



Challenging behaviour and children with trauma

Walking with care beside the traumatised child

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And how are the children?



- The child with trauma often knows very little peace. Days are full of fear and trepidation.

Trauma is Trauma does

“A psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, often involving a sense of intense fear, terror and helplessness” (Perry, 2011).



“Trauma shatters our sense of safety, stability, trust and innocence” (De Thierry, 2017, p. 14)

Meet Luke



A behaviourist view

Students engage in behaviour(s) to **"get"** what they find reinforcing or to **"get away"** from what they find aversive.

Function is determined by observing what happens prior to and immediately after behaviour.

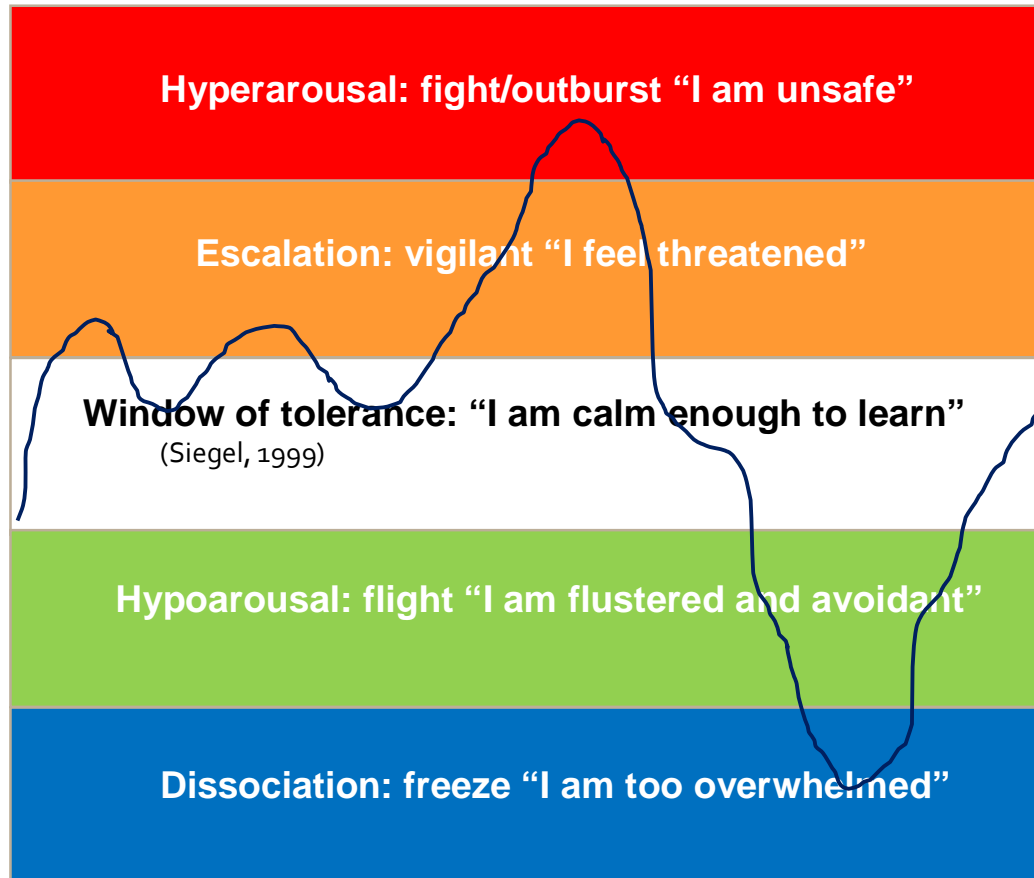


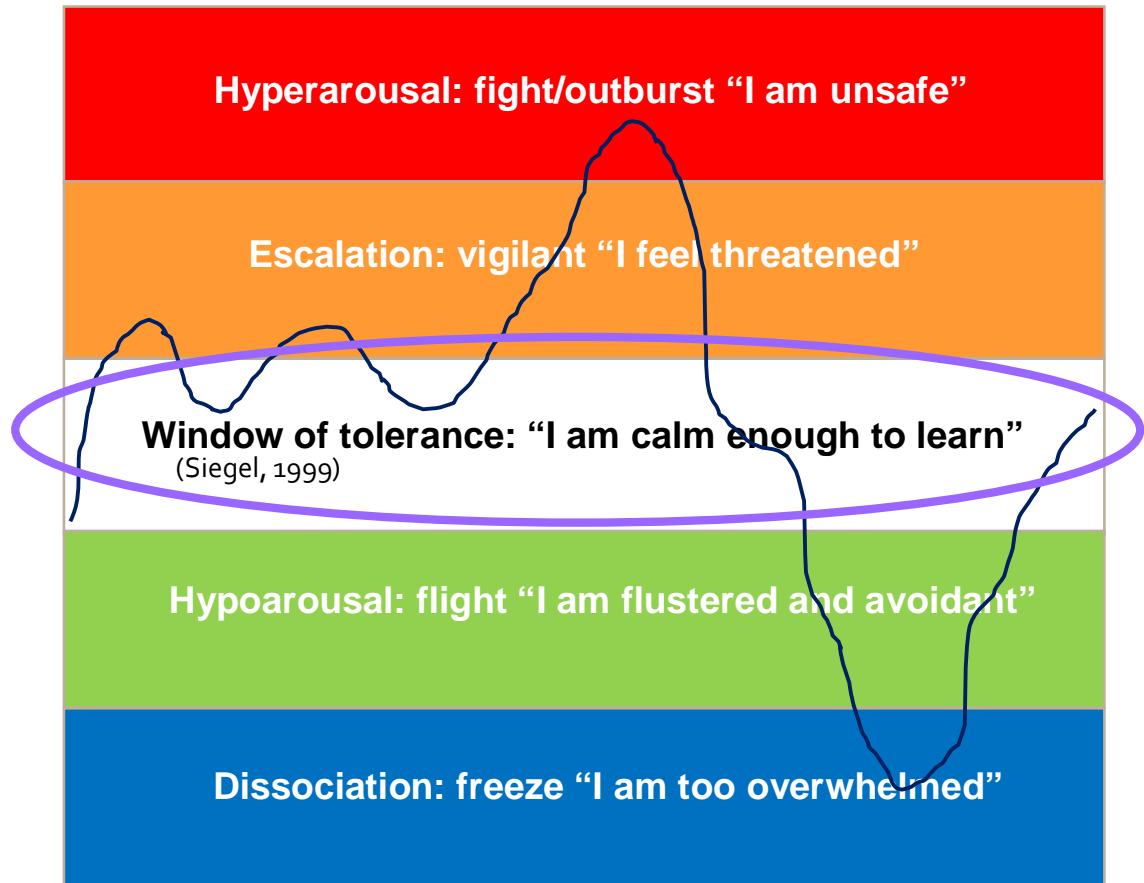
**Think
functionally**

“What’s in it for the kid?”



“Show me, teach me how to get what I need in a way that is acceptable in this space.”





Window of tolerance



"I am calm enough to learn"

- Feelings are tolerable
- Empathy can be felt
- Rational thought
- There is a feeling of being safe
- Able to function at their best (listen, learn and interact)
- Chatty
- Engaged
- Calm
- Windows can be narrow or wide
- Windows are affected by the environment

Window of tolerance

Hyperarousal: fight/outburst "I am unsafe"

Escalation: vigilant "I feel threatened"

Window of tolerance: "I am calm enough to learn"

