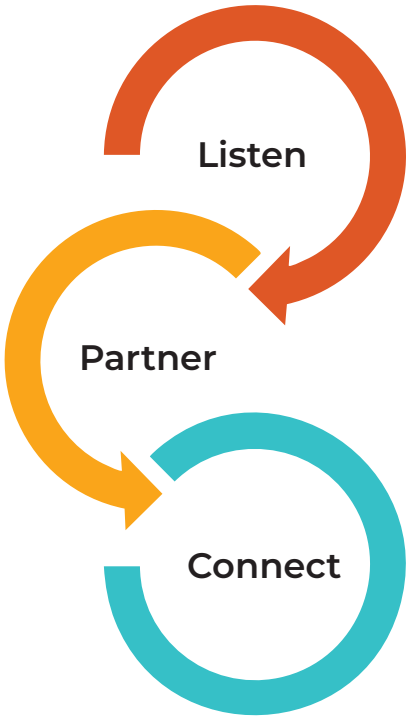
Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients

The way you talk about Stress Busters with clients matters. Engaging clients in applying Stress Busters involves conversation and partnership. Often Stress Busters are framed as "should dos" ("You should eat more vegetables"); however, this approach is often not effective because:

- It can create stress, blame, and shame for clients who, for various reasons, cannot incorporate all (or any) of the Stress Busters into their daily lives.
- The client may have different priorities, hopes, and goals than what you have in mind.
- It doesn't support self-motivation for behavior change.
- It focuses on what is lacking instead of on client strengths.

Listen, Partner, Connect Framework

How can you more consistently use a trauma-informed approach in client interactions? The Listen, Partner, Connect Framework provides a trauma-informed, strengths-based, and collaborative approach to connecting with clients and is intended to be an intuitive way to remember how to structure client interactions.



Listen	Ask open-ended questions about Stress Busters and actively listen to clients.
Partner	Use strengths-based and collaborative approaches with the client, such as motivational interviewing to address what matters most to them and builds on their strengths.
Connect	Refer clients to resources that they want within your organization or in the community, increasing access to resources that can help address clients' needs and calm the stress response.

To most effectively use the Listen, Partner, Connect Framework requires knowing some helpful skills. This chapter of the toolkit provides "how-to" information about some universal skills for trauma-informed approaches that may be helpful when working with clients on any Stress Buster and when providing other care or services.

What does it mean to "take a trauma-informed approach?"

Taking a trauma-informed approach when working with clients includes acknowledging an individual's life experiences. For example, asking "What happened to you?" (not "What is wrong with you?") and actively listening (see the Skills to support using Listen, Partner, Connect section of this chapter) to what clients are sharing.

A trauma-informed approach helps us be nonjudgmental and focus on client strengths to motivate and support. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides the following key principles of a trauma-informed approach, which offer useful guidance on providing care and services.[1]

Six Principles of a TIA

1	Safety	Safety in physical settings and interpersonal interactions
2	Trustworthiness and Transparency	Operations are conducted and decisions are made with transparency, consistency, respect, and fairness so as to build and maintain trust
3	Peer Support	Support from those with lived experiences of trauma or, in case of children with history of trauma, their family members
4	Collaboration and Mutuality	Partnering, leveling of power differences between and among staff and clients
5	Empowerment	Individuals' strengths and experiences are recognized and built upon
6	Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues	Organization moves beyond the cultural stereotypes and biases

Source: SAMHSA, Practical Guide for Implementing a Trauma-Informed Approach, 2023.

Skills to support using Listen, Partner, Connect

The universal skills highlighted in this how-to section are helpful to know to most effectively use the Listen, Partner, Connect Framework and engage clients with Stress Busters (and other care or services) in trauma-informed ways. To help incorporate these skills into client interactions, there are prompts in each Stress Buster chapter for when to use them. Return to review this skills section whenever a refresher or reminder is needed!

