

St Maries Primary School

Helping anxious children




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Plan

- ▶ Anxiety
 - ▶ Emotional regulation
 - ▶ Maintenance of anxiety
 - ▶ Support
 - ▶ Tips
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- ▶ Say hello to neighbours!

What is anxiety?

- ▶ *Some* anxiety is normal
 - ▶ Anxiety is (supposed to be) 'adaptive'
 - ▶ Anxiety is crucial to our survival
 - ▶ Anxiety is a normal part of growing up
 - ▶ Anxiety is *not* an illness
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- ▶ But... it is unpleasant to experience and can be distressing to see in our children
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- ▶ And... it becomes a concern when it gets in the way of children doing things they like or need to do
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What is anxiety?


- ▶ Anxiety is a response to perceived THREAT
 - Real or imagined / exaggerated
 - Physical or social
 - ▶ Fight/Flight/Freeze
 - ▶ Anxiety as a communication
 - ▶ Anxiety can be telling us something needs to be done
 - ▶ Anxiety can prompt us to prepare for something
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2 x nervous systems

- ▶ The brain and the body together
- ▶ 'Sympathetic' – prepare for danger
- ▶ 'Parasympathetic' – calm down, rest and digest



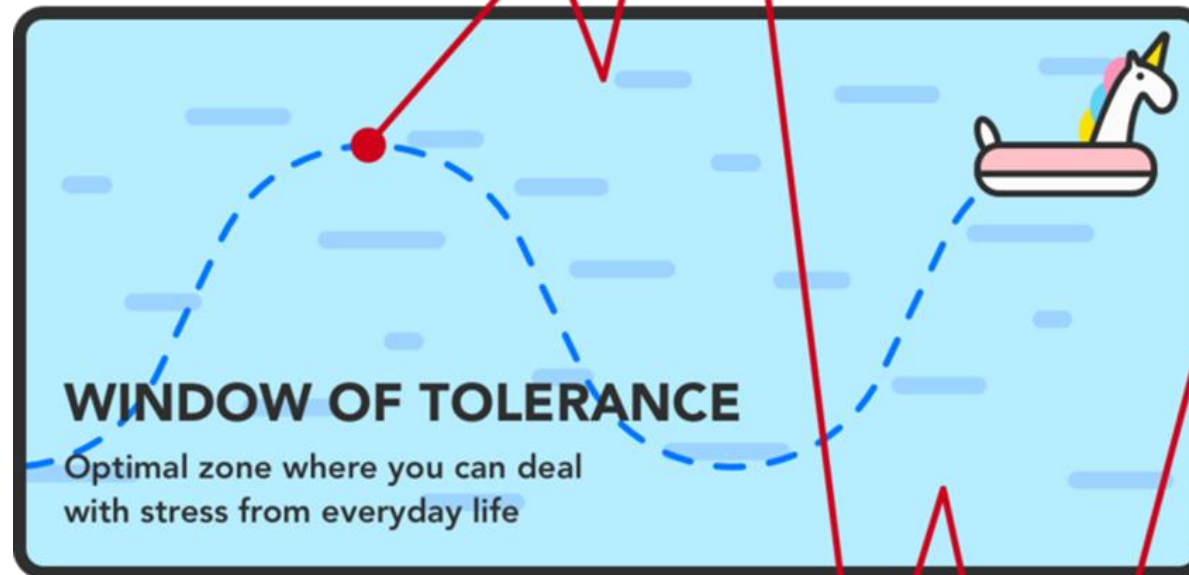
Regulation

- ▶ 'Emotional regulation'
 - ▶ Adjust internal reactions to situations so we are not overwhelmed
 - ▶ Regulated for > co-regulated > self-regulated
 - ▶ Labelling, understanding and expressing feelings
 - ▶ How:
 - Breathing, movement / exercise, touch & physical contact, care / love / attachment, cognitive reappraisal, suppression, senses (looking at, listening to, feeling, smelling, tasting), substances, etc.
 - ▶ **What helps you to 'regulate'?**
 - ▶ **What helps your child to regulate?**
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Regulation

