



UNLOCKING THE POWER OF MY PDA BRAIN

A Children's Guide to Thriving with
Pathological Demand Avoidance



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My PDA Brain Adventure

Hello! My name is Dr. Jennifer, and I have a unique brain called a PDA brain.

PDA stands for Pathological Demand Avoidance. PDA is thought to be a type of autism, but there is still so much we are learning about PDA that it is possible that it is related to other things, too. I work with a lot of PDA and Autistic children and adults that also have obstacles related to ADHD, Dyslexia, and being Twice Exceptional (2e: meaning gifted and having a disability). So, we are still learning and maybe someday you can help with that.

PDA is a newer concept in the United States; however, our friends across the pond in the UK, have known about this for quite some time.

I think of PDA as a long and fancy name for a brain that only feels comfortable when it is in charge, feels safe, and is not overwhelmed by people or senses.

If you are reading this book, you may find that you have a brain a lot like mine. If you do, congratulations, that makes us unique! But that also means that we have some work to do to understand our own brains and help others at home or school understand our brains as well. If think you know someone with a PDA brain, this book will help you understand their brain, too.

So, let's start on our adventure of exploring our PDA brains!

Dr. Jennifer



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**This book belongs to the
Junior Brain Detective:**



Note from Dr. Jennifer:

When I was little my favorite books had interactive choices and activities. This version of the book includes some of the activities. If you are interested in all of the activities, as well as interactive choices and a parent guide, please see the Activity Workbook and Parent Companion Guide (Coming Soon).

As you go through each section, you can decide which section sounds most like you. Go to that section first. Then, if you feel like it, you can look at the other section, too. You can complete activities or not, that is up to you! There is no right or wrong answer, so you do what feels right for you.

Sometimes you will see a Detour, if you want to learn more about that topic, keep reading. If not, turn the page!

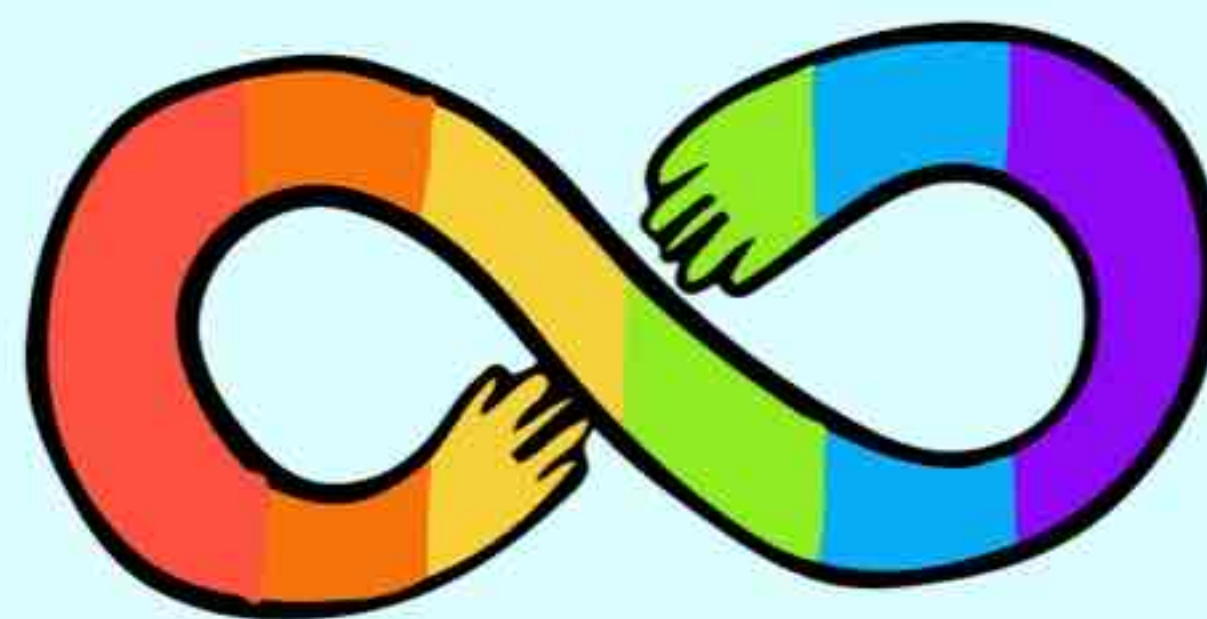
 Many big brains have helped us understand some of the topics in this book, so when you see a brain symbol that means you can look in the guide book for more information about the person who created that word or concept or helped us understand.



Have fun!!

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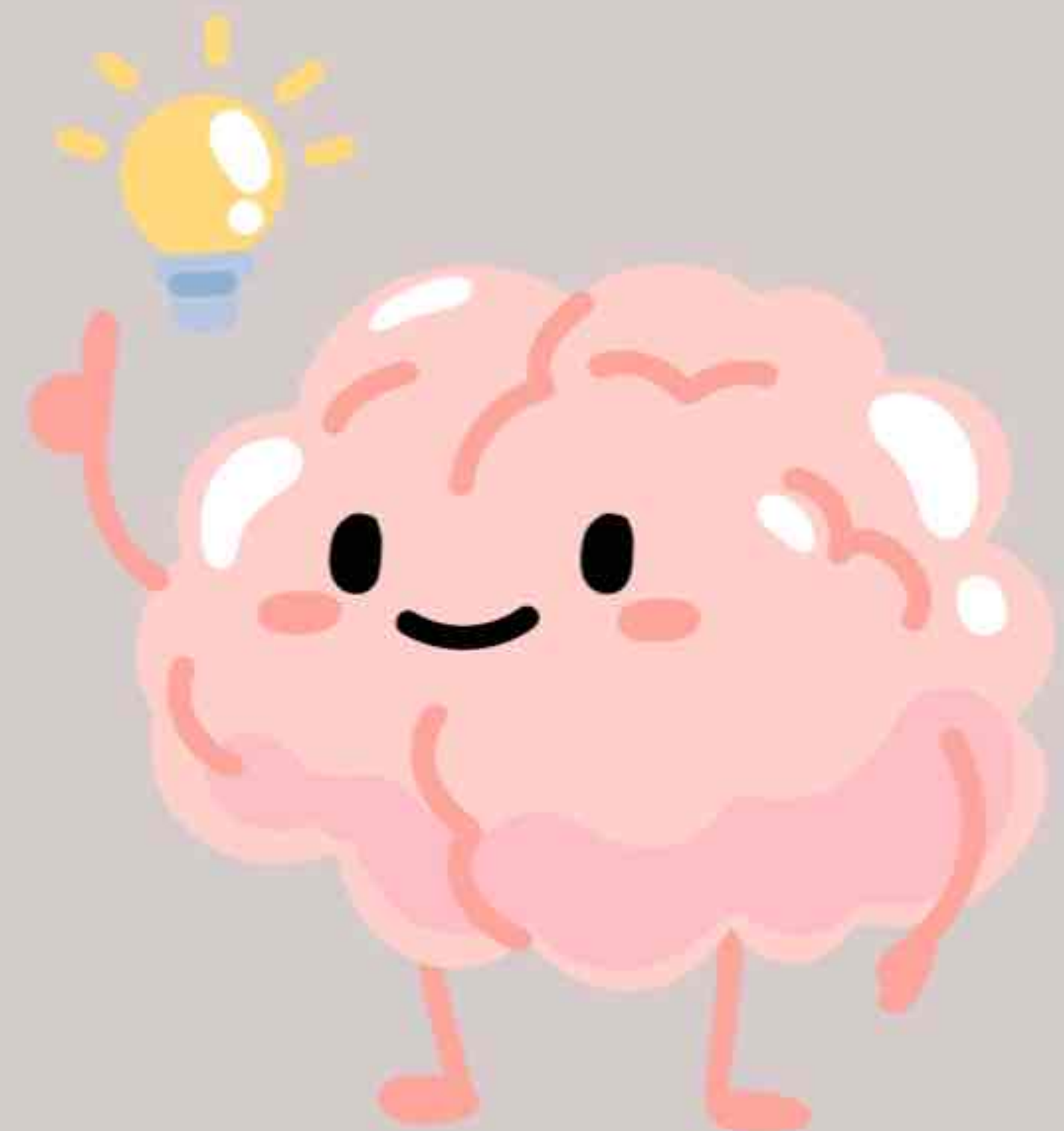
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INTRODUCTION

WHAT MAKES PDA BRAINS SO SPECIAL: CELEBRATING OUR UNIQUE SELVES

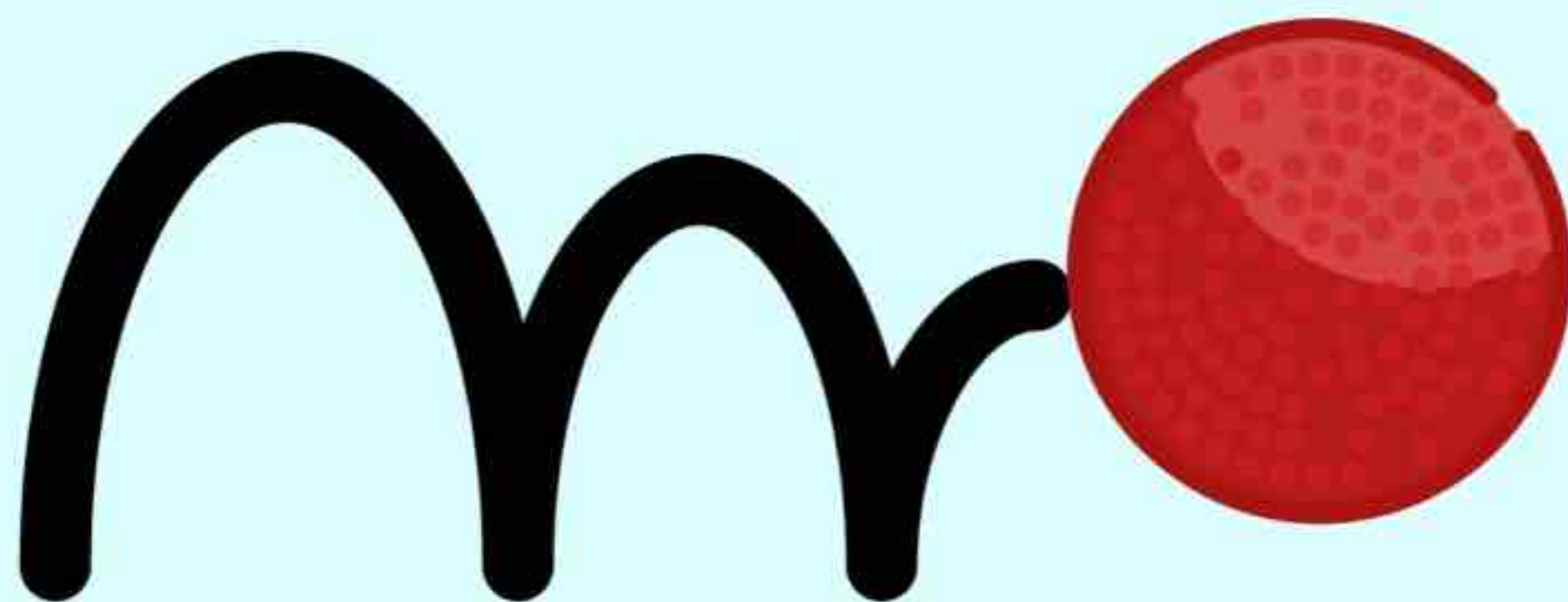
1. Super Strong Feelings: Having a PDA 🧠 brain means we can feel emotions really strongly. Sometimes, our feelings can be as big and wild as a rollercoaster, and that's perfectly okay! It's like having a powerful radar that lets us experience happiness, excitement, and even sadness more intensely than others.



2. Overflowing Brain Buckets: For PDA brains, even small demands can feel really big and overwhelming. Imagine our brains are big buckets. When there are too many demands, it can feel like our buckets are going to overflow. It is important for us to recognize when our bucket is getting too full and to find ways to gently empty it, like taking breaks or asking for help.



3. The Demand Dodgeball Arena: Imagine you're playing dodgeball, but with everyday tasks like brushing your teeth or doing homework. For someone with PDA, these tasks can feel like big, scary dodgeballs coming at you. You might want to dodge and avoid them because they make you super anxious. Sometimes the demands come from inside of us and we might want to avoid those as well.



4. Autonomy Adventure:

Autonomy means having the freedom to make our own choices and do things our way. It's like being the captain of our own ship. For our PDA brains, having control over what we do and how we do it is super important.



5. Inclusivity Champions (Equalizing Behaviors):



Fairness and inclusivity is important to our PDA brains. When we believe that things are not fair, we may try to make things equal. Sometimes the way we try to make things equal gets misunderstood as bad behaviors, things we did on purpose, or things we did to be mean (like not doing our work, leaving the room without asking or screaming a bad word). It is important for the grownups around us to understand that we are not doing these things on purpose to be hurtful. It is just the way our brain tries to make things fair. Sometimes we equalize and our parents and teachers don't even notice. Other times we equalize and we attempt to make things fair in a "not-so-good-way" (like hitting someone or biting).



When we struggle with making positive and safe equalizing choices we need our safe person to be patient with us, to help us communicate our anxiety, to help us regain our autonomy, and to help us feel safe again.



6. Sensory Sensations: We might be extra sensitive to sounds, lights, or textures. It's like hearing a whisper in a noisy room or having super sensitive touch sense.

7. Safe Brain Zones: Feeling safe and secure is super important for us, especially with PDA. When we feel safe, our brains can work better. But if we feel scared or stressed, our brains focus on keeping us safe instead of helping us to learn or think.

8. Different Operating Systems/Celebrating Different Brains:

Everyone's brain works in its own special way, and that's called neurodiversity. For those of us with PDA, it's important to understand how our brains work best. We might need different kinds of help to learn and think in a way that feels good for us. Many times, having a PDA brain means we may pay attention, problem solve, and learn differently. Some things may come very easily to us and others may be super hard. On our journey to understanding our PDA brains, we have to discover how we learn best.

Here are more ways our brains are unique:

Memory Magic!: Our PDA brains are like treasure chests filled with amazing memories, but sometimes we need a little nudge to find the treasure. For example, a hint to help us recognize the information. Dr. Jennifer calls this having a "prompt-dependent memory."

The Mighty Planning Power: Planning or organizing can be tricky for us. Imagine trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle where some pieces just won't fit. That's how it feels when we have executive dysfunction and difficulty shifting from one activity to the next.

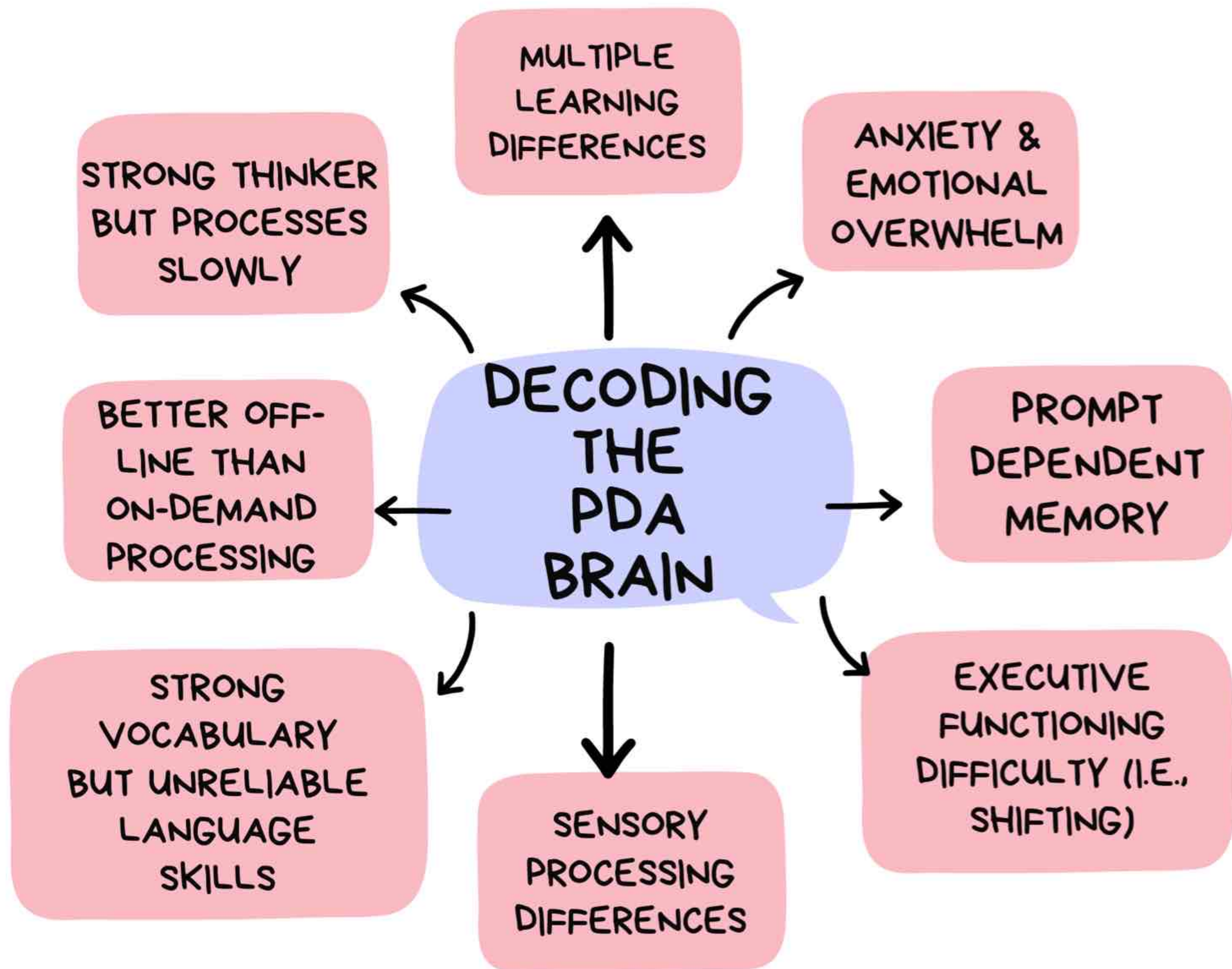
Brainy Ninja Skills: We have strong THINKING SKILLS, which means we're pretty smart! But our brains might work a bit slower, making us like brainy ninjas who take their time to make the right move. It is especially hard for us to think under pressure!



Off-line Genius: We perform better when we can think things through at our own pace, just like reading a book at home instead of doing a surprise quiz in class.

Word Wonders: Our vocabulary is fantastic! We know a lot of cool words but sometimes it's hard to use them when talking or writing, especially when we feel scared or overwhelmed.

We are still learning about PDA brains, but Dr. Jennifer has found some common ways our brains work.



WE WILL FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THESE ON OUR JOURNEY!

So now that we know a little bit more about our amazing PDA brains. Let's explore how we can unlock the power of our PDA brain with this knowledge.

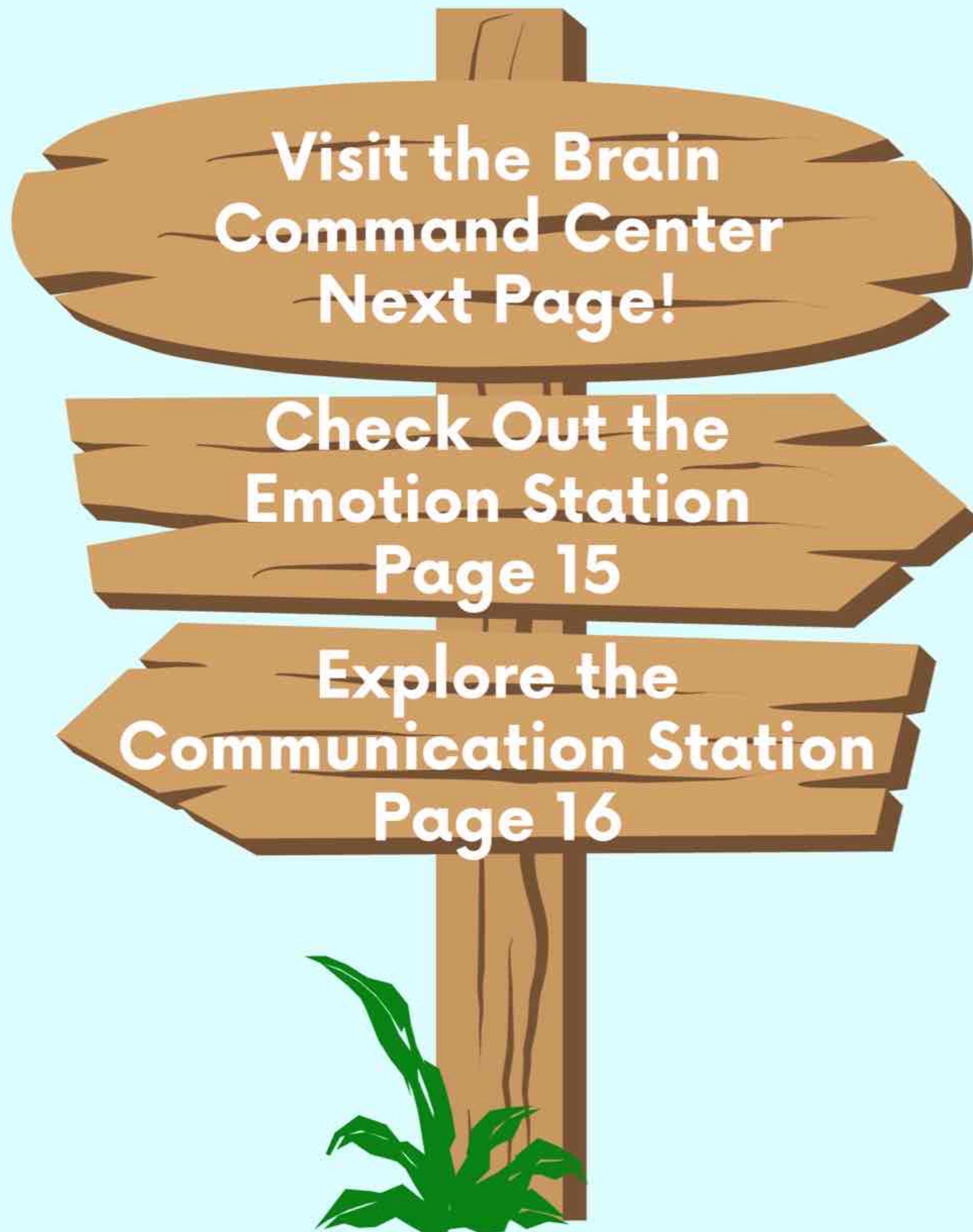
LET'S GO!





