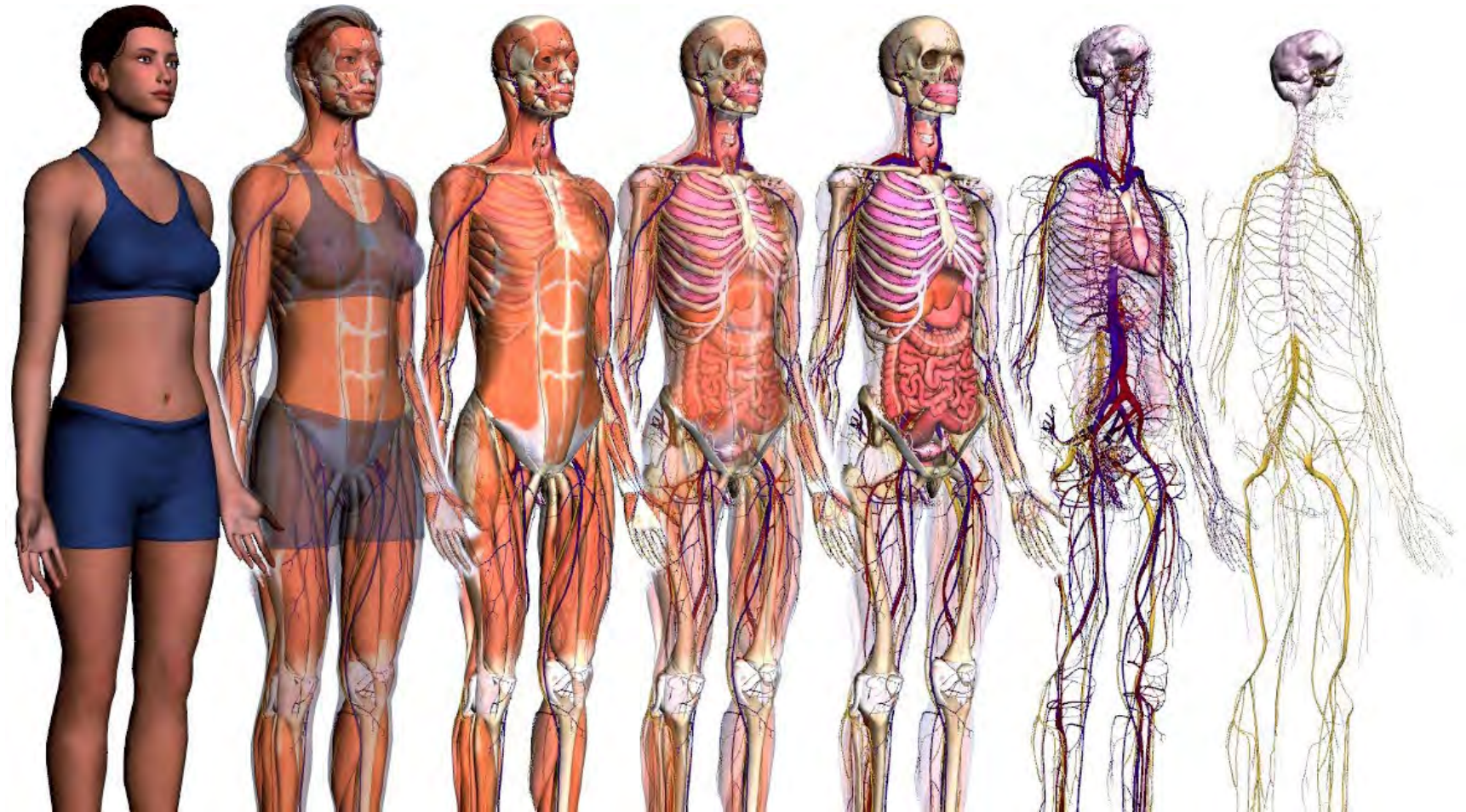


***State-dependent
functioning,
mental health &
(offending)
behaviour***



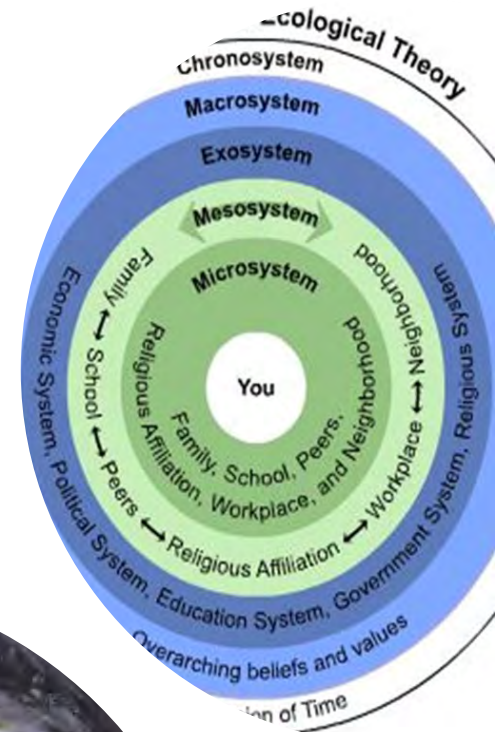
Jane Mulcahy
Higher Executive Officer, Social Inclusion Unit, Probation Service
@janehmul #loveirishresearch
JHMulcahy@probation.ie & [youtube.com/c/JaneMulcahy](https://www.youtube.com/c/JaneMulcahy)

**CEP workshop on Mental Health Importance: supporting
treatment processes in Probation**

CJEFE, C/de Paul Claris, BCN 27 November 2024

Who am I?

