



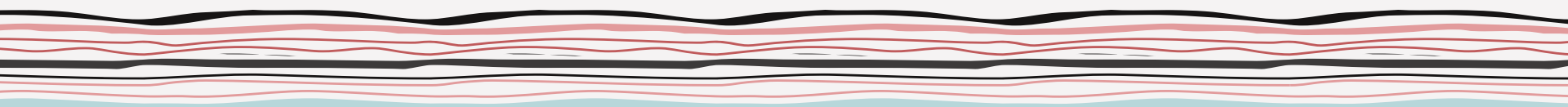
Neurodiversity & Mental Health

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PTHS Student Assistance Counselor





Introduction

- ❖ Student Assistance Counselor at Pequannock Township High School
 - ❖ In education field for over 25 years as a teacher, counselor & administrator
 - ❖ Private practice for 10 years in Bergen/Passaic County
 - ❖ Certified in EMDR and advanced training in trauma & neurodiverse populations
- 

Background

- ❖ My younger brother & I are neurodiverse
- ❖ **My brother** (ADHD) — **Me** (Sensory Processing Sensitivity/HSP)
- ❖ In my practice, almost, if not all of those come in with a primary feelings of depression & anxiety are neurodivergent
- ❖ Approx **15-20%** of population is neurodivergent but make up about **90%** of those in therapy
- ❖ It's a complex framework, so I will focus on the two aspects of neurodiversity and mental health I experience most often but you can apply all other neurodiverse categories.

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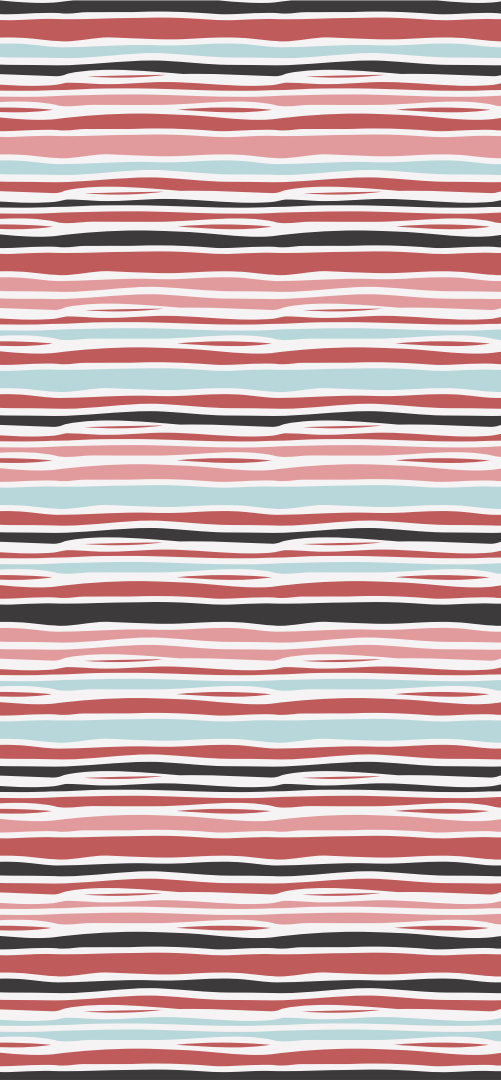
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01

The Goals

What Will You **Learn** Tonight?

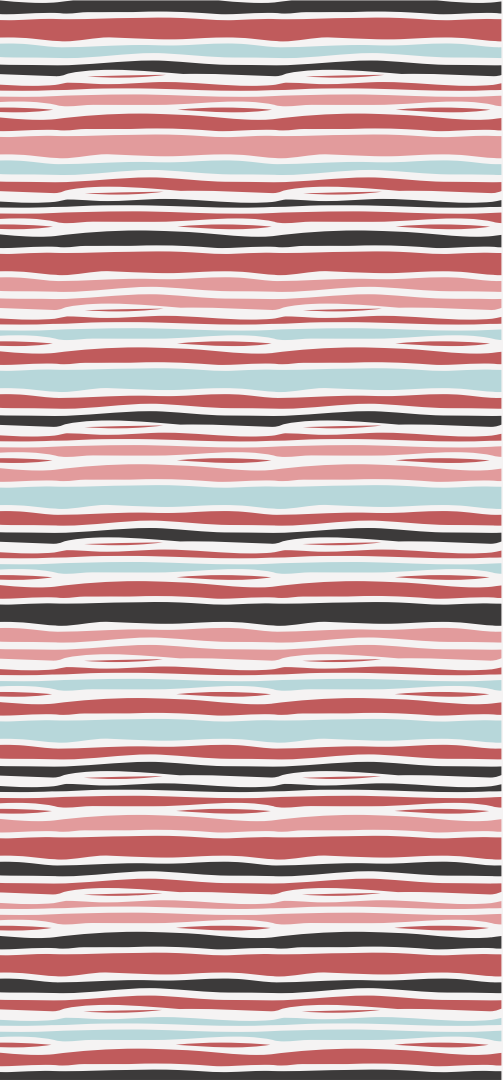
**Understand What Is Meant
by Neurodiversity**

