

The Impact of Trauma on Learning and Behavior in Children and Teens

School on Wheels Massachusetts
December 3, 2020

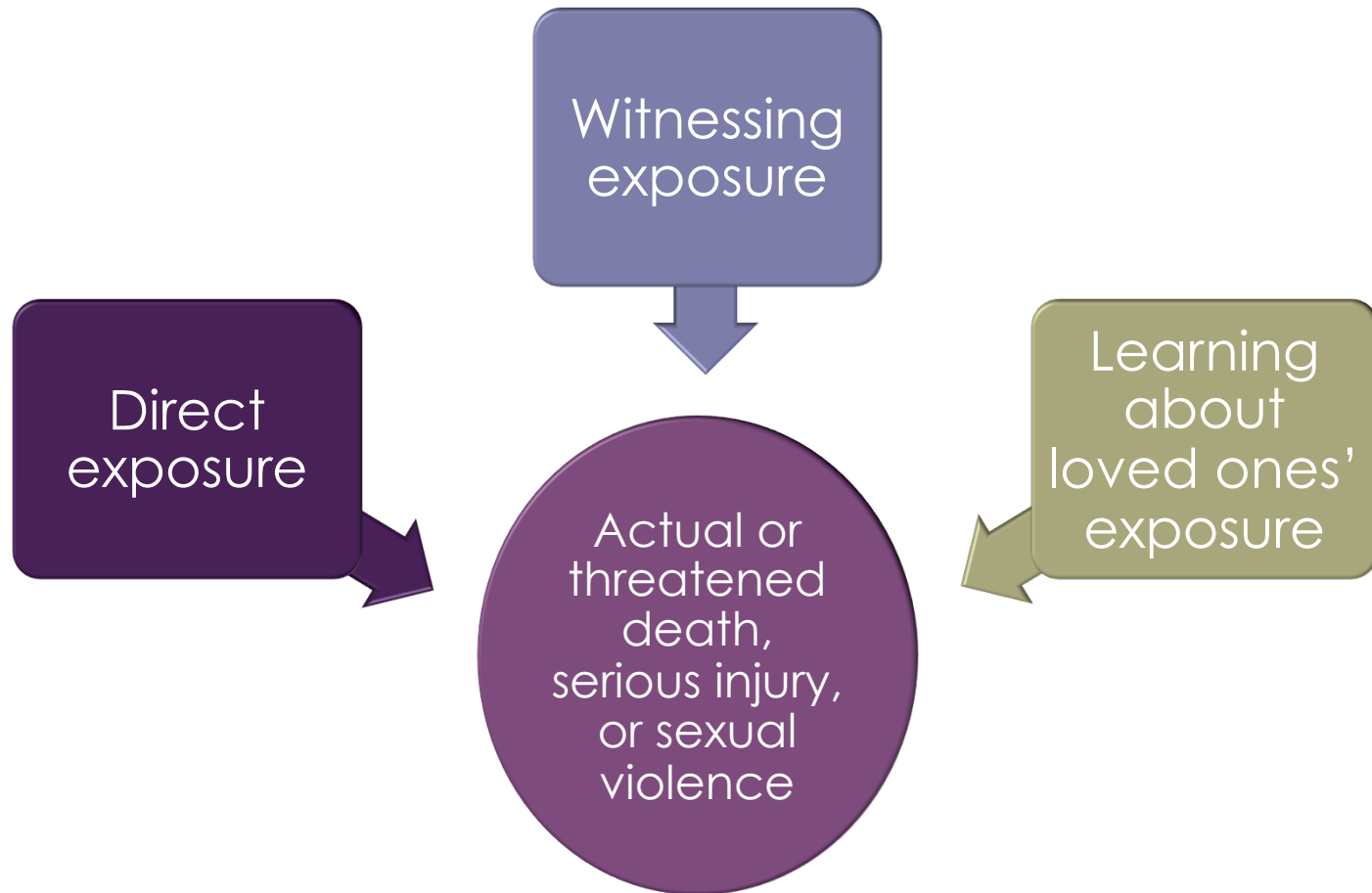
Michelle Alto, PhD
Postdoctoral Fellow
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health

Outline

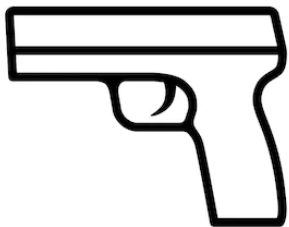
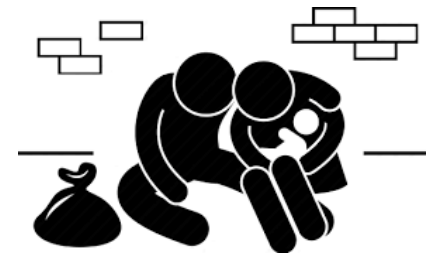
- ❑ What is trauma?
- ❑ Fear response
- ❑ Symptoms of traumatic stress
- ❑ Trauma triggers
- ❑ Traumatic stress across development
- ❑ Trauma and learning
- ❑ Trauma and ADHD
- ❑ Ways to help



What Is Trauma?

