



Parenting Mindfulness Moment 2

“The Container Exercise”

(Adapted from Kennard, 2018)

Sometimes feelings of all kinds can become large, unwieldy, and difficult to manage. Positive feelings may overwhelm or even create anxiety related to their fleeting nature as they tend to come and go. Negative feelings can become overbearing, stressful, and even distracting. This exercise is an attempt to help contain any strong feelings. This is not an effort to remove, eliminate, or judge any feelings as good or bad. Those efforts often lead to shame and can even create the opposite effect where feelings become bigger! This exercise is an effort to honor the feelings you have and create a safe sacred space to hold the feelings. The container will provide a space of curiosity and interest that will lead to improved tolerance of the feeling and a safe return to inspect the feeling at any time in the future.

Step 1: Identify the strong feeling that you would like to spend some time with and contain. If it is helpful, imagine the feeling as a color, a shape, or an object.

Step 2: Imagine an appropriate container for this feeling. Some have chosen something as small as a mason jar, others have chosen something as large as a galaxy in space. Pay attention to how you imagine the container noticing any special colors, decorations, or rustic simplicity. Notice how it is big enough and resilient enough to hold your feeling

Step 3: Imagine the feeling moving into the container. Allow it to move at its own pace, not forcing the movement, but encouraging it as needed. Notice when it is completely contained.

Step 4: Choose how you would like to seal the container. Does it need a lid, something to tie it shut, or something stronger to contain the feeling inside?

Step 5: Notice how the feeling is safely contained inside. You can choose to take it out and observe it anytime you would like to. Recognize the importance of the feeling and take some time to honor what it may be trying to tell you from within this safe container.

Step 6: Do you need help sealing and holding the container? Maybe choose someone from your life you see as a strong support, or a personal hero, or even a figure from your faith or spiritual tradition.

*If at any point you feel distressed or are having difficulty with the exercise, pause, try using the butterfly hug technique, the restart. You may also use the butterfly hug to deepen the sensation and improve its positive effects.



CONCEPT 2

Getting to know your brain body and nervous system

The early warning signs of stress and what you can do about it.

AN ANALOGY

A Really Great Car!

Imagine you have this fantastic car. It is very reliable and almost always gets you where you need to go. You know enough of the basics to operate it such as the speedometer, gas gauge, and the pedals, but beyond that you have not really got to know the car. Taking a little time to get to know the car could seriously improve the functioning, maintenance, and even enjoyment of the car. Taking out the manual, you find out it has cruise control, Bluetooth connectivity, GPS, and all sorts of safety and utility alert systems to communicate what is happening in the car. All of the sudden

you have gone from using it just to get around to truly mastering all the options this car has to offer.

Within the past several decades, more has been discovered about the functions and utility of the brain and nervous system than many ever thought possible. It is as if the 'owner's manual' for these areas has been completely updated and revised. Getting to know the parts and functions of your own brain can boost your own awareness, functioning, and even maintenance strategies for one of the most amazing organs in your body. Conscious thought, emotional experiencing, and even survival itself all emerge from these systems. Taking some time to pop open the hood, pull out the manual, and do some exploring can greatly assist awareness, control, and effectiveness within our thinking, feeling, and doing.

THE BRAIN AND BODY

Understanding from the Experts

Understanding the parts of our brain and nervous system involved in our emotional responses helps to give understanding and credibility to our own experiences. Each part has a unique purpose and very specific function. They work best as they connect and collaborate with their counterparts in a complex and sophisticated dance. There are times, particularly when under stress, when this delicate dance can become off balance and the parts function in isolated and extreme ways. Paying attention to these states will help bring the necessary balance and functioning.

Dr. Dan Siegel has made much of this information extremely accessible and helpful to the common person through books such as *Mindsight* (2010) and *The Whole Brain Child* (2012). Dr. Becky Bailey expanded on some of these ideas in her book *Conscious Discipline* (2015). Many others have contributed to the science and exploration, however, these two concepts of the structures and states of the brain will give some healthy knowledge and steps towards improving awareness and personal brain functionality.

