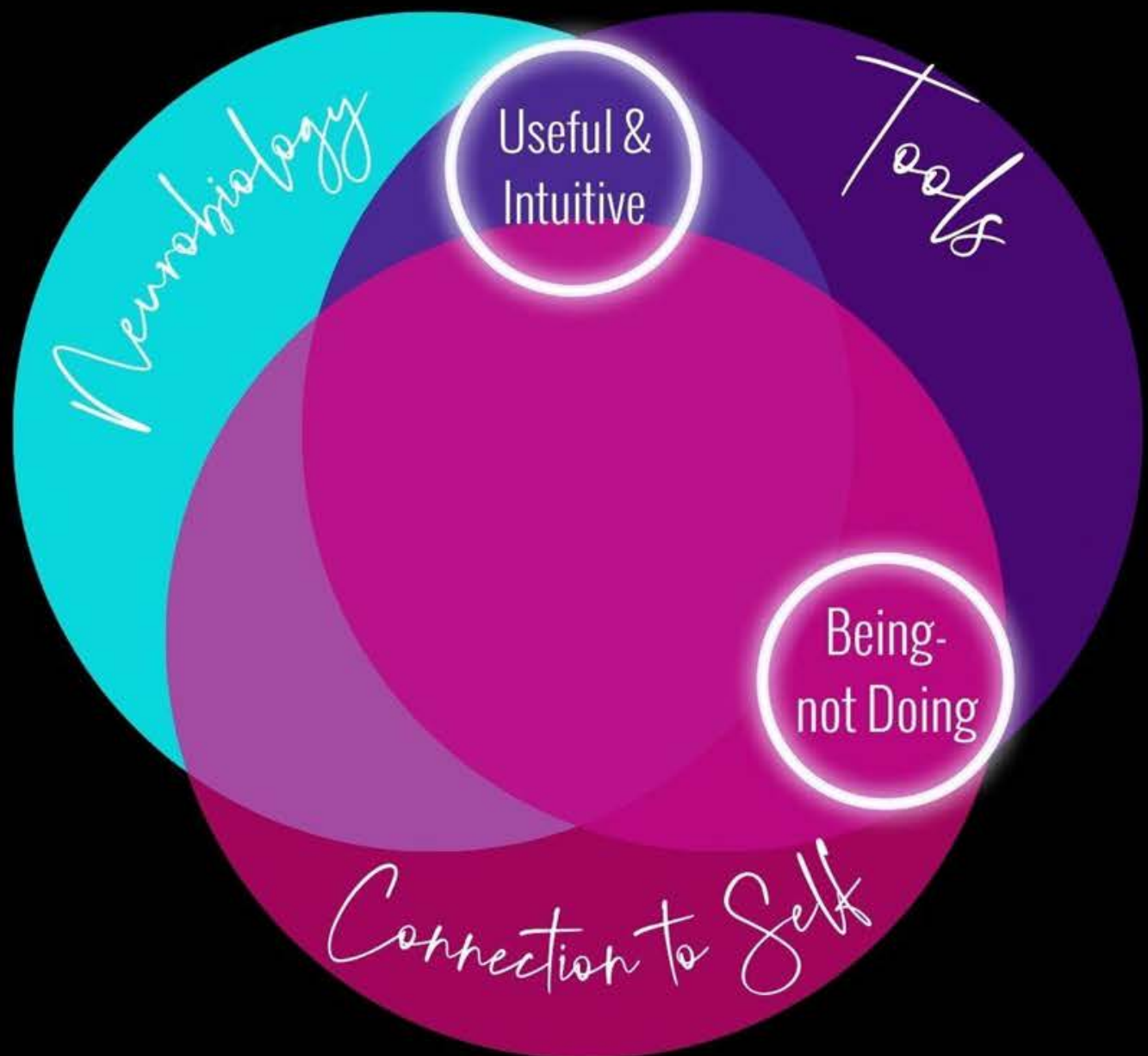


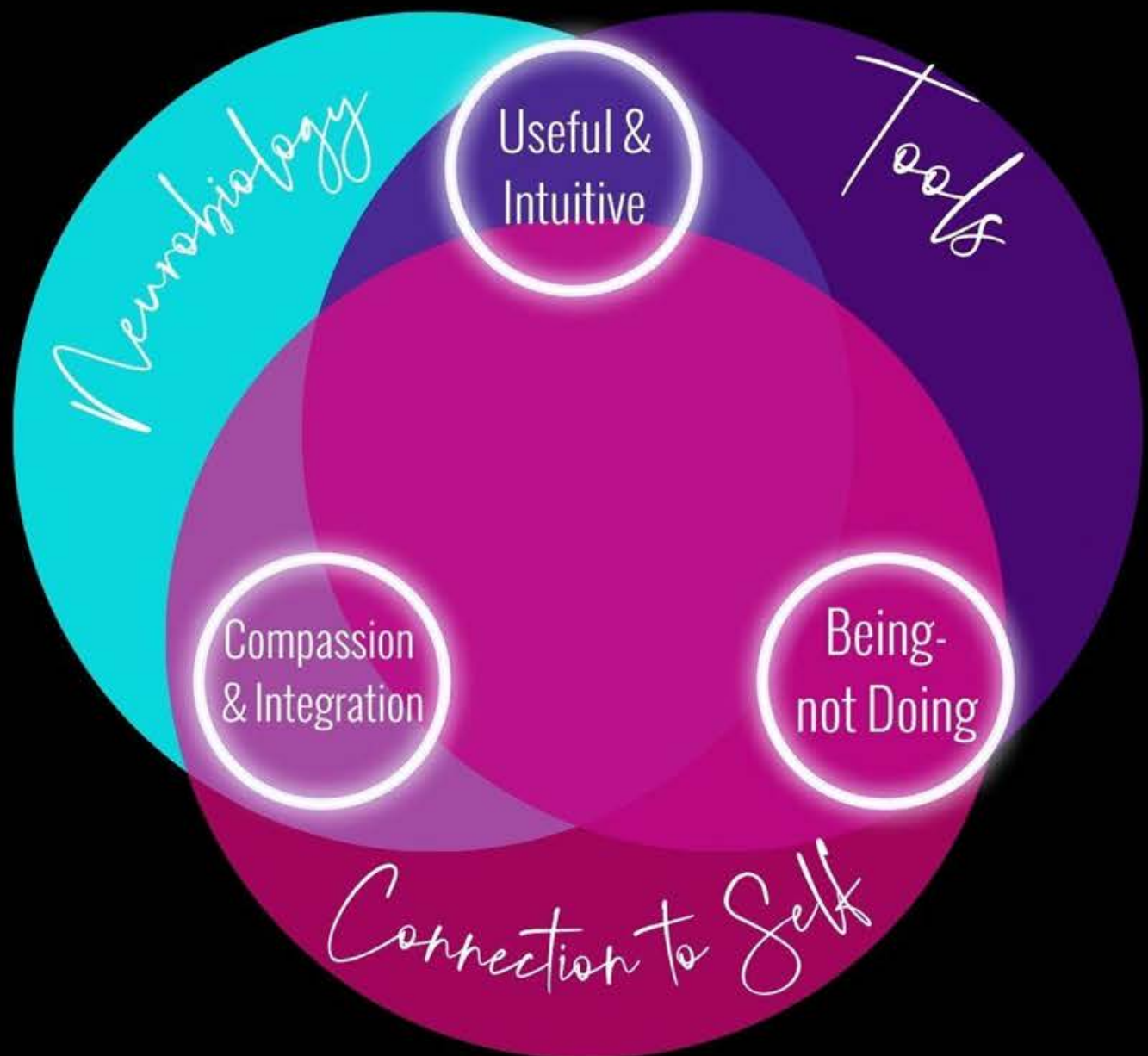


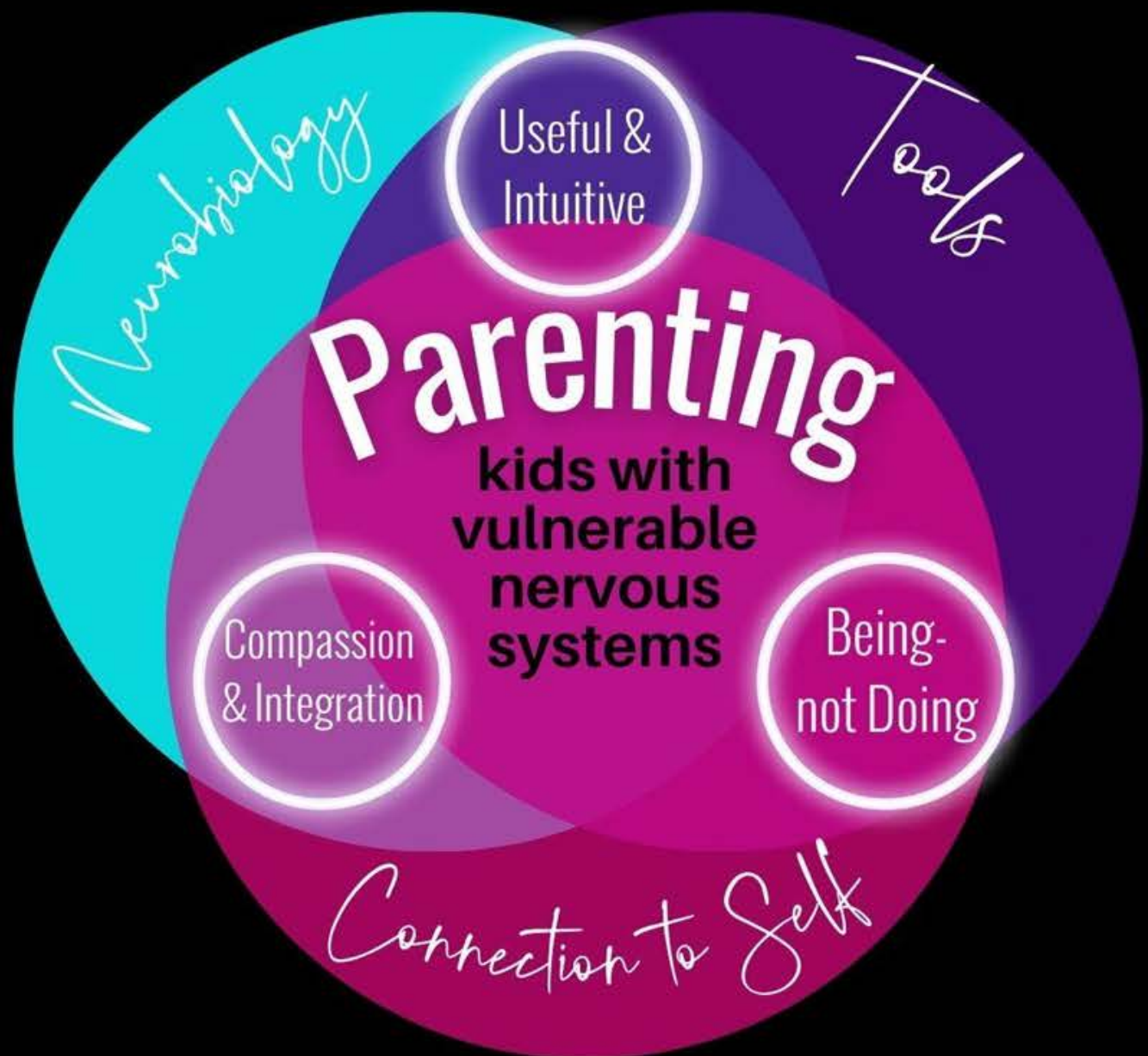












# Neurobiology

## Parenting

kids with  
vulnerable  
nervous  
systems

Useful &  
Intuitive

Compassion  
& Integration

Being-  
not Doing

*Tools*

*Connection to Self*

# Relational Neuroscience

# Relational Neuroscience

# Solve the Real Problem

Relational Neuroscience

Solve the Real Problem

Changing how we see people *changes* people

Relational Neuroscience

Solve the Real Problem

Changing how we see people *changes people*

Clarity, Confidence, & Connection





**The brain is  
behind  
EVERYTHING  
we do**

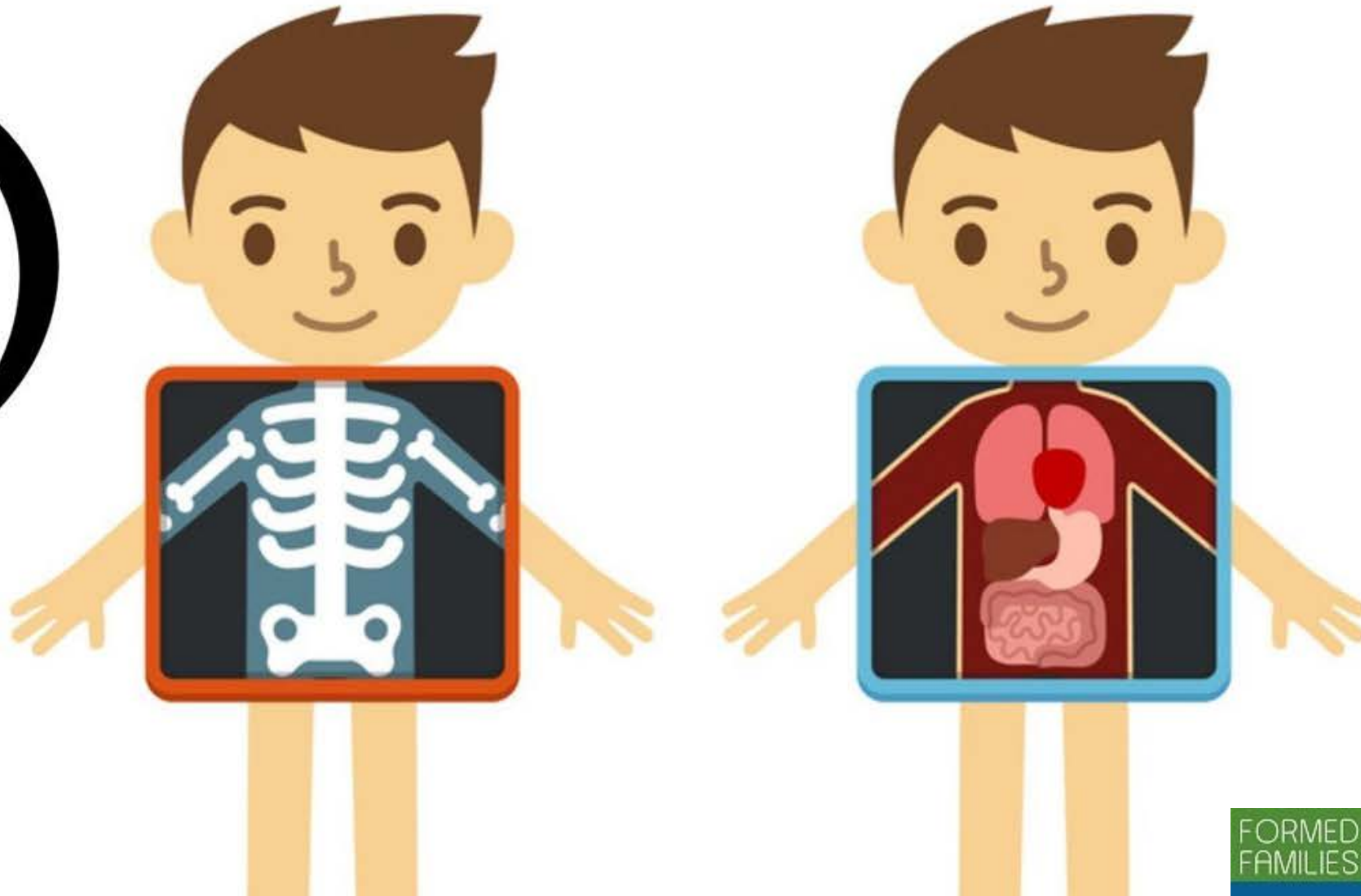
**including  
behaviors**



