



You are the key

Stress Detective Series for Leaders

Hi everyone, this is Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak and this is the [third](#) from a four part series that I've been calling "The Stress Detective Series for Leaders". This is all about how we can be the most effective leader possible, even when things are so uncertain, things are so challenging, even when they're just things about little old resistance from our staff and our colleagues, and maybe even those that are making policy decisions. So how do we really pull upon what we already know about best practice? How do we stay true to things like inclusion and play and supporting the wholeness of the adults that are then supporting children and families? So we're going to use the four S's from Dr. Dan Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson. This is all pulling from attachment science, but also really about what's going on in the brain when we are facing resistance or uncertainty or challenges.

And so we're going to talk about the four S's of being safe, seen, soothed, and secure. We're also building upon the work of Dr. Stuart Shanker from the MEHRIT Centre, and this is really all about the role that stressors play. And that's going to be so important to this third part, which is about sooth and the role that stressors play and how we can end up reacting to the world versus reflecting and really responding in a way that we want to. And so this third part in the series is all about being soothed. And when I think about being soothed, there's no better time than to think about being a stress detective, because a stress detective is going to figure out, recognize, and then reduce stressors that are causing me not to feel soothed. Well, that seems like a circular line of thinking, right? So what do we mean by stressors?

So let's break that down and then let's talk about what a stress detective actually does to help people feel soothed. We'll also define sort of what's going on inside when we do feel soothed, and of course, when we don't feel soothed. So let's start with this idea of what are stressors. And so based upon Dr. Stuart Shanker's work at the MEHRIT Centre, we're really going to think about five domains of stressors. And so there'll be a link in the show notes where you can learn about these five domains in depth, but let's just label the five and let me give you a few examples under each of the domains. So there's biological, emotion, cognitive, social, and prosocial. So let's break each of those down and give you a couple of examples. So under the biological domain, stressors are things like dry air or chronic pain or bright lights.

So there are things that are coming in through our sensory system and it's, from a biological perspective, it's taking effort and there's energy intention that I have to resolve. From the emotion domain, it could be things like just feeling sort of disappointed or guilty or facing deadlines. So anything that makes me have that emotional reaction to something. The third is cognitive. This is where my upstairs brain is really being asked to do things like make decisions or maybe I'm feeling overstimulated, or maybe I have to remember something like my password. So if you've ever felt frustrated in trying to remember your password, especially if you need it right away, that is a stressor from the cognitive domain. Then the social area,

this is where we might feel confrontation, especially if we're thinking about those challenging situations or resistance, maybe even a lack of human interaction. So if you're listening to this during the pandemic, there's a lack of social interaction or maybe too much interaction with these same people.

And then even just having to fake social niceties. That can be a stressor in the social area. Fifth area is the prosocial domain. And so things like being late or having to be very empathetic or wanting even to be empathetic and watching the news. Those can be all things that cause stressors. So when we think about soothing the system, we're thinking about how we be the very best stress detective we can and recognize and reduce stressors in others? Now, this is not possible for us to do for everyone all the time, and so really what we're hoping is to help children and youth develop so they become adults who are able to recognize and reduce their own stressors, or at least through co-regulation through good, positive, healthy relationships that they can apply what we're going to talk about in terms of coping strategies to really find the sweet spot, to really feel well soothed.

So I don't want you to feel like this is on you to take care of everyone's chapped lips and bright lights and watching too much news on their phone, but we can help people become aware that these are stressors. Then we can do a scan of the meetings that we're conducting, whether they're virtual or physically near each other. How are we adding to or reducing stressors? So let's talk about what is the sweet spot? What does it mean when I feel soothed? And so when a human feels soothed, whether they're consciously aware or non-consciously or unconsciously aware of it, it's when our internal state is not experiencing distress. So this is going to sound very familiar to feeling safe. It's when I have inner calm. It's when I'm able to respond and reflect versus react and ruminate. It's when my emotions aren't overpowering or paralyzing my thoughts or actions.

