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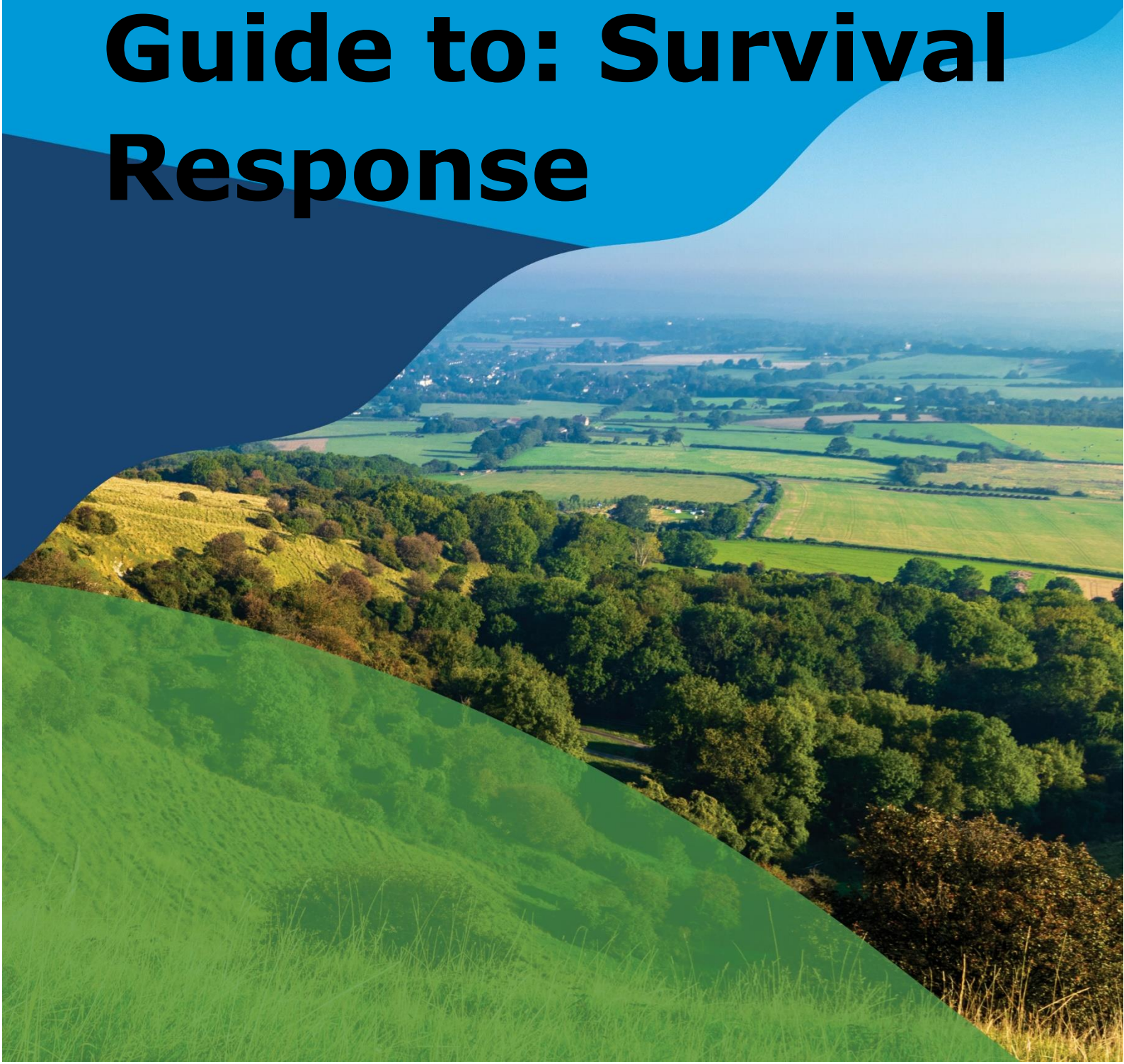
# ASCT

# Getting Started Guide to: Survival Response



# Introduction:

When something happens which makes us feel unsafe, our brains respond by going into survival mode. The brain sees or feels something frightening, interprets that this is a life-threatening situation and then does whatever it can to provide a sense of safety. This is often referred to as fight, flight, flood, freeze, fawn/friend or flop response.