# **XRAY Vision Goggles**

Behaviors are just what we see on the outside that gives clues about what's happening on the inside.

1



2



We all need *connection* to survive.

REGULATED,  
CONNECTED CHILDREN

*Who Feel Safe*

{and know what to do!}

③

BEHAVE WELL

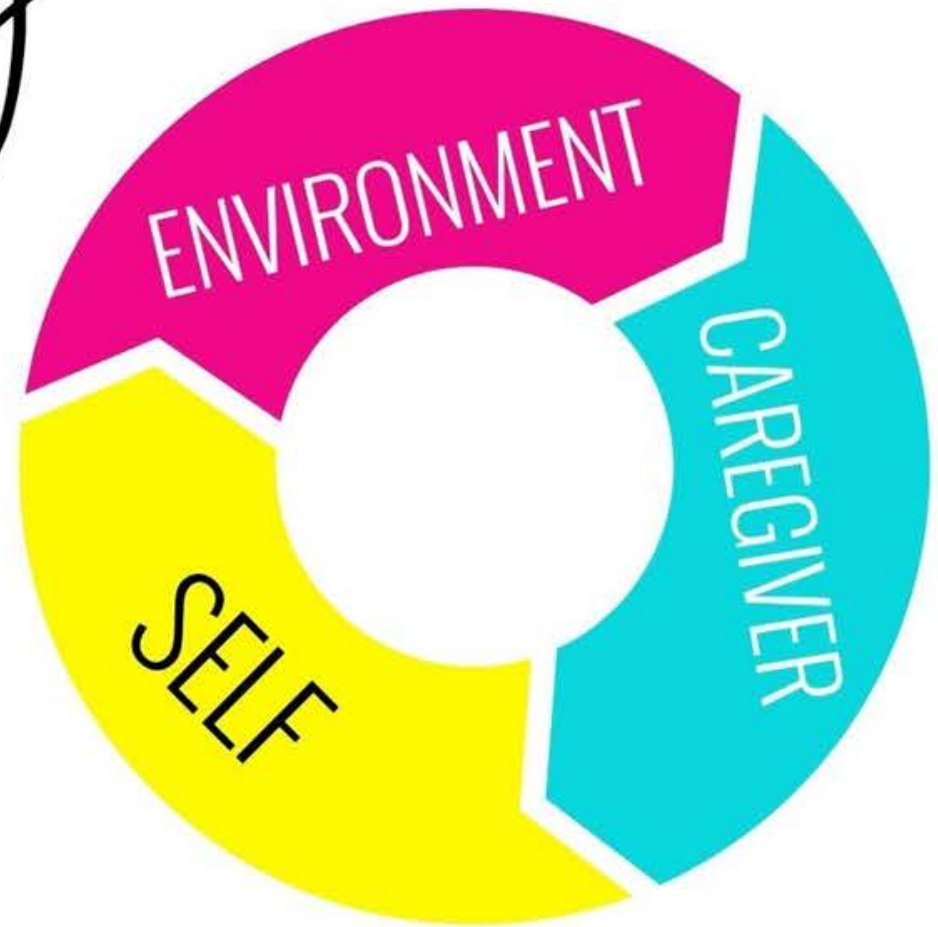
**Behavior is  
NOT a  
reflection  
of**



# Fett-Safety

A subjective  
experience  
based on

Alan Sroufe, PhD





# Neuroception

Stephen Porges, MD

Without us noticing or thinking about it, all our brains are looking  
Inside, Outside, & Between\* for Cues of Safety or Danger  
INCLUDING the internal experience of the people/caregiver we are with!

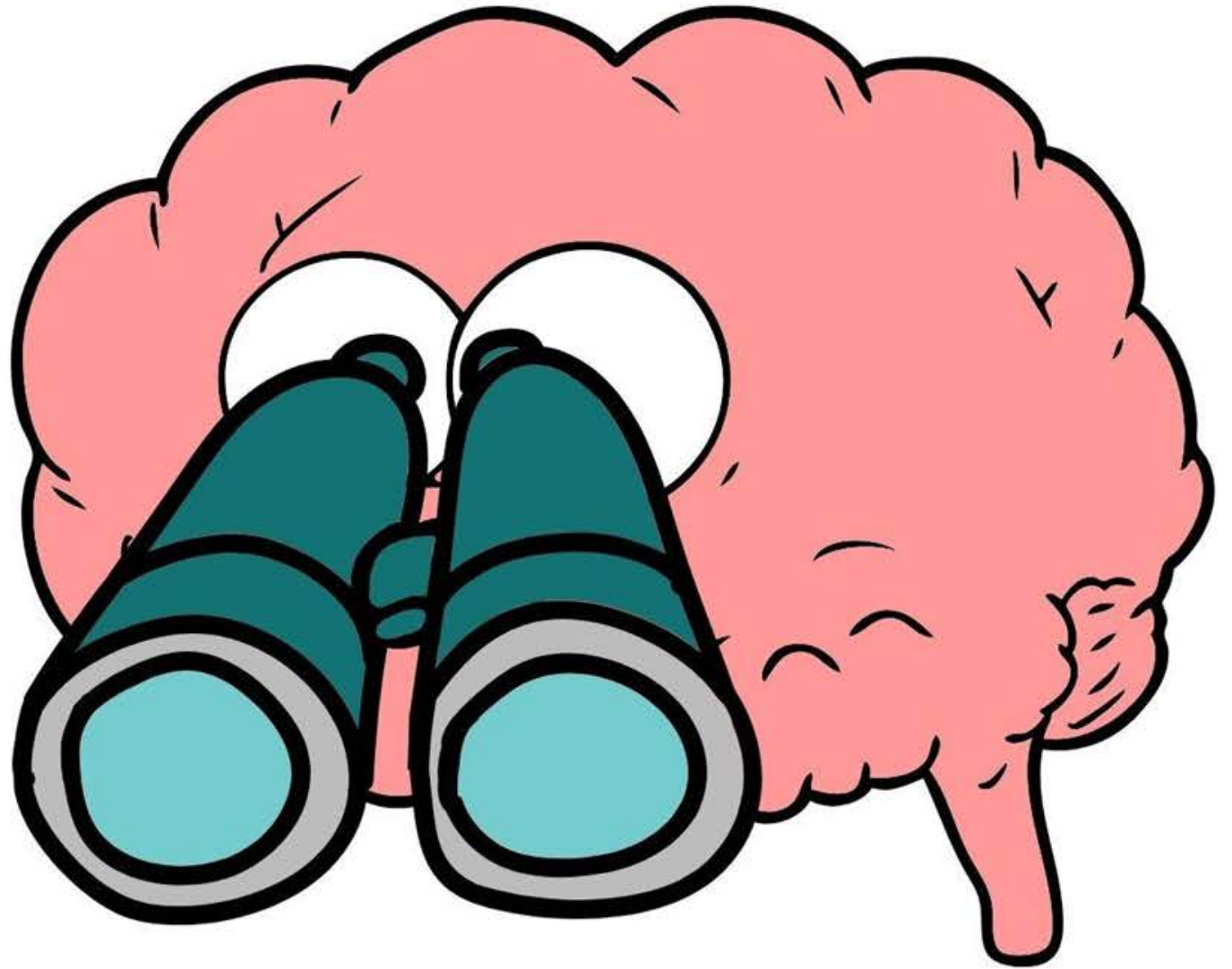
\*Deb Dana, LCSW



# Continuously!

At least 4 times  
per second!