HYPERAROUSAL

Excessive activation/energy in the form of fight/flight responses



WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

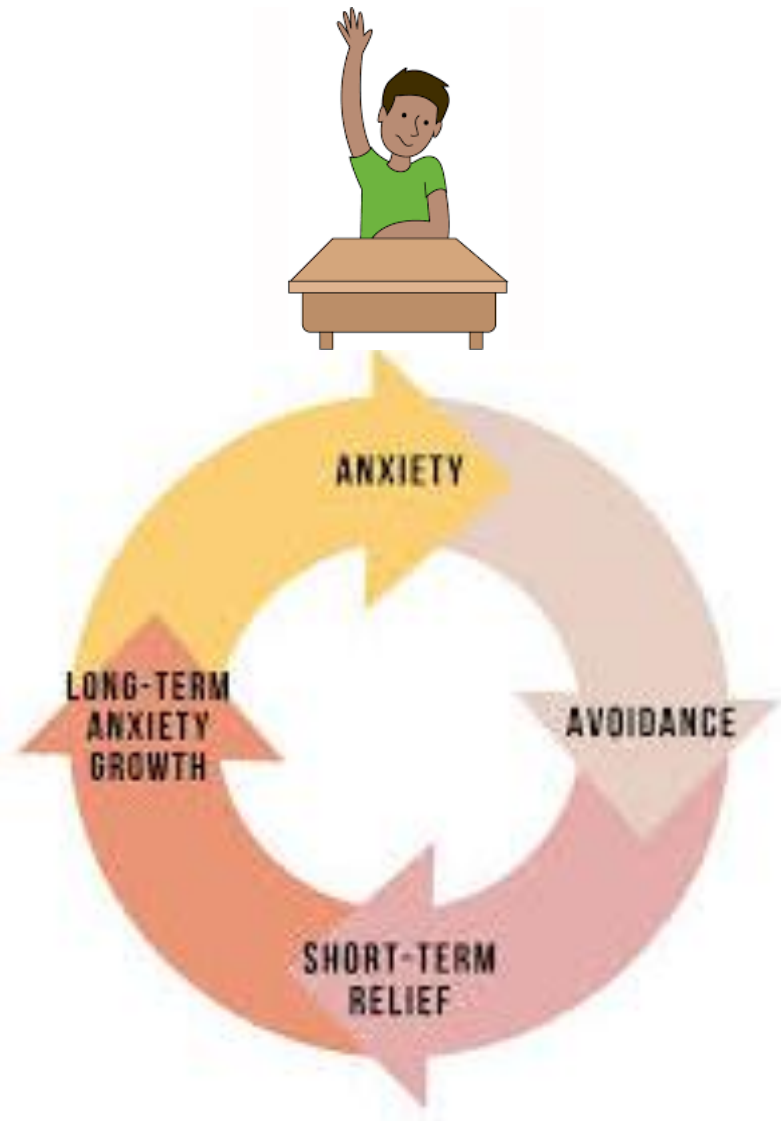
Optimal zone where you can deal with stress from everyday life