Chapter 1

Exploring the Brain's Command Central Stations

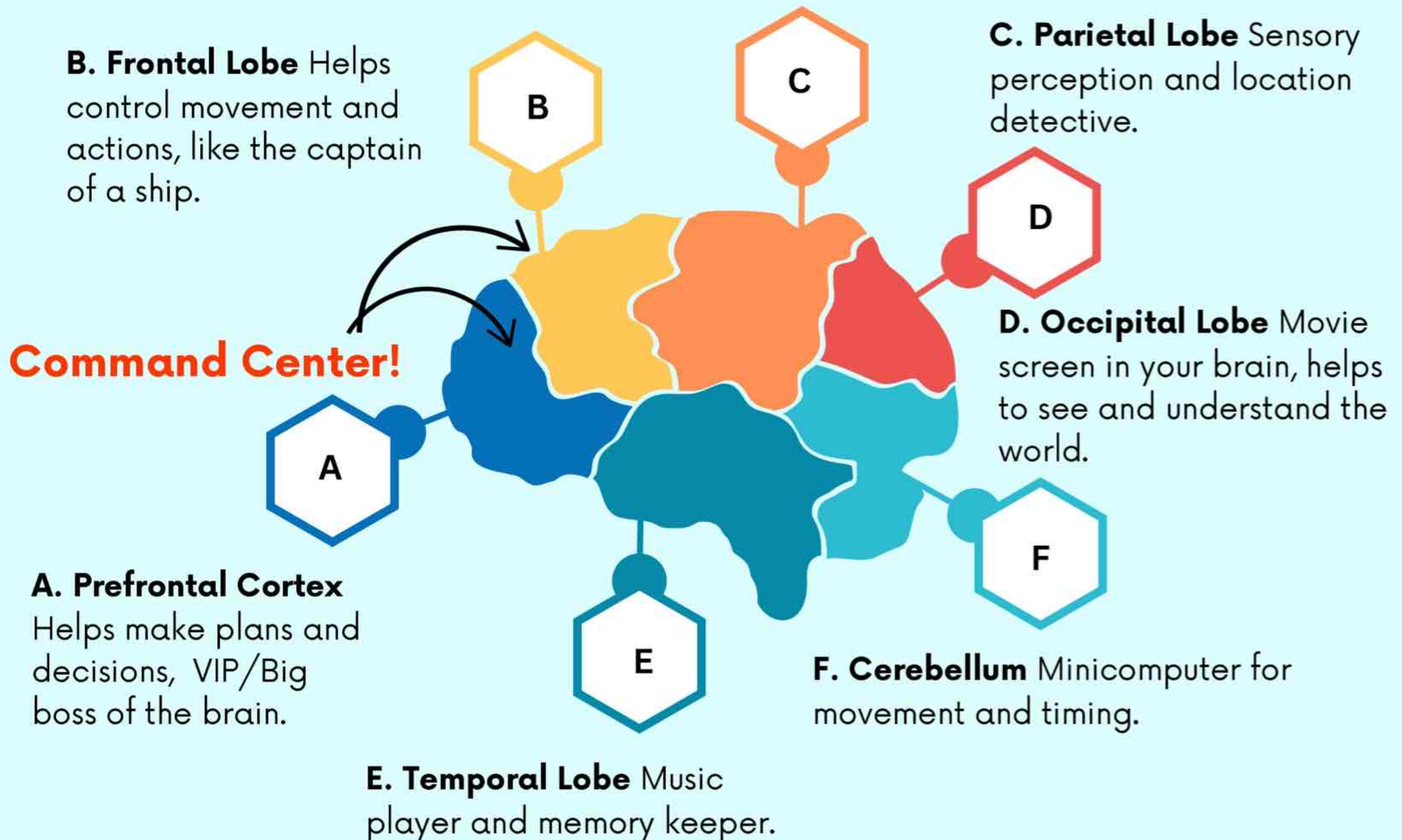


Visit the Brain's Command Center

You decide to visit your brain's control center.

Here, you learn that our brain has different parts that help us do everything from moving our body to feeling emotions.

In a PDA brain, the control center might work a bit differently. The part of our brain that helps with managing demands and stress can become overwhelmed easily, making it hard to follow instructions or handle requests.



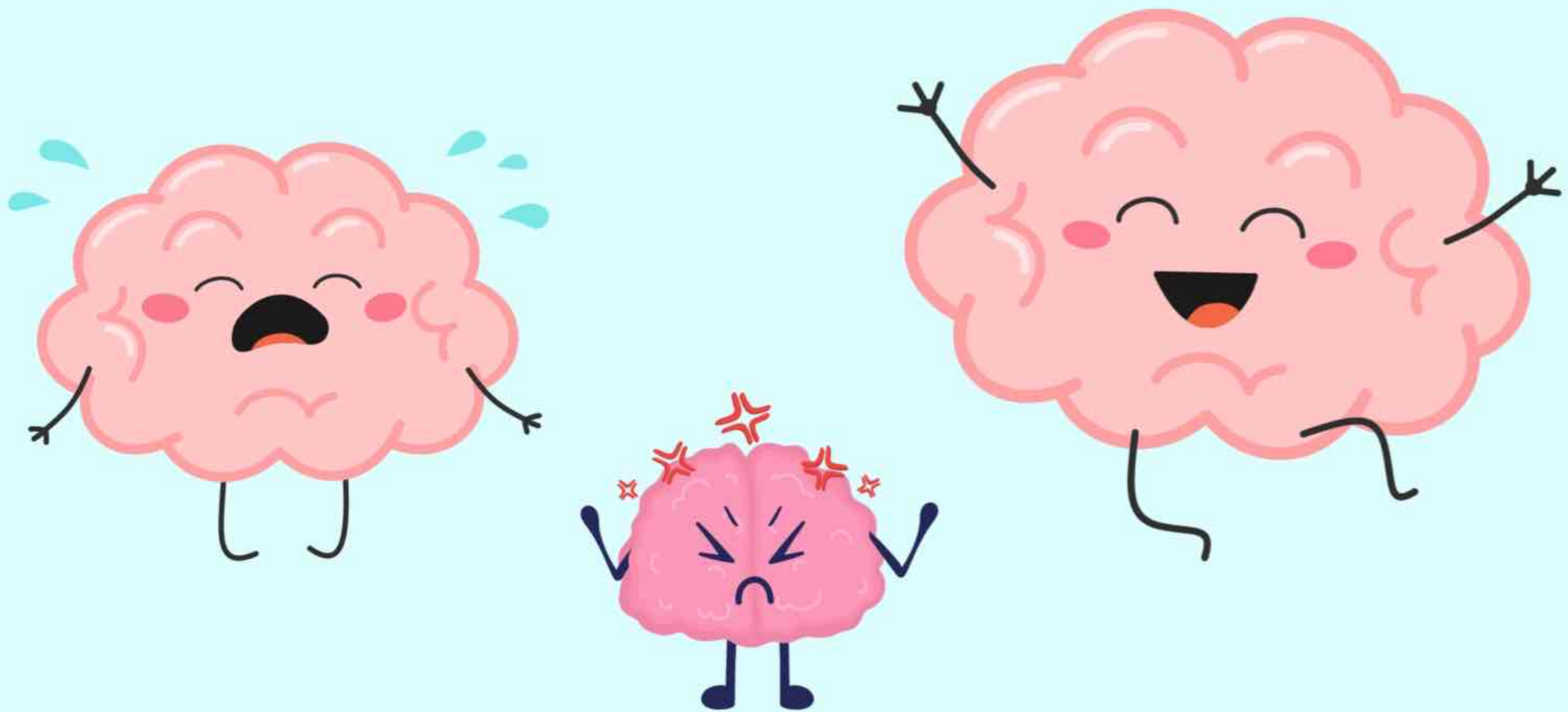
Check Out the Emotion Station

Next, you choose to check out the Emotion Station.

This part of the brain helps us understand and respond to our feelings.

In a PDA brain, the Emotion Station can be extra sensitive.

This means that things that seem like small things to someone else can feel very big and scary to us.





Explore the Communication Station

Next stop, you choose to check out the Communication Station.

This is the part of the brain that helps us to understand and communicate with others.

In a PDA brain, the Communication Station is very sensitive to being overwhelmed.

When the communication station in our brain is stressed, it can make it harder for our body to know what to do and know how to communicate. We might feel confused, tired, or upset because the messages aren't getting through properly. People may misunderstand us.

Sometimes, we don't even understand ourselves!

When this happens our **anxiety** can get really big.



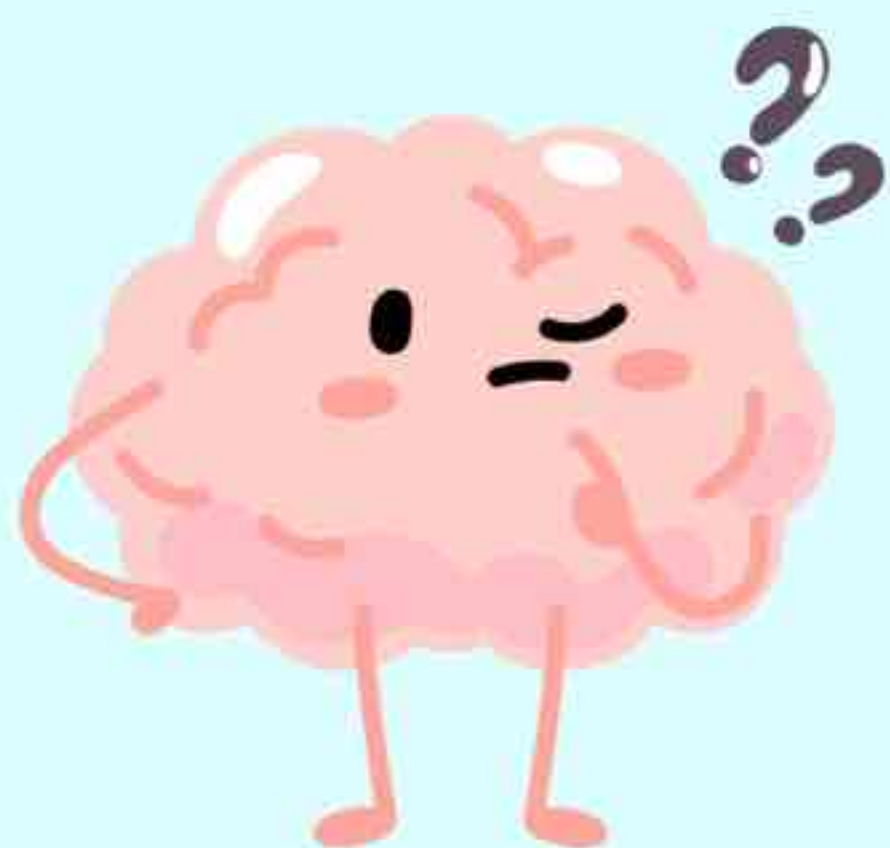


BIG ANXIETY can overload the communication station!

So we have to figure out the following:

- 1) How can we stay calm when we are stressed or anxious (deep breaths, count to 10, etc.)?
- 2) What supports do we need to help ourselves get calm if we are upset (safe foods, favorite toy, etc.)?
- 3) Who can help us when our brain's communication center is overloaded (our safe person or animal)?
- 4) What is a way we can communicate when our typical way isn't working (gesture, text, put up a sign)?

This works best if we try to figure it out BEFORE we get stressed!

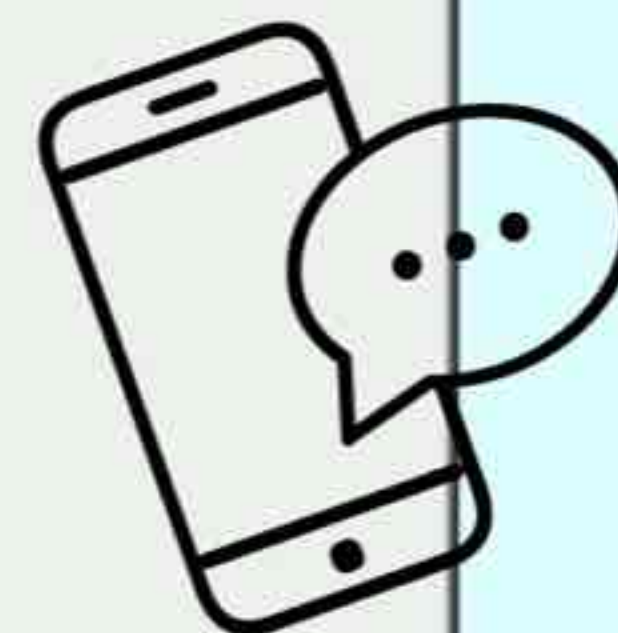


So... What are some ways that we can communicate when we are stressed?

Take a look at the words below and think about these questions.

- 1) What is your preferred way of communicating when you are not stressed or overwhelmed?
- 2) What are two ways you can communicate **at home** if you are stressed and the way you usually communicate isn't working?
- 3) What are two ways you can communicate **at school** if you are stressed and the way you usually communicate isn't working?

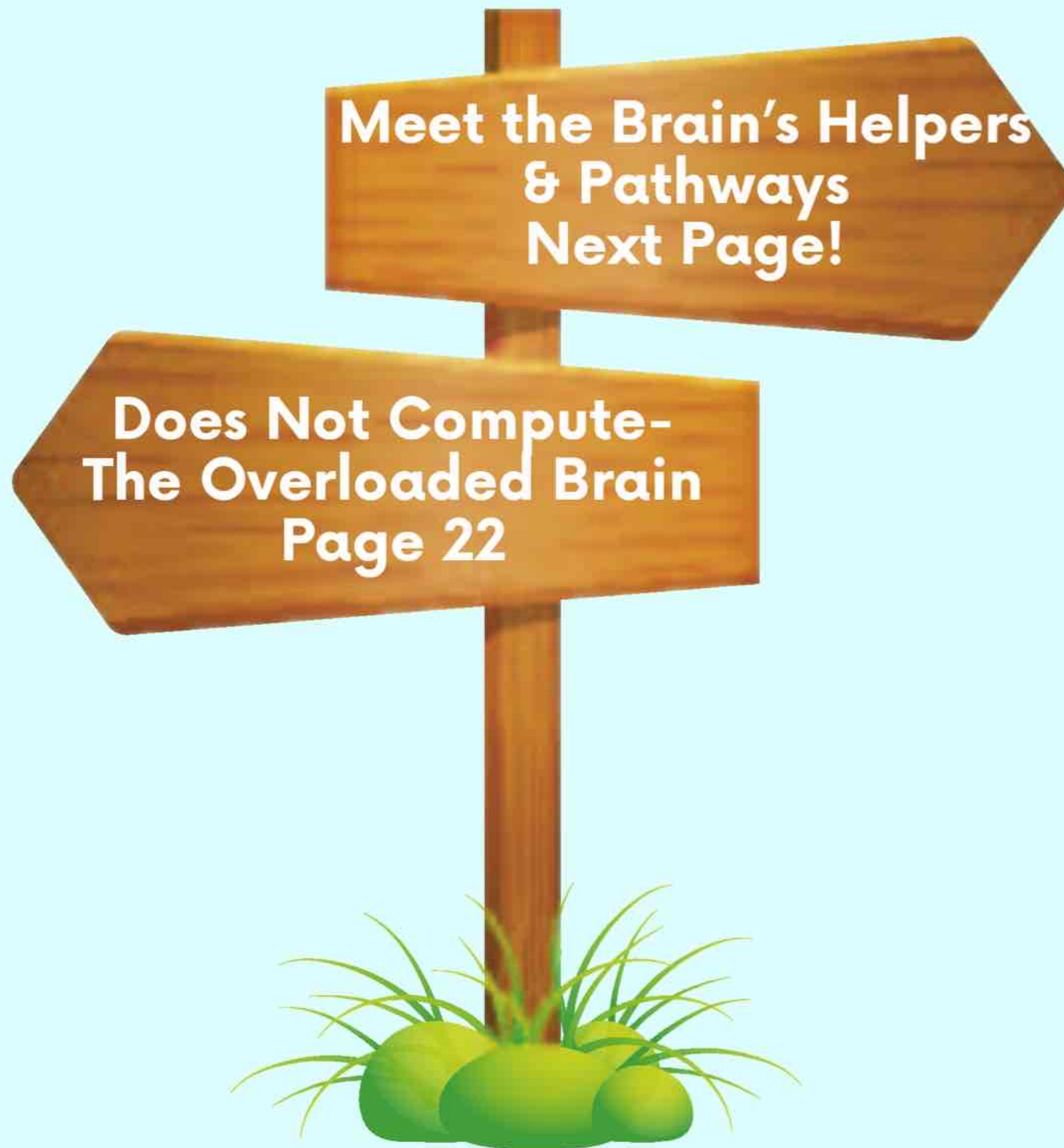
ELECTRONIC DEVICES
NONVERBAL GESTURES
BODY LANGUAGE
DRAWING PICTURES
MUSIC AAC
SYMBOLS
MORSE CODE
BRAILLE
EMAILS
ICONS
SOUNDS
IMAGES
INFOGRAPHICS
INSTRUMENTS
MOVEMENT
PICTOGRAMS
STORYTELLING
NONVERBAL SIGNS
WRITTEN WORDS
DANCE
SONGS
MEMES
TEXTS
SIGN LANGUAGE
FACIAL EXPRESSIONS
TALKING

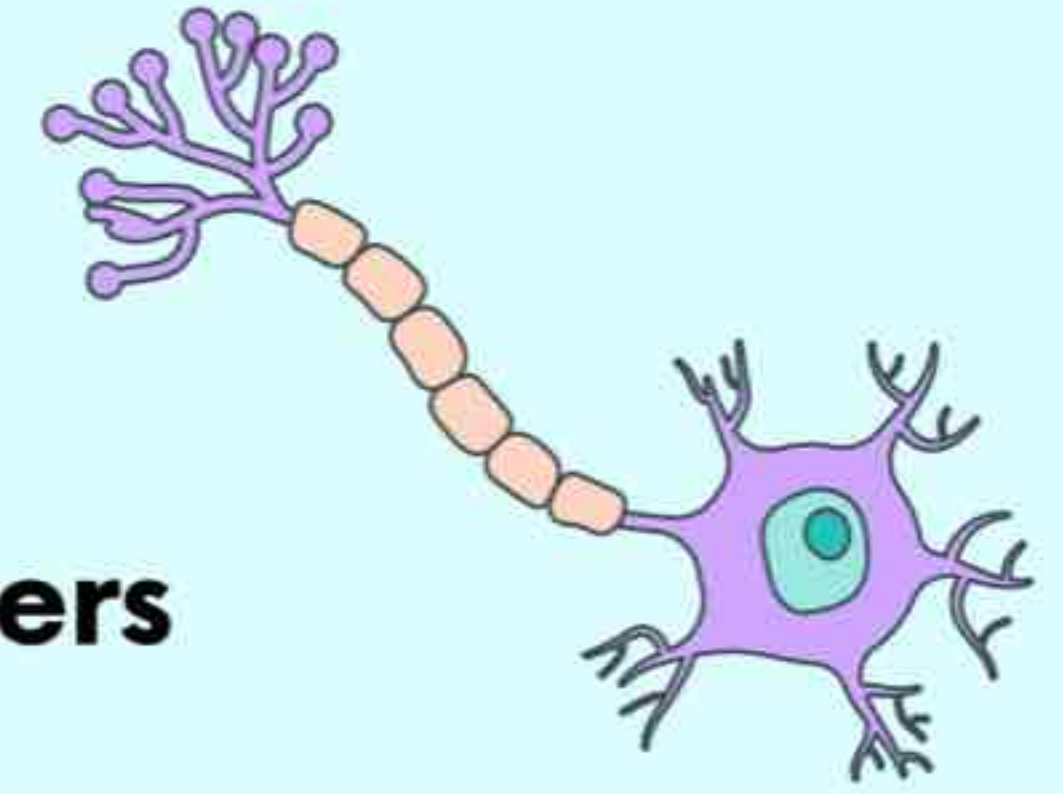




Chapter 2

Meeting the Brain Buddy Super Team!





Meet the Brain's Superhighway Helpers

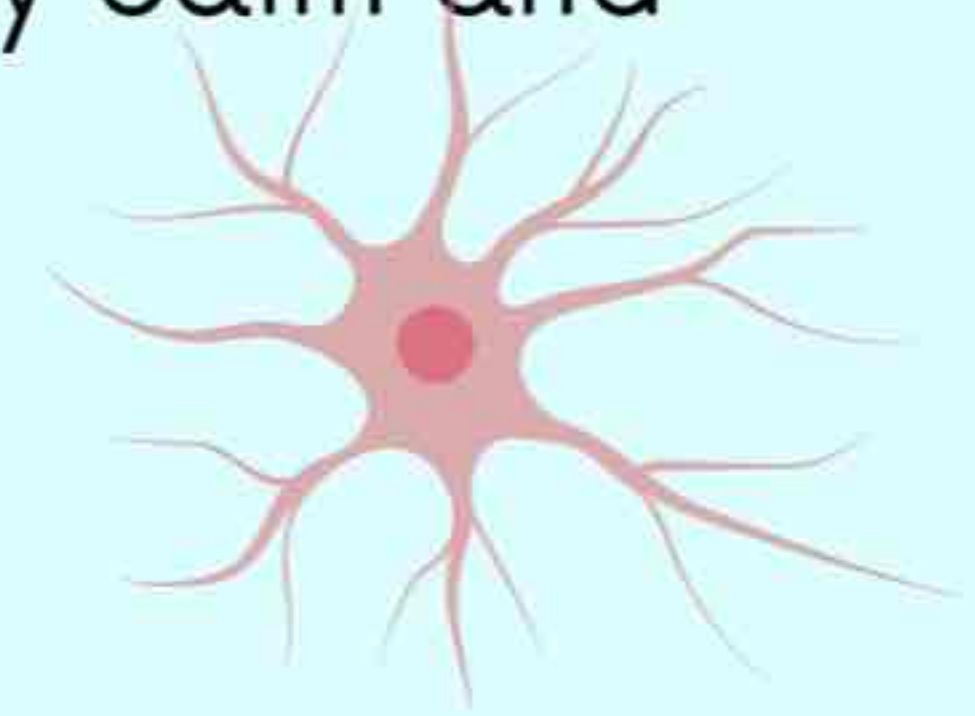
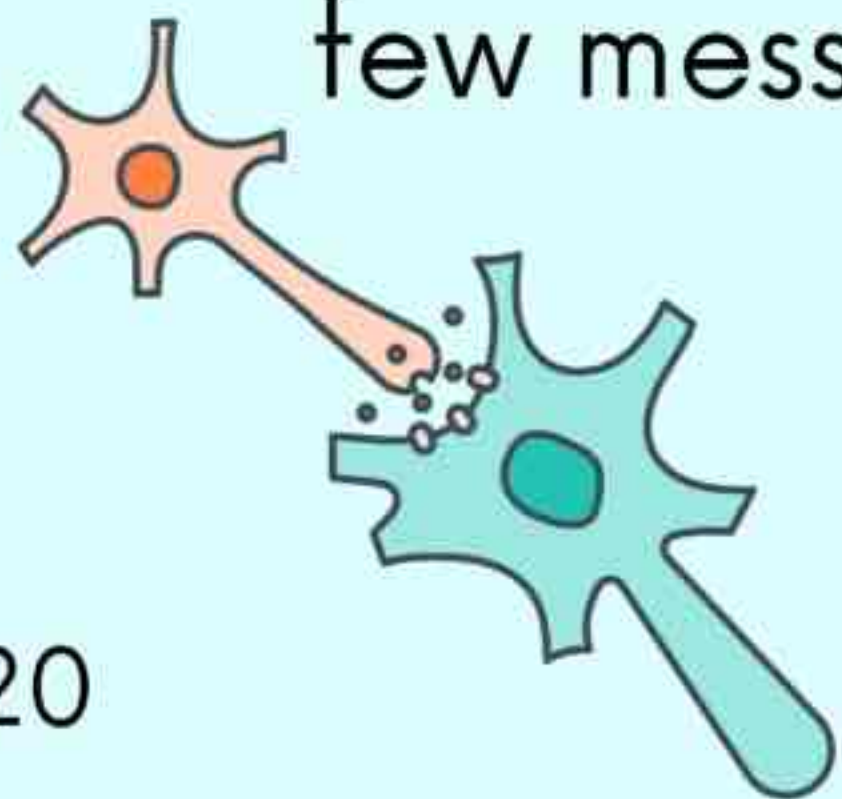
Imagine that our brains are like a big city with lots of different neighborhoods. To get messages from one neighborhood to another, we need special helpers called **neurons**. Neurons are like tiny messengers that carry important information all around our brain.

