





# THE RIGHT TO STAND UP FOR THEMSELVES

INSIGHTS, TIPS, AND THERAPIES FOR  
CONNECTING WITH AND HELPING  
NEURODIVERGENT CLIENTS

BY ROBIN COLLINS, RCC

**N**eurodiversity merely means the natural differences in brain functioning and behavioural traits between individuals. These differences can be significant enough to be diagnosable: ASD or ADHD are examples. Some diversity can be genetic, but neurodiverse traits can be a result, or symptom, of life experiences causing the prolonged activation of our stress response system, diverting energy away from non-life-saving body functions such as brain development. Significant traumatic events can cause changes in neuro-functioning and behavioural responses.

If pushed, I would have to state that the majority of the people I work with are neurodiverse. Their view of the world, their relationships, and their goals for life are different from what may be seen with “neurotypical” individuals. I have been navigating these — sometimes subtle and at other times obvious — differences for so long that I no longer consider them as different but as unfulfilled needs. I speak mostly about youth and adolescents, but I work with adults in much the same way.

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### **NEURODIVERSITY AND EQUINE-ASSISTED COUNSELLING**

Many of our responses to the world and to life’s stressors were once appropriate. But these coping mechanisms are no longer helpful since the situation that developed them is in the past. Working with horses can highlight these patterns in a very gentle and non-threatening way. Human-horse relational interactions highlight the subtle reactions that individuals have when engaging in human-human interactions. Generally, the subtle beginnings of negative patterns are overshadowed and discounted by the more obvious and impactful behaviours. More often than not, the people I work with have no previous horse experience. For them to make the commitment to

come out to the barn to work with horses indicates a desire and openness to learn.

As the therapeutic relationship grows and we begin to journey into difficult areas, the horses become lighthouses or touchstones, showing us the way while keeping us firmly grounded in the present. Being diverse comes with the feeling of being different or “other than.” This is not a comfortable place to exist in — it tends to heighten our sense of threat. Horses are able to redirect focus while providing a feeling of absolute acceptance.

I worked with a very young individual who has significant developmental delay coinciding with past sexual abuse. She has never felt safe or accepted by anyone or anything. When she came to me,

## **TRAUMA, COMMUNICATION, AND NEURODIVERSE NEEDS**

**W**hen I went into private practice, I did not mean to specialize in youth who have experienced trauma. But these are the people who find me, and over time, I have learned skills to help in my work. Trauma impacts developmental growth. This has been studied and shown by Dan Siegel, Bessel van der Kolk, Pat Ogden, Peter Levine, and Dr. Bruce Perry, to name a few. People who experience either singular traumatic stressors or chronic traumatic incidents respond differently to the world. To help individuals, caregivers, family, and other supports understand these differences, I have incorporated Dr. Bruce Perry’s Neurosequential Model of Therapeutics into the work I do. I find this model helps to provide a common language, which makes interactions more successful, and is one of the most helpful outcomes I have found.

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the biggest breakdown. Once this issue has been addressed, I generally see very quick improvements. The individuals feel less isolated and family breakdowns are less frequent. When breakdowns happen, it is much easier to reconnect afterwards with a common language. The reconnection of the relational bonds strengthens and builds more resilience within and between

those individuals which, in turn, helps heal past traumas and protects from future traumas.

The children and youth I work with have, for the most part, spent some time away from their family of origin or are permanently in care. The causes for children being removed from their family of origin are significant, but the new placement they find themselves in

her goal was to ride. For months, we worked on understanding how to keep ourselves safe, how to communicate, how to move our bodies, and how to read the horse. Every day, we would stand on the mounting block, with the horse standing patiently, waiting for her to be ready. Every day, she would say she wanted to ride, and every day, she would become too scared and was unable to get on the horse. I understood why. The physical act of getting on the horse is vulnerable and can be reminiscent of past traumas, but this was her goal, and we never gave up on it. The horse she had chosen to work with was kind, supportive, and the boss of the herd. She knew how to keep her herd safe and how to train new

