



Calming an anxious brain

Anxiety and stress



Children currently report more anxiety, maybe because:

- We are more aware of anxiety
- It is OK to talk about feelings like anxiety
- Easily built into stories
- Children have fewer opportunities for natural mindfulness moments
- Connectedness is ubiquitous – no release
- Less optimistic about the future

Adults are programmed to be attuned to children's emotions

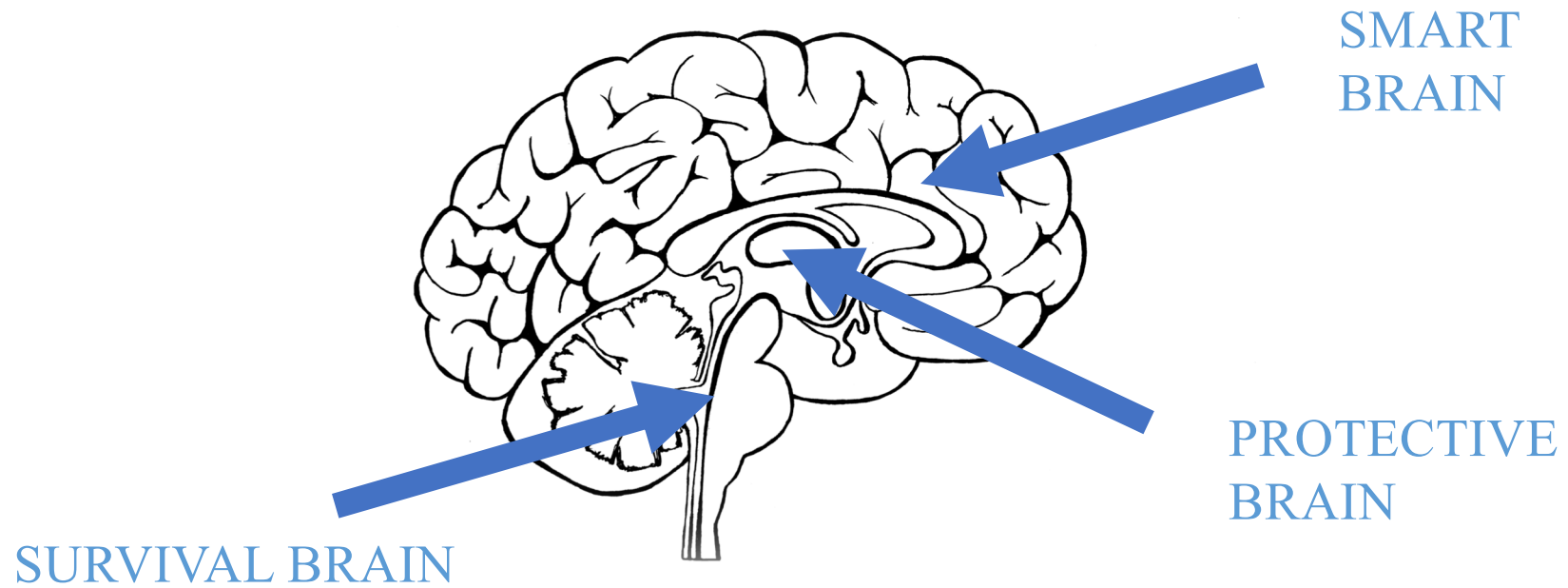
Stress is reciprocal

What changes may we notice?

1. Concentration	Difficulty concentrating, distraction
2. Performance	Challenged by academic tasks
3. Participation	Sense of hopelessness, disengagement, reticence around new activities
4. Sleep	Sleep problems/tiredness, irritability, listlessness or nightmares
5. Actions	Changes in behaviour, hair-trigger response, angry outbursts
6. Relationships and Play	New preferences for play, reversion to younger behaviours, clinging, lowered tolerance, increased sensitivity or withdrawal
7. Somatic indicators	Somatic problems, muscle tension, sore stomach, headache