But neurons can't do it all by themselves. They need a little help from their friends called **neurotransmitters**. Think of neurotransmitters as the magic dust that helps the messages jump from one neuron to the next.

When neurons and neurotransmitters work together, they make sure our brain can think, learn, and remember things!

So, neurons and neurotransmitters are like a super team that keeps our brain city running smoothly.

In PDA brains, these helpers sometimes send too many or too few messages, making it hard for us to stay calm and focused.



Brain Overload!

Neurons and Neurotransmitters in Our Brain

In every brain, neurons and neurotransmitters work together to send messages to the centers in our brain that help us think, feel, and act.

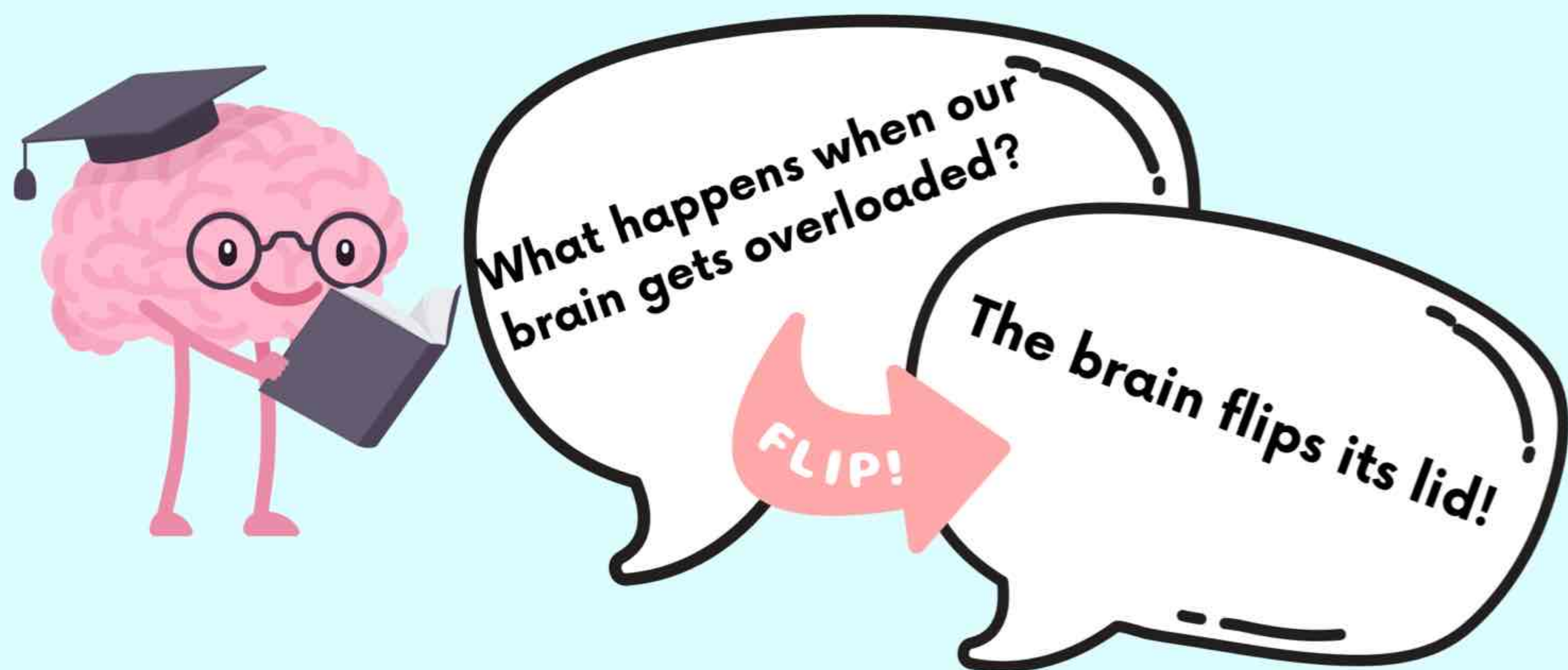
But in a PDA brain, these messages might be sent a little differently. Some neurons might be extra sensitive or react differently to certain situations.

Because of these differences, we might find it really hard to do things that seem easy to others, especially when we feel pressured or anxious or when things change suddenly without warning.

Sometimes when this happens, our brain's messaging system communicating between our command centers (the big boss) and the rest of the brain gets overloaded and overwhelmed.
It's like a traffic jam in our brains!



**Beep! Beep! It's a
traffic jam in our
brains!**



What does that mean? Let's take a look.

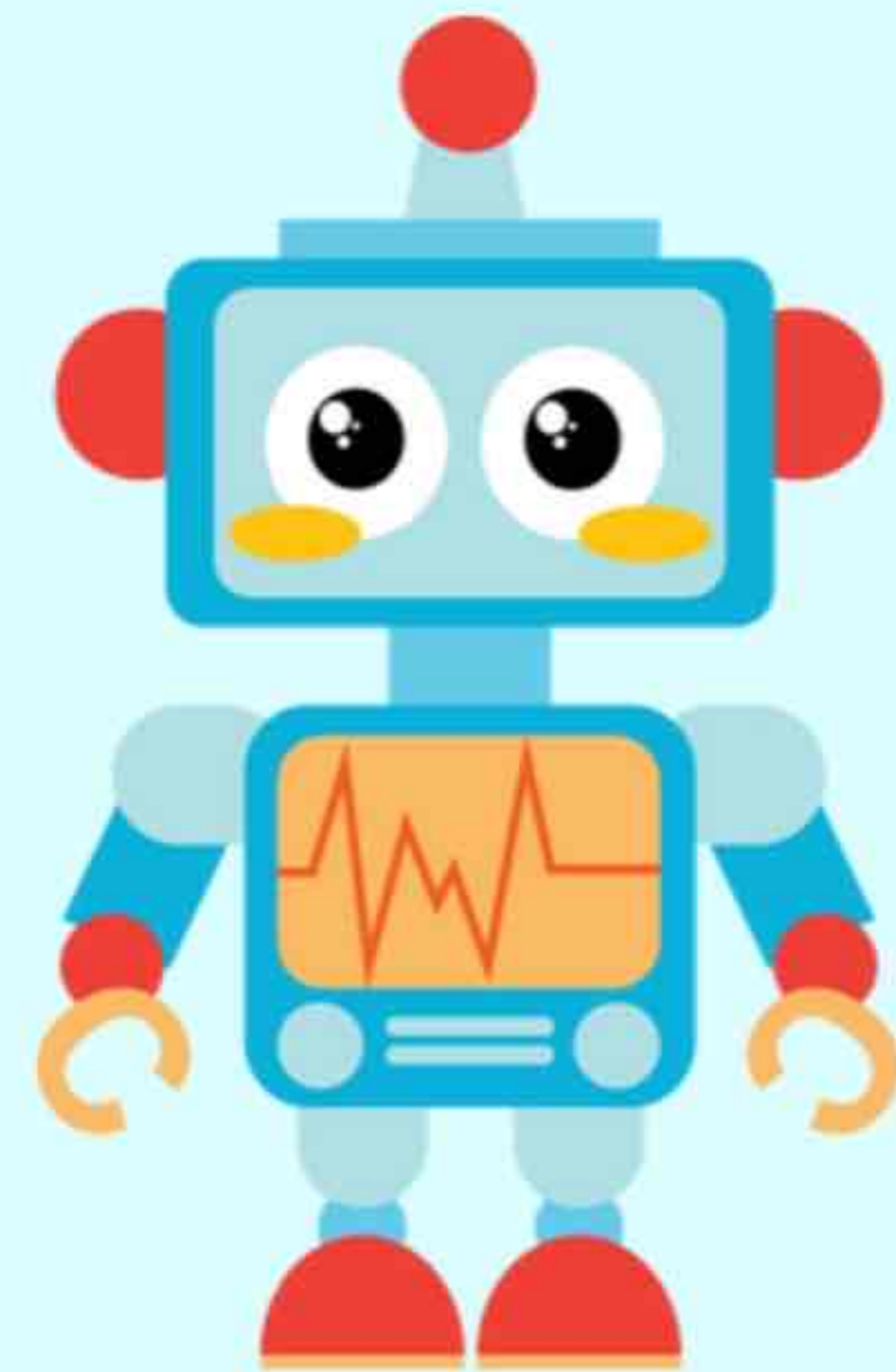
A really cool person named Dr. Dan Siegel  came up with the **hand model of the brain** to show how the brain "flips its lid" when under big stress! This is a great way to understand what happens to our brains.

How do you make the hand model of the brain?

When you make a fist with your thumb tucked inside your fingers, the thumb represents the midbrain (like the amygdala, which is involved in emotional responses), and the fingers represent the frontal lobe (you know, the big boss, responsible for decision-making, problem-solving, and self-control). When you "flip your lid," you lift your fingers up, exposing the thumb, which symbolizes how the frontal lobe loses control and the emotional midbrain takes over. When we "flip our lid" the big boss is no longer in charge.

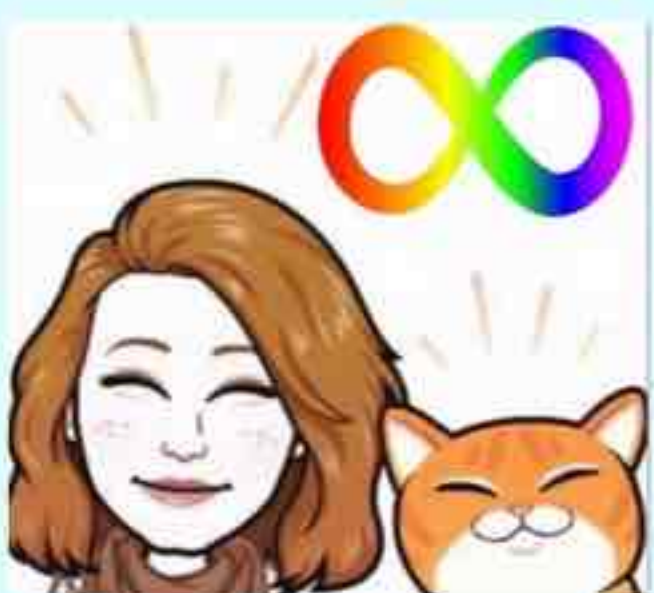
**DOES NOT
COMPUTE.**

**BRAIN IS
OVERLOADED.**



This is one reason why our brains struggle more with unexpected changes and feel overwhelmed when people ask or expect us to do things.

We get easily overloaded and “flip our lids.” Our big boss with its helpers and pathways gets shut down and our emotions center (and the alarm system) takes over. Uh Oh!



And, how do I know this you ask???

---This happens to my brain, too!

#ItTakesOneToKnowOne



Warning Danger Zone!

What is one thing that causes our PDA brain to overload the most?



Perceived threats 

of danger or of being unsafe
trigger our alarm system a lot!



When our brain thinks there is danger, it often sets off the alarm and goes straight to incoming-trauma mode. This happens because of:

Internal and External Demands: Feeling pressured by things we need to do or expectations from others.

Stress and Anxiety: Feeling worried or nervous about different situations.

Lack of Autonomy: Not having control over our own choices and actions.

Overwhelm: Being overwhelmed by too many sights, sounds, or social interactions.



Deploy the Trauma Shields!

If our brain starts to think that we are constantly under threat or in danger this can actually change how our brains work. The brain starts to think that everything is a threat.

When this happens to us our brain gets stuck in trauma mode.

When our brain gets stuck in trauma mode it makes it hard for us to learn, remember, and make decisions because the big boss of the brain is still offline.

Getting help from a trusted adult can make a big difference and help our brains feel safer and calmer.

You will learn more about trauma on the next page.



Trigger Warning!



Caution: Trauma Zone Ahead



When our brain gets stuck in trauma mode, we may experience it in a few different ways:



Big Brain Alert: Many big brains have helped us to understand these concepts see the reference guide for more information.

Fight Mode: Our brain tells our body to get ready to fight off the danger. We might feel angry, aggressive, or ready to argue or fight.

Flight Mode: Our brain tells our body to run away from the danger. We might feel scared, anxious, or like we need to escape.

Freeze Mode: Our brain tells our body to stop and stay very still, hoping the danger will pass. We might feel stuck, unable to move or speak, or like we are frozen.

Fawn Mode: Our brain tells our body to try to please or satisfy the danger to make it go away. We might feel like we have to be overly helpful, try to make others happy, or do anything to avoid conflict.

Flop Mode: Our brain tells our body to go limp and not respond at all, almost like playing dead. You might feel completely shut down, very tired, or like you can't do anything.

Feign Mode: Our brain tells our body to pretend to be something we're not to avoid danger. We might feel like we are acting differently, pretending to be brave or happy when we're not, or that we putting on a "show or mask."



When our brain is in the **trauma zone**, it is not focused on things like friends, learning, playing, or eating, the things we need to be happy and healthy. The things we need to thrive!

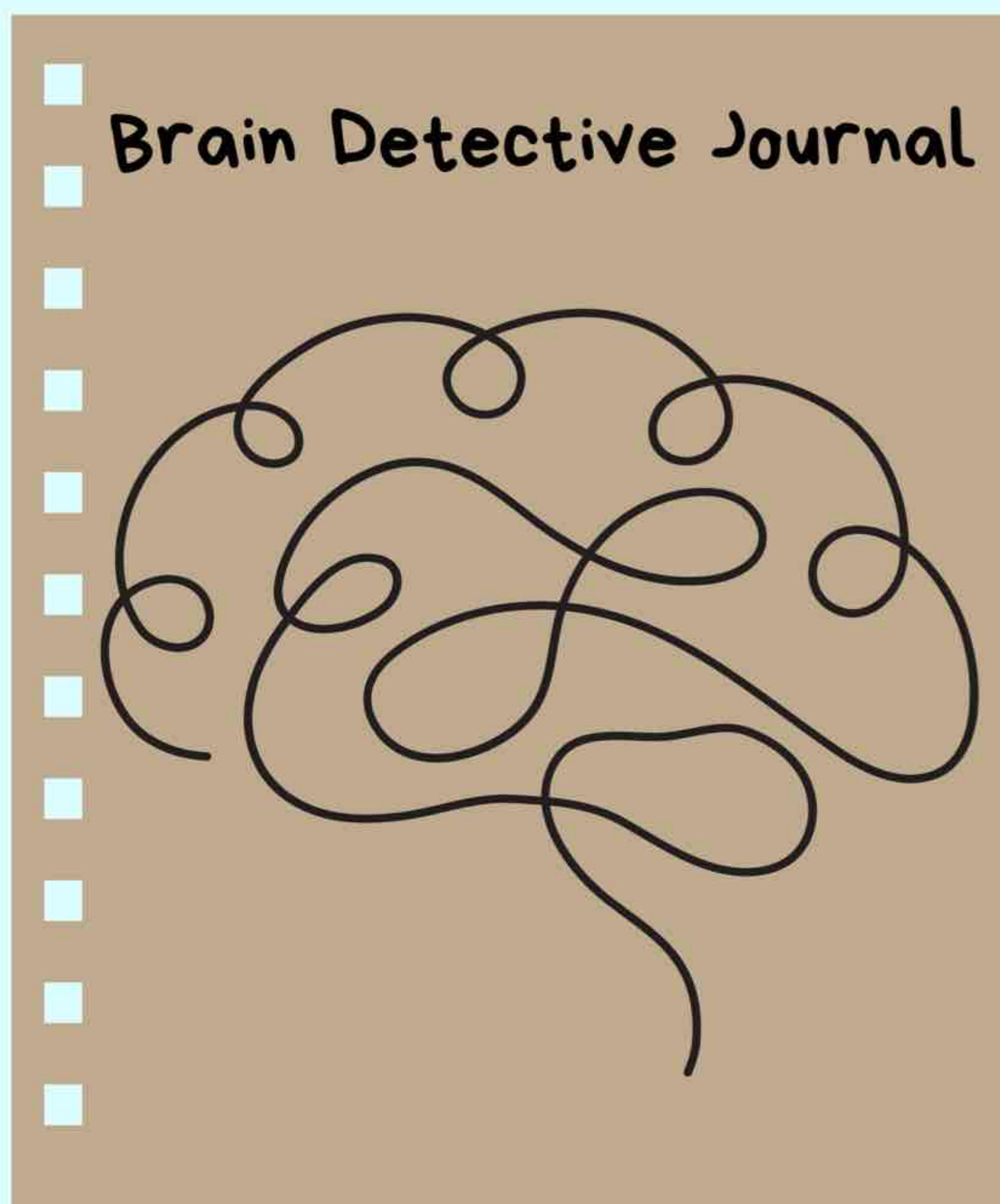
Let's figure out what we can do to fix this.

This might be a good time to start a journal in a book or on your computer. You can write, draw, dictate, type.

Think about times or situations when your brain might have gone into trauma mode.

What type of trauma mode did it feel like? (You can usually tell by what your body wanted to do. Run? Hide? Fight? Take note of that.)

We need to learn how to identify the trauma mode so we can learn to reset our brains out of trauma mode and into the safe zone.



On the next pages we will learn how to get into the **safe** zone.



Chapter 3

Supporting My PDA Brain at Home: Creating a Safe and Happy Space

Create a Calm Space
Next Page!

Use Sensory Supports
Page 31

Identify My Safe Person
Page 34



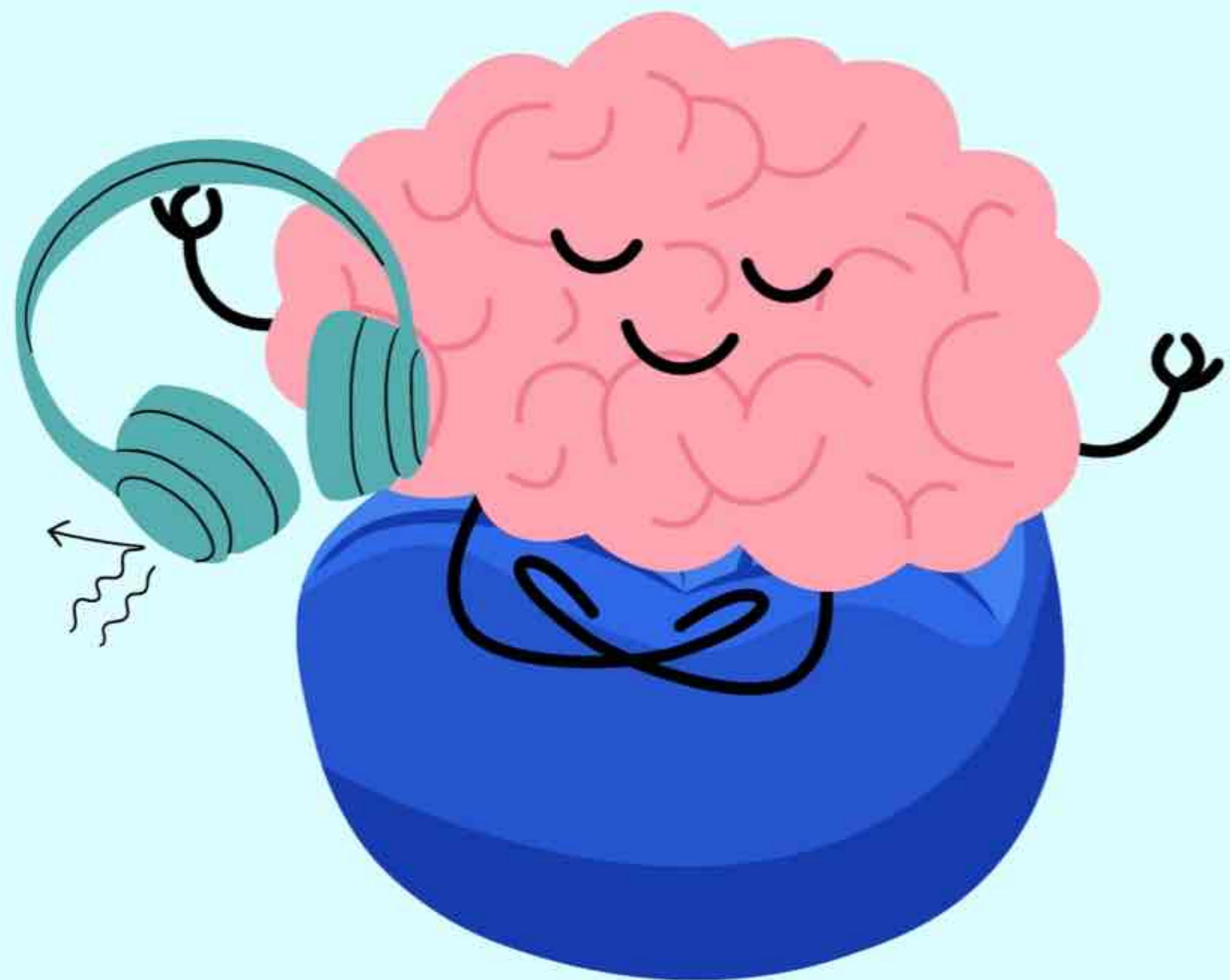
Create a Calm Space

You decide to create a calm space at home.

This is a special area where you can go to relax and feel safe.

