

# ClearMinds

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## Peek Inside

Do You Know Why We Can't "Trauma-Proof Our Lives"?

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# What Have We Been Up To?

**November** : Workshops and Outreach - mental health and therapy beyond the office

This month has been filled with school outreach events and meaningful conversations with young people and their communities. Together, **Dure** and **Yassine** delivered a presentation on bullying at Uptown School, that went beyond the usual definitions. They explored the emotional dynamics that make bullying possible, emphasizing not only the importance of recognizing harmful behaviors but also the silent power of bystanders. Students were invited to reflect on how action, empathy, and responsibility can shift the entire climate of a school.

**At Dubai College**, **Sara** organized a workshop on communicating with teenagers, and **Yassine** led the presentation. Drawing from EMDR principles, psychoanalytic understanding, and developmental psychology, he guided parents and educators through the challenging terrain of adolescence.

The session explored how to move from reactive responses to genuine connection, offering practical tools for listening differently, recognizing emotional cues, and reframing conflict. The workshop not only provided insight but offered concrete strategies that parents could bring into everyday family life.



## THE TRANSFORM TRAUMA CONFERENCE IN OXFORD Moni ElRamlawy, M.A.

The conference gathered leading experts among them Bessel Van der Kolk, Esther Perel, Richard Schwartz, and Dan Siegel - an exploration of trauma and the way it shapes our world. The event highlighted how healing only emerges through safety, connection, and community, offering powerful insights for the future of trauma work

# On living with Surprises: Why We Can't "Trauma-Proof" Our Lives

When we talk about trauma, we often focus on the pain, the loss, or the disruption it brings. But at its core, trauma is also something very simple: it's a surprise



By Nardus Saayman, PhD

## What comes after Trauma ?

After trauma, we often become highly focused on preparation, rehearsing future scenarios or searching for ways to 'future-proof' ourselves. But if preparation didn't (and couldn't) happen before the trauma, why does it become so intense afterward?

Part of the answer is that we live in the present moment. We don't have access to the future, no matter how much we imagine it. You can't 'prepare' for discovering a partner's betrayal by trying to predict it – you can only invest in building a healthy, meaningful relationship. Similarly, you don't prepare for a heart attack by practicing emergency drills – you prepare by living in a way that supports long-term health.

So how do we live with what we cannot predict? We build the resources needed to deal with surprises. To 'future-proof' our lives does not mean making the surprises irrelevant through prediction – it means working with what ~~we~~ know, and constantly strengthening what already exists.

## What's Trauma ?

It's the event we didn't see coming, couldn't prepare for, or never imagined would affect us the way it did. Sometimes the shock comes from the event itself. Other times, it's the emotional impact – the depth of hurt, fear, or grief – that catches us off guard. Even a small detail in a difficult experience can end up changing us in ways we never expected.

After a trauma, many people feel a powerful urge to make sure it never happens again. This isn't irrational – it's how our brains try to keep us safe.



# The Executive Brain: Why ADHD Is About More Than Attention

ADHD isn't simply a disorder of attention; it's a difference in self-regulation and goal-directed behavior.



Dure Msc

When most people think of ADHD, they picture distraction, fidgeting, or forgetfulness. But underneath those behaviors lies something more complex: a difference in how the brain manages its executive functions. These are the mental skills that help us plan, organize, regulate emotions, and stay on track.

ADHD isn't simply a disorder of attention; it's a difference in self-regulation and goal-directed behavior. Understanding this helps us assess, support, and empathize more effectively with both children and adults who live with ADHD.

## What Are Executive Functions?

Executive functions act like the brain's management system, coordinating thinking, emotion, and behavior so we can reach goals. Psychologists often group them into three core domains:

- **Working Memory** – holding information in mind while using it (e.g., remembering instructions while following them).
- **Inhibitory Control** – pausing before reacting; thinking before acting or speaking.
- **Cognitive Flexibility** – shifting focus, adapting to change, and finding alternative solutions when plans don't go as expected.

Together, these processes form what Russell Barkley calls the **executive system**. In ADHD, this system tends to develop more slowly or operate less efficiently. A child might know what to do but struggle to do it in the moment, not from laziness or defiance, but because their brains' self-regulation circuits work differently.

## Beyond Attention: The Executive Function Model of ADHD

Earlier models framed ADHD mainly as a problem of sustaining attention. Modern neuroscience paints a richer picture: ADHD reflects differences in executive control – maintaining attention intentionally, regulating impulses, managing motivation, and sustaining effort over time. **It's not about having or lacking attention, but about controlling where it goes.** Many people with ADHD describe episodes of "hyperfocus": intense concentration on stimulating tasks, alongside difficulty persisting with mundane ones.



## How Psychologists Assess Executive Function

When psychologists assess for ADHD, they're mapping the architecture of attention and self-management, not just measuring concentration.