- **Techniques to use while talking with clients about stress, trauma, and Stress Busters**
  - Active listening
  - Motivational interviewing
  - Leveling power differentials
- **Ways to help describe the connection between ACEs, trauma, health, and well-being**
  - "Flipping our lid" visual tool
  - Window of tolerance
- **Ways to support someone in the midst of a stress response**
  - Techniques to calm the stress response
  - The Three R's: Regulate, Relate, Reason

Active listening

Listening is different from hearing. Hearing is just the words coming in. Listening requires that we pay attention and try to understand what a person means and how they feel.[2] To practice active listening:[3]

- Give the client your full attention, avoid distractions.
- Listen more than talk.
- Show that you're listening (e.g., nod, smile, turn your body towards the client).
- Let the client finish talking before you respond (don't interrupt).
- Avoid bias, judgment, and providing "solutions."
  - Recognize where you may have implicit bias and work to avoid stereotypes or attitudes that affect your interactions. For more resources, visit www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit/.
  - Resistance to change is common; therefore, rather than arguing with the client or telling them what to do, be patient and use this as an opportunity to understand what they are struggling with.
- Periodically repeat back what you've heard to check your understanding.
  - "What I'm hearing is..."
  - "It sounds like you are saying..."

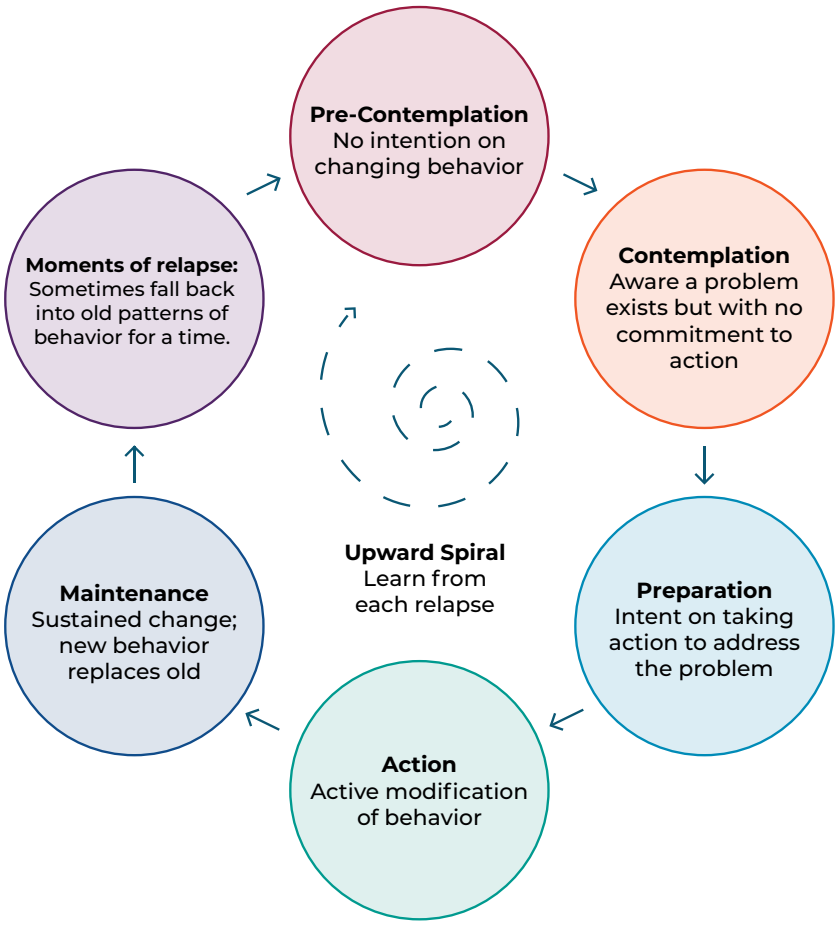
- Ask questions only to clarify or to increase your understanding.
  - "Could you tell me more about…"
  - "I get the sense that you were feeling…"
  - "It sounds like there are two things that are important to you…"

Watch this five-minute video showing how to practice simple and complex reflections with a partner.

Motivational interviewing

Motivational interviewing is a non-judgmental conversational technique used to help someone move forward with making a change.[4] It is often used by clinicians or others providing health services to understand a person's perspective, strengthen their self-motivation, and collaborate on a plan for positive change.[5]

Understanding the stages of change – the steps of awareness, understanding, and motivation that people typically go through – is key. Using this framework lets you know where a client might be in terms of their ability or readiness to change.



Source: Pacheco I. Social Work Tech blog. The Stages of Change (Prochaska & DiClemente), Jan 9, 2012. http://socialworktech.com/2012/01/09/stages-of-change-prochaska-diclemente/?v=f24485ae434a (accessed June 9, 2024).

