



Addressing Secondary Traumatic Stress in Veterinary Medicine

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Veterinary Mental Health & Wellbeing

Concepts

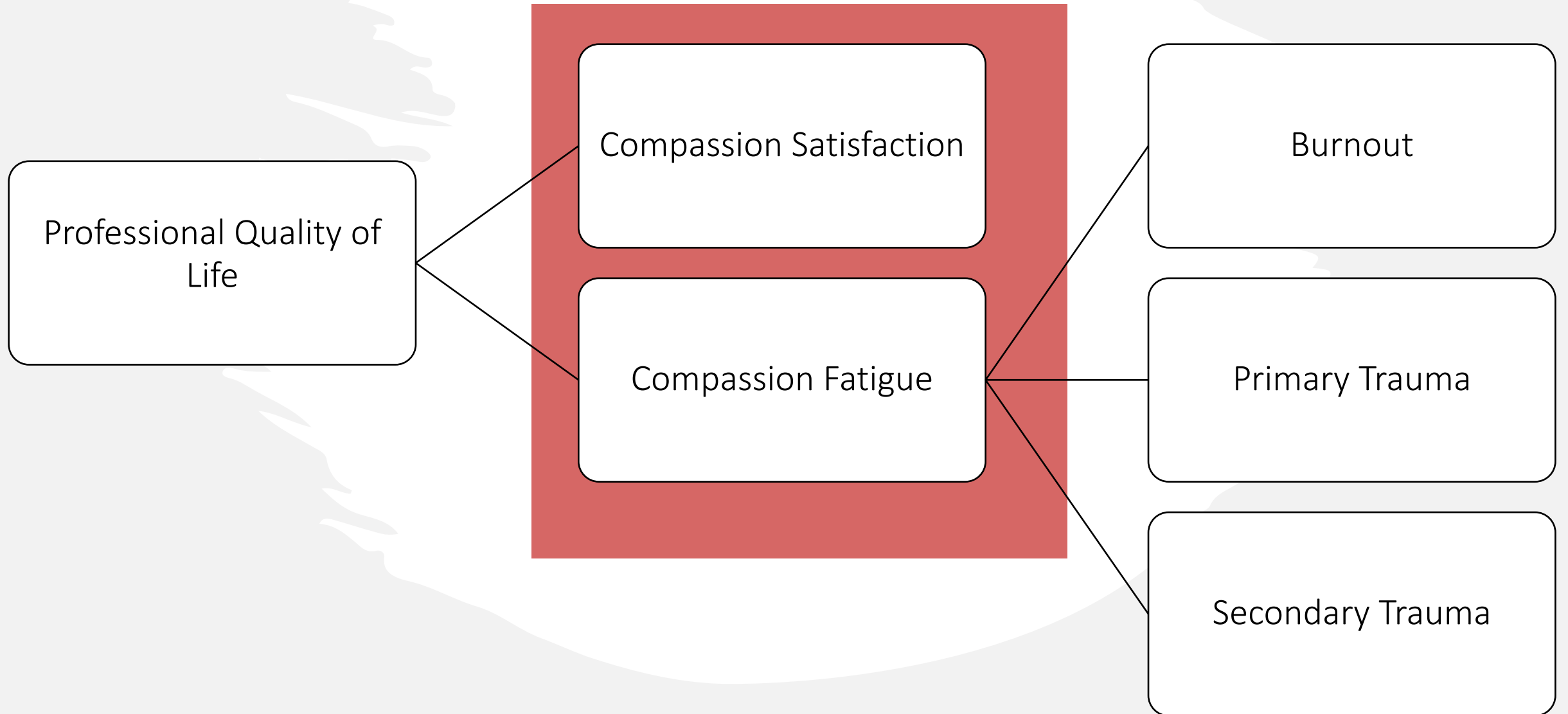
Professional Quality of Life
Secondary Traumatic Stress

Responses

Veterinary Practices
Veterinary Practitioners
Nervous System Regulation



Concepts



Secondary Traumatic Stress

exposure to the pain and suffering
of others that overwhelms
one's capacity to cope

Veterinary
Professional

The diagram illustrates the relationship between three entities: a Veterinary Professional, a Patient, and a Client. The Veterinary Professional is positioned at the top, connected by a red T-shaped structure to the Patient and Client at the bottom. The Patient is on the left, and the Client is on the right. A thick grey vertical bar is on the far left.