**FIGHT** – the brain thinks it can fight or scare off the threat.
**FLIGHT** – The brain thinks it can flee the scene to get to safety either physically or mentally.
**FLOOD -** The brain thinks that by showing extreme distress it can persuade someone to act as a protector.
**FREEZE** – The brain chooses to disconnect the body to 'play dead' until the threat gives up or goes away or disconnects the body and cognitive brain to prevent severe damage from mental overload.
**FAWN/FRIEND** - The brain seeks to placate the threat and aims to avoid conflict through extreme people pleasing behaviour.
**FLOP -** The brain seeks to avoid conflict or appearing threatening so the threat will give up and go away.

Although this is a natural process, autistic children and young people are more likely to experience this survival response due to living in a neurotypical world. NeuroWild has created the image below which shows factors which may contribute towards an autistic individual's dysregulation.


It is really important to note here that survival mode isn't always easy to spot. A common survival strategy that is detrimental to the wellbeing of autistic young people is masking. Sometimes, masking is a conscious choice, but for a lot of young people masking is a survival response. This is when a person is highly stressed but does not appear so from the outside, because they have gone into the 'Fawn' mode of survival

## Different Parts of the Brain

Amygdala - This is the first part of our brain that develops, even before we are born, it is connected to our survival and everything that will keep us alive. This controls our heart rate, breathing and temperature control and is our internal alarm system e.g., flight or freeze.

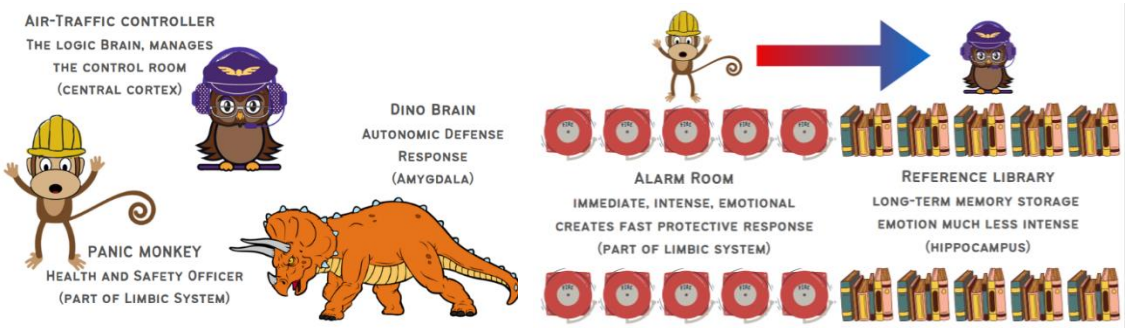
Hippocampus - This is the next part of our brain that grows both before and after we are born. It plays a key part in emotional memories e.g. how things, people and experiences make us feel. This is an important part of our brain but not super intelligent (not involved with higher level thinking such as meta-cognition or self-regulation), it is associated with the senses.

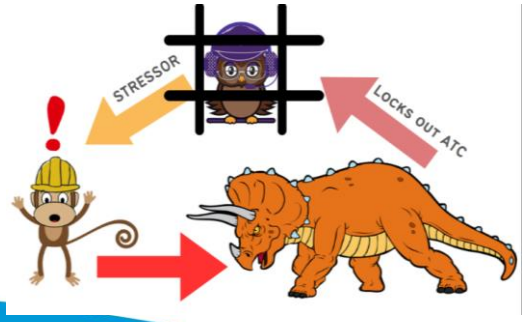
Prefrontal Cortex - This part of our brain is connected with our reasoning, language and social skills. It does not finish developing in men until their 30s and women in their late 20s, and research shows that this may be even later for neurodivergent individuals.

These parts of the brain are often linked to different animals or using Dan Siegal's hand model to make this complicated subject more accessible to professionals and children alike!

## Spectrum Gaming

Spectrum Gaming, a charity for autistic young people to help develop connection, self-acceptance, and support, have created their own set of characters to visualise the different parts of the brain and their response.

