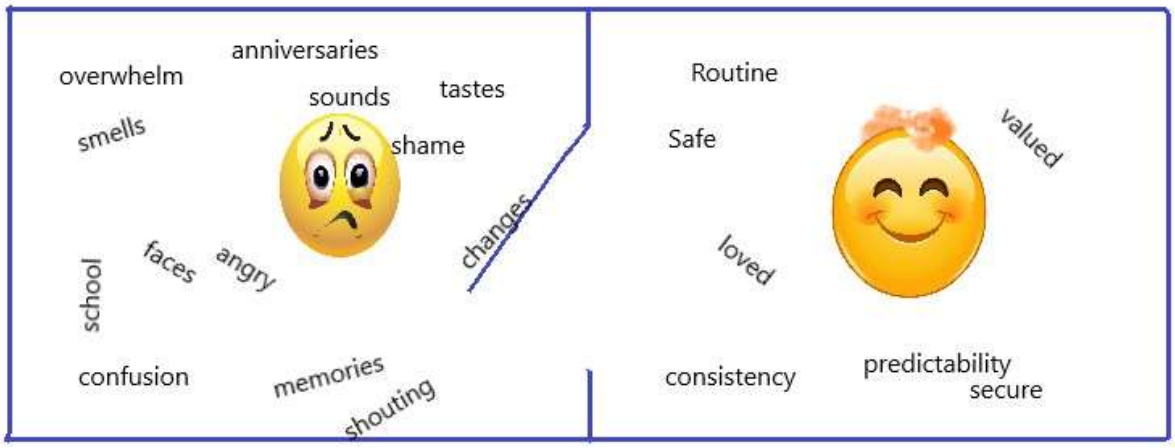
The Trauma Room

An explanation of how children and young people can be pulled back into their trauma as presented by Sarah Dillon

Jane Mitchell 2017

ROOM 1 – Trauma Room **ROOM 2 – Safe Room**



Clearly, we are not really talking about rooms, but about emotional states that our children enter into. We need to consider this in terms of environmental, sensory or other factors which may be trigger traumas, and which factors are needed for recovery. We also of course need to remember that change takes time, and that other factors such as cognitive, social or emotional issues, additional diagnoses such as ASD, ADHD, RAD, FASD all need to be considered. Hence our children have complex needs. In each individual case, there will be a greater or lesser number of triggers or stress points.

In the trauma room, I have given a sample of the issues that can trigger memories of trauma. These are often very real sensory states to our children and this is why this is a perfect analogy. It is as if the child is sucked back through time and space by the sensory, emotional or other input.	In the safe room there are factors which enable the child to feel warm, safe and loved. These emotions and sensory states allow a chid or young person to relax, to process, to understand and make sense of their relationships and get their trauma into context. Unfortunately, these feelings are unfamiliar and can make the child feel vulnerable. This

The trauma room is a terrifying place where adults may not be trusted – they abandon or hurt you. There is no predictability. No routine. There is chaos and fear. There is immense shame, and a sense of self as a terrible person. This has been your reality. You have had to fight to survive, and your fight/flight stress reaction is easily triggered. Once your fight/flight response is triggered, your brain does not stop to consider consequences; it's job is to follow raw instinct to ensure survival.	makes our job as parents far more difficult. In the safe room there is help, empathy, kind adults. There is predictability and routine so that cause and effect and consequences become understandable ideas. You are given appropriate models of behaviour to follow, and these are also consistent. Your stress levels may remain quite high, but your fight flight response is not activated, meaning that you can learn to understand yourself and use strategies to help you

How do our children get dragged into the trauma room?

We, as adults, can manage only a certain amount of stress before we get wobbly. The same goes for our children, but they have more triggers and their fuse can be very small, leading to that Jekyll and Hyde child that that changes for no reason, or just because you let them know it is tea time. So just imagine a glass. That is your child's stress container. Then imagine what their base line of stress may be – (general fear of being abandoned, that they are actually bad, pervasive shame or uncertainty are just some examples of what children carry as luggage every day).

This stress is heightened by school. Its too busy, too noisy. Break times are unstructured. You do not know what might happen. You have no friends. You are bullied. Now imagine it is also Christmas. Routine has disappeared in favour of Christmas plays, parties and decorations. You find it hard to manage the lights, sounds and smells and extra sensory input. You are

expected to behave, have fun and join in. You come out of school, overstimulated and hungry.