- A mom of two beautiful, smart, funny, frustrating children
- A wife
- A daughter
- A sister
- A friend
- A woman with a PhD in Law
- An employee of the *Probation Service* in Ireland since 04 November 2024!
- An activist
- A podcaster
- A former theatre-maker (director, actor, playwright)
- A work in progress (including my self-regulation, Design Thinking skills)
- Designer of an eight-module trauma course
- A yoga fanatic
- A Movement Medicine & Holotropic Breathwork enthusiast
- ***An energetic field*** (Hübl, Scharmer)



Content of presentation

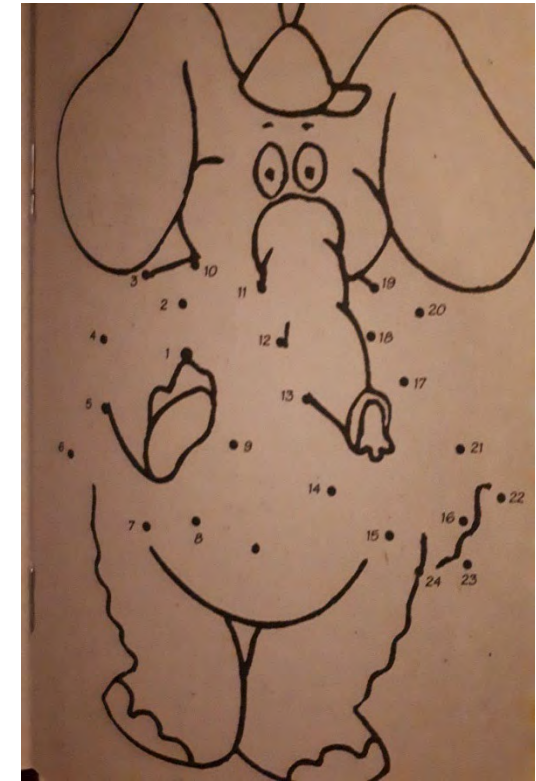
Trauma among Probation clients may appear in the guise of addiction, mental health symptoms, physical aggression, verbal abuse, difficulties processing speech and appearing spaced out (dissociation).

My paper provides a brief overview of:

- interpersonal neurobiology
- state-dependent functioning
- polyvagal theory and
- repetition compulsion/traumatic re-enactment.



***If we connect the dots,
will we find that
trauma is often the
elephant in the
Probation setting???***

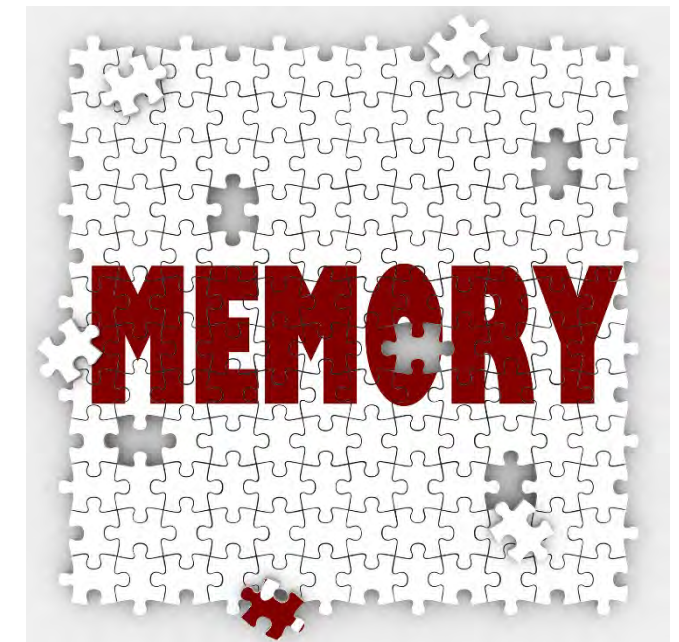


Qualitative data from PhD

Triangulation

PhD examined the factors that support desistance and successful change in men who are subject to some form of post-release supervision or engagement with the Probation Service (serving sentences of 2-10 years imprisonment)

- 32 semi-structured interviews with senior IPS & Probation management, senior policy-makers, Probation Officers, Community-Based Organisations and members of An Garda Síochána.
- Interviews with 12 male prisoners pre-release using a topic list informed by discussions with six men at different points in their desistance journey (6 2nd round follow up interviews post-release and 2 3rd round interviews.
- 3 Focus Groups in prisons with a range of services, including Assistant Governors, Chief Officers, Integrated Sentence Officers, Probation Officers, Addiction Counsellors, Teachers, Chaplains, Training and Employment Officers, Resettlement Officers and Nurses.
- [Connected Corrections and Corrected Connections: post-release supervision of long-sentence male prisoners | Request PDF \(researchgate.net\)](#) (PhD)



Cathal: a tragic criminal case study

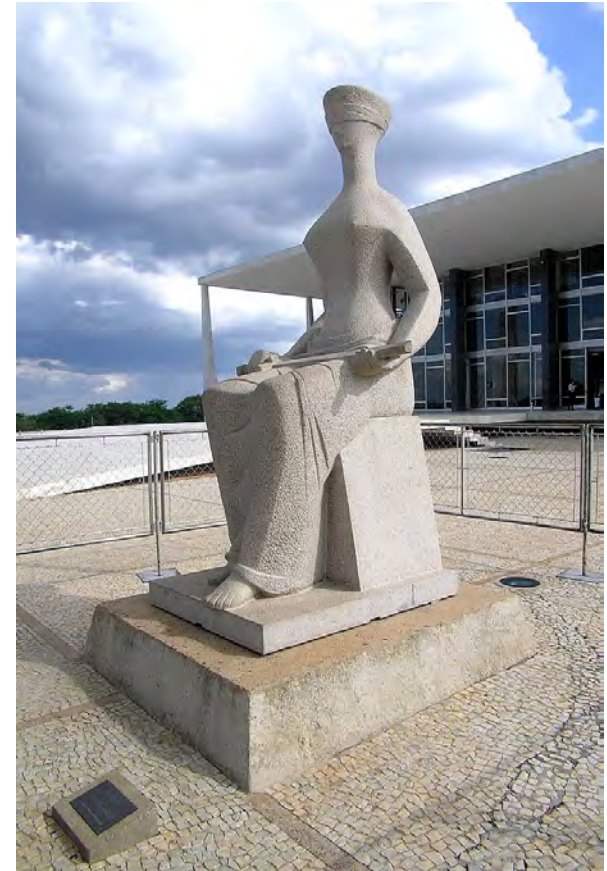
Cathal (not the man's real name) means "strong in battle. When I met him during my PhD, he has served a life sentence on instalments (i.e. 21 years in prison for drug-related theft, mostly on short sentences) starting with a stint in a Probation Hostel as a teenager where other boys set his arm on fire.

I was warned about Cathal by several services who all spoke about him in very negative terms. He was described to me manipulative and attention-seeking. Dr Karen Treisman uses the term "attachment-needing".

Cathal successfully came off heroin and methadone several times but could not function without benzos. He was on medications for depression and anxiety for years.

Iain Smith, Lawyer of the Year in 2020, for his work on trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences describe his criminal justice clients as "the hardest to like, but the most in need of love". Cathal is a fine example of this tragic reality.

The Limits of Reason, Sanity & Social Behaviour: Removing the Trauma Blindfold



The Welsh Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study (2015) – crime related findings

2,028 Welsh adults were questioned about their current health behaviours and exposure to ACEs.

The study found that that 47% of respondents reported having experienced at least one ACE and 14% experiencing four or more ACEs. Compared with interviewees with no experience of ACEs, those who experienced four+ ACEs were:

- **14 times more likely to have been a victim of violence over the last 12 months**
- **15 times more likely to have committed violence against another person in the last 12 months**
- **16 times more likely to have used crack cocaine or heroin**
- **20 times more likely to have been incarcerated at any point in their lifetime.**
- See <https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/policy-and-international-health-who-collaborating-centre-on-investment-for-health-well-being/publications-and-resources-bucket/adverse-childhood-experiences-and-their-impact-on-health-harming-behaviours-in-/>

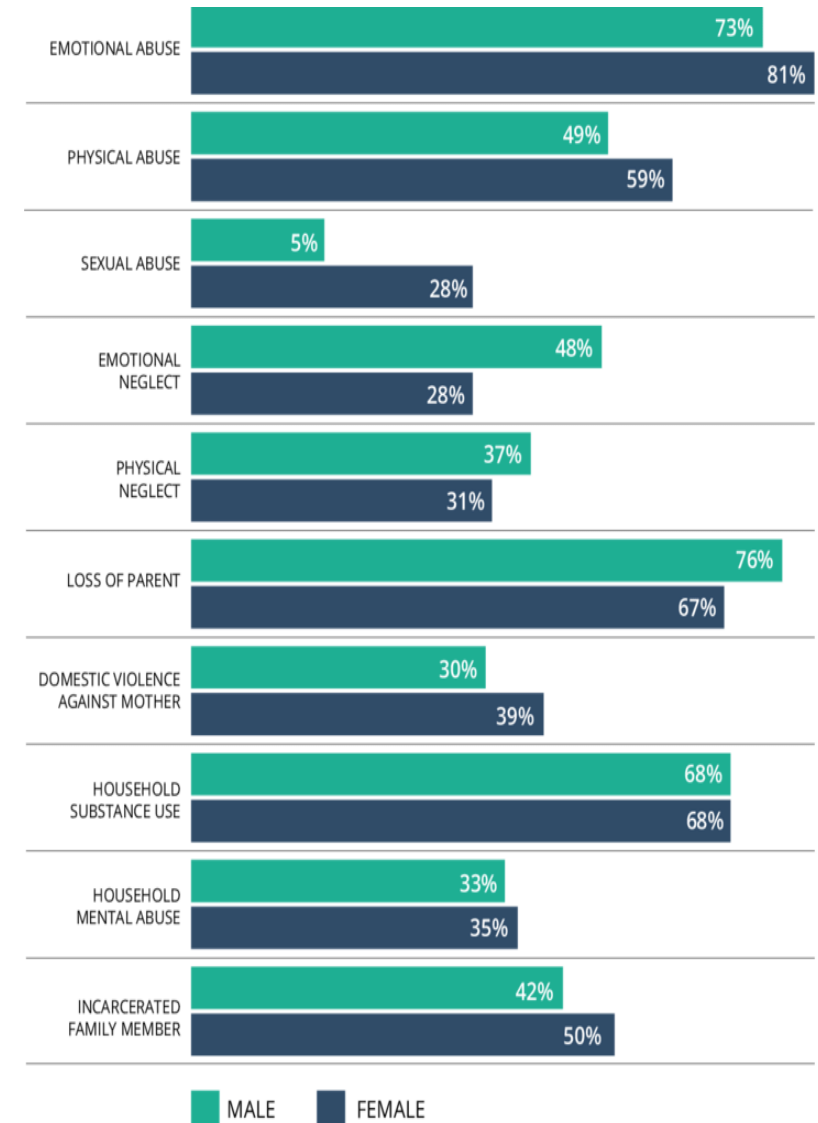
ACEs among GDYP participants

Recently published Irish research on ACEs prevalence among young people on Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GDYPs) found that while 96% of the 125 children involved in the research had experienced at least one ACE, 63% had suffered four+ ACE exposures and 36% had accumulated six+ adversities in childhood.