**Understand How
Emotional Regulation
Works**

**Understand Concrete Ways to
Support the Mental Health of
Your Neurodiverse Child**

**Know How Emotional
Regulation Impacts
Mental Health**

**Know How to Apply
this Knowledge to All
Types of
Neurodiversity**



O2

The How

Basis of emotional wellness is **nervous system regulation**

Will Build from There

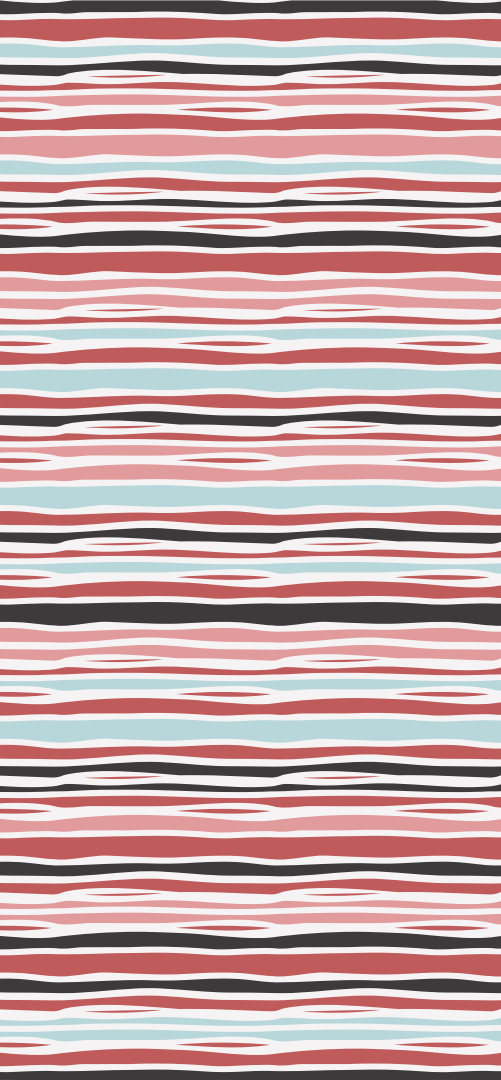
What you can do as a parent to help your child thrive

What this looks like with a neurodiverse child

How it gets linked

Why evolution, paired with neurobiology, puts neurodiverse individuals at higher risk for dysregulation–mental health

