

Nervous System Informed Anti-Racist Practice

The Impact of Trauma, Internalised Racism and
Vicarious Trauma in Social Care

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Today's Session

- Understand racial trauma through a nervous system lens
- Explore how trauma impacts families, practitioners and organisations
- Reflect on how race and racism can influence perception and decision making
- Understand the role of leadership in creating psychologically safer systems
- Identify practical actions to strengthen anti racist practice

What is one word that describes how you feel when conversations about race and racism arise?



How many different
races are there?



Key Definitions



Race

A social construct based on physical characteristics such as skin colour and features, historically used to categorise and create hierarchies between groups of people.
There is only one race.

Ethnicity

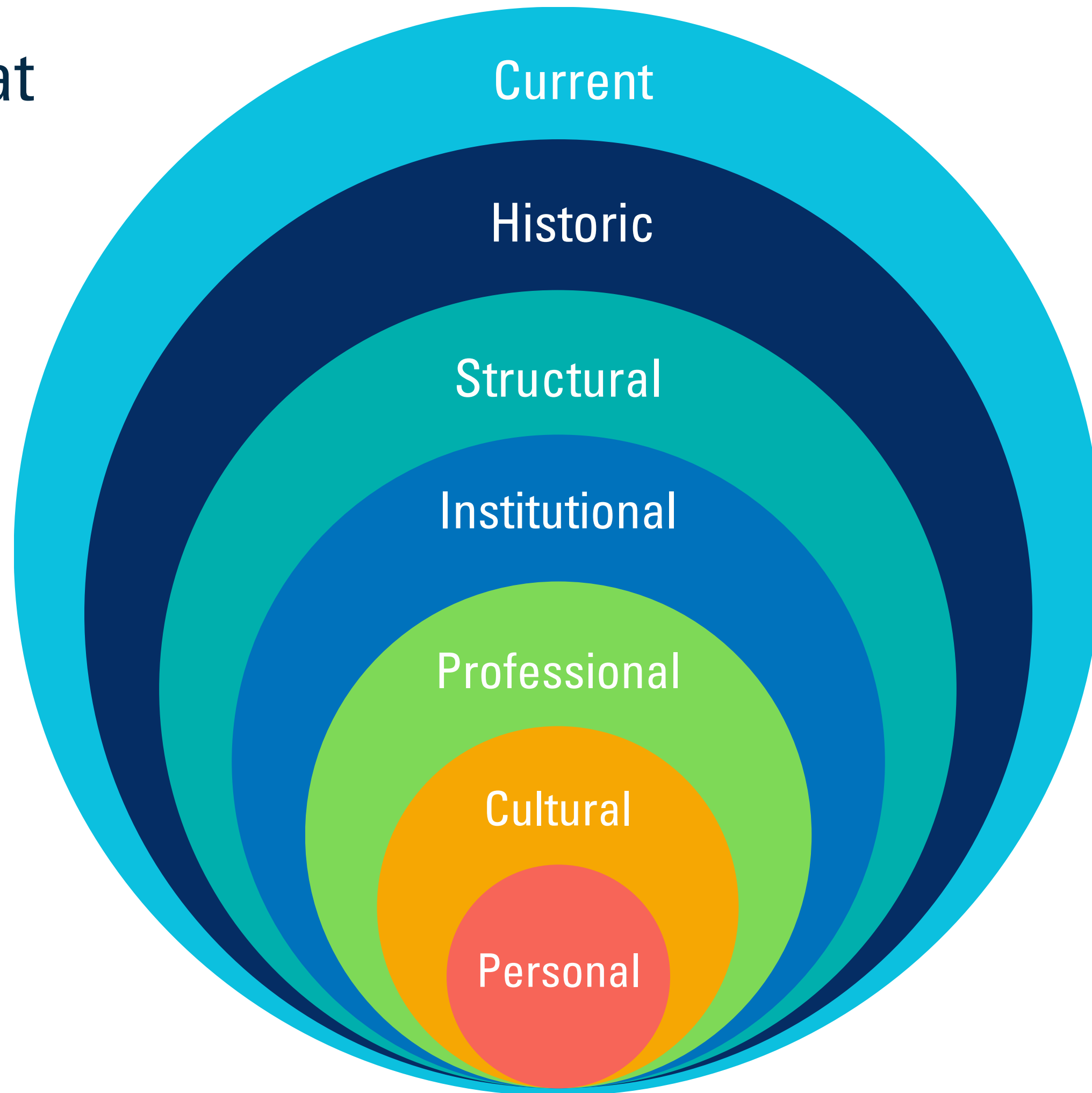
A person's identity based on shared culture, language, religion, ancestry or heritage, how someone identifies themselves

