

Te ara o tukutuku pūngawerewere

Introducing the Trauma Team

In honor of my new book 'Introduction to Trauma' being published towards the end of 2023 I have decided to devote this issue of *Te ara o Tukutuku Pūngawerewere* to introducing the concept and the members of the Trauma Team. After teaching about the basics of trauma-responsive care to graduate and post-graduate students, I realised that the key points about how to understand and care for someone who has experienced trauma could be made into memorable characters. This led to the birth of the 'Understanding Gang' and the 'Change Family'.

Let me explain ...

Introducing Professor Brainy

Professor Brainy is the person who leads the Trauma Team.

In addition, she is the one who explains what happens in the brain and the body when someone is affected by trauma.



Professor Brainy is good at explaining complicated things about what happens when people experience trauma.

Professor Brainy has six helpers in the Trauma Team. Three are in the Understanding Gang and three are in the Change Family.

Balancing Understanding and Change

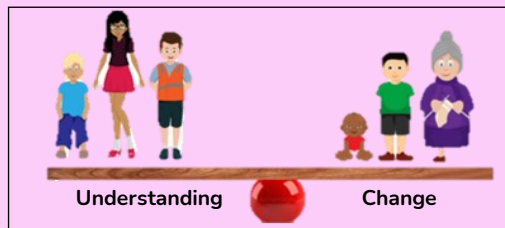
When supporting someone who has experienced trauma, they are likely to experience a number of symptoms including hypervigilance and avoidance as well as emotional and cognitive changes.

This means that there may be a benefit in working towards changes that will help the person to have less problems

with their trauma symptoms. However, an early focus on change can make a person feel invalidated, and that their challenges are not being understood or listened to.

What is needed is to demonstrate an understanding or validation of what is difficult, before moves are made towards change.

The illustration below is a picture of how the Trauma Team work together to balance these two facets of understanding and change.



Sometimes it is called balancing acceptance and change, or validation and change. We need both.

It is helpful to imagine them all sitting on a seesaw so that you remember that you need everyone to keep the balance.

The Understanding Gang

There are three characters in the Understanding Gang. These are characters that represent Predictability, Safety and Choice.

Penny Predictable
Penny is the first character in the Understanding Gang. She understands that someone who has experienced trauma needs other people to be consistent and predictable.



One of the main things that people who have experienced trauma lose is control and knowing what to expect. The trauma situation by definition is not predictable, and therefore, when supporting someone who has been through trauma, being predictable so they know what to expect is helpful.

In the book 'Introduction to Trauma', Penny Predictable explains the stress-vulnerability model. This model explains how people who have experienced a lot of adverse experiences in their life can make them more vulnerable. She explains people who are more vulnerable find it more difficult to cope with things.

Managing vulnerability requires developing resilience. In other words, Penny Predictable explains that we can teach people who have experienced trauma extra ways to manage difficult things. This helps them not to get overwhelmed a life is a bit easier for them.

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Tips from Penny Predictable

- If you make an appointment, keep it and don't cancel it or move it.
- Keep your meetings or lessons as regular as possible
- Make a calendar with times you will meet marked on it.
- Before you do anything explain what you are planning, and check it is okay.
- Have a structure. For example, start with a drink and end with relaxation.
- Avoid doing unexpected things.
- If you say you will do something, make sure you do. If you say you won't, don't.

Charley Choosey

Charley is the third character in the Understanding Gang.



When something traumatic happens, that person has little or no choice about what is happening. Charley shows us that it is important to allow the person we are supporting to make their own choices as much as possible.

Being able to choose is a way to have some power and control over their destiny. This can be a way to heal from traumatic situations where they had no option or choice to escape. To help someone recover, it is good to understand that they need to have a sense of control over some decisions in their lives. This can be done in steps.

Step 1: Start with two options

It may take a while for someone to feel confident in making their own decisions. They need time to learn to control what happens to them. Making little decisions between two options is a way to start helping someone build confidence in their ability to make safe choices.

Example: "Would you like an apple or a banana?"

Step 2: Ask an open question

Once a person is feeling more confident that they can trust themselves to make simple choices safely, you can give them bigger choices. This means you can ask an 'open' question.

Example: "What time would you like to meet?"

Sam Safety

Sam is the second character in the Understanding Gang. Experts say that a central factor for people who experience trauma is feeling unsafe. Sam reminds us that helping someone to feel safe is an important starting point in supporting someone who has experienced trauma.



People need to feel safe in relationships, culturally, physically, in their environment, and with the process. Sam uses his five toes to remind him of these five areas of safety.

If we think about how to create each of the five types of safety, we can help someone feel calmer, less threatened and stressed. When they feel calm and we talk, and they will be able to remember what we said.

1) Creating a safe relationship with someone means being careful how you act and talk. Your actions and words should not make someone feel less important, wrong, hopeless, worthless, or broken.

