



Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and Trauma

A moment to pause and connect



Trauma

An event, series of events or a set circumstances that people experience as **physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening.**

Trauma has long-term effects on people's physical, mental, emotional, social and spiritual well-being.

Types of Trauma



Extreme Acute Events

accident, assault, natural disaster



Chronic Stressful Events

abuse, poverty, historical, medical and systemic (e.g. governmental)



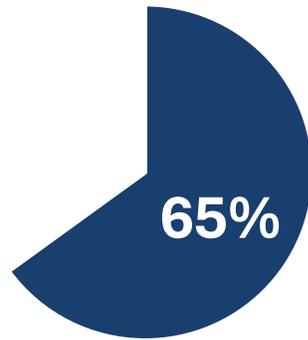
Complex Trauma

An intersection of multiple traumas or complications of the healing processes



Trauma and People with IDD

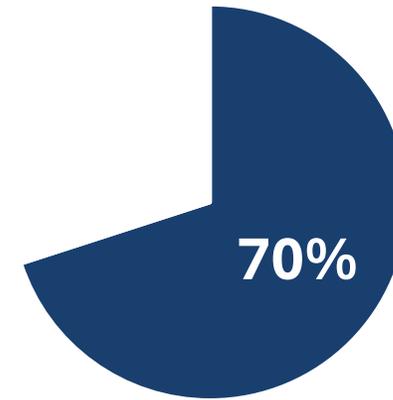
Children with IDD and Mental Health Conditions



At least one traumatic event

Lapshina and Stewart (2021)

People with IDD



One or more traumatic events

Scotti et al. (2012)

Signs of Trauma



Acute

- Overwhelmed.
- Nonverbal.
- Aggression or self-injury.
- Intensifying restrictive repetitive behaviors.
- Skill regression.
- Change in sleep habits.

Chronic

- Fluctuating signs of distress and regulation.
- New restrictive repetitive behaviors.
- Physical expressions of stress.
- Elopement.
- Disruptive behaviors during routines.
- Changes in sleep habits that fluctuate or persist over time.

Complex

- Relational and co-occurring mental health factors.
- Complicated distress responses.
- Variable responses to same stimulus.
- Avoidance of activities despite skill and desire to engage.