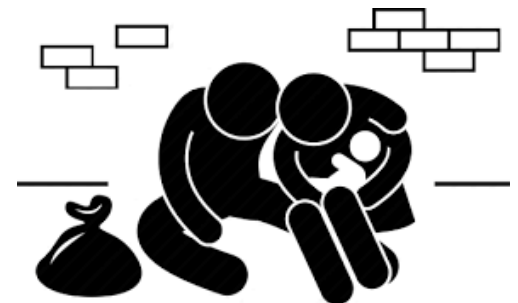


Examples of Trauma



Homelessness

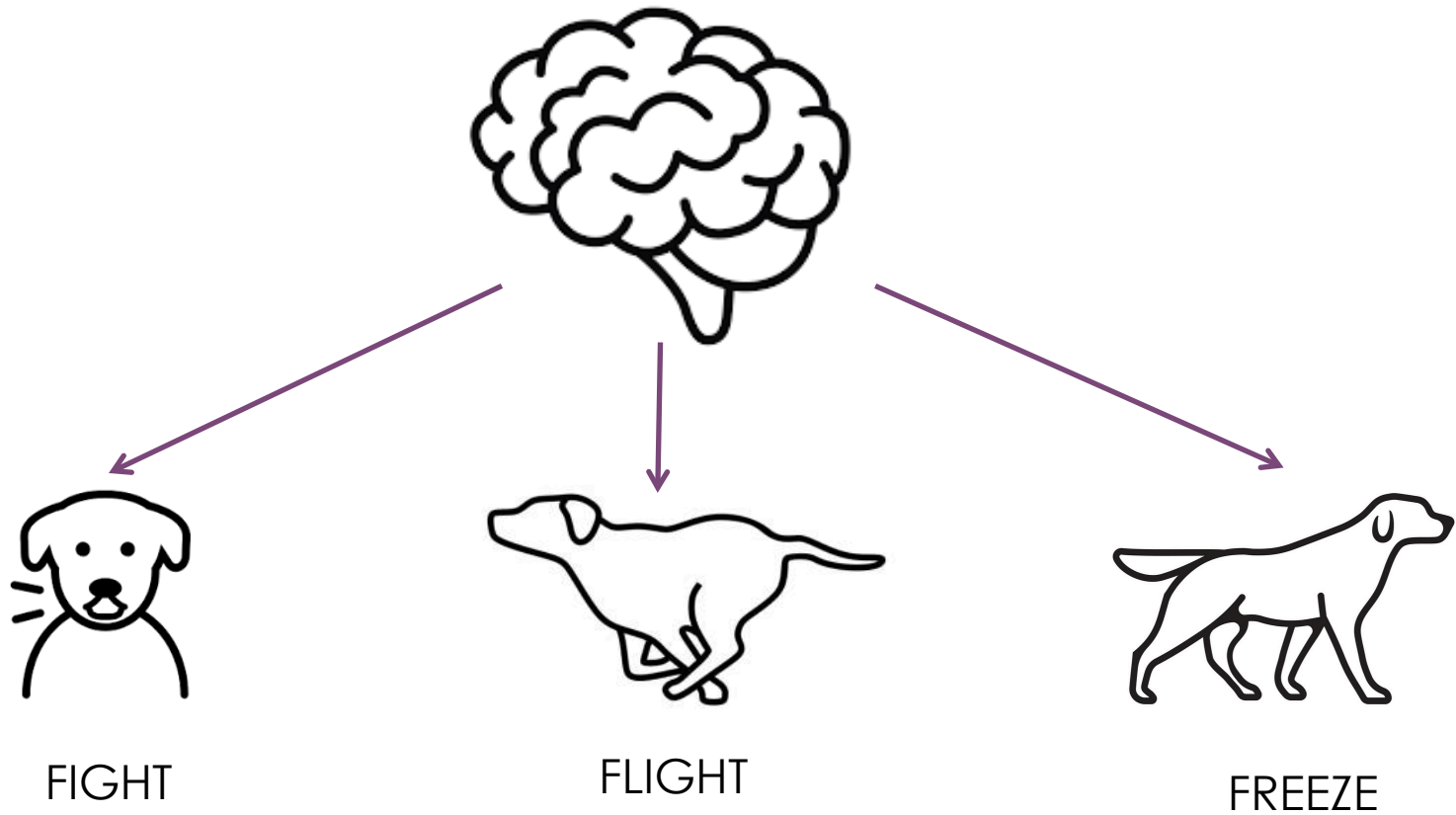
- ❑ Trauma prior to homelessness
 - ❑ Child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, community violence
- ❑ Trauma during homelessness
 - ❑ Loss of home, safety, sense of security, family separations, abrupt and unpredictable life changes



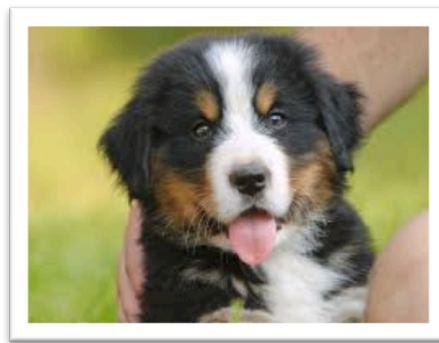
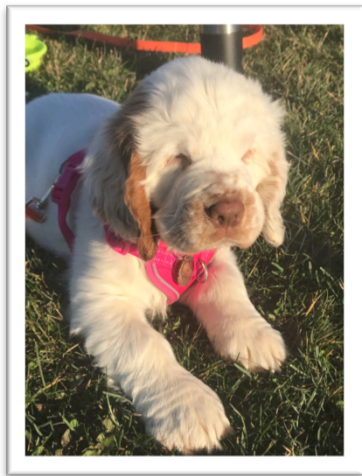
Fear Response



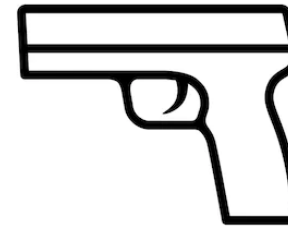
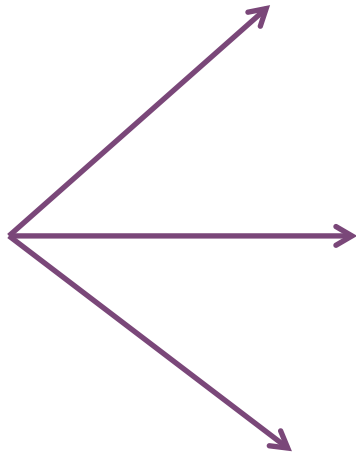
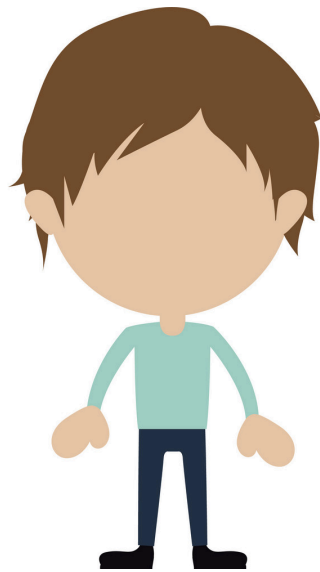
Fear Response