Racism is discrimination, prejudice or unequal treatment based on race, ethnicity, nationality or skin colour.

It can happen:

- between individuals
- within organisations
- through systems and structures
- knowingly or unknowingly

Racism exists at
multiple layers



Adapted from
Marcia Rice's model

What Does Racism
Do To The
Nervous System?

The Nervous System Has One Primary Question

Am I Safe?

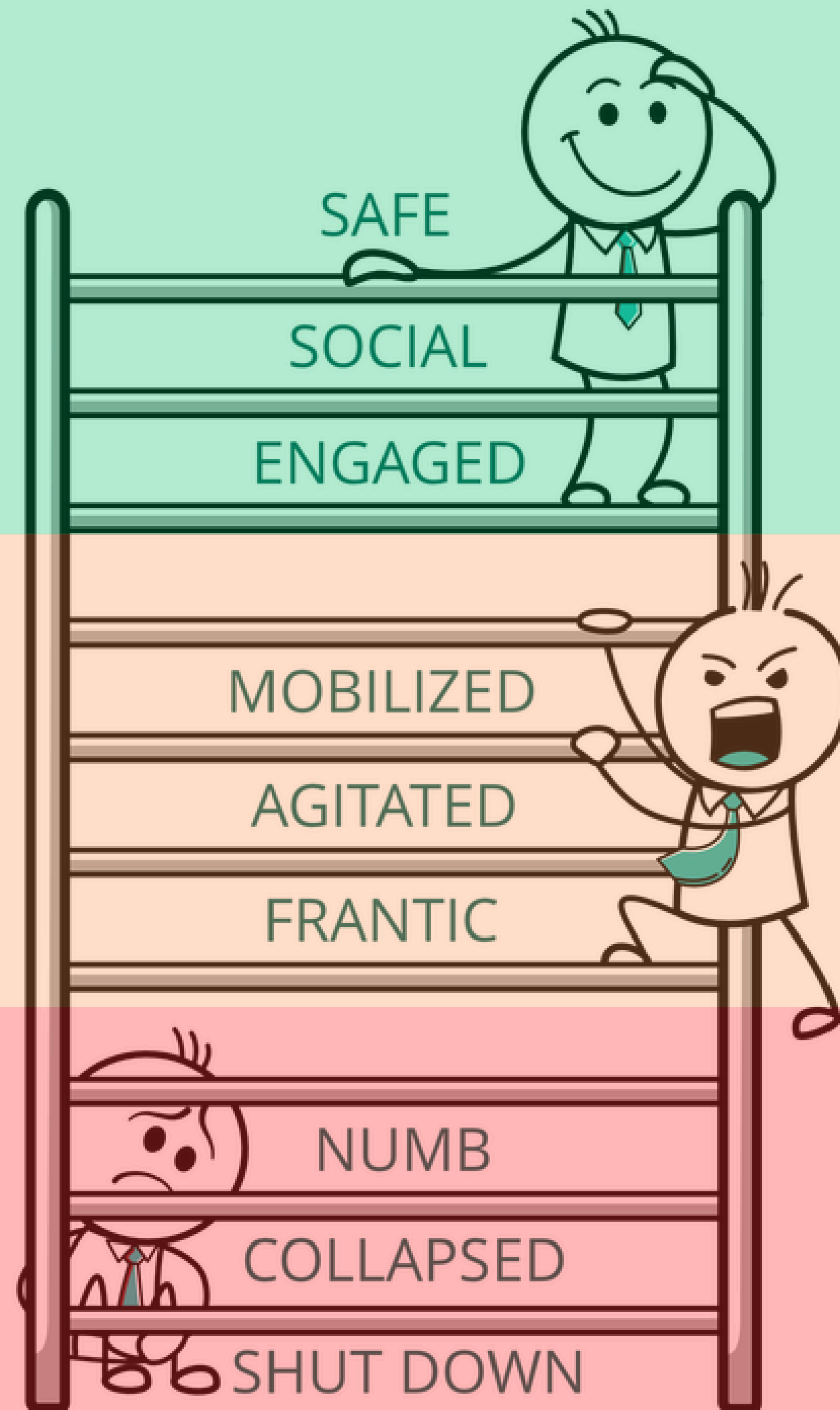
Everything else follows.



