

Create Calm

Though it can be thrilling, learning is also a risky business. When we learn, by definition, we enter into the **realm of the unknown**. Sociologist Brene Brown (2012) describes the **vulnerability, uncertainty and emotional exposure** that learning can incite. Persevering through this vulnerability and possible anxiety takes a particular form of resilience, “**shame resilience**”, which is built **through positive learning experiences and trusted support**. As educators we can strategically create a supportive classroom culture that feed all 3 Brains and encourages students to manage themselves to be both ready-to-learn and able to overcome the tricky feelings that will at times inevitably arise.

Felt safety is critically important to enable the brain to engage, concentrate and focus on the task at hand.

Stress, emotions and school: We can't learn when we feel too anxious

Stress is paradoxical: too little and we lose our ability to sustain attention and focus; and too much, we become overwhelmed and unable to learn new things. The *Yerkes-Dodson Stress Arousal Curve* demonstrates how different levels of stress can impact on an individual's behaviour from insufficient stress or arousal, resulting in boredom, right through to excessive levels of stress which may produce a panic response.

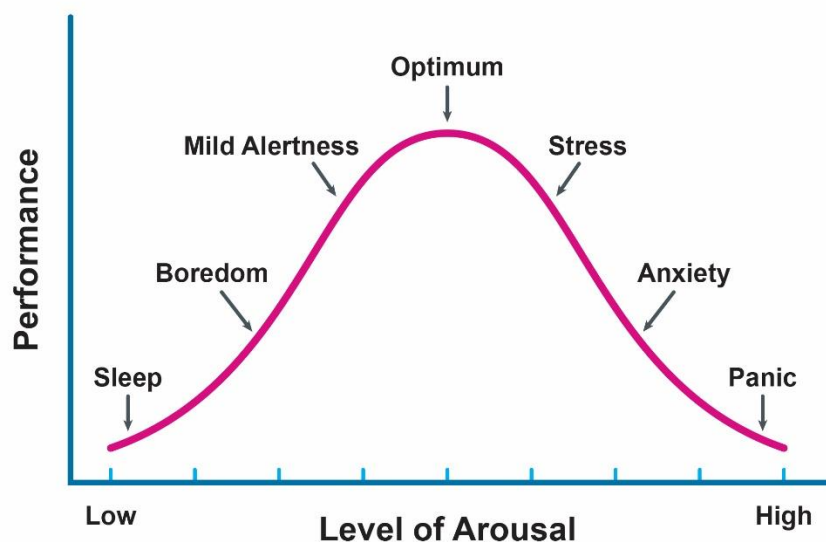
Stress puts us on high alert. The more stressed we become the more we move into 'high alert' and the Wild Brain (brain stem) strives for self-protection and survival. In Wild Brain mode there is limited blood flow to the thinking and reasoning parts of the brain (cerebral cortex aka Smart Brain), the Wild Brain responses are automated and unconscious and inhibit logical thought and the learning of new behaviours.

The Yerkes-Dodson Curve below clearly identifies the impact of stress on relationships, engagement, learning etc. Some young people come to school in an already elevated state. This might be due to past trauma (elevates the basal stress arousal line), things that are happening at home, anxiety about being at school or interacting with peers, changes in routine, worried about being 'dumb' etc.

When a person moves in Wild Brain mode their behaviour becomes an expression of fight/flight or freeze. This might be provocative or aggressive in nature or an effort to shut-down and fly-under the radar. The more stressed a person is the more extreme behaviours tend to be. Some young people constantly live in a highly elevated state. It's important that we 'feed' the Wild Brain the things that it needs to feel calm and relaxed, giving us access to more complex thinking processes. Any unmet Wild brain need will lead to increased stress.

Children with a trauma history or younger children need more Wild brain feeding.

Figure 2: The stress arousal curve



Optimal stress levels provide just the right levels of stimulus and differ from person to person. Maintaining engagement requires that we **read the ebb and fall of the stress arousal states** in both individual students and the class as a whole and **implement interventions to keep students able to engage**. Self-doubt, poor self-talk, exceedingly difficult tasks, stress, exhaustion or a lack of support drive us below the *Line of Opportunity*.

Neuroperception

Our physiology evaluates risks posed by others and our environment. This assessment of safety is then expressed in our perceptions, the way we interpret them and give voice to the expectations that we derive from them.