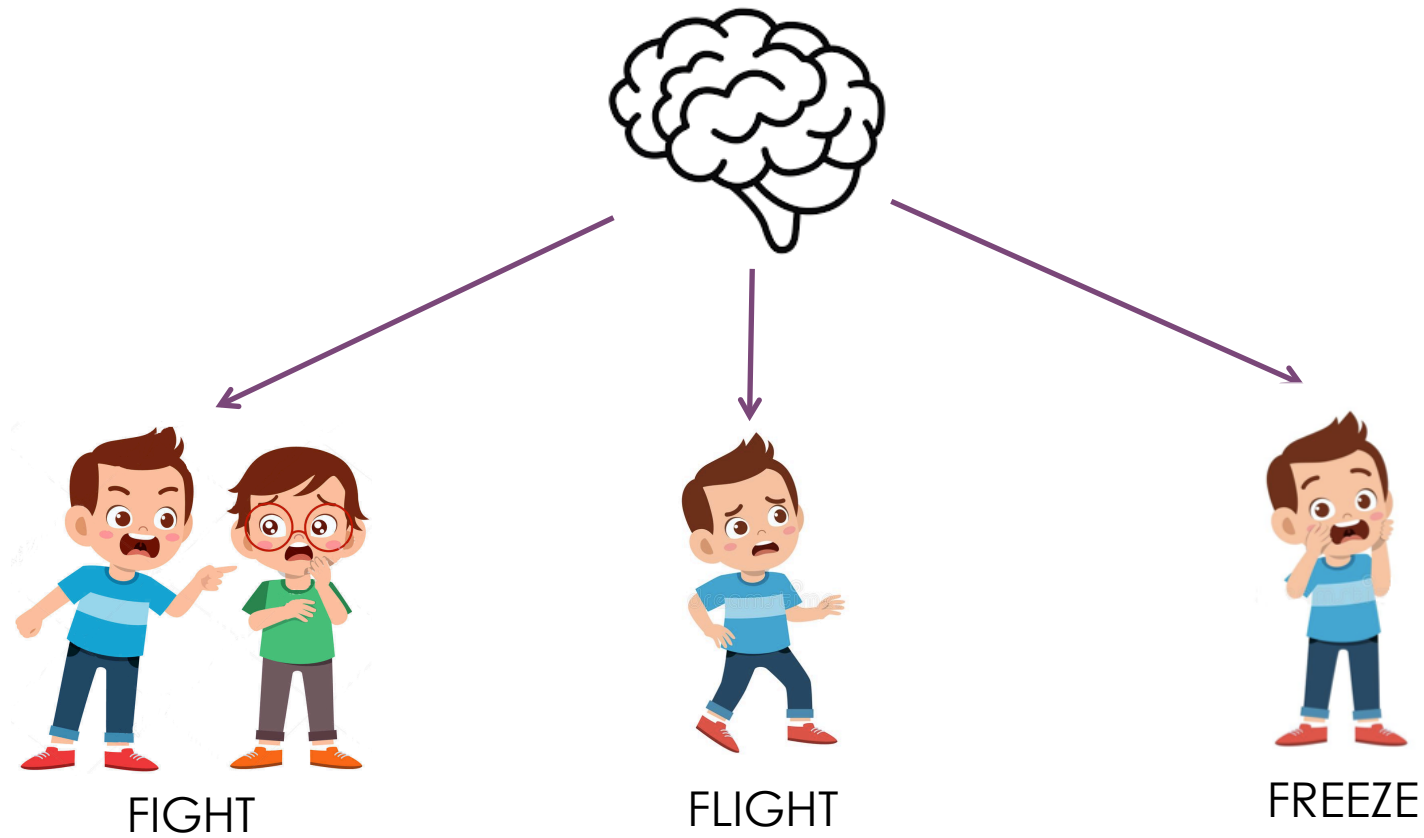
Fear Learning



Fear Response in Children



Fear Response in Children



Fight Response

- ❑ Yelling and tantrums
- ❑ Swearing
- ❑ Hitting or fighting
- ❑ Throwing things or damaging property
- ❑ Hyperactivity
- ❑ Hypervigilance



Flight Response

- ❑ Withdrawing (e.g., isolating, hiding)
- ❑ Not responding to others
- ❑ Running away from others
- ❑ Developmental regression