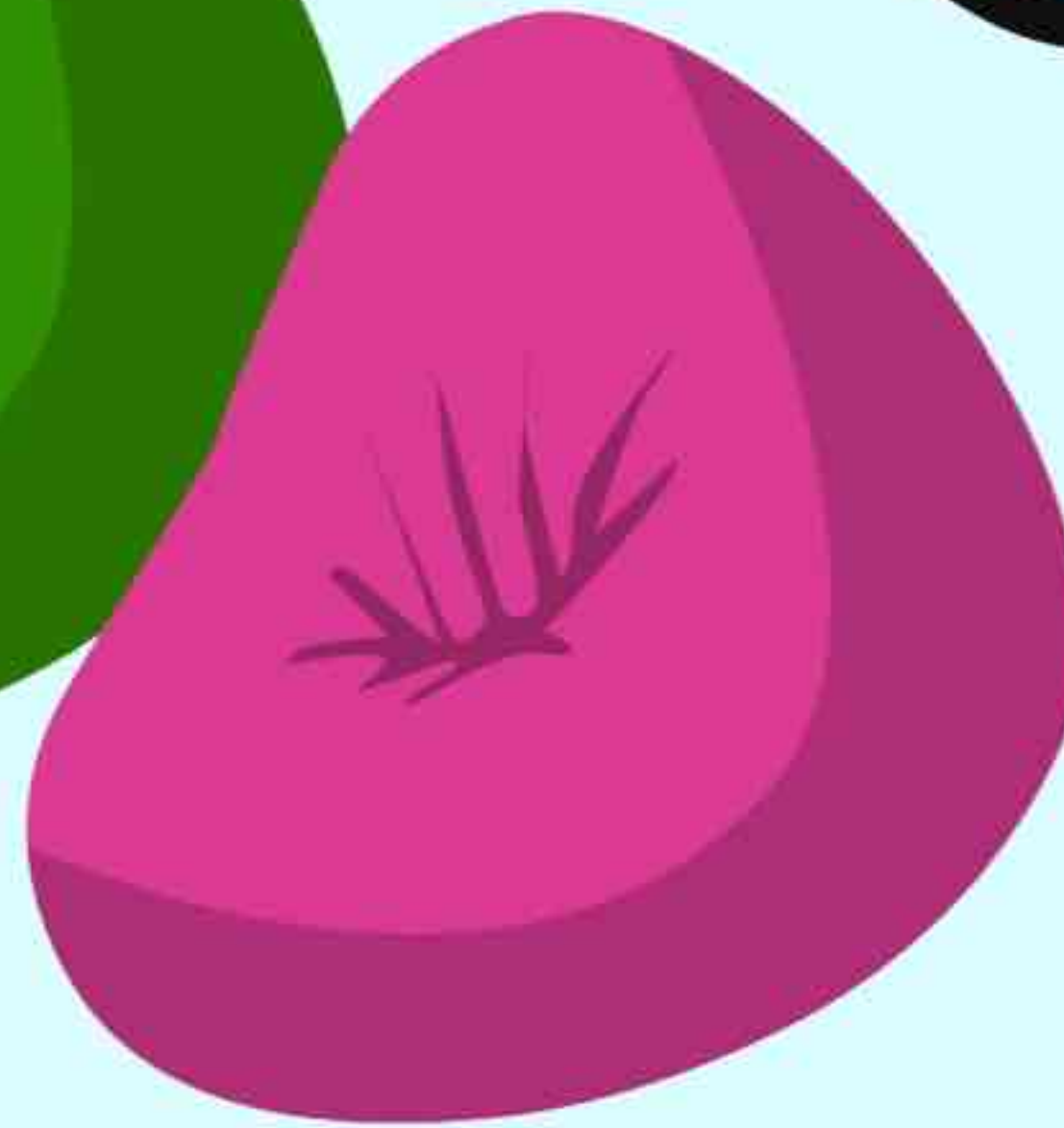
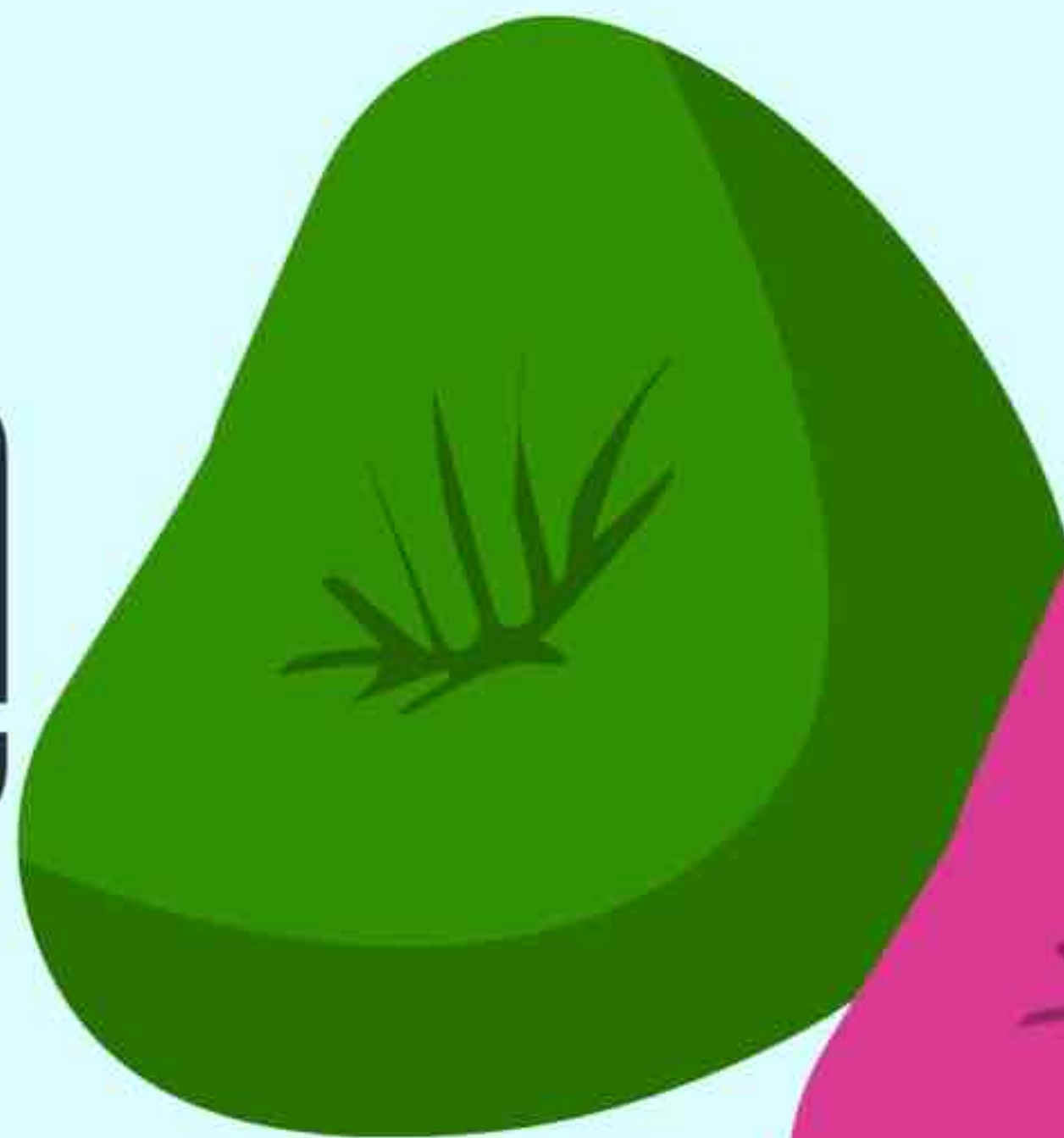
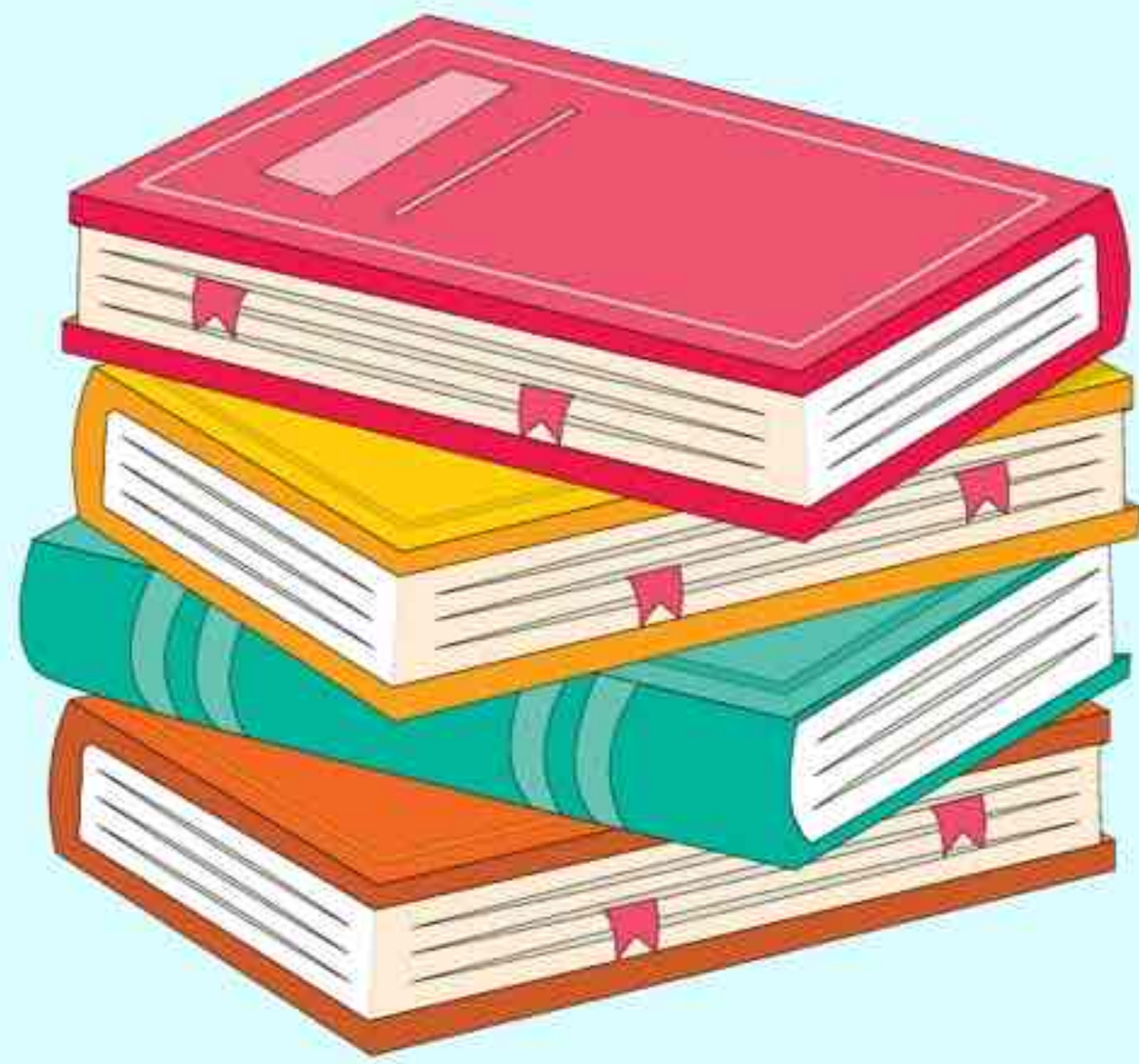
A safe and calm area is very important. You can make it feel just right for you.

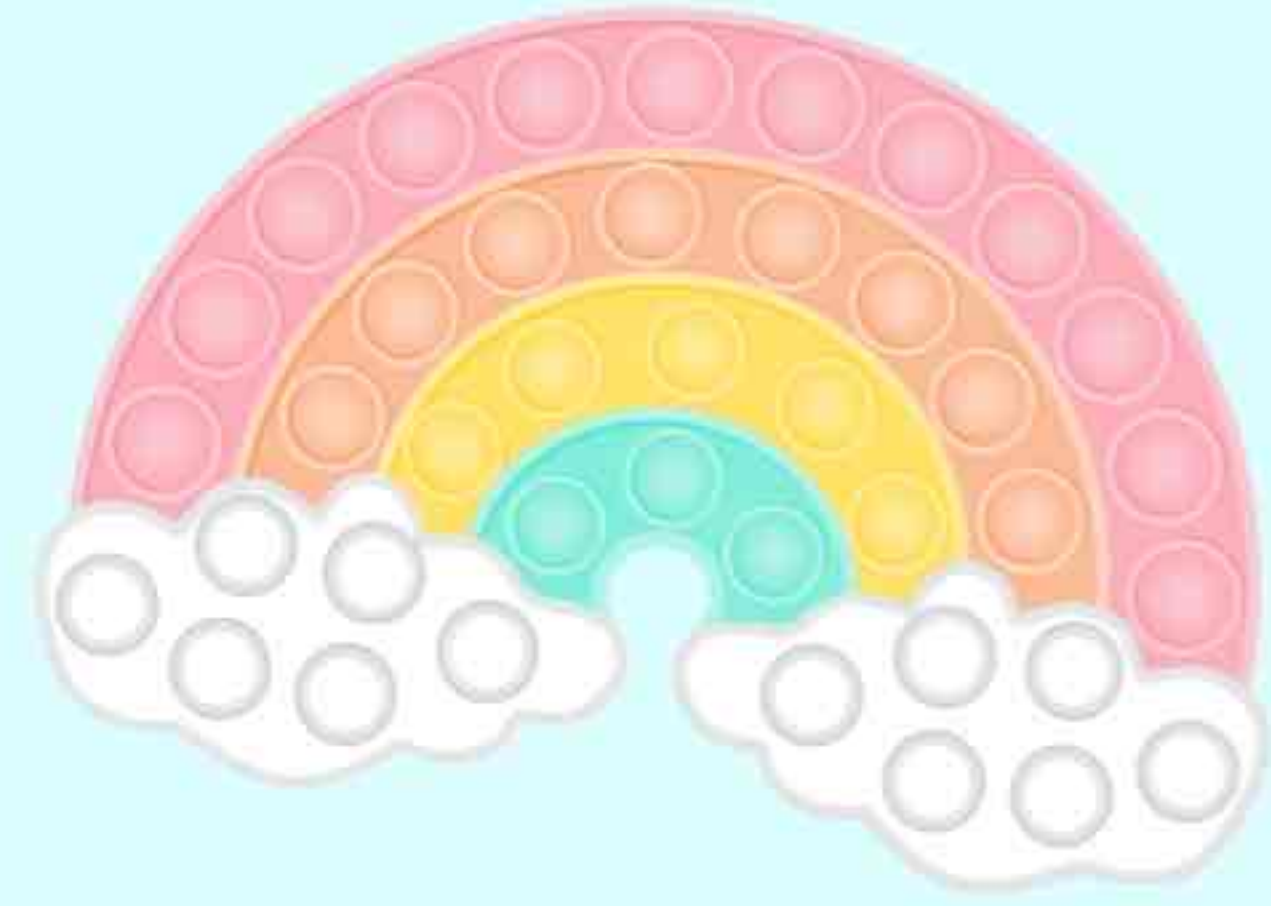
It might have soft lighting, calming music, and your favorite toys.



**What would I like in my safe and calm
space?**

Circle each one





You Decide to Explore Sensory Supports

Many times our PDA brains have unique sensory dislikes and needs, but since everyone is different you need to choose the sensory supports that are right for you.

Sensory tools are any object or activity that helps our body and brain feel more comfortable, safe, and focused.

For example, a weighted blanket can provide a calming sensation, or noise-cancelling headphones can help reduce overwhelming sounds.



Sensory Ideas

You can start with some simple ideas below, but if you need more advise, ask your parents* to see if you can work with a sensory specialist or an occupational therapist (they are the sensory experts).

Swing or Hammock

Bubble Tubes or Lava Lamps

Vibration Toys

Sensory Mats or Cushions

Scented Markers or Playdough

Foam Rollers or Massage Balls

Light Projectors

Compression Clothing

Water Beads

Balance Boards

Fidget Spinners

Fidget Cubes

Stress Balls

Weighted Blankets or Lap Pads

Chewable Jewelry

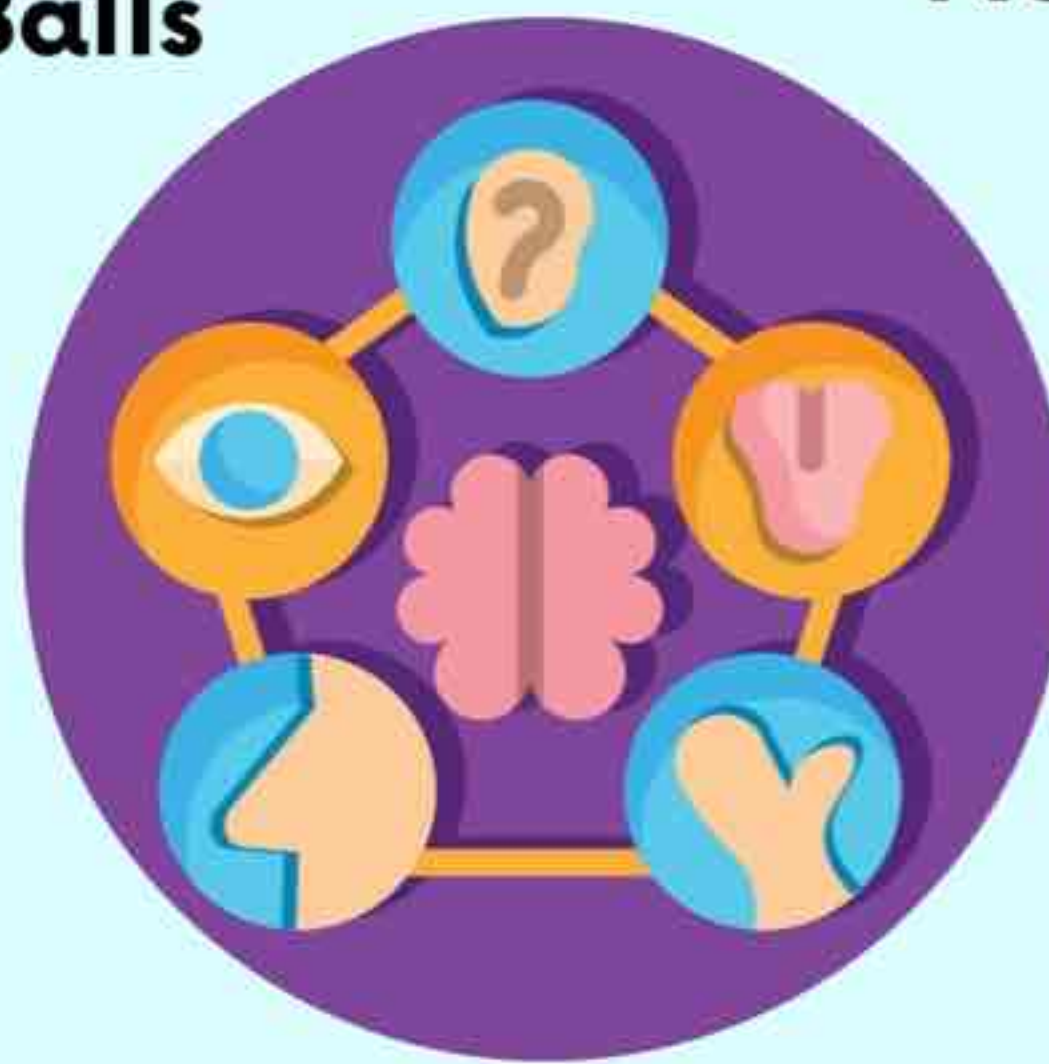
Noise-Canceling Headphones

Sensory Bottles

Therapy Putty or Playdough

Tactile Sensory Toys

Body Socks



Dr. Jennifer's favorite sensory items are brain shaped stress balls, scented playdoh, and chewing gum.

*Parents please supervise your child when using these tools.





We Also Have to Learn to Listen to Our Internal Radar

Sometimes PDA brains don't always understand what is going on inside of our bodies. Maybe we have a hard time recognizing when we are feeling hungry, tired, or thirsty. Sometimes we don't even know when we have to go to the bathroom until it is too late!

Recognizing our inside body cues is called **interoception**  (in-ter-oh-sep-shun). If we are not good at understanding our body cues, it can be hard to take care of ourselves, making us feel more stressed.

Practicing things like mindfulness or paying attention to our body's signals can help us understand these feelings better.

Identify A Safe Person at Home

You learn that a PDA brain feels anxious when we are pressured or misunderstood. You learn that it is hard for us to communicate when stressed.

So you decide to identify a safe person.

This is someone who we trust and feel comfortable with, who understands our needs and can help us when we are feeling overwhelmed.

Our safe person could be a parent, sibling, friend, or other relative. We may have more than one. A safe person at school is important, too, and we will talk about that later.

Try making a safe person list, so if you feel nervous you can look at your list and remember who helps you feel more secure and supported.





Chapter 4

Supporting My PDA Brain at School: Thriving in the Classroom





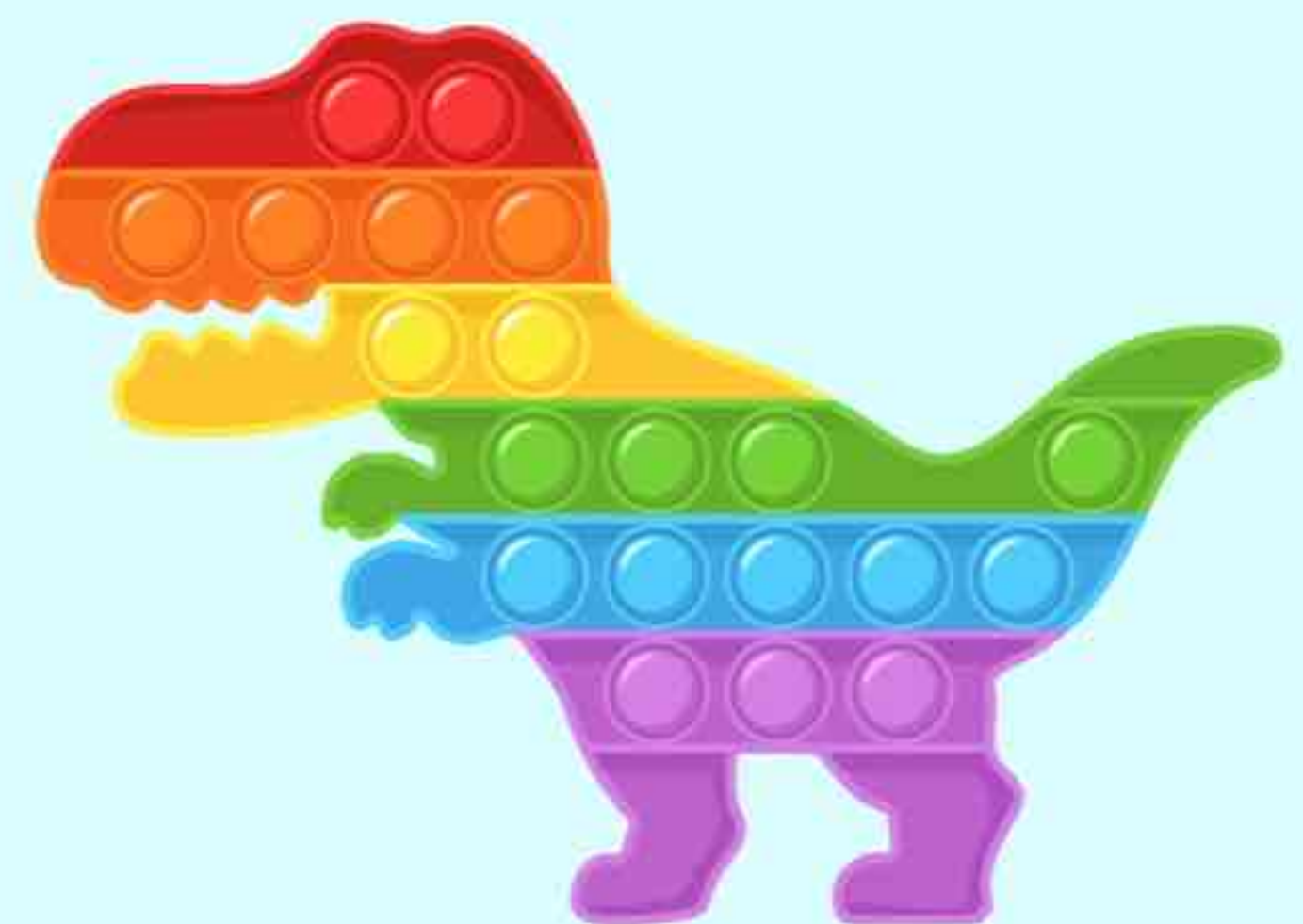
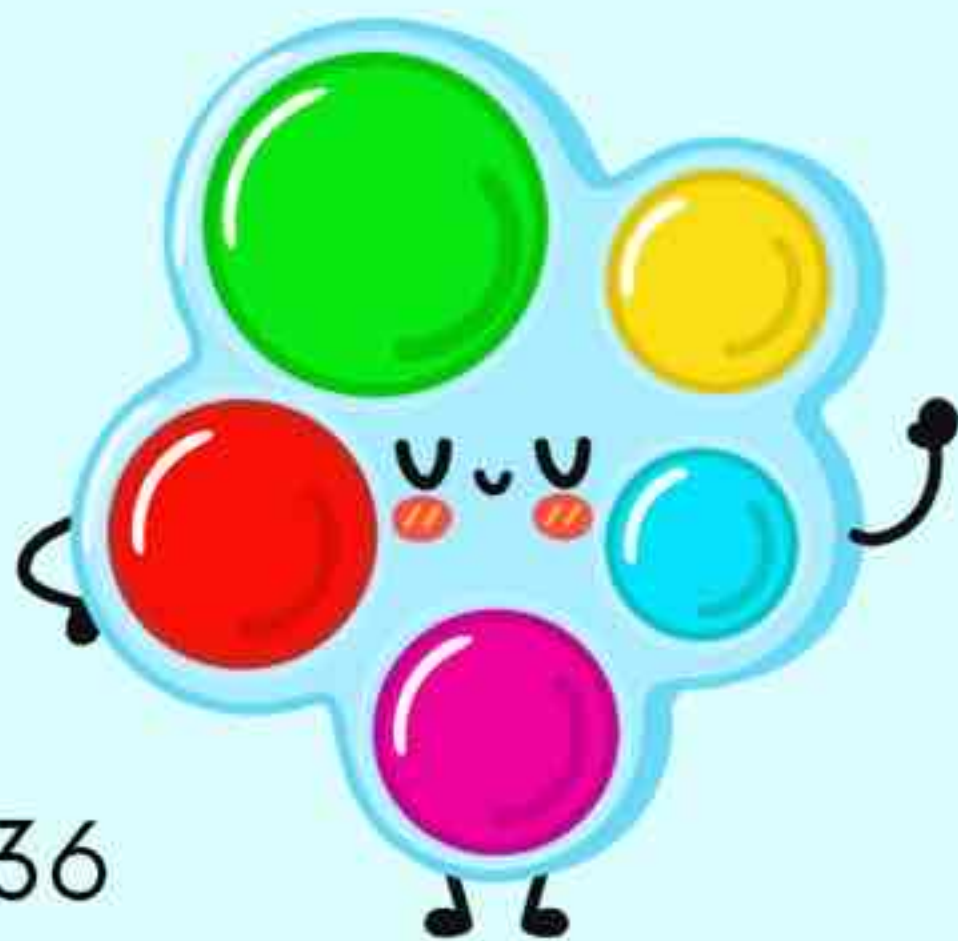
Create a Sensory-Friendly Classroom

You learn that a PDA brain can be easily overwhelmed at school and that makes it hard for us to learn, play, or make friends.

So you learn that you can ask for help in making your classroom or school more comfortable.

For example, you might have a quiet corner with soft lighting, or use noise-canceling headphones during loud activities. You might have fidgets.

A sensory-friendly classroom can help you feel more comfortable and focused.





Who is my sensory helper at school?

Schools in the US may have an occupational therapist, while in the UK you might have a teaching assistant help you. These helpers can support your sensory needs for school.

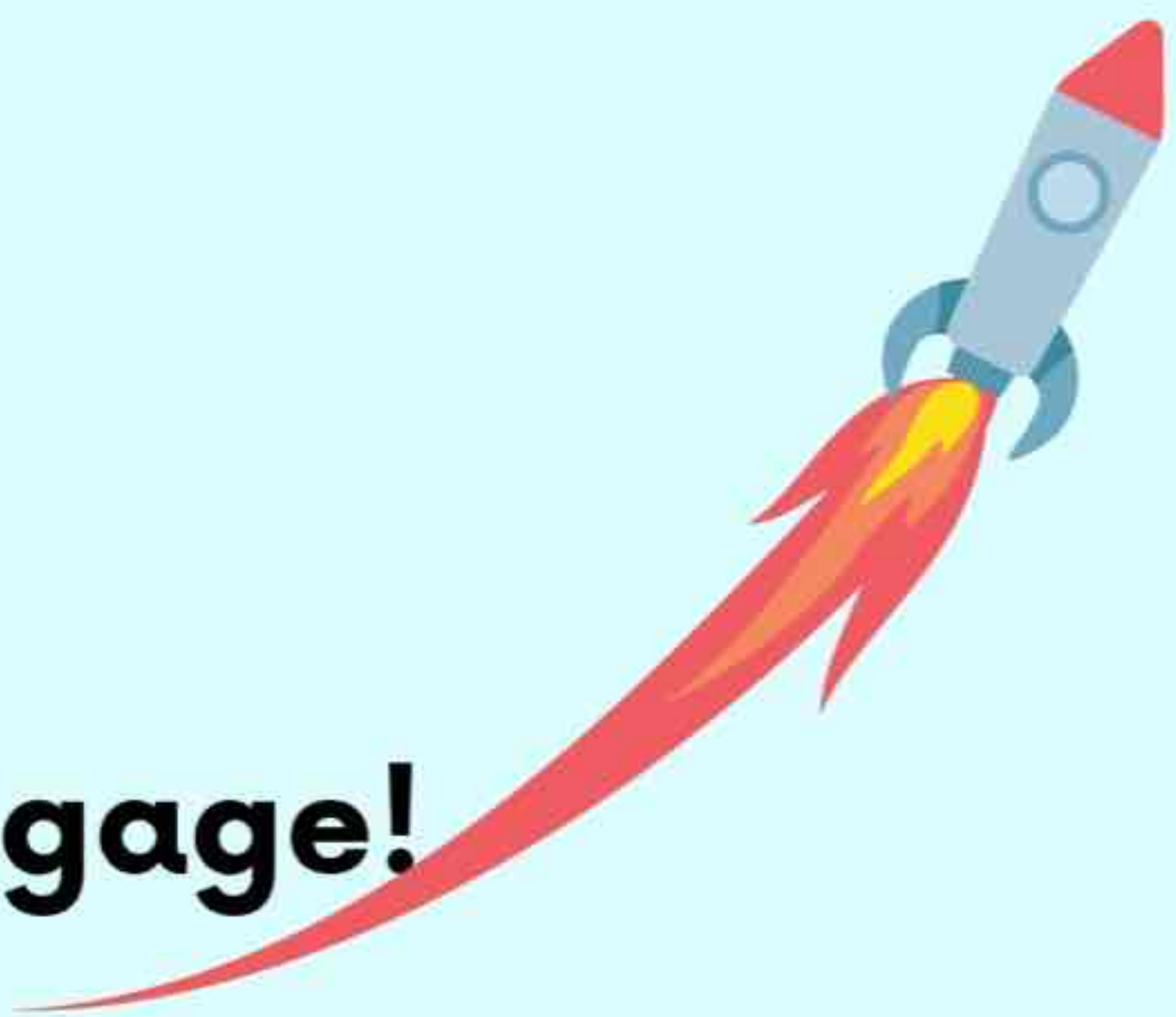
Some tools that you can use at home may not be available at school. So, you may need a **school sensory list** and a **home sensory list**.

School Sensory Tools	
☒	Headphones
☐	Stress Ball
☐	Weighted Lap Pad
☐	Chewable Jewelry

Home Sensory Tools	
☐	Swing
☐	Weighted Blanket
☐	Lava Lamp
☐	Balance Board



Learning Powers, Engage!



You learn that a PDA brain does not always learn in the same way as others. Sometimes it doesn't even learn the same way from one day to the next!

So you decide to explore how you learn best and ask for options when you hit a learning roadblock.

Having a flexible learning environment can help us feel **more** in control and **less** stressed.



When you are learning something new, is it easier for you to learn when you **listen, see, feel, or do?**



Learning Differences and Disabilities

Sometimes our brains learn a little bit differently and other times we have really big learning differences. When the differences are really big they are called **learning disabilities** (and we can have more than one).

Dyslexia: Trouble with pronouncing or reading words, understanding or remembering what you read, and spelling difficulty.

Dyscalculia: Difficulty with math and numbers, telling time, understanding passage of time, making change, and understanding quantities and measurements.

Dysgraphia: Difficulty expressing self through writing, including handwriting legibility, hand fatigue when writing, knowing what to write, and forgetting to use punctuation.

Dyspraxia: Trouble with coordination and motor skills, like writing, tying shoes, or playing sports.

That's her signature!

Dr. Jennifer has a learning disability in writing, have you seen her handwriting!?





Chapter 5

Finding Similar Unique Brains: Building My Community at School



Neurodiversity Movement



Imagine if everyone in the world was exactly the same. That would be pretty boring, right?

We need **neurodiversity**  and the **neurodiversity paradigm**  because it makes our world more interesting and helps us solve problems in different ways. When people have different kinds of brains, they can bring new ideas and ways of thinking. Brains work differently for many reasons, they may attend, learn, feel emotions, or behave differently.

Now, let's talk about being **neurodivergent**.  Being neurodivergent means your brain works in a special way. You might think, learn, or feel differently than others, and that's okay! Everyone's brain is unique and special. For example, PDA, Autistic, ADHD, and Dyslexic brains are neurodivergent. While being neurodivergent does mean having unique strengths, it can also mean we may need extra help with certain things.





Find Like-Minded Friends

You have got this!

You understand your PDA brain better now and you decide to focus on finding friends who share your interests.

Having friends who understand and enjoy the same things as we do can make it easier to connect and build strong relationships.

It gives us something to do together, even if we sit side-by-side and play separately.

It gives us a common topic to talk about!



Aunt Jenny!
Look how many
HP's this new
character has!
Can we trade?





Neurodivergent Buddy System

You choose to learn about the PDA brain and friends. A PDA brain wants to make friends, too, but you learn that sometimes it is harder to make or keep friends.

So you learn about the neurodivergent buddy system.

This is where we can have a buddy who also understands what it's like to have a brain that works differently.

Having a neurodivergent buddy, even if their brain works differently than ours, can make us feel less lonely because we understand each other and respect each other's differences.

Team PDA!

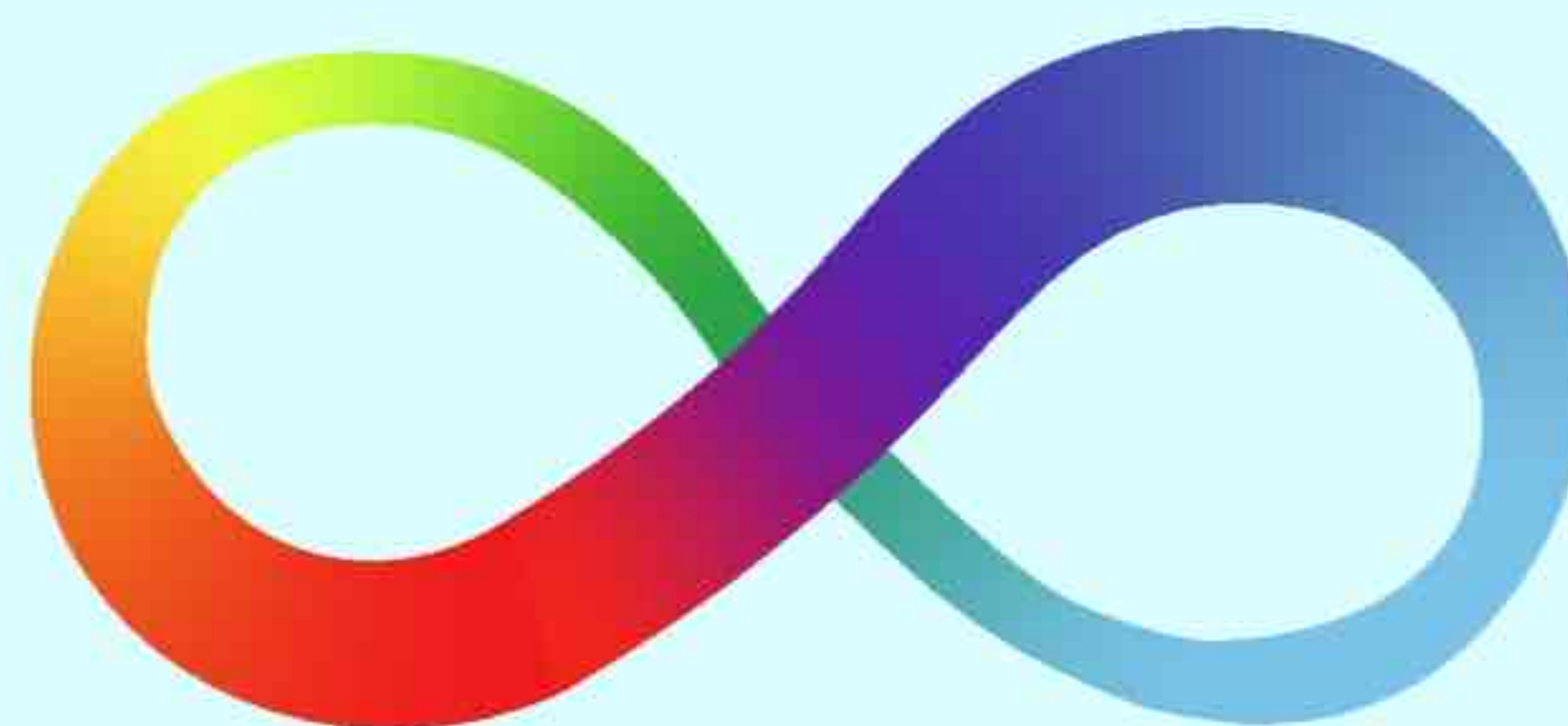


All Brains Welcome!

Neurodivergent Pride Club

What about starting or joining a Neurodivergent/Neurodiversity Pride Club at your school or community

There are lots of different clubs at school. Wouldn't it be cool if there was a club for different brains? Imagine it! This could be a club where neurodivergent students who learn, socialize, pay attention, and feel emotions differently than others can meet other neurodivergent students. No diagnosis would be necessary, as long as the members identify with and support other neurodivergent brains.





Identify My Safe Person at School

Once you identify a safe person at home, you learn that you need to find a safe person for you at school, too.

Sometimes this is harder because you may have felt a lot of frustration at school and that can make it hard to trust someone there and feel safe. Please don't lose hope!

It is still possible to find our person and feel safe again at school, but the **school will have to help you**. We may need help fixing hurt relationships, knowing how to ask for help when we need it, knowing what interventions or accommodations we need, and knowing how to get access to our safe person when we need them. Having these things will help make school feel safe for us again.

Your safe person could be a teacher, social worker, even the principal.



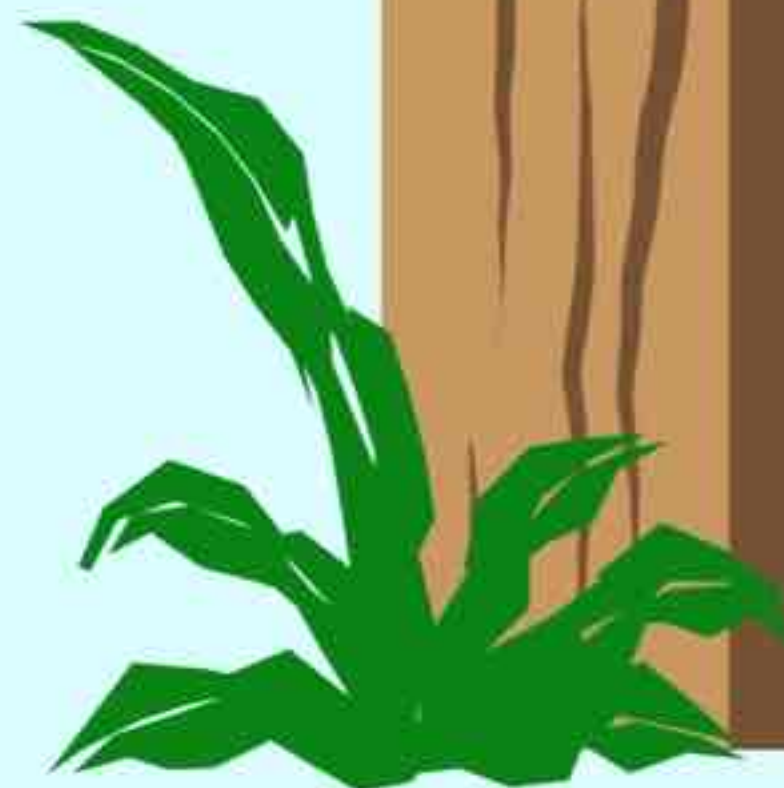
Chapter 6

Learning to Manage My Emotions: Mastering My Feelings

**Practice Mindfulness
Next Page!**

**Use a Feelings Chart
Page 49**

**Create a Coping Toolbox
Page 50**

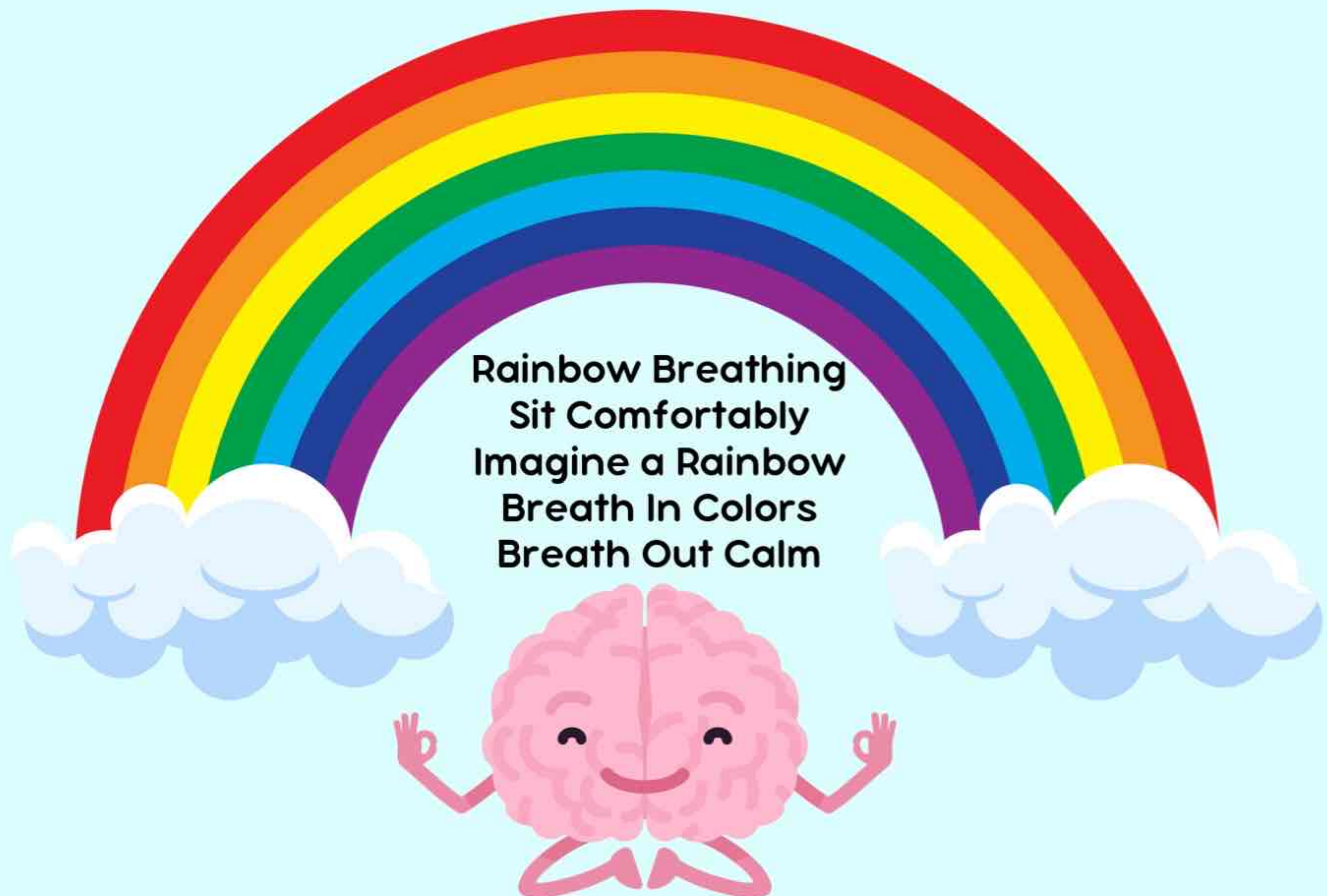


Practice Mindfulness

You learn that sometimes your PDA brain feels really overwhelmed. So you decide to practice mindfulness.

This means paying attention to the present moment and noticing your thoughts and feelings without judging them.

Mindfulness can help you feel calmer and more in control of your emotions.





Feelings Adventure Zone Roadblock:

Imagine a big room in your brain where all of your feelings hang out. But you don't recognize them!

Sometimes, figuring out what each feeling is and how to talk about them can be like a tricky puzzle.

This is what **alexithymia** (a-lex-i-thy-mia)  is like – it's a fancy word that means that it is hard to recognize and talk about your emotions.

A lot of times PDA brains have alexithymia. So even when we can communicate, it can be hard for us to understand our feelings. So sometimes we need to learn some tricks to learn how we are feeling.

it's okay to feel



your feelings

Use a Feelings Chart

You learn that a PDA brain does not always do a good job of identifying or expressing emotions. So you choose to use a feelings chart.

This is a tool that helps us identify and express our emotions. For example, we might have pictures of different feelings, like happy, sad, or angry, and point to the one that matches how we feel.

A feelings chart can help us recognize and communicate our emotions more easily to our safe person. Find a feeling chart that you like best.

-  Happy Cat
-  Excited Dog
-  Angry Bear
-  Calm Turtle
-  Brave Lion
-  Scared Mouse
-  Sad Penguin
-  Silly Monkey



The Stress Buster Box

**Creating a coping toolbox
that is just right for you.**

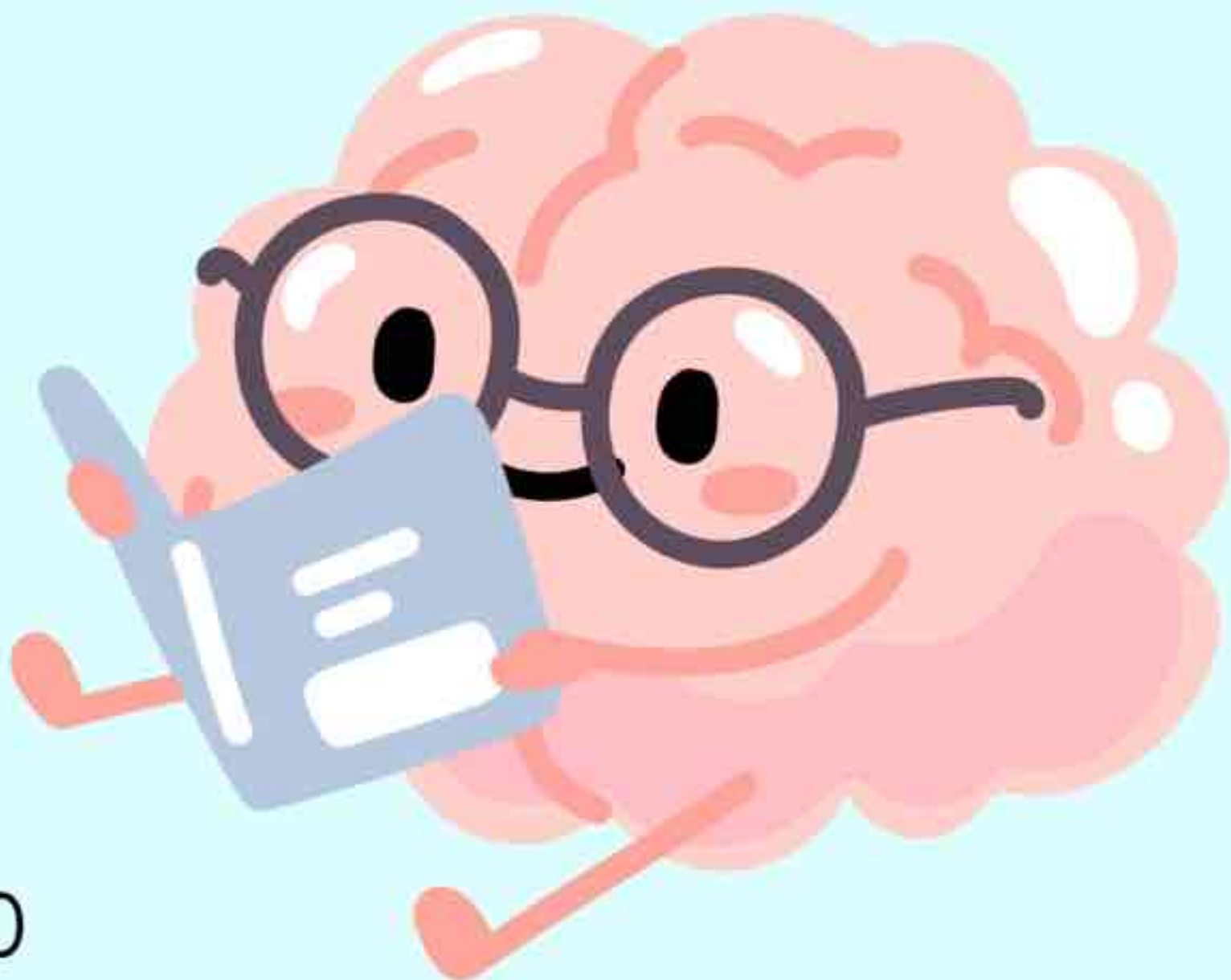


You learn that a PDA brain is going to need a lot of support to be less stressed.