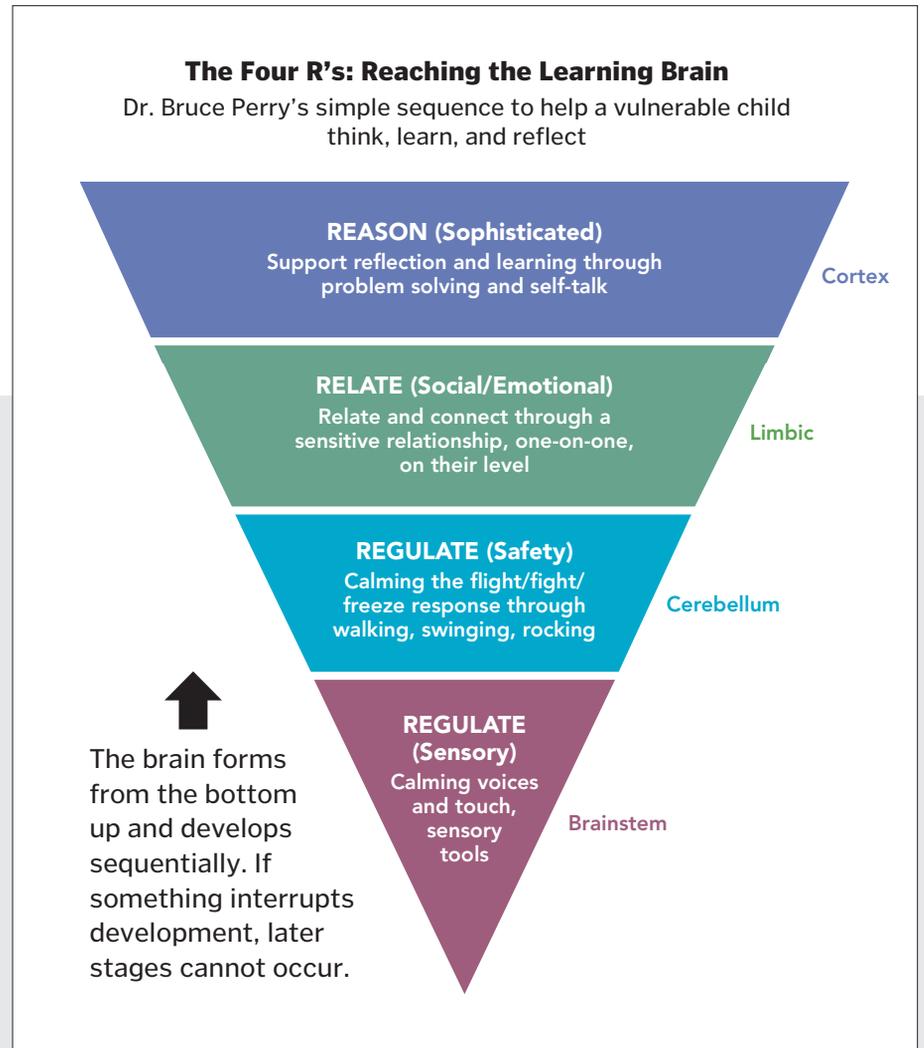
does not mean they will begin to thrive. The move will cause chaos and stress, on top of whatever they were dealing with before the move. It is human nature that we are adaptable, and we adapt to negative situations so we can survive them. Adaptation takes time, years even. It is unrealistic to believe that a simple change in living environment will make everything better. The behaviours that kept these children safe in unsafe situations will still be present in a new living environment.

As mental health professionals, it is our job to manage the expectations of ourselves, other professionals, family members, and the individuals themselves. The process of change takes time and one-hour meetings once a week will not make a significant impact if changes are not made at home. I do incorporate recommendations to families and support workers for changes in daily living and routine that support therapeutic goals. I find that families

members of the herd in appropriate communication, trust, and respect. Over the months these two worked together, this is what that patient, wise old mare taught this unfocused and scared young person.

We did achieve her goal of riding, and the joy and pride on that girl's face solidified for me why I offer

equine-assisted counselling. But the achievement of the goal was actually the least of what we accomplished together. For the first time, this client felt safe and accepted, and under these conditions, she was able to begin to grow and learn. There was a reduction in behavioural outbursts in school and at home, she was able to focus for



and support workers are more willing to implement these recommendations once we are speaking the same language. People are more willing to be supportive when they understand the importance of the recommendation as well as the intended result.

As counsellors, our job is to look

for thought and behavioural patterns, but what else? Dr. Perry's sequential brain development model has helped me. If we develop sequentially then we can manage our behaviours by making intentional changes based on sequence of events and adding activities that stimulate specific neurodevelopment.

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longer periods of time, and she learned how to use her words to express some of her thoughts and needs.

The wise old mare has now passed, and the young person knows this, but she still remembers her and reminds me of things they used to do together and will sometimes request that we try those activities with other horses. The strength of the bond these two shared was profound and has become a resource for this client to use far into the future.