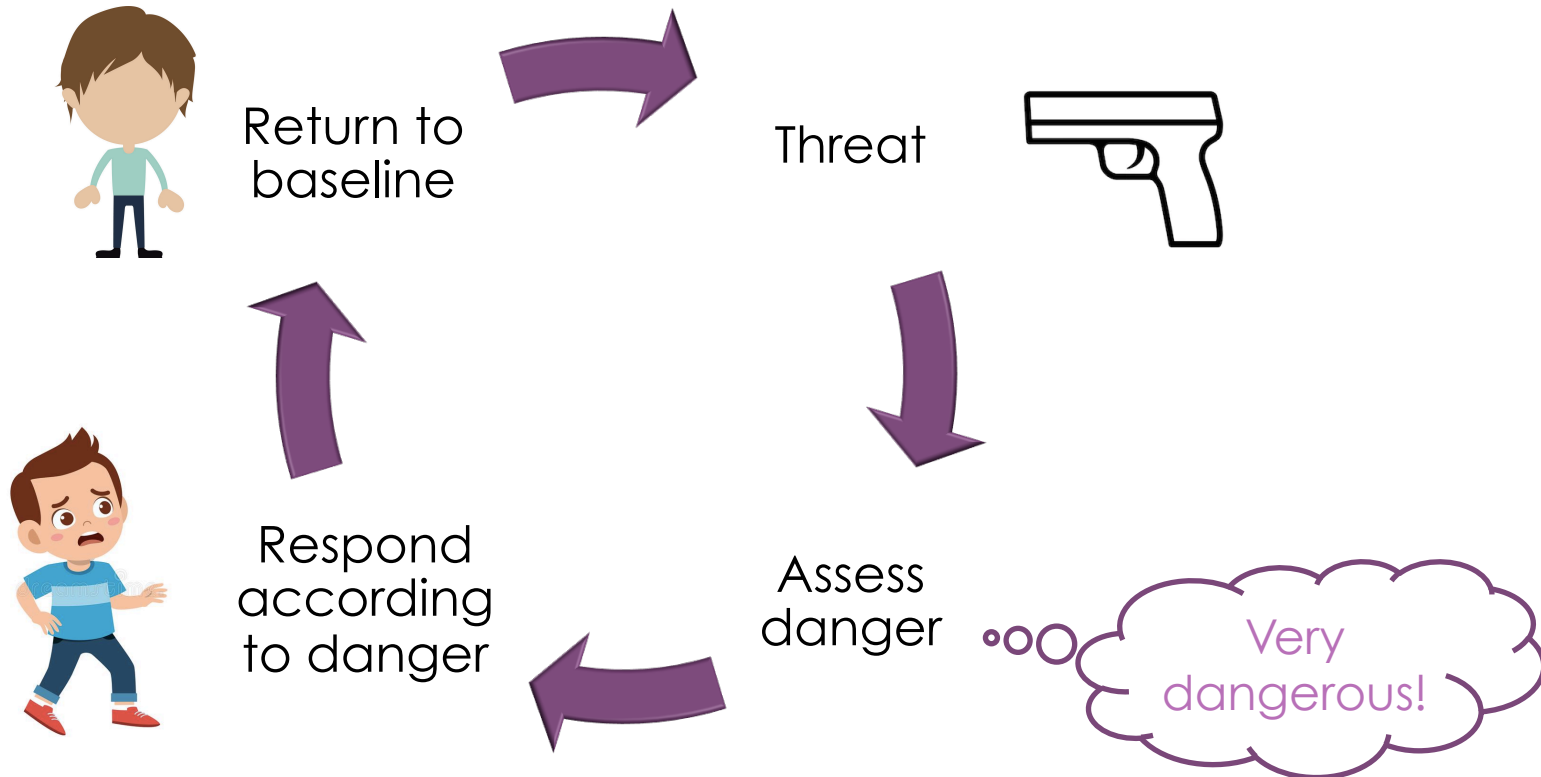


Freeze Response

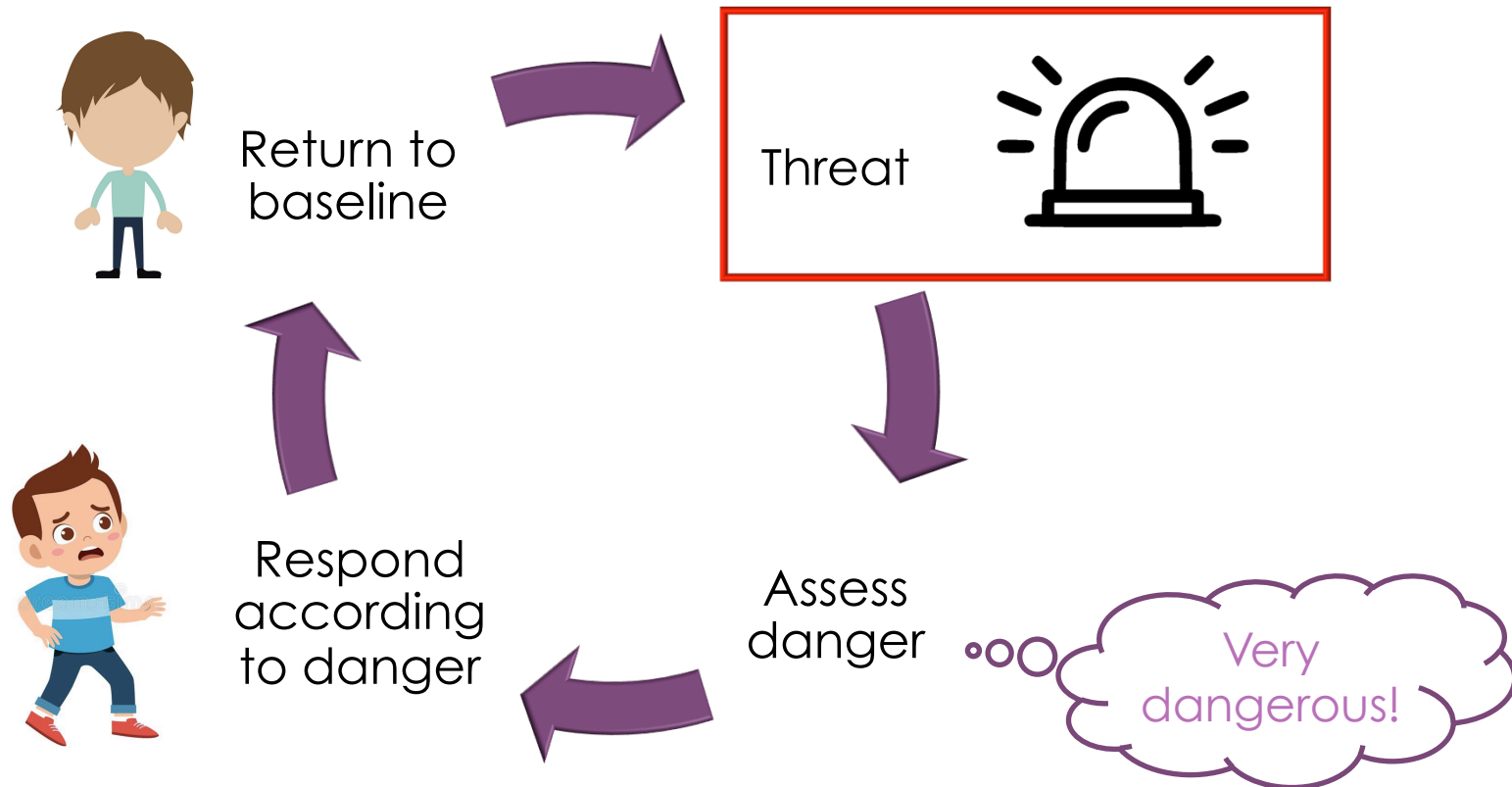
- ❑ Spacing out
- ❑ Difficulty concentrating or paying attention
- ❑ Increased sleep



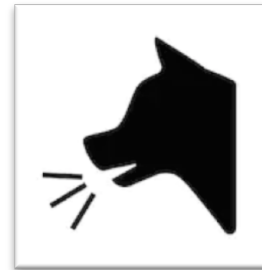
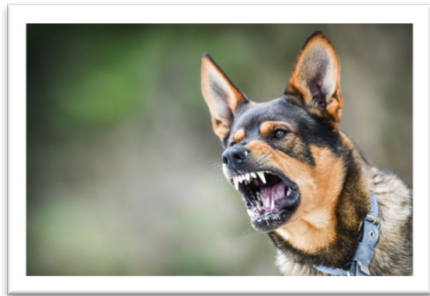
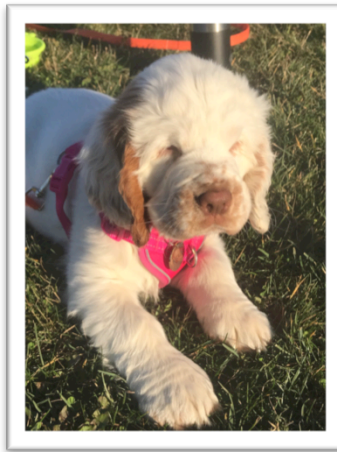
Adaptive Fear Response