**Psychological Safety
&
Connectivity**

**Fight/Flight/Fawn
(Hyperarousal)**

**Shutdown
(Hypoarousal)**



Real Life Case Study M (Age 14)



- 14-year-old boy
- Mixed-heritage White British and Black Nigerian heritage
- Moved from East London due to concerns around exploitation
- Frequently returned to East London and became involved in Youth Justice
- Bullied in previous schools, in early years

Poll

What changed our assessment of M?

- A. More information about his offending
- B. Understanding what his sense of identity and nervous system were communicating
- C. Stricter boundaries
- D. Increased monitoring



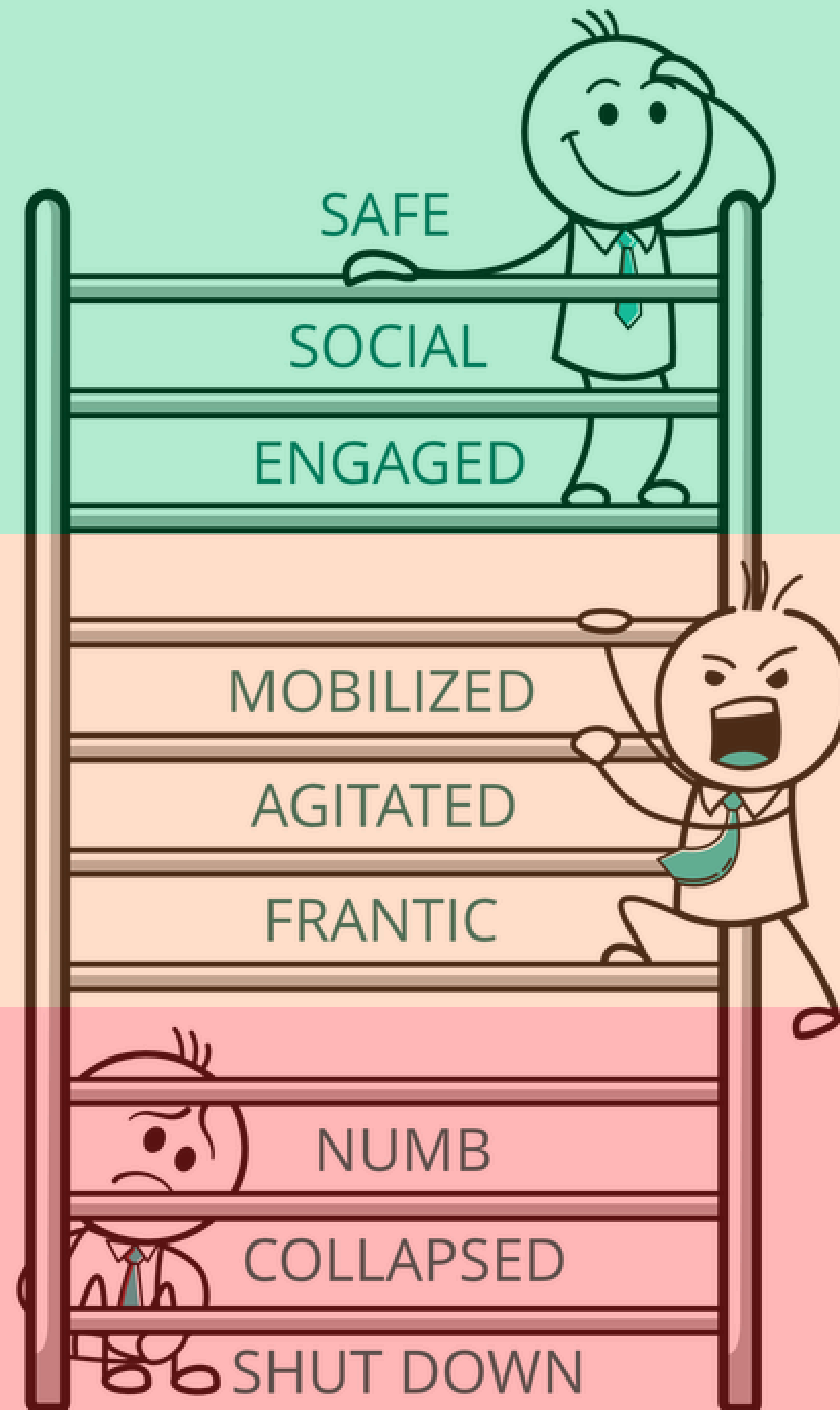
Stories Shape Nervous Systems

What We See	What Might Be Underneath?
Anger	Repeated experiences of injustice
Distrust	Past experiences of discrimination
Hypervigilance	Anticipation of bias or harm
Withdrawal	Protection from further hurt
Over-compliance	Fear of being stereotyped
Silence	Concern about consequences of speaking up

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Adultification and Child Q

- 15-year-old Black schoolgirl
- Suspected of possessing cannabis at school
- Strip searched by police in school
- No appropriate adult present
- No drugs found



The Brain Seeks Certainty

When we feel under pressure, our brains naturally:

- Predict before they understand
- Look for patterns
- Confirm existing beliefs
- Simplify complex situations

This can contribute to:

- Confirmation bias
- Prejudice
- Adultification
- Misinterpretation of behaviour