Patient

Client

Examples of Exposure

Animal cruelty

Euthanasia (under conditions of moral distress)

Traumatic death (patients, people)

Clients' reactions to loss

Escalated conflict

Discrimination and oppression



Susceptibility

Prior history of
trauma

Social isolation

Emotional
suppression

Blames others

Ineffective
training and
supervision

Lack of
processing
spaces

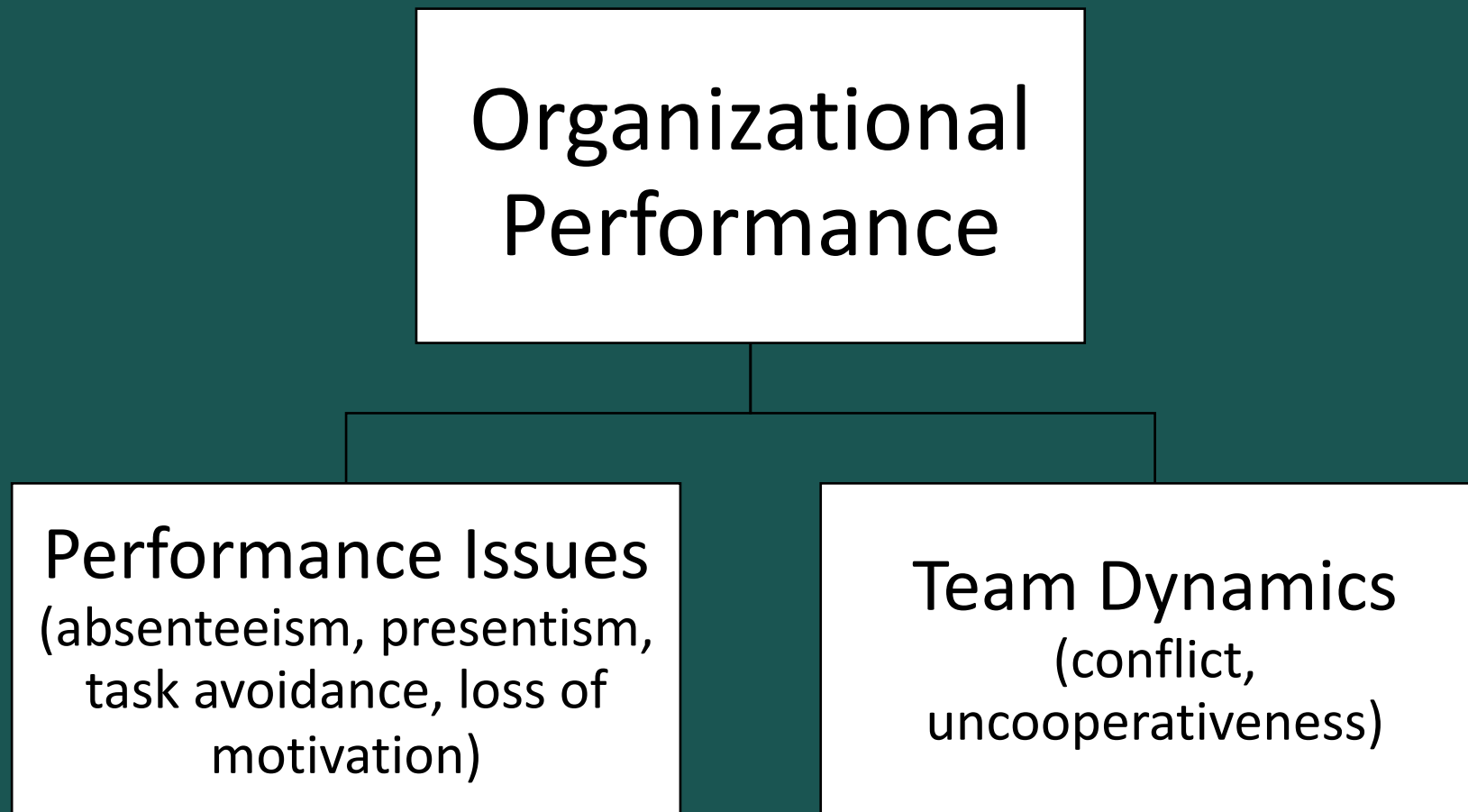
Impacts: Individuals

Emotional
(dysregulation,
numbing)

Physical
(somatization, sleep
disturbances,
hypervigilance)

Cognitive
(cognitive errors,
intrusive thoughts)

Impacts: Team





Responses

Veterinary Practices

Trauma Training

Critical Incident Debriefing

Regular Team Debriefing

Build Supervisory Capacity

VSW Integration



Debriefing



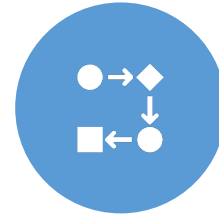
WHAT HAPPENED?



HOW WERE
WE/OTHERS
IMPACTED?



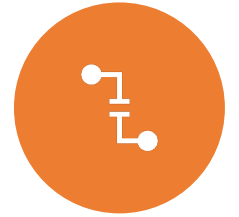
WHAT DID WE DO
WELL?



WHAT COULD HAVE
BEEN DONE
DIFFERENTLY?



WHAT DID WE LEARN?



NOW WHAT?



What is your hospital currently doing to address
secondary traumatic stress?
What else could you be doing?