Dr. Siegel explains the major structural areas of the brain as a three tiered system consisting of the cortex, the limbic system, and brain stem (upstairs, down-

Upstairs

Cerebral Cortex: Thinking

Higher level thought
Reason, Logic, Problem Solving
Learning Ability Decision Making
Awareness

Left

Literal
Logical
Language
Linear Thinking
Letter of the Law

Right

Images
Emotional
Figurative
Big Picture
Spirit of the Law

Downstairs

Limbic Region: Feeling

Emotion Motivation Reaction: Fight or Flight
How we Focus Attention

Basement

Brainstem: Surviving

Wake/ Sleep, Breathing, Heartbeat

stairs, and basement). He also describes how the brain is divided into right and left hemispheres, each of which has its own jobs and functions.

Dr. Bailey uses a color analogy that is easy to remember and functional to use. She describes the needs and tasks for each of the three main areas of the brain, how they work together, and what each area needs most. Looking at the red, blue, and green brain states can be helpful for adults in modeling good awareness and self-regulation skills. The color analogy is also easy to teach children which can help them with emerging self-regulation skills as well. Being able to speak the same language and identify our reactions to stress can greatly improve emotional communication and even connection with children.

Upstairs Brain (Green Zone): Our thinking brain. The cerebral cortex is capable of logic, abstract reasoning, and other skills necessary for problem solving and conflict resolution. Wants to learn and figure it out.

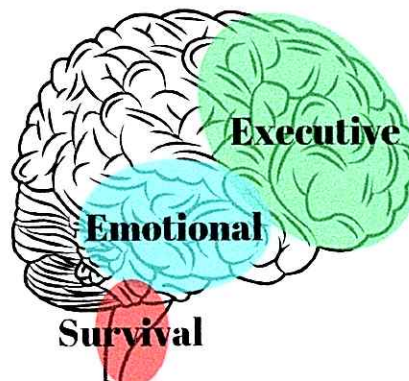
Downstairs Brain (Blue Zone): Our feeling brain. All areas below the cortex are useful for emotions and action necessary for survival. Our limbic region specifically houses attachment and emotion. **Wants to feel connected and cared for. Very vulnerable to disrespect.**

Basement (Red Zone): Our surviving brain. The brainstem is used for breathing, heartbeat, and life sustaining functions. **Wants to feel safe. This is the center of automatic behavior that keeps us alive.**

Right Brain: The hemisphere useful for big-picture, emotion-drive, and creative thinking. When out of balance the right brain becomes flooded resulting in highly emotional responses to stress or conflict.

Left Brain: The hemisphere useful for logical, linear, language-based, thinking. When out of balance, the left brain becomes cold, dry, and void of feelings in favor of the facts and logic.

The Flipped Lid: Phrase made popular by Dr. Dan Siegel in the book *The Whole Brain Child* (Siegel & Bryson, 2012) to explain the phenomenon that occurs when the upstairs brain is overwhelmed with stress, trauma, or emotions. This results in the upstairs brain going offline leaving only the downstairs to deal with the situation. Logic, language, and reason leave and are replaced with emotion and reaction. This is automatic, reactive behavior



THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

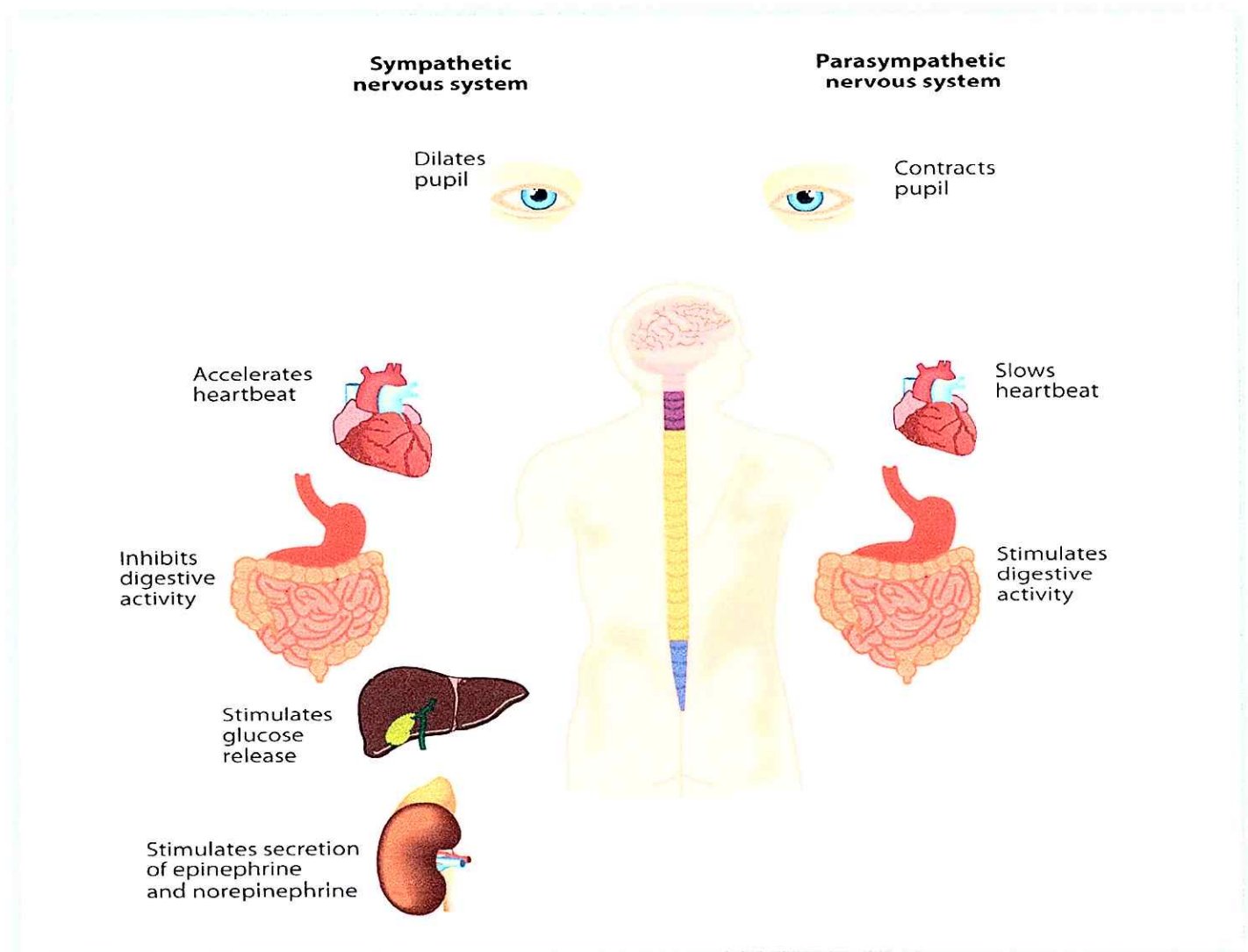
The body has an

extremely sophisticated system connected to the brain and all sensory organs that can spring a person into action almost immediately when necessary. The other component slow the body down for recovery and repair after moments of intense reaction. Getting to know the signs and symptoms of the nervous system's functions can help normalize and bring greater awareness to the body's reactions to stress and sensations of calming.

