STATE-DEPENDENT FUNCTIONING
HOW OUR INTERNAL STATE AFFECTS HOW WE PROCESS INFORMATION AND OUR BEHAVIOUR

What is state-dependent functioning?
State-dependent functioning is the concept used to understand how we process and store information differently depending on how we are feeling at the time – our internal state, or more specifically our state of arousal which is a continuum from calm to terror. Our state of arousal is influenced by our body’s alarm system which changes depending on the environmental cues we receive. The more threatened we feel, the further we shift along this continuum.

Impacts of trauma on children
Children who have experienced abuse or neglect live in a constant state of alertness (the yellow to red zones on the continuum), and this causes them to become hyper-vigilant to threats. These children move quickly along the arousal continuum and they can perceive small environmental changes as life-threatening.

When a child (or anyone) perceives a threat, their state of arousal increases and their brain focuses on survival, decreasing their ability to think rationally (cognitive capacity) and causing distinct changes to their behaviour. When in such a state, the child’s brain:
> struggles to concentrate
> becomes more anxious
> is more attentive to cues like tone of voice, posture and facial expressions.
As the more primitive parts of the brain are responsible for fear and terror responses, the child’s behaviour also regresses (as if they are younger) when in this alarm state because they are unable to access the higher functioning parts of their brain.

As a result, when in a state of alarm, the child may:
> care only about themselves
> struggle with speech
> want their needs met immediately
> be hard to reason with
> be emotional and reactive.

How a child’s behaviour can regress can also be shown against the arousal continuum and the typical level of brain function we achieve at different ages.

How you can help
To help children live in a calmer state and to access rational thinking, follow the three Rs:

1. Regulate: Help the child get into their optimal ‘window of tolerance’ – that is where they do not feel overwhelmed or withdrawn.
   > If hyper-aroused (anxious, panicked, racing thoughts) encourage the child to breathe deeply, jump or go for a run.
   > If hypo-aroused (feeling numb or empty), increase arousal by playing music, stretching or dancing.

2. Relate: As the child calms down, relate to them by:
   > using short sentences
   > validating their feelings
   > connecting with them.

3. Reason and reflect: When the child is calm:
   > reinforce that you love and care about them
   > talk about emotions and how they feel in their body
   > speak about boundaries and alternative behaviours.

Here to help! Come and talk to us if you’d like more practical ways you can be trauma informed.

Sources: