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Trauma-Informed Tips for Working with Neurodivergent Students

Diana Perry, Regional Trauma Coordinator, CREC
Jen Tuller, Education Specialist, CREC Resource Group

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[Notes Catcher](#)

Today's Objectives

Participants will be able to:

- Understand the intersection between neurodivergence and trauma, and recognize how **trauma-informed practices can support neurodivergent students**
- Identify and apply specific trauma-informed strategies that create a **supportive and inclusive learning environment** for neurodivergent students

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Navigating the Journey

Supporting neurodivergent students is like navigating through different kinds of landscapes. Each terrain presents its own challenges, beauty, and learning opportunities.



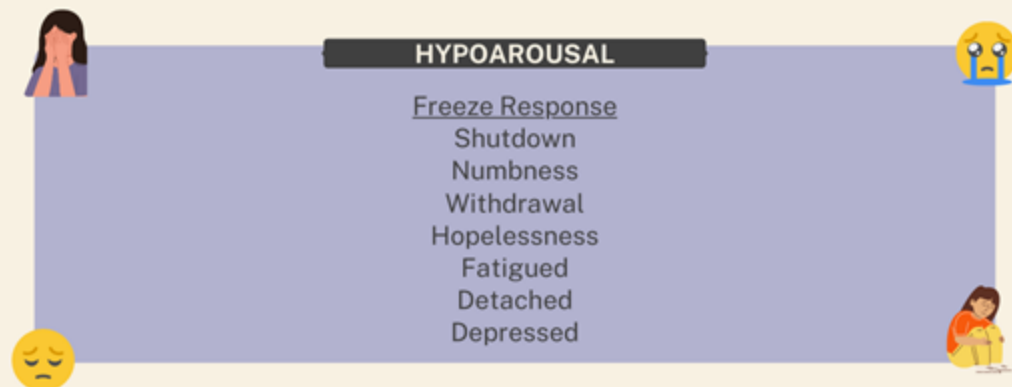
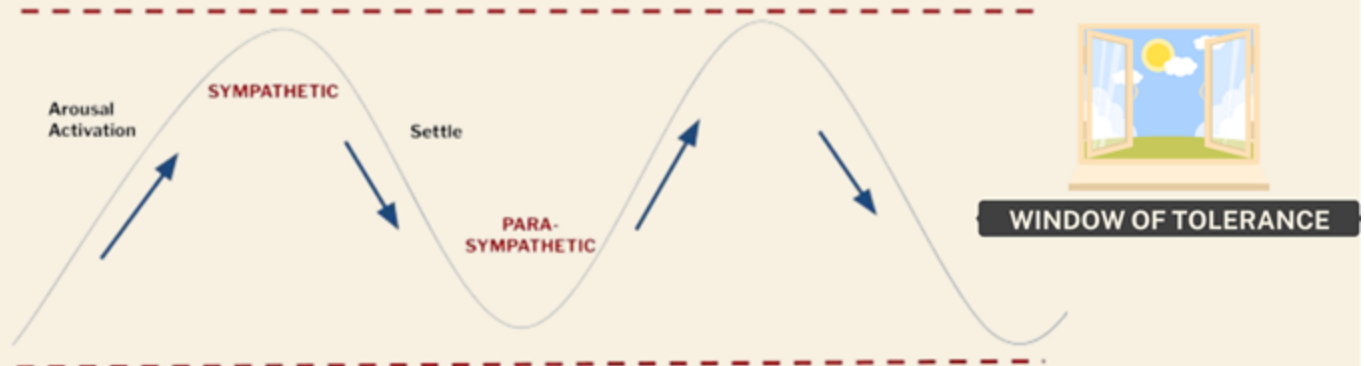
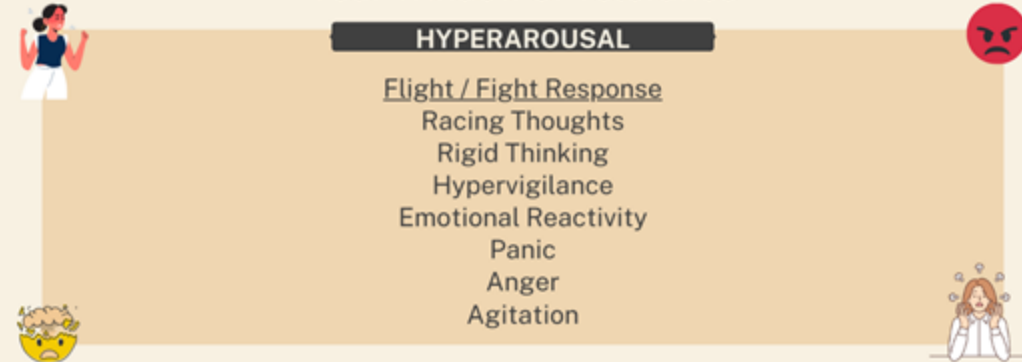
Diagnosis is Rife with Inequity

1 in 6 kids in the US are diagnosed with an intellectual or developmental disability

- Latinx kids are, on average, diagnosed **1 year later** than non-Latinx/White kids
- Black parents report that their concerns are **often ignored**
 - diagnoses come **more than 3 years after** initial concerns are expressed
 - mean age of diagnosis: 5 years, 5 months
 - over **1 year later than average** age of diagnosis



How Trauma Can Affect Your Window of Tolerance



Safety

**Trustworthiness
& Transparency**

Peer Support

SAMHSA's Six Guiding Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach

**Collaboration &
Mutuality**

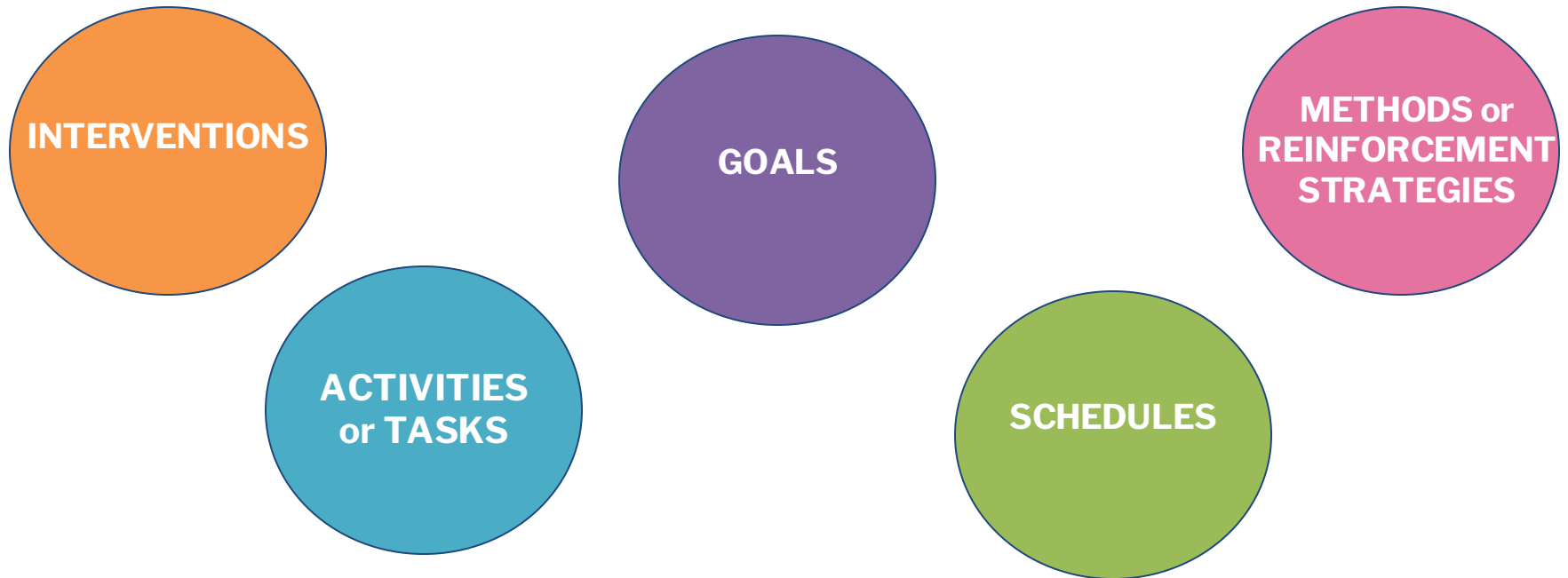
**Empowerment,
Voice & Choice**

**Cultural,
Historical &
Gender Issues**

How does your system support neurodiverse students in these areas?

In which area is there room for growth?

Common Areas for Self-Efficacy



Offer Choice, Minimize Distress, Increase Comfort,
& Recognize Past Adversities or Current
Activators



Strategy Time

Executive Functioning Worksheet

Find your child's EF challenges and check off the interventions that have been effective (or you think may be effective). Talk them over with his teacher(s).

PERFORMANCE CHALLENGES RELATED TO ADHD & EFD

Getting started and finishing classwork

- ☐ Use reminders: visual (Post-it note, timer) or aural (alarm, adult prompt).
- ☐ Give a private signal as a reminder; pull your ear.
- ☐ Student selects nearby student to tap his arm as a reminder.

Remembering, completing, and submitting assignments

- ☐ Use **remind.com** software to notify student and parent of assignments.
- ☐ Appoint "row captains" to check to see that homework assignments are written down and later submitted.
- ☐ Let student take a picture of the posted assignment on his cell phone.

Losing homework

- ☐ Notify parents of missing assignments.
- ☐ Parents should keep all finished papers, review with child, and submit missing work.

Following directions

- ☐ State directions clearly: Step 1, do all odd problems. Step 2,....
- ☐ Post directions on board or give written copies to students.

Getting organized

- ☐ Walk all students step-by-step through organizing their notebooks, and check them regularly.