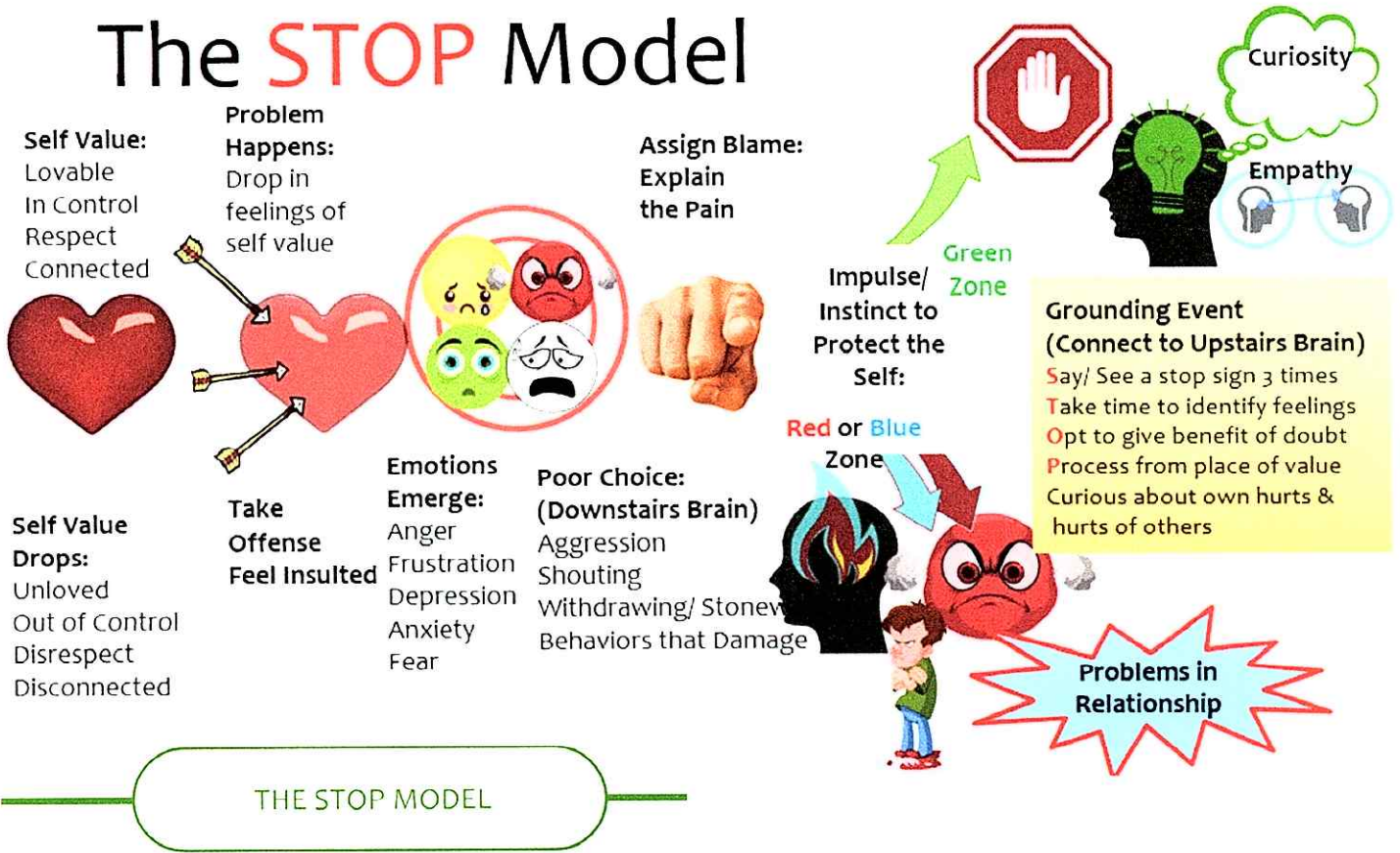
Sympathetic Nervous System: The system that springs into action when facing stress or conflict. The SNS triggers flow of blood away from extremities and towards large muscle groups for fight or flight responses. Heart rate increases, breath be-

comes shallow, eyes become narrowly focused, and fists may clench. These automatic responses are the first indicator that you may need to take a break, use a calming strategy, or separate yourself from your child to avoid an unintended physical response.

