

Guide To:



Nervous System Regulation
And Somatic Techniques

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Hello!



Who am I?

Ron Yap

- Mental Health Advocate
- OCD and Anxiety Survivor
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SOCIAL MEDIA

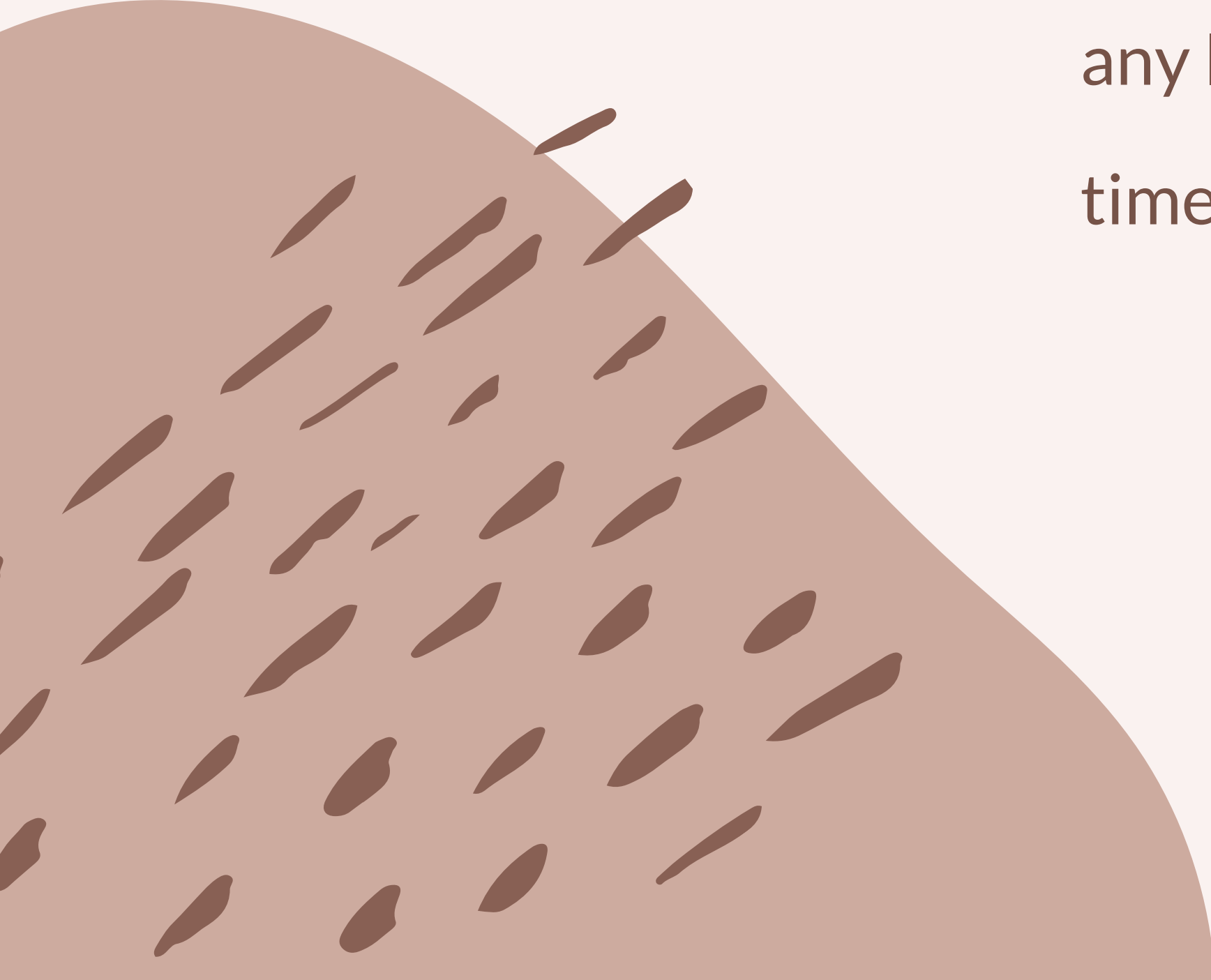