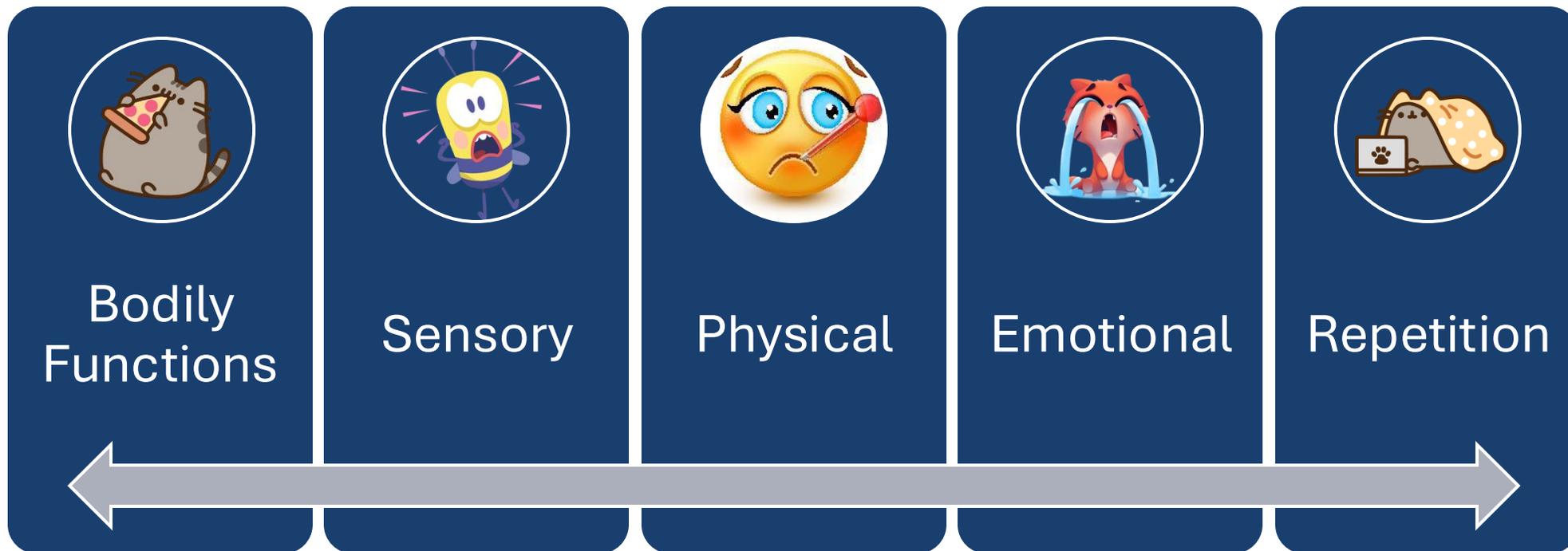
Heightened emotional responses

Can also include signs of Acute trauma

Can also include signs of Acute and Chronic trauma



Expressions of Trauma



Considerations

It can be difficult to distinguish changes due to:

- Psychiatric symptoms.
- Unmet needs.
- Learned behaviors.
- Environmental resistance.
- Medical conditions.
- The environment.
- Trauma and grief.



Impacts of Trauma



- Needs going unmet.
- Vulnerable to re-traumatization.
- Difficulty maintaining healthy relationships.
- Unstable housing.

- Acute hospitalizations.
- Increased medical problems.
- Development of other mental health conditions.
- Trauma not being healed because of lack of treatment.
- What may begin as acute or chronic trauma becomes complex.