The table shows high levels of ACE exposure of the young people on GDYPs (2020, 33). The authors note that the ACE profile of young people on the GDYP participants has more in common with “populations accessing homeless, probation and substance use support services” than the general population (p.5)

A. Dermody, *et al* (2020) Early Life Trauma and its Implications for Garda Youth Diversion Services (Dublin: YouthRISE).

A. Dermody et al (2018) “Resilience in the Face of Trauma: Implications for Service Delivery” 15 Irish Probation Journal; S. Lambert & G. Gill-Emerson *Moving towards trauma informed care: a model of research and practice* (2017) (Cork: Cork Simon Community).



Daring to Ask “What Happened to You?” - Why Correctional Systems Must Become Trauma-Responsive

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/324531733_Daring_to_Ask_What_Happened_to_You_-_Why_Correctional_Systems_Must_Become_Trauma-Responsive

Offending behaviour is a **symptom of trauma**, like addiction, psychosocial disability (mental illness), homelessness, & suicide.

Criminality and the consequent loss of liberty may, for many prisoners, be a minor aspect of their personal adversity stories. Offenders tend to come from communities where ACEs are all around them; in their homes, on their streets, in their schools, doctor's surgeries and emergency rooms. If prisons and probation become trauma-responsive and help people to understand their childhood adversity and its enduring magnitude, they will be more likely to buy into participation in both personal development and offending behaviour interventions. People who grow up to be offenders typically come from “Adverse Community Environments” (Ellis & Dietz, 2017)

Recovery from addiction and psychosocial disability (mental health symptoms) and healing from trauma begins with safety. It is about relationships.

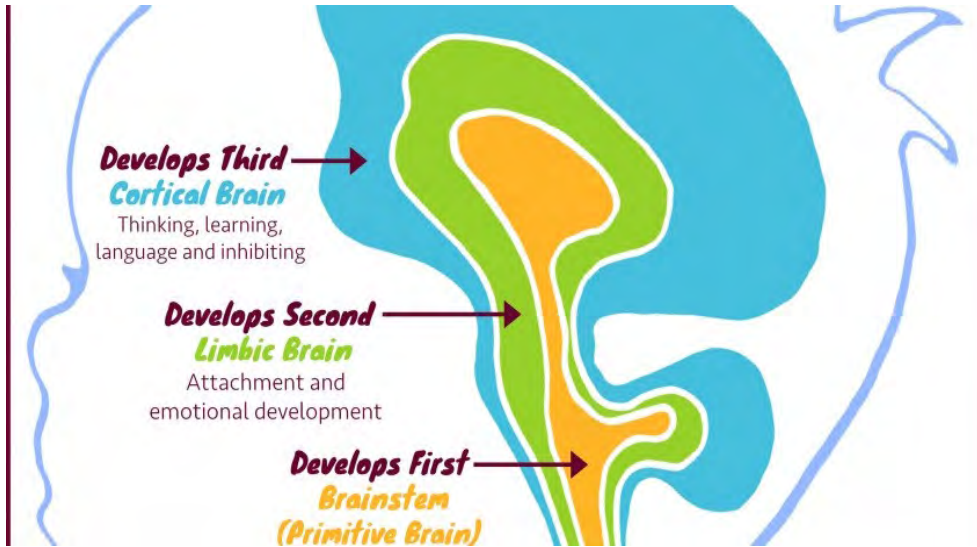
For those interacting with “unrecovered trauma survivors” (Whitfield, 1998), such Probation Officers, the impact you have on the person before you is considerable: **“You are your own best tool”** (Probation interviewee, Phd). (However, you may also be your own worst enemy!)

Treisman states “relational rupture requires relational repair” and “every interaction can be an intervention.”

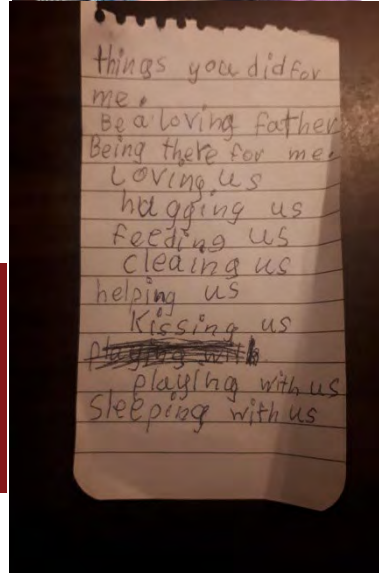


The limits of reason: we can only think, feel empathy for others & exercise impulse control when we are safe & regulated

The brain develops from the bottom up



In the absence of nurturant care in infancy & relational health throughout childhood, an overdose of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) has a negative impact on brain structure and function, leading to overactivation of the fight/flight/freeze response



