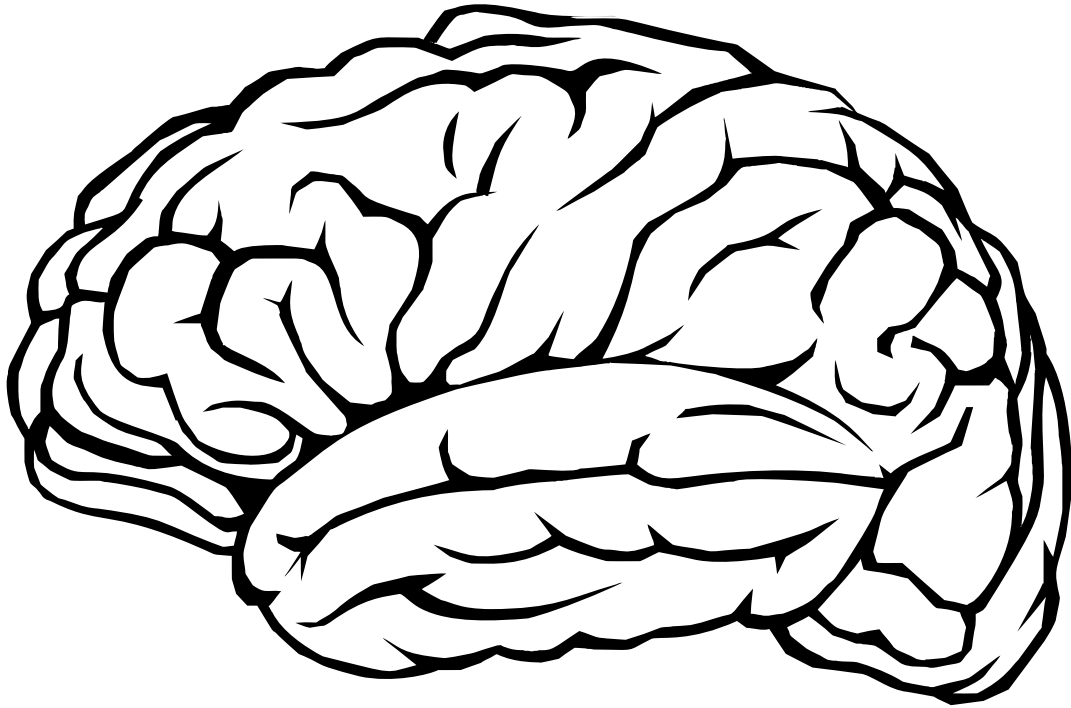


Teaching Teens the Brain

created by Angela Murphy

Complex Trauma Resources



Key Concepts:

- Recognizing How Stress Shows Up
- The 4 F's: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn
- Teaching the Brain
- Ways to Calm the Brain and Body



Brain Lessons



1

Discussion: "Our brain isn't fully developed until our mid-twenties." What does that tell us? (We are still learning!)

2

Visualization. Have students sit comfortably, close their eyes if they feel safe doing so. You can show a visual of a path and forest.

Script: "Imagine: It is a beautiful and sunny day. As part of your planned activities, you decide to take a small hike through a forested area near your home. The air is fresh and you can feel the breeze against your skin as you begin. It's a perfect day- not too hot, not too cool- just right. For some time, you work your way through the winding forest path. You notice both young and aging trees, you listen to the birds hidden in the brush, you catch the scurrying of a squirrel out of the corner of your eye, an eagle flies above, and you examine the ground cover that pass by. It is a good day.

As you press on, you feel something brush against your skin. More particularly, you feel the light touch of a web dance against your face. Instinctively, your hand rises and wipes it away. But out of the corner of your eye you catch something: Movement. It is a shape of something on your shoulder. You turn your head to look and you see it: a large brown spider." (you could show a visual of a spider).

Brain Lessons

Share/Discuss: "Depending on our relationship or experiences with spiders, it will determine how we react in that moment."

"Share how you would feel, what would you be thinking, how would you behave, and would your awareness change?" (there is no wrong answer here) "What if the spider was always there?" If it's not the spider for you, think of if you were face-to-face with a bear or cougar. 😬



Watch video: Kristi and the Weathercam
Ask students to observe what Kristi does when she is stressed. Frontload: Let them know what you will have a brainstorm about it after.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFVF5g0qgps>

Brainstorm: Write down all of the things the students noticed about Kristi's behaviours, thoughts, feelings and awareness (i.e., running, giggling trying to explain, looks like she's going to pee herself, embarrassment, etc.)