So you decide to create a coping toolbox.

This is a collection of items and activities that help us feel better when we are upset. For example, we might have a favorite toy, a stress ball, or a list of calming activities like deep breathing or drawing.

A coping toolbox can help us calm down and regulate ourselves and learn to manage our emotions more effectively.



My Coping Toolbox

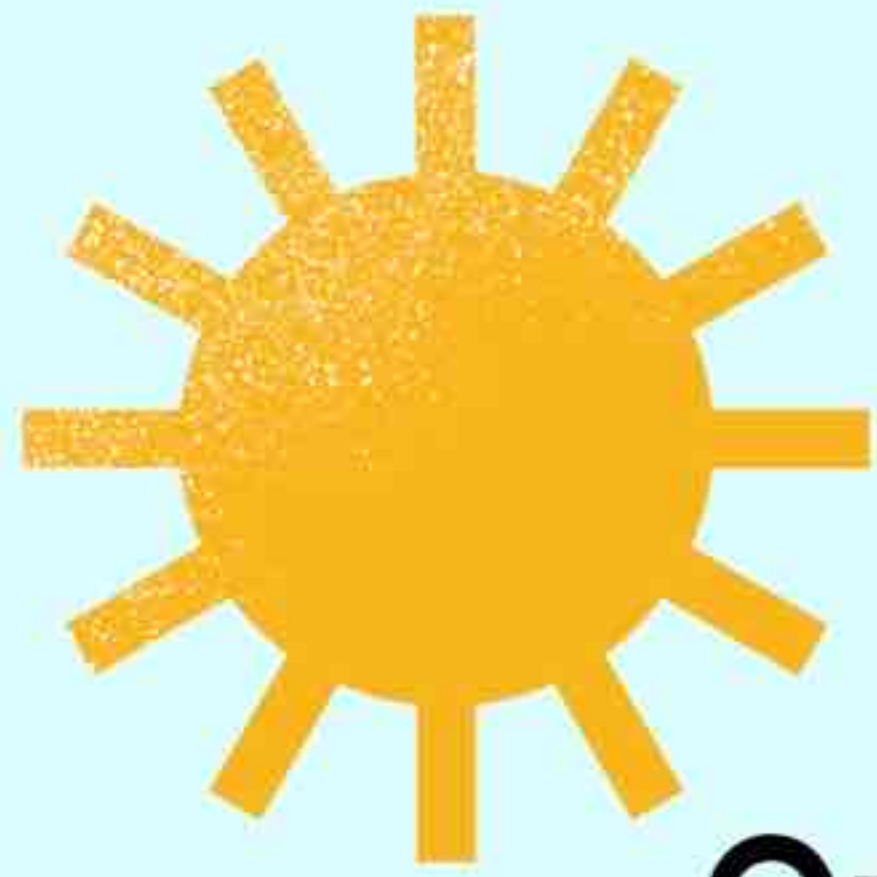
This Toolbox Belongs to: Dr. Jennifer



Here is Dr. Jennifer's coping toolbox, what special tools would you like in yours?

Your Coping Toolbox



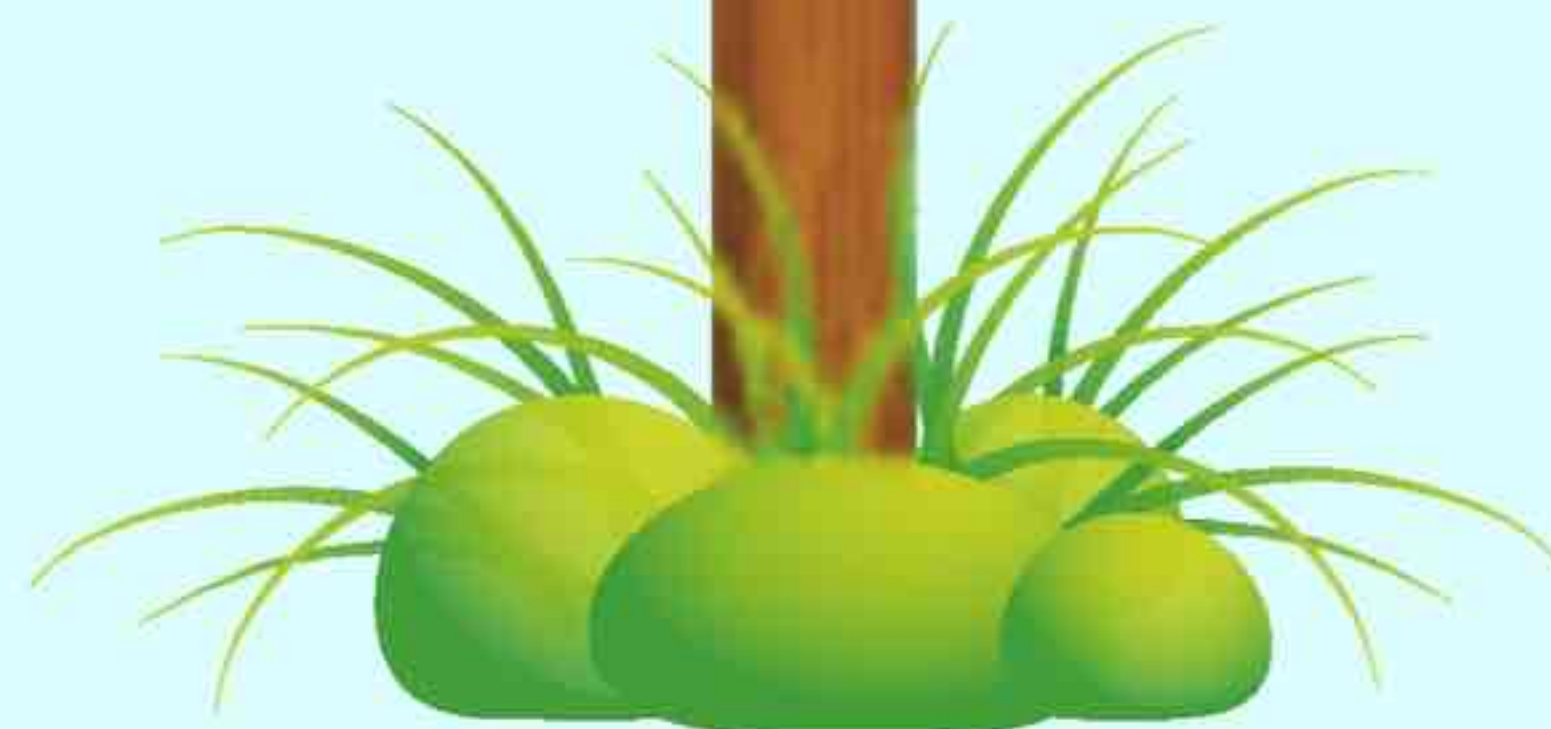


Chapter 7

Outsmarting the PDA Brain Boss: Strategies for Success

Focus On My Interests
Next Page!

Boosting My Brain Boss
Page 55



Strategies to Outsmart the PDA Brain Boss

A PDA brain does not like being told what to do. Dr. Jennifer calls this the PDA Brain Boss. Sometimes, the PDA Brain Boss makes it hard for us to do things, even if we want to do them. But don't worry, there are ways to outsmart this boss!

First, we can learn about and then focus on our **interests!**



Then we can learn about executive functioning and how to help our brain boss **gets things done!**





First Up, Focus on Your Interests!



You learn that a PDA brain learns faster when it is interested.

So you decide to learn about and focus on your interests.

What do you like to do? What makes things interesting and fun? What could you do for hours and hours?

No matter what we are interested in, when we are doing something that interests us or that we love our brain is more focused and happy.



Beating the Big Task Blues

Next, we learn ways to help our brain boss get things done!

You learn that a PDA brain can get stuck and overwhelmed when given big tasks.

So you choose to learn how to break down tasks into smaller steps.

Sometimes when a big task feels overwhelming, breaking it into smaller parts makes the task easier to handle.

When we are really stressed even a small task to others seems like a BIG task to us.



Try the "Pizza Slices" Method:

Draw a Pizza with Slices

Label the Slices as Each Step

Complete One Slice at a Time

Reward Yourself When You Are Done!

Avoiding the Shifting Shutdown

You learn that your PDA brain can get STUCK!

You learn that when PDA brains are told to stop and do something else without warning, we may get really upset. Especially if we are super focused on one of our interests and not ready to be done.

So you choose to learn how to ask for a cue or warning if you need to shift off of a task. You talk about this with your safe person when you are calm, including what type of cue would help you and what else you or your safe person can do when your brain gets stuck.

Sometimes advanced notice helps. Other times, keeping the same routine helps. But most of the time you just need more time to shift.

PDA brains need to let their safe person know that sometimes when we have to shift without warning, it makes our brain go into...



Anxiety Meltdown Zone.





Chapter 8

Navigating the Anxiety Meltdown Zone: Staying Calm in Tough Times

Learn about the the
Anxiety Meltdown Zone
Next Page!

Use Distraction &
Grounding Activities
Page 61

Practice Negotiation
Page 62



Unlocking the Anxiety Meltdown Zone

You learn about how anxiety feels in your body and brain.

Anxiety feels different for everyone. For some people, it feels like a worry brain, for some it feels like scary "popcorn thoughts," and for others it causes their heart to race.

Some PDA brains have so much anxiety that they are almost always in fight or flight mode. When this happens, many of our PDA brains can get stuck in Anxiety Meltdown Zone!

Anxiety Meltdown Zone is when the brain shuts down the brain boss and instead only focuses on a sense of safety or danger!



If this happens to you, you are not alone.

Let your safe person know so they can help.





Stop the Magic Mind Eraser!

Dr. Jennifer calls anxiety the "Great Mental Eraser."

Anxiety can be like a big eraser in our brains. When we feel super anxious or worried, it's like everything we were thinking about or trying to remember gets erased.

This happens because our brains are busy dealing with the worry instead of the things we need to remember or learn. But this is temporary and when we relax, the information will magically reappear.

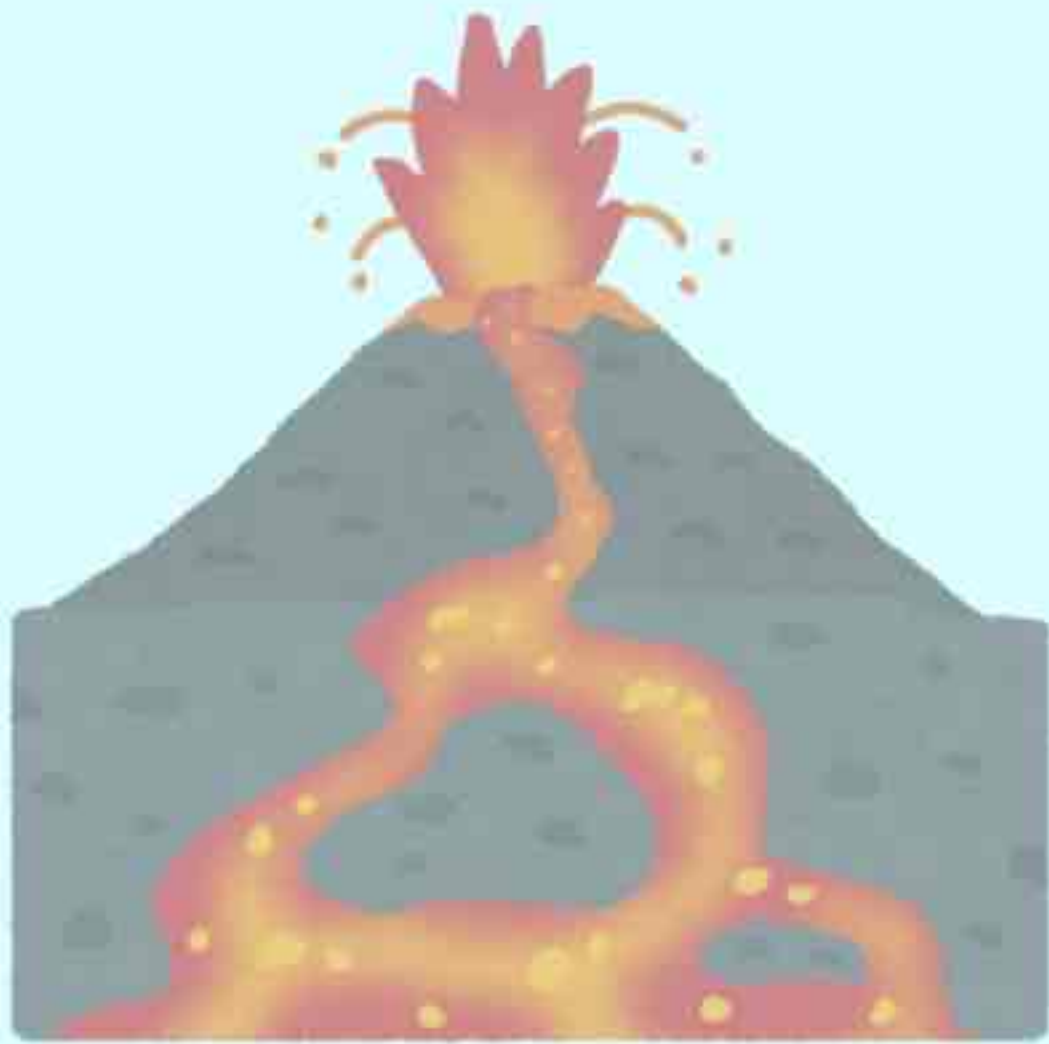
Words
Information
Numbers
Faces
Movements



Meltdowns, Who ME?

Yep! Meltdowns are very common in PDA brains.

Sometimes **meltdowns are like a volcano** exploding everywhere **or like an earthquake** deep inside that no one but us can feel.



The first step in figuring out what causes our meltdowns is to **identify patterns**. This is where we need to be **brain detectives** and figure out what may have caused it.

We cannot do this during a meltdown, but we can do it when we feel relaxed, regulated, and safe.

There are so many reasons why a meltdown may occur. It is often difficult for us to know. It is also hard for our parents and teachers to see the WHAT and WHY for our meltdowns.

So, I hope that using books like this one can help you communicate about how you feel on the inside (the what and why).

Use Distraction and Grounding Activities

You learn that a PDA brain may often use **distractions** to manage our anxiety and avoid demands.

This might include listening to music, drawing, or playing a game over and over and over.

Distracting yourself with something enjoyable can help reduce anxiety and make demands feel less overwhelming.

However, after a period of distraction, it is time to get our **senses grounded**. Otherwise, we may miss the fun times, too!



Five Senses Grounding

Find a Comfortable and Safe Space

See: Name 5 things you can see

Touch: Find 4 things to touch

Hear: Listen for 3 different sounds

Smell: What are 2 different things you smell

Taste: What is 1 thing you taste?

Practice Negotiation



You learn that one way to navigate the anxiety of demands being placed on you is to practice negotiation.

When faced with a demand, we can try to negotiate a compromise that works for us.

For example, we might ask to do a task later or break it into smaller parts.

Negotiation can help us feel more in control and less anxious.

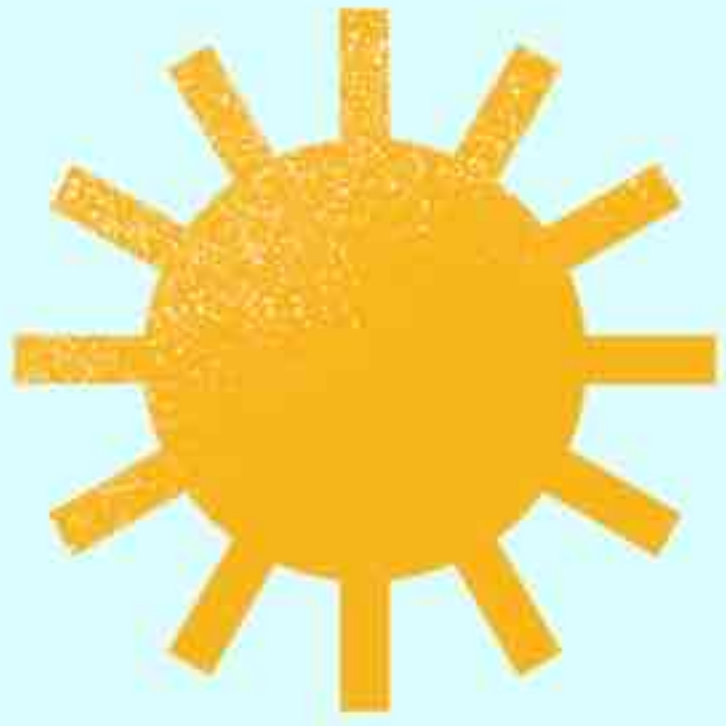


Create a Yes-No-Maybe Chart

Draw a chart with 3 columns (Yes, No, Maybe)

List tasks in each row, put a ✓ in the Yes, No, or Maybe column

Discuss and negotiate the "Maybe" column

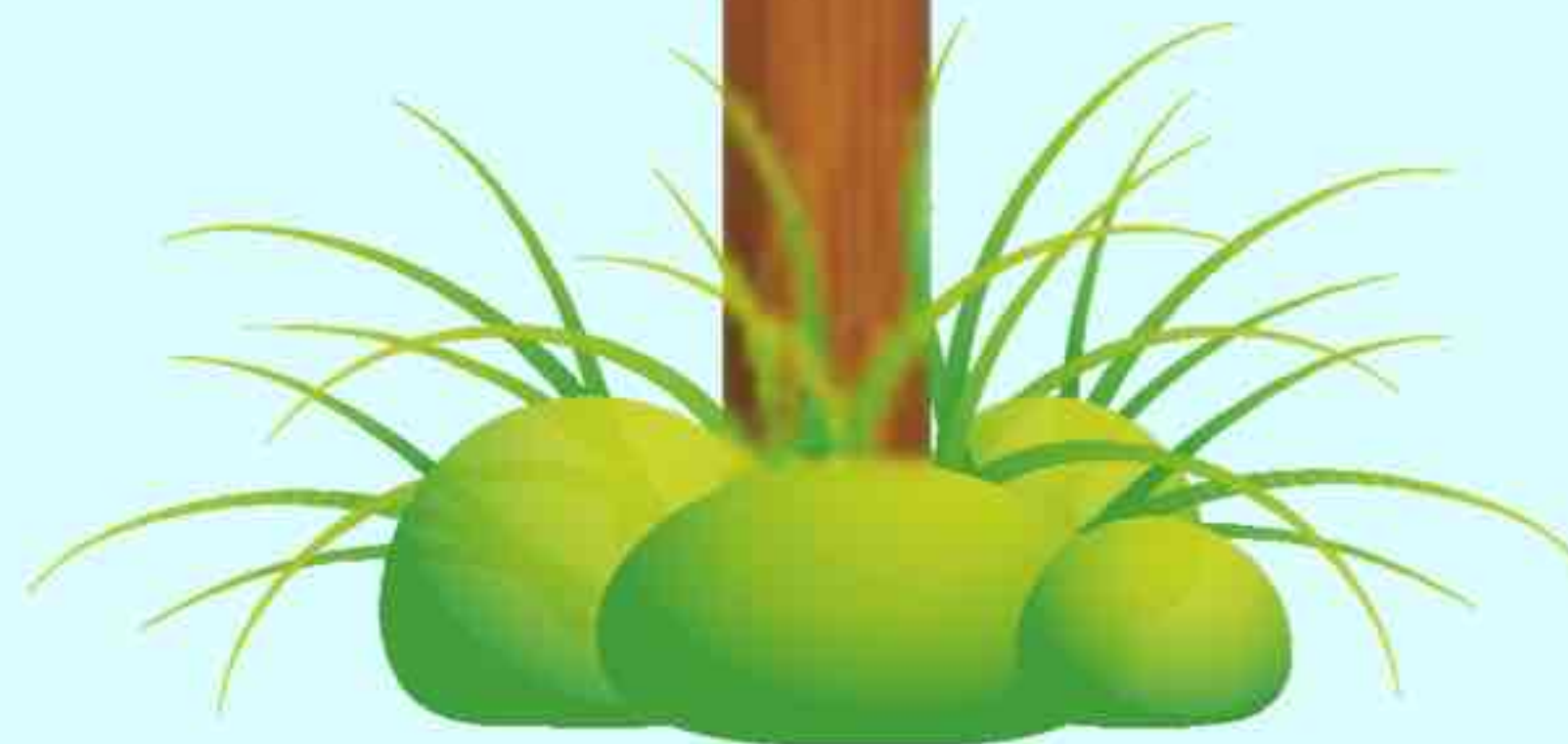


Chapter 9

Taking Control of My Emotions and Behaviors: Becoming the Boss of Me

**Identify Triggers
Next Page!**

**Learn about Coping
Tools and Spoon Theory
Page 66**



Identify Anxiety Triggers

You learn that a PDA brain gets triggered by a lot of things.

You decide to learn about your triggers: the **what, when, why, how and what helps**. What they are, when they happen, why they happen, how it feels, and how to help you calm down afterwards.

By understanding what makes us anxious, we can take steps to avoid (when we can) or manage these triggers. We can also let our safe people know what makes us anxious.

In your journal, make a list of the things that cause you anxiety.

Rate them on a scale of 0-10.
A 0 means no anxiety and a 10 means anxiety meltdown zone!

Talking on the phone = 8
Visiting a new place alone = 9
Having a new assignment at school = 5





Identifying Our Triggers

Everyone is different but sometimes similar things cause meltdowns in PDA brains. You can use this list to see what might bother you and add your own.
You can circle the ones that are true for you.

Internal Triggers (Feelings Inside Us)

Feeling Overwhelmed

Feeling Tired

Feeling Hungry

Feeling Anxious

Feeling Sick

External Triggers (Things Around Us)

Loud Noises

Bright Lights

Crowded Places

Unexpected Changes

Too Many Demands





Use Coping Mechanisms

Your understand now that our brain needs to learn a lot of coping skills.

You choose to learn **what makes you feel better** when you are upset, stressed, or overwhelmed.

We can rock, spin, or other repetitive behaviors that help us to calm our anxiety. These are called stims.
Stims are fine if they don't hurt us.

We can also try meditation or take deep breaths.

