

Strengthening the Safety Circuit: Caring for the Mother-Infant Dyad Affected by Substance-Use Disorder

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Today's Crystal Clear Message

*Growth and development occur in
the context of relationships.*

*All healing occurs
in the context of relationships.*

In every pregnancy, there is a mixture of anticipation and anxiety....





Just imagine...



Neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS)

Associated with a number of medications and substances including opioids, benzodiazepines, alcohol, barbiturates, and SSRIs

Opioid-related NAS affected > Connecticut 400 babies and their mothers in 2017.

Two-thirds (2/3) of all adults with Substance Use Disorder experienced physical or sexual abuse during childhood.


<https://www.dualdiagnosis.org/unfortunate-connection-childhood-trauma-addiction-adulthood/>

SUD in Healthcare Professionals

10-15% of health care professionals will misuse substances in their lifetime.

Rates of prescription drug misuse, especially opioids and benzodiazepines, are five times higher in physicians than the general population.

Merlo. The American Journal on Addictions. 2013;22, 605–612.

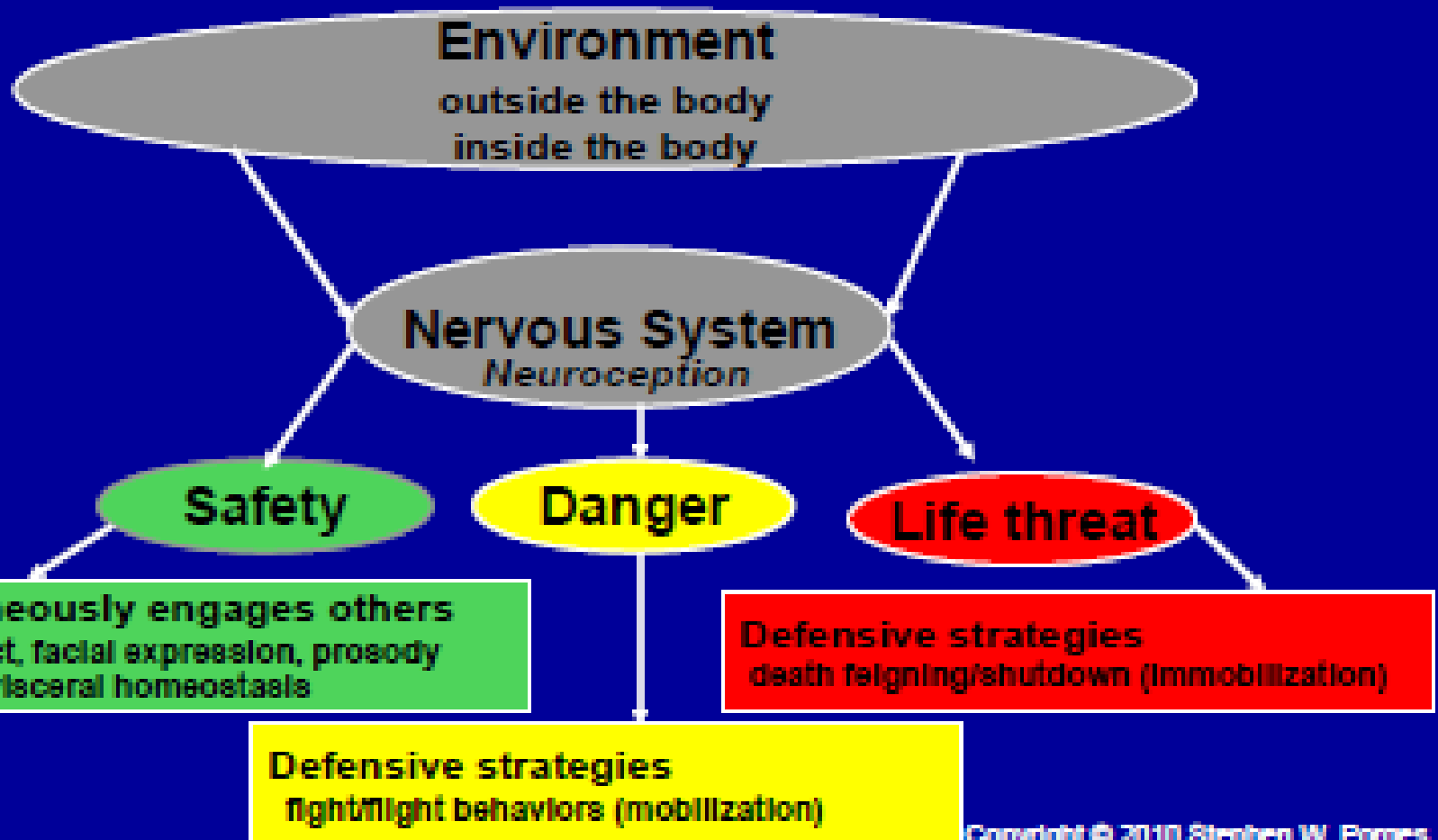


How can we avoid re-traumatization
and promote
mother and her baby to engage?

Social connection is a biological imperative for mammals.



The Quest for Safety



Neuroception

The unconscious or autonomic nervous system's appraisal of ...