Understanding of the neurobiology of emotional regulation

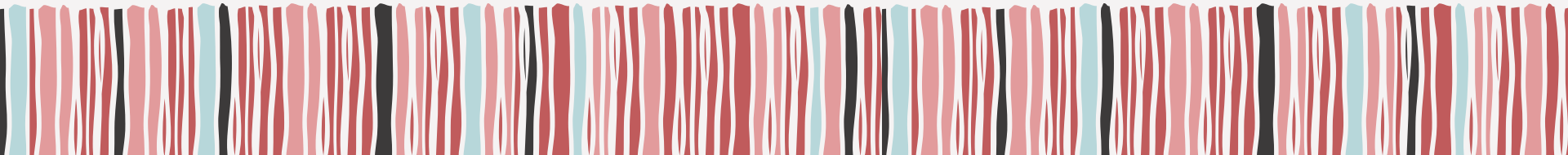


03

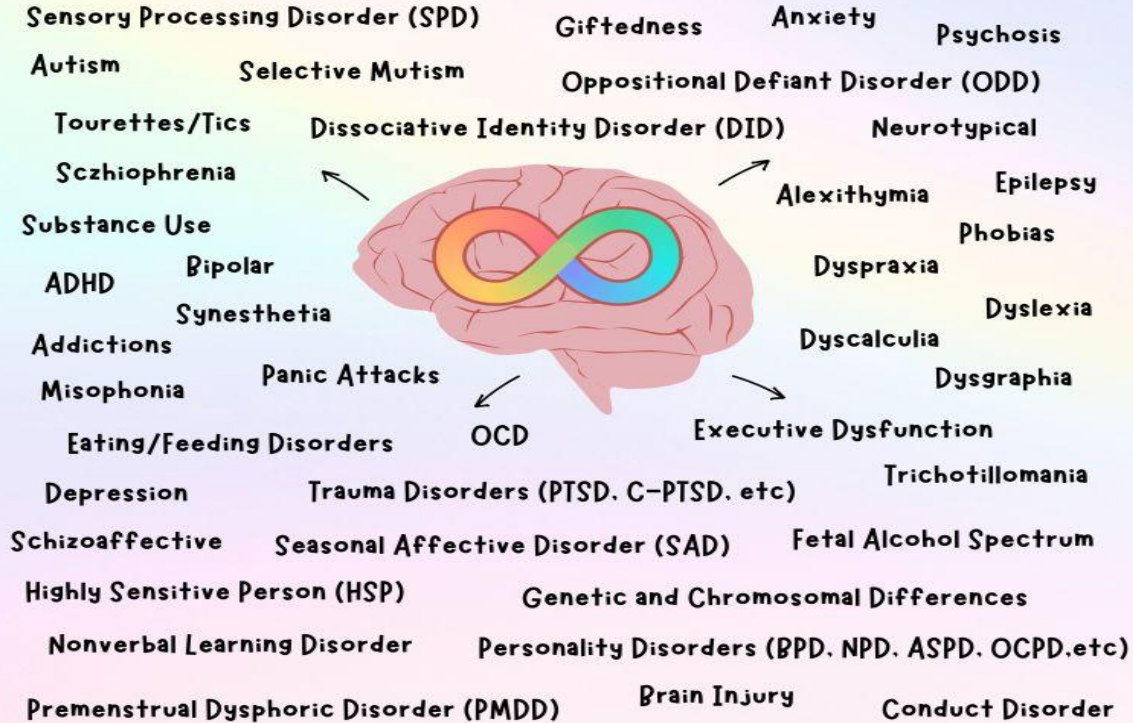
What is Neurodiversity?

What is Neurodiversity?

- Neurodiversity describes the concept that there's no “correct” way for brains to work, embracing differences in how people perceive and respond to the world.
- It describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways.
- There is no one “right” way of thinking, learning and behaving & that **differences** are not **deficients** .
- Refers to the diversity of all people but often used in the context of:

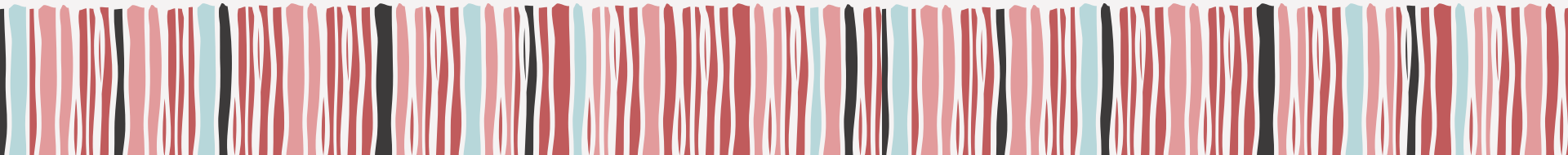


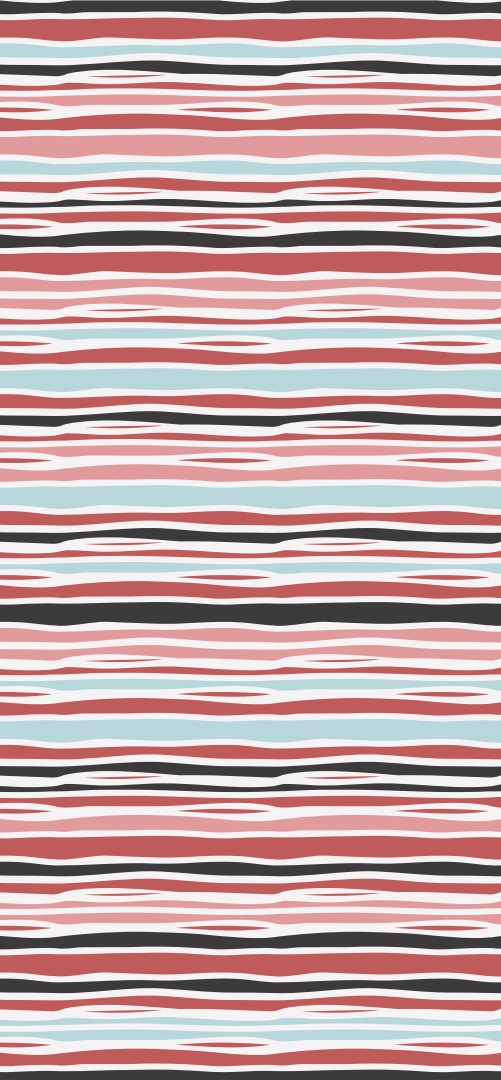
NEURODIVERSITY



Neurodiversity Con't...