~Stephen Porges, MD





Connection  
is a biological  
imperative.

Stephen Porges, PhD



The brain develops  
inside connection.

We need connection with a  
safe, regulated, caregiver for  
the brain to wire up and  
bloom.

When we can't find connection, our nervous system experiences that as a cue of danger and flips into protection mode.



When our kids are behaving in a way that is either rejecting of or not inviting of connection, we know their nervous system is in protection mode.

Let's pause and ask ourselves

What's up with That?

# Regulation

Keeping the accelerator and the  
brakes of energy & arousal  
in balance.

Dr. Dan Siegel, Parenting from the Inside Out

# Autonomic Nervous System

## Sympathetic- (Accelerator)

- Stress
- Surprise
- Excitement
- Energy

**If neuroceiving danger**

Fight/Flight/Freeze

## Parasympathetic- (Brake)

- Brings energy down
- Engage socially/connect
- Calm/Relax
- Repair/Restore

**If neuroceiving life threat**

Collapse

**Sympathetic accelerator**

A black sine wave is shown on a white background. A pink arrow points from the text 'Sympathetic accelerator' to the first peak of the wave. Another pink arrow points from the text 'parasympathetic brake' to the first trough of the wave.

**parasympathetic brake**



# Window of Tolerance

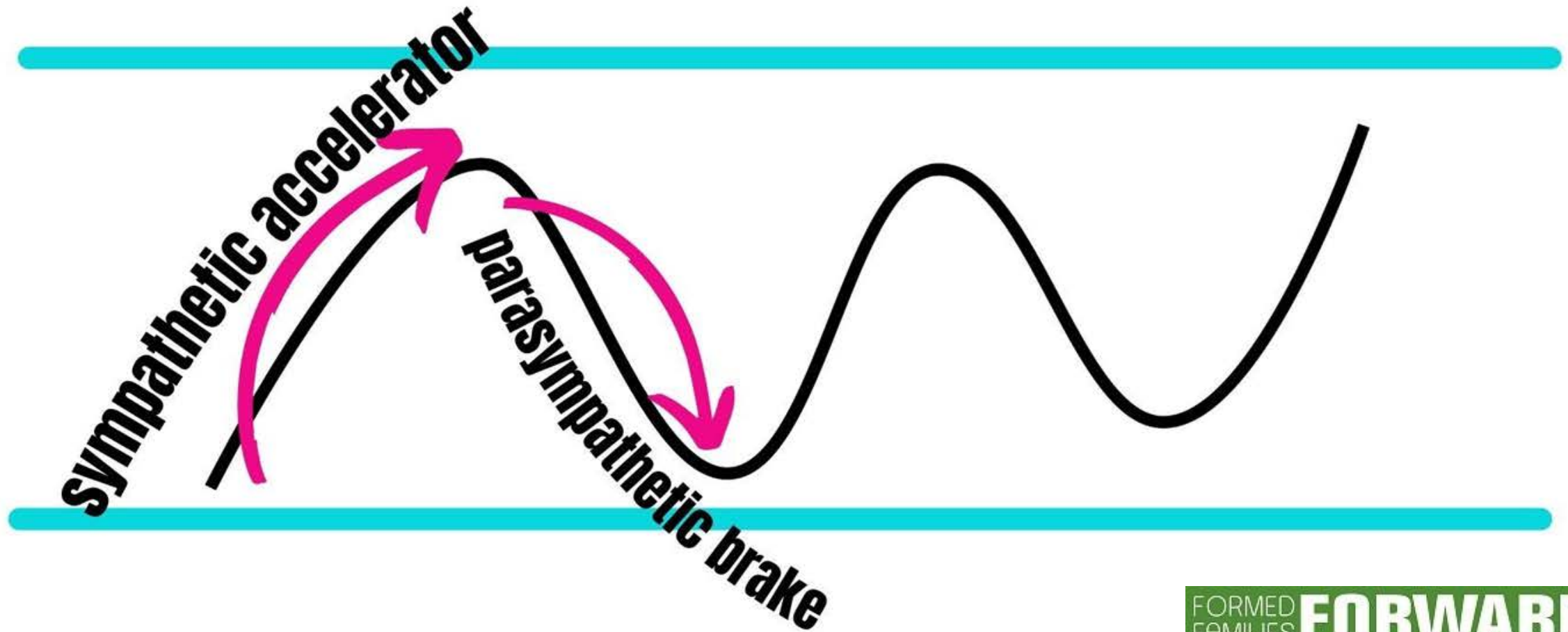
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The space inside our nervous system where we can  
manage stress without

