

COMMUNITY WEBCAST

Understanding pathological demand avoidance in autistic youth and young adults



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About The Help Group

The Help Group is the largest, most innovative and comprehensive nonprofit of its kind serving children, adolescents and young adults with special needs related to autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities, ADHD, developmental delays, abuse and emotional challenges through its wide range of specialized education, therapy and outreach programs.

- Specialized Day Schools
- Assessment
- Mental Health Services
- Residential Programs
- 18+ Programs
- LGBTQ+ Services & Programs
- Coaching
- Social Skills Training
- Parent Education
- After-School Enrichment



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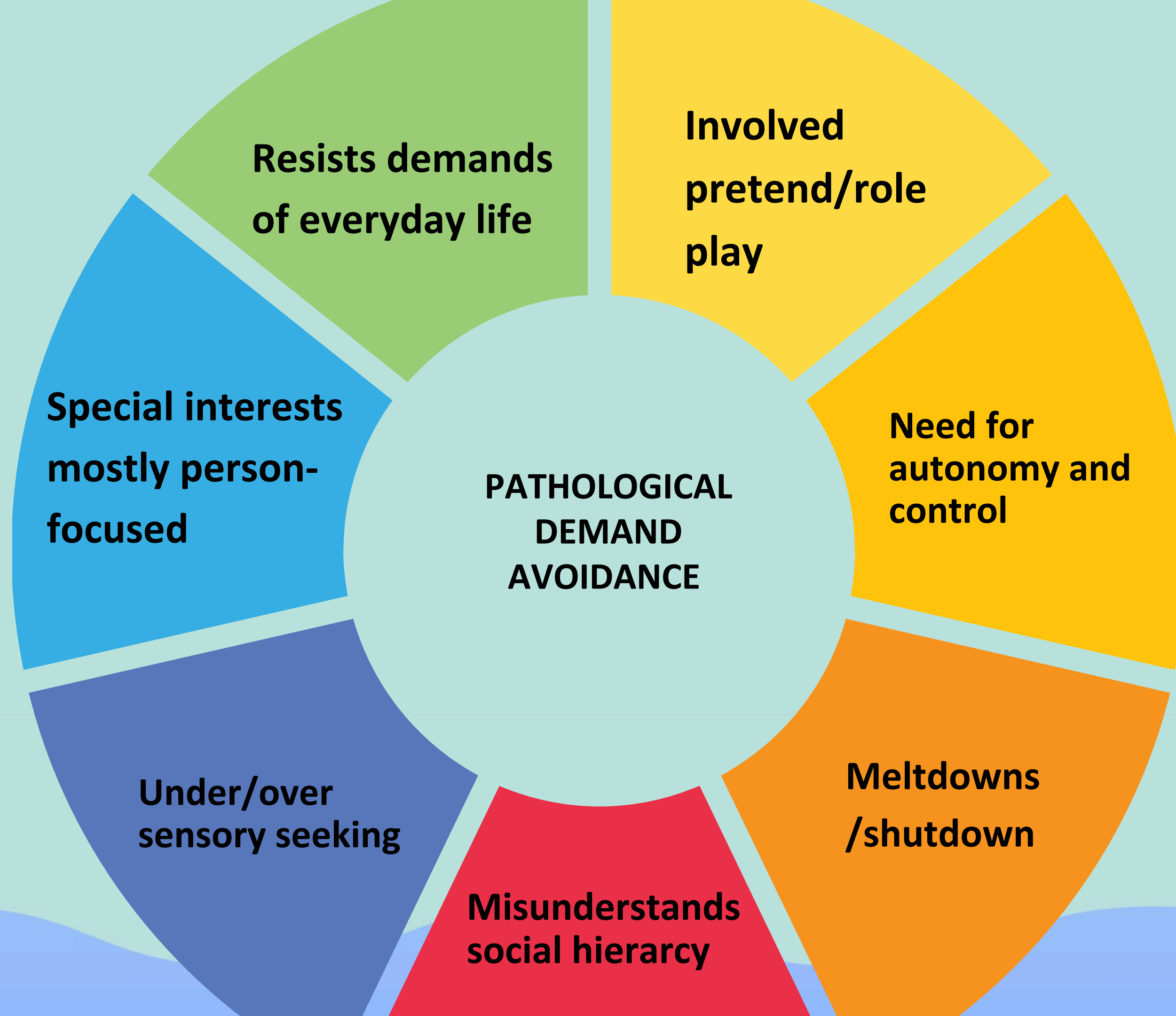
WHAT IS PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE?