Veterinary Professionals

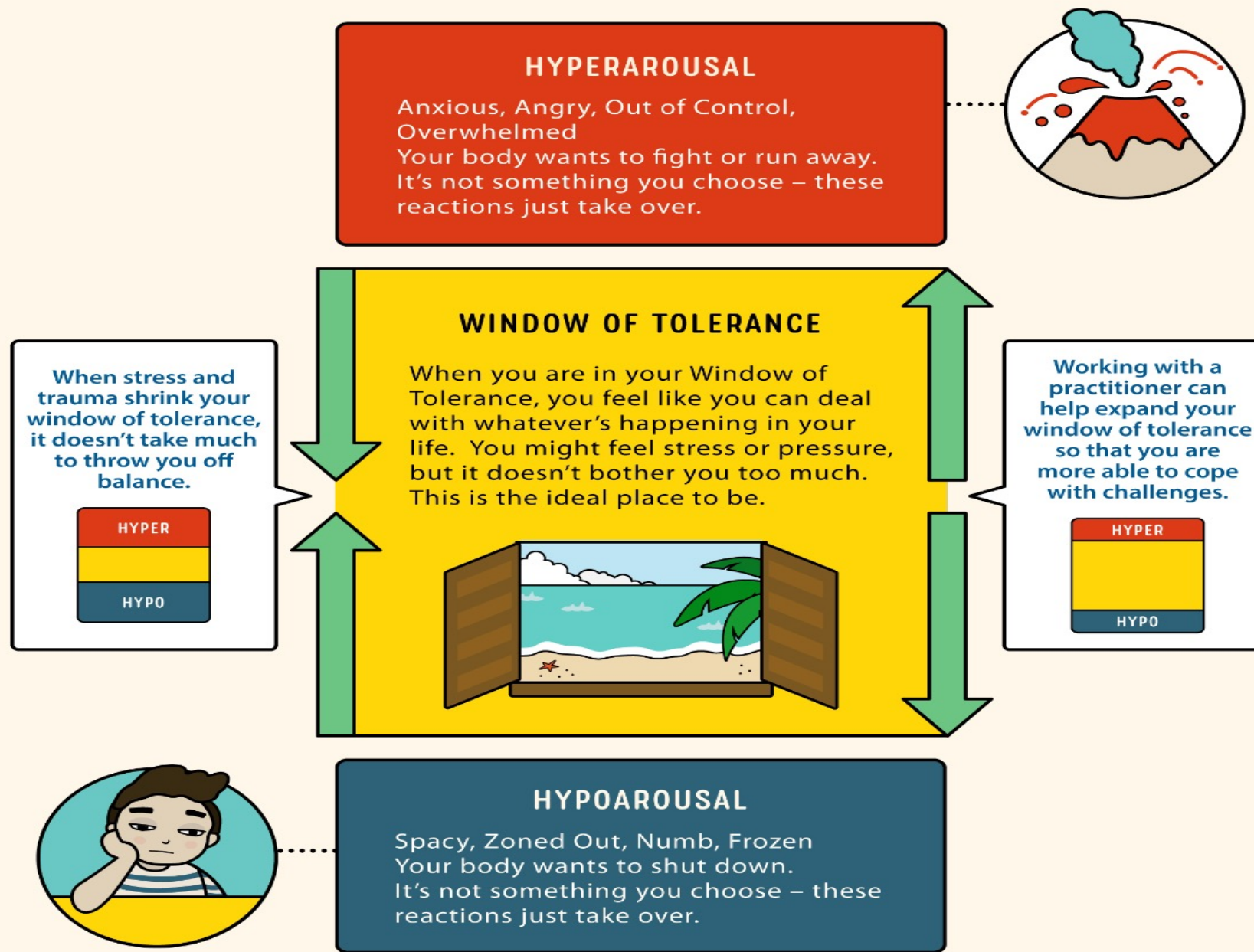
Professional Support

Peer Support

Social Support Network

Self-Care

We can't think our way
through stress, we need to feel
our way through it





What factors shrink your window of tolerance?

What stressors take you out of your window of tolerance?

What does this feel like?



