

FRIDAY 1ST MAY 2020 SESSION 18 STAYING CONNECTED AND CURIOUS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Knowledge and understanding of attachment and trauma

Hypervigilance

I have noticed that whenever I have to go out, be it my weekly shop or daily walk, I am experiencing extreme hypervigilance (see <https://www.healthline.com/health/hypervigilance#symptoms> for information about hypervigilance). I'm constantly watchful and anxious, nervous when approaching a corner or blind spot, jumping if a car or person or animal suddenly appears. I startle at sudden noises. I quickly become angry or tearful if someone gets too close to me or suddenly appears. Shopping, of course, is the much more difficult of the two outings because there are so many people, and the space is so limited and restrictive. On my shopping day, I usually awake with a sense of dread, and am either irritable or needy towards my husband. I try to keep those feelings in check, but often, I can't; I'm so busy being anxious that I forget about managing my behaviours. I get a headache and feel nauseous before I go. When I get home safely, I'm flooded with relief, but continue to have physical symptoms for at least a couple of hours. I am quite loud, manic and excitable as I unpack my shopping, and repeatedly tell my husband how awful it was and about all the people who 'aren't following the rules'. My language is usually quite colourful and I experience my rage and fear all over again as I describe the experience. I need my husband to listen to me and agree with me about all the 'idiots' I have encountered, and validate my emotions. He usually makes me a cup of tea while I'm ranting, and unpacking and uses a lot of touch, for example, hugs me when I get through the door, pats my arm or shoulder as I process and recount my experience. Gradually, I become calm, but the experience stays with me for the day, and I repeatedly say and think 'Thank goodness that's over with for another week'. On my walks, I am fortunate enough to have plenty of green space nearby so don't have so many 'near misses' to deal with. I feel more in control than I do in the supermarket, and while I am constantly in a highly watchful state while walking, my arousal only peaks when I first leave my house, approach corners, go through park gates or similar, or if something, for example, a parked car is blocking my view.

I have known about hypervigilance in my head for many years. I have worked with professionals to try to help them to understand hypervigilance in children, and I have felt empathy for children and young people who are constantly watchful, hard wired to expect threat and danger.

I am learning for the first time what 'felt' hypervigilance is like experientially. I have written previously about the 'unthought known', to describe for

example, a baby's trust and sense of safety when they are in the presence of a familiar and caring person. Their sense of safety cannot be constructed as a coherent thought, laid down in words, but it is no less known than if they could articulate it. I think my new understanding of hypervigilance could be described as the 'felt known', no longer something that I have to use my imagination in order to understand, but an ongoing experience that I can recall and draw on. I can identify the feelings in myself in order to be more empathic with those children who are predisposed to hypervigilance and distrust, leading them to misread social cues, and over-react to what might be described as minor situations.

I am reflecting a lot on this lately, and my writing may not be as clear as usual, because my ideas are still emerging and developing, but I wanted to share this today, in its raw form, because I think that in this awful crisis, we have the opportunity to experience trauma, with all its uncomfortable and unmanageable emotions, to reflect upon it, and to let it inform our attitudes and practice. Some people will do that, and they will write new, trauma-informed policies that move right away from 'behaviour management' and focus instead on relationships and supporting the development of pro-social behaviours.

Reflection

There are many references to my husband and home in today's reading. They are my safe base, my husband particularly. Imagine this alternative scenario:

I usually awake with a sense of dread. My husband tells me not to be silly, it's perfectly safe as long as I follow social-distancing guidelines.

I am either irritable or needy towards my husband. My husband says that he knows I'm having a hard time today, BUT, it's simply not acceptable behaviour to be rude and attention-seeking.

I get a headache and feel nauseous before I go... continue to have physical symptoms for at least a couple of hours. My husband tells me that I'm just imagining it and don't really feel unwell. I just need to get on with my work and I'll forget about it.

When I get home safely, I'm flooded with relief. My home isn't my safe place. My husband is hypervigilant too, or violent, or an addict, or is caught up in his own world so can't enter mine, is unpredictable, isn't interested in me or my feelings.

My language is usually quite colourful and I experience my rage and fear all over again. My husband tells me that my language is unacceptable. He knows I'm having a hard time BUT we don't use that language in this house.

I need my husband to listen to me and agree with me about all the 'idiots' I have encountered, and validate my emotions. My husband asks me to take the perspective of the 'idiots'.

I am quite loud, manic and excitable as I unpack my shopping. My husband tells me to calm down and use a quiet voice as we are indoors. He says that I have two webinars to write so the unpacking of shopping will have to wait. (The repetitive movements of bending, lifting, opening and closing cupboards, arranging and rearranging items have been calming my brainstem, but I am not allowed to use my body, I have to use my brain.)