It's really when that upstairs brain, that beautiful prefrontal cortex is really engaged and helping me control my thoughts, my actions, and my judgments. There's some sort of stop, think, act, if you will. And then as Dr. Dan Siegel talks about, there are the FACES, and that's an acronym for this mental integration, this idea of being in the flow. And so FACES stands for flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable. And don't worry, you don't have to write all of those down, right? Because I'm taxing the cognitive domain and adding stressors for you to remember what does FACES stand for, but you can download a PDF, a handout with all of these definitions of what it means to feel soothed, and then you can unpack what does it mean to be flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and to feel stable. So if that's the sweet spot, if that's what we're aiming for, of course we're going to try to do that on our own, but through our interdependence and our co-regulation with other humans and by trying to control our environment a little bit, we can achieve this sweet spot.

And so one of the ways that a stress detective, after they recognized and reduced stressors, they're also helping develop their own coping strategies, as well as helping their colleagues create coping strategies, instead of coping mechanisms. And this

comes from Alyssa Blask Campbel of Seed & Sew, where she really differentiates between a coping mechanism and a coping strategy. So let's start with the mechanisms. So mechanisms are things that we do, again, non-consciously or consciously to sort of numb a big emotion or numb what we're feeling or thinking or a thought or even a judgment. If we don't want to have that thought, maybe some of you are like me and others, really trying to understand the white dominant culture and really understand the role that we're playing in white supremacy.

And in that process, you may be coming up with realizations of where your racism is coming from and where it's playing out in your everyday life, or just even in your thoughts. And maybe you don't like that. It makes you feel guilty or bad or shameful or maybe even just angry that you have that thought or that feeling. Well, that can cause us to react and try to numb it by doing something that either perpetuates the white dominant culture and white supremacy, or maybe it makes us feel better temporarily, but we haven't actually taken a risk or done something to halt or stop or disrupt the status quo. And so if we do things that continue to numb our blindness or numb how we don't have to feel that kind of upsetness, then that is a coping mechanism. So anything that is sort of pushing something beneath the surface, something that is temporarily going to make us feel better, but in the long term, there's not a solution. Long term we're perpetuating something that is not healthy for ourselves or other humans.

The converse of that is a coping strategy. And a coping strategy is really that idea that we can acknowledge or be attuned with that big emotion or that thought or that feeling or that judgment, and we can do something that keeps us from kind of going in a spiral downhill into fight or flight, freeze or faint, and we can actually go, "Oh wait, I want to disrupt this and I'm going to let my upstairs brain really have a role here. I'm going to reflect more deeply. I'm going to engage in conversation. I'm going to ask questions. I'm going to do something to keep my upstairs brain engaged and not that slippery slope of ending up in the basement where it's fight or flight, freeze or faint." So we develop what we call coping strategies and these are ways to keep that, again, upstairs brain engaged, our thinking brain. Doesn't mean we're not full of emotions or feelings, but we're able to pair that with our upstairs brain that has problem solving, perspective taking, empathy, compassion. And all of that allows us to then respond in ways that are productive.

So we're really helping ourselves and our colleagues develop coping strategies, and we're often trying to help find that sweet spot. And so you'll learn that I always love to leverage what we know about children and then apply that when it's more difficult, which is with adults. And so we use this thing called the zigzag process. This is how can I lessen the load, the cognitive stressors, the emotion stressors, the prosocial stressors? How can I lighten that when children are starting to flip their lids?

And so we use what's called the zigzag process. And I'll put a link to that in the show notes so that you can then learn how it is applied to children and try it out with

adults. But there are three simple ways that you can sort of help adults find their sweet spot. So again, you're trying to recognize and reduce stressors. You're helping them build their capacity to have coping strategies, but in the moment on the fly, if you do something that is more repetitive and less open-ended or flexible, that can sometimes help people find the sweet spot. So one idea is to be repetitive, to say, "There are three ways that you can lighten someone's load through the zigzag. Number one is to be repetitive."