A comprehensive evaluation typically includes:

- **Cognitive Testing** – Instruments such as the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (V) measure Working Memory and Processing Speed, two key executive domains.
- **Attention Tests** – Tools like the Test of Everyday Attention for Children (TEA-Ch2) or Continuous Performance Tests (CPTs) assess sustained attention and inhibitory control under structured conditions.
- **Behavior Rating Scales** – Parent, teacher, or self-report questionnaires (e.g., Conners-4, BRIEF-2) capture everyday behaviors such as disorganization, impulsivity, or difficulty shifting between tasks.
- **Clinical Interviews and Observation** – Qualitative data reveal how executive skills influence daily functioning, frustration tolerance, and emotional control.

An experienced clinician integrates all these sources to see how executive functioning shapes real-life performance. One child might show strong working memory but weak inhibition, leading to blurting answers or rushing work. Another might test well yet struggle with time management, illustrating the gap between **capacity** and **performance**.

## When the Executive System Falters

Imagine driving a car. Executive functions are the driver: steering, braking, and planning the route.

In ADHD, the driver sometimes hesitates or gets distracted. The engine (motivation) might rev too high or stall; the steering (focus) can drift toward whatever seems more interesting. That's why a person with ADHD may complete complex tasks in one setting (like building a model or gaming for hours) yet forget routine chores. **The issue isn't knowledge; it's self-directed execution.**

Difficulties **regulating emotion** are part of this same picture. The diagnostic criteria for ADHD includes emotional dysregulation as an associated feature, and clinicians increasingly treat it as a core target of therapy. Trouble inhibiting emotional reactions or recovering from frustration reflects the same executive-control challenges that underlie attention and impulse regulation.

## Rethinking the Label

When we move beyond the word "attention," ADHD becomes easier to understand and far more human. It's not a failure of discipline but a different wiring of the executive brain.



It's not about having or lacking attention, but about controlling where it goes.



# Supporting Children: Why Acknowledging the Emotion Should Come First?

"Many parents today find themselves preoccupied with helping their children "behave better"



By Hacer Subasi, Msc

When a child is crying, shouting, refusing, or melting down, the most visible piece is the behavior. Yet this focus often leads parents to rush into firm directives—"Stop." "Don't do that." "Calm down" "Behave"— believing that behavioral correction is the first step.

However, this is one of the most common developmental misunderstandings in parenting.

From a neurodevelopmental perspective, children—well into late childhood, often until ages 11-12—operate largely within a pre-verbal emotional landscape. Even though they can speak, reason, and negotiate, their inner world is still dominated by feelings rather than by mature cognitive regulation. What appears on the surface as behavior is nearly always the visible tip of an invisible process: an over-aroused nervous system struggling to regain balance.

In moments of emotional dysregulation, a child is not failing to adjust their behavior on purpose; rather, they are often neurologically unable to do so. Expecting a child to comply while their nervous system is in a state of acute arousal is like asking someone to swim while they are already underwater. The capacity simply isn't available yet.

This is why immediate commands—however well-intentioned—rarely work as effective limit-setting strategies, and developmentally, they do not meet the child where they truly are.

## Emotion First, Limit Second

Before a limit can be heard, understood, or integrated, the child must first experience a sense of felt safety. This occurs when the parent acknowledges the child's inner state—without interrogating, without moralizing, and without trying to fix the feeling.

The most effective way to do this is simple: No questions. No "why." No explanations. Instead, the parent **pauses, makes soft eye contact, attunes to the child's posture, breath, and expression, and reflects the child's inner experience using the second-person singular.**

## Practical Examples

- "You're really overwhelmed right now."
- "You didn't expect that, and it felt too much."
- "You're upset because something didn't go the way you wanted."

This type of acknowledgment communicates powerful nonverbal messages:

- You are safe with me.
- Your feelings will not make me abandon you.
- I am staying with you through this moment.
- You don't need to hide or fight your feelings.
- You are accepted—fully, unconditionally, as you are.

When a child receives this form of emotional mirroring, the nervous system shifts from high arousal toward regulation. Only after this shift can the brain access the cognitive areas needed for problem-solving, impulse control, and cooperation.

## Preparing the Ground for Healthy Limits

Once the child's emotional state has been acknowledged and their nervous system has settled, the parent is then free to set a clear, calm limit.

At that point, the limit is far less likely to turn into a power struggle, because the child is no longer fighting for emotional survival—they are simply responding to guidance.

In this sense, emotional acknowledgment is not the opposite of discipline; it is the prerequisite for effective discipline.



When parents shift from behavior-first reactions to emotion-first attunement, they align with the child's developmental reality and create a foundation for cooperation, resilience, and genuine emotional growth.



# Practical Skills for Children



By Sara Caroppo

Children do not need big changes to feel more confident and capable. What makes the real difference are the tiny habits they repeat every day.

Small actions, done regularly, can boost focus, calm, organisation and emotional strength. This section shares quick and friendly ideas children can try at home or at school.

Each habit takes less than a minute, yet it can gently shape their wellbeing and turn ordinary moments into chances to grow.

## 1. The One Minute Reset

*What it is:* A short breathing-and-reset routine children can use before homework to calm their body and focus their mind.

*Strengths:* Helps regulate the nervous system, improves concentration, and encourages positive self-reflection.

*Potential challenges:* Children may rush the breathing or forget to use it without gentle prompting.

## 2. The 20-Second Tidy

*What it is:* A micro-tidying routine that turns decluttering into a short, manageable task.

*Strengths:* Reduces visual clutter and overwhelm, builds responsibility, and feels playful rather than punitive.

*Potential challenges:* Only suitable for light mess; deeper clutter will still need separate attention.



### **3. Pack-It-Back Practice**

*What it is:* A simple routine of packing school materials immediately after homework.

*Strengths:* Supports organisation, builds planning skills, and prevents morning stress.

*Potential challenges:* May require modelling, repetition, and supervision for younger children.

### **4. The Kindness Sticky Note**

*What it is:* A small act of kindness where children leave a positive message for someone else.

*Strengths:* Builds empathy, strengthens social connections, and boosts self-esteem through pro-social behaviour.

*Potential challenges:* Children with limited friendships or social anxiety may need support choosing a recipient or message.

### **5. The Three-Object Clean Desk**

*What it is:* A simple rule that limits the desk to three essential items during work time.

*Strengths:* Reduces cognitive load, supports focus, and creates a tidy, distraction-free workspace.

*Potential challenges:* May feel restrictive to children who prefer having materials visible; less practical for multi-step tasks.

### **6. The 30-Second Posture Check**

*What it is:* A brief moment to adjust posture (feet flat, shoulders relaxed, back straight) before starting work.

*Strengths:* Improves comfort, energy, and attention; introduces healthy body awareness.

*Potential challenges:* Children often forget without reminders; benefits build gradually rather than instantly.

### **7. The Two-Minute Bedroom Loop**

*What it is:* A short walk around the bedroom to pick up anything out of place each evening.

*Strengths:* Builds independence, prevents clutter from escalating, and encourages pride in personal space.

*Potential challenges:* Can feel long to some children; works best when paired with a timer or music.





# What Really Happens Behind the Door of Couples Therapy?

What if couples therapy isn't about fixing your partner... but understanding the cycle you're both stuck in?



Moni ElRamlawy, M.A.

Couples don't usually come to therapy because they stopped caring about each other - they come because they can't make sense of what keeps going wrong between them.

Most partners are trying hard, but the harder they try, the more stuck they feel.

Couples therapy gives us a chance to slow down and look closely at what's actually happening in those moments of disconnect.

It's not about deciding who's right or wrong; it's about understanding the interaction that takes over and keeps both people from feeling connected.

One of the common things I hear in the first couples therapy session is "we are stuck", "we fight about the same thing over and over again", "my partner doesn't listen", or "when we fight about something, my partner brings up all the things we fought about throughout the years of our relationship".

When I hear this, I feel the frustration, the helplessness, and the longing to hold on to a thread of hope.

In couples therapy, we don't look for "the bad guy", we look for the pattern. Every couple has a pattern - pursue/withdraw, attack/defend, shut down/try harder. It's not intentional. It's a protective response.

So instead of focusing on who's right and who's wrong, we ask about what happens between you when you're hurting. We slow things down so you can hear each other. Most couples aren't fighting about the issue they come in with. They're fighting because they feel alone, unseen, unimportant, or unsafe in the relationship.



When we understand the underlying hurt under the anger, the frustration, the withdrawal, and the defensiveness, we start hearing things like:

- "I walk away because I'm scared of losing you".
- "I push because I feel abandoned".
- "I get angry because I feel unseen".

Once these truths enter the room, the relationship shifts.

*"When we slow down, the pattern becomes clearer than the accusation."*



The goal of couples therapy isn't perfect communication, it's emotional safety. When partners feel safe, communication naturally improves.

The outcome of couples therapy is not to stop fighting or to fight better, it's to repair better.

When partners begin to understand the emotional logic behind each other's reactions, everything shifts. Arguments become moments of clarity instead of rupture, and distance becomes an invitation to reach rather than retreat.

Couples therapy doesn't promise a conflict-free relationship, it offers something far more meaningful: the ability to repair, reconnect, and return to each other with softness instead of fear. In the end, healing doesn't come from eliminating the cycle, but from learning to face it as a team.

If you understood what you were both really protecting in those moments, how different would your conversations look?



## Riddle Time - Answer and you shall pass !

### **Who Am I?**

I happen when your mind  
expects one thing, but reality  
delivers another.

I interrupt your certainty,  
And shake the story you live in.  
To heal me, you don't erase the  
past—

You rebuild the future.

What am I?

Answer: Trauma – the disruption of prediction.



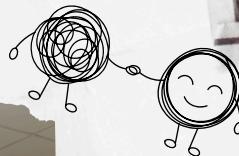
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