We must feel safe & emotionally regulated to access our thinking brains



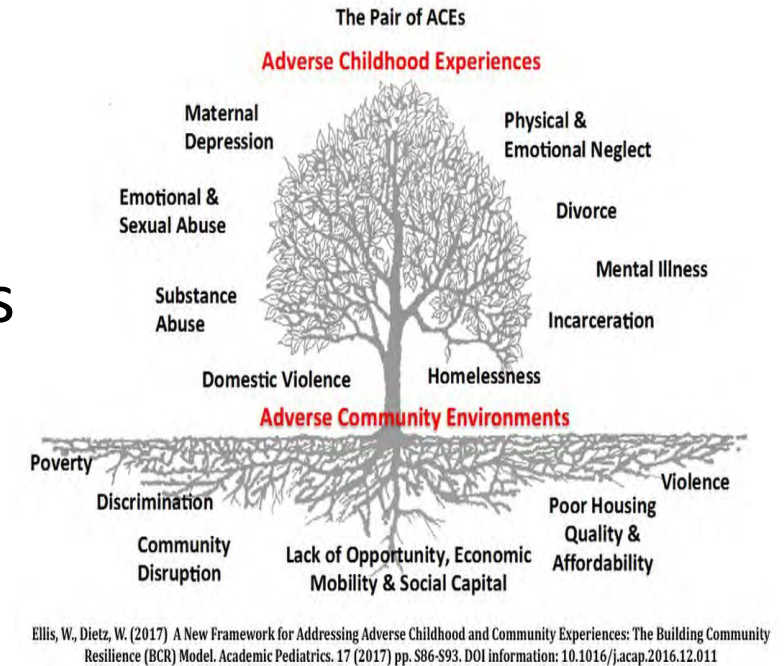
The triune brain – see The Trauma Recovery Centre, “The Triune Brain” at 1 minute 57 seconds, available at <https://youtu.be/eVhWwciagOE>

State-dependent functioning:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1uCn7VX6BPQ>

**Neuroception is the unconscious detection of safety or threat in our environment.
A sense of safety means our body feels safe in the presence of other bodies**

Resilient children are “made, not born” (Szalvitz & Perry, 2017:38)

- Children are not resilient, but rather “malleable”: adaptable and capable of being moulded by their environment.
- Children’s emotional safety derives from their parents
A baby’s development is “experience dependent” (Hambrick et al (2019).
- Growing up in a safe, nurturing, comfortable home where basic human needs are met, in a community that is not perpetually under siege, is a prerequisite for healthy child development and ultimately for societal health and stability.

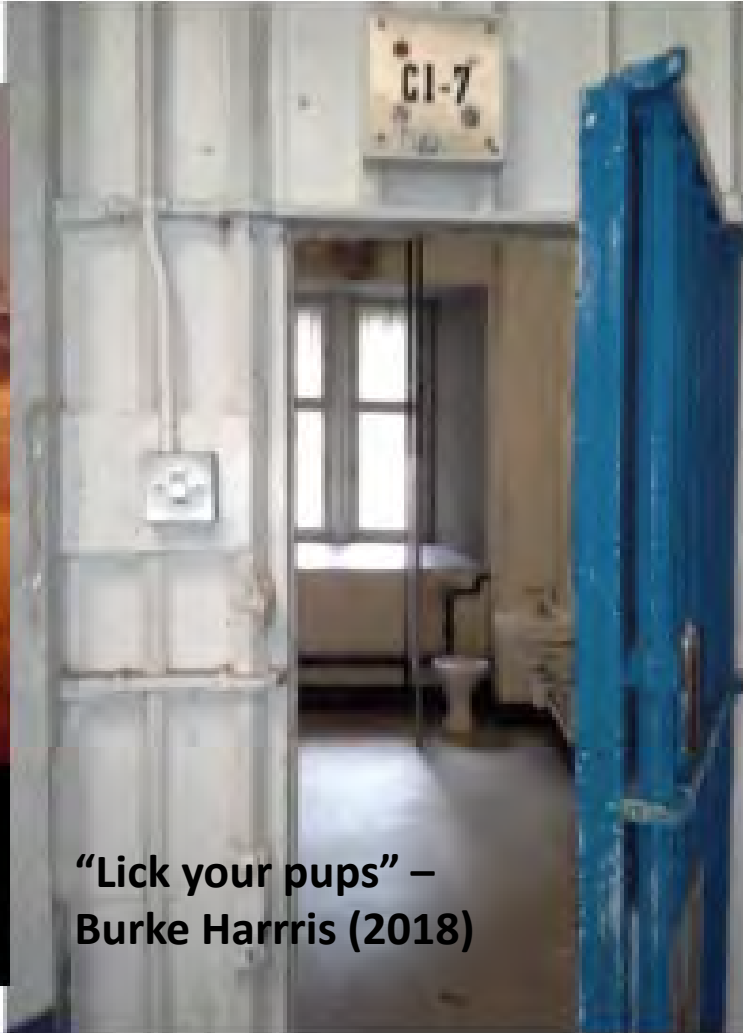


Memory templates (Perry, 2017): “Like *attachment* and *early* childhood experiences will inform *who* comes through those doors, and who doesn’t.” (PhD Focus Group participant)

www.heraldscotland.com/politics/19700034.scotlands-violent-crime-epidemic-can-solved-war-poverty-womb/
(Niven Rennie’s comments on <https://trauma, poverty & violence>)



Memory is “the way past events affect future functioning.” Siegel (2015), 46



“Lick your pups” –
Burke Harris (2018)

“The primary ingredient of secure attachment experiences is the pattern of ‘emotional communication’ between child and caregiver.” Siegel (2015), 12



Winnicott’s concepts of
“good enough mother” &
holding environment

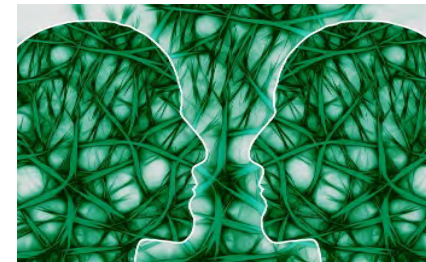
Neural pathways & the autonomic nervous system

The nature of “interpersonal neurobiology” (Siegel, 2015) is that our brains develop (*and change*) in the context of experience & relationships.

Neural connections are “use dependent” – use them or lose them (Perry, 2017 edition). As far back as 1949, Donald Hebb, a Canadian neuropsychologist, had explained that neural pathways become stronger with repeated use. Hebb’s rule is usually summarised as “neurons that fire together wire together”.