2) To help someone who has experienced trauma to feel safe with the process, one of the things that can make it much easier is to talk about the process upfront. Explain to the person what you are planning or what to expect.

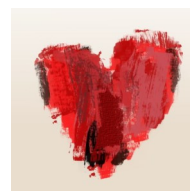


The five toes of the Safety-First Foot

3) When we think about a safe environment, We can make the place or room you are in feel safe. This includes whether a door is locked, whether people can overhear you or watch you through a window. Also make sure there is nothing dangerous nearby like a fire, sharp objects, a cliff edge, or busy road.

4) Creating cultural safety for someone means thinking any differences in culture and background from the other person. You can learn about what is important in another person's culture, and you can ask how they would like to do things. It is important to demonstrate consideration of how other people might think and act, and to treat those things with respect.

5) When we are thinking about helping someone feel safe in their body, Sam suggests we do not touch a person, make sudden movements, or get too close to them, so we do not frighten them. Often when people have been physically hurt, they feel scared of the pain in their body. They may avoid thinking about certain parts of their body because it reminds them of being hurt.



The Change Family

There are three characters in the Change Family. These are characters that represent Bravery, Noticing and Calmness.

Baby Brave

Baby Brave is the first character in the Change Family. Baby Brave knows that for someone who has experienced trauma to change their symptoms they need to be brave



When people have experienced trauma, one of the symptoms that can cause problems is avoidance.

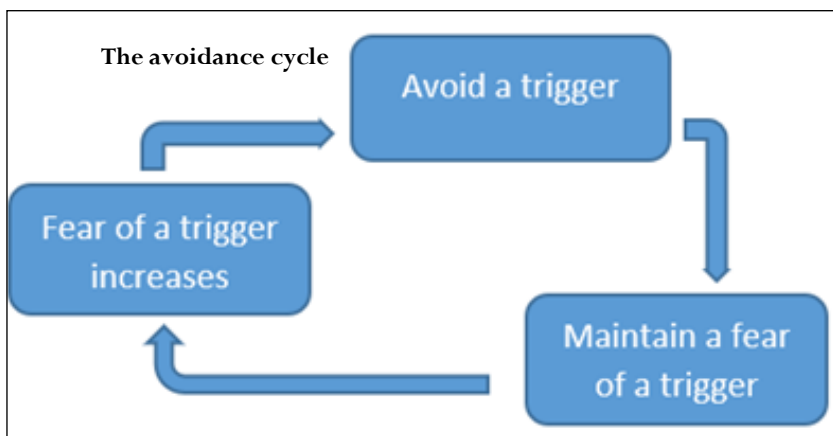
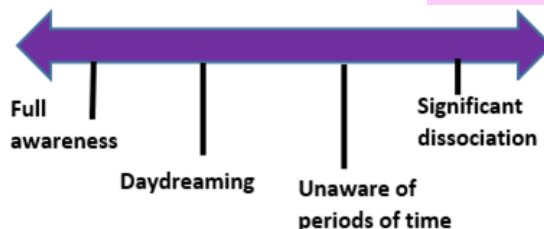
Nana Noticing

Nana Noticing is the second character in the Change Family. She knows that for someone who has experienced trauma to change their symptoms they need to notice things.



This is also part of not getting caught in the avoidance cycle. She helps people to stay in the here-and-now and not to disconnect from float off into a daydream. That is also known as dissociation, which is a thing people who have experienced trauma can have problems with.

Everyone dissociates a little bit, and some people dissociate a lot. It isn't always a problem. However, dissociation can start to be a problem for some people when it happens often in their life, and it becomes a habitual way of avoiding physical, mental or emotional pain.



Dissociation is on a continuum, with full awareness on one end and full dissociation on the other. Also, people can move up and down the scale at different times.

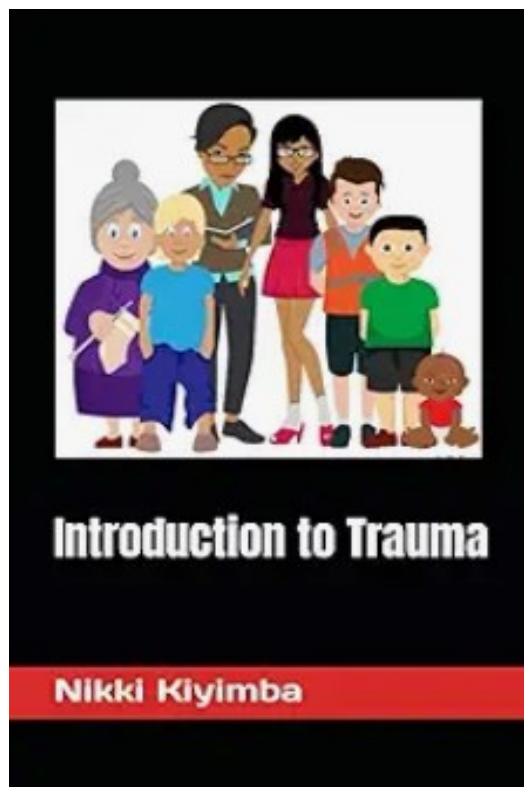
Something Nana Noticing offers is to help people learn not to 'check out' and switch into automatic pilot. Using mindfulness is a way to 'notice' what is happening in the present moment.