Stress Cycle

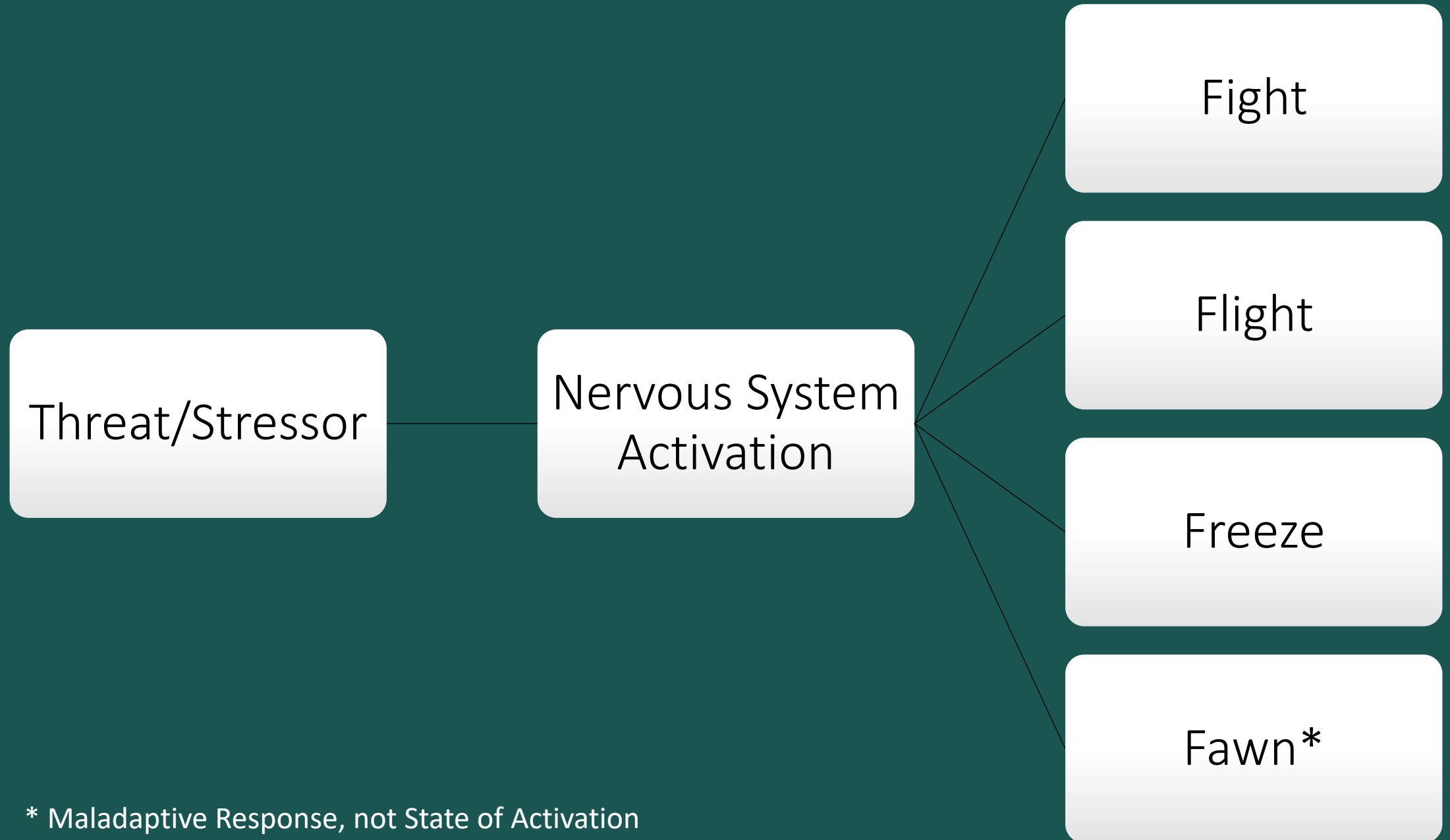
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graph TD; A[Stress Cycle] --> B[Resting]; A --> C[Tension/Strain]; A --> D[Response (passive/active)]; A --> E[Relief];
```

Resting

Tension/Strain

Response
(passive/active)

Relief





Dysregulation is not bad,
it's normal.

It's our body's way of trying to protect us
from threats.

We need to understand it, embrace it and
learn to work with it.

The goal of nervous system regulation isn't to achieve a state of calm but rather to create a flexible and resilient window of tolerance

A regulated nervous system doesn't look like:

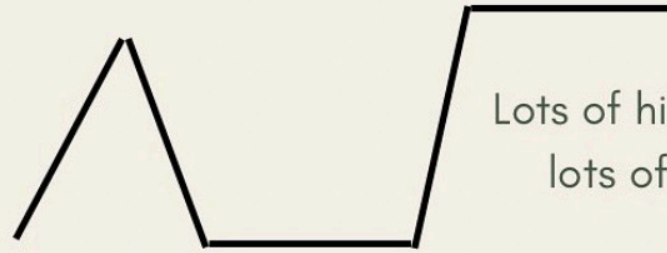
This

Always "calm"



OR

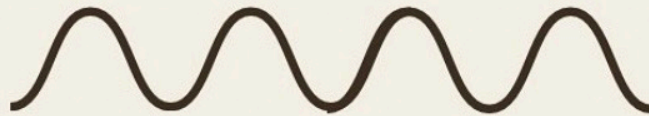
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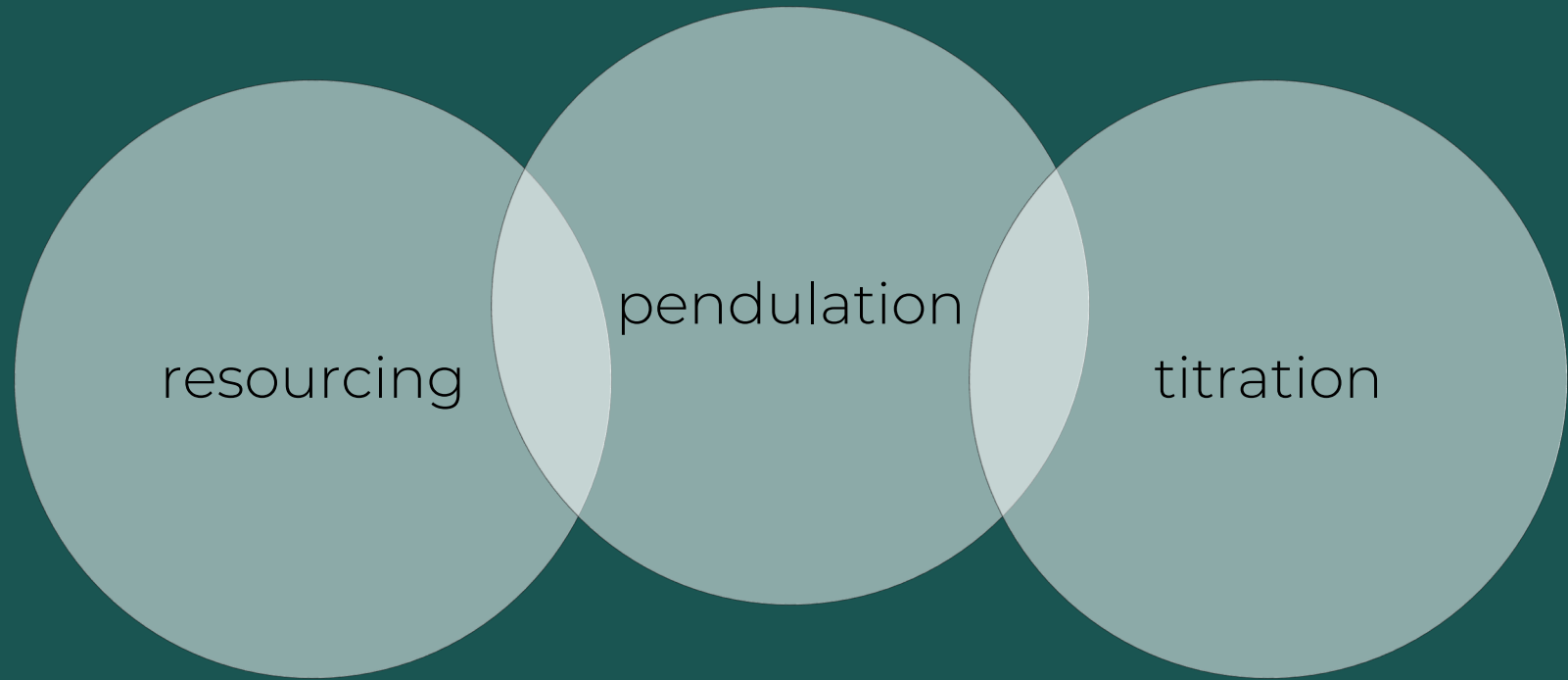
Lots of highs and
lots of lows

But

This



**Regulation simply means having the capacity to
move in and out of stress while still being able to
return to "baseline" with ease**