- ☐ Ask another student to help him organize his notebook.
- ☐ Parent/tutor reviews student's notebook weekly and helps with organization.

No sense of time (late)

- ☐ Have student set watch or cell phone alarm to keep up with time.
- ☐ Parents review how much time is needed for driving, parking, visiting the locker, and talking with friends. Leave early enough to get to school on time.

Changing activities or classes

- ☐ Give a warning, "Finish up. In five minutes

you need to start work on your math assignment/leave for lunch, PE, or art."

Planning ahead

- ☐ List step-by-step requirements, divided into segments with separate due dates.
- ☐ Notify parents/students of pending separate due dates.

Controlling emotions, acting impulsively, talking a lot, or daydreaming

- ☐ Medication is most helpful when a child talks a lot, daydreams, blurts out, or interrupts.
- ☐ Take a photo of the child raising her hand; tape it to her desk as a visual reminder.
- ☐ Give opportunities to talk more: read the morning bulletin, read stories to younger children.

COMMON ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

Slow processing speed (slow reading, writing, responding to questions, and taking longer to complete tests and homework)

- ☐ Shorten assignments (e.g., every third math problem).
- ☐ Give extended time on tests.
- ☐ If student spends hours completing homework that takes most students 30 minutes, shorten assignments.
- ☐ Allow student to write answers only, not the questions (photocopy questions).
- ☐ Ask a question, give a few minutes to think, and come back to student for answer.

Remembering key points in lectures and what they read and study

- ☐ Appoint a note taker who copies and shares with the class.
- ☐ Have student slide color cellophane strip or ruler down the page to highlight and help him focus on what he's reading.
- ☐ Use erasable highlighter to note important information.
- ☐ Underline main noun and verb in first sentence in each paragraph to identify main idea.
- ☐ Write key points on Post-it notes.
- ☐ Teach test-taking skills.

- ☐ Encourage students to review test material briefly right before going to bed.