Using motivational interviewing techniques, you can hold a guided conversation that allows the client to explore their thoughts and feelings, identify goals and hopes that are personally important, and explore how they might achieve them. While you might have goals in mind for the client based on your training and expertise, the client may have different priorities that are shaped by their unique racial, ethnic, and cultural background, gender identity, and circumstances.[6] Use active listening skills while you guide the client in identifying their own motivation for change.[4]

> ### Why motivational interviewing works[7]
>
> The catalyst in motivational interviewing comes from "developing discrepancy." What does that mean? When a person concludes for themselves that their present situation does not match their values or desires, they are more likely to want to make changes.

Core skills of motivational interviewing

The core skills of motivational interviewing[8] can be described using the acronym "OARS":

- **O**pen questioning: Asking open-ended questions (rather than yes/no questions) to gain understanding, develop trust, and offer a sense of safety (using active listening).
  - "Can you tell me more about that?" "What was that like?"
- **A**ffirmation: Recognizing and stating the client's positive efforts and behaviors; this must be genuine and used sparingly to avoid being received as patronizing.
  - "It sounds like you make sleep a priority – that's great and really important for managing stress."
- **R**eflections: Demonstrate listening by repeating back what you've heard, or demonstrating you understand what the client is telling you.
  - "You like to walk in the park near your work, but sometimes you don't have enough time."
- **S**ummaries: Bring together what you've heard from a client by summarizing and ask if you've missed anything.
  - "I'm hearing that you've tried a lot of different ways to get more physical activity and what works best for you is having someone to walk with so you're going to ask a friend if they would walk with you. Did I miss anything?"

Processes of motivational interviewing

Motivational interviewing[8] consists of four processes: 1) engaging, 2) focusing, 3) evoking, and 4) planning. Following are examples of open-ended questions you can use with clients for each step.

1. **Engaging:** Use active listening and relational skills for compassionate understanding.
   - *"What are your stressors and how are you coping with them?"*
   - *"What else are you dealing with in your life?"*
   - *"What would you like to be different?"*

2. **Focusing:** Elicit concerns and desires and come up with a shared agenda for the encounter.
    - *"What are you concerned about?"*
    - *"What is most important to you?"*
    - *"Which Stress Buster are you most interested in?"*
3. **Evoking:** Increase the client's own motivation for change by cultivating the client's "change talk" (when the client talks about their own reasons for wanting change) using open-ended questions.
    - Using a scale of 0 to 10 to ask about importance and confidence is a key motivational interviewing tool that has been shown to be well-received and effective[8] in evoking a client's "change talk" and in identifying and addressing barriers to behavior change. For example:
        - Importance
            - *"On a scale of 0 to 10, tell me how important [name the desired behavior change] is for you, where 0 is not important at all and 10 is as important as it could get."*
            - Then, no matter what the number, draw out their "change talk" by asking them why they didn't pick a lower number. For example, *"I noticed you picked 4 – can you tell me why not a 2 or 3?"* Reflect back their motivations.
        - Confidence
            - *"On a scale of 0 to 10, tell me how confident you feel about [name the desired behavior change], where 0 is not confident at all and 10 is as confident as you can be."*
            - Again, ask why they didn't pick a lower number, and reflect back.
            - Ask more open-ended questions to identify and address challenges, such as *"What might help you move higher up the scale?"* Then, *"What have you tried in the past? What worked? What didn't?"*

Watch this four-minute video for an example of evoking "change talk" using scaling in motivational interviewing.

4. **Planning:** Collaborate to make a specific, concrete action plan with the client.
    - *"I heard you say you'd like to try [name the change they've identified and how they'll address challenges]. Is that right?"* Have the client clearly set their own intentions and go at their own pace. Make a plan to check back in with the client at a later visit.

Watch this 10-minute video for an example of how to partner with a client using several motivational interviewing skills.

For more information about motivational interviewing, visit www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit.

Example: Using motivational interviewing with the Stress Busters

The following is a general example of using motivational interviewing and active listening skills when working with a client on Stress Busters. (In each Stress Buster chapter, you will also find example prompts and questions specific to each Stress Buster.)

