

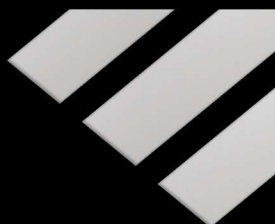


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Professor Andrew McDonnell



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Understanding the Impact of Stress on
Behaviour: Using Low Arousal Approaches to
Reduce Distressed Behaviour

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Managing and Recognising Our Own Stress

'This above all: To thine own self be
true,
And it must follow, as the night the
day,
Thou canst not be false to any man'
- *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare

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Judgements Under Uncertainty

- The Nobel Laureate and psychologist Daniel Kahneman identified that human judgements under uncertainty can be full of biases that have an impact on our every day behaviour.
- The perceived unpredictability of the world is a constant source of stress.
- Understanding this stress response is critical to surviving in a world that can appear to be so unpredictable and chaotic.

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Chaos

- David Pitonyak has often remarked that supporting people who are distressed can feel like you are 'jumping into the chaos of things'
- This talk will focus on how we support people who are experiencing high levels of emotional distress and are in a state of panic
- Making sense of chaos starts with making US less of a threat

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Emotional Contagion

- Both positive and negative emotions are literally contagious
- Emotional contagion is important for supporters, as sometimes they need to distinguish their own emotional state from that of the person they are supporting
- Being regulated and modelling regulation is a difficult task which I call a Low Arousal Approach

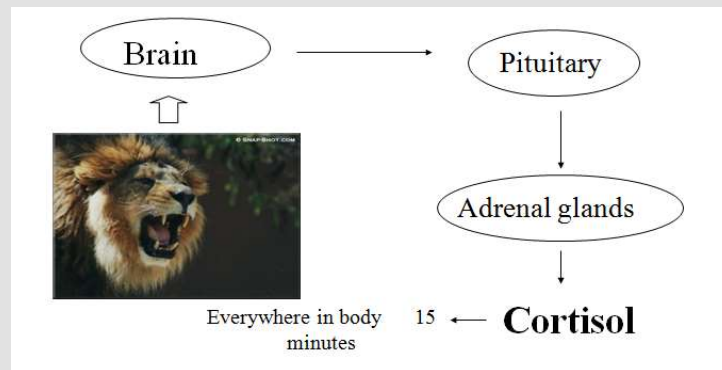
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Threat Appraisal

Threat causes cortisol secretion, and disturbs the 24 hour rhythm.



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Low Arousal

- To manage crises, my colleagues and I adopt what we describe as Low Arousal Approaches
- In essence, these approaches avoid confrontation and challenging a person who is highly distressed
- They require individuals to be able to emotionally be present with an individual and saying less rather than more

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The Low Arousal Practitioner

- The low arousal approach was developed in the late 1980s as an approach to managing crisis situations
- There has been a strong emphasis on 'in the moment' crisis management – for example, avoid making demands, be aware of non-verbal cues etc
- The key is understanding that we often inadvertently trigger situations or make them worse
- Low arousal is about being reflective as a practitioner, and looking at ourselves first and the individual second

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Avoiding Verbal Arguments

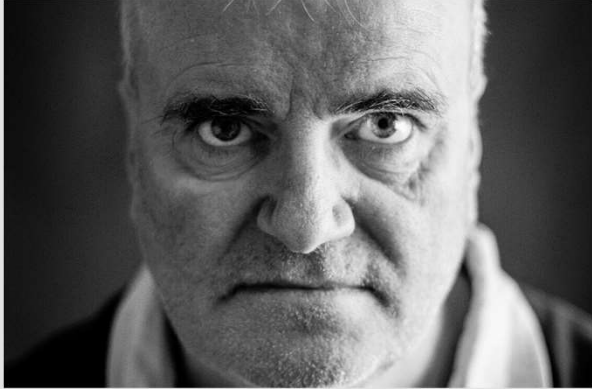
- Avoiding arguments can be extremely difficult and significantly challenging to do in practice, but it is a skill that you can practice. There are many individuals who find it difficult to avoid responding
- The low arousal mantra is: 'When in doubt, shut your mouth. If you're not sure, walk out the door'
- People tend to over-engage emotionally in such situations
- Think about the common everyday arguments you experience: Do you feel a strong urge to 'win the debate?'