If we become chronically stressed as babies because our care-givers are frightening, or because they ignore us due to severe depression or debilitating drug or alcohol use, we do not have the luxury of being playful or curious, keen to explore our environment.

Still Face Experiment: Dr. Edward Tronick available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apzXGEbZht0>



If subject to overwhelming stress in infancy, the neurons we use most are those linked to our brain’s survival apparatus, not our prefrontal cortex. Fear causes the production of cortisol in children, which activates the autonomic nervous system (i.e. flock/fawn/fight/flight/freeze or collapse) stress. The development of normal neural pathways is stunted.

Frightened/frightening caregiving, absence of nurturant care

CATHAL* – I was in an' out of care homes. I come from a dysfunctional family. I weren't given a fair life, to be honest wit' ya. Djunno?

JM – Yeah. And did you leave school early?

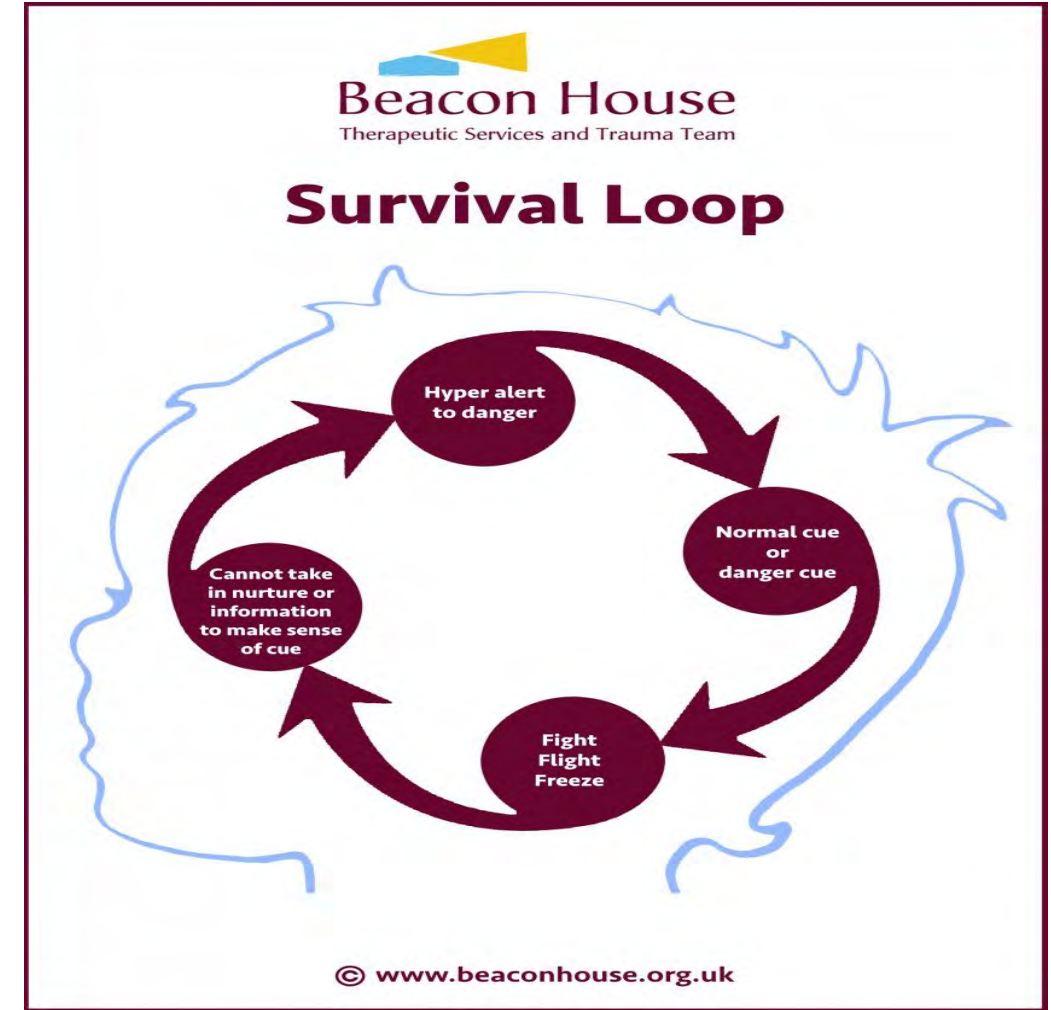
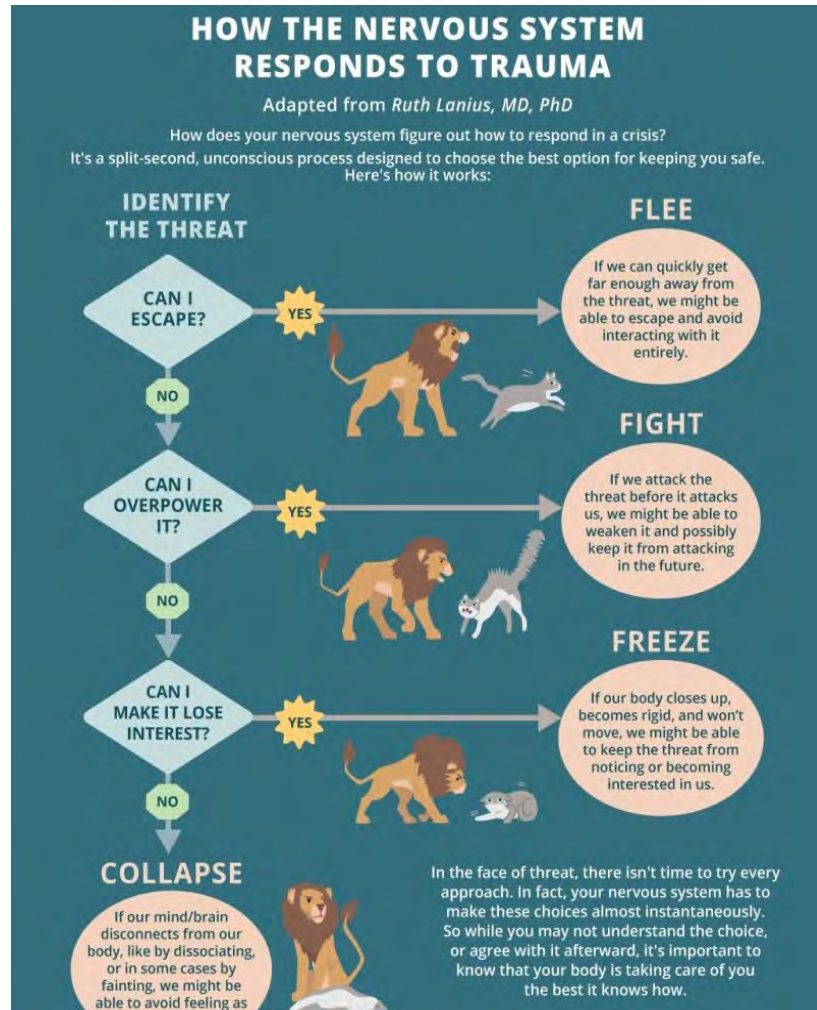
CATHAL – (high pitched) Yeah. I did leave school early. Djunno? Weren't given a fair life, like. Djunno what I mean?