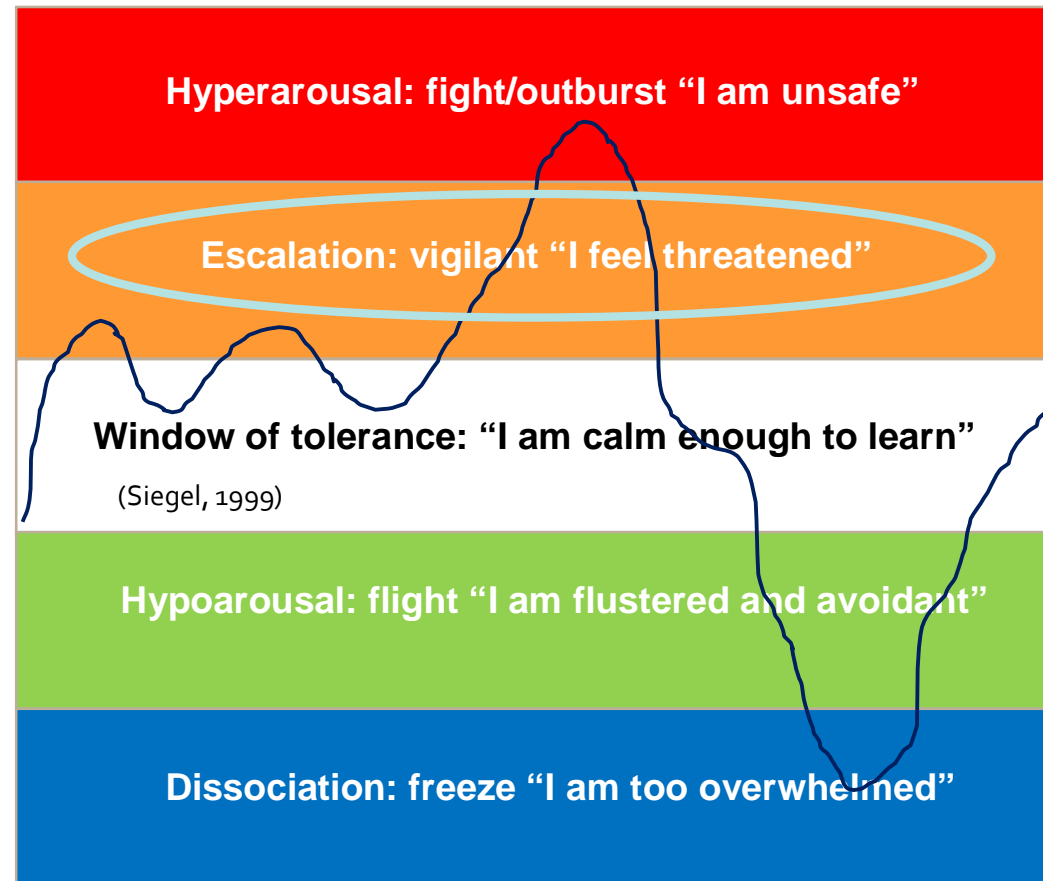
Hypoarousal: flight "I am flustered and avoidant"

Dissociation: freeze "I am too overwhelmed"

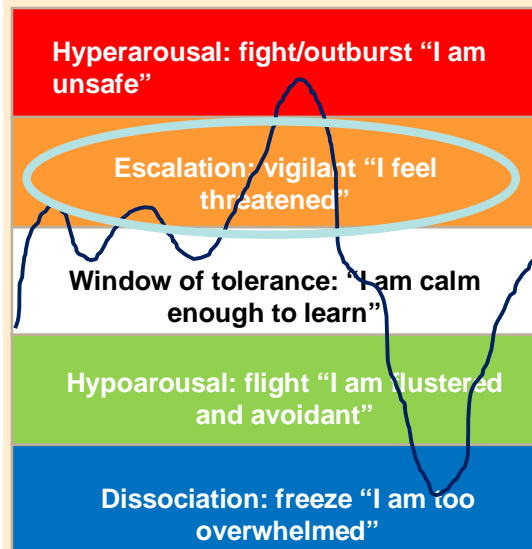
"I am calm enough to learn"

Strategies

- A quiet safe space (not for punishment or time out)
- Provide breaks from tasks
- Ritual and routine for a sense of sameness
- Sharing control
- No surprises (where possible)
- Individual work area
- Consider where the student's desk is situated (a corner seat)



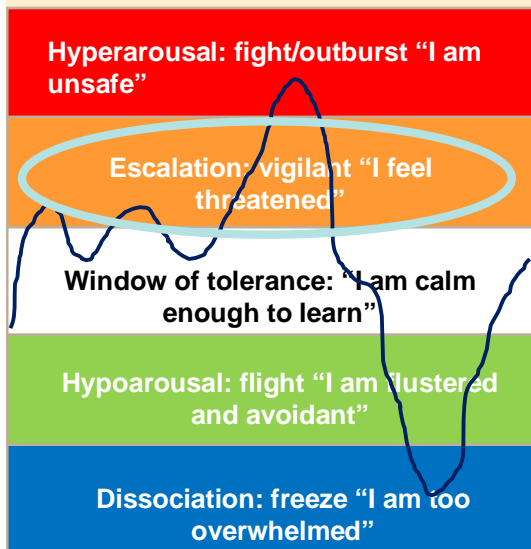
Escalation



"I feel threatened"

- Agitated
- Early warning signs of "losing it" (rocking, jiggling, scribbling out work with purpose, screwing up work, slamming down the pencil)
- Distracted from the task at hand (constantly checking those around them, "He's looking at me", out of seat, pacing)
- Frowny face
- Annoyed
- Stressed

