

LATE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

CHAPTER 2

Building Resilience

Overview

Chapter One explored the concepts of kindness and happiness what they mean for us when we are together in the form of class agreements. Chapter Two explores the important role that our bodies, and in particular our nervous systems, play in our happiness and well-being. It does so by introducing the following:

The Resilient Zone

A way of describing when the nervous system is regulated (in homeostasis) and neither hyper-aroused (stuck in the high zone) nor hypo-aroused (stuck in the low zone). You can also refer to this as the “OK zone” or “zone of well-being.”

Sensations

A physical feeling or perception within the body or using the five senses, as distinct from emotions and non-physical feelings (like feeling happy or sad).

Tracking

Noticing and attending to sensations in the body in order to build up body awareness or “body literacy.”

Personal Resources

Things one likes and associates with greater safety and well-being that can be brought to mind to return to or stay in one’s resilient zone.

Grounding

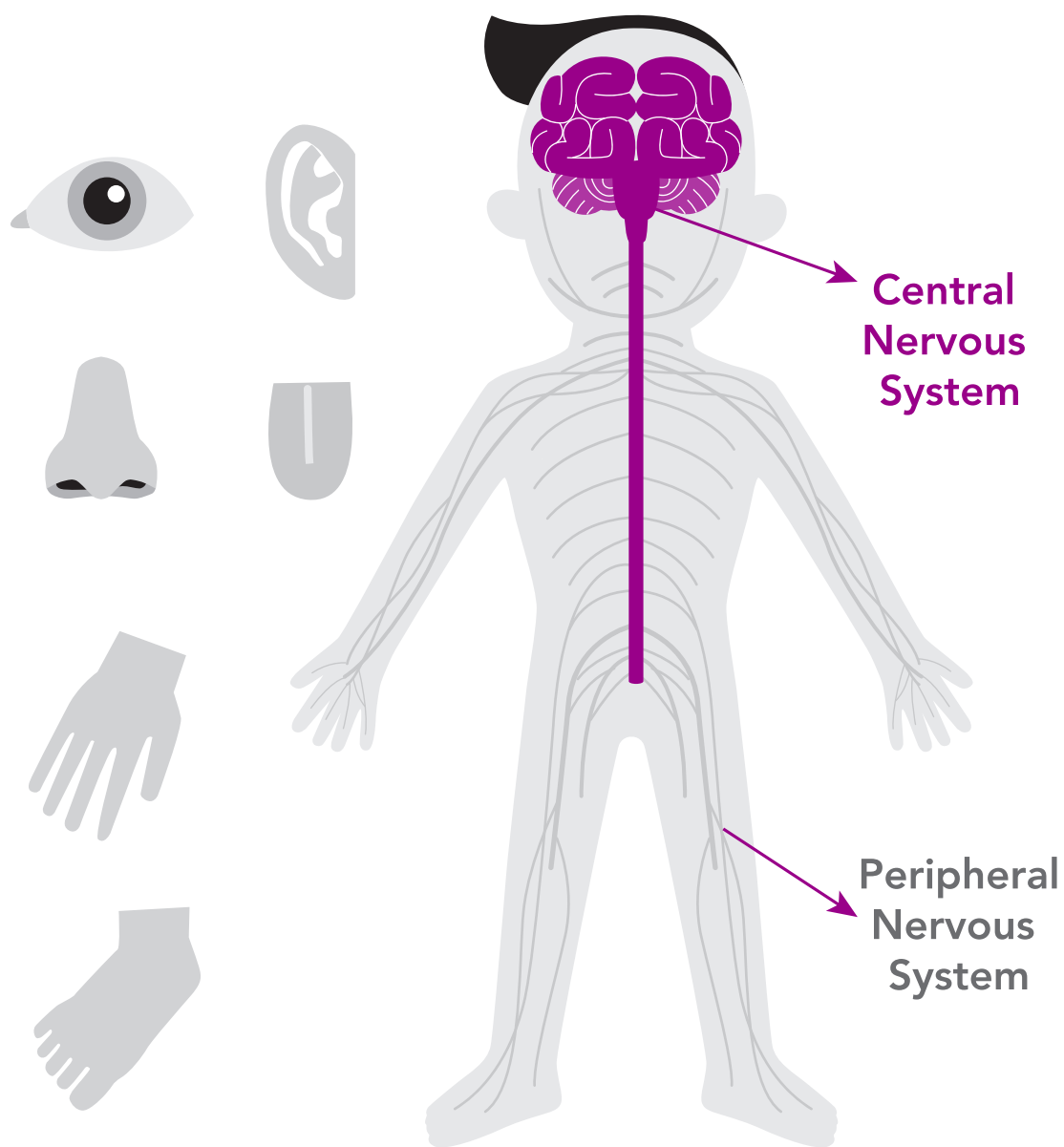
Attending to the contact of one’s body with objects or the ground in order to return to or stay in the resilient zone.

