

Trauma Informed Care



Emotional Regulation

Do you remember the last time you were so nervous or anxious you couldn't think straight? Maybe it was the time you were involved in a minor car accident that left you so upset you had a hard time remembering your phone number or the time you had to make a presentation in front of a group of people and the fear of public speaking made it almost impossible for you to communicate. We have all had times when strong emotions took over our ability to use calm rational thought. There is a reason this happens, and it has to do with the fact that our brains have evolved to place the highest priority on keeping us alive. For the human brain, survival trumps reason. The priority of survival is so deeply hard-wired into our brains that anytime we feel threatened (real or imagined) the lower part of the brain goes on "auto-pilot" and takes over. This puts us in a "fight, flight or freeze" response, sending blood flow and energy to those parts of our bodies that are needed to run, attack, or even dissociate to protect us from pain. This is great if the threat we face is real and our survival depends on rapid, unreflective response. But if the threat we feel is either imagined or connected to something frightening that happened so long ago we can't remember it our responses may not work to our advantage. Our brain doesn't filter real or imagined threats – if something is sensed to be a threat the brain's fight or flight system kicks in so rapidly that we respond physically before we can reflect on what is really going on.

What's the Problem?

Generally, most adults are able to manage our emotional responses. As a normal part of growing up we learn to control our impulse to scream at every frustration or to run away when something is a little difficult. That is what it means to be emotionally "regulated". Unfortunately, for many of the children and youth we work with, this is not the case. Those "imagined" fears are based on repeated experiences that happened to them so early in childhood that they are not remembered in the part of the brain that can reason, but are embedded in the part of the brain that was developing when those experiences happened. When threatening or highly stressful events happen repeatedly to a young child (like witnessing domestic violence) their stress response system develops in a way that makes it highly sensitive to even seemingly minor threats. These are the youth who go from 'zero to a hundred' in a millisecond – and with no obvious trigger. It is important to remember that even if we can't detect the trigger and even if the individual can't identify it (which is very often the case) that doesn't mean the trigger wasn't there. The sad truth is that many of our clients are triggered by things neither we nor they will be able to identify, which is one of the reasons that asking them "why" or trying to "talk them down" often doesn't work. The other reason holds true for all humans – when the fight or flight system takes over, reasoning turns off.

This is why it is so important that we learn and remember three important words in this order: Regulate, Relate, Reason. Our brains function in such a way that a person CAN NOT reason when they are highly dysregulated. In fact, some new research using brain scans shows

that when you try to use reason to help a highly dysregulated person calm down, it increases their negative emotional responses. Rule of thumb – until someone is *Regulated* (feeling physically and emotionally settled) they are not likely to be able to *Relate* to you. And until someone can *Relate* to you, they are unlikely to be engaged in conversations that use higher level thinking for problem solving or perspective taking. *Reasoning* has a much higher likelihood of helping our clients if we first make sure they are regulated and related.

What Will Help

Because the fear response system triggers physical responses (increased heart rate, tightened muscles), we can better help a client who is becoming dysregulated using a rhythmic or sensory intervention than lecturing or warning of consequences. Going for a walk, bouncing or tossing a ball, calming music, deep breaths, reduced noise/chaos, rocking chairs and swings are actions that have a calming effect for many people. Learning to observe the calming strategies that work best for our clients will increase our ability to support them *before* things get out of control.

It is also important to know that the ability to self-calm is a skill that can be learned, but requires repeated practice before it becomes developed enough to be available when needed. This is why it is important that we develop helpful sensory activities for all of our clients, but especially for our most severely dysregulated clients. As we continue to build our resources of sensory objects and interventions we are also developing methods to communicate ideas and techniques across the Ranch so that none of us are left without tools that could be helpful.

Moving Forward

Over the next few months we will be emphasizing the concept of *Regulation* and sharing stories and ideas of ways to help our clients. In future quarters we will explore the concept of *Relating* and the best ways to advance our client's *Reasoning* abilities. We will also continue our efforts to better support staff in the difficult challenges you face every day as you must manage the stresses associated with this important, life changing work you do.