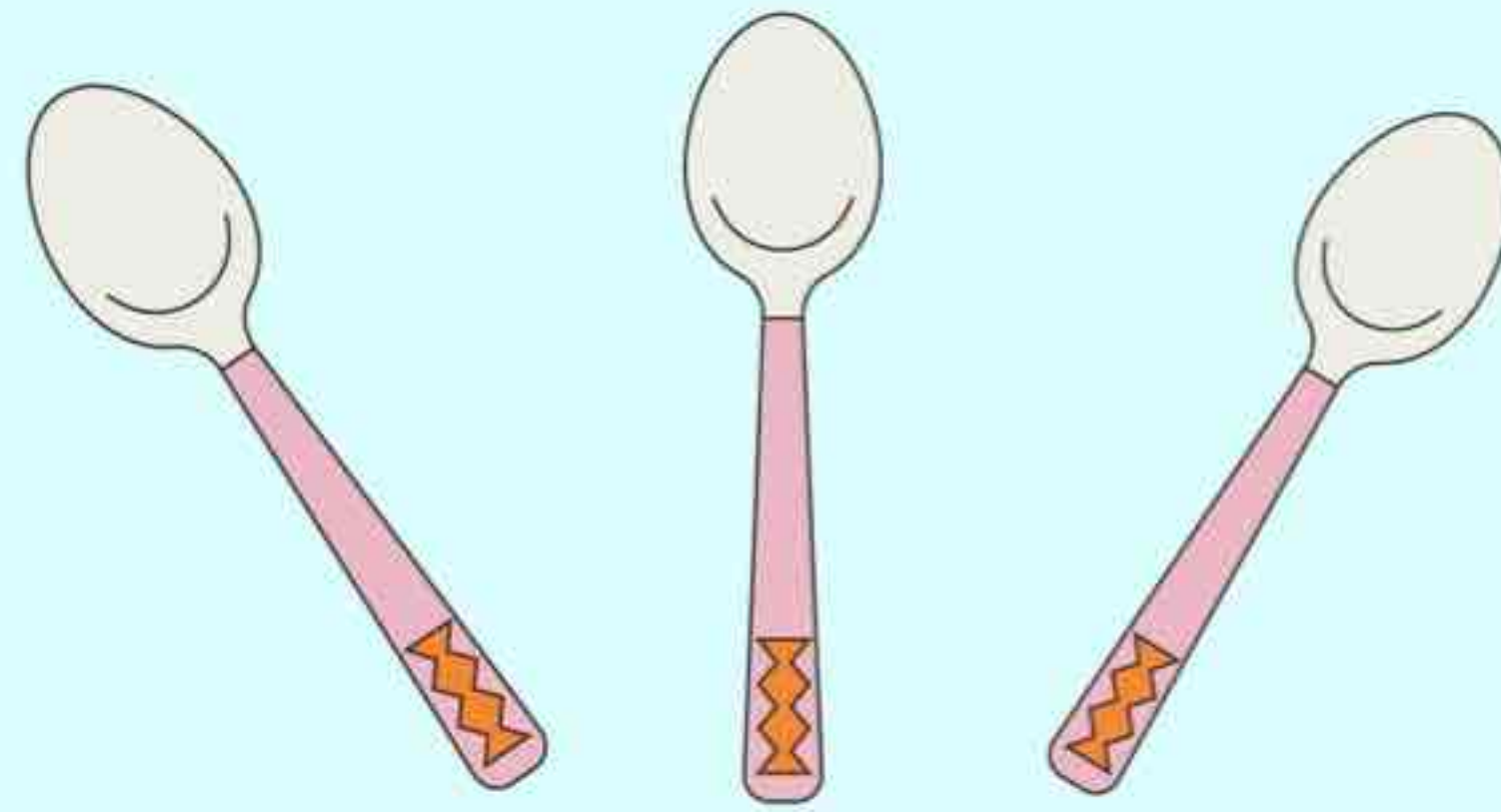
We can exercise.

We can talk to a safe person.

We can find a quiet, calm space.

I can do this





Learn About Spoon Theory

You decide to learn a way to communicate with others about **how much coping energy you have left.**

Many Autistic and PDA individuals talk about how many “spoons” they have. You discover that this has nothing to do with utensils, but instead is about “spoon theory.” This means how much coping energy we have.

Spoon theory is the concept that everyone has a certain number of “spoons” each day. Each activity we do, like getting dressed, playing, going to school, and doing homework uses up one and sometimes multiple spoons.

When we run out of spoons for the day, we need to rest to get more spoons for the next day. So, it's important to understand what uses our spoons (and how many) so that we know when to take a break.

It is important for our safe person to understand this, too. 67

Spoon Math

We need to learn how many spoons things take for us because everyone is different.
So we are going to do some spoon math.

In your journal make a list of activities and whether they take or give spoons to you and how many.

Ewww, math!

I went to school with six spoons. Now I have less spoons to cope with a big change or demand. This might mean **meltdown zone...**

My Spoons Math

Let's say you start with 10 spoon a day

At Home:

Get out of bed	=Takes 3 spoons (4 on Monday)
Get dressed	=Takes 2 spoons
Hug from mom	=Add 1 spoon

6 spoons left!!

School:

● A substitute!?!	=Takes 6 spoons!
Recess	=Adds 2 spoons
Math	=Takes 3 spoons

Home:

Play outside	= Adds 5 spoons
Homework !?!	= Takes 5 spoons
Clean room	= Takes 4 spoons

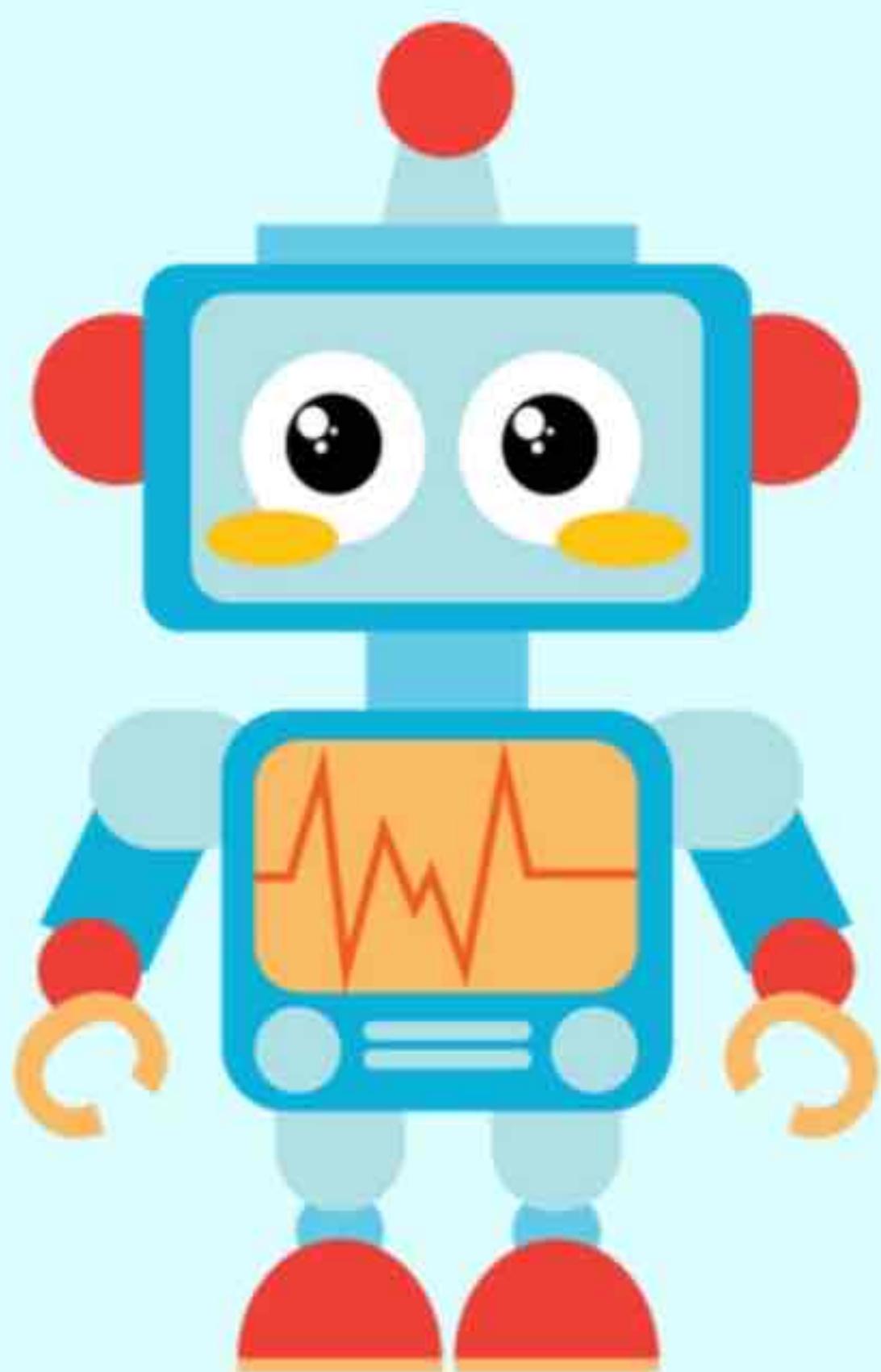
How many spoons do you have left??



Chapter 10

Powering Up My PDA Learning Center: Unlocking My Brain's Potential



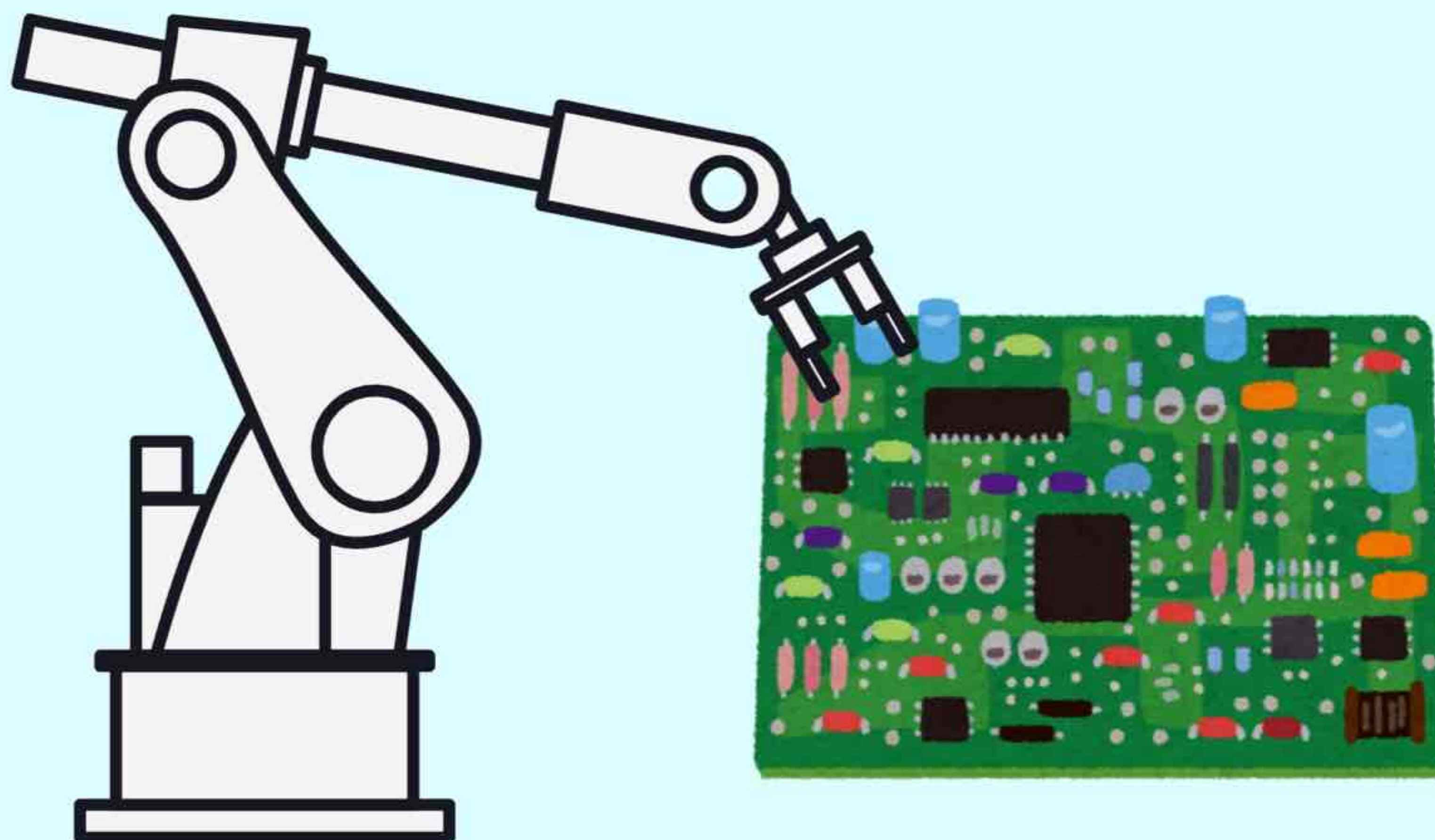
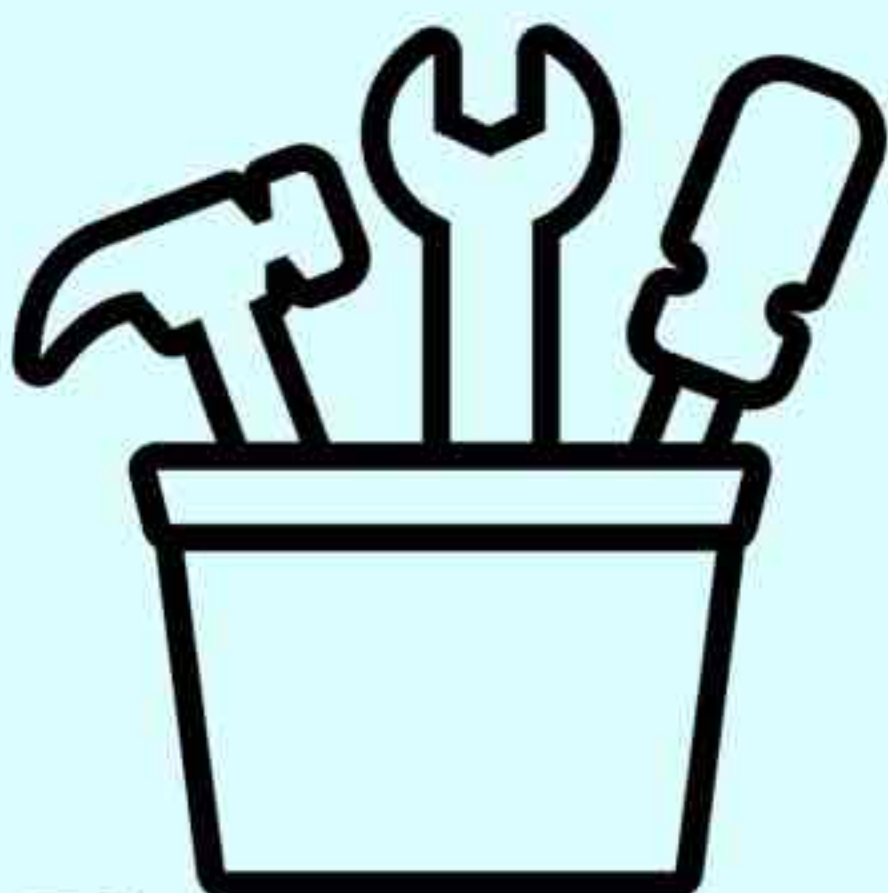
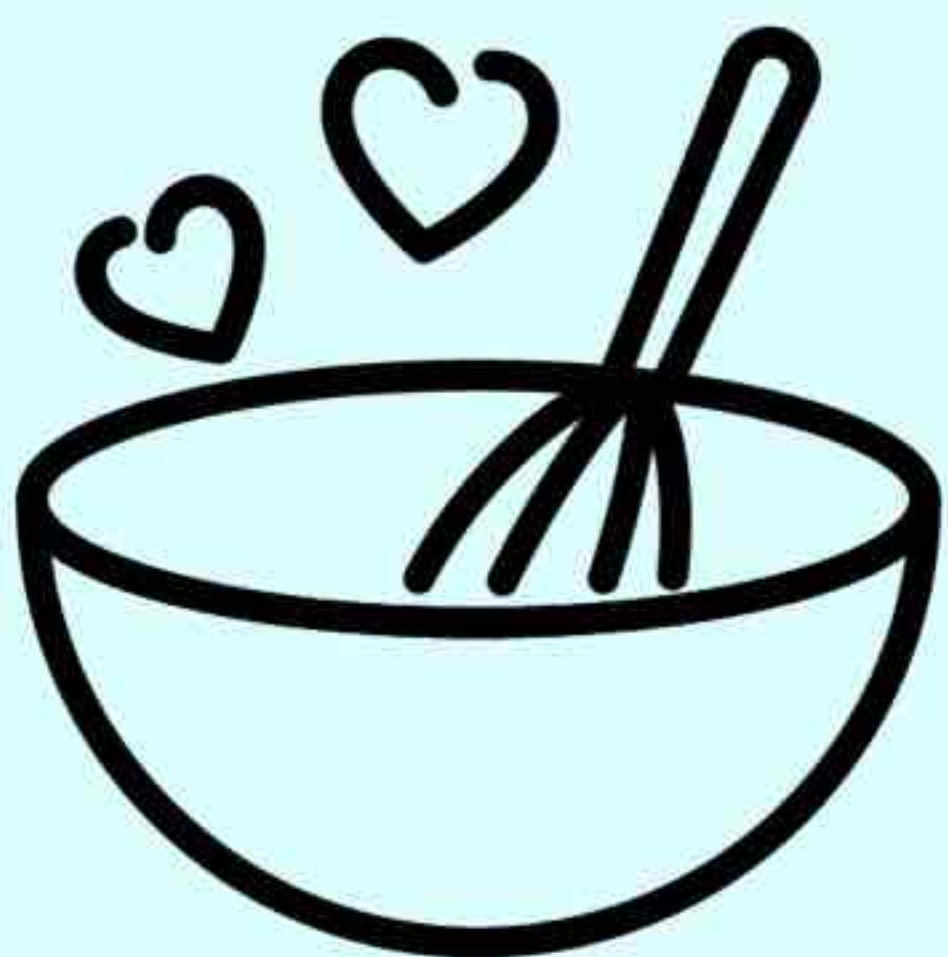


Engage in Hands-On Learning

You discover that PDA brains learn best with hands-on learning activities.

So you decide to explore activities that allow you to learn by doing.

Whether it's building, experimenting, or exploring, hands-on learning helps our brain understand and remember new information.



Hands-on-work and Careers

DID YOU KNOW?



Do you know how many jobs there are for people with brains like ours?!

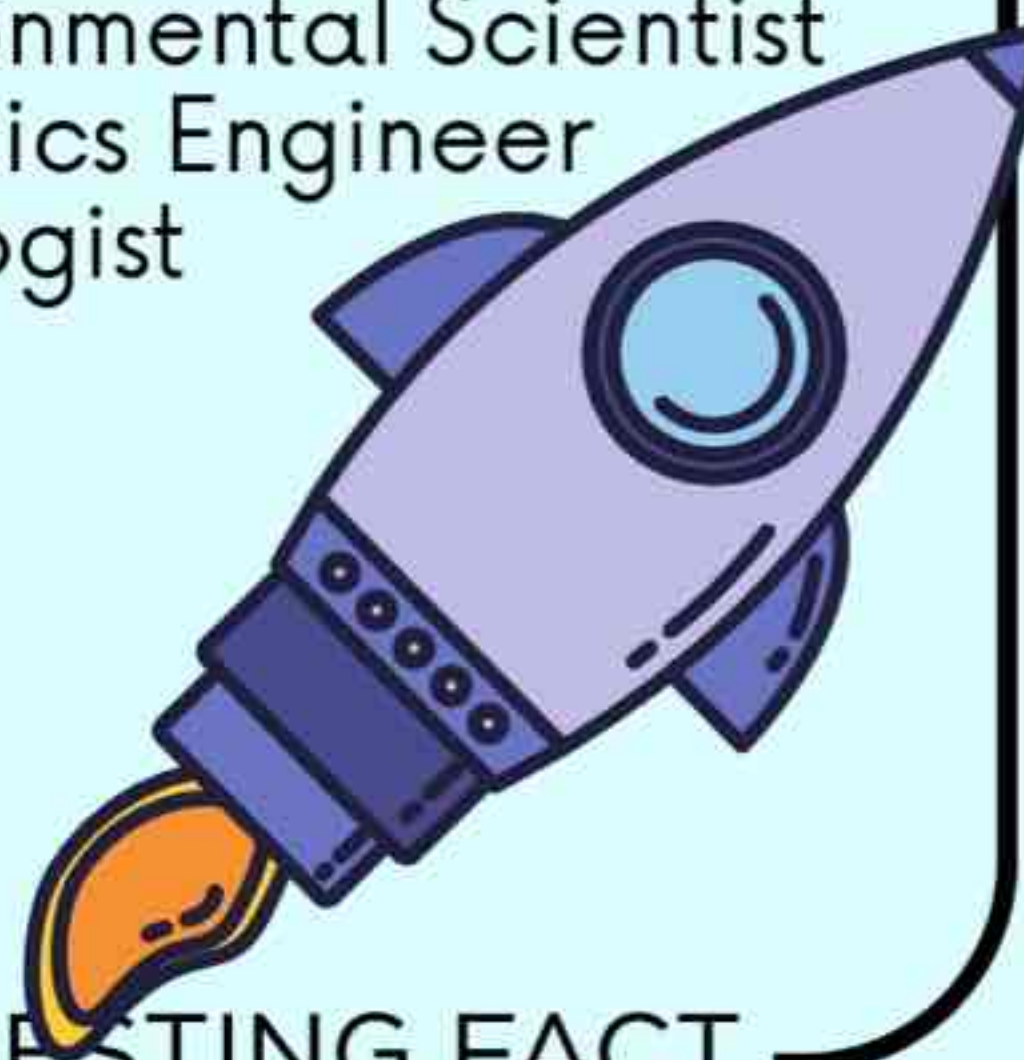
PDA brains often like activities and work that allows for **flexibility, creativity, and autonomy.**

We like to **think outside of the box** and often enjoy **hands-on-learning** the best.

Art and Craftsperson
Gardener or Horticulturist
Animal Care Worker
Chef or Baker
Carpenter or Woodworker
Welder
Mechanic or Technician
Photographer
Fitness Trainer or Yoga Instructor
Teacher
Biomedical Engineer
Laboratory Technician
Videogame Developer



Marine Biologist
Astronomer
Astrophysicist
Biotechnologist
Software Developer
Civil Engineer
Materials Scientist
Medical Physicist
Aerospace Engineer
Neuropsychologist
Therapist
Environmental Scientist
Robotics Engineer
Geologist



INTERESTING FACT



Off-line Processing

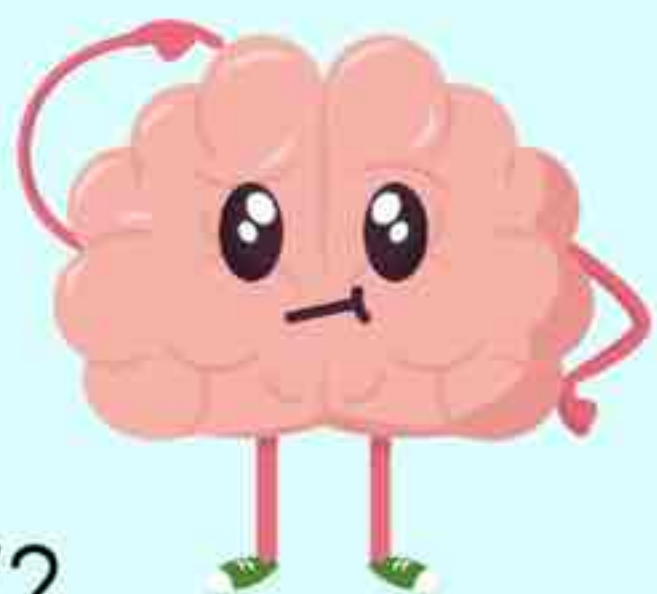
You learn that PDA brains take time to process, learn, and remember information. Sometimes this can be frustrating if we (or others) don't know that.