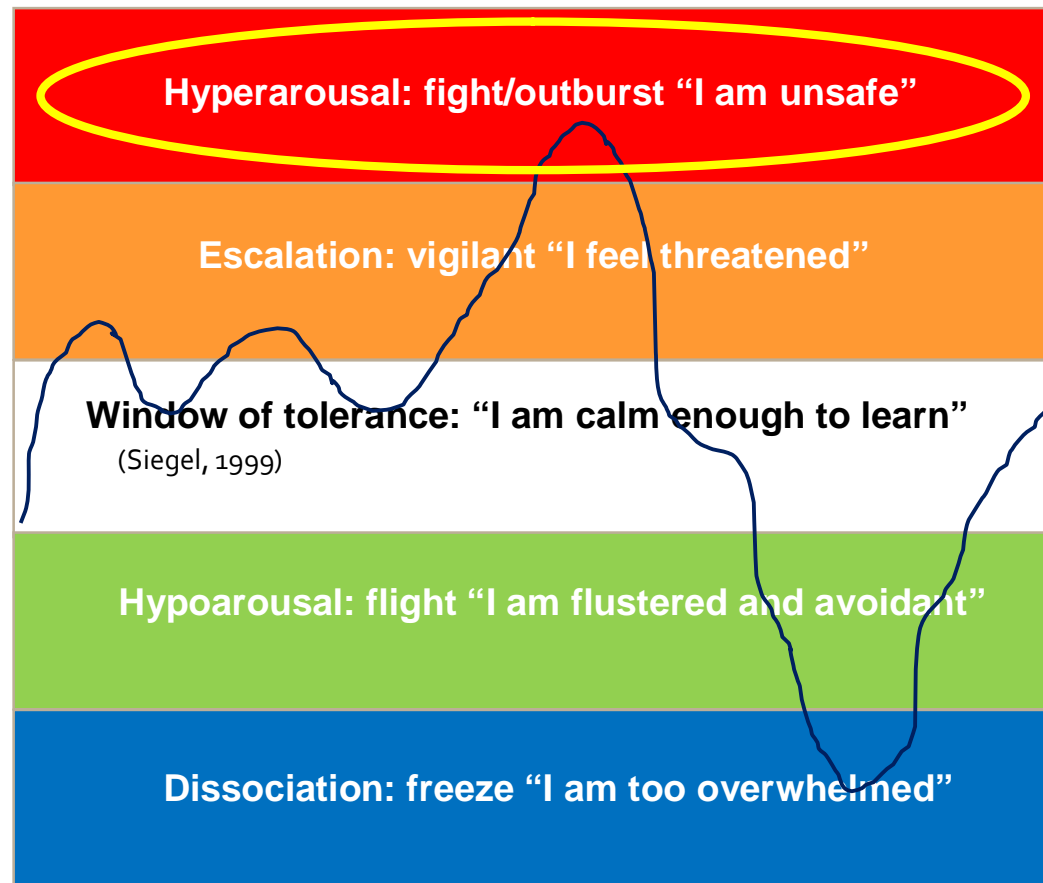
Escalation



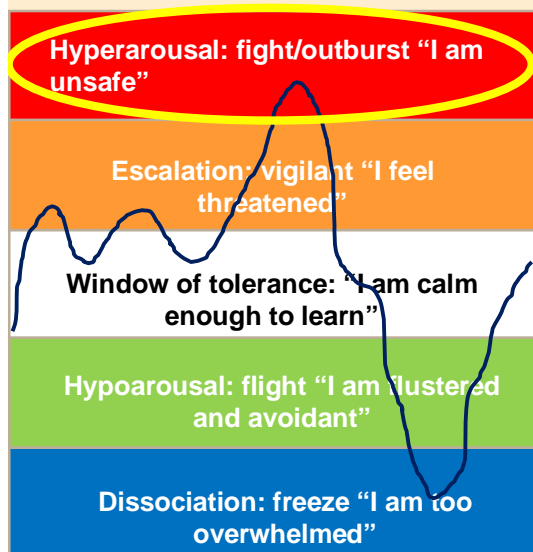
"I feel threatened"

Strategies

- Look for early warning signs and remove antecedents if possible. Do you notice any increases or changes in the child's behaviour?
- Be calm, don't OVERREACT
- Don't threaten
- Don't pick up the rope (avoid power struggles)
- Set simple, clear and reasonable instructions
- Be empathetic to help alleviate anxiety
- Be consistent
- Give choices where appropriate
- Reframe the bubbling disruption as the child's need for your extra help and attention