Did you notice that I just repeated... repetitive? That helps us sort of come back to it versus having to catch it the first time. Now, flexibility is a beautiful thing, but if I am sort of overwhelmed or if I'm feeling freeze or faint, paralyzed, it's really hard for me to be flexible. And so we want to help someone achieve that to be soothed by being repetitive. The second way we can sooth a system and help somebody kind of come into that sweet spot is to be organized.

When we are random, that causes more of a disruption, more stressors on the other human. So anything you can do to organize things visually, linearly, or even in a way that makes sense for the learner. So we know that sometimes when we present things in a too linear of a way, people think, "I have to go from top to bottom or left to right." And that can be overwhelming when they want the thing that's at the bottom or they want the thing that's on the right. So putting things in a circle might convey choices and non-linearity. So we want to be organized in a way that helps the person feel like they can approach and have choices.

The third way that we create this sort of sweet spot is by using visual supports or visual information, not visual clutter, but we really tap into the visual part of learning. And so normally we, from a universal design, or when we think about humans that may have visual impairments, we always promote multi sensory, but when we're overloaded in our senses, the visual support can often be the most supportive. And so if you can do things that are less auditory and more visual, that can find that sweet spot for the learner very quickly. So that's kind of the big overview of how we soothe the nervous system is that we recognize and reduce stressors.

So that means we have to be aware of the five domains of stressors. We help people develop coping strategies, not coping mechanisms, and we help people find and stay in the sweet spot by doing three things, being repetitive, being organized and using visual supports. You can also download the handout that gives you, let me count them. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight other really specific strategies that you can do to help ensure others are soothed. These can be sort of preventive. Do them ahead of time. That keeps us in that flow. That helps us stay feeling like we're soothed. You can also use them as lifelines. Once my lid is flipped, or I have a strong emotional reaction, I'm now becoming resistant or I'm feeling shut down, I can help others kind of come back upstairs by offering this lifeline. And so there are eight ways on the handout to this part of the series that gives you a couple of ideas.

Let's walk through just a couple together. So one of them is I'm aware of things that cause me to go limbic. And you're like, "Hey, wait. What about me? I thought I was helping others." But we all know that we have to help ourselves before we can help others. So this is really inviting you to understand the things that make you go limbic. And so what does that mean? This is this sort of limbic state that Stuart Shanker talks about. It's this limbic alarm. It's where there's this subconscious physiological alarm that is triggered in that middle area, that limbic area, that place where we have the amygdala and the hypothalamus and the hippocampus, and a whole bunch of other words that are hard to say, but this is really what, when the alarm goes off, it says, "There might be a threat. We might need to take an action that is fight or flight, freeze or faint."

And this is really what can slow down or shut down our ability to remain engaged, remain upstairs, remain thoughtful and perspective taking. So we really want to think about ourselves first. How am I going limbic? What are my triggers, if you will? We also want to think about that we're aware of the impact of our tone of voice, of our facial expressions, all of that beautiful non-verbal communication. And so when I slow down, when I have an inviting posture, when I have welcoming gestures and soft eyes, these are things that help others feel soothed. And whether you are virtual through a video conferencing, whether you're on the phone, whether you're text messaging or whether you're actually physically with other humans, being really aware of your tone of voice and your facial expressions or the little emoticons that you're using can help others feel soothed.

So be cautious as you think about how you use emojis, what words you use, especially in the absence of your facial expressions. And then we just want to make sure that we're always acknowledging how others feel, allowing for processing of emotions, we want to aid in identifying those coping strategies, and we're really attending to their needs for what Rick Hanson talks about in terms of safety, satisfaction, and connection.

So that is how a stress detective, that's how a leader helps others feel soothed. They recognize and reduce the stressors from across the five domains, they help identify, invite, and encourage either through co-regulation or just through an invitation to use coping strategies, and then they also do things that find that sweet spot. They help others feel soothed by doing the eight things that you can download, which embody this idea of finding the sweet spot.