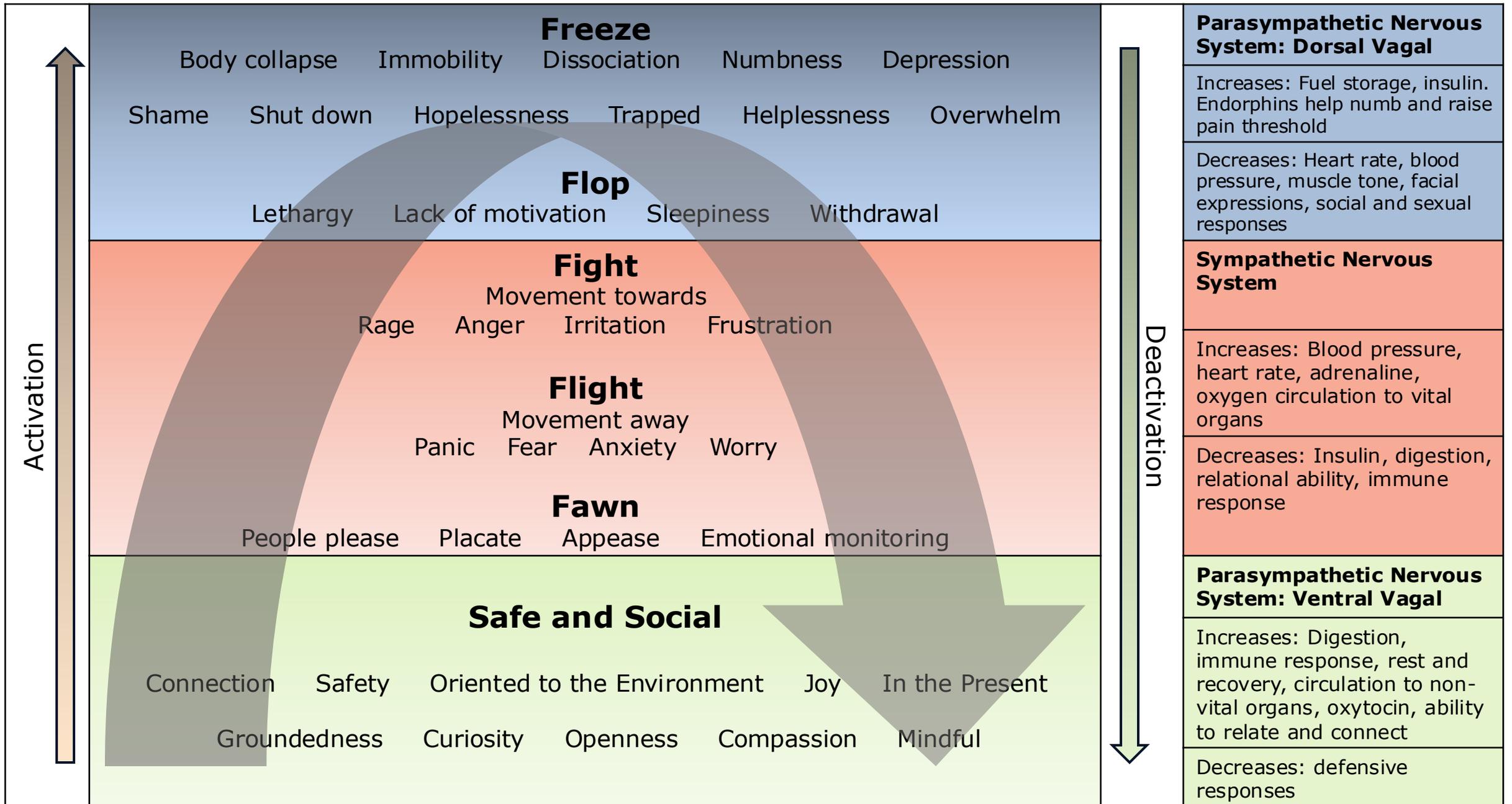


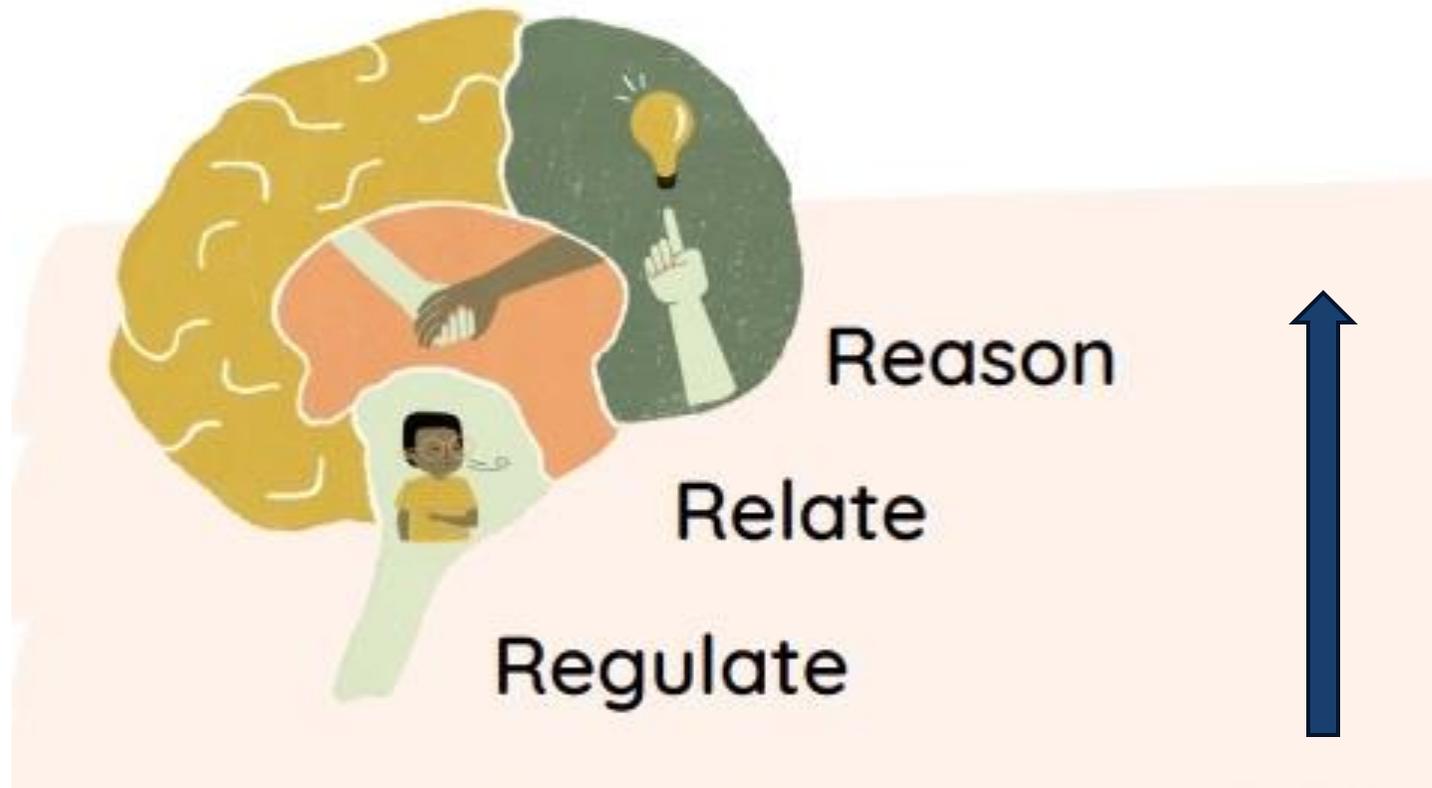
Trauma-informed Care

All humans are wired to assess signs of safety and danger.

When people have experienced trauma or have neurobiological differences, their nervous systems may be sensitive to environmental, relational or internal cues.

Understanding how nervous systems respond to stress helps us provide compassionate care.







Connection

Connection is an essential human need.

Everyone connects in their own ways.

Stay open, be curious, let others lead.



Principles of Trauma-informed Care



Trauma-informed Practices



Safety and
Connection before
direction or correction



Regulation through
rhythm and the
senses



Co-regulation



Access to interests



Allow space as
needed



Work together on goal
setting and treatment
decisions



Communication
preferences

Processing Trauma

Prioritize

- Safety, Regulation, Connection, Pacing

Use

- Unpredictable routines, Repetition, Visual Supports

Integrate

- Sensory-based tools like art, sand, music, movement, deep pressure
- Play and stories

Modify

- Trauma-focused models
- CPP, EMDR, TF-CBT, IFS

Teach

- Caregivers co-regulation and reflective language skills

Child-Centered Play

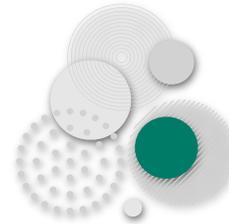
- Follow their lead; attune, don't direct.
- Trust play as the natural language of healing.