Hyperarousal

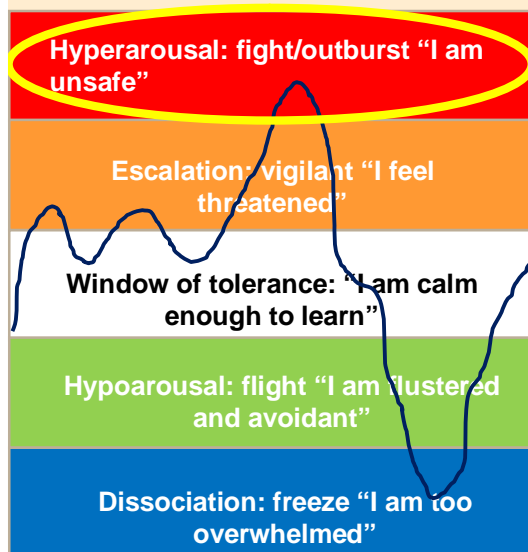


"I am unsafe"

- Physically aggressive (hitting, throwing things, punching, kicking)
- Verbally aggressive (swearing at, threatening others, using derogatory language)
- Yelling (at staff, peers)
- Running (out of the room, out of the school grounds)
- Destruction of property (breaking, defacing, tearing)
- Unsafe (hanging out of windows, standing on a busy road, climbing onto walkway roofs)
- Irrational
- No control over behaviour

"I am unsafe"