Resourcing

Practice of inviting our body to safety and goodness
(self-soothing)

Pendulation

Shifting between expansion and contraction of
nervous system

Titration

Slowing things down to experience small chunks of
discomfort so as not to retraumatize the body

Important Take Aways:

There are times we need to **self-soothe**,
there are times we can increase our
ability to sit with the **discomfort**

Resourcing

1

Meet Your
Basic
Needs

2

Be in
Your Body

3

Have Daily
Practices

Resourcing Tools

Breathwork	Diaphragmatic Breathing Double Breathing Longer Exhale (4-7-8, 7-11) Five-Finger Breathing
Grounding	5-4-3-2-1 Feet on ground Visualization
Easeful Movement	Muscle relaxation Stretch, Walk, Yoga, Dance
Nature	Mindful experiencing
Self-Soothe	Self-touch (hand over heart, hold your own hand, hug yourself) Hum, Sing Weighted blankets

The key is to integrate these practices when regulated, so your body can more easily tap into them when dysregulated

Sit with Discomfort

Identify What
Response
You're In

Tune Into
Your
Body

Discharge
or
Mobilize

1. Identify what response you're in

2. Tune into your body

FIGHT (sympathetic branch)	Increased heart rate, irritability, dry mouth, flushing, muscle tension, sweating	Body prepares to defend itself. Explosive, condescending, demands perfection, controlling.
FLIGHT (sympathetic branch)		Body prepares to run away from the threat. Overthinking, overwhelmed, avoidance, worry, constantly busy, perfectionism, stuck in 'on' position.
FREEZE (parasympathetic branch)	Decreased heart rate, feeling numb or cold, physical stiffness, heaviness in limbs, restricted breathing, holding of breath	Body immobilizes when it can't survive through fight or flight. Brain fog, difficulty listening, difficulty making decisions, zoning out, self shaming, self-isolating.
FAWN (behavioural modification response)	Disconnecting from self to focus on others	Behavioural modification response to nervous system activation. People pleasing, no boundaries, ignoring one's needs, loss of self, overlistening, overgiving