- Use repetition and symbolic play to uncover themes.
- Offer empathy and containment.
- Value nontraditional play (spinning, lining up objects) as communication.
- Model calm responses and naming feelings. Encourage parallel play at home to strengthen connection.
- Validate caregiver trauma and that healing happens within relationships.



Strategies for your organization



Co-design



Build a team

Train all staff



Ongoing assessment



Staff wellness



Intentional Referral Network



Trauma Resources

- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [Regulate, Relate, Reason | Think:Kids](#)
- [ChildTrauma Academy](#)
- [Rhythm of Regulation](#) Deb Dana Polyvagal Theory
- [Child Parent Psychotherapy](#)

DDCS Resources

- [Washington State Parent to Parent Network – The Arc Washington](#)
- [Developmental Disabilities Administration \(DDA\) | DSHS](#)
- [DDA's Guidebook: Meeting the mental health needs of people with intellectual disabilities](#)
- [NADD Certifications](#)
- [Best Practices for Co-occurring conditions](#)
- [NASDDDS Adaptive Strategies for MH Modalities](#)

References

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- [Agency self-assessment for Trauma-informed Care](#)
- Kramolis, K. and Stobbe, G. (2025) [The Intersection of Intellectual and Developmental Disability \(I/DD\) and Trauma](#)

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