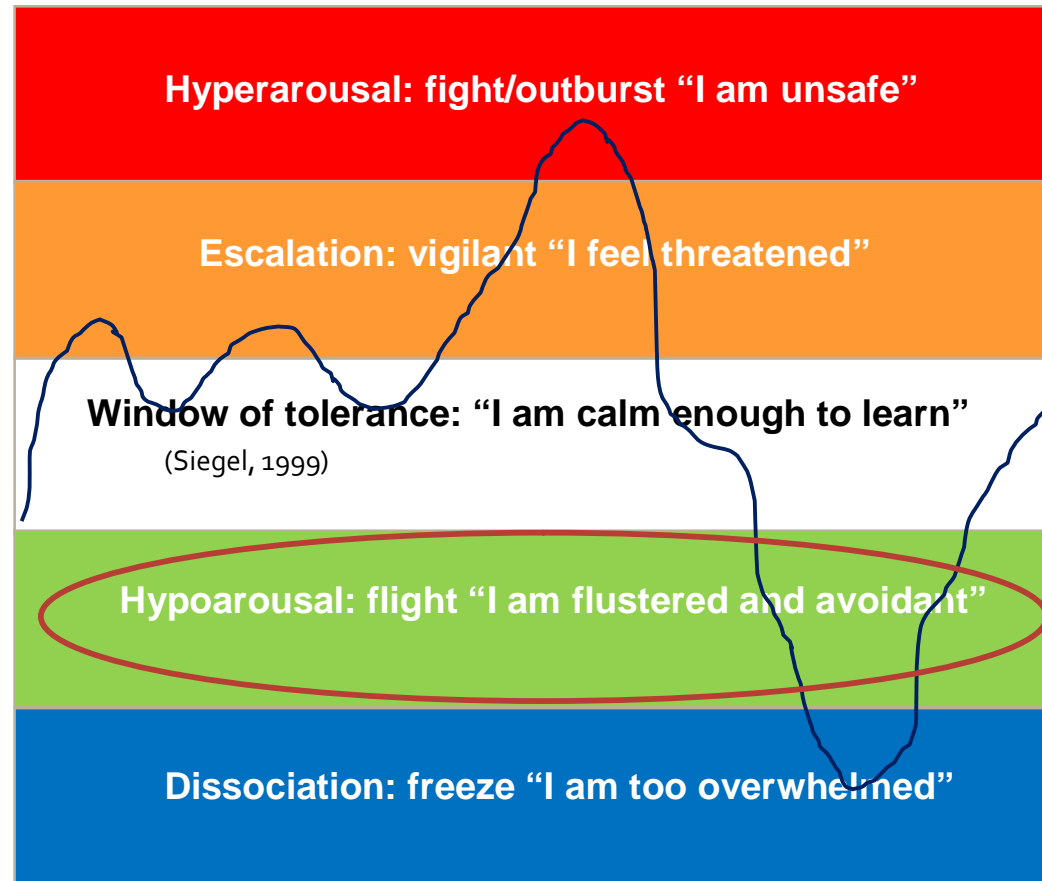
Hyperarousal



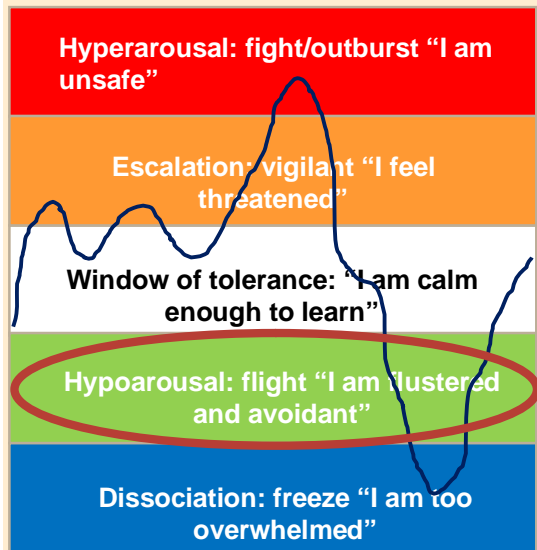
Strategies

- Remain calm and regulated (teacher)
- Use a soothing tone to remind the child you are helping to keep them safe
- Stay close to the child; deliver statements; use your presence to keep them calm
- Remain rationally detached
- Easy escape route

If you are frightened of the student, remove yourself and let someone else take over



