Three Modes of Operations

This section of the curriculum material is present if you want to share this level of detail with your mothers. A very brief summary is provided in session two where we briefly discuss ANS, SNS and PNS when we discuss the benefits of mindful techniques. This is interesting but academic.

Emotions are related to activity in brain areas that direct our attention, motivate our behavior, and determine the significance of what is going on around us. Studies have shown, the flexibility required to manage the balance of attention and behavior develops from an early secure attachment relationship. Studies have also shown that a mother’s attunement helps physiologically structure her infant’s nervous system. Affect regulation is governed by the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which keeps the body in homeostasis (balance). The ANS links the brain stem with the rest of the body. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) is activated by external demands on an individual. The sympathetic branch of the ANS energizes us to deal with challenges and engages our ‘fight or flight’ response, while the parasympathetic branch discharges this arousal, so we can relax when an encounter ends. Under normal conditions a balanced exchange occurs between the two systems, producing a feeling of well-being and confidence that we can handle what life hands us. There are three types of Affect Regulation Systems:

**Threat Focused System (TFS):** seeks protection and safety. It lies in our most ancient brain system (reptile brain) and its function (TFS) is to pick up on threats quickly, triggering feelings like anxiety, anger, or alertness. Those feelings will urge us to take action to protect ourselves from anticipated danger. Either through fight, flight or a freeze reaction. The stress hormone Cortisol is most associated with this system.

**The Motivation System (TMS):** seeks resources and drives and motivates us to seek mechanisms we will need to survive and prosper. When our needs and wants are met, we feel excited and energized. When our needs are not met, we often feel disappointed and discouraged. When balanced with the other two systems, (TMS) will guide us toward achieving our goals. If there is not balance between the other systems, we may experience extreme high and extreme lows as we become too dependent on achieving external rewards and pleasures. The hormone Dopamine is the substance in the brain most linked with this system.

**Soothing and Relationship Focused System (SRFS):** This system enables us to feel inner calm and a sense of safety and belonging. It is linked to affection and kindness and is activated by a soothing response through meditation and the practice of Self-Compassion. It is always relational. The relation of one to self and self to others when others are affectionate and kind, will bring peace and sense wellbeing. The hormones oxytocin as well as endorphin are linked to our feelings of social safeness, connection, love, belonging and feeling safe. As children we were likely confronted with overwhelming situations, and were left without comfort. It is important for children to have an environment where they feel ‘safe’ so their bodies may rest and recover. If not, they can become stuck in the hyper-arousal (the sympathetic NS) or numbness (the parasympathetic NS), or they fluctuate wildly between the two. The symptoms of PTSD reflect this instability: the hyper-arousal of irritability, sleep disturbance and hyper-vigilance, and the numbing of withdrawal, avoidance and detachment.

The more we learn to cultivate and develop the soothing system, the more we can regulate the other two systems restoring balance and achieving an inner peace and sense of calm.