- Movement—emerged in 1990's.
- Aimed to create more acceptance & inclusion of **all** people while embracing neurological differences & neurological minorities.
- People whose brains function differently from the societal "norm" are often described as **neurodivergent** . Those who fall within the societal norm are considered **neurotypical**.





O4

Emotional Regulation

EVERYTHING COMES BACK TO

SAFETY



Intense Anger
Overwhelmed
Feeling Threatened
Out of Control
Sleeplessness

Hyperarousal

"Fight or Flight"

Increased Heart Rate
Reactive Outbursts
Digestive Problems
Poor Concentration
Can't Relax
Hypervigilant

Panic
Chaos
Addictions
Highly Anxious
Rage

Start to Feel Irritable

Anxious

Dysregulation

Agitated

Feel Uncomfortable



Window of Tolerance



When we are in the Window of Tolerance life feels comfortable. Our body is in an optimal state, and we can access both reason and emotion. We are calm but not tired. We are aware and alert but not anxious. We engage with our environment well.

Working with a therapist can help you **EXPAND** your Window of Tolerance so that you are less easily 'triggered' and have improved abilities to cope, soothe and self-regulate when challenged.



Grounded
Present
Relaxed
Connected
Social
Regulated

Flexible
Caring
Good Sleep
Able to Soothe
Feel Safe

Creative
Curious
Flexible
Calm

Able to Learn
Creative
Good Digestion
Open

Start Shutting Down

Feel uncomfortable

Dysregulation

Lose Track of Time

Poor Concentration

Depressed
Numb
Poor Digestion
Disconnected

Shut Down
Dissociated
Detached
No Energy

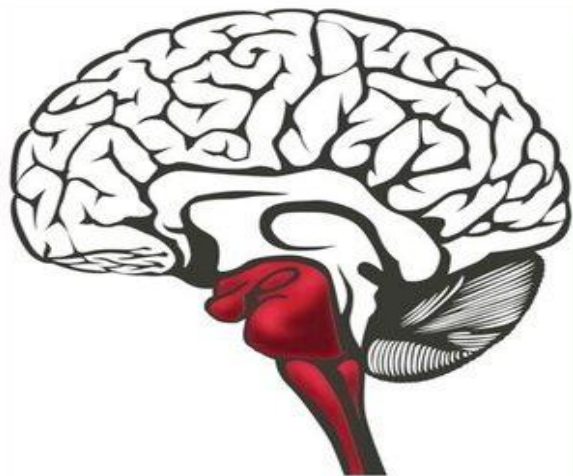
Hypoarousal

"Freeze"

Rigid
Flat
Unavailable



Safety, Connection and Problem-Solving



Survival State

BRAIN STEM

The Survival State represents the primal brain and asks the question, "Am I safe?" The only way to soothe the Survival State is through the creation of *Safety*.

[Learn More →](#)



Emotional State

LIMBIC SYSTEM

This Brain State represents mid-level functionality and asks the question, "Am I loved?" The only way to soothe an upset emotional state is through *Connection*.

[Learn More →](#)