1. **Engaging**

   - Introduce the Stress Busters using the ACEs Aware Overview of the Stress Busters handout (from www.ACEsAware.org/managestress).
   - Check in about how the client/family is doing with each of the Stress Busters:
     - *"Tell me where you're at with each of these Stress Busters?"*
   - Listen for family strengths and validate what they're doing well:
     - *"Wow, it's great that your family dinners feel so positive, and you really connect with one another. Those supportive relationships are important in managing everyone's stress."*
     - *"It sounds like you really pay attention to your family's nutrition. That's great!"*

2. **Focusing**

   - Elicit the client's desires and interest and pick a Stress Buster:
     - *"Which of these Stress Busters would you like to learn more about?"*
     - *"Let's pick one of these Stress Busters to focus on."*
     - *"Which one would you like to double down on?"*
     - *"It sounds like you're ready to figure out how to get more physical activity into your routine. Let's talk more about that."*

3. **Evoking**

   - Ask the client to scale the importance of adding more physical activity:
     - *"On a scale of 0 to 10, tell me how important physical activity is for you, where 0 is not important at all, and 10 is as important as it could get."*
       - No matter what the number, draw out their "change talk" by asking them why they didn't pick a lower number. *"I noticed you picked 4 – can you tell me why not a 2 or 3?"*
       - Reflect back their motivations. *"I'm hearing you say that you know you would feel better if you walked more. You've done it before and remember how good that felt, and you slept better."*

- Ask the client to scale their confidence around walking more:
  - *"On a scale of 0 to 10, tell me how confident you feel about adding more physical activity to your routine, where 0 is not confident at all and 10 is as confident as you can be."*
    - Ask why they didn't pick a lower number. *"I noticed you picked a 2 – can you tell me why not a 0 or a 1?"*
    - Reflect back. *"I heard you say you have had times when you walked regularly, especially when you had a walking buddy. But you said you lost your walking partner. I'm sorry to hear that. Is there anyone else you could walk with? What has gotten you out there in the past when you don't have a walking buddy?"*

4. **Planning**

- Have the client clearly express their own intentions and goals:
  - *"It sounds like you'd like to add a half hour of walking a few times a week. And you were going to ask a colleague if they'd like to walk at lunch during the week. And if you don't have a walking buddy you're going to keep a pair of tennis shoes at work to make it easy to head out on your own. Is that right?"*
- Make a plan to check back in with the client at a later visit:
  - *"Could we set a time to check back in to see how you're doing?"*

Leveling power differentials

Because clients may see you and other staff at your organization as authority figures, they may feel like they should do what *you* want, rather than what *they* want.[9–11] "Leveling" or eliminating this power imbalance (whether it is actual or perceived) can help clients feel comfortable to speak openly without fear of being criticized. Some ways of interacting with clients to level power differentials that were suggested by community partners include:

- inviting a client to make themselves comfortable and offering something to drink or eat if appropriate.
- sitting at eye level with clients rather than standing above them when talking.
- dressing in a way that is relatable to clients, while maintaining professionalism.
- reminding clients that your role is to be of service to them and that you will work with them as a supportive partner.
- reminding clients about confidentiality, stressing that what you discuss stays in the room, with exceptions of having to share information under limited circumstances.
- offering opportunities for the client to share their thoughts and ideas; listening and not interrupting.
- using language that clients can easily understand.
- in classes or groups, setting ground rules such as being a "judgment-free zone".
- in classes or groups, encouraging participants to speak up if they have knowledge or expertise that would help others.

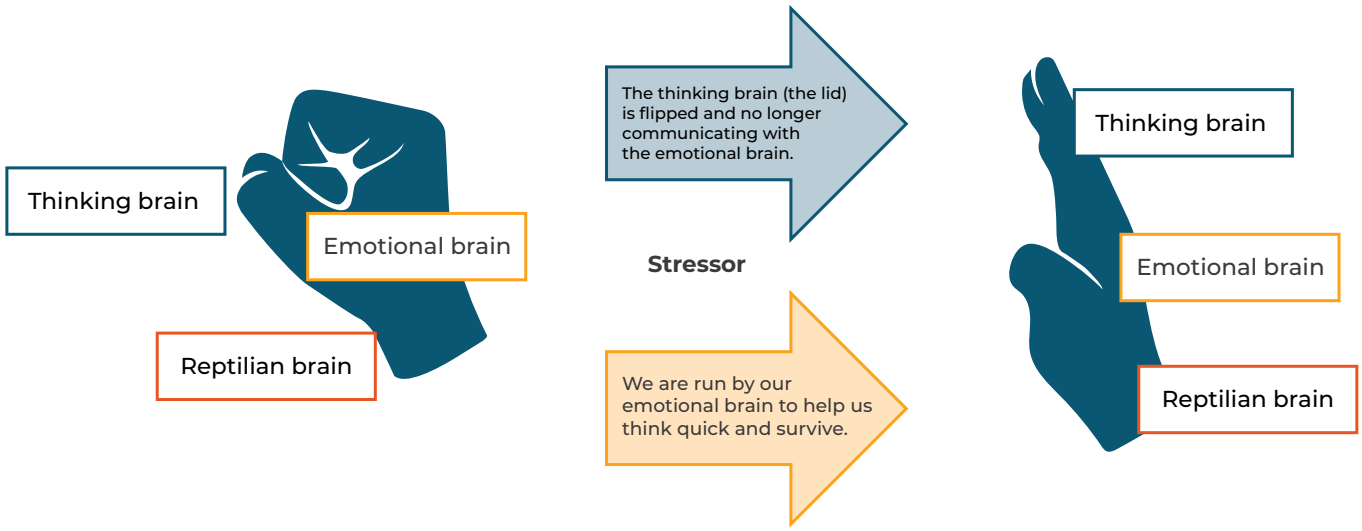
"Flipping our lid": A visual tool to explain the stress response