De-escalation

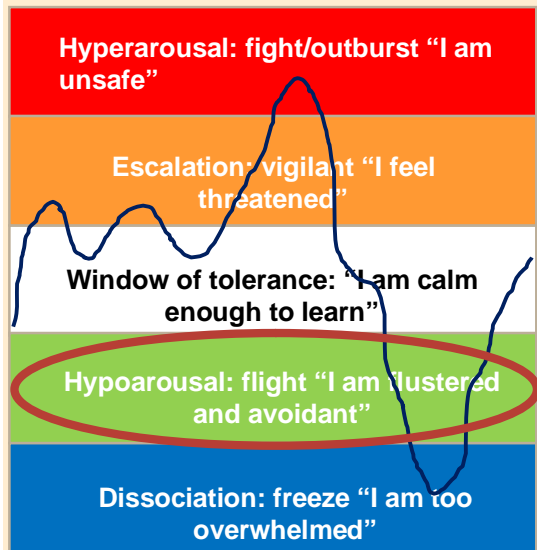


"I am flustered and avoidant"

- Low level challenging behaviour
- Coming down from escalation
- Rational
- Can make decisions
- Swearing, threatening, shoving, knocking things over, running, excessive talking, challenging questions

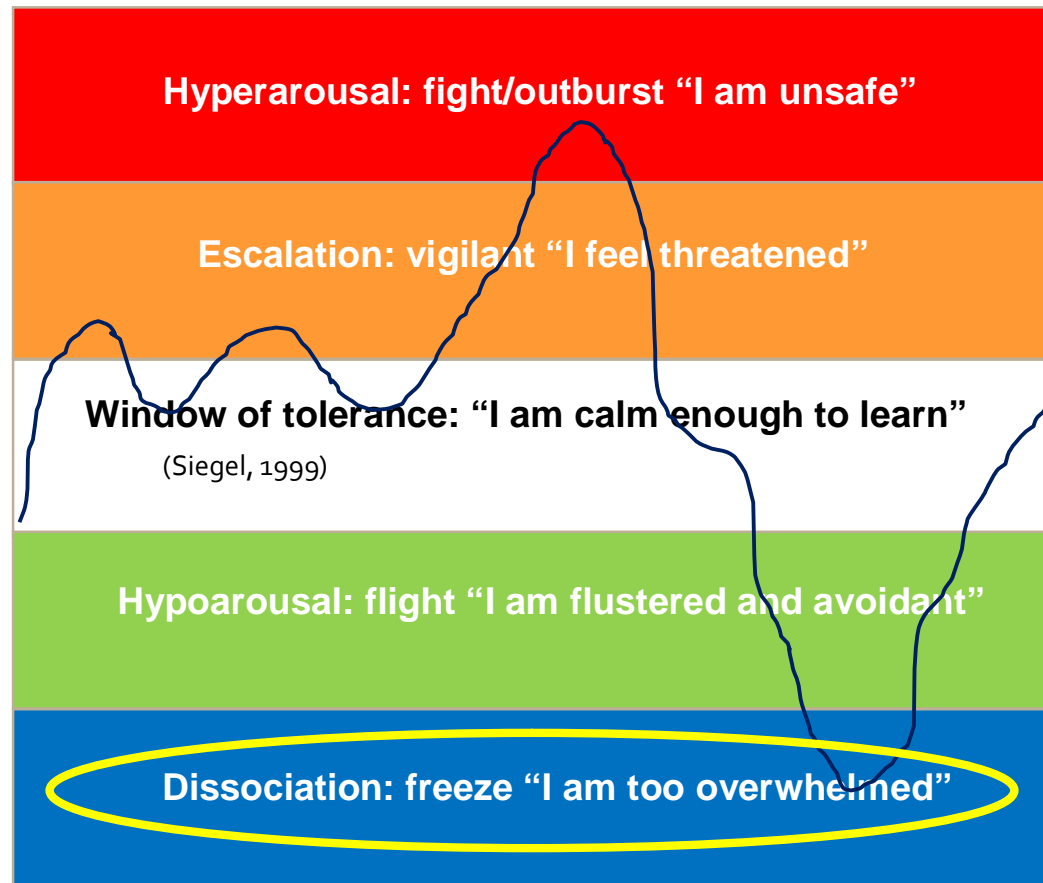
“I am flustered and avoidant”