JM – And so would you think – like when you've done the addiction counselling and stuff, why do you think you've taken drugs?

CATHAL – (high pitched) For wha' I was watchin' at five years of age a' home. Dat's where it all started. (high pitched, soft) Watchin' me mudder ge' bate by me fa-der. Dat's where. It all kicked off when I was a small little child wit' nobody to hug me. (high pitched) I'm gone into all dis in treatment. (high pitched) I know who I am. I know *why* I am. [...] I went back t'rough all dese years. I put it out in groups. I don't hold in naught'n no more. (pre-release interview)

* Pseudonym

The impact of accumulating stressors = “a nervous system in a chronic state of defence” Porges



Understanding addiction and mental health problems as “neural state disorders”. Trauma is an embodied experience that occurs after overwhelming experiences *in the absence of an “empathetic witness” (Maté)*

Relational poverty, trauma and risk in context: a “village problem” (Cormac Russell, 2020)

“Relational poverty is not defined by socio-economic circumstances as much as it is by intergenerational trauma or familial cycles of abuse. A study by Widom (1989) found that one in six maltreated boys and girls go on to be violent offenders. This is incredibly high given that most children never come into contact with the youth justice system at all, let alone for violent offences. Children can grow up in economic hardship and receive nurturing relationships during childhood and adolescence. However, if a child grows up faced with the adversities that tend to sit alongside economic hardship and is not provided with nurturing relationships due to the relational networks being characterised by trauma, criminality and violence, this is relational poverty. My own childhood was entrenched in both. The relational poverty was far more harmful and yet was compounded by the lack of financial stability, albeit they often intertwined like the branches of a thorn bush”. **Andi Brierley, *Connecting with Young People in Trouble: Risk, Relationships and Lived Experience* (2021), 20.**

Young people in trouble are typically those who feel they are children that “the village doesn’t want. This risks pushing them into the arms of those they *can* relate to if we do not connect with them. Crime often comes when they have decided they belong on the outside of the village and its rules. When they lose connection with those that should and could have protected them from relational harm”.

See also J. Mulcahy “Relationships Matter: a Law and Justice interview with Andi Brierley at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLkiuy9GodY&t=2275s>

(Mal)adaptive coping strategies

- Dr. Daniel Sumrok, Director of the Center for Addiction Sciences at the University of Tennessee Health Science Center's College of Medicine, advocates for the renaming of addiction as 'ritualized compulsive comfort-seeking'. According to Sumrok, ritualized compulsive comfort-seeking is a '*normal* response' to ACEs, 'just like bleeding is a normal response to being stabbed'. See <https://acestoohigh.com/2017/05/02/addiction-doc-says-stop-chasing-the-drug-focus-on-aces-people-can-recover/>
- Dr Gabor Maté's mantra is: "The question is not why the addiction, but why the pain." Maté (2009) has also stated that "Not everyone that is traumatized becomes addicted, but everyone that is addicted was traumatized."
- **Addiction: "any behaviour that gives you temporary relief, temporary pleasure, but in the long term causes harm, has some negative consequences and you can't give it up, despite those negative consequences" (2012)** The Power of Addiction and The Addiction of Power: Gabor Maté at TEDxRio+20
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66cYcSak6nE>



- I'm 76 years old.

