

A Safe Brain Is A Smart Brain:

Reducing fearful patterns in schools to foster connection, growth and healthy systems change

Gillian Boudreau, Ph.D.
Licensed Clinical Psychologist
Licensed School Psychologist

A Safe Brain Is A Smart Brain

“The Opposite of Fear Is Love”

...(Also curiosity)

Relationships and Curiosity Are Key To Our Success

Building a positive relationship with a client is the main predictor of the benefit of any psychotherapy intervention

(Horvath & Greenberg, 1989, 1994; Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000).

Interpersonal connectedness at school plays a big role in academic motivation and success

(Martin & Dowson, 2009 review).

Effectiveness of parent-child interventions, regardless of intervention, is correlated to the degree that parents are present for and creative of attunement

(Mahoney, 2009).

**Connection Is Necessary For Optimal
Human Functioning.**

WHY?

Healthy relationships Tell Us The
World Is Safe By Creating A
“Secure Base”

Bowlby, J. A Secure Base. London:Routledge, 1988.

The Importance of Basic Safety

When we are feeling “basic safety” meaning more love than threat, our brain allows:

Problem Solving
Perspective Taking
Empathy
Curiosity

Under stress, humans are thrown out of basic safety and into survival mode, which blocks non-emergent but massively important functions

Regulation Responsibility For Power-Holders:

Neurodivergence as an example

Fear and anxiety interact with diagnoses like ADHD and autism to worsen or even initiate symptoms

White et. al, 2013; Dalton et. al, 2007; Joseph et. al, 2008; Kleinmans et. al, 2010; Bellini, 2006; Ozsivadjian, Knott & Magiati, 2012; Spiker et. al, 2012; Gotham et. al, 2013

Fear and anxiety significantly shrink executive function and capacity for adaptive behavior

(Weiser et. al, 2009; Pessoa, 2009; Adler, Spencer & Wilens, 2015 p 98; Levy, 2004.; Ford, 2009; Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010; Kushnir & Sadeah, 2010; De Bellis, Hooper, Spratt, & Woolley, 2009; Samuelson, Krueger, Burnett, & Wilson, 2010)

Enhanced cortisol response in autistic children:
Spratt et. al, 2012

Autistic Anxiety Is Often Punished or Pathologized

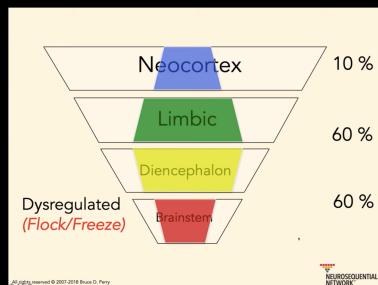
Anxiety tracks with irritability more often in autistic children
(Dickerson Mayes et. al, 2011)

Anxiety may be at the root of social challenges associated with autism (Briot, Jean et. al, 2020; White et. al, 2013).

Youth on the spectrum tend to demonstrate anxiety through behavior change rather than voicing concerns (Ozsivadjian, Knott & Magiati, 2012).

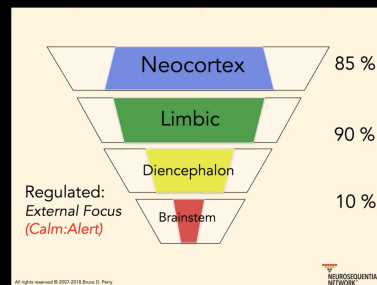
Restricted interests may serve as an attempt to control feelings of anxiety for autistic folks (Spiker et. al, 2012).

Low-Capacity for Luxurious Brain Functions



Fear

High-Capacity for Luxurious Brain Functions



Calm

Emotional Contagion: Neurosequential Network Stress & Trauma Series March 30, 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=96evhMPcY2Y&feature=youtu.be>

Mental bandwidth, space to think, is itself a form of power and privilege.

The basic safety required to access this is often enjoyed disproportionately by those in powerful, “normative” or “typical” demographics.

How Does Fear Move Through Communities?

Fear Is Contagious



Emotion Contagion

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VW1PH6B9p20>

When Emotions Are Contagious | Invisibilia | NPR
July 21, 2019

Emotion Contagion

(Hatfield, Bensman, Thornton, & Rapson, 2014)

1. Mimicry

(Hatfield, Carpenter & Rapson, 2014)

2. Feedback

(Ekman, Levenson & Friesen, 1983)

3. "Catching" Emotion

(Hatfield et. al 2014, Hess & Fischer 2013, Eiflenbein, 2014)

Shark Music



<https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/resources-for-parents/>

Identified Patient Theory

Bateson, G. 1972, Satir, V. 1967, Gray, D. & Weinberg, J. 2006.

One Human Decides They Know Another Human Is A Threat



Fearful Human Becomes More Avoidant or Hypervigilant



"Threat" Human Senses Danger/Rejection



Challenging Emotions and Behaviors



We Get More Of What
We Expect



Calm Is Also Contagious!



Calm Connection Example

(The Rookies performing "My Roots Grow Down" 6/28/14)
Karl Ruch Youtube

Calm Spreads:

1. On Purpose
2. When One Person is Anchored To The Present
3. Through A Connection

How Do We Stay In Calm Connection?

Mindfulness Practice Can Induce A Calm State

Mindfulness Practice Can Reduce Ongoing Anxiety

Mindfulness Can Help Us Meet Each Moment As It Comes

Mindfulness for Parents Helps Reduce Parent Stress and Often Child Symptoms

Autism:

Great Review Article:

Cachia, R., Anderson, A., & Moore, D. (2016). Mindfulness, stress and well-being in parents of children with autism spectrum disorder: A systematic review. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 25(1), 1-14.

Great Information For Parents:

<https://www.cfha.net/blogpost/753286/294791/Mindfulness-for-Parents-of-Children-with-Autism-Spectrum-Disorder>

ADHD and General Behavioral Challenges:

Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Karazsia & Singh, 2013. Mindfulness training for teachers changes the behavior of their preschool students. *Research in Human Development*, 10 (3), 211-233.

Singh, Singh, Lancioni, Singh, Winton & Adkins (2009). Mindfulness training for parents and their children with ADHD increases children's compliance. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, published online.

Connected Movement Exercise/Synchrony:

Pair up

Move around with one person leading the movement, then switch

Move around with the other person leading

Get into groups of four, take turns leading the movement.

Current Conceptualization of Mindfulness

1. Focused attention on present moment experience
2. Open and accepting attitude toward experience

Tang, Holzel & Posner 2015.

Staying Connected To Our “Freestanding Adult”

Modeling self-determination and internal freedom

Fostering purpose and accomplishment, not
compliance

Get Curious About What
Makes You “Go Urgent”

Anchor Questions:

How can you transmit calm connection through
your interactions at school?

How can you receive calm connection from
others?

What are you most curious to learn about your
students this year?