Your stress level by now is very near the top of the glass.

You ask for a snack, but because you are wobbly it comes out as a yell. You are beginning to panic. Mum or Dad is also stressed. They snap back a cross comment. You begin to panic – they are going to be like those other adults. You knew they didn't want you, wouldn't understand. When you get home you race for the biscuit jar – maybe sugar will help. You get into trouble for not waiting, not asking and not sitting nicely or putting your bag or coat away. You are unable to cope any more – fully activated your stress response leads you to lash out in fear and anger.

At this point, all your memories, the cross faces, Christmas, Shouting, being hungry and lack of consistency which are all part of your trauma, have flooded your brain with cortisol and before you know it, you are right back in the trauma room.

(Note: I have used Christmas as an example, but equally stressors can be birthdays, anniversaries, difficulties in a lesson, hunger…)

So how do we get dragged in too?

Interesting this, as in some ways it can be viewed quite positively. First of all, we have to remember there is a connection between us and our children. There has to be as otherwise we would be indifferent to their moods and feelings, or at least detached. But emotional states are catching. If your child is feeling chaotic, you will feel muddled up too. If your child is scared and angry, you will be likely to follow them into that state. Interesting, don't you think, that we will then say we "lost it" – meaning, lost control, lost the plot, stopped thinking. Exactly the same that is happening to our children. When our children escalate (especially at very busy stressful times) we escalate with them. The more stressed our relationship is, the easier it is for us to get drawn into the trauma room with our child.

Recreating the Trauma Room

Unfortunately, one of the issues that can result from a child that is easily triggered into trauma is that we as parents become traumatised, worn out from relentless stress and lack of positive feedback from our children: grieving for the family we wished for, we can become exhausted and unable to fulfil more than the basic needs of our children. No reciprocation or love, lack of empathy, respect or kindness on the part of our child and the added stress of external pressures such as work, money, social pressure etc can cause us to withdraw from our children to protect ourselves. The children sensing this use their own inappropriate strategies to reclaim our attention, which drives us further apart, and a downward spiral keeps all of us in the trauma room, fearful of giving love, feeling aggressive, hurt and angry and blaming.

Getting back to the Safe Room

The greatest safeguard, I feel, for our children to avoid falling back into their trauma and pulling us with them, is our own ability to understand and empathise. But this is hard, and the task is relentless and sometimes thankless. Many of us face opposition from professionals, schools, friends and families. This is why self care is so important.

- Take time out for you. Take time off when children are at school, if that is the only way to manage.
- Identify supporters who can help you and not criticise.
- Let people know how they can help
- Be kind to yourself – you are only human
- Forgive yourself when you "lose it". What can you do differently?
- Join a support group
- Join the National Association of therapeutic Parents
- Take part in training – gain confidence and validation

- Repair your relationship with your children – try and remember enjoyable moments – can they be recreated?

Strategies to reduce stress and reconnect

- Make a list of all the behaviours that are stressing you out. Which can you let go of – just for now. You will be amazed how this can reduce your stress and household stress. Reduce your list down to three things.
- Breathe. Pause before you respond. Give your brain a chance to reconnect so that you respond therapeutically not emotionally.
- Use empathy to respond to feeling states.
- Use wondering to connect with cognitive states and reflect on incidents after the event.
- Use straplines that reassure – I will always keep you safe. I can help you sort out your muddled feelings.
- Use routine, predictability and consistency of approach to create a safe home environment.
- Create visual aids including a visual timetable
- Remember to support your child to to use strategies
- Ask someone to give you a hug!
- Use natural consequences, not punishments. Especially do not get into what the child does and does not deserve.
- Do something silly – have fun!
- Remember – you and your child are connected. Use that connection. Calm yourself, and they will calm down. Model kind and caring behaviours and explain to them why you do the things you do. This will develop their understanding. Ie – I know you are hungry after school. Shall we get you a snack? I am worried you will get cold. Please will you wear your scarf? (It does not matter if they refuse. Keep going, and understand this is new to them).

With thanks to Sarah Dillon