Memorizing facts: letters, numbers, words, multiplication tables, math formulas, and foreign languages

- ☐ Use memory tricks, such as acronyms or mnemonics.
- ☐ Write key facts on strips of poster board and post at school or home.
- ☐ Consider *Times Tables the Fun Way*, a book that helps kids memorize math facts.
- ☐ Post chart with multiplication tables on desk.

Analyzing, synthesizing, paraphrasing, and problem-solving

- ☐ Provide step-by-step written instructions for assignments.
- ☐ See tips below for organizing and writing essays.

Writing essays or reports

- ☐ Have student dictate essay to a "scribe" or parent to type, then edit and organize on the computer.
- ☐ Use graphic organizers with step-by-step tips for essay components.
- ☐ Average two grades on essays—one for content and one for grammar.
- ☐ Give topic choices of only two or three titles, quickly narrow down to one topic.

Completing complex math/algebra problems

- ☐ Solve sample problem and leave on the board.
- ☐ Have students work in pairs (teacher explains problem, students make up their own examples, and discuss answers).

Completing long-term projects on time

- ☐ Provide graphic organizer to plan necessary steps to complete the project.
- ☐ Provide a job card with steps required for completion.
- ☐ Divide long-term projects into segments with separate due dates and grades.
- ☐ Notify parents about projects. Include this in the student's IEP or 504 Plan.

Ideas for Supporting Executive Functioning

| Challenge | Impact | Support Strategies | Tools & Resources |
|---|---|---|---|
| Difficulty remembering assignments | Missed homework, disorganization. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write homework in the same spot daily. - Use assignment notebooks or digital planners. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Homework planner apps (Google Keep, MyHomework) - Whiteboard for daily reminders |
| Struggles with planning and organization | Poor time management, lost materials. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schedule weekly organization time. - Teach explicit executive functioning and study skills. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weekly planners - Task management apps (Todoist, Trello) |
| Transitions are overwhelming | Anxiety, difficulty shifting focus. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Give 3-5 extra minutes to organize before transitions. - Use visual schedules and transition cues. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visual timers - Transition warning cards |
| Inconsistent routines and difficulty following them | Difficulty starting and completing tasks. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create routines and practice them often. - Use visual step-by-step guides. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Visual schedules - Routine charts |
| Forgets materials needed for class or home | Frustration, incomplete assignments. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create an end-of-the-day checklist. - Keep an extra set of books at home and in the classroom. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Checklist apps (Microsoft To-Do) - Duplicate school supplies |
| Struggles maintaining focus | Zoning out, missing key information. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provide brain breaks during and after instruction. - Incorporate movement into lessons. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fidget tools - Standing desks |
| Unclear on academic and social expectations | Misunderstandings, social struggles. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clearly explain academic and social expectations. - Provide concrete examples and role-playing activities. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social stories - Visual behavior expectations |
| Poor time management during tasks | Incomplete work, stress. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use countdowns and time checks during work periods. - Offer structured work sessions with breaks. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Timers (Time Timer, Pomodoro apps) - Task breakdown sheets |
| Loses or misplaces homework and materials | Frustration, lower grades. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have students set up homework binders. - Teach organization techniques. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Color-coded folders - Binder organization labels |