Parasympathetic Nervous System: The body's "parachute" slowing everything down and signaling the "all's clear" to the rest of the body. You may be able to trigger this reaction by spreading out clenched fists, placing an unclenched hand to your heart, or taking some deep breaths. These actions take your body off of autopilot and allow for calming and soothing to take place on a body level preparing you for clear and rational thinking when interacting with your child.



The STOP Model



What To Do Next

Awareness of body and brain states under stress is a first step towards self-regulation. Taking action is the next logical step in the process. What good does all the knowledge of the brain do if you don't take some positive steps towards better functioning. The STOP model helps leverage what you know about your brain and body's functioning under stress towards more clear thinking and more successful relational interactions with your children.

The STOP model uses elements of cognitive behavioral therapy to recognize the connection between emotional states and the underlying thoughts contributing to these states. Effort is taken to seek emotional grounding in order to attain the most clear and effective thinking. This clear thinking can help explore more rational and realistic explanations for relational triggers with our children. Positive, proactive steps can be taken in order to return to a place of calm, regulation, and clear thinking. Once regulated, it becomes easier to respond to triggering events positively, proactively, and in ways that preserve relationships and or personal integrity. Key elements include the following steps:

Steps in the STOP Model

—> Recognizing strong emotional responses to triggering events with the understanding that efforts to avoid pain or assign blame often lead to negative or problematic reactions.

—> Finding a grounding event. This may be visualization of something like a stop sign flashing, saying the word "stop" to yourself, or any other visualization, self-talk, or relaxation technique that will disrupt the intensity of the emotion.

—> Becoming curious about the situation. What feeling might you be feeling and why (name them). Becoming curious about what may be going on for the other person. Is there another possible explanation for the insult rather than a personal attack?

—> Proceed with processing the event from a place core values. Giving self and others the benefit of the doubt allows for successful and positive actions towards self and others.

ACTIVITIES

Triggers

Take some time to think about situations, behaviors, attitudes, or images that are particularly triggering to you when parenting your children. Take some time to identify any thoughts, physical sensations, memories, or personal experiences that may be connected to these triggers.

Triggering Events	Related thoughts, physical sensations, memories, or related personal experiences
Trigger 1:	
Trigger 2:	
Trigger 3:	
Trigger 4:	

Take some time to reflect on activities that contribute to your sense of health and wellbeing. What activities help you relax, give you energy, or leave you feeling refreshed?

My personal recharging activities:

Who are the people in your life you can count on? Who do you call when you have had a bad day or are feeling particularly stressed? Who can you laugh with? Who can you reach out to when you need help?

My personal supports:

ACTION STEPS

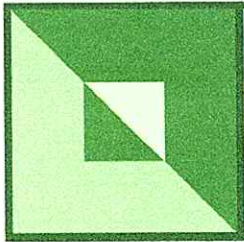
Over the next week pay attention to times that you notice yourself moving across the zones of regulation. When are the times you notice staying in the “Green Zone” with clear thinking and strong problem solving ability. When are some moments you notice drifting into the “Blue Zone” where emotions rise to the forefront and may impact thinking? Identify any “Red Zone” moments when you feel significantly triggered to the point that you notice yourself seeking safety or managing a crisis the best you can?

Moments I notice “Green Zone” thinking:

Moments I notice “Blue Zone” thinking:

Moments I notice “Red Zone” thinking:

Attempts at using the STOP model:



Positive TIPS

Understanding
Yourself

Concept 2:
Brain Body & Nervous System

Improving your personal awareness to your brain and body's responses to stress helps you become proactive rather than reactive to triggering events.

Take time to identify your own early warning system. Recognize the thoughts, feelings, and sensations related to your nervous system.

Keep yourself emotionally healthy. Locate your supports and participate in self-care activities.

When in crisis get curious, grounded, and STOP. Find grounding activities that work for you. Connect your whole brain to maximize