SAFETY

DANGER

LIFE THREAT



SAFETY

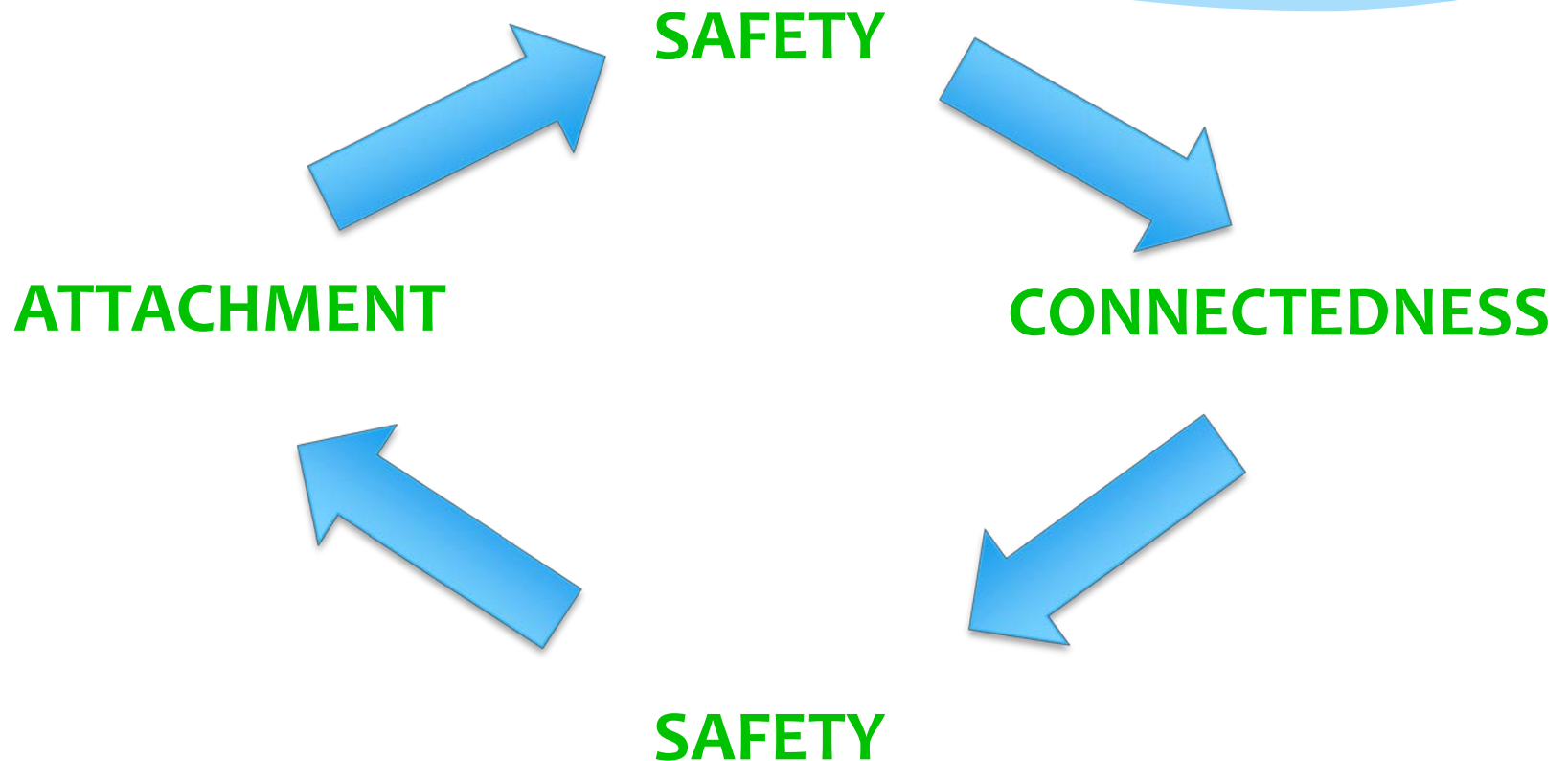
LIFE THREAT



DANGER



The Safety Circuit





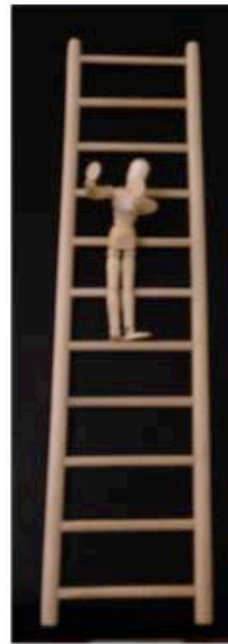
Moving from “what’s wrong with her?”
to “what happened to her?”

Where are our patients and their families? Where are we?

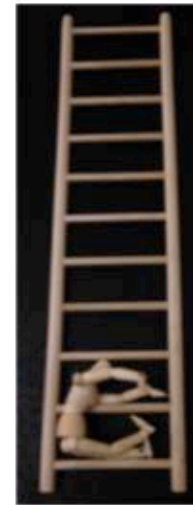
The Automatic, Autonomic Ladder



safe, connected
calm, social



danger, mobilized
action taking



life threat, trapped
shut down, collapsed



Every interaction is relational...

Treating distress with medication

Pharmacology is the answer:

Infant hospitalized without mother.

Staff knows best.

Mother “picks baby up” on day of discharge.



Treating distress with relationships

Mother is the treatment:

Mother and infant remain together.

Mother provides infant's care.

Mother and staff share decision-making.



Provider-patient relationships: A secure base

Proximity of an infant to a caregiver is critical to survival/well-being.

Proximity/availability of provider to mother instills a positive working model of relationships.



Embed the parent and newborn within a secure base

Maintain physical and emotional proximity.

Explicitly state your availability.

Engage the safety circuit—it's iterative.

Maintain eye contact

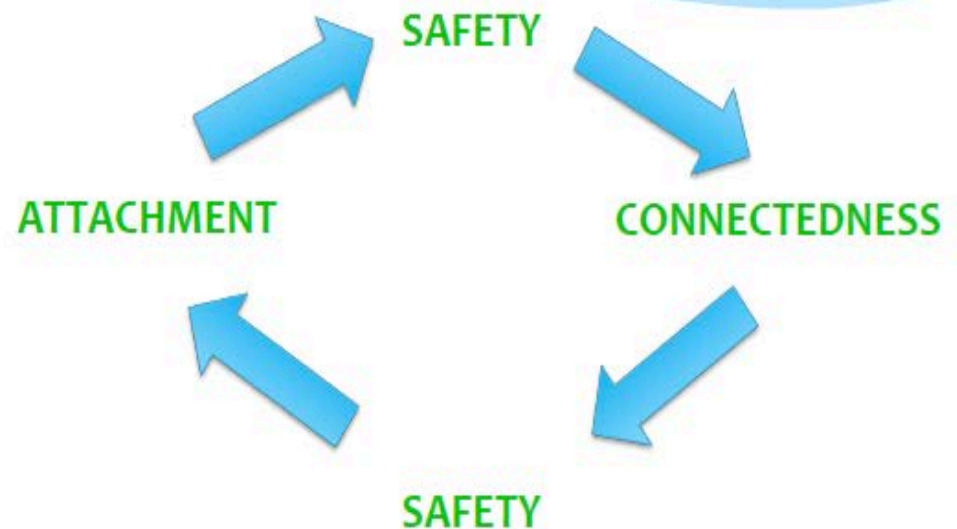
Facial expression

Soft smile

Warm touch

Prosody

Creating a neuroception of safety



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“Weller than well”

Some of our very sick patients surprised us by getting well even without much of our “treatment”... They kept improving, got “weller than well.”

Karl A. Menninger, MD

Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic,

1989; 53(4): 350-352