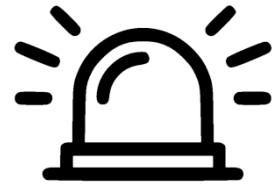
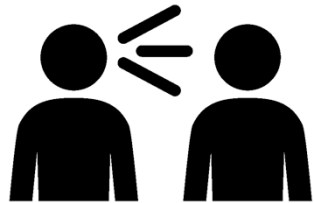
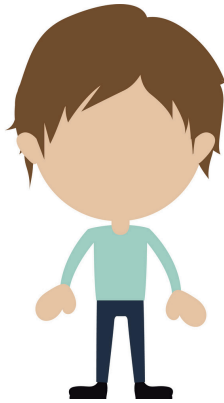
Maladaptive Fear Response



Trauma Triggers



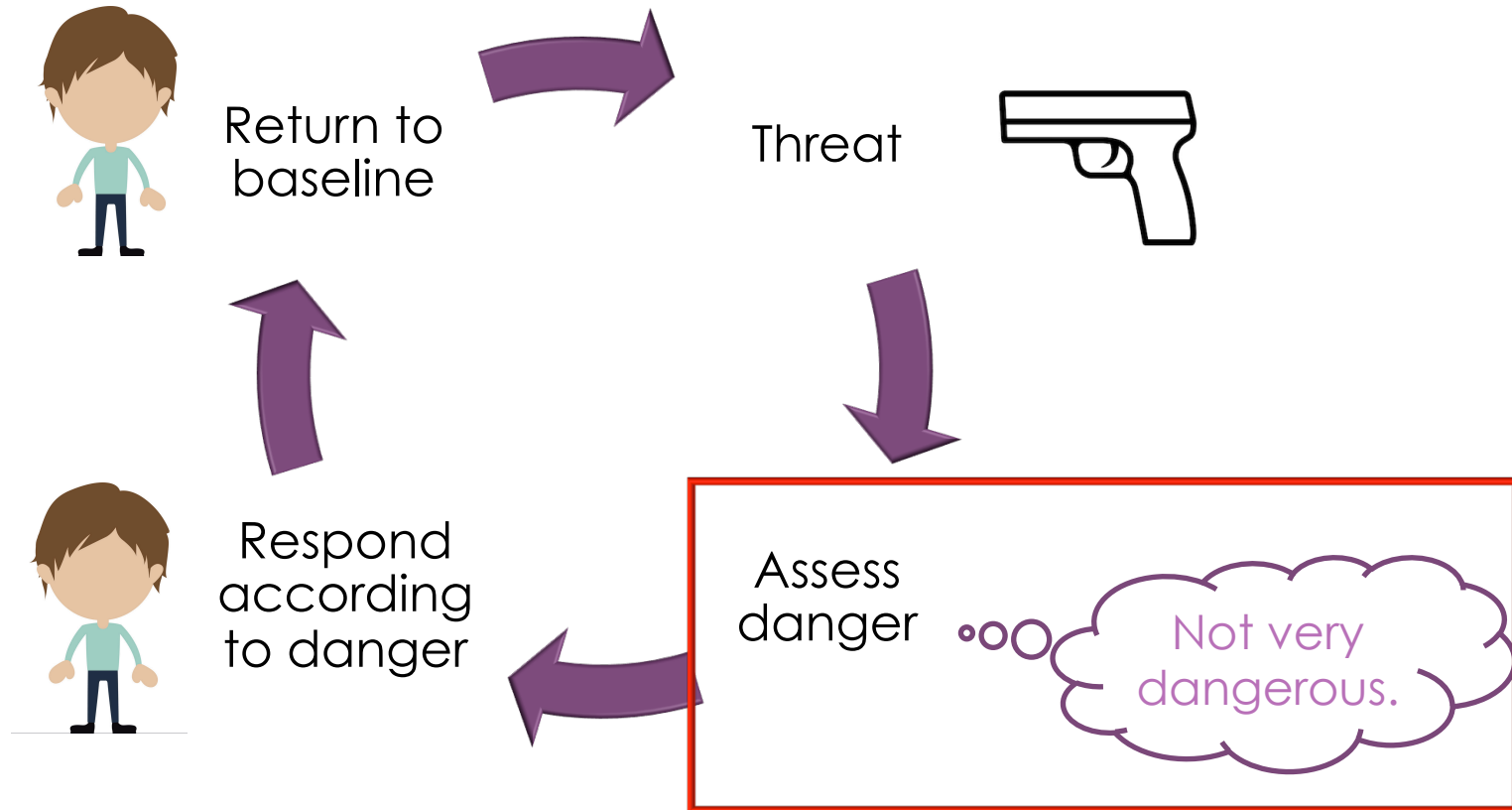
Trauma Triggers



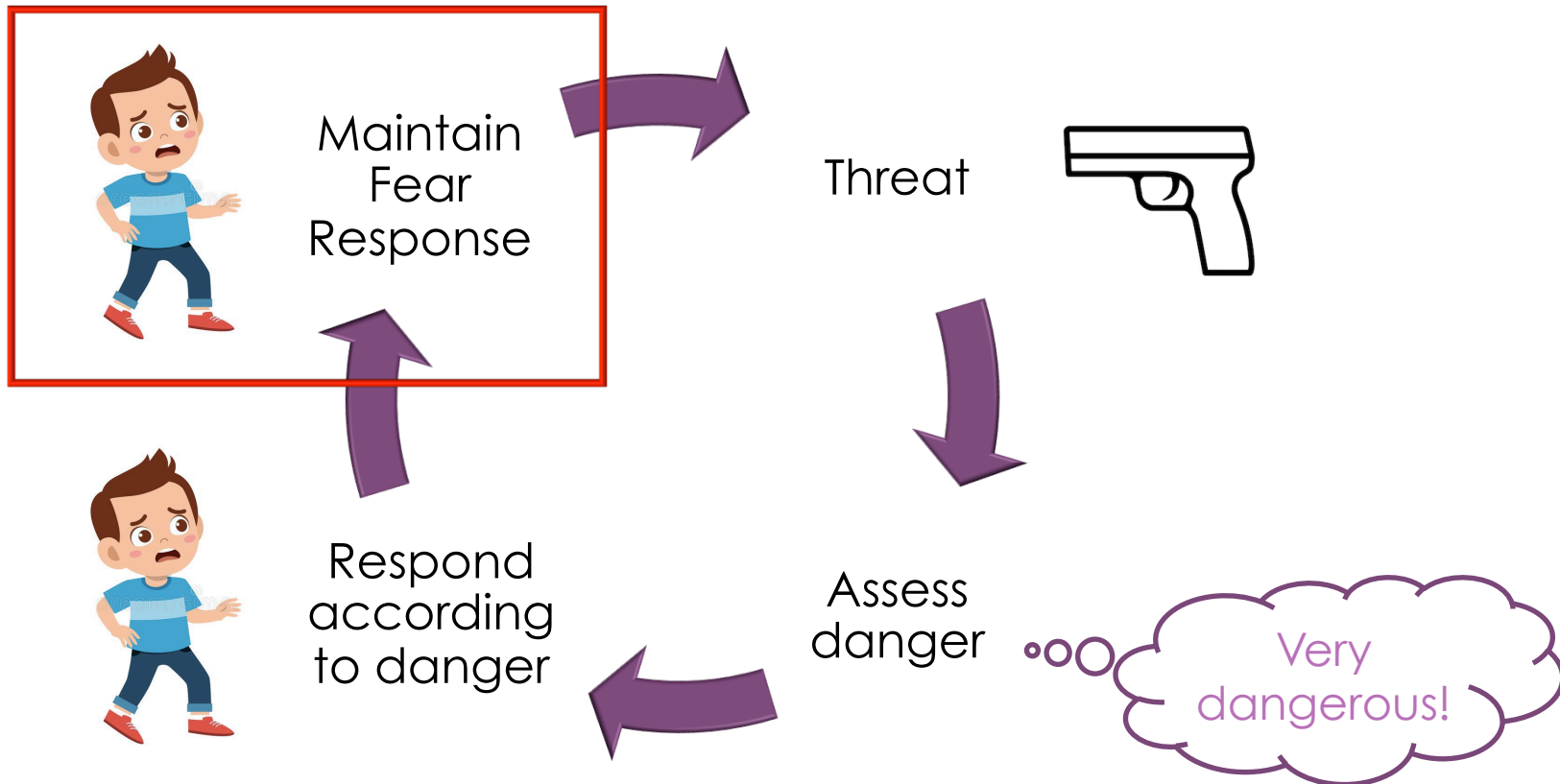
Common Trauma Triggers

- ▣ Loud noises
- ▣ Anniversaries
- ▣ Hand/body gestures
- ▣ Fighting
- ▣ Confusion/chaos
- ▣ Transition/change in routine
- ▣ Feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, or sadness
- ▣ Physical touch
- ▣ Emergency vehicles
- ▣ Certain smells
- ▣ Separation from caregivers
- ▣ Loss of things, people, home, etc.

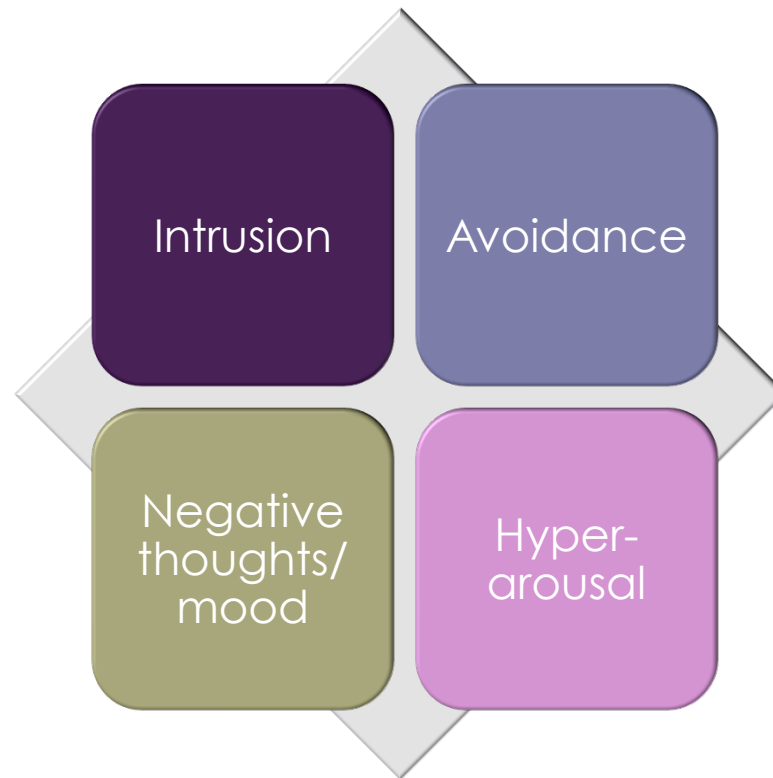
Maladaptive Fear Response



Maladaptive Fear Response



Symptoms of Traumatic Stress



Traumatic Stress in Preschoolers

- ▣ Separation anxiety
- ▣ Regression or delays
- ▣ Recreating the event
- ▣ Sleep difficulties
- ▣ Changes in behavior
- ▣ Over- or under-reactivity
- ▣ Increased distress
- ▣ Anxiety about safety
- ▣ New fears
- ▣ Preoccupation with death

Traumatic Stress in School-Aged Children

- ▣ Increased activity
- ▣ Decreased attention
- ▣ Withdrawal
- ▣ Anger/aggression
- ▣ Absenteeism
- ▣ Mistrust
- ▣ Change in social behavior
- ▣ Difficulty with authority
- ▣ Somatic complaints
- ▣ Changes in school performance
- ▣ Core symptoms of PTSD