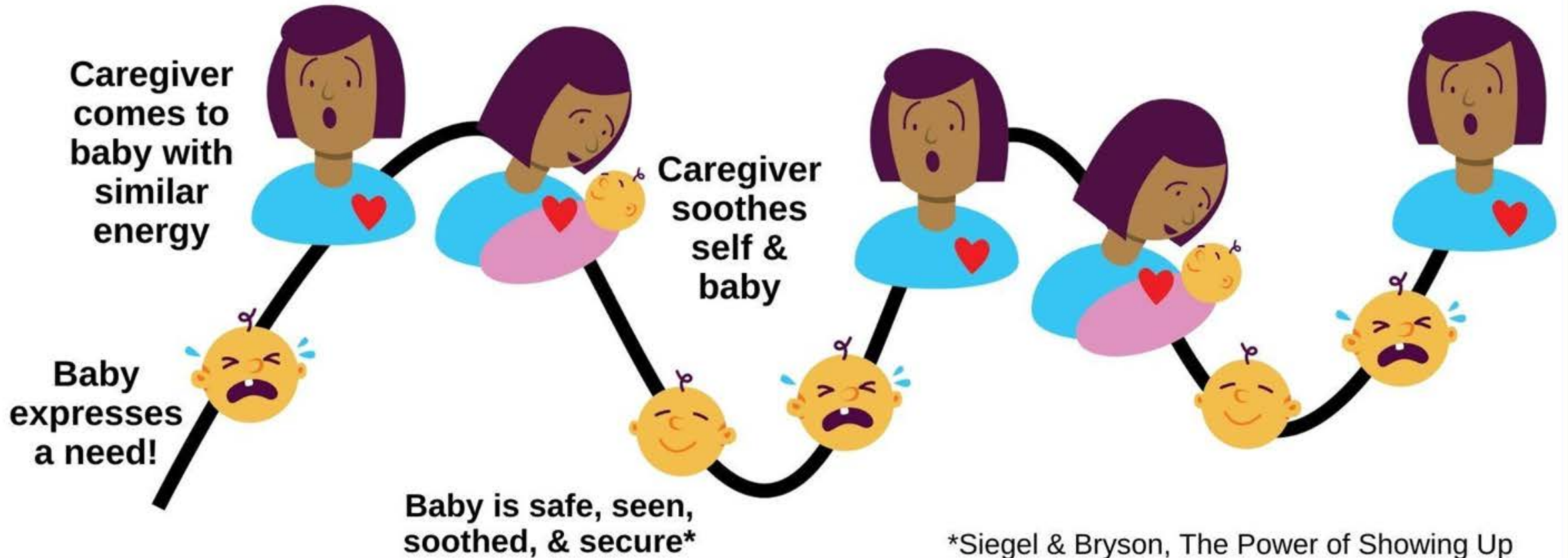
*Freaking Out*

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# Window of Tolerance



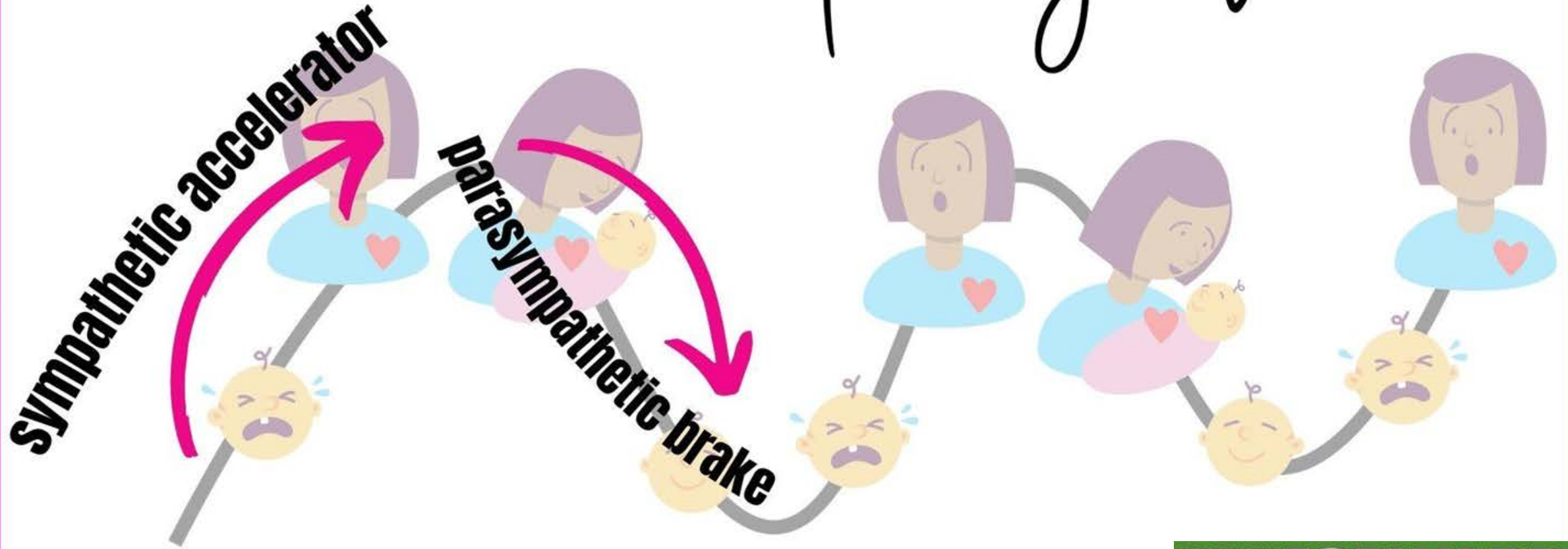
# Attachment Cycle



# Attachment

is the foundation for

# Regulation



Seeing Behaviors through  
*a lens of*  
Regulation, Connection & Felt-Safety

mood instability

inattention

hyperactive

anxiety/worries

controlling

depression

substance abuse

manipulation

self-harm

explosive behavior



FORMED FAMILIES **FORWARD**









FORMED FAMILIES **FORWARD**

Connection

Connection  
Protection

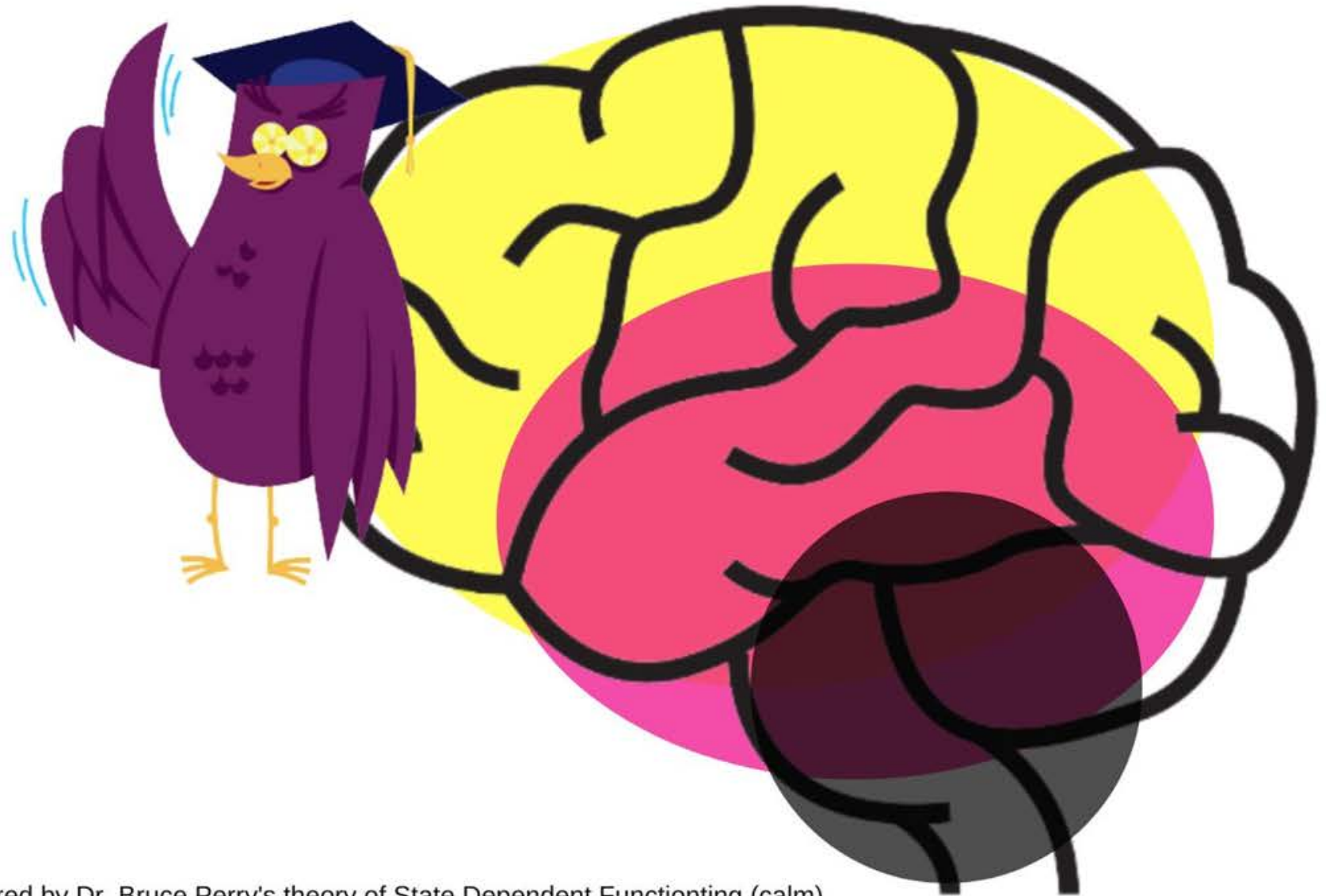
Safe

FORMED  
FAMILIES **FORWARD**

# Connection Mode

*owl*  
SAFE!!!

Socially engaged  
Thinking Brain  
Cues of SAFETY



Inspired by Dr. Bruce Perry's theory of State Dependent Functioning (calm)  
Dr. Stephen Porges' polyvagal theory (ventral vagal complex)  
& hundreds of kids from play therapy

# Connection Mode

*owl + watchdog*

Socially Engaged  
Playful

The owl grabs some  
energy from the  
watchdog!

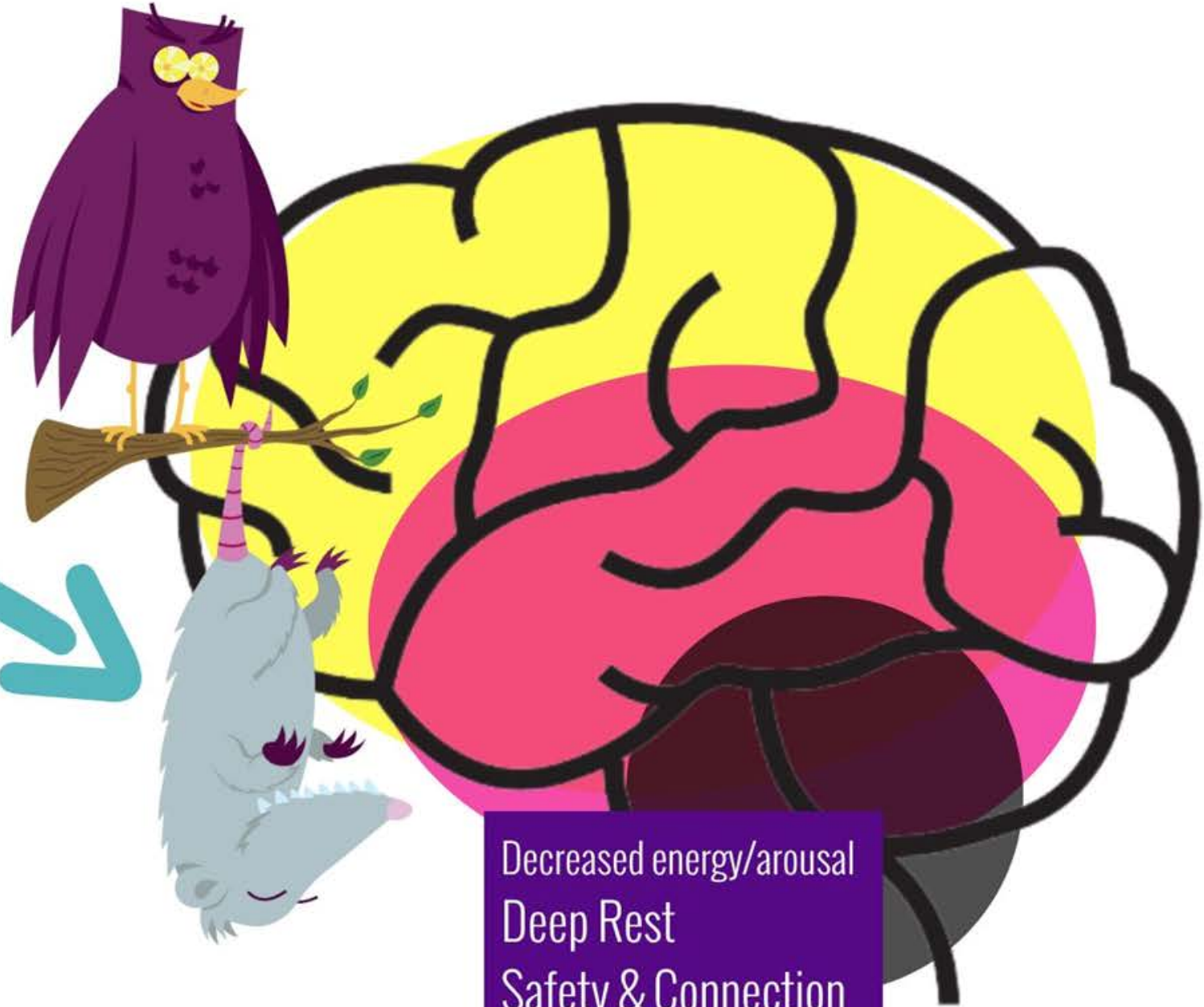


Increased energy/arousal  
Playful  
Safety & Connection

# Connection Mode

*owl + possum*  
Socially Engaged  
Deep Rest

The owl grabs some energy from the possum.