Help Now! Strategies

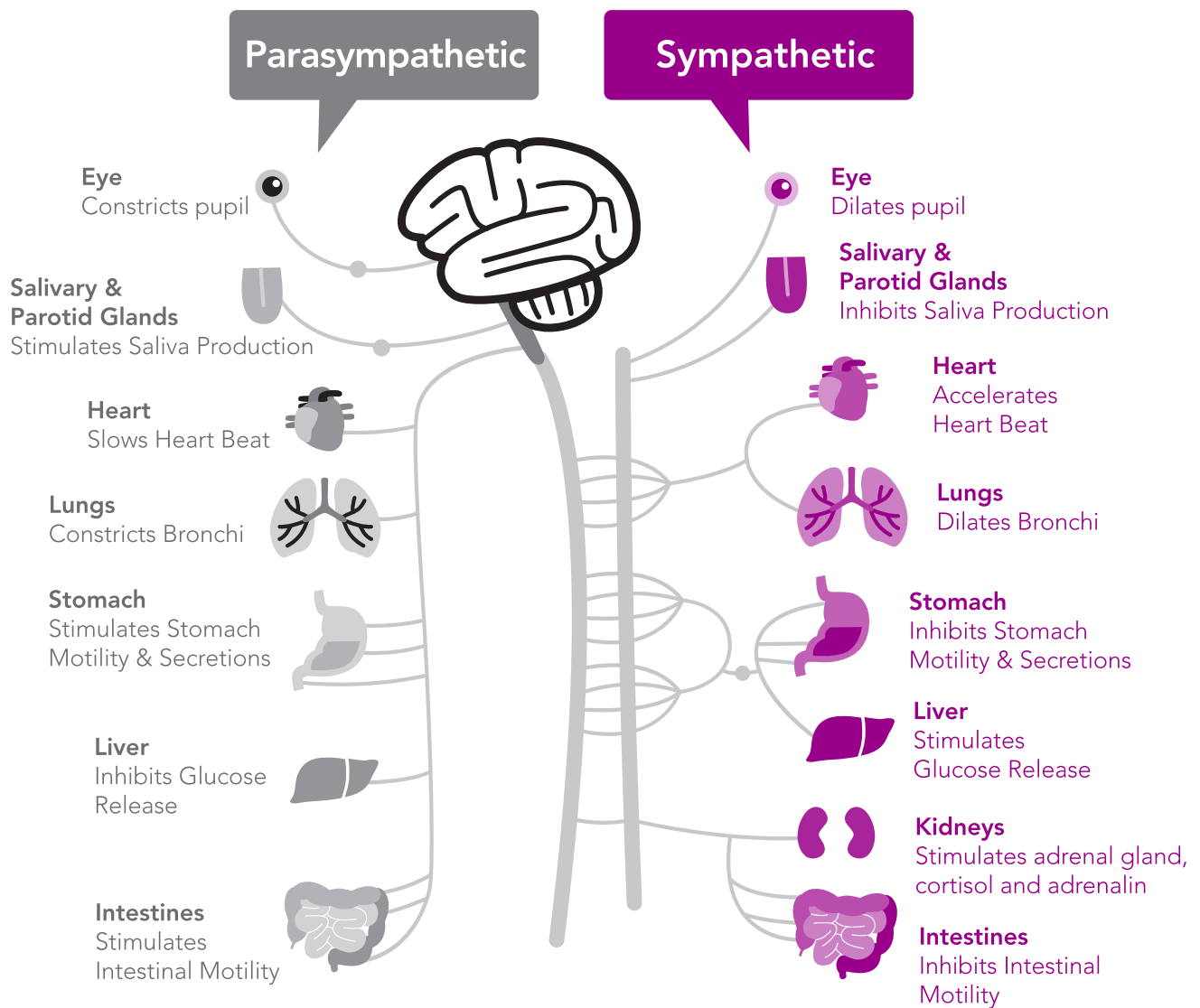
Simple and immediate techniques for helping students return to their resilient zone when they get “bumped out” of that zone.