#### **THE BENEFITS OF PHYSICAL EXERCISE**

While I am fortunate to be able to offer equine-assisted counselling, I recognize this is a specialty and is not available to every individual or counsellor. And not every person is interested in working

with the horses, so I also offer to go for walks or hikes with clients. The mental health benefits of physical exercise have been well studied and recommended for years. The rhythm of walking, physical stimulation, and regulating activity helps to increase comfort level and engagement.

On top of that, when working with youth, consider the top complaints from teachers, family, or support workers: the youth cannot seem to focus, they are impulsive, they are disruptive, they are runners, they cannot sit still, etc. This is a symptom of an unfulfilled need. These young people are dysregulated. Attempting to physically confine this energy behind a desk or within a house will only cause their need to grow exponentially into the explosive



behaviours we are trying to prevent. When we are dysregulated, our fight-flight-fawn-freeze response takes over. If we are unable to run to expend energy and regulate our systems, then we will fight — yelling, aggressive behaviours, physically attacking.

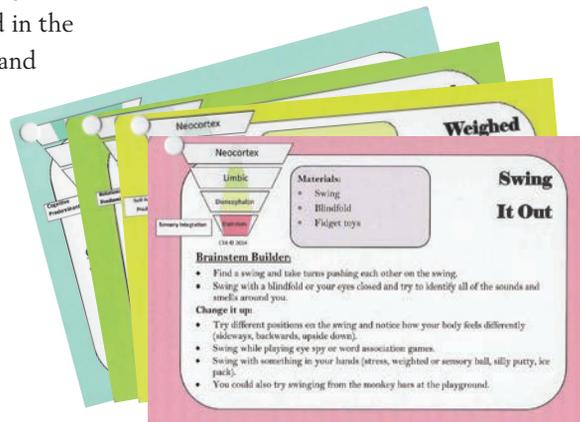
When we are overpowered in the flight and fight, we will fawn and freeze. This looks like the person is not listening, because they are not — they are dissociated. What do adults do when children are not listening to them? Snap their fingers in front of their face and say, “Are you listening to me?” How is this action perceived by the child? It is a threat — “You’d better listen to me or else...” — which shuts the child down further.

Something I say to all the people who come to see me is that nothing they say or do will ever insult me, and we can pause at any time. This takes the pressure off of them. They do not need to monitor their words or actions as closely, and it allows me to be more curious in my questions. When action begins to happen as a result of heightened emotion, that is when we take a pause. Silence is a powerful entity. Rarely do we allow ourselves the gift of silence.

### **NO MATTER THE REASON BEHIND IT, NEURODIVERSITY REQUIRES CURIOSITY**

Once a diverse pattern or type of interaction is identified, then curiosity is a wonderful approach to take. By my becoming the student, the youth I work with are given the unique experience of being a teacher. The role of teacher brings with it feelings of choice and control, which provides feelings of safety and comfort that, in

turn, increases willingness to engage — something many of us find difficult to pull from teenagers. Combining this new role with horse experiences provides fertile ground from which to begin new growth patterns.



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Adding to this, targeted neuro-activities in daily life and supporting family education through common language practices brings together all invested parties, strengthening relational ties. One of the resources I use is Brain Booster cards. These cards are provided by Hull Services and are based on the type of neurodevelopment that is needed. These activities are simple and can be done at home by the individual with support by family.

So often, people who feel or are seen as different are made out to be “other than.” The nature of evolution has created an innate safety mechanism within us that anything that is different or other than the majority of the collective whole is dangerous. The white gazelle will be ostracized from the herd because they put the whole herd in danger. This is the

same premise human nature operates on. If actions or thoughts are seen as different, then the individual becomes unpredictable and puts the entire herd in danger. Most of us believe we are open and accepting of people, but to someone who has experienced bullying, exclusion, derision, racism, or bias, even subtle inequities will be noticed by their highly sensitized systems and used as one more example of their unworthiness.

By combining the ideas of curiosity, client as teacher, openness to challenge/insult, and taking a pause, we can open ourselves to exploring challenging topics. We give the reins of the relationship to clients if they can reflect on and tell us in a safe environment if we, as counsellors, have ever done or said something that they perceived as degrading or down putting. This may be the first time the client has had permission to name their experience. In the safety of the therapeutic relationship, they begin to learn that they have the right to stand up for themselves and build safety into their own lives and relationships.

This article has aimed to explain some of my experiences with neurodiverse clients. In closing, I hope I have been able to give you some small insight into my experiences. ■

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