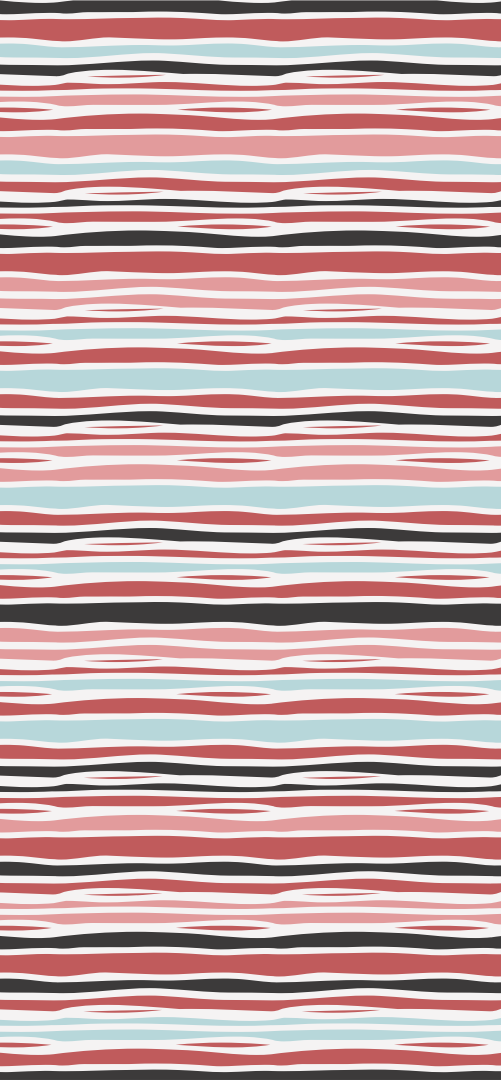


Executive State

PREFRONTAL LOBES

The Executive State represents the optimal state for problem-solving and learning. This Brain State asks the question, "What can I learn from this?"

[Learn More →](#)



O5

Evolution

Everything COMES BACK TO

SAFETY

Plus

CONNECTION
SEEN & HEARD

Why Are They Requirements of Mental Wellness?

- **Evolutionary Survival (Belonging)** : Humans are social creatures who survived by belonging to a tribe. Being overlooked or invisible historically meant being left behind, which equaled death
- **Seen & Heard:** When someone sees and hears you, it signals that you are not in danger. This helps the brain shift from high-cortisol "survival mode" (fight-or-flight) into a calm "healing mode"
- **Validation of Existence:** Being seen confirms that you exist and that your needs matter. A baby cries, and a caregiver responds, confirming, "I matter"

What Happens if These Evolutionary Needs Are Not Met?

Neurodiverse Child Feels Different

(they are in the minority)

You're Lazy

They Don't Know Why

(Don't have cognitive capacity)

**Stop
Overreacting**

*And Often Being Judged (negatively) by Behaviors They
Can't Control*

(for reasons they can't understand)

**You're Not
Trying**

Then...

They Don't Feel Connected to Others
(or self)



Feel Unsafe & Helpless



Develop a Cognitive Belief
(because the brain needs to make sense of world)

I am defective , *something is wrong with me* , *I am not enough*

As a Result...

*Imagine a Child Gets Supplied with Custom Glasses –
Sees the World Through a Lens Shaped by Threat*

(High Zone)

Cortisol

Adrenaline



Endorphins

Dopamine

*Younger It Happens, Stronger & More Integrated into the Psyche
(Then It Feels Like Who They Are)*



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Feeling Threatened
Out of Control
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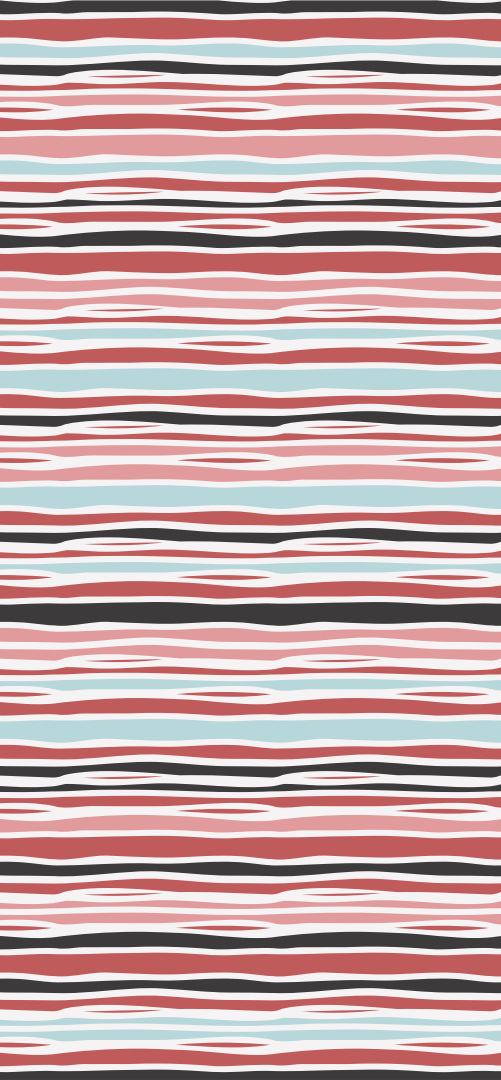
Shut Down
Dissociated
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No Energy

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06

Examples

ADHD

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder.

It affects brain development, structure, and function

The cortex responsible for impulse control peaks 3 years later than it does in a neurotypical brain.

The labels a child collects during those years—*the bad one*, *the dramatic one*, the *one who refuses to try*—arrive long before the brain has the architecture to understand what is happening

By the time the brain catches up, the child has already built an entire identity around the consequences of a delay that they had no ability to control.