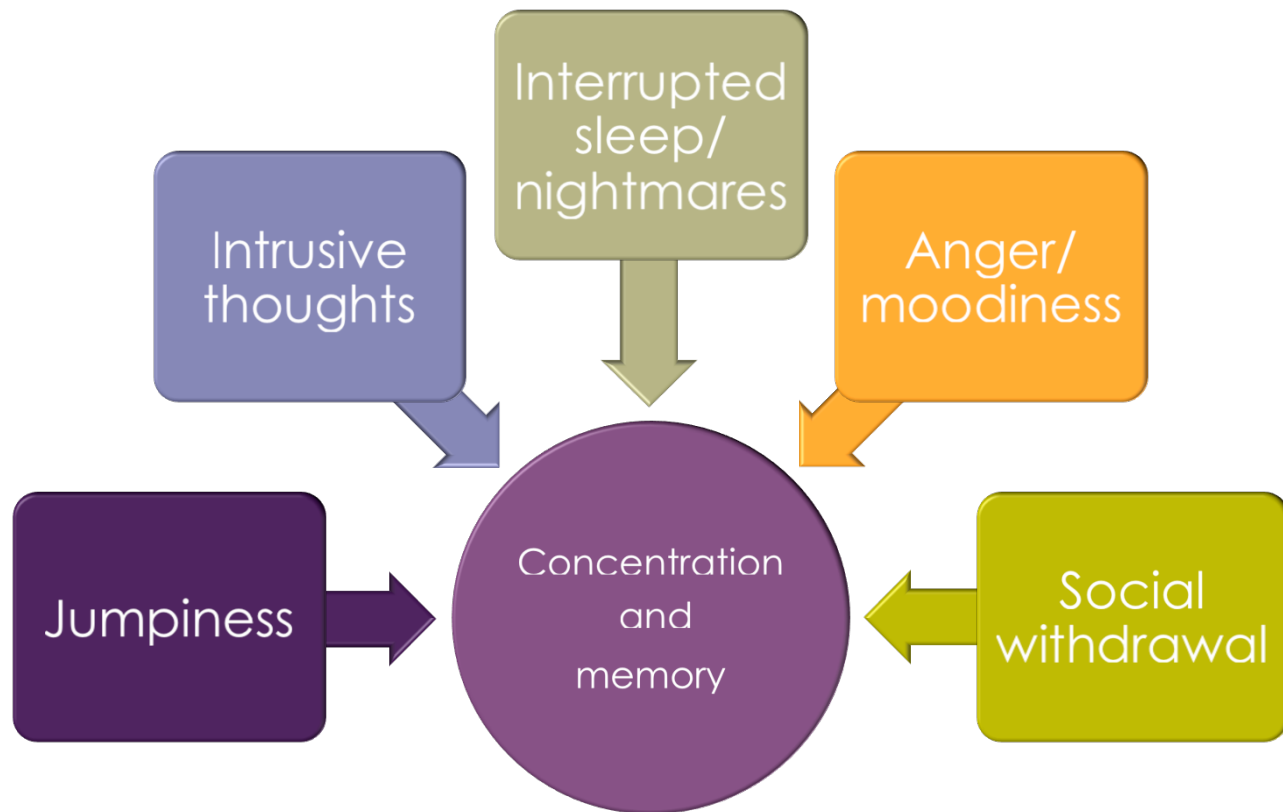
Traumatic Stress in Middle School Students

- ▣ Irritability with friends, teachers, or events
- ▣ Discomfort with feelings
- ▣ Repeated discussion of trauma

Traumatic Stress in High School Students

- ▣ Increase in impulsivity/risk-taking
- ▣ Increased risk for substance use
- ▣ Negative impact on trust or perception of others
- ▣ Heightened difficulty with authority, redirection, or criticism

Trauma and Learning

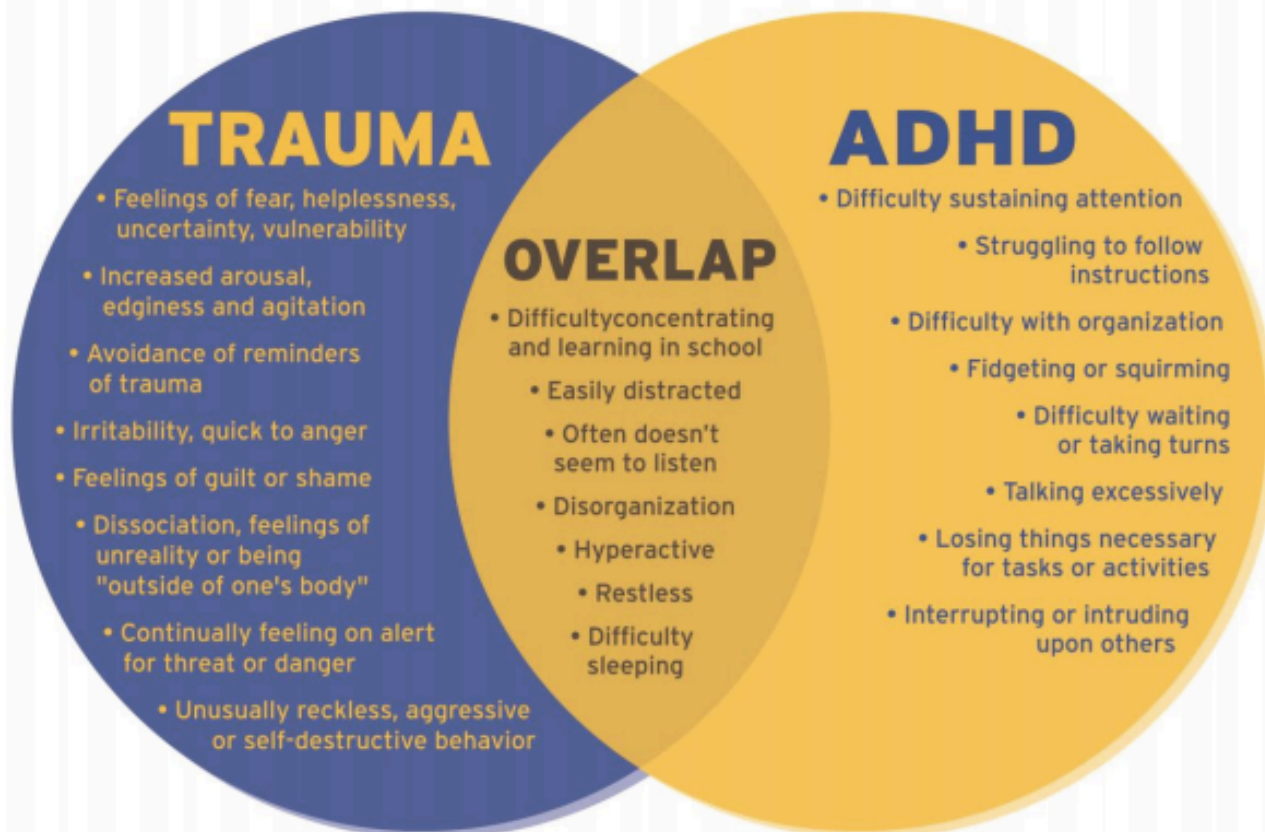


Chronic Trauma and Learning

- Chronic trauma exposure can impact brain development
 - Long-term effects on attention, memory, and cognition
 - Difficulty focusing, organizing, and processing information
 - Challenges with effective problem-solving/planning
 - Increase feelings of frustration and anxiety