**Reflection interrupts automatic thinking.
Curiosity leads to better decision making.**



Our Nervous Systems Matter Too

Vicarious Trauma and Professional Decision-Making

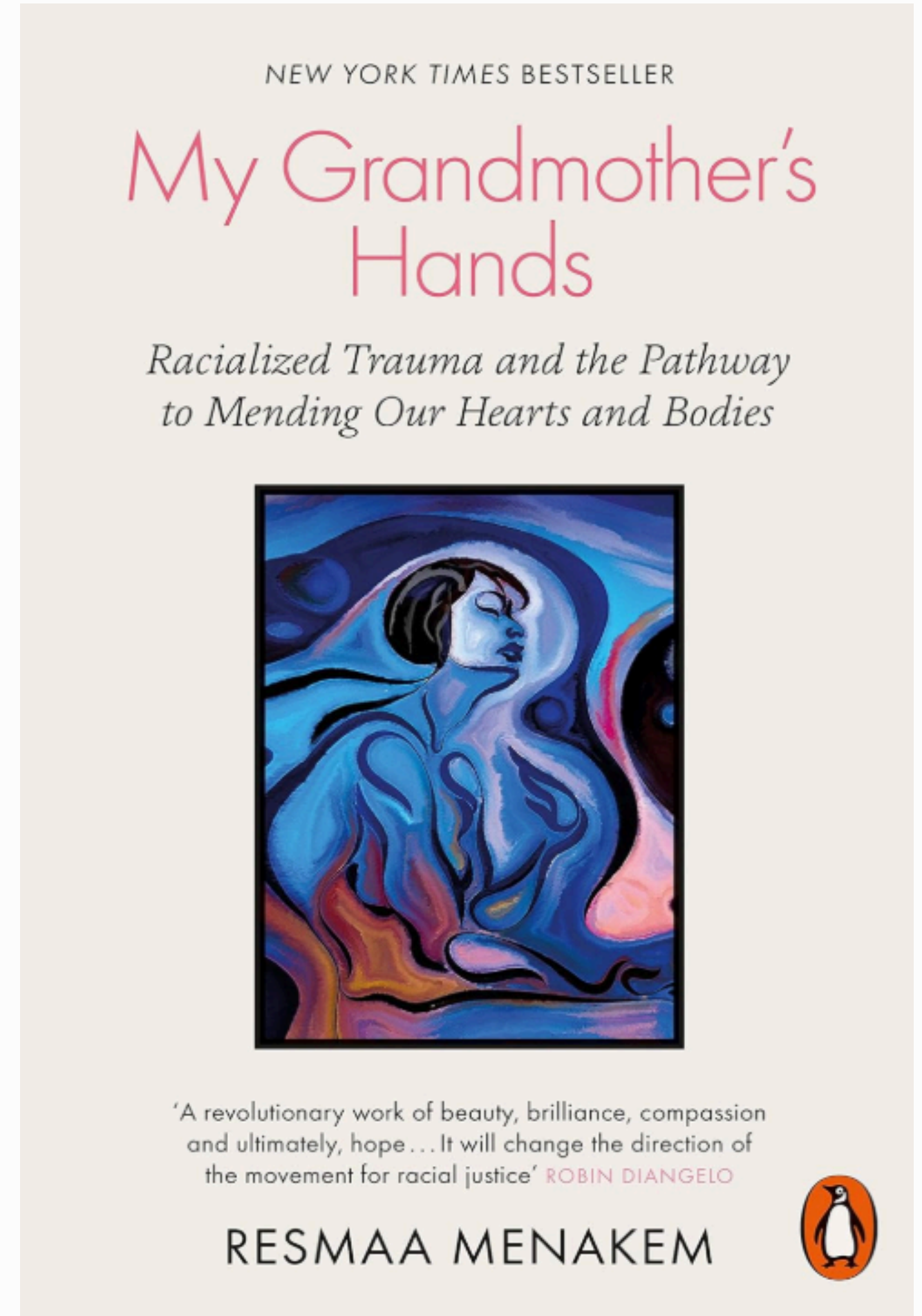
- Repeated exposure to trauma can influence how we think, feel and respond.
- Reduced capacity for reflection
- Greater reliance on automatic thinking
- Increased need for certainty
- Reduced curiosity under pressure

**“Trauma in a person,
decontextualised over time, can
look like personality.**

**Trauma in a family,
decontextualised over time, can
look like family traits.**

**Trauma in a people,
decontextualised over time, can
look like culture.”**

Resmaa Menakem





"We do not see the
world as it is, we see it
as we are"

Anais Nin

Language Shapes Perception

The words we choose influence how children, families and professionals understand behaviour.

Before recording, ask yourself:

- Am I describing behaviour or interpreting it?
- What context might I be missing?
- Could bias be influencing my language?
- Would I use these words for every child?
- Does this recording increase understanding or reinforce assumptions?

If Trauma Reduces Safety...
What Restores It?

The S.A.F.E Framework Principles for Increased Psychological Safety, Anti-Racist Practice