70% of people with ADHD struggle with emotional dysregulation

****This may be a symptom of not feelings seen, heard and misunderstood, not a mental health diagnosis that is comorbid with the ADHD****

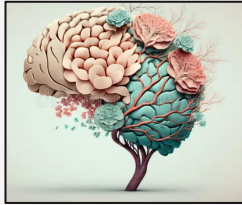
HIGH SENSITIVITY

High sensitivity, known scientifically as **Sensory Processing Sensitivity (SPS)**, is often considered a neurodivergence because it involves a biologically distinct nervous system that processes sensory, emotional, and social data more deeply and intensely than the majority.

It is a natural genetic variation—found in over 100 species—that influences how individuals experience the world, often characterized by **heightened empathy**, **sensory overload**, and **deeper cognitive processing**.

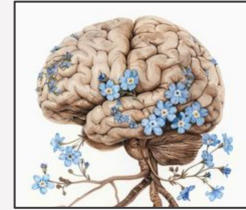
Trait can **coexist** with anxiety, trauma responses and other conditions but it is distinct from all of them.

Types of Responses



HIGH SENSITIVITY

- **Was affected deeply**
“Stop being so sensitive.”
- **Got upset easily**
“You need to get a thick skin.”
- **Need alone time**
“What’s wrong with you that you would rather be alone?”



ADHD

- **Was impulsive**
“Why don’t you think?”
- **Couldn’t sit still in school**
“Can’t you control yourself?”
- **Terrible executive functioning**
“You aren’t trying”

Neurodivergent Adaptation–*Masking*

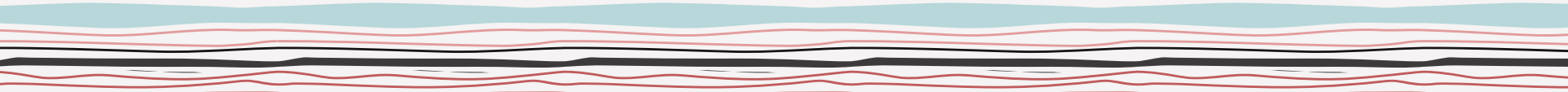
Consciously or unconsciously hiding symptoms
to fit in

High Sensitivity

Pretending things don't bother
them
Using physical symptoms
Acting outgoing

ADHD

Sitting still when brain is racing
Copy how others act socially
Staying quiet instead of blurting things
out
Over-prepare to avoid mistakes





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What is the Cost?

Not being diagnosed (or misdiagnosed)
(ODD, Generalized Anxiety Disorder)

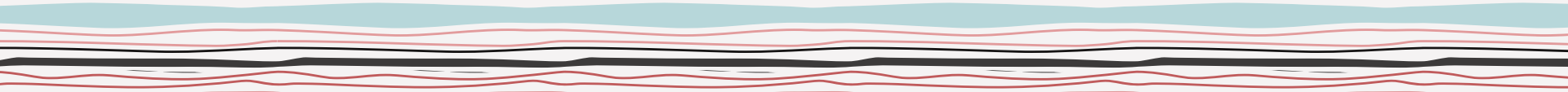
Prevent child from being authentically seen

Mentally & emotionally draining

Task paralysis
Rejection sensitivity
Outbursts
Lethargy
Meltdowns

Chronic People Pleasing
Perfectionism

BEHAVIOR IS COMMUNICATION



Client #1
Highly Sensitive

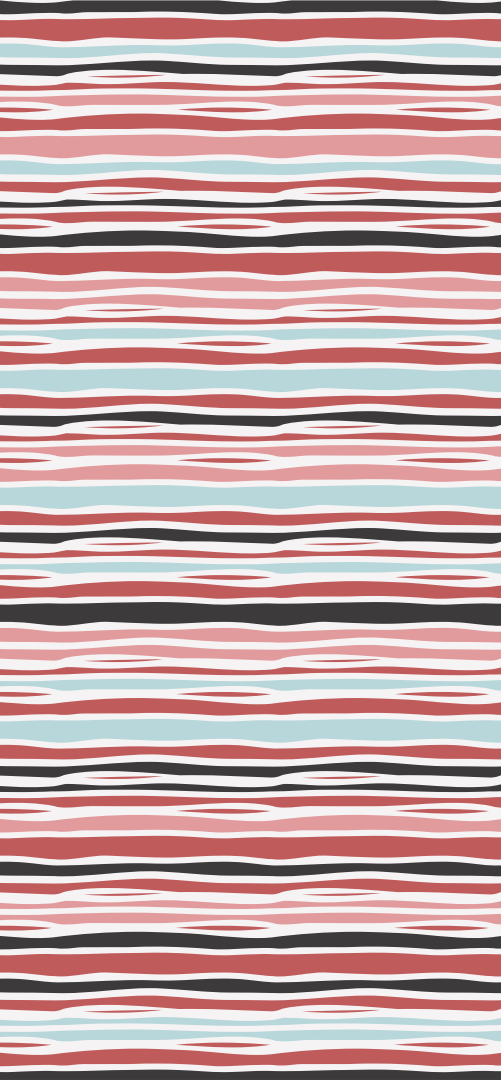
Used sensitivity to always read situations to
feel accepted
People Pleaser
Dx'ed with Anxiety Disorder (something to fix)
Was celebrated for maladaptive way to
regulate