Trauma vs. ADHD



Trauma and ADHD Overlap

- ❑ Difficulty with learning and concentration
- ❑ Easily distracted
- ❑ Often doesn't seem to listen
- ❑ Disorganized
- ❑ Hyperactive
- ❑ Restless
- ❑ Difficulty sleeping

ADHD Only

- ❑ Difficulty sustaining attention
- ❑ Struggling to follow instructions
- ❑ Difficulty waiting or taking turns
- ❑ Talking excessively
- ❑ Losing important things
- ❑ Interrupting or intruding upon others

How to Support Youth

- ❑ Maintain routines
- ❑ Give choices
- ❑ Increase support/encouragement
- ❑ Set clear limits with logical consequences
- ❑ Be sensitive to trauma triggers
- ❑ Consider learning accommodations



How to Support Youth

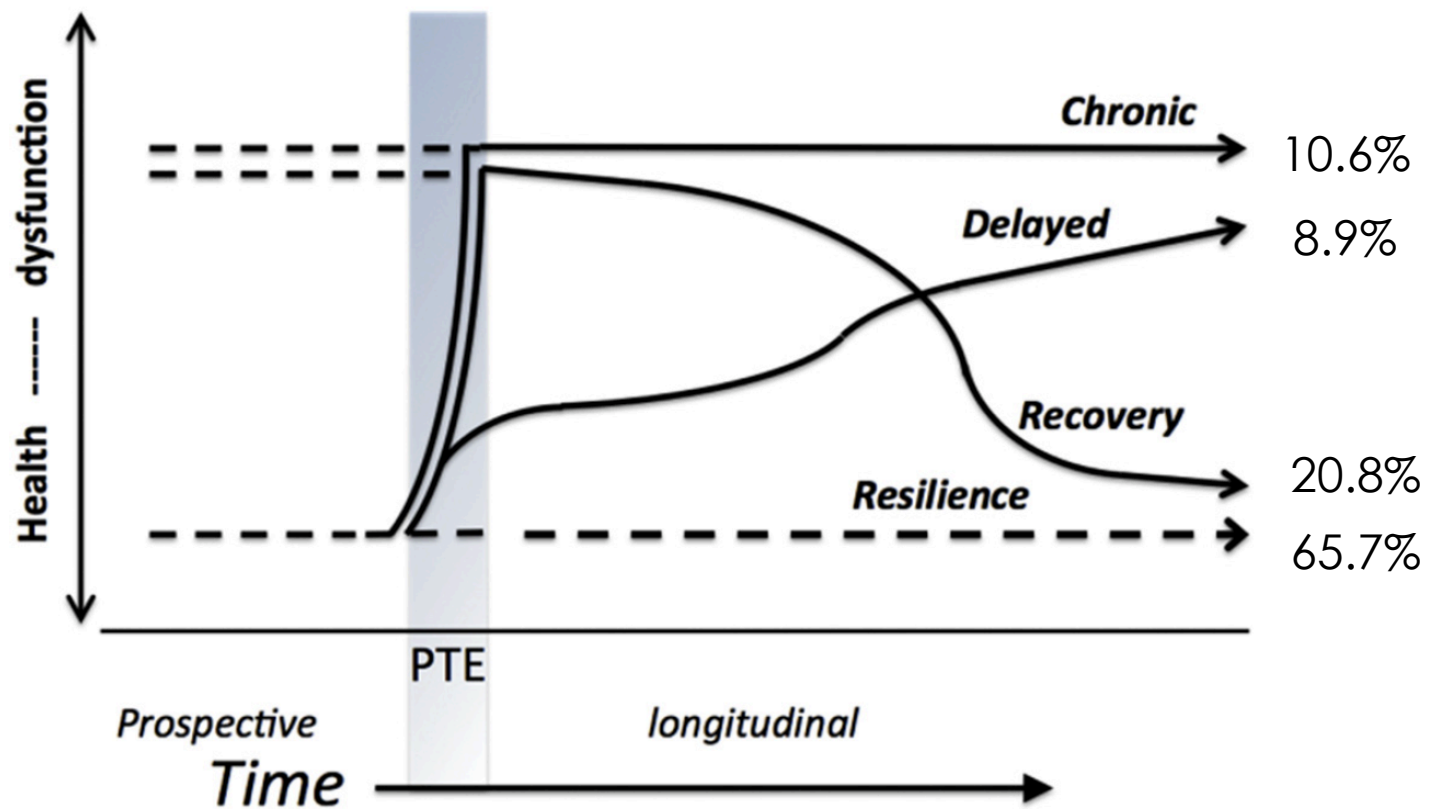
- Anticipate difficult times and provide additional support
- Warn children about anything out of the ordinary
- Avoid provocation and power struggles
- Model prosocial behavior
- Maintain clear boundaries
- Remain respectful and nonjudgmental

When To Get Help

- Following reporting procedures if you suspect abuse
- Contact your supervisor if applicable
- Refer to community resources when a child shows signs of being unable to cope with traumatic stress



Resilience



Compassion Fatigue and Secondary Traumatic Stress

- Irritability and impatience
- Difficulty planning
- Decreased concentration
- Feeling numb, detached, or denying the impact of trauma
- Intense intrusive thoughts about students' trauma
- Dreams about students' trauma

Self-Care

- ▣ Teamwork and social support
- ▣ Seek help with personal trauma
- ▣ Spend time with children who are not experiencing traumatic stress
- ▣ Take breaks
- ▣ Allow yourself to cry
- ▣ Engage in healthy and pleasurable activities
- ▣ Take time to self-reflect

Resources

- ▣ National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN; www.nctsn.org)
 - ▣ Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators
 - ▣ Resources for Working with Homeless Youth
- ▣ SAMHSA Homelessness Programs and Resources (www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources)