

What to Do When Things Are HARD

Understanding & responding to challenges
with gifted & twice-exceptional children



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“Hard”

Difficult
Exhausting
Tough
Unpleasant
Uncomfortable

but also:

Not easy to bend or break (RESILIENT!)

Let's Get Curious:



- ❑ about *why* behavior happens**
- ❑ ways to navigate difficult moments**
- ❑ how adults can stay regulated when it matters most**



Common Themes

“We just don’t know what the right approach is”

“It feels like we’ve tried everything”

“What are we missing?”

“Communications from teachers/coaches doesn’t match what we see at home”

“Lots of worries, doesn’t talk about it, maybe anxious?”

“Argues, yells to get their way”

“Avoids, ignores; just refuses to do anything”

“It’s the same thing over and over”

“It seems to be getting worse not better over time”

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**These apply to
nearly any
circumstance!**

**What the research tells us
about “what to do when
things are hard”**

What can we do when things are hard?



- ❑ **Pause; Slow Things Down**
- ❑ **Name What's Going On**
- ❑ **Break The Problem Into Smaller Pieces**
- ❑ **Ask for Support**

What can we do when things are hard?

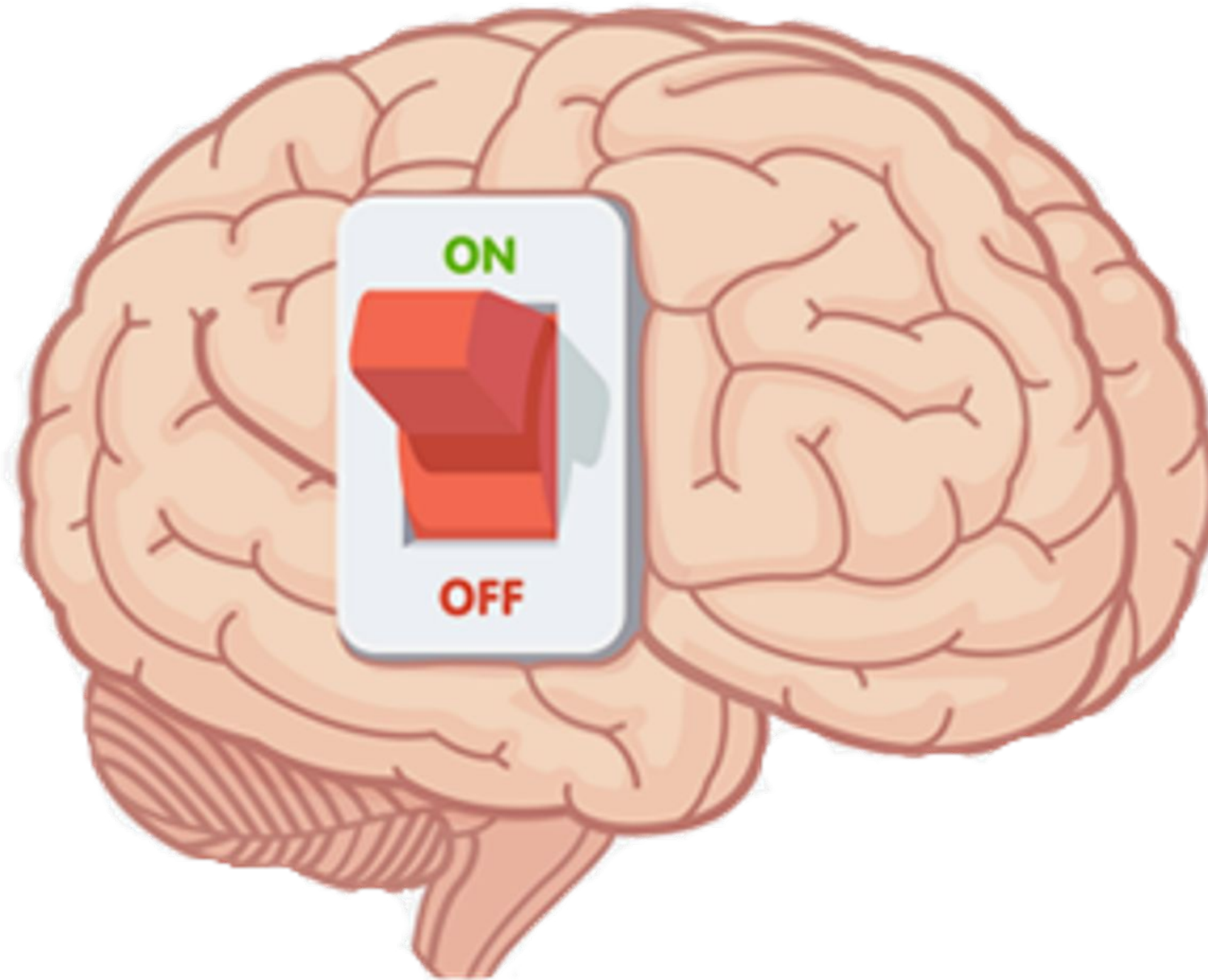


- ☐ **Take Care of Your Basics**
- ☐ **Be Kind and Curious With Yourself**
- ☐ **Move in the Direction of Your Values**
- ☐ **Remember, It Won't Feel Like This Forever**



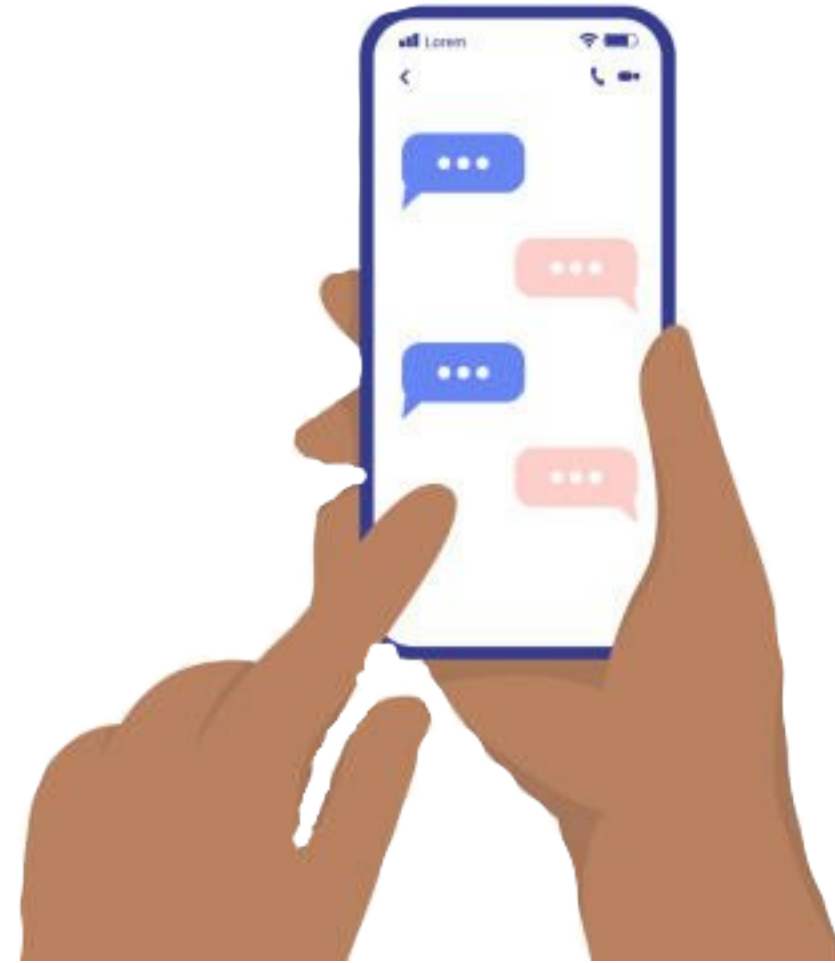
A Day in the Life...

Pause;
Slow things
down



Why is pausing so hard?

Pause;
Slow things
down



Why is pausing so hard?



An orange circle with a thick black border, positioned on the left side of the slide. It contains the text "Pause; Slow things down" in white.

**Pause;
Slow things
down**

**While your emotional brain gets
the first word...**

**your reasoning brain can have
the last word if you let it.**

Pause;
Slow things
down

Where Are Emotions Felt in the Body

Increase responses registered as **warmer colors**, while decreased responses registered as **cooler colors**.



Anger

Increased activation in the upper half of the body and the arms. Notice the activation in the legs and feet as well.



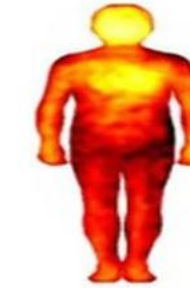
Fear

Increased activation in the upper half of the body, excluding the arms. Also notice the activation in the feet.



Disgust

Increased activation in the upper half of the body and the arms.



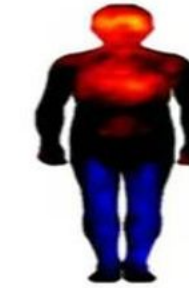
Happiness

Increased activation in the throughout the entire body.



Sadness

Increased activation in the chest, as well as decreased activation in the arms, legs, and feet.



Surprise

Increased activation in the chest and head. Decreased activation in the legs.



Envy

Increased activation in the chest and head, decreased activation in the legs.



Shame

Increased activation in the torso and head; decreased activation in the arms, legs, and feet.



Pride

Increased activation in the torso, head, and arms.



Contempt

Increased activation in the head and decreased activation in the pelvic and legs area.



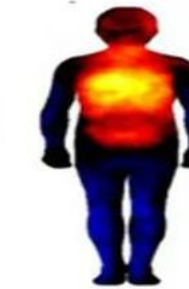
Depression

Decrease activation in the whole body, practically the limbs.



Love

Increased activation throughout the whole body, but less activation in the legs.



Anxiety

Increased activation in torso and head. Decreased activation in the arms, legs, and feet.



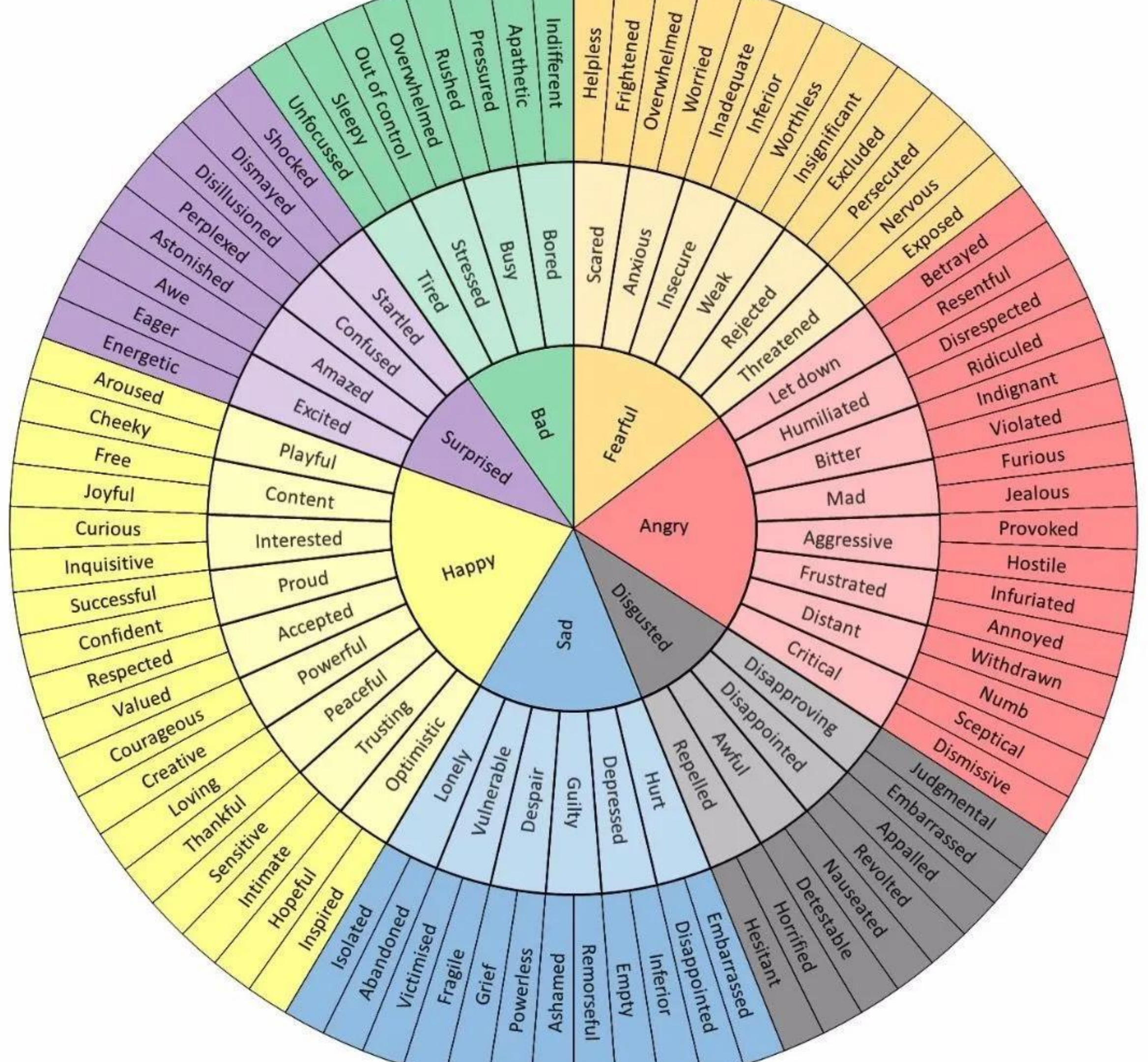
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Name what
is going
on.

Feelings are information.



**Name what
is going
on.**





Co-Regulation

The first intervention you provide?

Your presence

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**Break the
problem
into smaller
pieces.**



Every task requires the right balance
of

competence

(knowledge + skill)

and

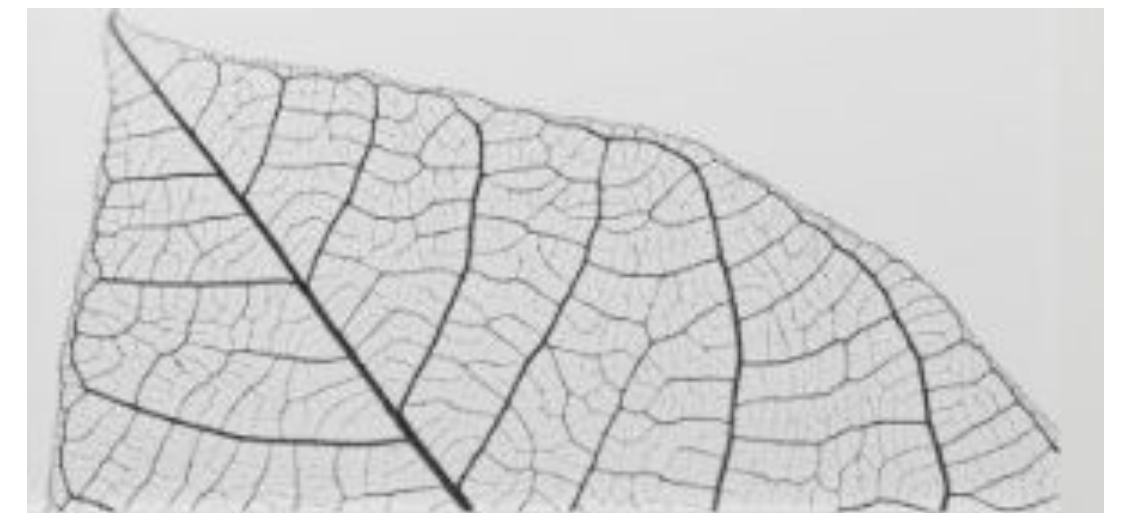
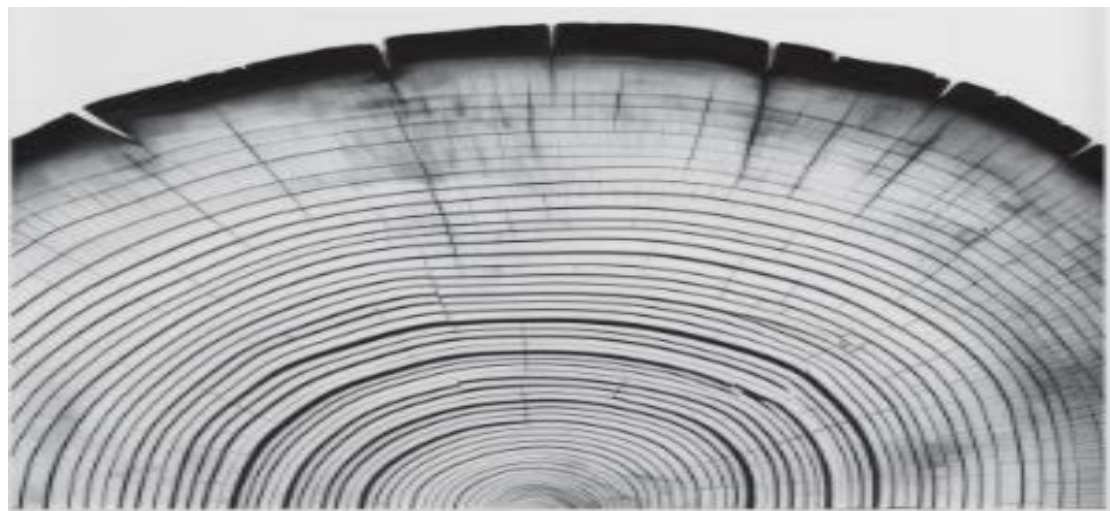
commitment