Good One

Client #2
ADHD

Outbursts
Turned to substances (belonging/self med)
Defiant

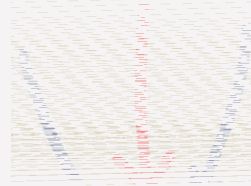
Bad One



O7

What to Do...

Remember
Everything Comes Back to ...



SAFETY
CONNECTION
SEEN & HEARD

Three Basic Strategies

Self Regulation

Attunement

Curiosity

Self Regulation

Notice Own Triggers

Creates Safety & Connection in Own Body
Models for & Can Create Co-Regulation



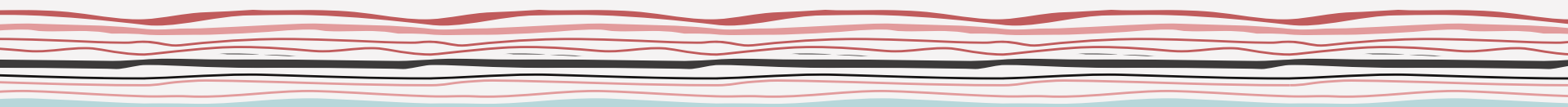
What about your child's behavior triggers you?

How do you regulate?

Do you know your patterns?

Is your own lack of self-regulation contribute to your
child's?

Ask Your Child about Theirs



Attunement

The ability to sense, understand & respond to your child's emotional state

This doesn't mean agreement or solving*

“Attune” to promote regulation in your child

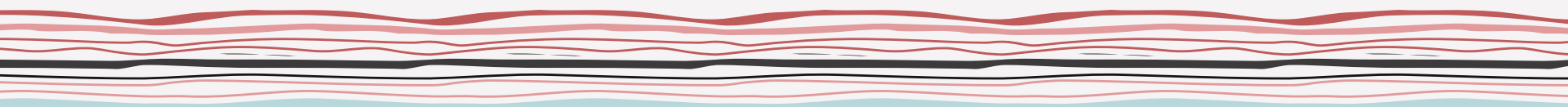


Labeling emotions: “It sounds like you are frustrated.”

Validating Feelings: "It is okay to feel angry/scared/sad"

Mirroring body language: Get on their level, leaning in

Empathizing: "That must have hurt your feelings"



Curiosity

When we feel safe, we are free to explore.
When we feel in a space of threat, our focus narrows and we lose the ability to explore.

Through an evolution lens, this makes sense.

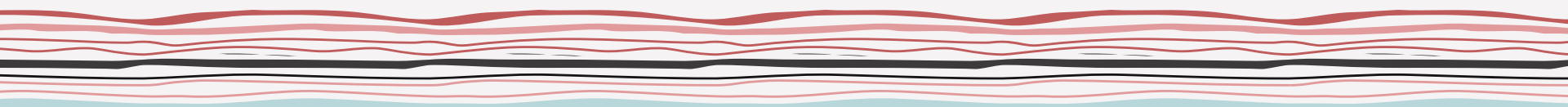
At moments during which our ancestors faced the threats of their day, often predators, it would not have been wise to wonder what is happening.