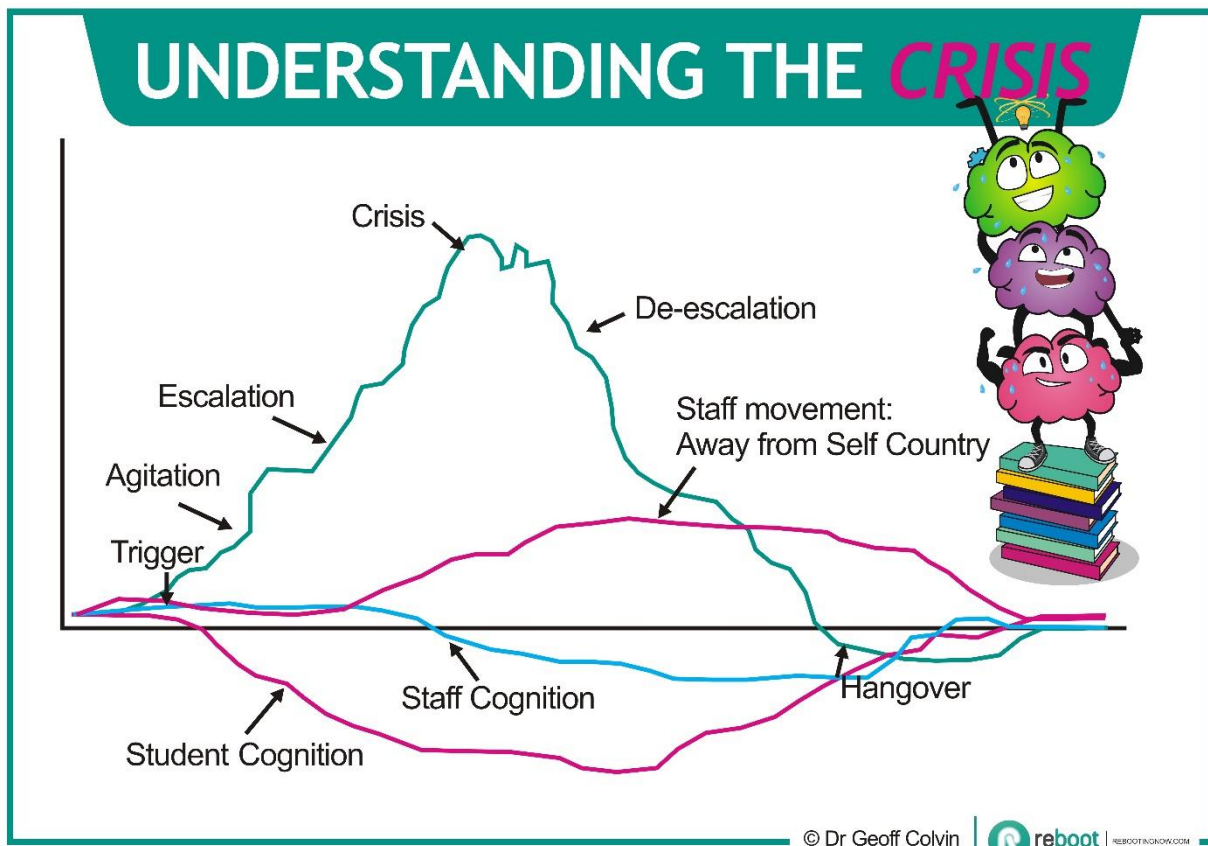
It informs our beliefs about how relationships work, what they can offer, how we should feel in them and whether or not they will provide the resources we need to continue to live with the courage to change the very physiological patterns that have evolved as adaptations to danger.

Safety is more than the absence of risk. At its core, it occurs in relationships which engage the neural circuits underpinning physiological renewal and growth.

It is found in our spontaneous seeking out of proximity with others, our playfulness and curiosity as we explore intimacy and our attunement to the comfort of others. It also emerges when our bodies find themselves giving peaceful priority to sleep, rest and nurture.

We come to find safety in the embodiment of our vulnerability in the heart of a loved one.

The nature and impact of escalation



Managing the Cycle of Acting-Out Behaviour in the Classroom – Dr Geoff Colvin.

Younger children and children with a trauma history might be more reactive – less able to self-regulate and less sense of felt safety and trust.