- ✿ Extreme avoidance of everyday demands coupled with a strong need for autonomy and control, even if it is something they enjoy
- ✿ PDA is viewed as an extreme anxiety response to perceived demands
- ✿ “A need to avoid everyday demands to reduce anxiety, using social manipulation as a key strategy” (Newson et al., 2003)
- ✿ Experience rapid mood swings driven by a desire for control and frequently demonstrate obsessive behaviors (often focused on interactions)

WHAT IS PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE?

- ✿ Difficulty with “arbitrary hierarchy,” conformity and authority
- ✿ Strong sense of ethics; desire to create new systems/question existing systems that are harmful
- ✿ Generates internal discomfort- “an involuntary response to threats to autonomy”
- ✿ PDA is not a recognized diagnosis in either ICD or DSM classification systems





PATHOLOGICAL DEMAND AVOIDANCE CHARACTERISTICS

- 🌸 Delay - "I need to finish the game"
- 🌸 Distract - "Look at what the dog is doing!"
- 🌸 Negotiate - "I'll finish the game and then I'll take out the trash"
- 🌸 Make believe - "I can't because I twisted my ankle earlier"
- 🌸 Use Humor - Tells a Knock Knock joke
- 🌸 Meltdown

PDA AND AUTISM

- ✿ They are not the same thing; PDA is not exclusive to Autism
- ✿ Because PDA is not "a diagnosis"– prevalence is hard to establish.
 - 20% of autistic youth show traits of PDA
 - 4% of autistic youth meet "full" criteria
- ✿ Highly sociable, but may struggle to understand where they fit in the social hierarchy
- ✿ Verbally competent, but may understand less than we realize
- ✿ Often highly skilled when it comes to pretend play (becoming characters)
- ✿ Both autistic traits and anxiety were unique and equally important predictors of demand avoidance

PDA CLIENT/PARENT QUOTES

- ✿ “ So many day-to-day things trigger my PDA; gentle suggestions, advice, needing to get up and drink water, the demand of masking, a text message, wearing acceptable clothing, even advertisements! ”
- ✿ “It's just how somebody asks him to do something; if he sees it as ‘We need to go and do our reading now’ he will refuse to do it, but if it's ‘Oh it's our discovery time& we're going to do some reading, would you like to choose a book from these two?’ then he's more compliant.”
- ✿ “It makes no sense that my parents always get to decide where we go on vacation.”
- ✿ “When I feel like someone is expecting me to do what they want right away, I panic. Why do I need to do it? What if I can't? What if I mess up? What are they expecting?”
- ✿ “We've learned to do things on her time. We talk each night about the things we need to do the next day and let her plan the order.”

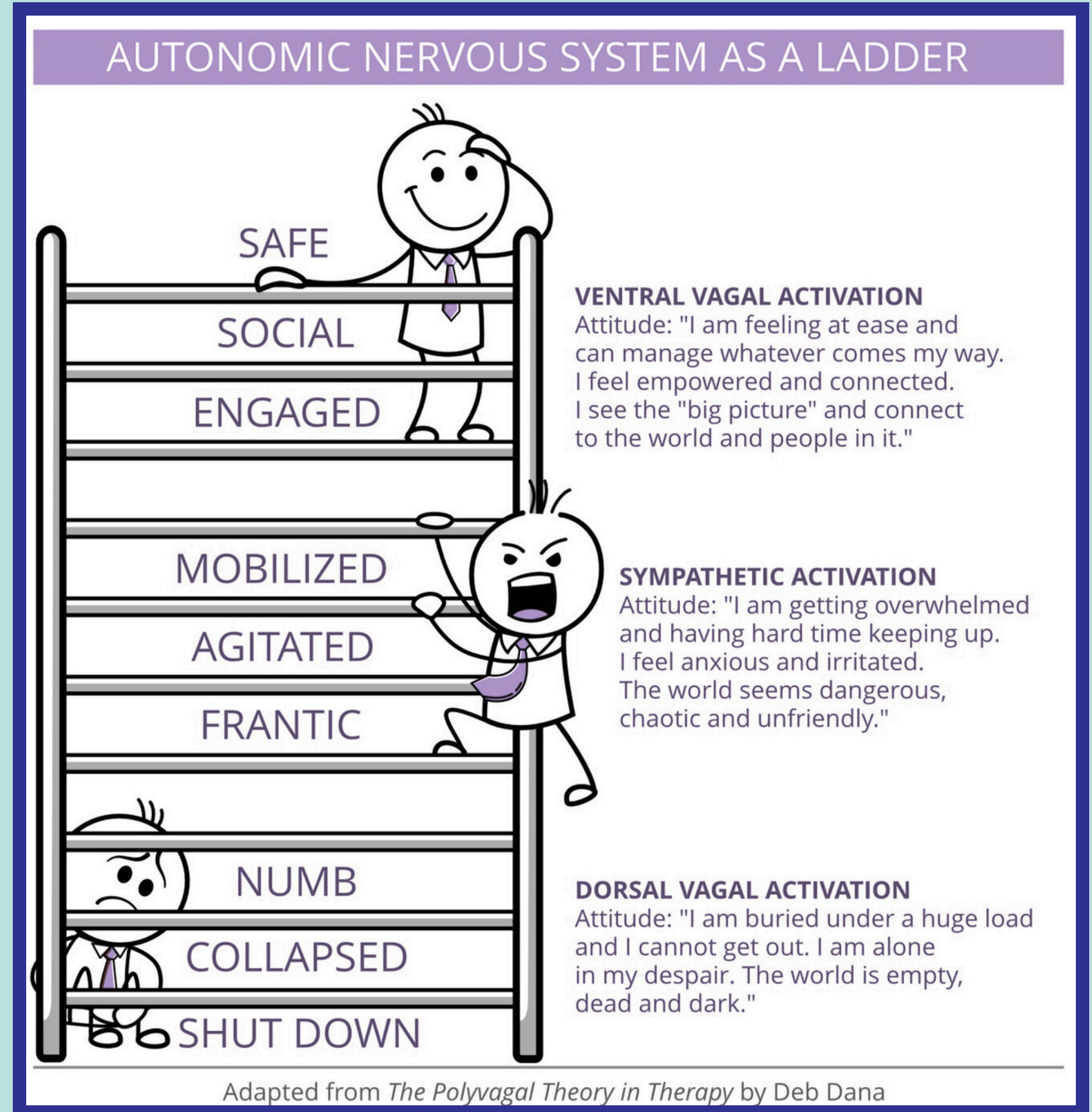
PDA CLIENT/PARENT QUOTES

- ✿ My father...says I have to go to college to be successful, I drop out. He tells me I should be working full-time or more, I quit my job. He says that I'm irresponsible for door dashing and I need to stop, I make that my main source of income. I quite literally live in spite, and don't get me wrong it is hard, but I cannot help myself.
- ✿ People trying to control me, no matter how politely, and regardless of their places in social hierarchies, feels like an attack on me- Sally Cat

POLYVAGAL THEORY

Our nervous system wants to keep us "safe"

Our bodies override our brain



PANDA STRATEGIES

P

Pick Your Battle

- Minimize rules
- Allow some choice and control
- Provide rationales
- Accept that some things can't be done

A

Anxiety Management

- Use the low arousal approach
- Recognize/validate the underlying anxiety, social and sensory challenges
- Have coping strategies ready
- Treat reactions like panic attacks

PANDA STRATEGIES

N

Negotiation and Collaboration

- Keep calm
- Proactively collaborate and negotiate to solve challenges
- Be fair and foster trust

D

Disguise and Manage Demands

- Phrase requests indirectly
- Monitor tolerance & match demands accordingly
- Do things together

PANDA STRATEGIES

A

Adaptation

- Try humor, distraction, novelty and role play
- Be flexible
- Have an alternate plan
- Allow plenty of time to get things done
- Give advance notice
- Try to balance the amount of give and take

HELPFUL SENTENCE STARTERS

SAY

- "I wonder if we can..." "How can we..."
- "Shall we see if we can beat the clock..."
- "Maybe we could investigate..." "Who do you want to help you today..." "When would be a good time..."
- "You seem to be stuck..."
- "How do you imagine me supporting you? "

AVOID

- "It's time for you to..."
- "You've got to..."
- "You need to..."
- "You must..."
- "You're safe..."
- "Just calm down"
- "But you love..."

HELPFUL STRATEGIES

- ✿ **It's about feeling "safe" – I know I'm heard, I know I'm seen, I know I'm understood**
- ✿ Move away from seeing the child as "bad" and use affirming lens
- ✿ TRUST must be established
- ✿ Allow opting out of tasks/setting own schedule
- ✿ When anxiety (fight, flight, freeze) allow decompression space
- ✿ Use indirect communication (post-it notes)
- ✿ What does it look like to be safe
- ✿ Support sensory needs
- ✿ Match demands to tolerance level

RESOURCES

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

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

Sally Cat: <https://www.facebook.com/SallyCatPDA>

Zack Morris: <https://www.aliveatlearn.com>



Thank you for joining us as we proudly provide opportunities to autistic youth so they may experience happiness in fulfilling their limitless potential.

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**AGES
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THE HELP GROUP'S 12TH ANNUAL
SPECIAL NEEDS
RESOURCE FAIR

Sunday, April 27, 2025 | 11am – 2pm
Sherman Oaks, CA

thehelpgroup.org/resource-fair FREE ADMISSION