HYPOAROUSAL

Freeze response, emotionally flat, lack of energy and response

- SMOOTH SAILING
- DYSREGULATION
- FIGHT/FLIGHT/FREEZE

The vicious cycle of anxiety

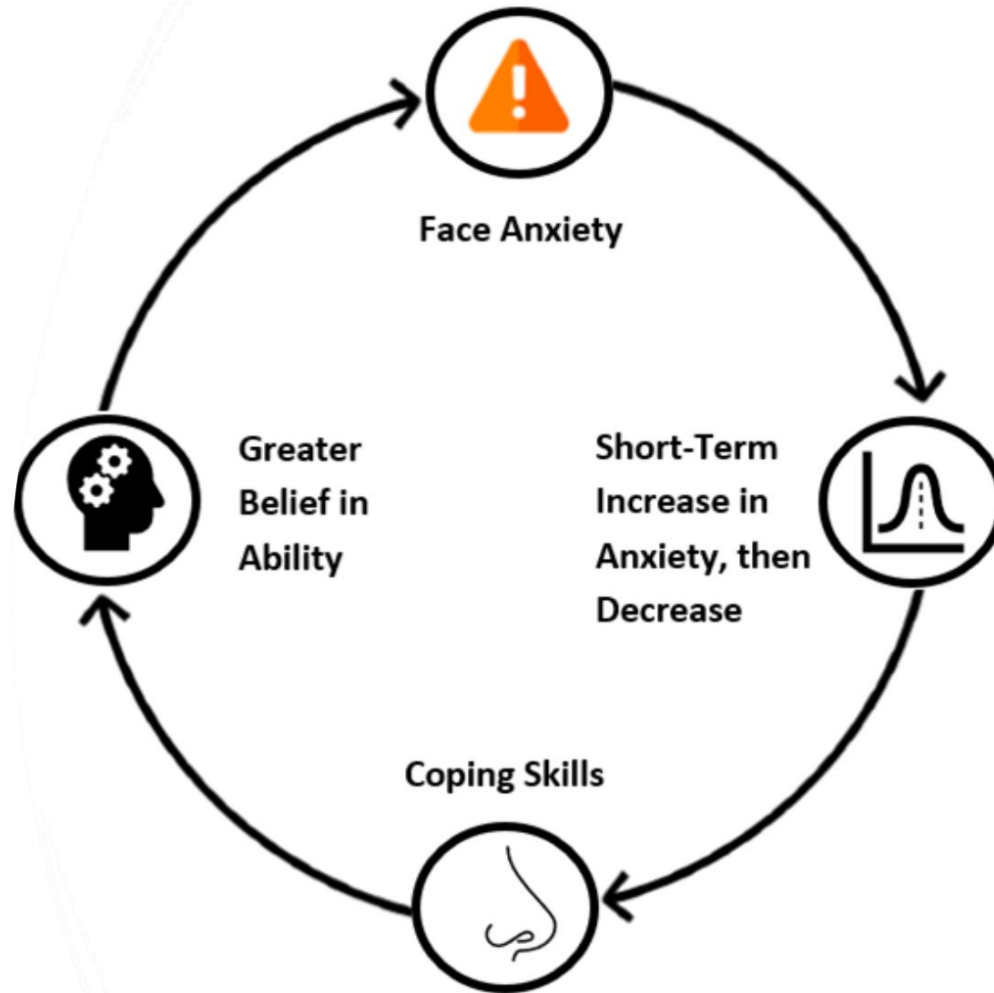


What keeps the problem going?

- ▶ Avoidance
- ▶ Excessive reassurance
- ▶ Never discovering they can manage or cope with the discomfort!
- ▶ **What is your child avoiding?**