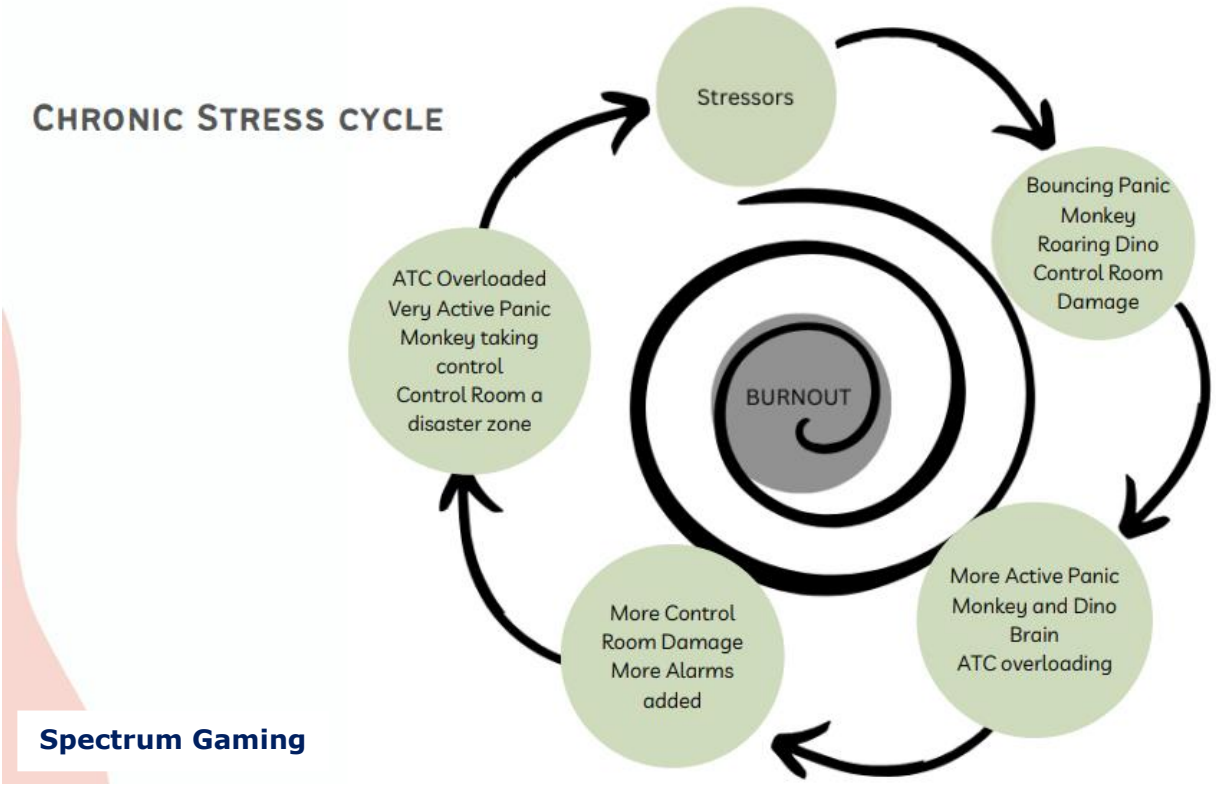



Spectrum

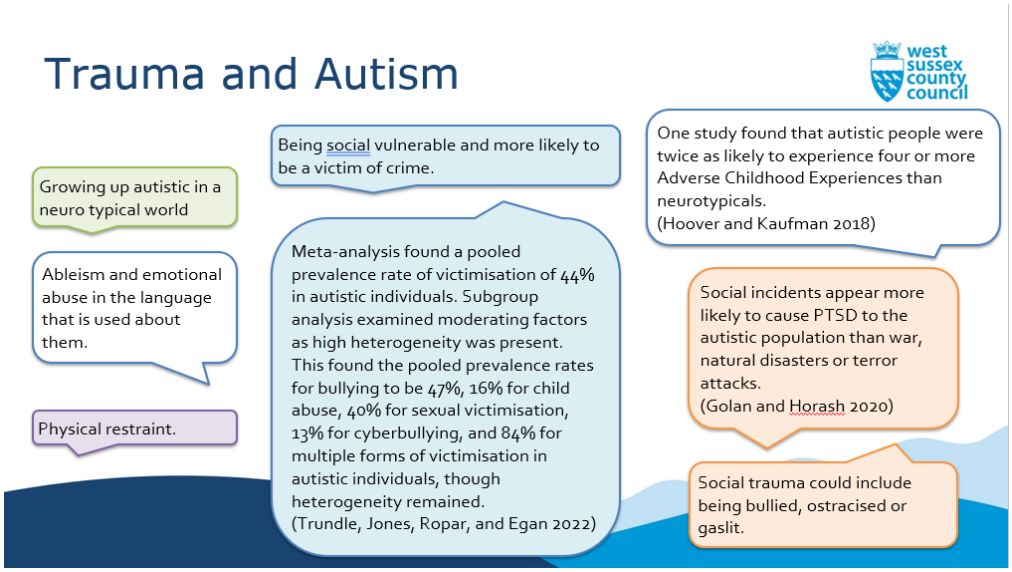
Due to higher stress, autistic children and young people are likely to have more memories stored in their amygdala, and this can cause more stress! High levels of stress creates more memories stored in the amygdala, which then means our brains become more hypervigilant (because they expect danger) which can in turn cause more stress. The amygdala can become very sensitive, and you can get stuck in a vicious cycle where you are always in survival mode and always feel unsafe.