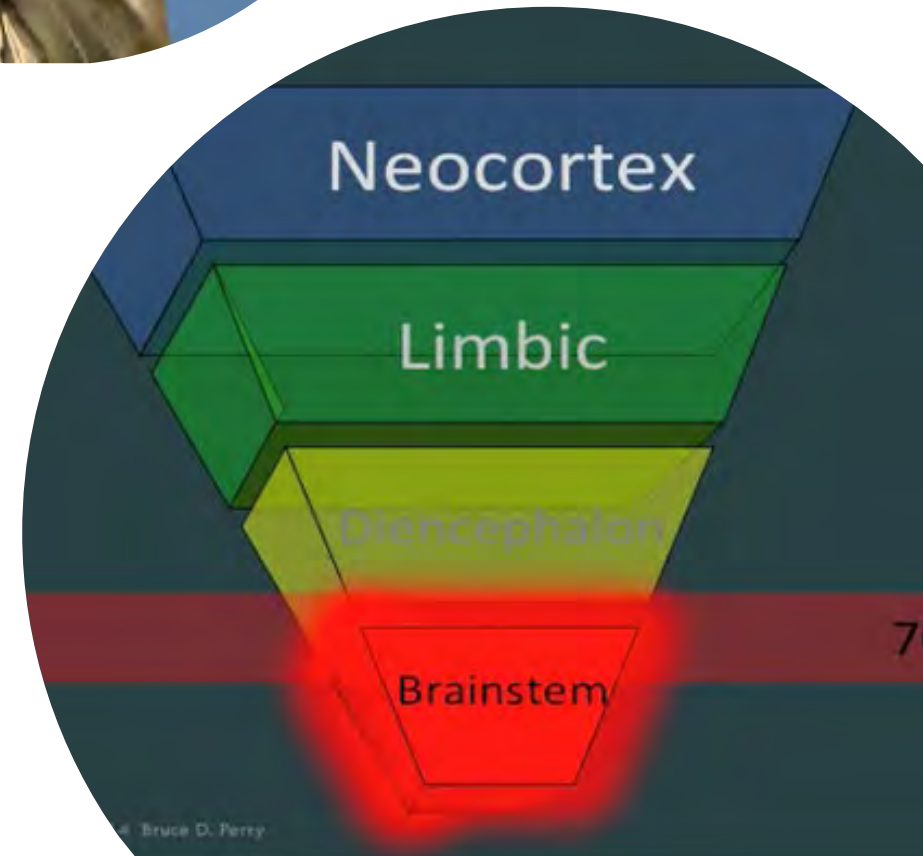
Step Inside the Circle at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FVxjuTkWQiE>

All criminal justice professionals need training on:

- The limits of reason: “state-dependent functioning” (B. Perry)
- Understanding trauma as an embodied experience
- Behaviour is communication
- **Why heart-centred justice is smart** (shifting from a punitive focus to a healing-centered one)
- Secondary trauma, stress and self-care
- For a safer, more just and equitable world practitioners need to engage in “a different way of seeing” and listening (shifting from a punitive focus to a healing-centered, restorative approach).

“Punishment doesn’t align with who we are, and so when we start responding to things from a space of compassion, you can then hold people accountable for their actions, by saying ‘clean up your mess. I’ll help you.’ [...] Instead of punishing people for their actions, heal the trauma that caused their actions.”

Joe Brummer, Relationships Matter interview at
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pMTMpluz65Q>



Combining research, activism & awareness raising

- Submission on sentence planning, prisoner progression, rehabilitation and resettlement to the Oireachtas Committee on Justice – See Appendix to Report on Sentencing and Penal Reform, p. 111- 147 https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/32/joint_committee_on_justice_and_equality/reports/2018/2018-05-10_report-on-penal-reform-and-sentencing_en.pdf
- (PDF) Submission on the development of a criminal justice strategy ([researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340309690))
- (PDF) Submission on the draft Youth Justice strategy - 30/06/20 ([researchgate.net](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340309690))
- J. Mulcahy, *Re-storying offending behaviour: a normal response to an overdose of trauma?*, Giving Voice to Diversity in Criminological Research (2021) at <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781529215540.ch005>
- J. Mulcahy, “A neurodevelopmentally aware, trauma-responsive approach to understanding risk”, *Advancing Corrections* (2020) (PDF) [A neurodevelopmentally-aware, trauma-responsive approach to understanding risk \(researchgate.net\)](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340309690)
- J. Mulcahy, “Towards ACE-Aware, trauma responsive penal policy and practice” *Prison Service Journal*, September 2019, 3-13, <https://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/sites/crimeandjustice.org.uk/files/PSJ%20245%20September%202019%20Journal.pdf>
- “The Human condition: we are all on a quest for safety” <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340309690> [The human condition we are all on a quest for safety](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340309690) (polyvagal theory training notes)
- “How to talk policy and influence people”: a Law and Justice interview with Dr Stephen Porges (Polyvagal theory, violence & addiction as a “neural state disorder”0)
- “How to talk policy and influence people”: a Law and Justice interview with Dr Bruce Perry (Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics and Founder of the Child Trauma Academy)
- “How to talk policy and influence people”: a Law and Justice interview with Jim Sporleder (Former principal of Lincoln High Alternative School, the subject of Paper Tigers documentary)
- “How to talk policy and influence people”: a Law and Justice interview with James Leonard (Two Norries podcaster)
- “How to talk policy and influence people”: a Law and Justice interview with Fiona Ni Chinneide (former IPRT CEO)
- “How to talk policy and influence people”: a Law and Justice interview with Judge Ginger Lerner-Wren (mental health court judge)
- “How to talk policy and influence people”: a Law and Justice interview with Fritzi Horstman (Compassion Prison Project) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cza9gkZwU8E>
- “How to talk policy and influence people”: a Law and Justice interview with Chief Superintendent Stan Gilmour
- Law and Justice interview with Dr Stephen Porges: The Science of Safety at <https://soundcloud.com/jane-mulcahy/law-and-justice-interview-with-dr-stephen-porges-the-science-of-safety?si=c42cd48eed6046ae84be68c8ab1169b1>
- “Relationships Matter”: a Law and Justice interview with Andi Brierley at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLkiuy9GodY>

Thank you for listening!

- Email: JHMulcahy@probation.ie
- @jane mul
- @jane mulcahy.bsky.social
- YouTube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC0PVCDqklryeGznYDxvSwiw> (“Relationships Matter” and “How to talk policy and influence people” series of Law and Justice)