Reversing the vicious cycle



Psycho-education – recognising anxiety

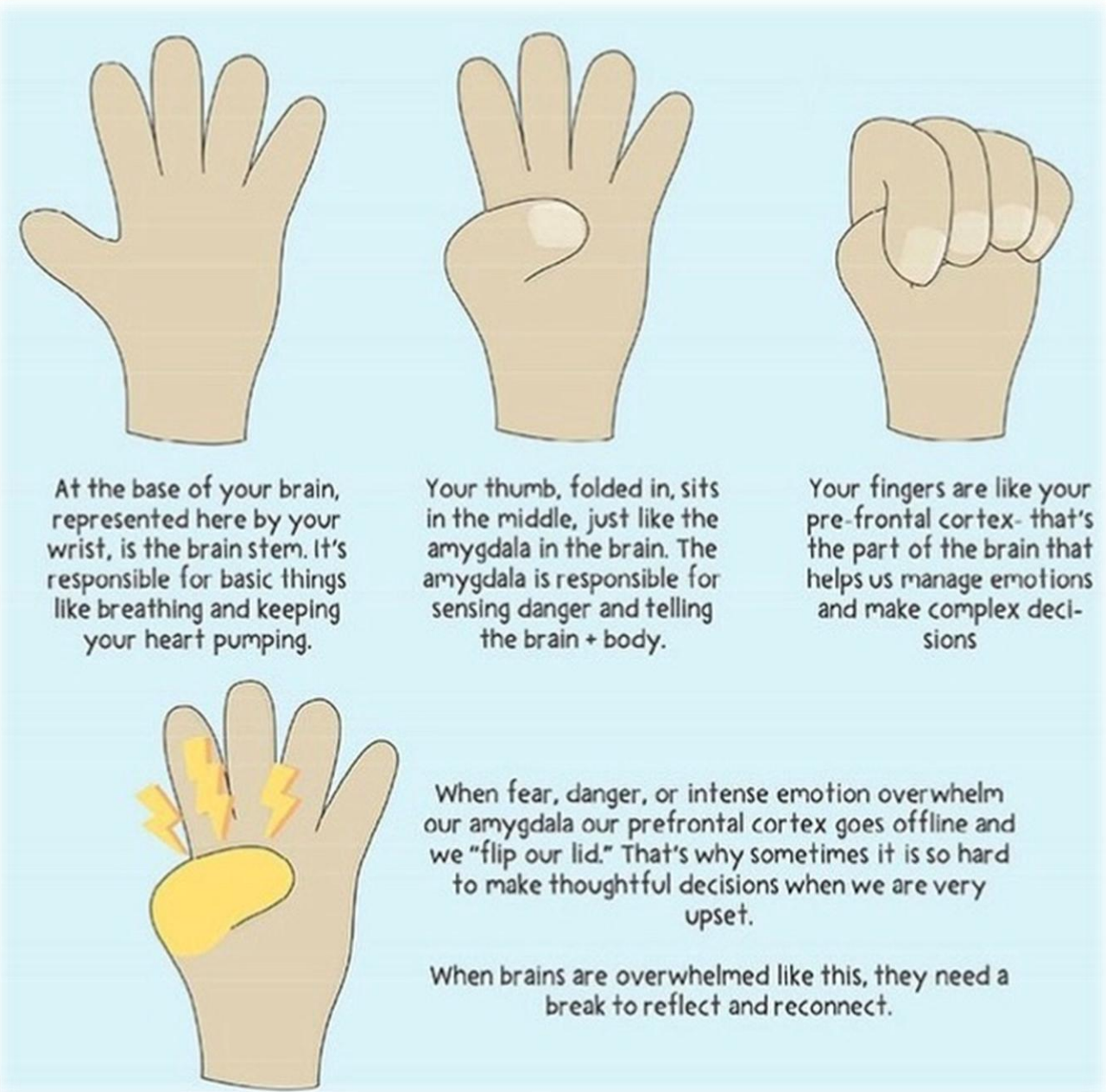
How does anxiety feel in
the body...



Psycho-education – ‘hand model’ of the brain

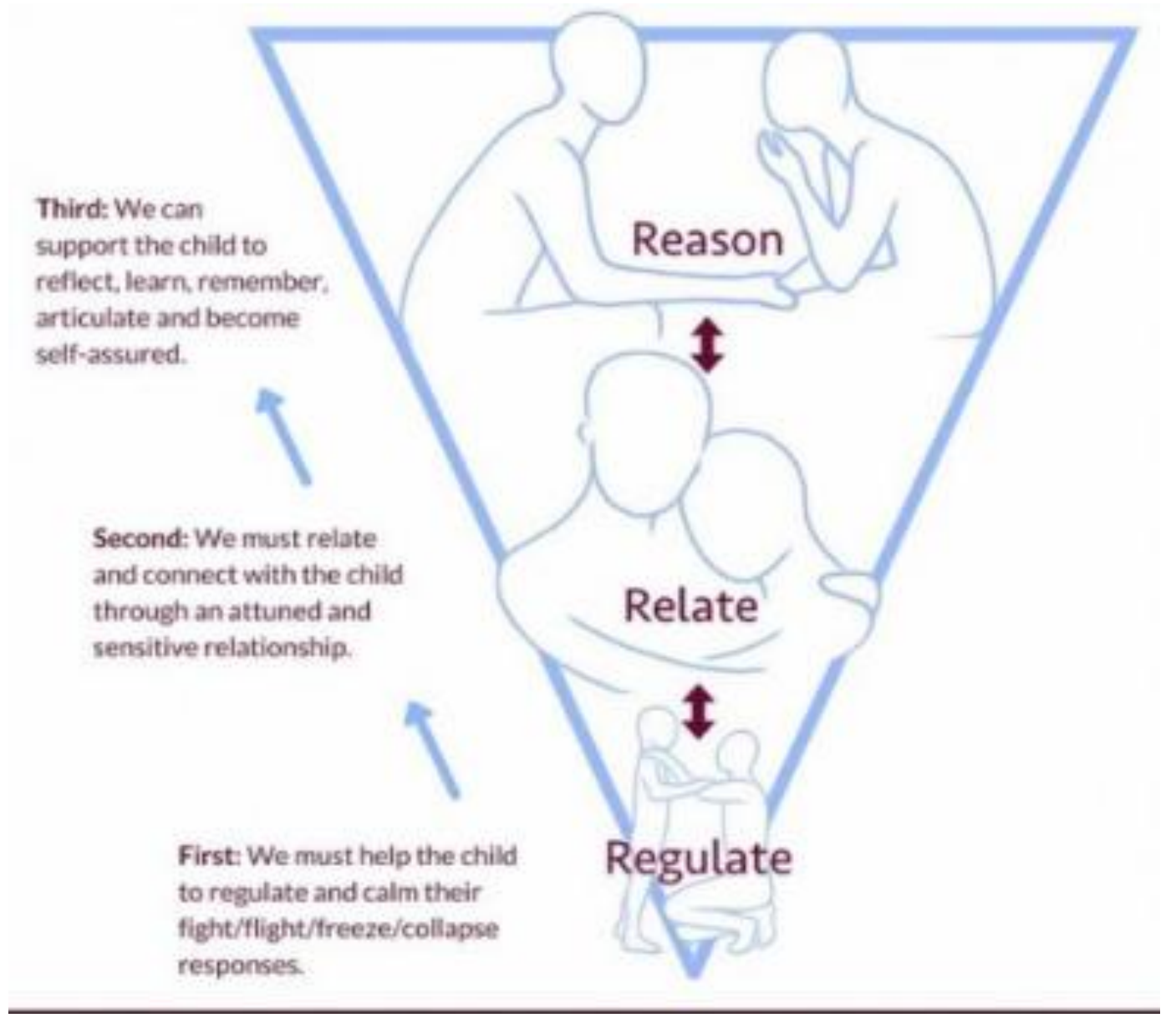
- ▶ An easy-to-remember analogy
- ▶ For us and our children

(Dan Siegel)



Reason– Relate– Regulate

(A helpful tip from
Dr Bruce Perry)



Heading straight for the 'reasoning' part of the brain with an expectation of learning, will not work so well if the child is dysregulated and disconnected from others.

Supporting – staying calm

- ▶ Children look to their parents for information about how to interpret ambiguous situations
- ▶ Try to be more swan!
- ▶ What will help you appear calm and confident they can do 'it'?



Support vs dependence?



- ▶ Natural, caring impulse to help
- ▶ Repeated 'doing for' = over-reliance, perceived incompetence & learned helplessness
- ▶ Confidence in competence
- ▶ Problem-solving, not problem removing
- ▶ Remain a trusted support in your child's life while creating an environment of greater self-trust for them
- ▶ Goal? Not reducing pain, but helping suffer less?
- ▶ **How and where can you encourage independence?**

Top tips

- ▶ Try to resist giving reassurance straight away
 - Giving reassurance feeds the vicious cycle – not helpful long-term
- ▶ Listen, normalise and understand your child's concerns
- ▶ Support your child to recognize what's going on and think how they can stop avoidance
- ▶ Provide certainty where possible– who can they talk to, how they can communicate to you they are not okay

Separation anxiety

- ▶ Talk about what you'll do later
- ▶ Transitional object – reminder of you to carry around
- ▶ Make saying goodbye positive and warm, that they will be held in mind by you throughout school day
- ▶ Ask yourself about your own anxiety
- ▶ Are you helping to avoid?
- ▶ Keep anxieties manageable in general for you and your child
- ▶ Good sleep, food, exercise
- ▶ Have fun together
- ▶ Keep your promises – consistency is key!
 - E.g. come back when you say you will
- ▶ Have a goodbye ritual
- ▶ But keep it short! (remember the unhealthy cycle)

Book recommendations

- ▶ **Helping your child with fears and worries: A self help guide for parents** by Cathy Creswell, Lucy Willetts, et al.
 - ▶ **The Whole–Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind** by Dan Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson
 - ▶ **Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain** by Dan Siegel
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