Avoidance is a psychological defence to try to get away from feelings of distress. Apart from avoiding people, places, objects, music, and situations that are reminders of the trauma, people also use drugs and alcohol to try to avoid the thoughts and feelings inside them.

The problem with avoiding feared triggers, is that every time a person goes around this cycle, they risk increasing their original fear. This means the person can get stuck and trapped in an avoidance cycle.

It is only when a person takes this courageous step to bravely face what they fear that they can break this cycle of avoidance and fear that keeps them trapped and stuck.

The awareness that Baby Brave brings is to find ways to face things head-on. Baby Brave wants to learn and grow and always wants to ask questions and investigate things.



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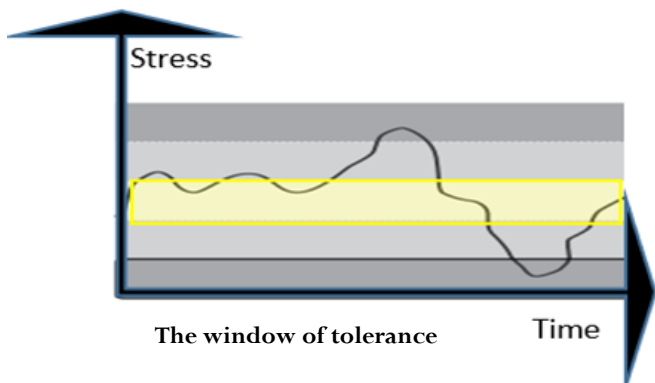
Available from Amazon.com US\$ 11.96.

Cousin Calm

Cousin Calm is the third character in the Change Family. Cousin Calm knows that for someone who has experienced trauma to change their symptoms they need to be calm.



The Window of Tolerance is a helpful diagram that Cousin Calm uses to explain how to stay calm for people who have experienced trauma.



In this diagram, the yellow area in the middle is the optimum level of stress to experience that means that a person has some motivation but is not hypervigilant and over-stressed (above the yellow area). Equally, it shows the importance of avoiding the lower area below the yellow zone where there would be hypo-arousal, which is a lack of energy and enthusiasm.

Cousin Calm knows that when someone is very stressed, the best way to calm down is to do it in stages. To explain this better he uses a Stressometer.



The top of the Stressometer is a 10 which represents the most stressed the person has ever been. The bottom is a 0 which represents not being stressed at all.

- High stress is the red zone.
- Medium stress is the yellow zone
- Low stress is the green zone

Using the Stressometer

If the person starts in the HIGH zone, they can use some calming techniques from stage one to get into the MEDIUM zone.

When they are in the MEDIUM zone, they can use the stage two calming techniques to get down into the LOW zone.

Stage one calming plan

Cousin Calm explains that when someone is in the HIGH stress zone, they need to start with a calming plan that will first use up some of the stress chemicals that are filling the body.

The main stress chemical is adrenalin, which makes you feel like moving. The best way to do this quickly is to do some exercise.

Stage two calming plan

Cousin Calm explains that when someone is in the MEDIUM stress zone, they need a calming plan that is a bit less physical. However it is important to do the Stressometer check first by asking the following question:

“On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the most stressed you have ever been, and 1 being not stressed at all, how stressed are you feeling right now?”

At this stage you can suggest deep breathing. It is best to breathe in through the nose, down into the tummy or diaphragm. An important thing with deep breathing is to breathe **out** as fully as possible. A good way to blow out candles, blow bubbles, or blow up balloons. Earthing, butterfly hug and positive affirmations are also good at this stage.

Stage three calming plan

When someone is in the LOW stress zone, this is when they might want some help with really relaxing and getting off to sleep. The useful kind of music for stage three calming is very gentle and quiet.

Another good thing to do if a person is in stage three and trying to relax or sleep, is to be in a dark room and close their eyes.

Some people like to do gentle stretching exercises to release tension in their muscles at stage three calming. Simple repetitive motions such as swinging or rocking in a chair or stroking a pet are also excellent stage three calming activities.

The body and brain like routines, and it can be helpful to train yourself with a routine to calm down. In doing so, your body can automatically start to feel more relaxed when you start the routine. Cousin Calm suggests choosing three things that are always done in the same order every time you want to settle yourself down at stage three to relax or go to sleep.

Tips from Cousin Calm for stage three

- Have a warm bath with lavender oil, listening to calm music with low lighting.
- Change into comfortable PJs and sit in the rocking chair and read part of a novel.
- Turn the lights off and lie flat, stretch every muscle then relax.
- Breathe slowly, listening to the hum of the fan.

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