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Non-Verbal Cues

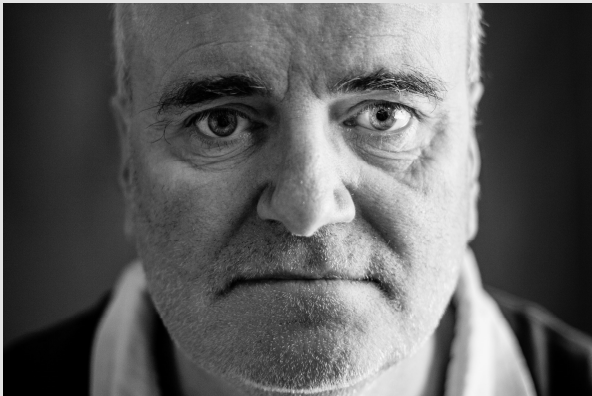


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Non-Verbal Cues



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What Makes a Good Low Arousal Practitioner?

- What are the main characteristics of a good low arousal practitioner?
- What are their values?
- How can we recognise a low arousal practitioner?
- What are the features of a low arousal practitioner you work with?

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The Original Definition

*" Attempts to alter staff behaviour by
avoiding confrontational situations
and seeking the path of least
resistance"*

(McDonnell, Reeves, Johnson & Lane, 1998: p164)

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Low arousal is about 'us' not 'them'

- Many of the central principles of the low arousal approach are based on non-violent philosophies, such as Buddhism and Quaker beliefs
- There are also strong influences from mindfulness and particularly the role of reflective practice
- Before you attempt to change or 'manage' another person, you need to reflect on your own behaviour

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Understanding Your Own Stress is Key



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Stress and Distressed Behaviour

- Stress, anxiety and trauma have been proposed as potentially significant factors in behaviours of concern of people with ASD (Lipsky, 2011; Bradley and Caldwell, 2013, McCreddie and McDermott, 2014).
- Stress based interventions can focus on the child, the carer or the wider organisational context (such as a school or college environment).

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Stress and Distressed Behaviour

- Many of the people we support are experiencing high levels of stress.
- Many of the supporters of people who work with people who present with behaviours of concern are also highly stressed.
- Many staff actually inadvertently triggers so called behaviours of concern (McDonnell, 2010).
- But, it's the client who receives the Behaviour Support Plan.
- An understanding of the transactional nature of stress can be really helpful when focussing on behaviours of concern.

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Fight or Flight: Stress Hormones



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Stress in Care Settings

- Rippon, McDonnell, Smith, McCreadie & Wetherell (2020) used a Grounded Theory approach to identify stressors in care environments. They interviewed 51 staff in Hospital and community settings in the UK and Ireland
- They found that colleague to colleague differing views about the causes of behaviour led to higher perceived workplace stress.
- Lone workers appeared to report higher levels of stress.
- A range of service user based behaviours were perceived to cause high degree of stress these included: Self harm and repetitive behaviours, in particular repeated verbal requests.