Sometimes we process information way later!

Dr. Jennifer calls this "off-line processing." That is where we need to step away from a situation to process it on our own in our own time.

So you decide to learn about your processing speed and share that with your safe person. They can help you get access to supports that will give you more time to think and respond.

Giving yourself this time helps you feel less pressured and more capable. Phew!



You learn that our brains do best when we take our time.

What Should I Know About PDA Brain Obstacles?

Everyone's brain works at their own pace, but PDA brains typically like to take more time. That is one of the things that makes us so special.

Some brains are like Zooming Zoey, who can speed through tasks quickly. Other brains are like Careful Connor, who takes a little more time to think things through. Both ways are great because each brain has their own unique strengths.

Sometimes we need more than extra time--here are some of the common accommodations at school:

☐

A break card: I need to be able to take more breaks and I don't always know how to ask.

☐

Teacher Check-In: I need teachers to check in to make sure I understand what to do and know how to start.

☒

Extra Time: I need extra time to transition from one activity and to do tests or homework.

☐

Separate Testing: I need to take tests in a separate room away from distractions.

☐

Check-in and Check-out: I need help remembering to take work home, complete it, and turn it in.

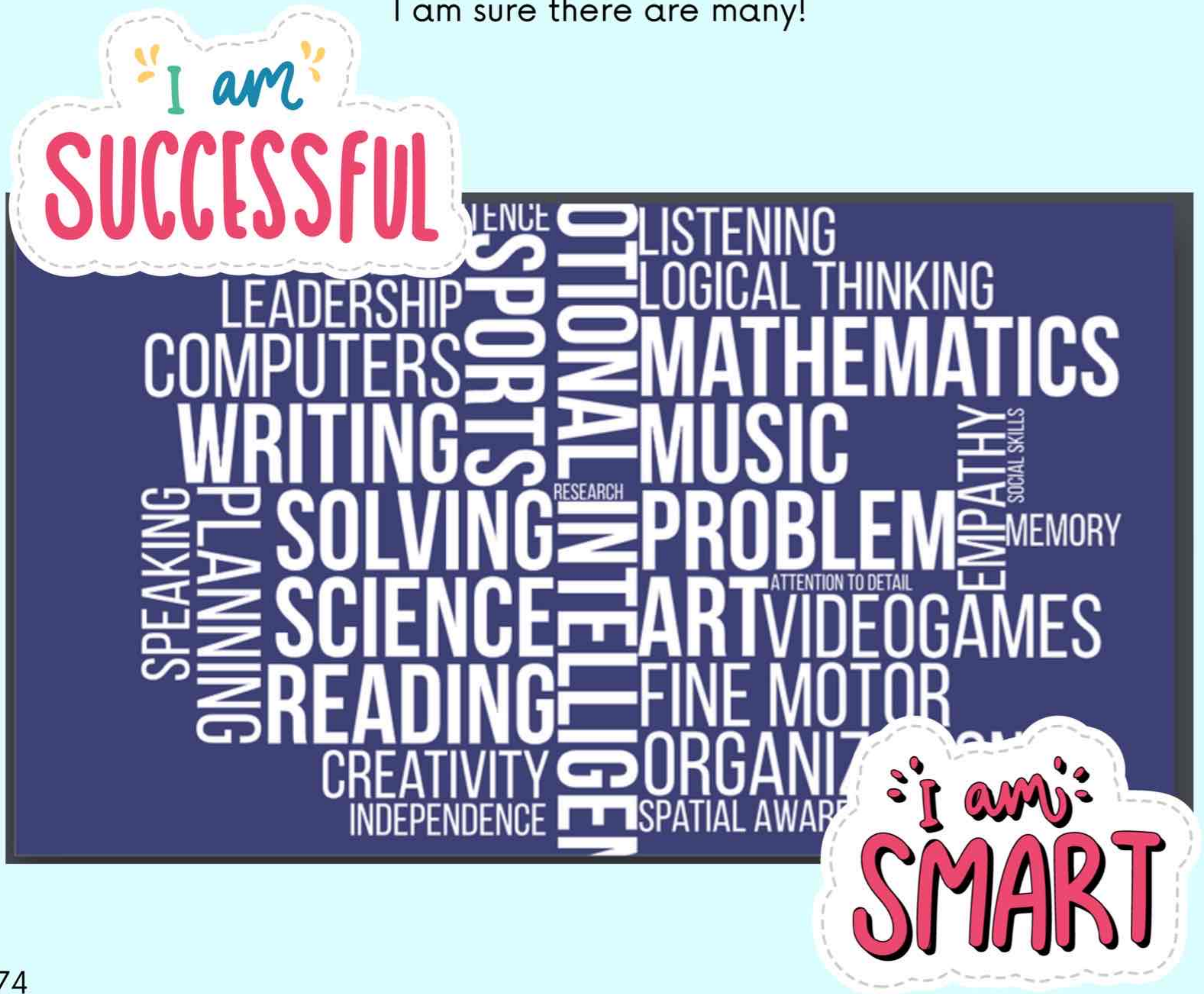
☐

Reduced Homework: I am overwhelmed after school, I need less homework (or none).

What Should I Know About PDA Brain Strengths?

PDA brains have so many strengths! Since every brain is unique, you need to learn what your strengths are so that you know yourself and then you can tell your safe person. If you get stuck, they may even be able to help you identify the strengths they see in you.

I am sure there are many!

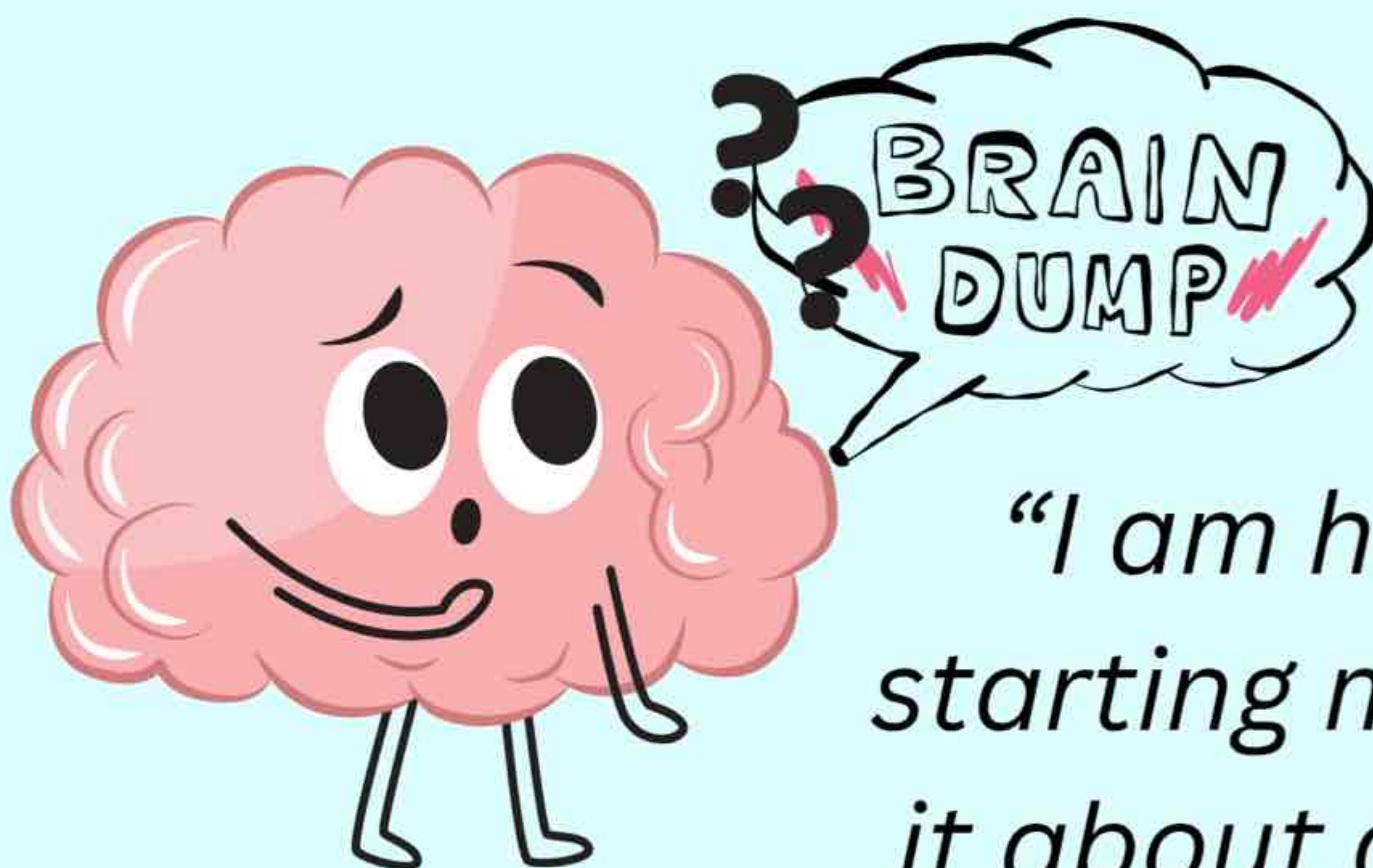


Focusing on Strengths and Interests at School is the KEY to success!

You are getting the hang of this now!
You understand that PDA brains love our favorite activities, especially those that include our strengths and interests. So know that you know more about your interests and your strengths, you can share that with your safe person at school.



Maybe they can help you do more of the things you love and less of the things that cause you stress! Learning might even become fun!



"I am having a hard time starting my story. Can I make it about dinosaurs instead?"

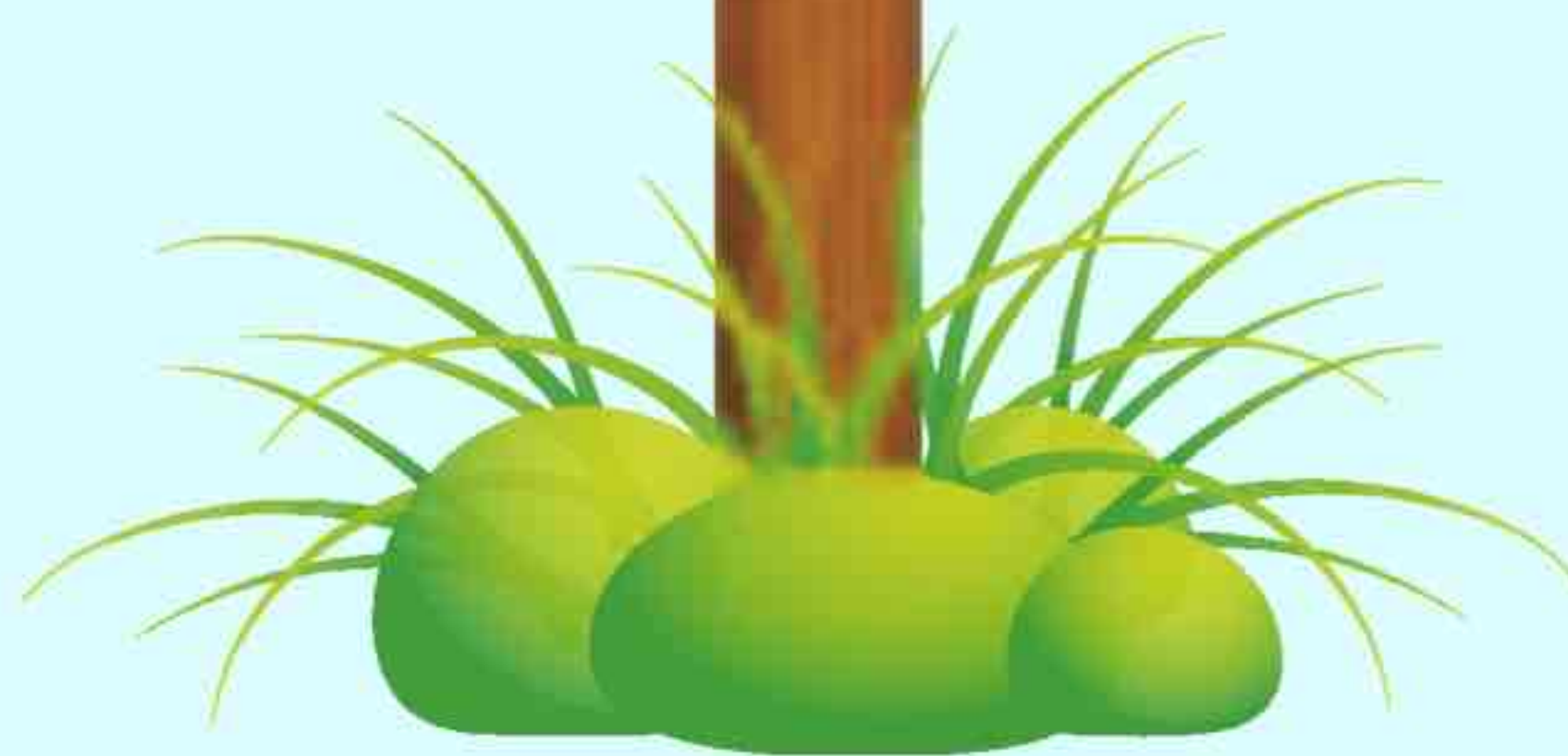


Chapter 11

PDA and Thriving: Being Authentic and Learning to Advocate

**Becoming Aware of Masking
Next Page!**

**Learning to Advocate
for Yourself
Page 78**





Practice Being Authentic

Learn About Masking



As you have been learning about yourself, you have discovered that not everyone is the same.
It is OK for you to be just the way you are.

However, sometimes we may pretend or put on a mask to act like someone else because we do not feel comfortable being ourselves. We often doesn't recognize that **masking is very stressful**. It causes a lot of anxiety and **takes up many spoons!**

So you decide that **in safe places** you will learn to **be yourself** and take off your mask.

It is important for you to still be yourself whenever it is safe to do so.

Three things Dr. Jennifer wants you to know:

- 1) It is okay to show your true selves in your safe places.
- 2) Sometimes it may not be safe to unmask in unsafe places.
- 3) Let your safe person know about the situations when you need to mask and they can help you.





Advocating for Yourself

The last thing you learn is how to ask for help when you need it. That is called advocating for yourself.

This means learning how to express your needs and preferences at home or school. Self-advocacy can help you feel more in control and respected in different settings.

Sometimes, it might feel really hard to let others know how you feel and what you need. You can say things like, 'I need a break,' or 'Can we do this a different way?'

It's okay to ask for help and to tell people what makes you feel comfortable. Your feelings and needs are important, and speaking up helps others understand you better.



My PDA Brain Adventure Activity Guide

This worksheet will help you show what you've learned and think about the supports that can help you at home and school. Let's get started!

What is PDA and what does it mean to me?

What have I learned about my brain?

How does my brain learn best?



What are my favorite coping skills?

What are my interests?

Who is a safe person for me at home?

Who is a safe person for me at school?

Do I need help from a parent or teacher to find a safe person?

What are some things that would make me feel better at home?

What are some things that would make me feel better at school?



Do I mask? If so, when and where? Is it safe to unmask?

What are some things that I do to try to make things fair?

Are these things helpful or do I get in trouble?

How many spoons do my different activities take?

What refills my spoons?



What is something I want to learn about myself?

What is something I want others to learn about me?

What was my favorite part of the adventure?



ADVENTURE

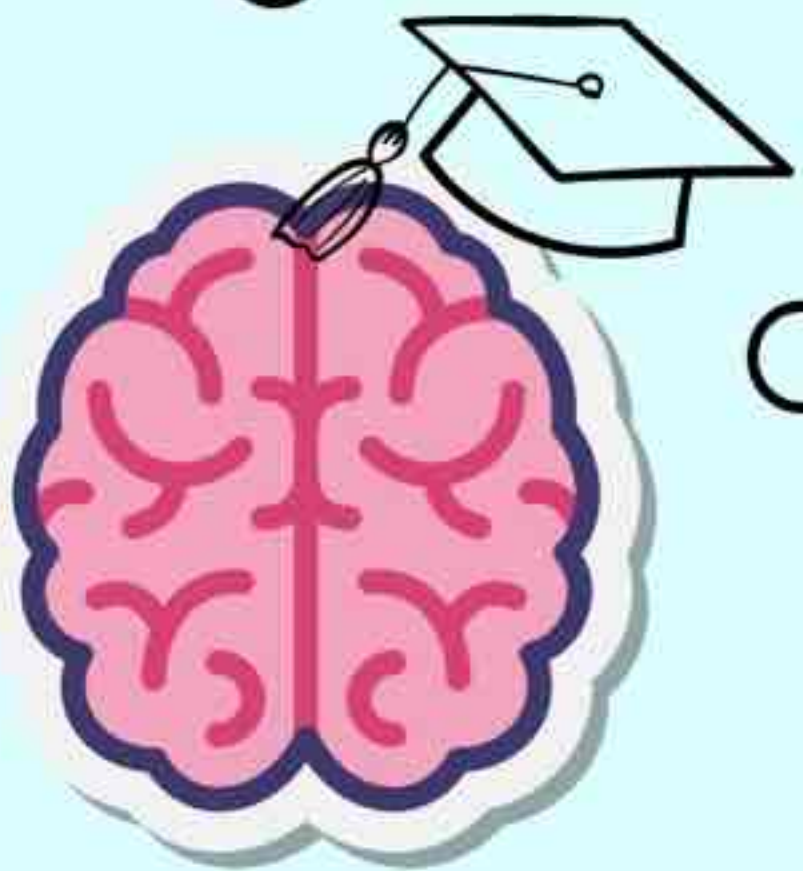
My PDA Brain Adventure Certificate

This certificate is awarded to the
Junior Brain Detective:

For completing the adventure in
understanding their PDA brain and
learning how to support themselves at
home and school.

Date: _____

Signed: _____



Certified by fellow PDA'er, Dr. Jennifer Huffman
Neurodivergent Neuropsychologist
www.neurodivergentneuropsychology.com

THE END

Congratulations! You did it!

You've completed your adventure in
understanding your PDA brain.

You are now an official expert about your
amazing and unique PDA brain!

Maybe you can share what you have learned
about PDA brains with others, so they can
learn about PDA, too!

Keep exploring and learning!



Dr. Jennifer

Appendix: References (The Big Brains) !

Alexithymia: The term "alexithymia" came from Dr. Peter Sifneos, a Greek-American psychiatrist. It refers to a condition characterized by difficulty in identifying, describing, and expressing emotions.

Equalizing Behaviors: Who first created the term? Phil Christie is a leading expert on PDA and has co-authored several books and articles on the subject. He has worked extensively with children and adults with PDA and has discussed various behaviors, including equalizing behaviors, in his work. The PDA Society of UK also reference these behaviors often. Finally, Ruth Fidler educational consultant specializing in PDA and autism references these behaviors in her books.

Feelings Chart: Dr. Robert Plutchik was a psychologist who developed the "Wheel of Emotions" in the 1980s. His work has been influential in the development of tools and charts to help people understand and express their emotions.

Hand Model of the Brain: Dr. Siegel is renowned for his work in interpersonal neurobiology and has introduced the "hand model of the brain," which is a simplified way to explain the brain's structure and function, particularly in relation to emotional regulation and the fight-or-flight response. Created by Dr. Dan Siegel. Learn more <https://drdansiegel.com/resources/>

Interoception: The term "interoception" came from Dr. Charles S. Sherrington, a British neurophysiologist, in the early 20th century. Dr. Sherrington introduced the term to describe the sense of the internal state of the body, encompassing sensations related to physiological processes such as hunger, thirst, heart rate, respiration, and internal pain.

Masking: Dr. Lorna Wing was a British psychiatrist and a pioneer in autism research. Her research has influenced the study of social behaviors and coping mechanisms in autism. Dr. Judith Gould has also contributed significantly to the understanding of autism, particularly in girls and women. Her work has highlighted how females on the autism spectrum may be more likely to engage in masking behaviors to conform to social expectations.

Mindfulness: Jon Kabat-Zinn is often credited with bringing mindfulness into mainstream Western medicine and psychology.

Neurodiversity: While Judy Singer is often credited with coming up with the term "neurodiversity," the neurodiversity concept was created collectively, as it was being discussed and popularized around the same time by other advocates and writers. So she and others came up with it around the same time but she write about it in research literature.

Neurodiversity Paradigm: The neurodiversity paradigm is a conceptual framework that views neurological differences, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other neurodevelopmental differences, as natural variations of the human brain rather than as disorders or deficits. Dr. Nick Walker, a scholar and advocate, was integral in the development and sharing of this paradigm through their book, "Neuroqueer Heresies: Notes on the Neurodiversity Paradigm, Autistic Empowerment, and Postnormal Possibilities."

Neurodivergent: The term "neurodivergent" is generally attributed to Kassiane Asasumasu, an autistic activist and writer. Kassiane Asasumasu created the term "neurodivergent" to describe individuals whose neurological development and functioning diverge from what is considered typical or neurotypical.

Pathological Demand Avoidance: The term "Pathological Demand Avoidance" (PDA) was created by Dr. Elizabeth Newson, a British developmental psychologist. Dr. Newson first identified and described PDA in the 1980s while working with children who exhibited extreme avoidance of everyday demands and requests. She noted that these children displayed behaviors that were distinct from other forms of autism and proposed PDA as a specific profile within the autism spectrum.

There are a lot of BIG BRAINS who have led the way of our understanding of PDA after it was described by Dr. Newson, including Phil Christie, Ruth Fidler, Kristy Forbes, Sally Cat, Kieran Rose, Diane Gould, and Laura Hellfeld, to name a few.

Online PDA Resources: Some places to learn more about PDA:

PDA Society (UK) <https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/>

PDA North America <https://pdanorthamerica.org/>

The PDA Space <https://www.thepdaspace.com/>

My website: <https://theablecenter.com/learn-more-about-pda>

Perceived Threats: Dr. Richard Lazarus and Dr. Susan Folkman, developed the transactional model of stress and coping. This model emphasizes the importance of cognitive appraisal, where individuals evaluate and interpret potential stressors (or threats) in their environment. This is why everyone is different in what makes them feel unsafe.

Sensory Processing: The concept of Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD) was developed by Dr. A. Jean Ayres, an occupational therapist and educational psychologist. She developed methods to identify and treat children who had difficulties processing sensory information, which often affected their daily functioning and behavior.

Dr. Winnie Dunn is also a significant figure in the field of sensory processing, an occupational therapist and researcher,. Dr. Dunn developed the Sensory Profile, an assessment tool used to evaluate sensory processing patterns in individuals. 88

Spoon Theory and Spoon Math:

The concept of Spoon Theory was created by Christine Miserandino as a way to explain the experience of living with chronic illness and limited energy. They use spoons as a metaphor for units of energy.

Trauma Modes: Fight, Flight, Freeze, Fawn. and Feign:

Walter Cannon, an American physiologist. In the early 20th century, Cannon described the "fight-or-flight" response as a physiological reaction to perceived threats, where the body prepares to either confront (fight) or escape (flight) the danger.

The concept of "fawn" as a response to threat was popularized by Pete Walker, a licensed marriage and family therapist who specializes in complex trauma and PTSD. Walker describes "fawn" as a response where an individual attempts to appease or placate a perceived threat to avoid conflict or harm.

Kristy Forbes, an Australian autism and neurodiversity support specialist, has used the term "flop mode" to describe a specific type of response to overwhelming stress or sensory overload.

Sally Cat, an advocate and educator specializing in autism and neurodiversity. Sally Cat often refers to the "fight, flight, freeze, and flop" responses to describe the various ways that individuals might react to overwhelming situations.

Dr. Judy Eaton, a clinical psychologist who has written extensively on PDA and its connections to trauma and anxiety, especially in girls and woman.