Supporting Social Emotional Skill Development

GAMES TO TEACH SOCIAL EMOTIONAL SKILLS

| GAME | SKILL TAUGHT | DESCRIPTION |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------|---|
| Jenga | Self-Control | A skill game where players remove blocks from a tower without causing it to fall. |
| Team Pictionary | Teamwork | A drawing game where teams must guess what one of the members is attempting to illustrate. |
| Chess | Decision-Making | A classic strategy game that encourages planning and decision-making. |
| Charades | Social Cues | A mime game where players guess the word or phrase someone is trying to represent without speaking. |
| Guess Who? | Conversations | A deduction game where players must guess the opponent's mystery character. |
| Candy Land | Turn Taking | A simple board game for young children that teaches rule following and turn sharing. |
| Scrabble | Flexibility | A crossword game where players create words on the game board to earn points. |
| "Feelings" Uno | Emotions | A variation of classic Uno where players must express an emotion when they play a special card. |
| Monopoly | Financial Literacy, Patience | A property trading game that teaches money management and negotiation. |
| The Settlers of Catan | Resource Management, Strategy | A strategy game where players collect resources and build developments to win. |
| The Resistance | Trust, Deception | A card game that tests players' abilities to detect deceit and build trust. |
| Ticket to Ride | Strategic Thinking, Cooperation | A board game where players build railroads across the country to earn points. |
| Pandemic | Team Strategy, Problem Solving | A cooperative game where players work together to stop the spread of global diseases. |
| Dixit | Imagination, Interpretation | A card game where players use their imagination to match images with stories or concepts. |

Tools and Strategies to enhance functioning, memory, and independence

| Challenge | Support Strategy | Tools/Resources | Why It Works |
|---|--|--|---|
| Difficulty starting tasks | Use "First-Then" prompts and structured checklists | Visual checklists, timers, task cards | Helps initiate action with clear, step-by-step expectations |
| Forgetting materials or assignments | Color-coded folders and daily planners | Assignment notebook, subject-labeled folders | Promotes routine and memory through visual systems |
| Trouble managing time | Break tasks into timed segments with visual timers | Timer apps, sand timers, time strips | Makes time visible and manageable |
| Losing track of multi-step tasks | Use visual schedules and task breakdown charts | Visual task maps, sticky notes | Supports sequential thinking and task completion |
| Disorganized workspace | Provide labeled storage and guided clean-up routines | Drawer labels, picture cues, checklists | Reduces cognitive overload and builds independence |
| Difficulty transitioning between activities | Give warnings and visual countdowns | Transition visuals, countdown clocks | Prepares the student for change and reduces stress |
| Poor memory recall (short-term or working) | Repetition, use of memory cues, and mnemonics | Anchor charts, flashcards, repetition games | Reinforces learning through structured repetition |
| Trouble prioritizing tasks | Use visual "To Do/Done" boards or traffic light charts | Task organizers, color-coded priority labels | Helps distinguish between urgent and non-urgent tasks |
| Limited self-monitoring | Teach check-in routines and self-reflection | Self-monitoring charts, mood meters | Builds awareness and encourages ownership of progress |
| Overwhelm with cluttered instructions | Simplify and chunk verbal or written instructions | Step-by-step cards, visual key words | Supports processing and reduces frustration |

NOTE: Students with cognitive disabilities benefit from **structured, predictable, and visual systems** that support organization, attention, and task management. The strategies in this table are **for informational purposes only** and should be **adapted to each learner's cognitive profile** in collaboration with special educators, therapists, and families.

Some ideas for what to say when a child is melting down

Supportive language for emotional safety and regulation

| What to Say | When to Use It | Why It Helps |
|---|---|---|
| "I'm here. You're safe." | At the beginning of a meltdown when the child is overwhelmed | Reassures the nervous system and grounds the child in the present |
| "You don't have to talk right now." | When the child is non-verbal or shut down | Reduces pressure and allows space to regulate |
| "Let's take some slow breaths together." | When the child is starting to calm but still dysregulated | Models co-regulation and slows the body's stress response |
| "I see you're having a hard time. I'll stay close." | During the meltdown without trying to fix it | Communicates presence and support without adding stimulation |
| "You're not in trouble. You're having a big feeling." | When the child expresses fear or shame | Helps separate emotion from behavior and reduces guilt |
| "Let's go to our calm space." | When redirection is possible and safe | Offers a regulated, quiet place for recovery |
| "You're allowed to feel angry/scared/sad." | When validating emotional expression | Teaches emotional literacy and acceptance |
| "We'll get through this together." | Toward the end of the meltdown as the child begins to reconnect | Builds trust and emotional connection |