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The Solution: Cortisol Management

You can control cortisol levels via:

1. Stress Management Techniques
2. Relaxation
3. Being mindful
4. Support systems
5. Coping styles
6. Exercise
7. Nutrition



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Stress and Trauma

- Viewing behaviours from the perspective of stress and trauma is essential
- This requires empathic understanding of why a person behaves in the way they do
- Stress and trauma are transactional and cumulative
- Stressed people make poor decisions – supporters included
- In a recent study, we attempted to understand the stress of staff in adult service in the UK. Some of the results were surprising

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The Negative Behaviour Narrative

- In a recent article on the Studio 3 website, I described myself as 'A Behaviourist in Recovery'
- Low Arousal Approaches are almost 80% reactive in nature
- They are not 'instead of' other therapeutic approaches
- Accepting that our role is to SUPPORT and not FIX people is an essential focus of the Low Arousal Approach (McDonnell, 2019)

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Managing Crises

- Good behaviour management focuses on calm and reflective individuals who actively avoid threatening cues
- Remember, even moving towards an individual who is highly distressed can trigger a cocktail of fear, threat, and in some cases physical violence
- Low Arousal practitioners are often attempting to 'ride out the storm'

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1: Role Model Being a Calm and Reflective Individual

- Good behaviour management focuses on calm and reflective individuals who actively avoid threatening cues
- Remember, even moving towards an individual who is highly distressed can trigger a cocktail of fear, threat, and in some cases physical violence
- Low Arousal practitioners are often attempting to 'ride out the storm'

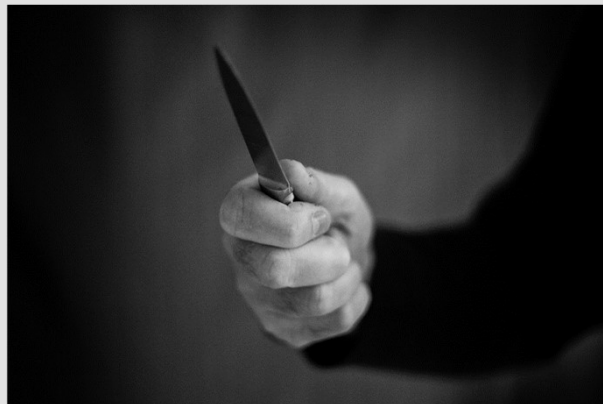
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2: Stop Catastrophising

Are most behaviours we experience on the same level as knife crime?



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3. Highly Stressed People Need More Control

As practitioners, we often try to over-control behaviours



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The Battle for Control

- He/she is trying to wind me up.
- He/she is doing it deliberately.
- He/she knows what they are doing.
- He/she could stop if they wanted.
- He/she can think through their actions.
- He/she means to make me feel bad.
- He/she knows the best time to challenge.

*Adapted from the Controllability Beliefs Scale (Dagnan et al., 2013)

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The Battle for Control

'Emily was a thirty-two-year-old shop manager who, over the years, had issues around her weight. When she was sixteen, she was given a formal diagnosis of anorexia nervosa. Since her early adulthood, she has managed to control her eating effectively. She did observe that the more stressed she became, the more powerful the urges to control what she ate. She described this to her therapist as 'the only thing I can control.'

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4. Recognise Panic and Avoid Emotional Contagion

- Many people with intellectual disabilities and challenging behaviours show signs of panic in specific situations
- Panic reactions can often lead to people needing to escape from situations
- Panic responses do not appear to habituate rapidly
- Individuals are not always allowed by carers to escape from situations

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5. Focus More on the Behaviour of Supporters

- In my experience, there can be an overly mechanistic approach to supporting behaviours of concern
- Changing the conversation or, as my colleague Elly Chapple says, 'flipping the narrative,' can be positive
- In therapeutic relationships, the supporters of clients and their stress reduction should be a primary focus

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6. It's About 'Us' Not 'Them'

- If we are to change our approach to crises, the key is to change our own behaviour
- Sometimes this means 'giving in' (McDonnell, 2019)
- Often, it means saying nothing
- Highly stressed people tend to focus more on body language than words
- Ask yourself, 'How can I manage that situation better next time?'

