

THE NEURORELATIONAL FRAMEWORK'S

Safety-Challenge-Threat Triad



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The first NRF paradigm shift sees behavior through the lens of safety, challenge, and threat rather than through compliance versus non-compliance.

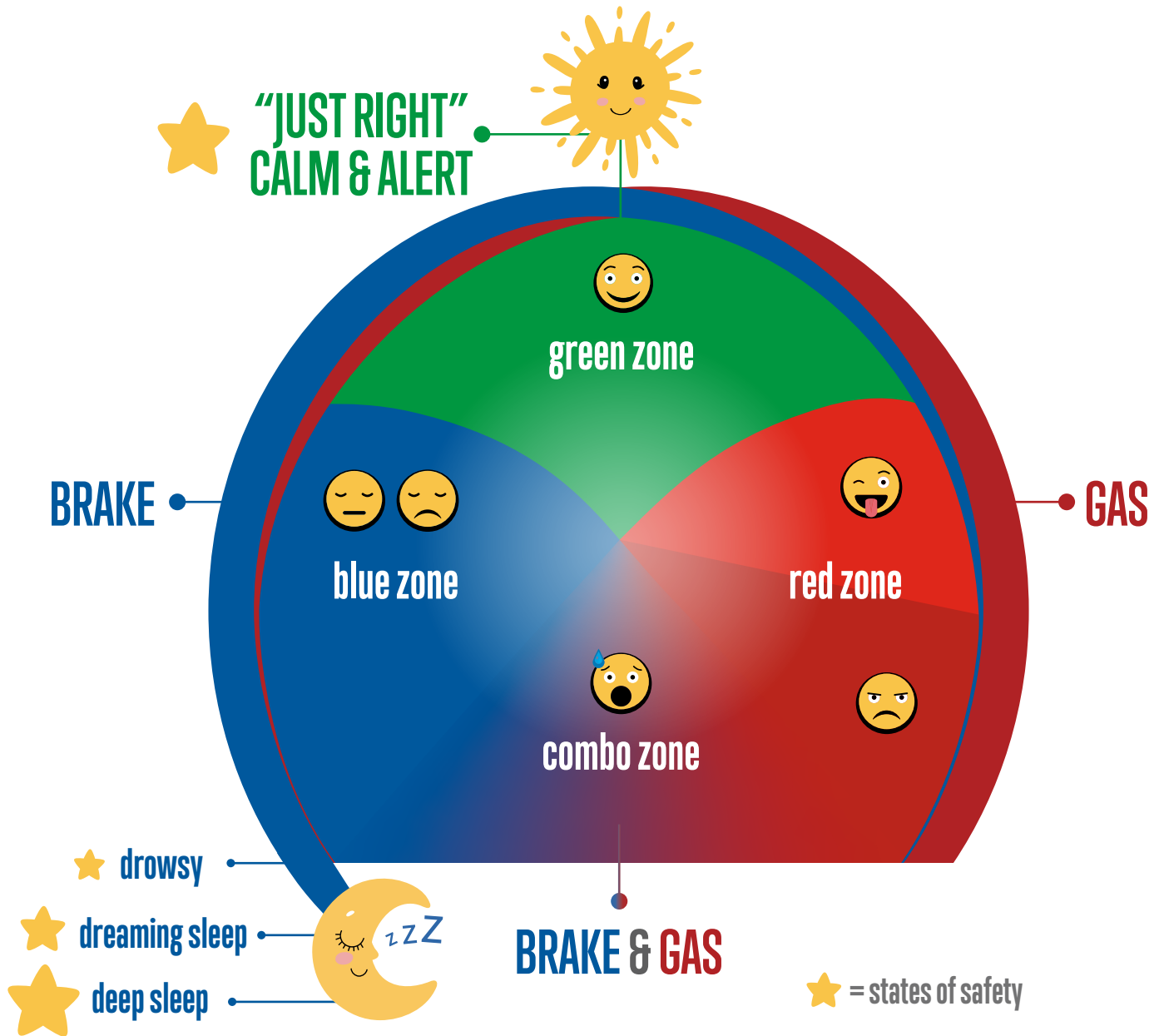
Safety is a person's real or imagined perception of protection from harm. Other conditions can include feeling safe—yet challenged; not feeling safe while experiencing challenge; and a lack of safety with threat. Many people think that all stress is 'bad' or toxic. That is not the case; stress, in fact, is necessary and adaptive. Adaptive stress is important as it builds stress tolerance and stress recovery with the right dose of challenge. Challenge represents adapting to novelty or other changes in the environment, learning a new skill or maintaining effort. Threat is when we experience possible pain, injury, or harm - physical or psychological. When a threat is too intense, too frequent, and/or too prolonged one is more likely to meet criteria for toxic stress. However, when a challenge is mismatched to the person's capacities, this can also create a situation of threat to the nervous system.