He makes me a cup of tea, and uses a lot of touch, for example, hugs me when I get through the door, pats my arm or shoulder as I process and recount my experience. My husband tells me to get on with unpacking the shopping while he goes to chat to our daughter on FaceTime.

The experience stays with me for the day, and I repeatedly say and think 'Thank goodness that's over for another week'. My husband tells me to move on, put it out of my mind, not dwell on it, the politicians are sorting everything out and it looks like a vaccine is close so I shouldn't worry.

On my walks... I feel more in control... and while I am constantly in a highly watchful state while walking, my arousal only peaks when I first leave my home, approach corners, go through park gates or similar, or if something, for example, a parked car is blocking my view. My husband tells me to stop being silly and keep up with him; I don't need to see what's ahead. He says it's rude to jump and shriek or back away when someone suddenly appears.

Questions for reflection

1. How did reading my alternative scenario make you feel?
2. Did it raise any questions or issues for you around 'Behaviour Management'?
3. Has your own experience of hypervigilance given you any insights into unwanted behaviours in children?
4. We've previously (e.g. Easter Supplement 1) looked at Bruce Perry's sequence for regulation in the Regulate, Relate, Reason model (see at the end of this document and attached). Can you map my Three-Rs sequence in my account of shopping, above? Can you see how my husband moves through the sequence with me, supporting me to be able to reason and think coherently about experience today?
5. Do you think the experiences of the pandemic will lead to schools developing more trauma-informed policies and practices? Why or why not?
6. Do you need to consider any changes in your school?
7. **Covid-19 relevance** We will see high levels of hypervigilance in our school communities when we return. What systems can you put in place to

increase perceived safety and reduce perceived threat, particularly, but not exclusively, for the children?

A lot of thinking again today but if you want more, you may want to reflect a bit more on your own experience of hypervigilance. Are you experiencing hypervigilance? Could you write about it in a similar way to my account above? Maybe you would like to draw an image or comic strip instead to describe your own experiences.

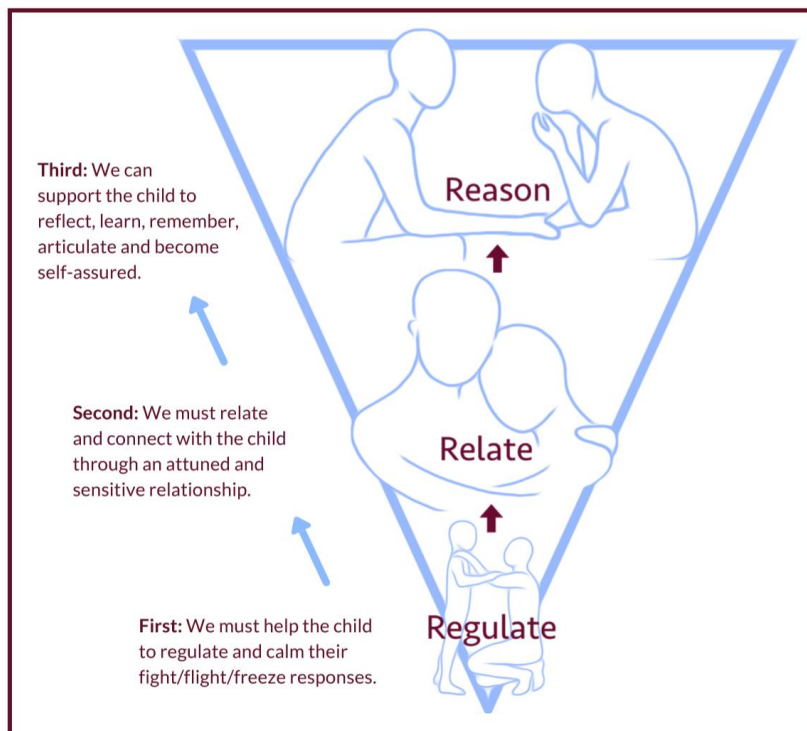
Have a good day, keep safe and healthy and ring or email me to chat if that would help. *Jenny x*

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The Three R's: Reaching The Learning Brain

Dr Bruce Perry, a pioneering neuroscientist in the field of trauma, has shown us that to help a vulnerable child to learn, think and reflect, we need to intervene in a simple sequence.



Heading straight for the 'reasoning' part of the brain with an expectation of learning, will not work so well if the child is dysregulated and disconnected from others.