The Nervous System

The Central and the Peripheral



The Autonomic Nervous System



The Nervous System

Our nervous system is an essential part of our body, and understanding it can be enormously helpful for enhancing our well-being. Our nervous system is made up of our brain and our spinal cord (called the central nervous system) and the network of nerves that connect our brain and spinal cord to the rest of our body, including our internal organs and our senses (called the peripheral nervous system).

A part of our nervous system runs automatically, without the need for conscious control: this is called the autonomic (literally, “self-governing”) nervous system (ANS). Our ANS regulates many body processes necessary for survival, including our heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, and digestion. It also regulates our internal organs such as our stomach, liver, kidneys, bladder, lungs, and salivary glands.

Since our nervous system’s chief function is to help keep us alive, it reacts very quickly to perceived threats or to perceived safety. Our autonomic nervous system has two pathways that activate based on whether we perceive danger (the “fight or flight” response) or safety (the “rest and digest” response). The fight or flight response triggers our sympathetic nervous system, turning off systems of digestion and growth and preparing the body for action and possible injury, while the rest and digest response triggers our parasympathetic nervous system, relaxing the body and allowing for functions like growth, digestion and so on to resume. This is why when we sense danger and have a fight or flight response, we notice changes in our heart rate, breathing, blood pressure, pupil dilation and our internal organs. Then when we sense that the danger has passed and we are safe again, we notice changes in these same organs.

In modern life, our bodies sometimes react to danger when there is no real threat to our survival, or hold on to a sense of danger after the threat has passed. This leads to a dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system, meaning that its regular alternation between parasympathetic and sympathetic activation is disrupted. This nervous system dysregulation in turn lead to inflammation and a host of other problems. It is one of the main reasons why chronic stress is so damaging to our health and well-being.

Fortunately we can learn to calm our bodies and minds and regulate our nervous system. Since our nervous system is what senses things both on the inside (such as tension, relaxation, heat, cold, pain, and so on) and on the outside through the five senses, it is giving us constant information about the state of our body. This chapter focuses on the information and skills necessary to enhance this type of self-care.

Sensations

The first Learning Experience, “Exploring Sensations,” helps students build a vocabulary of sensations as a guide to notice the state of our nervous system. Sensations (warmth, coldness, heat, tingling, tightness, etc.) are physical, and are to be distinguished from emotions (sad, angry, happy, jealous), which will be explored later in SEE Learning. Although feelings will be explored later, it is important to note that feelings, thoughts and beliefs have a corresponding sensation or set of sensations within the body. Learning about sensations helps introduce another portal of understanding to ourselves and our children.

Help Now! Strategies

Learning Experience 1 then moves into Help Now! strategies. These are easy actions that can be practiced to quickly return our bodies and minds to the present moment, and thus function as useful ways to bring our bodies back to a place of balance if we get bumped into our high or low zones (states of hyper-arousal or hypo-arousal).

Resourcing

Learning Experience 2 “Resourcing” uses the individual kindness drawing created in Chapter 1 as a personal resource. Personal resources are internal, external or imagined things, unique to each person, that bring about a sense of well-being, safety or happiness when brought to present moment awareness. When we think of a personal resource (a wonderful memory, a favorite place, a loved one, a joyful activity, a comforting thought), this often brings about pleasant sensations in the body. If we then attend to those sensations consciously and give them a bit of space and time, they can deepen. This increases our nervous system’s sense of safety and brings about an ever greater sense of well-being and relaxation in the body.