(motivation + confidence)

Brain Networks & Processes...

(2026, Rodriguez, et al)

- ❑ Sensory “circuits”
- ❑ Attentional
- ❑ Emotional
- ❑ Reward/Motivation
- ❑ Social communication; other aspects of executive function





***Using everything we know,
is there
-any other-
explanation
for what we are seeing or
experiencing?***

Questions
I Love
Asking!

What are 2-3 things you are *best* at doing?

What are 2-3 things you most *enjoy* doing?

What are 2-3 things you spend a lot of time doing that you are *really bad at*?

What are 2-3 things that bring you the most *praise* in your life?

If you weren't afraid of getting in trouble, what would you want your [teacher, parent] to know about you that they don't understand?

Adapted from *ADHD 2.0* (2021);
Ed Hallowell, MD & John Ratey, MD

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Emotion

What to Do: Evidence-Based Emotional Interventions (WITH TALKING)

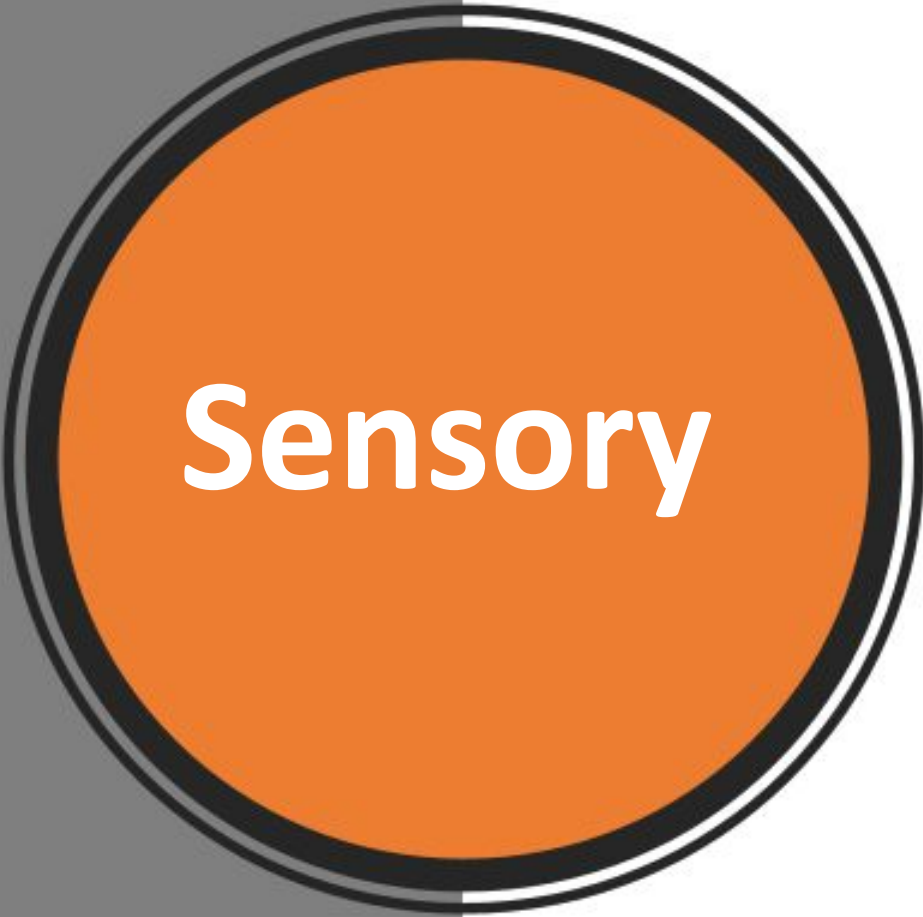
- ❑ Use language to highlight flexibility
-stuck/unstuck, big problem/little problem, Plan B
- ❑ Have a default strategy
- ❑ Ask them to predict what will happen and how they will handle it; teach & rehearse the strategy; give them the exact words to say as a starting point
- ❑ Give “controlled choice”
- ❑ Preview changes in schedule
- ❑ Reduce novelty & return to familiarity

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Emotion

What to Do: Evidence-Based Emotional Interventions (WITHOUT TALKING)

- ❑ Reduce use of language; have a “help” card or other signal
- ❑ 1-minute plank
- ❑ 30 second downward dog; 20 second child’s pose
- ❑ 4-7-8- breath
- ❑ “shake it out” / dance!
- ❑ play loud music/quiet music
- ❑ get outside - “touch grass”, sunshine, go for walk
- ❑ dim the lights; use a calm down/quiet space
- ❑ eat something (sour!) hold something (cold!)
- ❑ do an Insight Timer (or similar) meditation
- ❑ do something kind for someone else
- ❑ do it scared. do it anyway.



Sensory

What to Do: Evidence-Based Sensory Interventions (more on this later!)

Do we know the triggers?

Common: Unstructured time, ambiguous situations, transitions...excessive screen time....specials, cafeteria, recess; writing time, homework; bedtime; sibling conflict, the list goes on...

- ❑ Limits to the usefulness of fidget toys, wiggle cushions, headphones, etc.
- ❑ Reduce or eliminate triggers
- ❑ Plan ahead and anticipate needs (with the child)
- ❑ Peer/sibling support? an accountability partner?
- ❑ Change the environment - light, sound, proximity
- ❑ Teach & practice mindfulness-daily! (1 minute!)

Mindful
Noticing

PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR SURROUNDINGS IN THE MOMENT

**Silently look around the room
you are in for 1 minute**

**Try to find things in the
room that you've never
noticed before.**

Looking
Around the
Room

Layers of
sound

**Close your eyes and
listen.**



Mindful
Body

LOOSEN UP YOUR BODY & MIND

squish &
relax

① Sit or lie down with your eyes closed.

② **SQUISH & SQUEL** the muscles in your body as tightly as you can.

FACE &
JAW

SHOULDERS

ARMS &
HANDS

CHEST &
BELLY

LEGS & FEET

③ Hold for a few seconds.

④ Slowly release & relax

Mindful Breathing

FOCUS YOUR BREATHING

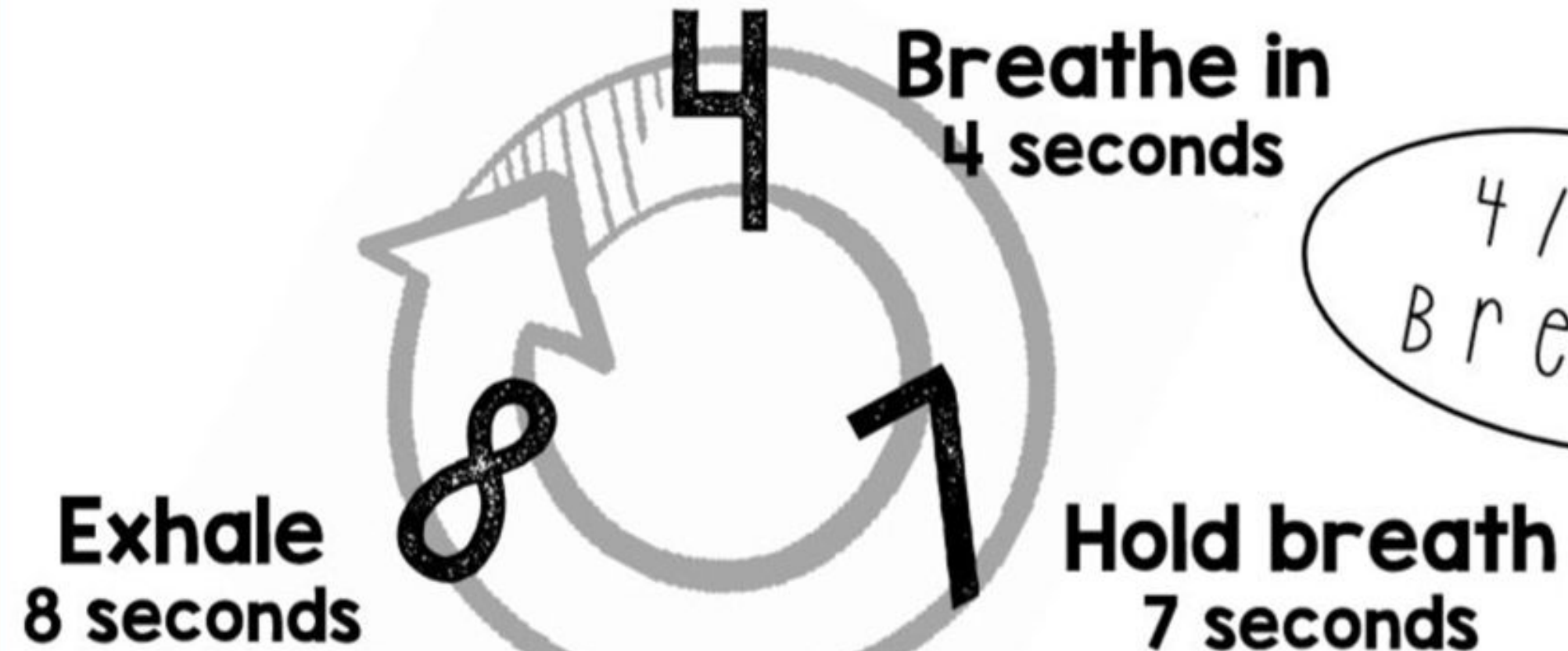
Heart-Belly
Breath

① Breathe in
through your nose
with your mouth
closed



② Slowly breathe out through your mouth -
imagine the air emptying from your lungs

③ Breathe in- feel your belly expand



4 / 7 / 8
Breath

Mindful
Thought

TAKE CONTROL OF REALLY BIG FEELINGS

When you have a
really big feeling,
remember that
thoughts are like
bubbles!

POP!

Thought
Bubbles

Picture your thought as a
thought bubble and watch it

F L O A T A W A Y

or **POP IT!**

with an **I Can** thought or another
exercise in this flipbook. 😊

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Motivation

What to Do: Evidence-Based Motivational Interventions

- ❑ Help children define and identify “have tos”, “want tos” and “love tos”
- ❑ Use the “behavioral nudge” technique to build momentum
- ❑ Reward and reinforce healthy & desired behaviors
- ❑ Help them identify something to look forward to after work is done
- ❑ Use a timer - start with “just two minutes”
- ❑ Talk yourself into it - challenge negative thinking!
- ❑ Set up for success by scheduling activities at times you are most likely to succeed



What we are giving our attention to matters!

It also shapes how we offer and seek support



**Ask for
support.**

How?

Who else is on our team? Who can we talk to in our school, in our district, in the community?

How do we communicate with teachers?
How can we build a relationship and ask for help?

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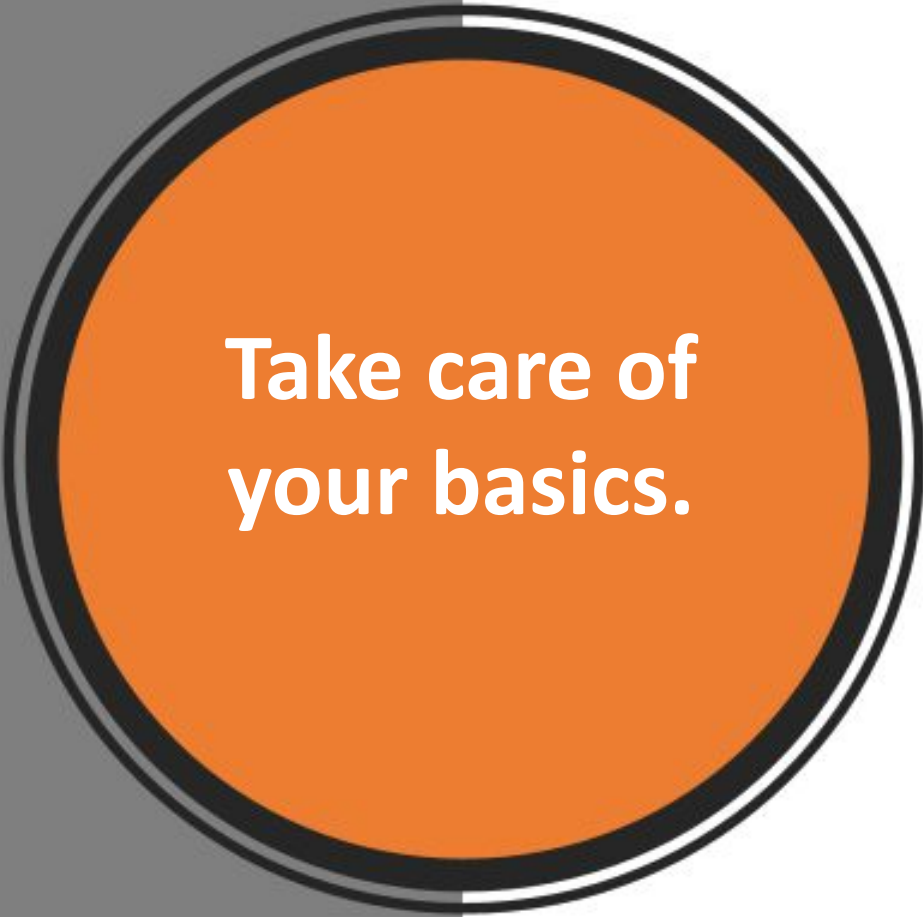
Attention

What to Do: Evidence-Based Attentional Interventions

- ❑ Structured physical activity; rhythm & movement
- ❑ Training attention & awareness
- ❑ Build working memory skills

Classroom-Based Behavior Management

- ❑ Token economies
- ❑ Breaking down tasks with visuals
- ❑ Making time real
- ❑ Frequent & personalized communication

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**Take care of
your basics.**



**Be kind and
curious
with
yourself.**

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**Move in the
direction of
your values.**



Move in the Direction of Your Values

- ❑ Enhances self-discovery and decision-making
- ❑ Guides goal setting and conflict resolution
- ❑ Treat values as your compass

Here are some other experiments to explore your own values:

1. Imagine that an important newscaster were doing a biographical story on your life. Think about how you'd want them to describe you. How would they describe the way you spent your time? How you related to others? What was most important to you? What are your strengths as a person? Write down a narrative of what they would say.
2. Imagine you could read the mind of a person that's important to you and with whom you've had a good relationship. They are thinking all kinds of thoughts about your qualities: what you stand for, what your strengths are, what you mean to him or her, and the role you play in his or her life.
3. Think about your heroes. They can be people directly in your life, or other people that you look up to, even fictional characters. What are their qualities? What do you admire about them?
4. Imagine you are writing your own autobiography. Imagine how you would like to live your life, barring all barriers, in the "best case scenario." What are the things that are most important to you in this scenario? What would you stand for? How would you spend your time?
5. Imagine that someone is performing the eulogy at your funeral. Looking back on your life, they would be commenting on your strengths, values, and achievements. How would you want them to describe your life?

Physical well-being

What kind of values do you have regarding your physical wellbeing? How do you want to look at yourself?

Family relationships

What kind of relationships do you want with your family? What kind of mother/father/ brother/sister/uncle/aunt do you want to be? What is important to you about a good family?

Intimate relationships

What kind of partner do you want to be? What quality of relationship do you want to be part of? How do you want to spend time together?

Citizenship/Community

What kind of environment do you want to be a part of? How do you want to contribute to your community?



Mental/Emotional Health

What helps you maintain sound mental health? Why is this important to you? What issues would you like to address?

Spirituality

What kind of relationship do you want with God/nature/ the Earth/mankind? What does having a spiritual life mean to you? How can you exercise this?

Friendships/ social relations

What sort of friend do you want to be? How would you like to act towards your friends? How can these relationships be improved?

Hobbies/ Recreation

How would you like to enjoy yourself? What relaxes you? When are you most playful? Are there any special interests you would like to pursue?

Education/training/ personal growth

How would you like to grow? What kind of skills would you like to develop? What would you like to know more about?

Employment/career

What kind of work is valuable to you? What qualities do you want to bring as an employee? What kind of work relationships would you like to build?

Thank you!

Questions?

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