Helping clients manage their reactions to stress can start with explaining what's happening in the brain during a stressful experience.

First, you can explain the brain as having three different parts – the brainstem, limbic system, and cortex (see *The science of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress* chapter of this toolkit). Then, to explain how our thinking brain can go offline when we feel threatened, try using Dr. Dan Siegel's hand-brain model and the concept of "flipping our lid."[12]

We can use our hand to visually represent the brain.

1. Make your hand into a fist
2. The wrist represents the reptilian brain (brainstem) that controls our heart rate and blood pressure
3. The thumb area represents the emotional brain (limbic brain)
4. The fingers represent your thinking brain (cortex)



What happens to the brain when we experience a threat? "We flip our lid."

- We are run by our reptilian and emotional brain.
- Our thinking brain is no longer connected to our emotional brain – it goes offline.
- We can flip our fingers up to show how the thinking part of our brain is no longer connected to our emotional brain (the thumb) – we are "flipping our lid".

To see the hand model of the brain in action, watch this video by Emotion Coaching UK.

Example script: "Let me show you what happens in the brain during the stress response"

"When we get stressed or feel threatened, there are some things happening in our brain. To help you understand it, it is helpful to think of the brain as having three different areas.

"Think of my whole fist as the brain.

"First, the brainstem or the reptilian brain, which is located at the back and bottom of our brain, controls things we do automatically, like breathing. (Point to your wrist.)

"Second, the limbic brain, or the emotional brain, is more in the middle. It is where our emotions get processed and why we can sometimes act instinctually, without thinking. (Point to your thumb, under your fingers.)

"And third, the cortex, or the thinking brain, at the top and front of the brain, is where we do our logical thinking. (Point to your fingers.)

"When something happens to stress you out or you feel like you're in danger, your thinking brain actually disconnects from your emotional brain. (Lift your fingers away from your thumb so they are sticking straight up.)