Autistic children and young people repetitively accessing their survival mode can lead to them experiencing the chronic stress cycle, and ultimately burnout. During burnout, the child or young person may appear physically exhausted, have increased sensory sensitivities, be unable to attend school, have increased withdrawal or isolation, difficulty with self-care, experience 'meltdowns' or 'overwhelms', increased emotional reactivity, and have impacted executive functioning.



## Survival mode and trauma

Autistic young people often don't have the tools or support to be able to process negative experiences, and their behaviour and emotions may not be understood as a response to trauma by the people around them. This means that they might be punished or blamed for their traumatic stress, which can then add to the stress.  The image below shows the link between autism and trauma.




## Supporting autism and trauma recovery

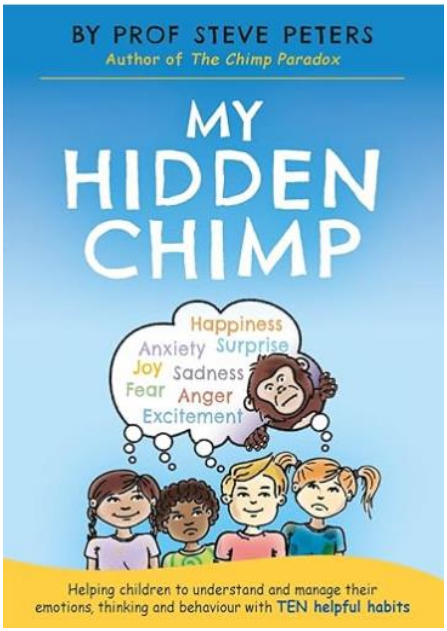
Early intervention with proactive support including increased understanding of autism, listening to pupil and parent carer views, and environmental adaptations are key. For further information on how to support children and young people, please see the following Getting Started Guides with specific reference to

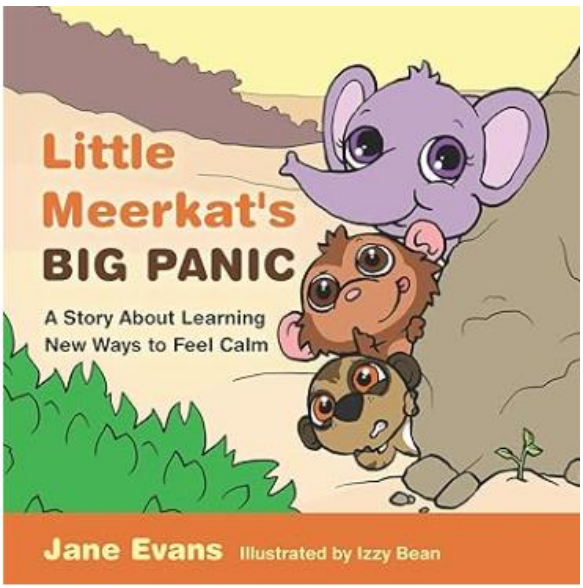
- Sensory Environments
- Affirming Autism
- Pupil and Parent Views
- Regulation
- Masking

# Books/Resources:

My Hidden Chimp by Prof Steve Peters.

Little Meerkat's Big Panic: A Story About Learning New Ways to Feel Calm by Jane Evans.




# Websites:

Dr Daniel Siegel presenting a Hand Model of the Brain - YouTube

Exploring Anxiety and Stress Management (Teens) - YouTube

NeuroWild: Emily Hammond -NeuroWild | Teachers Pay Teachers

Spectrum Gaming: What Does Survival Mode Look Like? (spectrumgaming.net)

The Fight Flight Freeze Response - YouTube