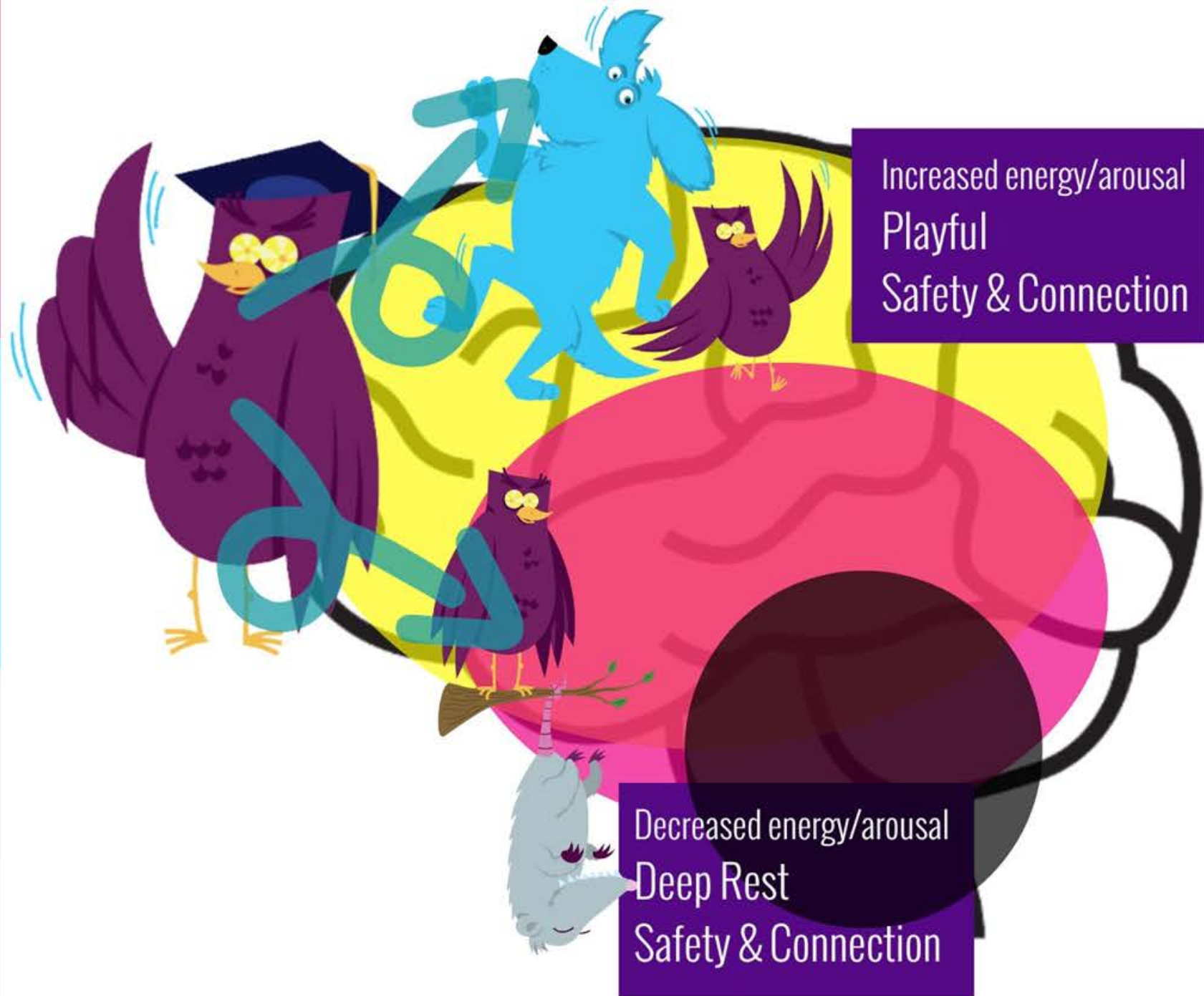


Decreased energy/arousal  
Deep Rest  
Safety & Connection



# Connection Mode

*owl*  
Socially Engaged  
Playful  
Deep rest



# Protection Mode

*watchdog*

Not safe!!! DANGER

Fight/Flight

- Opposition
- Defiance
- Tantrum
- Verbal Aggression
- Physical Aggression



Increase Fear

Increase Arousal



Decrease Safety

Decrease Connection

Decrease Regulation

\*based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning

# 4 Levels of Arousal

mild danger



*alert*

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

# 4 Levels of Arousal

mild danger



*alert*

moderate



*alarm*

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

# 4 Levels of Arousal

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

mild danger



*alert*

moderate



*alarm*

intense



*fear*

# 4 Levels of Arousal

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

mild danger



*alert*

moderate



*alarm*

intense



*fear*

severe

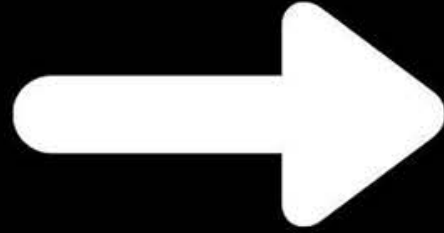


*terror*

# Watch Dog Brain (Arousal Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

*alert*



Vigilance

*alarm*

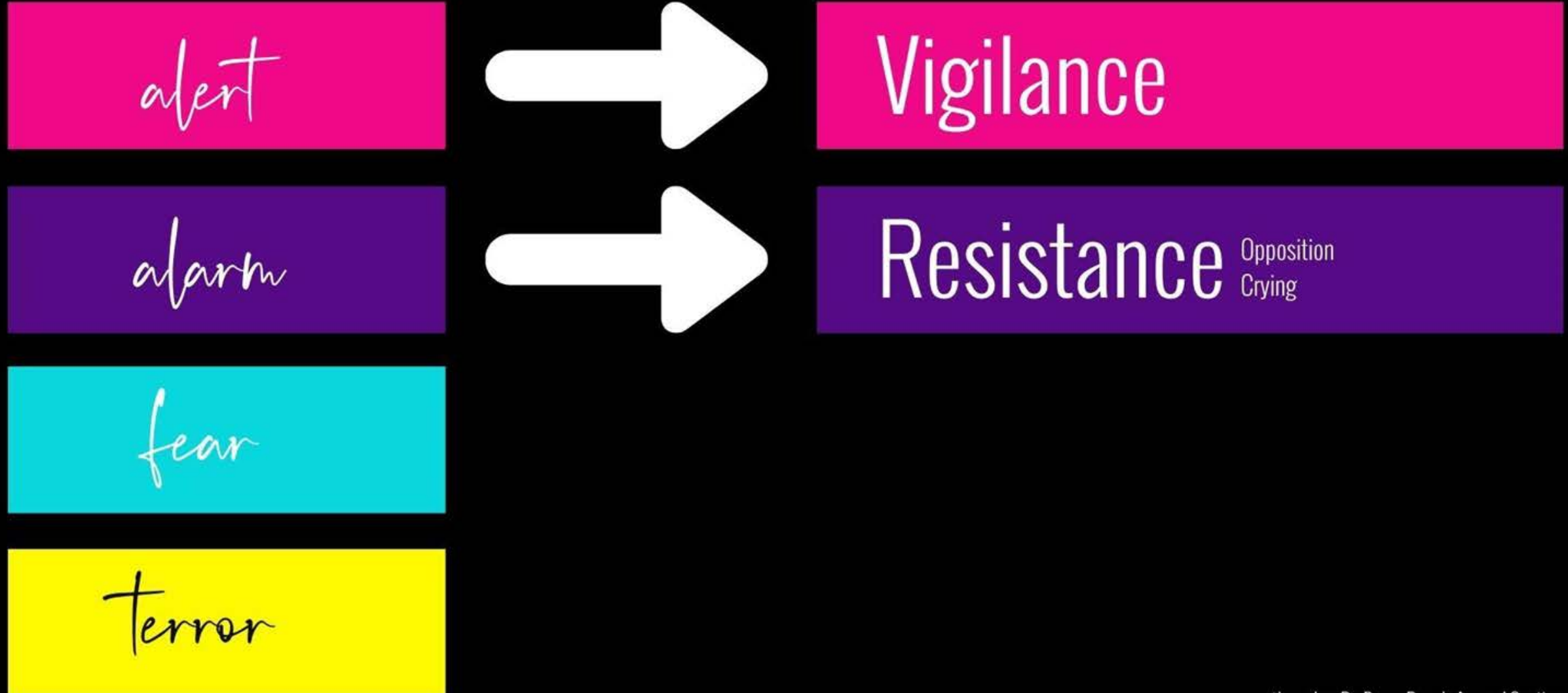
*fear*

*terror*

\*based on Dr. Bruce Perry's Arousal Continuum

# Watch Dog Brain (Arousal Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

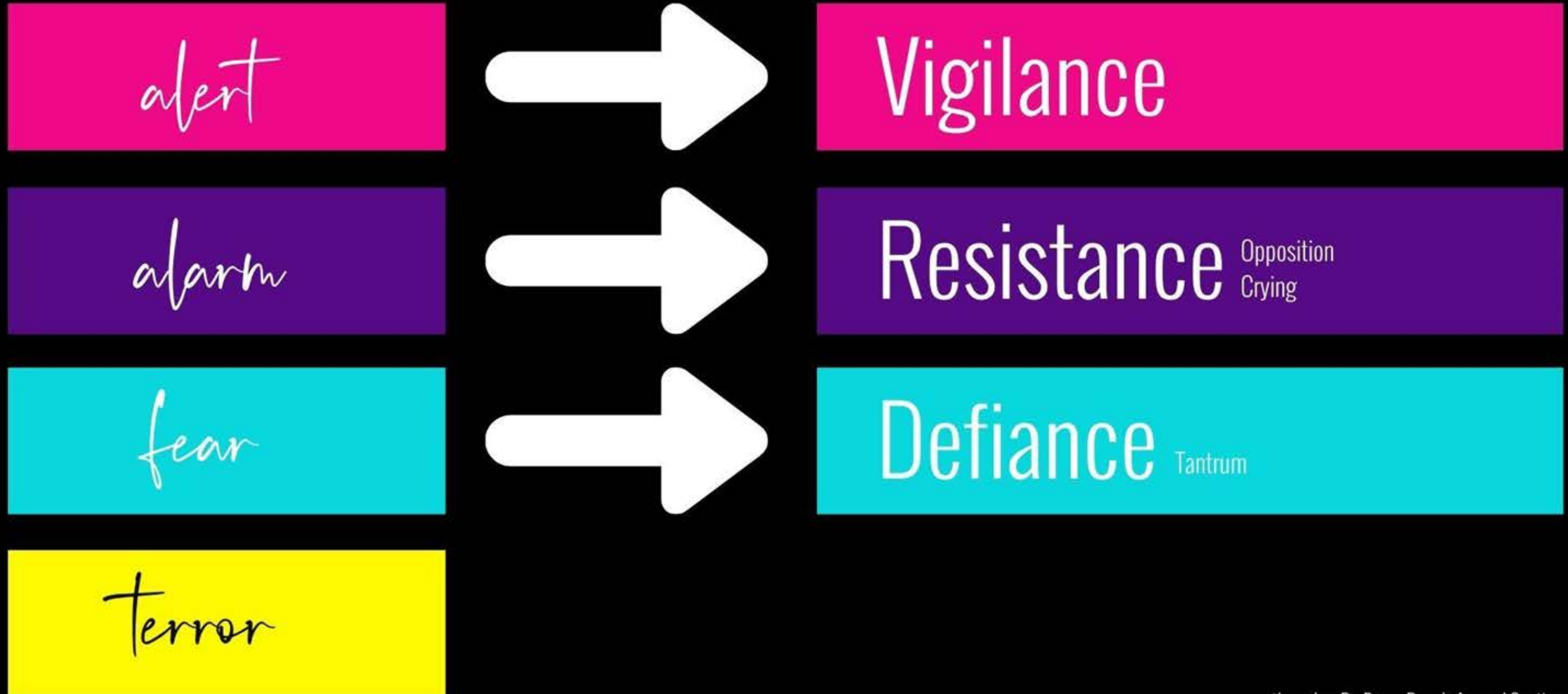


\*based on Dr. Bruce Perry's Arousal Continuum



# Watch Dog Brain (Arousal Continuum\*)

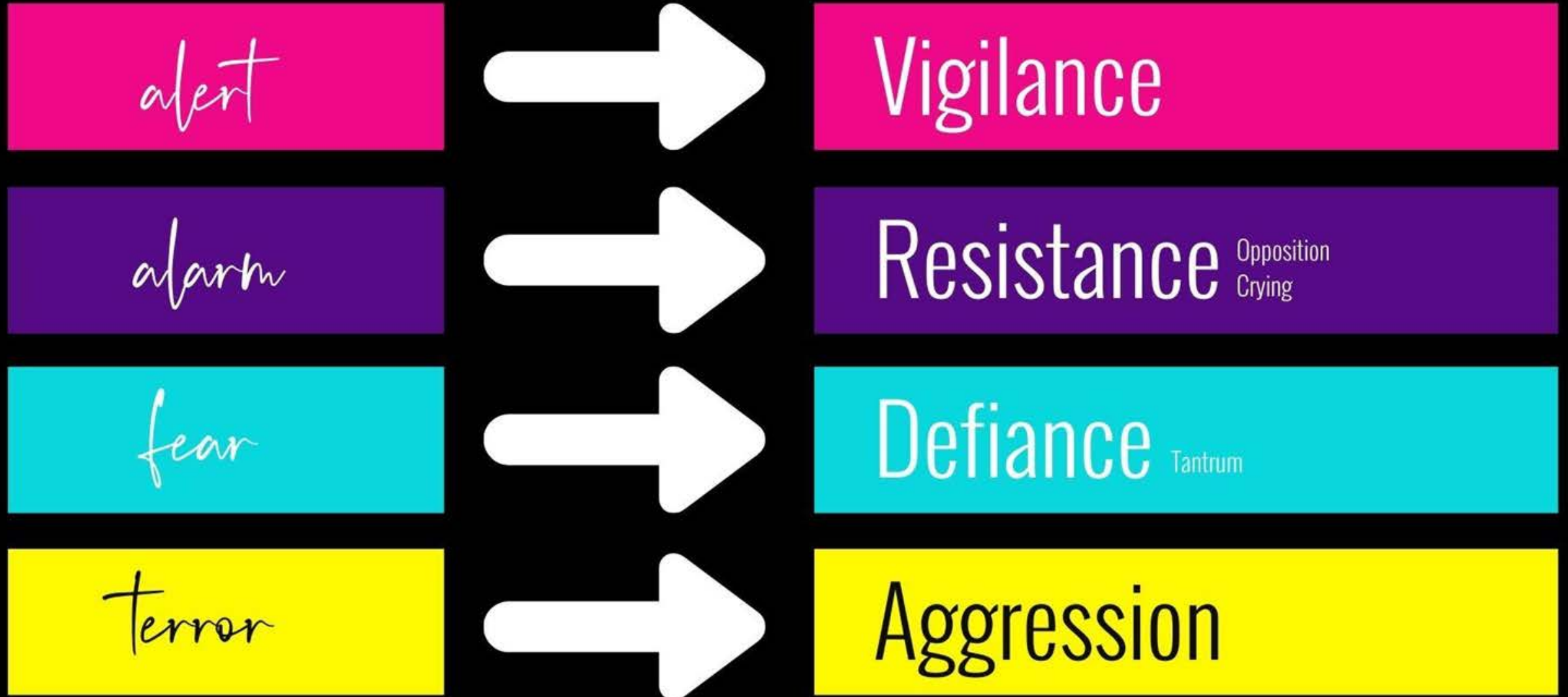
Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart



\*based on Dr. Bruce Perry's Arousal Continuum

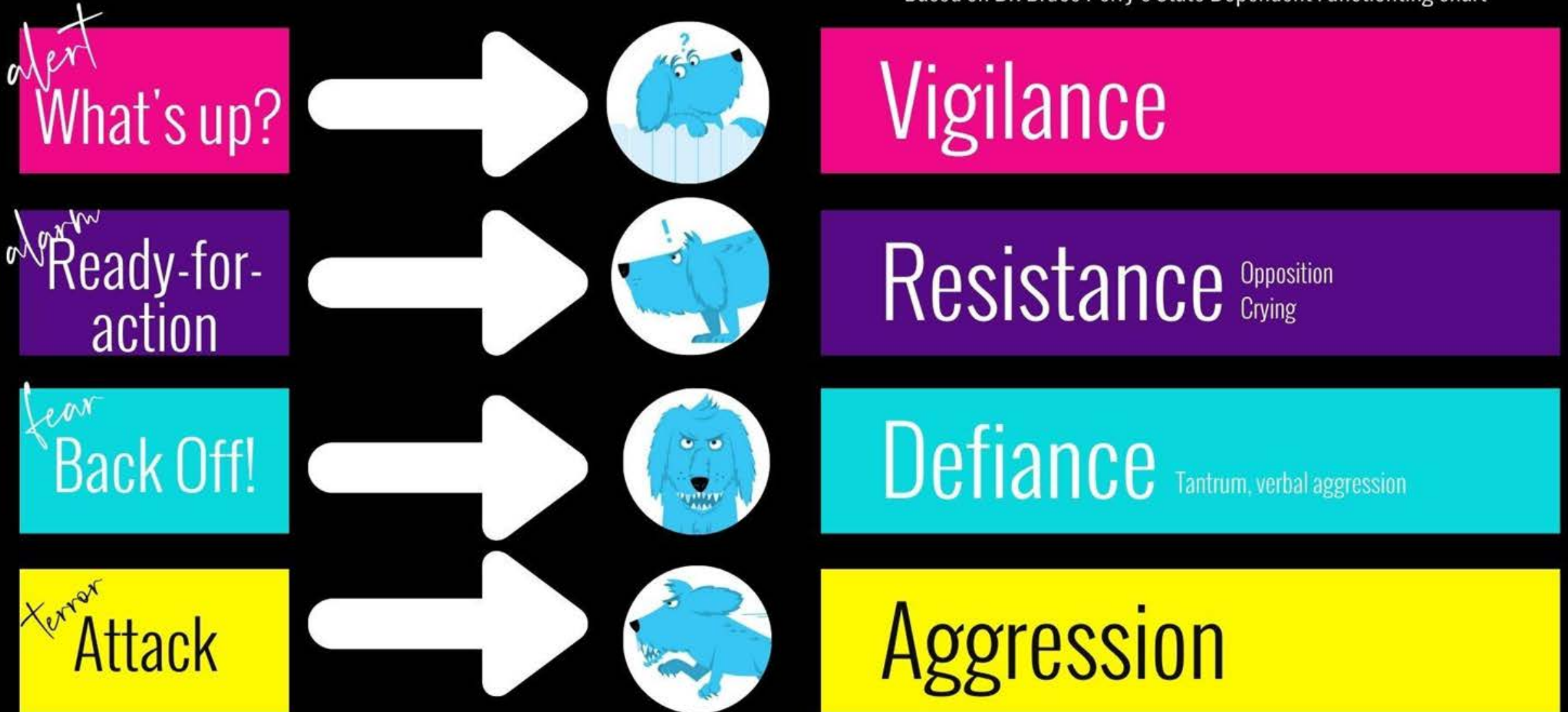
# Watch Dog Brain (Arousal Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart



# Watch Dog Brain (Arousal Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart



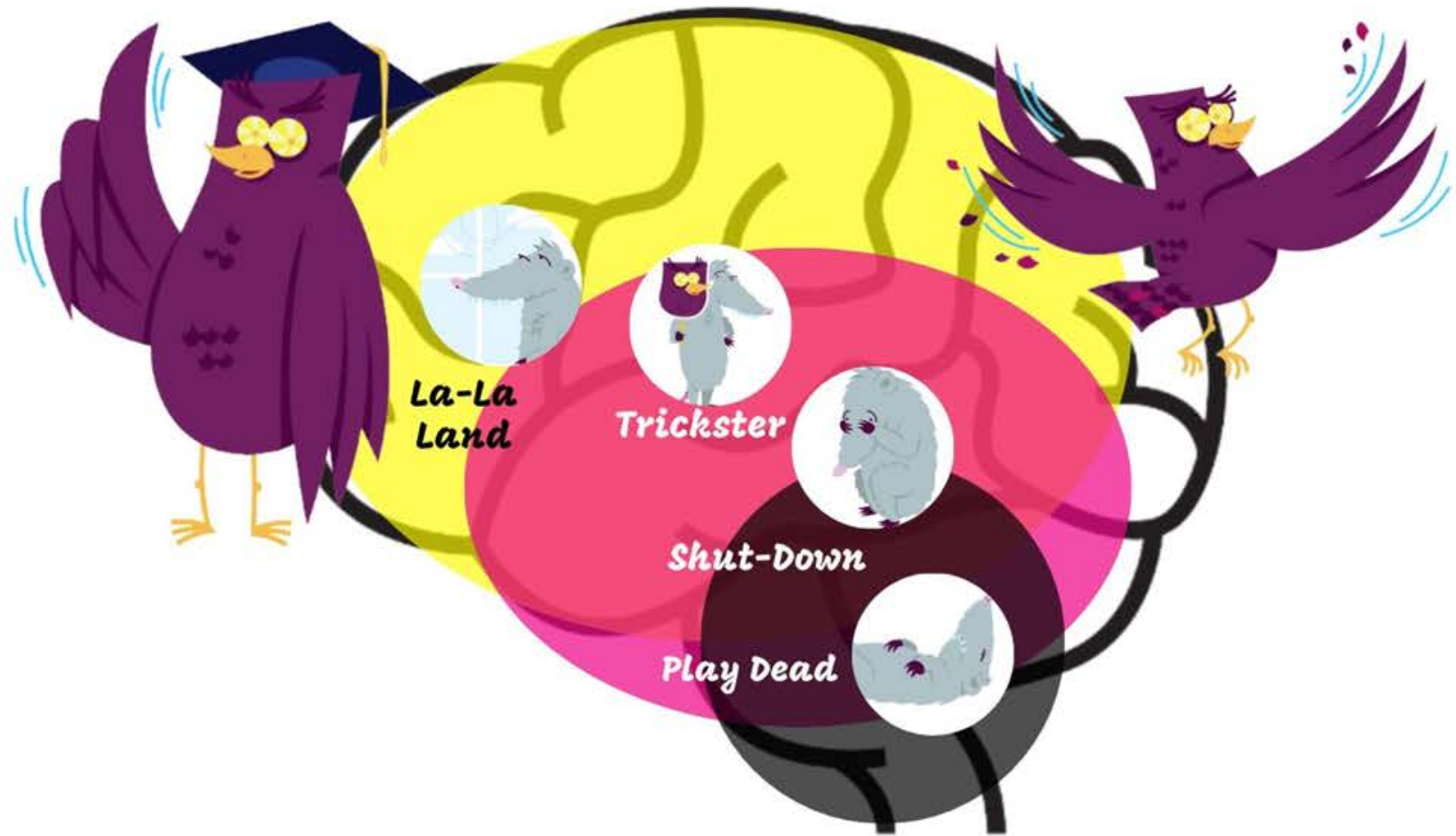
Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning

# Protection Mode

*possum*

NOT SAFE! LIFE THREAT!  
Collapse

- Checked-out
- La la land
- Over-compliance
- Shut down
- Dissociation



\*based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning

# Poosum Brain (Dissociation Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

mild danger



*alert*

# Possum Brain (Dissociation Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

mild danger



*alert*

moderate



*alarm*

# Poosum Brain (Dissociation Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

mild danger



*alert*

moderate



*alarm*

intense



*fear*

# Possum Brain (Dissociation Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

mild danger



*alert*

moderate



*alarm*

intense



*fear*

severe



*terror*

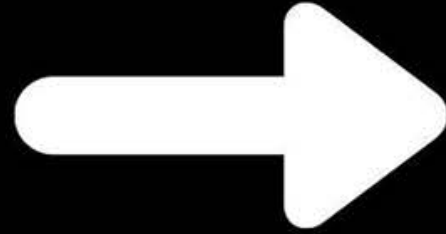
\*based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning Chart