De-escalation

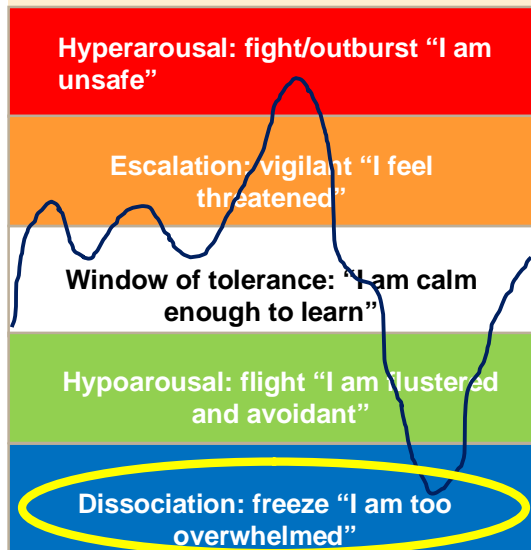


Strategies

- Actively listen to their story
- Offer assistance
- Provide a narrative for what happened
- Allow time out
- Provide take up time/alone time
- Breathing exercises - Big, deep breaths
- Do not enter into an argument about what happened. They may not tell the truth and they may blame others
- Talk through what happened **BEFORE** enacting consequences



Dissociation

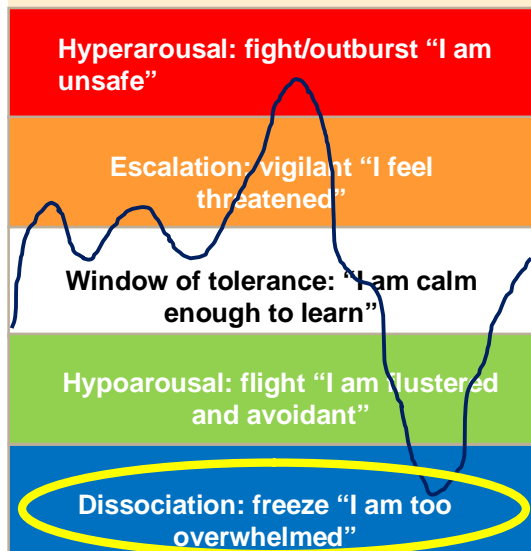


"I am too overwhelmed"

- Withdrawn
- Behaviours that don't match developmentally
- Not "with it" in the space – lost touch
- Day dreaming (mild)
- Glazed look (mild)
- Mind wandering disconnected from surroundings
- Sudden changes in mood, appearance, friends and favourite activities
- Use several names
- Difficulty remembering and concentrating
- Unpredictable (withdrawn/aggressive)

“I am too overwhelmed”

Dissociation



Strategies

- Do not shout
- Reassure the child and orient them back into the present
- Be consistent
- Act predictably
- Avoid touching the child
- Do not label
- Care and help
- Reinforce safety and minimise triggers

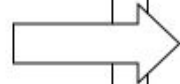
“Ultimately, the dissociative child is a highly courageous and intelligent child who has survived complex and tragic experiences that children should never be exposed to” (De Thierry, 2015, p. 99)

Behaviour Response Planning



Window of Tolerance- "I am calm enough to learn"

Behaviour & Feelings: When _____ is fine & at baseline. Write down what the student is usually like when calm and engaged. E.g. chatty and interactive.