Tracking

Noticing sensations and keeping one’s attention on them is called “tracking.” We “track” or “read” sensations, since sensations are the “language” of the nervous system. This leads to body literacy: our understanding of our own body and how it responds to stress and safety. Although we all share the same basic structure of having a nervous system, our bodies react to stress and safety in slightly different ways. We may become tense in different parts of our body. We may also respond to well-being in different ways. We may experience a pleasant warmth in our chest or an opening and loosening in our facial muscles. Learning to track the sensations of our own body helps us understand when we are feeling relaxed, safe and happy, or if we are having a stress response. This ability opens up “choice” so when we are distressed, we can choose to bring our awareness to a

sensation of well-being or neutrality within the body. This awareness can increase the sense and feeling of well-being.

Note that sensations are not inherently pleasant, unpleasant or neutral for everyone or at all times: warmth, for example, can be experienced as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral at different times. This is why it's important to ask whether the sensation is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Since tracking can lead to awareness of unpleasant sensations, which can then be triggering, tracking is always done in conjunction with resourcing, grounding or a Help Now! strategy. The following strategy of "shift and stay" is also important to teach when introducing tracking.

Shift and Stay

Part of tracking is noticing if the sensation is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. If we find pleasant or neutral sensations, resting our attention on that part of the body can sometimes allow the sensation to deepen and allow the body to relax and return to the resilient zone. However, if instead we become aware of an unpleasant sensation, we can "shift and stay." This means to scan our body to find a place that feels better (either neutral or pleasant) and then rest our attention on that new location.

The Treasure Chest and Resource Stone

Learning Experience 3 "Creating a Treasure Chest" builds on previous experiences by helping the students build up a personal "treasure chest" or "tool box" of personal resources that can be called upon whenever necessary. It then reinforces the skills of resourcing and tracking.

Grounding

Learning Experience 4 "Grounding" introduces the practice of grounding. Grounding is noticing the physical contact our body has with things, including things we touch or how we are standing or sitting. Grounding can be a very helpful tool for calming the body and mind. Typically, we have already unconsciously developed a number of grounding techniques that help us feel relaxed, secure, safe and better. These may include things like sitting in a certain way, folding our arms in a certain way, holding objects we like, lying a certain way on a couch or in bed, and so on. However, we may not be aware of intentionally using these to calm our bodies and return to our resilient zone. Practicing grounding introduces new techniques and makes conscious ones that we have already developed, thereby making them more accessible when we need them.

The Three Zones

Learning Experience 5 “The Resilient Zone” introduces the “three zones” as a way of understanding how our body (and specifically our autonomic nervous system) operates. The three zones are the high zone, the low zone, and the resilient zone (or zone of well-being). Understanding this model can be very helpful for both teachers and students.

In this model, our body can be in one of three zones. Our resilient zone is our zone of well-being, where we feel calm and alert, and where we feel more in control and better able to make good decisions. Although we can go up and down in this zone and may feel a bit excited or have slightly less energy, our judgment is not impaired and our body is not in a state of harmful stress. Here our autonomic nervous system is in homeostasis, which can be defined as a stable physiological equilibrium. It is able to alternate between sympathetic and parasympathetic activation properly.

Sometimes we get bumped out of our resilient zone by life events. When this happens, our autonomic nervous system becomes dysregulated. If we get stuck in our high zone, we are in a state of hyper-arousal. We may feel anxious, angry, nervous, agitated, afraid, manic, frustrated, “amped up,” or otherwise out of control. Physiologically we may experience shaking, rapid and shallow breathing, headaches, nausea, tightness in our muscles, indigestion and changes to vision and hearing.

If we get stuck in the low zone, we experience the effects of hypo-arousal. This can have us feeling lethargic, exhausted, lacking in energy, and not wanting to get out of bed or be active. We may feel isolated or lonely, numb, checked out, unmotivated, lacking in optimism, or uninterested in activities that we would normally enjoy. It’s important to note that since the high zone and low zone are both states of dysregulation, they are not opposites of each other: they may share physiological characteristics and when we are dysregulated we may bounce between high and low zones.

In Learning Experience 5, students will learn about these three zones through scenarios and then will give advice to each other on how to return to their resilient zone, based on the skills they have already learned (resourcing, grounding, tracking, and the Help Now! strategies).

Being able to monitor the state of our body is essential to our well-being and happiness because our autonomic nervous system can short-circuit other parts of our brain (harming decision making and bypassing executive function). When we learn to remain in our resilient zone there are many health benefits for our body, including being able to maintain peace of mind and greater control over our behavior and our emotional reactions.