In this diagram, the three aspects of the triad are shown as cyclical in nature. Safety often occurs in the context of relationships with others who can calm us, share joy with us, and with others who are responsive to our immediate needs. The 'just right' challenge that is developmentally appropriate is important to our lifelong maturation. We build stress tolerance by adjusting the right dose of challenge to match our children's developmental capacities so that our children can be successful, staying in a modulated stress response. Adults can scaffold activities to support the child's learning.

We need to 'watch for' threat behaviors that look like flitting/frenetic energy, or fight/flight (moving too fast), fright/freeze (anxiety), or flatness (moving too slow). When we are experiencing threat, we need to follow the arrow to the left to find safety in our relationships. We can also follow the arrow to the right to reduce the demand or create a better match with challenge. Remember the 'two way' arrow shows that we work to combine safety with the right dose of challenge. The NRF emphasizes that connection with others, or co-regulation, that can support an optimal dose of challenge that adjusts when the demand is too high.

Another way to walk around the circle is to start with threat and then move to safety and challenge. When you use the threat-safety-challenge triad in this sequence, one has just walked through the NRF's three steps: assess for toxic stress (threat -roots of the tree); establish relational safety by improving the quality of engagement (trunk of the tree); and match the right dose of challenge by understanding individual differences (4 brain systems - branches of the tree).

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Sleep-Wake States Arc
SUPPORTS HEALTH



THE NEURORELATIONAL FRAMEWORK'S Sleep-Wake States Arc

This picture shows how our nervous system affects our behavior every day.

The part of the picture with the moon shows that we need to have good quality and length of sleep. We all need sleep to function well during the day. There are three parts to sleep – when we are drowsy, deep sleep, and dreaming. The stars represent safety. When we feel safe, we can sleep well. When you sleep in a new place for the first night you may not feel safe and may wake up when you hear noises. Often, you relax the next night, knowing that the noises will not harm you.

When we are safe during the day, we can function in the green zone where we feel ‘just right.’ We are calm and alert and can learn and do our work. In the green zone, we have a healthy balance between the brake pedal (blue stripe) and the gas pedal (red stripe) in our nervous system. The healthy brake pedal with the right amount of gas keeps us green and helps us to have a variety of experiences and emotions. We are still calm, present, and engaged with others and the world around us.

Throughout the day we may get stressed. Once we start to lose balance in the green zone, the gas pedal can start to take over, the brake pedal can take over, or the gas and the brake can go on at the same time. When the gas pedal is on, we are in the positive or negative red zones and speed up inside. When the brake is on, we are in the blue zone and slow down. Sometimes the brake and gas can be on together; we call this the combo zone. We have a jittery, nervous feeling in our bodies. These four reactions of our brain and body are called stress responses. It is important to know that these stress responses are all healthy and normal. It is good to have all four. We call this adaptive stress.

HERE IS AN EXAMPLE OF DRIVING A CAR:

We should be in the green zone when we are driving a car: paying attention and alert. Many of us have driven blocks or miles and not remembered that chunk of the trip. This is driving in the blue zone. We also all have gotten irritated and felt our bodies speed up inside when someone has cut us off in traffic (negative red zone). Or we may be driving to fast music we like on the radio and speed a bit (positive red zone). In these two examples, we are driving in the red zone. When driving, if we hit a wet or icy road, we may step on the brake then gas pedal, back and forth. But in our bodies, brakes and gas actually go on *together at the same time* and we feel a ‘nervous’ combination in our bodies. We are then in the combo zone. These are all helpful adaptations to driving; the key is our getting back to green.



EXAMPLE