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The Triune Brain



Circuiting on the fast and slow tracks

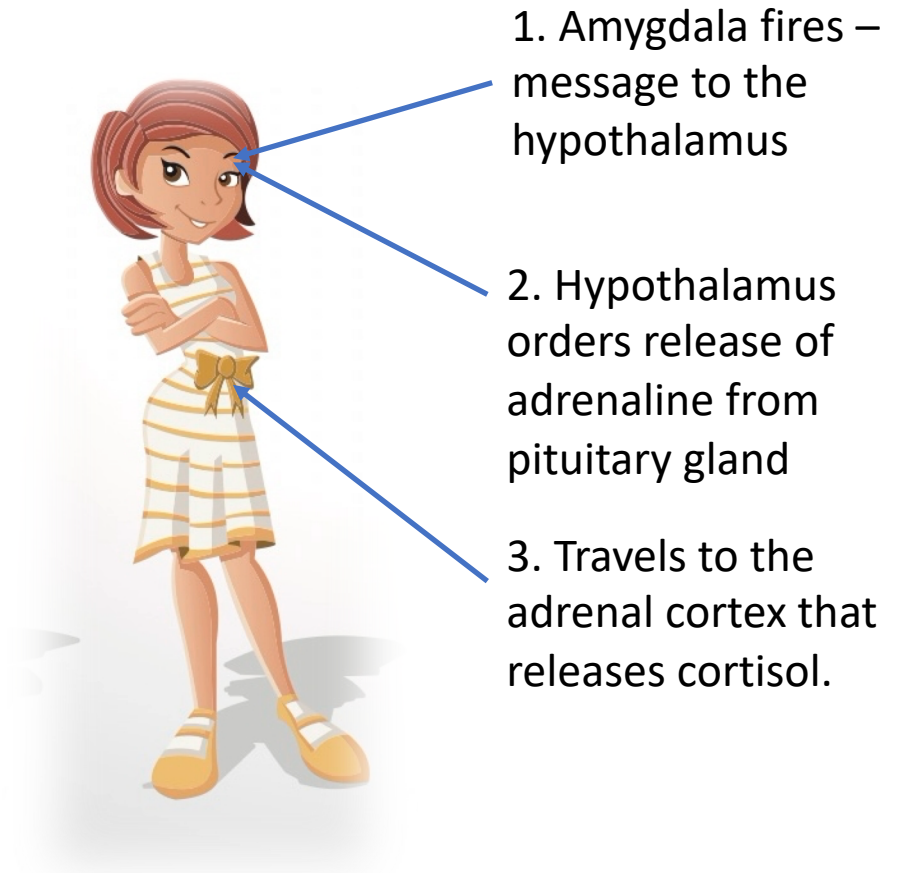
- **SLOW ROUTE:** Circuiting from mid-brain to survival brain and smart brain – whole brain response.
- **FAST ROUTE:** All resources circuit between the mid-brain and the survival brain – away from the smart brain.



Up-regulation of the sympathetic nervous system

Fight, flight or freeze response

- Neurotransmitters (e.g. adrenaline and cortisol)
- Increased heartrate
- Pounding heart/tight chest/feeling of suffocation
- Slowed digestion - distress
- Dilation of pupils
- Priming of muscle groups to respond, blood flow to muscles in arms
- Numbness
- Fainting
- Nausea
- Hot or cold
- Sense of time



Challenging anxiety – general principles

1. Shift the focus away from the cause toward maintaining factors
2. Understand the context
3. Immediate focus: Bring children back to the moment – whatever it takes.
4. Long-term: Need increased experience of the challenging event.
 - **Just enough** disequilibrium to form new neural connections
 - Experience is better than hours of talking.
5. Reduce avoidance activity that strengthens unhelpful neural connections/increase approach behavior in other areas.
 - Attempts to directly reduce anxiety may be counterproductive
 - We grow in the direction in which we focus
6. Accepting the experience required is usually the hard part.
7. Things may become more challenging before getting better.



What can we do in the classroom?

1. Teach children how to understand and manage anxiety – active role
2. Focus on breathing, language of amygdala, control of the primitive brain
3. Mindfulness – create space between you and anxiety – awareness of the moment – attend to what *is* – kindness to oneself – from head to whole body focus
4. Exercise (e.g. regular physical activity, pacing during panic attack)
5. Muscle relaxation, release of tension
6. Experience, not trying to avoid the challenge completely
7. Change relationships with the response



Narrative questions around anxiety: Some examples

After assuring of safety and alliance (e.g. worry)

- Tell me the story of the worry.
- What do you call the worry?
- How strong is the worry? (1-10, big and small etc)
- What would worry look like if you drew it?
- What would be better than the worry?
- What makes the worry shrink?
- What makes [what is better than worry] grow?
- Has worry been around this week?