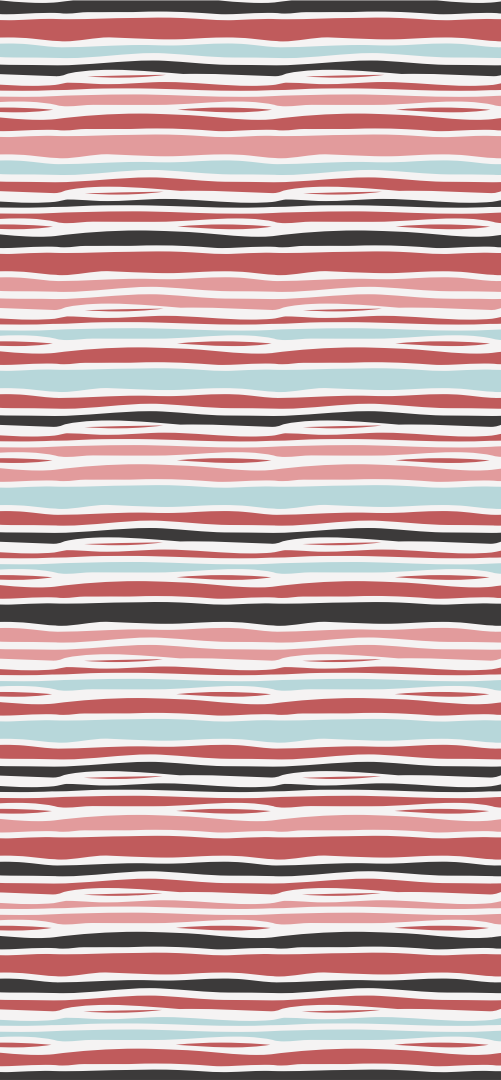
Curiosity tells our nervous system, “***You are safe***”
Modeling for your child to be curious about themselves, helps them embody safety



By saying phrases like: “I wonder why”, “Do you think...”
This expands the Window of Tolerance.

By saying: “Do you want a solution or for me to just listen” gives a child a voice.





07

The Mental Health Connection

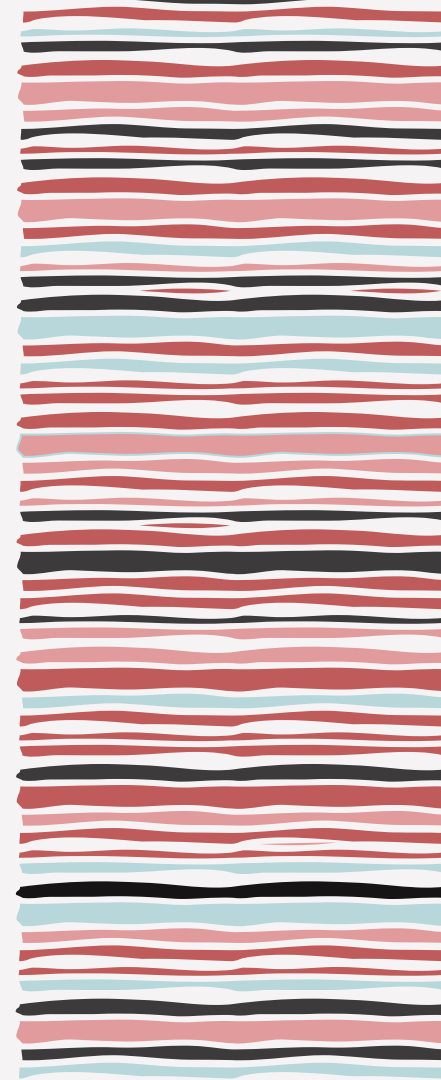
How is This Connected to Mental Health?

Neurodiversity, by nature, makes someone different

Our nervous systems often translates being different as a threat

Due to ways children adapt to be accepted in a neurotypical world, *such as masking*, sometimes the symptoms of masking mimick mental health disorders

By becoming curious about a neurodivent child's experience, it can potentially create safety and lessen mental health symptoms such as anxiety or depression that result from chronic dysregulation.



Take Aways...

Neurodiversity is a difference, not a defect

The goal isn't to "fix" the child but to understand and support how they think, learn, and experience the world.

Mental health and neurodiversity often overlap

Neurodivergent children may be more vulnerable to challenges like anxiety disorders or depression—often due to misunderstanding, sensory overload, or repeated frustration.

Behavior is communication

What looks like "defiance" or "laziness" is often a signal of unmet needs—overstimulation, difficulty with executive functioning, or emotional overwhelm. Shifting from "What's wrong?" to "What's going on?" is powerful.

Strength-based perspective is key

Neurodivergent kids often have unique strengths—creativity, deep focus, pattern recognition, empathy. Helping them build confidence around these strengths improves both mental health and resilience.

Regulation before expectation

Kids can't learn or behave well when overwhelmed. Supporting emotional regulation (calming strategies, sensory tools, breaks) comes before discipline or correction.



Lastly

Connection over Correction

A strong, trusting relationship is more impactful than perfect parenting strategies.
Feeling understood and accepted is foundational to a child's mental health.



Thank You!

Do you have any questions?

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Resources

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