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7. Choices Not Boundaries

- My colleague David Pitonyak has always argued that we should give people choices rather than boundaries
- Every boundary or rule is a point of confrontation
- A Low Arousal Approach to crisis management means having fewer rules, not no rules

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8. See the Person, Not the Behaviour

- Always try to remind yourself that you are working with a highly distressed individual
- Try to avoid focusing just on the person's behaviour
- There are always complex reasons why we behave in the way we do
- Try and see the person as stressed and traumatised

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‘When a person is drowning, that is not the best time to teach them how to swim.’

- David Pitonyak

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Avoid the ‘Critical Parent’

- The therapist Eric Berne in his book *Games People Play* (1964) proposed that our human transactions (interactions) are guided by deeply learned ego states: Parent, Adult and Child
- Berne believed these to be the main ego states that people switch between when interacting with one another. He used the term ‘game’ but it is easier to think of them as over-learned scripts that we feel compelled to read and act out
- Applying these scripts to adults interacting with other adults or children who appear to be acting in a ‘childlike’ manner, there is one ego mode that is relevant which is the so-called ‘critical parent’

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Acceptance and Understanding

- When we are supporting people who are highly distressed, we may be exposed to a whole range of abusive behaviours
- The concept of acceptance is a very useful one to consider in these situations. It may mean that we have to accept the complexity of a situation, namely that we cannot easily control that person's behaviour
- We may sometimes have to avoid personalising what a person has said to us, which often means that we are accepting that the person may be stressed or traumatised

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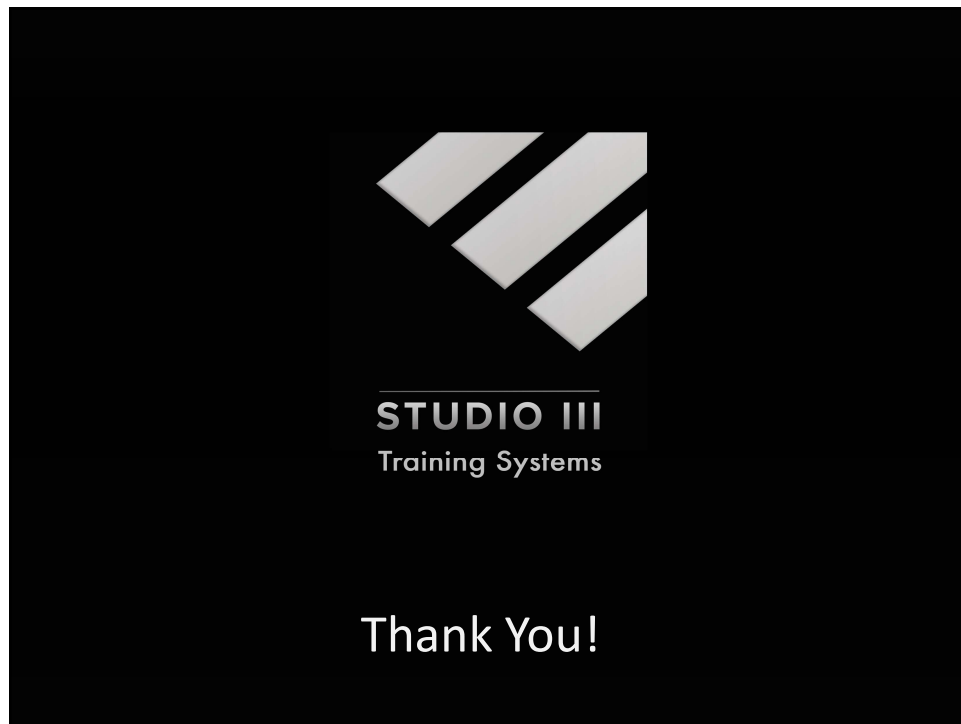
Empathy and Compassion

- It is arguably difficult to meet and work with people without experiencing some form of empathy. However, sometimes the people we work with struggle with empathy
- This can be due to their past experiences and having not learnt the necessary skills, or due to neuro-developmental conditions, which can make empathising with others difficult
- Compassion in how we behave is central to the whole approach

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