# Possum Brain (Dissociation Continuum\*)

Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

*alert*



Avoid

*alarm*

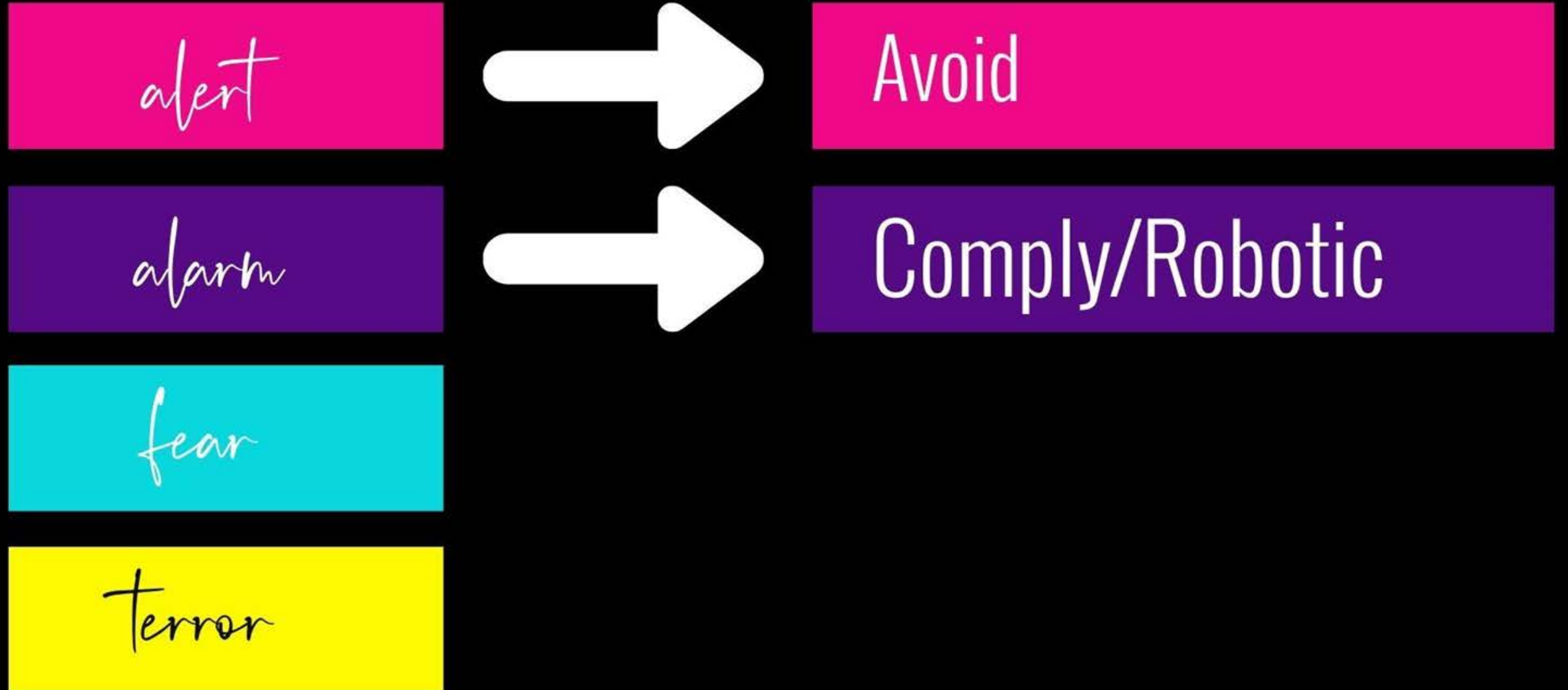
*fear*

*terror*

\*based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning Chart

# Possum Brain (Dissociation Continuum\*)

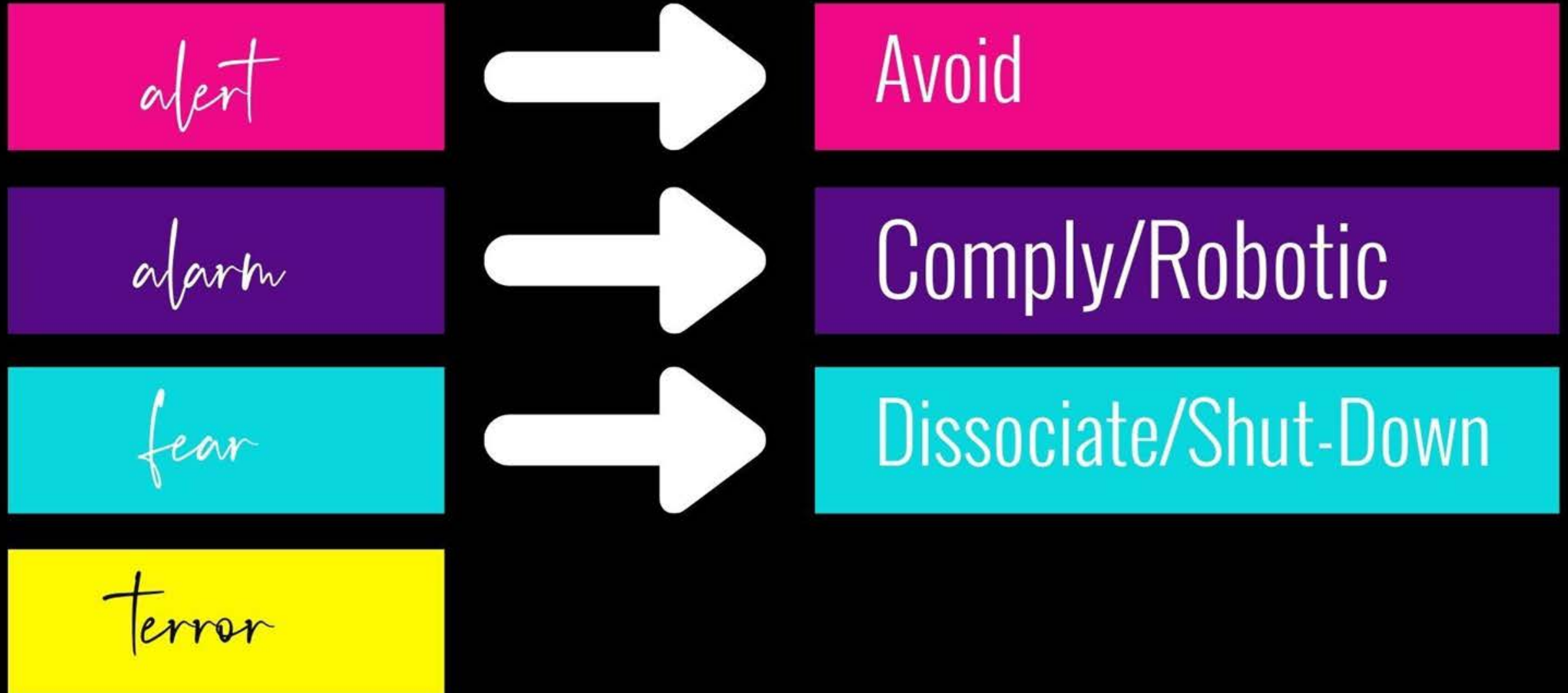
Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart



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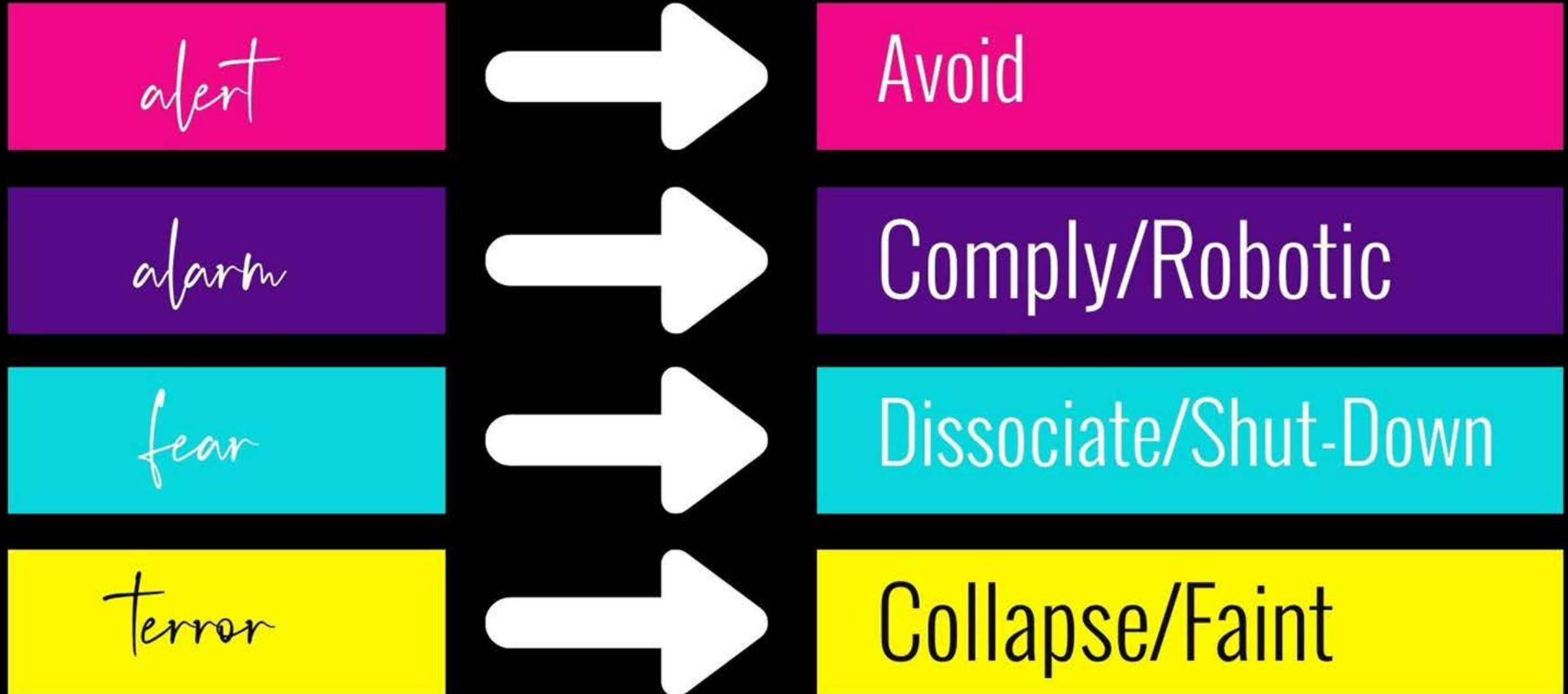
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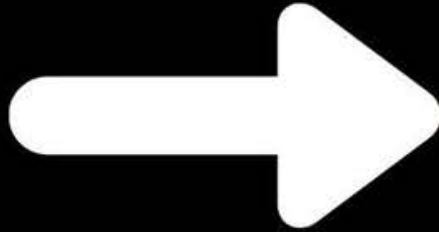


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# Possum Brain (Dissociation Continuum\*)

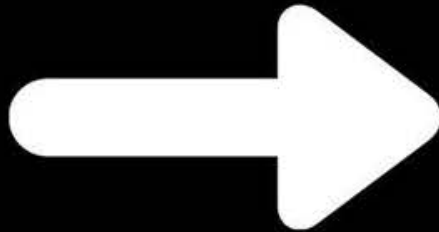
Based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning chart

*alert*  
La La Land



Avoid

*alarm*  
Trickster



Comply/Robotic

*fear*  
Shut Down



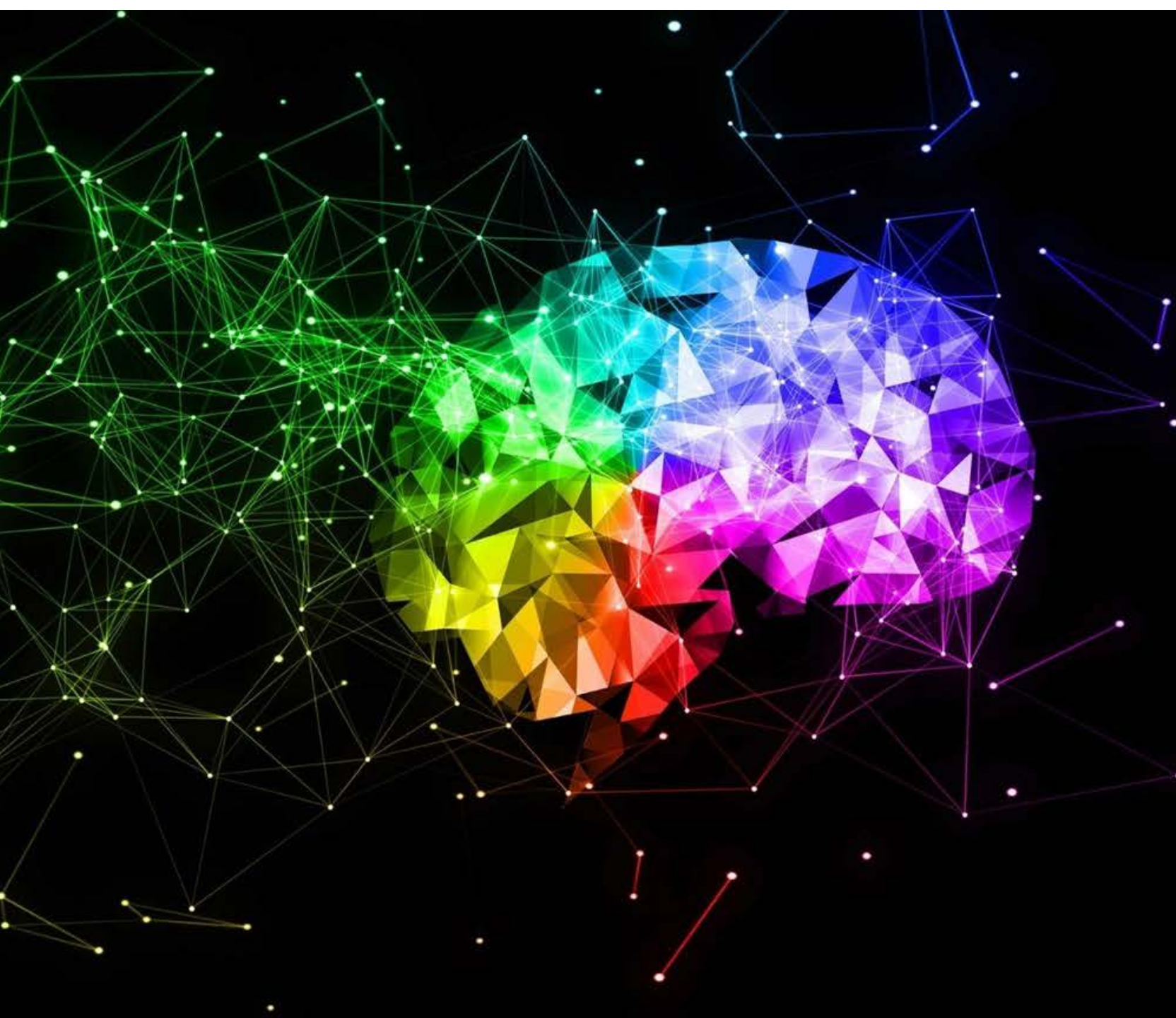
Dissociate/Shut-Down

*terror*  
Play Dead



Collapse/Faint

\*based on Dr. Bruce Perry's State Dependent Functioning Chart



This is true  
about all  
brains.



# Nervous System Vulnerability



*overactive*  
Watchdog Brain



*super scared*  
**Poosum Brain**





**Trauma**

**Toxic Stress**

**Adoption**

**Neurodivergence**

**Sensory Differences**

**NeuroImmune Disorders**

**Racism**

**Ableism**

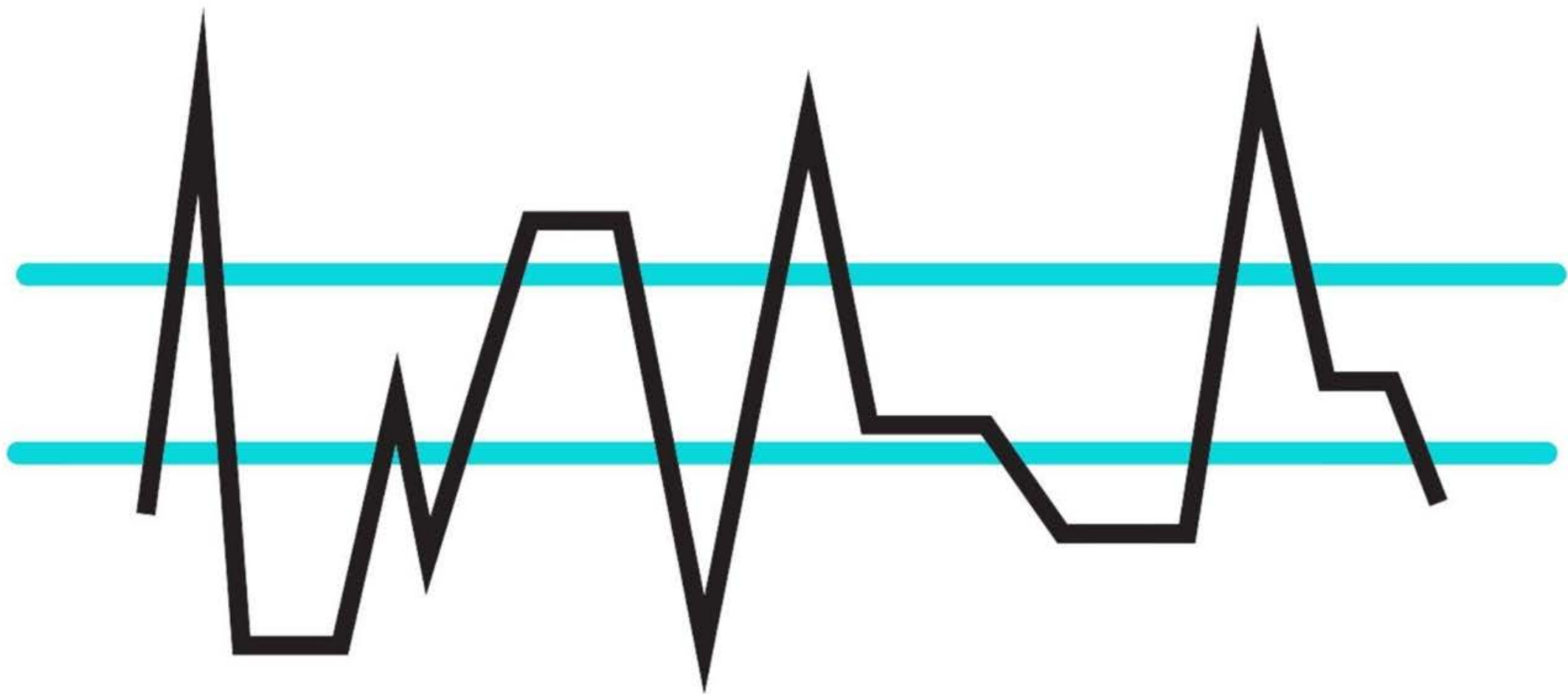
**Temperament Differences**

**Unknown Cause**

**Sympathetic accelerator**

A black sine wave is shown on a white background. A pink arrow points from the text 'Sympathetic accelerator' to the first peak of the wave. Another pink arrow points from the text 'parasympathetic brake' to the first trough of the wave.

**parasympathetic brake**



FORMED FAMILIES **FORWARD**

Overactive watchdog &  
possum brain leads to  
significantly impaired  
regulation

*Mountain*

*Mole Hill*



**DANGER!**



Connection =  
Danger!



FORMED FAMILIES **FORWARD**





**ALL  
BEHAVIOR  
MAKES SENSE**

REGULATED,  
CONNECTED CHILDREN

*Who Feel Safe*

{and know what to do!}

BEHAVE WELL

# Questions for Behavior Change

Is this child regulated?

Is this child connected to me? *to themselves?*

Is this child experiencing felt safety?



Changing how we  
see people  
*Changes People*



**This 12-week hybrid course starts September 21<sup>st</sup>. Course participants will access weekly pre-recorded modules released each Saturday. On Thursdays from noon to 1 PM, participants will attend virtual group meetings to review and discuss the week's content. The sessions conclude Thursday, December 19, 2024.**

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# Follow Formed Families Forward on social media



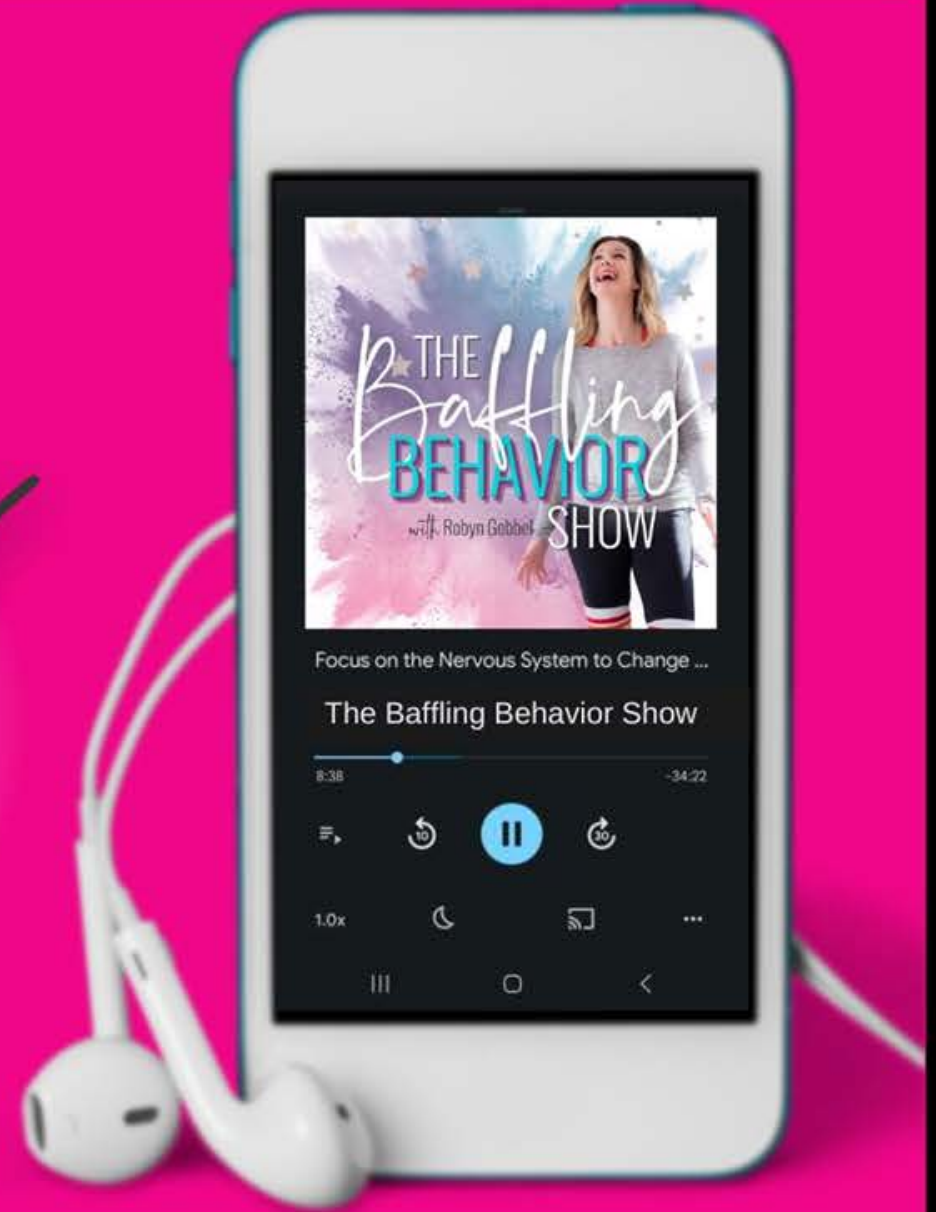
*More*

Resources

FORMED  
FAMILIES **FORWARD**



# THE Baffling BEHAVIOR SHOW



# RobynGobbel.com/FreeResources

## Owls, Watchdogs, and Possums, Oh my!

An introduction to the model described in *Raising Kids with Big, Baffling Behaviors: Brain-Body-Sensory Strategies that Really Work* by Robyn Gobbel | [robyngobbel.com/book](http://robyngobbel.com/book)



There are three different energy pathways in the brain.

1



2



3



I call them the *Owl Brain*, the *Watchdog Brain*, and the *Possum Brain*.

### OWL BRAIN

The wise Owl Brain is in charge when the brain and nervous system is feeling safe and open for connection.

The kind of behavior that you're hoping to see from your child- and yourself- comes from the Owl Brain.

When you are seeing big, baffling behaviors, you can be sure that the Owl has flown away.

You don't need to stop behavior. You need to bring back the Owl Brain.



[robyngobbel.com](http://robyngobbel.com)

### WATCHDOG BRAIN

When the nervous system detects possible danger, it flips into protection mode and the Watchdog Brain emerges.

Inspired by Dr. Perry's arousal continuum and his theory of State Dependent Functioning, there are four different Watchdog Brain responses: **What's Up? Ready for Action, Back Off!, and Attack.\***

The watchdog is scared, but acts so scary that the Owl freaks out and flies away!

*This is why logic isn't helpful and why previous consequences don't seem to matter.*



**Felt-safety is the number one goal.**

### POSSUM BRAIN

When the nervous system detects not just danger but potential life threat, it engages the Possum Brain.

Again, inspired by Dr. Perry's theory, there are four different Possum Brain responses: **La-La Land, Trickster, Shut Down, and Play Dead.\***

The Watchdog pathway increases activation but the Possum pathway decreases it. As the Possum Brain gets more and more scared, it shuts down more and more.

*\*Each level of Watchdog and Possum activation will respond differently to different interventions.*



## WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM IS FRIED

[robyngobbel.com/podcast](http://robyngobbel.com/podcast)



List inspired by members of The Club



#1 Best Seller in Parenting Hyperactive Children & Children with Disabilities

#1 New Release in Adoption

#1 New Release in Medical Child Psychology



<https://amzn.to/3XsQU2E>

[RobynGobbel.com/BafflingBook](https://RobynGobbel.com/BafflingBook)



Contact Melissa for more information  
[melissa.lebling@formedfamiliesforward.org](mailto:melissa.lebling@formedfamiliesforward.org)

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# Session Evaluation