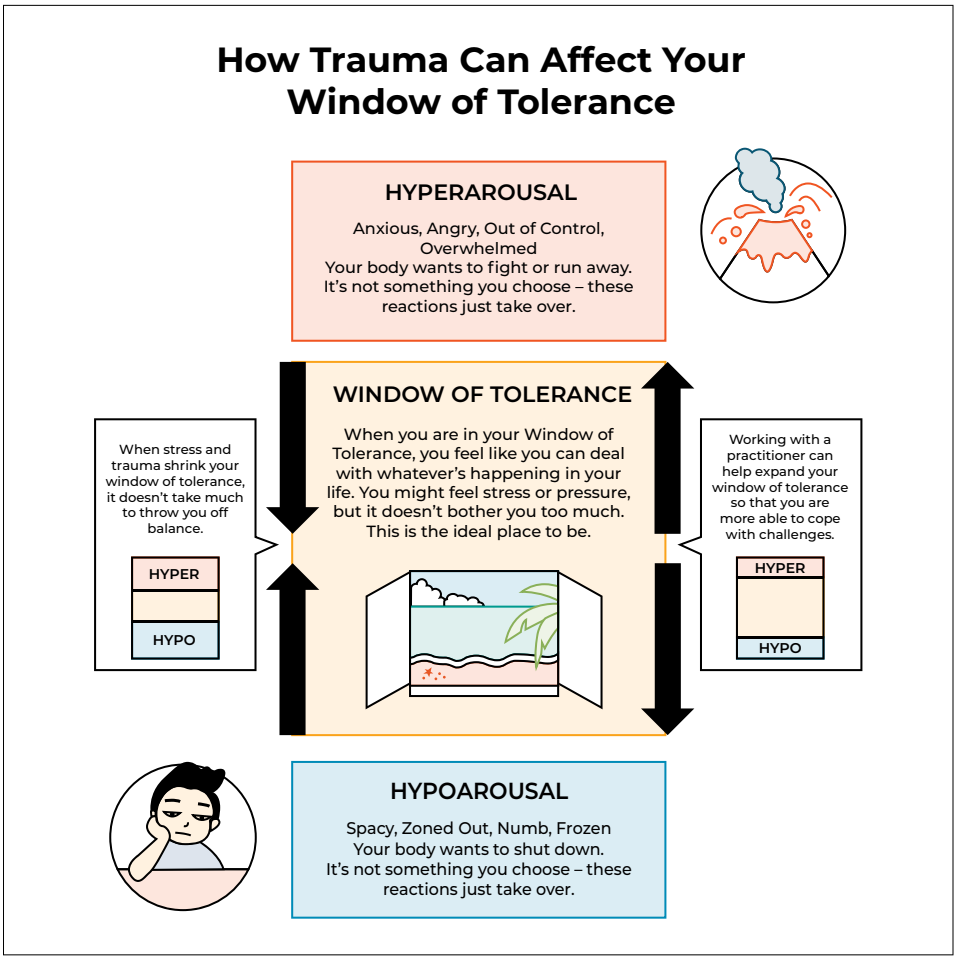
"That's why it is hard to think clearly and logically sometimes. There is a biological change in the brain. To bring the thinking brain back in control, the most important thing is to calm the stress response. And we can use Stress Busters to do that." (Close the fingers over the thumb again.)

Window of Tolerance: Helping clients understand a range of reactions to stress

If everyone's brains function the same way during a stress response (affiliate, fight, flight or freeze), why do some people get upset more easily or in more extreme ways than others? One way to talk about this with clients is using Dr. Dan Seigel's Window of Tolerance framework.[12]

We all experience some stress throughout the day. Most of the time we can stay regulated, grounded, and flexible in our "window of tolerance." We can tolerate and deal with the challenges that come our way. However, feeling stress or a threat can "knock us out the window" and we can react in different ways:

- **Hyperarousal:** Vigilant, impulsive, ready to fight or flee
- **Hypoarousal:** Withdrawn, numb, spacey, frozen



Source: National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine. How to Help Your Clients Understand Their Window of Tolerance Infographic. 2019. https://nicabm-stealthseminar.s3.amazonaws.com/Infographics/window-of-tolerance/NICABM-InfoG-window-of-tolerance.jpg (accessed July 16, 2024).

For those of us who have experienced ACEs or trauma, we may have a narrower window of tolerance. Our system may have adapted over time to protect us and to be on constant readiness for a threatening environment. This means we could more quickly go into a hyper- or hypo-aroused state.

When we notice that we are feeling triggered, nervous, anxious, or down, we can use Stress Busters in the moment to help us calm and regulate our stress response. Over time, using Stress Busters can also help widen our window of tolerance.

Techniques to calm the stress response

If either you or the client are outside of your "window of tolerance" (see previous section) or are feeling anxious, stressed, or rushed, the interaction won't be as successful. The thinking brain, or cortex, might be shut down, and the limbic system, or the emotional part of the brain, might be most active. If you notice this, take a moment to pause and use one of the following techniques to calm the stress response. You also can suggest these to clients.

Depending on the time you have and what's available to you, you might consider:

- **Grounding techniques:** When feeling overwhelmed, you can take a few moments to feel your feet on the ground, your back against the chair, your hands pushing against a wall. You can also use all five senses to notice things you can see, things you can hear, things you can touch, things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.
- **Breathing techniques:**[13,14] For example, pause and take a few slow, deep, belly breaths. Or try three rounds of "4-7-8" breathing: breathe in for a count of 4, hold for a count of 7, and breathe out for a count of 8.
- **Body scan:**[15] This can be done in a sitting or lying down position. Begin by taking a few big deep breaths and let your eyes close or focus loosely on the ground. Then, focus on your body, usually starting at the feet and working up to the head. This can be done with children too! For more information visit: www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit.
- **Sensory support:**[16] Consider ways to nourish your senses. Drink a glass of water, hug or cuddle with a loved one, share a hand massage, use scented oils/lotions, listen to music, draw, paint, or use a mindfulness coloring book.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation:**[17] Slowly tense and then release the muscles, usually starting at the top or the bottom of the body. For example, clench then release the feet and then work up to the calves, thighs, buttocks, abdominal muscles, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, and face. Examples for children can be found at: www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit.
- **"Loving kindness" meditation:**[18] This can be done in a sitting or lying down position. Begin by taking a few deep breaths and let your eyes close or focus loosely on the ground. Imagine a friend or someone who you truly believe has your best interests at heart. See them smiling in front of you, wishing for you to feel happy and fulfilled. Feel that positive energy and intention of goodness. Notice how that makes you feel. Feeling the warmth from those good wishes, try to relax into them for a few minutes, as you take a few deep breaths. Audio guidance can be found at: www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit.
- **Exercise:**[19] Getting the body moving can help to regulate the stress response. Try taking a brisk walk, walking some stairs, or just shaking your body for a couple minutes.
- **Connect:**[19] Reach out to your support person. Talk to a friend or colleague, or anyone else who can offer you support.

Nuances of supportive touch

When we're listening with compassion to someone who is having a hard time or who is sharing a difficult memory, it can feel natural to want to offer them a hug or reassure them with a hand on their arm or shoulder. We know that touch, in the right circumstances, can calm the body – lowering blood pressure and regulating our heartbeat.[20–22] But sometimes a person can experience touch as threatening, particularly if they have histories of abuse or trauma.[22] Whether you are working with adults or children, asking permission before touching is important.

For children, offer choices. Make sure you offer a choice that doesn't involve touching and one that doesn't involve participation at all. For example, you could ask them, "Would you like a hug, high five, bow, or pass?" Some kids may be in need of a nurturing hug. For others, a high five offers the level of touch they are comfortable with. Bowing slightly to one another shows we care about each other but doesn't require touching. And by offering a "pass," they are empowered to not participate at all if they don't want to. Watch this fun video showing how a teacher offers choices to her students.

With both children and adults, keep power differentials in mind (see the *Leveling power differentials* section of this chapter). In other words, because clients may see you as an authority figure, they may feel like they should do what *you* want, rather than what *they* want. Social pressure might make it harder for them to decline an offer of touch as well. Encourage them to check in with their own feelings and assure them all choices are fine. Look for any body language that may suggest discomfort, even if they say "yes." You can respond to that with something like "I'm sensing some uneasiness, so let's skip it, but please know that I am wishing you comfort."

Your organization may have protocols that don't allow you to touch clients. In this case, you can also let clients know verbally that you are there with them and wish them comfort.

The Three R's: Regulate, Relate, Reason

Dr. Bruce Perry, a neuroscientist with expertise in trauma, developed what he calls The Three R's: Regulate, Relate, Reason.[23] The Three R's are a helpful frame to remind us that when we see someone in the midst of a stress response we respond by using trauma-informed and calming techniques in order: 1) regulate the lower brain through cues of safety, 2) relate with the emotional brain by actively listening and connecting with the other person, both of which will help the thinking brain come back online and 3) allow us to reason.

Regulate

- Have a calm, soothing tone of voice.
- Get on the same level as the client (rather than towering over them, which can feel threatening).
- Offer to guide the client through grounding, breathing, shaking it off, or progressive muscle relaxation, or offer water, tea, or coffee to help provide sensory support.
- Check in with the client to see when they are feeling more regulated before moving on to the next step.

Relate

- Start with active listening, using a non-judgmental approach to understanding what the client's concerns or experiences are.
- Affirm their experience by relating *with compassion*, such as "I've heard that from a lot of my clients," "That's a really tough and common experience," or "I recognize those feelings in myself."

Reason

- Once the client feels safe and connected and they can think, they will be able to problem solve together.
- This problem-solving conversation may need to wait until later that day or even the next day.
- Consider the underlying issue and make a plan for coping more effectively in the future.

For more detail, watch this 20-minute video with Dr. Bruce Perry explaining "Regulate, Relate, Reason" and how it can help minimize miscommunication and behavioral challenges (especially with dysregulated adults and children).

For more information and training on how to identify what is causing concerning behaviors and how to resolve them collaboratively and proactively, visit www.livesinthebalance.org.

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