

## UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA DRIVEN PANIC AND ANXIETY

Trauma survivors have symptoms instead of memories. Trauma memories are encoded as bodily and emotional feelings without words or pictures.

When we get triggered, we experience sudden and overwhelming feelings, sensations, and impulses that convey, "I am in danger – **right now!**" Not "I was in danger **then.**" Emotional memory converts the past into an expectation of the future ... and makes the worst experiences in our past persist as felt realities. (Ecker et Al, 2012, p. 6). The brain and the body continue to respond to everyday life as if we were in danger, **now.** When triggers set off our internal alarm system daily, it is common to feel overwhelmed and confused. It is also common to reach conclusions like "There is something wrong with me" or "There is something wrong with my life" which can increase anxiety, anger, shame, and/or hopelessness.

When we are triggered, the thinking brain is deactivated leaving the reptilian brain free to act on instinct. The reptilian brain instinctively seeks relief and safety.

- What does this look like for you when you are anxious? What are your impulses for relief and safety?

### **Working With Anxiety in the Moment by Engaging the Thinking Brain:**

To feel safe now and know we are safe requires restoring activity to the thinking brain (prefrontal cortex) so that we can observe, reflect, see ourselves and others in perspective, and have access to curiosity and compassion. The thinking brain has a calming effect on the amygdala, the brain's fire alarm. Think of the amygdala like a smoke detector in your home that is usually set off when toast is burning: when we activate the thinking brain, we can discriminate better, and when we recognize the smell as toast burning, the brain's smoke detector stops beeping.

### **Try "dropping the content." Let the words go and stay just with body sensation.**

- Describe what is happening in your body with sensation words.
- What happens if you do not analyze them? What happens when you drop the content of the emotional experience?
- How does noticing affect your impulses and sensations?

### **Try interacting with the anxiety as if it was a scared, childlike part of you.**

- How would you soothe a scared child?

You might consider statements like:

- *What are you afraid is going to happen?*
- *I am here with you; I am an adult, and we can leave if we need to (you might take a moment to look at your adult body, feel your adult muscles, etc.)*
- *It is ok to feel scared, it doesn't mean we are unsafe*
- *I can protect us*

**Try engaging your body in different ways.**

- Placing a hand over the heart slows heart rate.
- Orient to the environment: turn the head in a 180 degree circle noticing "what is different" can be a signal to the body to reduce anxiety.
- Making a boundary: hold up a stop sign, draw a circle around the body