Step 3: Discharge or Mobilize (complete stress response)

FIGHT

squats, scream into a pillow, clench fists and release,
cry, laugh
breathwork (exhale longer than inhale)

FLIGHT

fast forward Movement - run, walk
shake to discharge panicky energy
grounding – feet on ground, visualize energy leaving your body, 5-4-3-2-1

FREEZE

conscious breathwork: e.g. Wim Hoff, Voo Breathing
focus on one small thing you can do
self-touch
co-regulate

FAWN

increase awareness of our own emotional, physical needs
boundaries, assertiveness
griefwork



Over time, we want to build our capacity to self-soothe and sit with the sensations of each activated response

Helpful Pendulation Exercise:

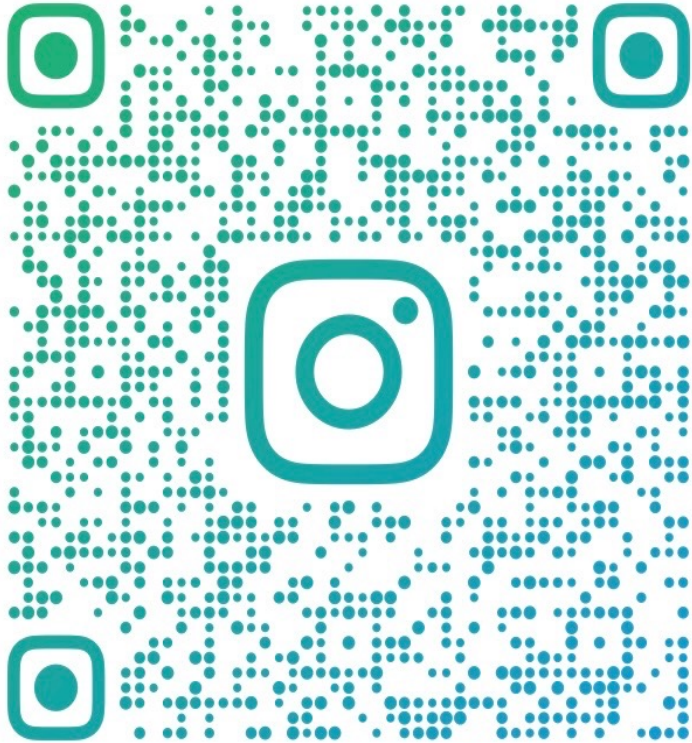
<http://www.sarahmcintyrelpc.com/coping-with-distress-pendulation-technique/>



Irene Lyon, MSc

is a nervous system specialist
and somatic neuroplasticity
expert.

What's your golden nugget?



@VETERINARYWELLBEINGCOACH

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