Self-
Regulation



Awareness

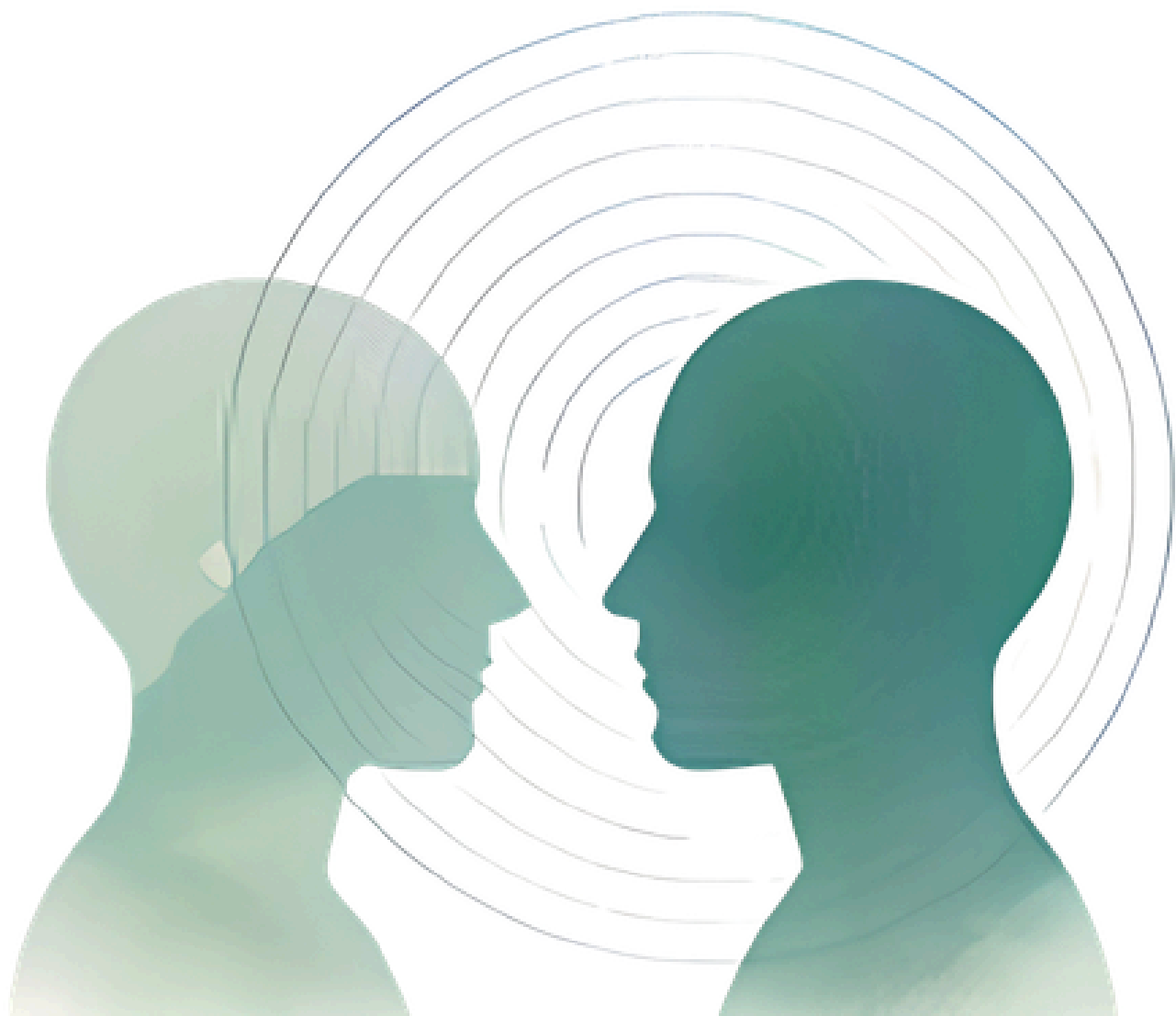


Fear into Courage
and Collaboration



Empowerment

Self-Regulation Improves Co-Regulation



Practitioners	Children & Families
Regulate before responding or challenging	Experience consistency and predictable relationships
Approach conversations with curiosity rather than defensiveness	Feel heard, believed and respected
Ask about previous experiences with professionals and services	Have their identity, culture and lived experience recognised
Do what you say you will do to build trust	Be involved in decisions affecting them
Reflect on bias and seek supervision	Feel safe to raise concerns, including experiences of racism
Challenge racism and discriminatory language when it occurs	Experience adults who advocate for them

Building and Sustaining a Nervous System Informed Anti-Racist Culture

We lead by creating teams where people can:

- Model curiosity
- Create psychological safety
- Challenge racism
- Reflect on bias
- Build trust
- Champion equity



work
wise

Thank You!

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