Environmental changes and teaching strategies

'CALM & HAPPY'



'DO YOUR BEST. ASK FOR HELP'

On-task behaviour and proactive use of accommodations for self-regulation.

For _____

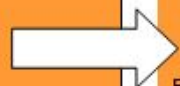
Plan for myself & support: Being alert and not alarmed. Identify opportunities to spot good behaviour.

Response plan: Supportive stance: E.g. plan, praise, reward, have fun. Engaging curriculum; regular sensory breaks; clear expectations. Sufficient scaffolding & challenge. Prompting & redirection

For Me

Escalation – Vigilant – "I feel threatened"

Behaviour & feelings: Early warning signs of _____ being agitated. Describe observable behaviours that show that the student is beginning to feel distressed, anxious or agitated. This could include: rocking, pacing, talking louder or faster, grumpy facial expressions, withdrawal, red face etc.



To prevent challenging behaviour

'STRESSED / ANNOYED'



'TELL THE TEACHER. ASK FOR SAFE SPACE'

Write in the strategies that will help the student calm down & solve their problems.

For: _____

Plan for myself & support: Helpful thoughts for yourself & others: show empathy; look at situation from their perspective; try & work out what the problem is.

Response plan: Directive / 'referee' mode: Acknowledge escalation & offer choices. Manage demands & expectations. Offer self-regulation & co-regulation opportunities.

For Me

Hyperarousal – Fight / Outburst: “I am unsafe”

Behaviour & feelings: When _____ is being unsafe. Describe the observable severe challenging behaviours. At this stage the student has lost rationality and has no control over their behaviour. The person and others are at risk of getting hurt. Behaviours may include hitting, biting, kicking, throwing things, head banging etc.

‘SUPER ANGRY / STRESSED’



‘STAY CALM. STAY SAFE’

Write in the strategies that will help the student calm down & stay safe. Being clear how others will respond (to minimize triggers; make responses predictable even in a crisis) and what is expected of the student.

For _____

Safety strategies

Plan for myself & support: Strategies to help yourself and others remain calm. For example: deep breath, take a break, call for help.

Response plan: Keep everyone safe – child teacher and other children. Remove audience & offer student some space. Minimal, simple & concrete verbal interactions.

For Me

Hypoarousal – Flight – “I am fatigued and avoidant”

Behaviour & feelings: When _____ is displaying low level challenging behaviours or is coming down from an escalation. At this stage the student is rational, therefore can still make decisions. These behaviours may look like; swearing, threatening, shoving, knocking things off the desk, excessive talking, challenging questions etc.

To de-escalate the situation and prevent re-emergence of challenging behaviour

‘TIRED / SAD / BORED / WORRIED’



‘RESUME WORK. ASK FOR A BREAK’

Write in strategies that will help the student stay calm and re-engage in the work.

For _____

Plan for myself & support: Write in strategies you or other people will use to remain calm. For example, deep breath; thinking positively e.g. ‘He is not doing it on purpose’, ‘I can do this’.

Response plan: Resume work by managing demands and expectations. Look for opportunities for repair – coregulation & reflection. Practice self-regulation & skills together.

For Me



Dissociation – Freeze – “I am too overwhelmed”

Behaviour & feelings: When _____ is dissociating or ‘zoned out’. Describe behaviours you see when the student has withdrawn or lost touch with their surroundings. E.g. spacing out; day dreaming; glazed look, staring, mind going blank; mind wandering; sense of world not being real; disconnected from surroundings.



To prevent losing touch with surroundings and feeling unsafe

‘ZONED OUT’ or ‘NUMB / EMPTY’



‘TAKE TIME OUT. TALK TO THE TEACHER’

Write in strategies that will help the student recognize the ‘zoned out’ feeling & a plan for them to access the teacher or use the safe space’

For _____

Plan for myself & support: Write in strategies you or other people will use to recognize signs of dissociation and strategy to reach out to the student.

Response plan: Checking in; Orientating the student to the present – grounding, narrating. Reinforce safety & minimize triggers. Defer blame / investigation / consequences until the child is oriented to the present.

For Me



Final thoughts

- The role of the teacher can never be underestimated
- Positive pockets of progress
- Be relentless in your **care** and **advocacy**
- Wrap the child with trauma in your **courage and compassion**
- **Be brave, be there, be great!**

They deserve nothing less.



References

Photos

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References

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