Learning Experience 6 “Kindness and Happiness in the Body” connects this chapter back to Chapter 1 and the themes of happiness, kindness, and the class agreements. Now that students know about the important role that their bodies play in their well-being and happiness, they can better understand why it is important to show kindness and consideration to one another. They begin to learn that being mean or inconsiderate of one another leads to stress and our bodies respond to that stress in unpleasant ways, hindering our ability to be happy. Students can explore the idea that since we are constantly relating to one another and share the same space, we can play a positive role in helping each other remain in our resiliency zones, or return to them if we become out of balance.

In some cases, the activities in this chapter may not instantly yield the results and insights you wish. Don’t be discouraged, as it is often hard even for adults to notice and describe sensations at first. It may take repeating some of the activities a few times before your students are able to describe sensations, notice if they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral, and use the skills of resourcing and grounding. Even if they do gain insights quickly, repetition is key in order for the skills to become embodied. Eventually, some of the students may begin practicing the skills spontaneously, particularly when facing challenging or stressful circumstances.

Many of these skills were developed through trauma and resiliency work and they are based on a significant body of clinical and scientific research. It is possible that while exploring sensations of the body with your students, some of them will have difficult experiences that you may not be able to deal with sufficiently on your own, especially if they have suffered or are suffering from trauma. Help Now! Strategies can be suggested to the child in the immediate aftermath of an unexpected reaction. If you have counselors or school psychologists, or a wise administrator or colleague, we encourage you to seek assistance and further counsel as necessary. However, the approach taken in SEE Learning is a resiliency-based approach that focuses on the strengths of individual students, not on treating trauma. These are general wellness skills that can be beneficial to anyone, regardless of their level of experience of trauma. Students will be in a good position to explore the next elements of SEE Learning: cultivating attention and developing emotional awareness when they have more of an ability to regulate their nervous systems.

Check-ins and Repeated Practice

From Chapter Two onwards, the importance of practice becomes even more important in SEE Learning. You will note that the check-in’s for this chapter build, each incorporating skills and material covered in preceding Learning Experiences. Feel free to select which check-in’s work best for your class and then use them on a regular basis even when you are not doing a full session of

SEE Learning. Although the Learning Experiences include “Reflective Practice” sections for developing embodied understanding, the repetition of the check-in’s and the repetition of insight activities (with modifications as you see fit) will greatly aid this process of helping students internalize what they are learning to the point where it becomes second-nature.

Time and Pacing

Each Learning Experience is designed to be a minimum of 30 minutes. It is recommended that you take longer than this if time allows and if your students are capable of it, spending more time on the activities and reflective practices especially. If you have less than 30 minutes, you can choose to only do one of the activities or a part of the activity, and finish the Learning Experience in the following session. However, remember that Check-ins and Insight Activities are important to include regardless of time.

Student Personal Practice

This is the stage in SEE Learning where it’s important to recognize that your students may be beginning their own personal practice, even in an informal way. As you support them in this, it’s helpful to recognize that each student is different, and that images, sounds and activities that may be calming for some students can be activating for others. Even things such as the sound of a bell, an image of a cute animal, yoga postures, long moments of silence, or sitting and taking long breaths may be experienced as unpleasant by some of your students and may actually hinder their ability to be calm rather than promote it. You’ll come to know this by watching your students and by asking them what they like, and then by giving them options so that they can develop a personal practice around what works best for them.

Teacher Personal Practice

Naturally, teaching your students these practices will be strengthened by your own familiarity with them. It is recommended that, if possible, you first try these practices on your own and with colleagues, friends and family as you are able. The more experiential knowledge you have, the easier it will be to do these exercises with your students. All the practices suggested in this chapter can also be done with older children and adults.

Further Reading and Resources

Content for the learning experiences in this chapter has been adapted from the work of Elaine Miller-Karas and the Trauma Resource Institute with their kind permission. Teachers interested in learning more about the content and skills presented in this chapter are encouraged to read the book *Building Resilience to Trauma: The Trauma and Community Resiliency Models* (2015) by Elaine Miller-Karas, and to visit www.traumaresourceinstitute.com

Also recommended is Bessel van der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2015).