Brain Lessons

Further discussion points:

- Did Kristi look like she was in control?
- Did you notice when it looked like she was embarrassed (she is a trained professional, and still she had this automatic reaction).
- Have you ever been so stressed that you reacted automatically? (NORMALIZE THIS - even as adults this happens. Your brain is still learning!)



Video: Fight, Flight, Freeze

- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEHwBIPG_-Q

FAWN: this F was not discussed in the video. Teach students what this 4th F is: FAWN. Spell it out. The body's response to please someone to avoid conflict (people pleasing) (I need to do this to be loved), and having a hard time saying NO.

If you'd like students to take notes or illustrate these concepts, you can share the page on FFFF.

Use this page to take notes
while watching the FFF video:

Fight

Flight

Freeze

Fawn



Write down examples for each F:

Fight

Flight

Freeze

Fawn



Brain Lessons



Activity: ABC's of Stress

Materials: paper, something to write with (I like using big sticky notes)

Instructions: Form small groups. When teacher says GO, write down the letters from A-Z. As a group fill in the signs you see when stress shows up. For example, A = anxiety, active, anger. Give some examples first.

Time: 10 minutes

Share: Say a letter and have students share what they came up with. Choose 4-5 different letters.

Follow Up: "This activity shows us that stress can show up in many different ways and that it can look different for some of us."

Brain Lessons



Teaching the Upstairs and Downstairs Brain

Here is a video to help YOU (not to be shared with your students) with these concepts:

- <https://vimeo.com/109042767>

Teach: "Our brains are amazing!". Have students hold up their hand and teach them this model. See script to help with some of the language.

Activity: Be creative! Use hands on materials to re-create the brain. For example, use gloves and sharpies to create and label the hand-brain model.



Stress Bucket Video:

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KYC5SsJjx8&t=1s>

Activity: Brainstorm positive and negative stress and ways to cope (see graphic organizers). Choose top 3 positive ways of coping. Write them down or illustrate them.

Teaching the Brain



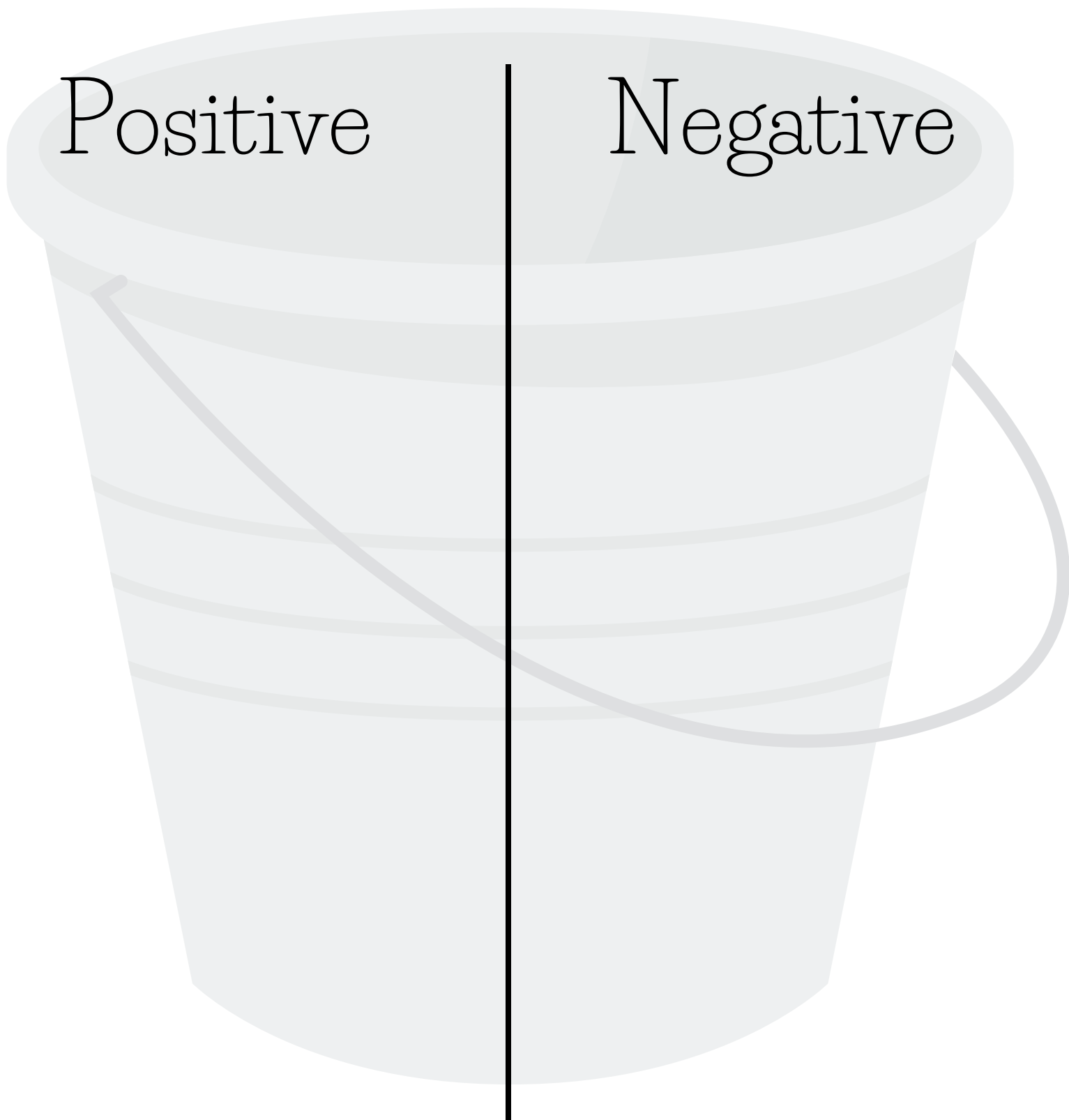
TEACHING CHILDREN ABOUT THEIR UPSTAIRS AND DOWNSTAIRS BRAIN CAN HELP INCREASE MENTAL WELLNESS.



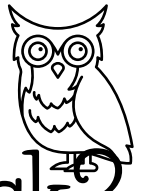
"The downstairs part of your brain is responsible for keeping you safe. Your brain is aware of things around you before you notice them. **The downstairs part of your brain is like a barking dog that warns you of danger.** If when you were younger your barking dog barked a lot because of stress, it can sometimes think there is danger now and warns you of it, even though there is no real danger. This is why we might sometimes fight, control or run-away. **This is our brain's way of protecting ourselves and keeping us safe.**

Now we also have an upstairs part of the brain. **The upstairs part of the brain is responsible for things such as thinking, planning ahead, remembering school work.** **The upstairs part of your brain is like a wise owl.** It can also teach your downstairs brain that you are safe, when the barking dog goes off and there is no real danger. You haven't had as much practice using your wise-owl (your brain is still growing!) so that's my job as the adult, to help you. When you are feeling safe, your wise owl shows up more and more. Sometimes it can take time to get that wise owl back, and the more we practice strategies like breathing, moving our bodies, going for a drink of water, the more that wise owl shows up. **This can be hard work but you have adults that can help you with this.**

Brainstorm Positive Stress and Negative Stress:



Brainstorm Positive and
Negative Ways to Cope:
How do we get that wise owl back?

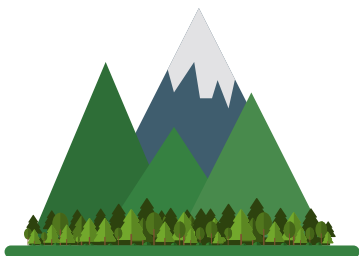


Positive

Negative



Write down the top 3-5 ways YOU deal with stress:



BREATHE





Growing My Fuse

Created by Angela Murphy, Complex Trauma Coach & School Psychologist

Many children who have experienced complex trauma struggle with a short fuse; it's like they go from 0-60 in a matter of seconds. When children reach the end of their fuse, we often see externalizing (verbal or physical aggression) or internalizing (withdrawal, anxiety) behaviours.

The good news is that there are many ways to grow a fuse!

This activity provides a starting point to talk about stress tolerance and coping with stressful experiences, and strategies to "grow my fuse". It is important that this activity be done relationally (with a caregiver).

- 1 Watch the Wile E. Coyote videos and talk about the difference between the short fuse and the long fuse. Ask the child: *What do you notice when the fuse is short? What do you notice when the fuse is long?*

- Short fuse example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pXl1PDTp5gk>
- Long fuse example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g5hELThaKME>



Talk about the benefits of having a long fuse.

Image credit: Looney Tunes Wiki

- 2 Create a visual by drawing dynamite stick and a long fuse. Along that fuse, add personalized strategies for growing the fuse (caregiver should make their own drawing at the same time).
Example

- 3 Share your fuse with each other.

- 4 Post this fuse somewhere in the house as a reference (somewhere the child sees regularly). Add to the fuse as positive coping strategies come up.