Special Education Community

Apps Made with Specific Kiddos in Mind

Dyslexia

SoundLiteracy

Read 2 Me

Dyseggia

Dyslexia Quest

DD's Dictionary: A Dyslexic Dictionary

Happy Math Multiplication Rhymes

Phonics with Phonograms

ASD/Executive Functioning

Speech with Milo

Sequences for Autism

Verbal Me

See, Touch, Learn

Words on Wheels

Autism iHelp

Autism/DDT Shapes

Autism/DDT Letters

Sight Words

Visual Impairments

Dragon Dictation

Light Detector

Color ID

TapTapSee

Talking Calculator

SayText

AccessNote

VisualBrailier

VIA

Be My Eyes - Helping Blind See

Difficulties with Writing

The Writing Machine

iWrite Words

Letter School

Alpha Writer

ABC Pocket Phonics

Word Magic

Ideas for IEP/Behavioral Plan Accommodations

For This Behavior...

...Suggest This Solution

| Assignments | |
|--|--|
| Consistently unable to complete classwork in time | Allow extra time to complete assigned work |
| Starts assignments strong, but quality of work decreases | Shorten long assignments or break into smaller parts |
| Struggles to follow instructions | Pair written and oral instructions |
| Makes careless mistakes | Schedule a five-minute period to check work before turning it in |
| Distractibility | |
| Falls behind during class discussions | Ask questions to encourage participation |
| Complains that lessons are "boring" | Involve student in presenting the lesson |
| Easily distracted by outside stimuli | Seat student in the front row; develop a private signal to refocus attention |
| Disruptive Behavior | |
| Engages in "attention-getting" behaviors | Seat student near positive role model |
| Blurts out answers or interrupts others | Acknowledge answers only when student's hand is raised and she's called upon |
| Touches other students | Increase distance between desks |
| Doesn't respond to detention or other common punishments | Increase immediacy of rewards and consequences; implement a token system |
| Needs long-term help on behavior management | Set up a behavior contract; send home weekly reports |

Ideas for IEP/Behavioral Plan Accommodations

For This Behavior...

...Suggest This Solution

| Organization | |
|--|--|
| Can't keep track of papers | Set up binders with dividers, folders, and color-coding |
| Fails to write down homework assignments accurately | Assign partners to double check each other's assignment books |
| Loses books or other materials | Allow student to keep an extra set of books at home |
| Fidgety or Restless Behavior | |
| Moves around frequently; gets out of seat at inappropriate times | Allow student to run errands or stand at desk when working |
| Loses focus during long lessons | Provide short breaks throughout the day |
| Taps on desk, kicks chair legs, or otherwise fidgets loudly | Allow the use of discreet fidget toys to release excess energy |
| Social Challenges | |
| Seems lonely or acts withdrawn | Plan teacher-directed group activities to encourage social interaction |
| Is easily frustrated | Acknowledge positive work frequently |
| Does not work well with others | Encourage cooperative learning; reward good group behavior |
| Is not respected by peers | Praise student's talents in front of classmates |

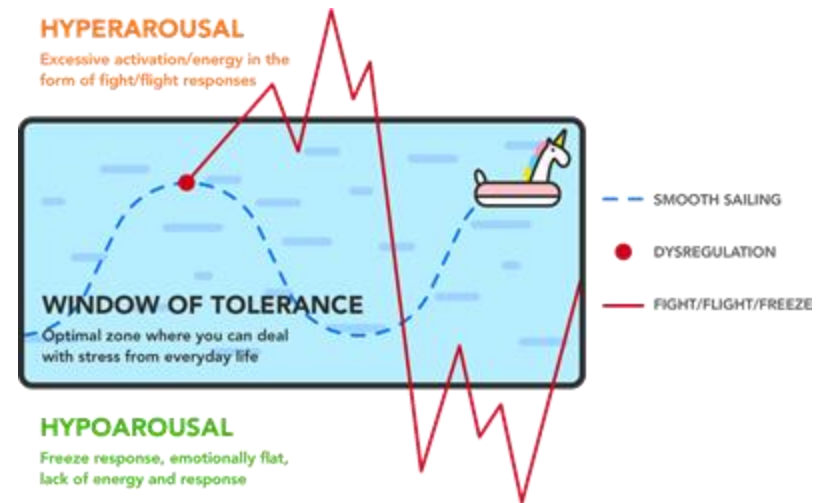
Everyone And Every Day is Different

Inventory of Potential Aversive Stimuli & Setting Events (IPASS)

Overall Purpose: To effectively address challenging behaviors by identifying *sensory activators*

IPASS activator breakdown:

1. Auditory 2. Visual
3. Odors 4. Places
5. External Events
6. Internal Events



[How to Recognize Your Window of Tolerance — Mind My Feelings](#)

What iPASS Sections Look Like

| <input type="checkbox"/> Check this box if ODORS (things the person SMELLS) seem to be related to challenging behaviors | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|----------------------------|----------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Which odors may relate to behavior challenges? | When were odors related to challenging behavior? | Are these aspects problematic? | How are these stimulus events related to challenging behavior? (Mark all that apply) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> alcohol <input type="checkbox"/> chemicals <input type="checkbox"/> feces <input type="checkbox"/> urine <input type="checkbox"/> smoke (fire) <input type="checkbox"/> smoke (cigarettes/drugs etc) <input type="checkbox"/> perfume <input type="checkbox"/> food <input type="checkbox"/> Other, or specific examples: <div></div> | <input type="checkbox"/> Never <input type="checkbox"/> Past <input type="checkbox"/> Now (present) - but rarely <input type="checkbox"/> Now (present) - and often <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure Give an example of a time that odors related to challenging behaviors for the person. | <table border="1"> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Y</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> N</td> <td>When it starts</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Y</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> N</td> <td>When it stops</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Y</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> N</td> <td>When people discuss it</td> </tr> <tr> <td><input type="checkbox"/> Y</td> <td><input type="checkbox"/> N</td> <td>When it lasts a long time</td> </tr> </table> | <input type="checkbox"/> Y | <input type="checkbox"/> N | When it starts | <input type="checkbox"/> Y | <input type="checkbox"/> N | When it stops | <input type="checkbox"/> Y | <input type="checkbox"/> N | When people discuss it | <input type="checkbox"/> Y | <input type="checkbox"/> N | When it lasts a long time | <input type="checkbox"/> Visual events seem to "set off" (or precede) challenging behavior <input type="checkbox"/> Person freezes when these stimuli are present <input type="checkbox"/> Person seems upset when these stimuli are present <input type="checkbox"/> Person uses challenging behavior after seeing these stimuli <input type="checkbox"/> The person avoids these stimuli <input type="checkbox"/> The person uses unsafe behaviors related to these stimuli <input type="checkbox"/> At least one is often present before challenging behavior If yes above, when before behavior do they occur? Mark all that apply <input type="checkbox"/> seconds <input type="checkbox"/> minutes <input type="checkbox"/> hours <input type="checkbox"/> days <input type="checkbox"/> weeks |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Y | <input type="checkbox"/> N | When it starts | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Y | <input type="checkbox"/> N | When it stops | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Y | <input type="checkbox"/> N | When people discuss it | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Y | <input type="checkbox"/> N | When it lasts a long time | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Is sound an activator?

Does what they see activate them?

Are there scents that make them respond?

Are there any "hot spots" in their lives? (places)

What outside or building-based events cause stress? (external)

What personal experiences challenge them? (internal)



Moving Forward, Taking Action

Choose Your Own Adventure




National Autistic Society




Neurodiversity Center

As you read, consider
the questions on the
notes catcher

Action Planning



**What did I
learn today
that I will try
implementing
right away?**



**What am I
excited to try
tomorrow
with my
students?**



**What support
do I need to
move forward
and grow my
work in this
area?**



**What
questions do
I still have?**

Wrap Up, Q & A, Feedback

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