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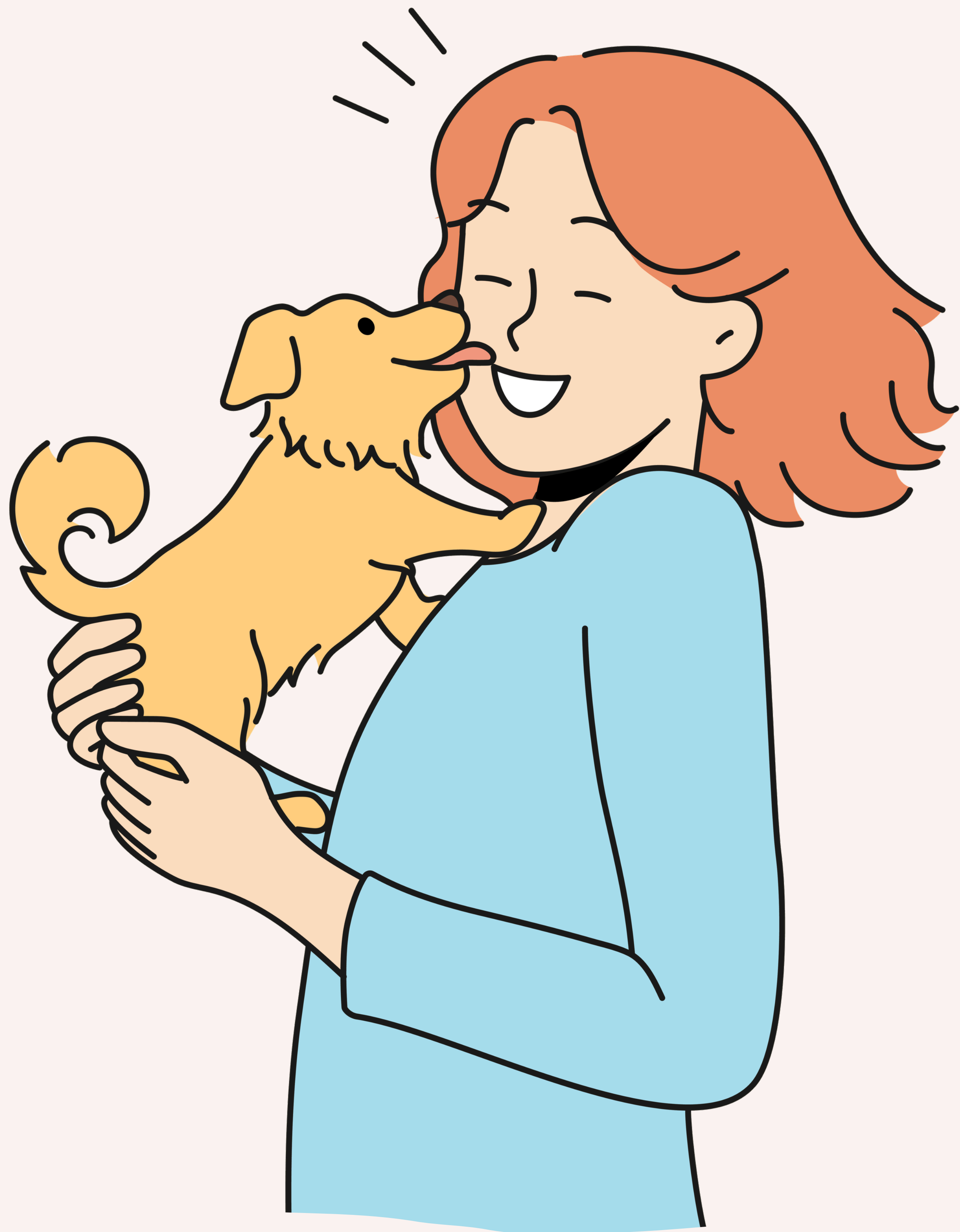




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WHAT IS *Emotional Regulation?*

The first thing you must know about trauma is that it is when you are reacting to something that's happened in the past as compared to what's happening right now.

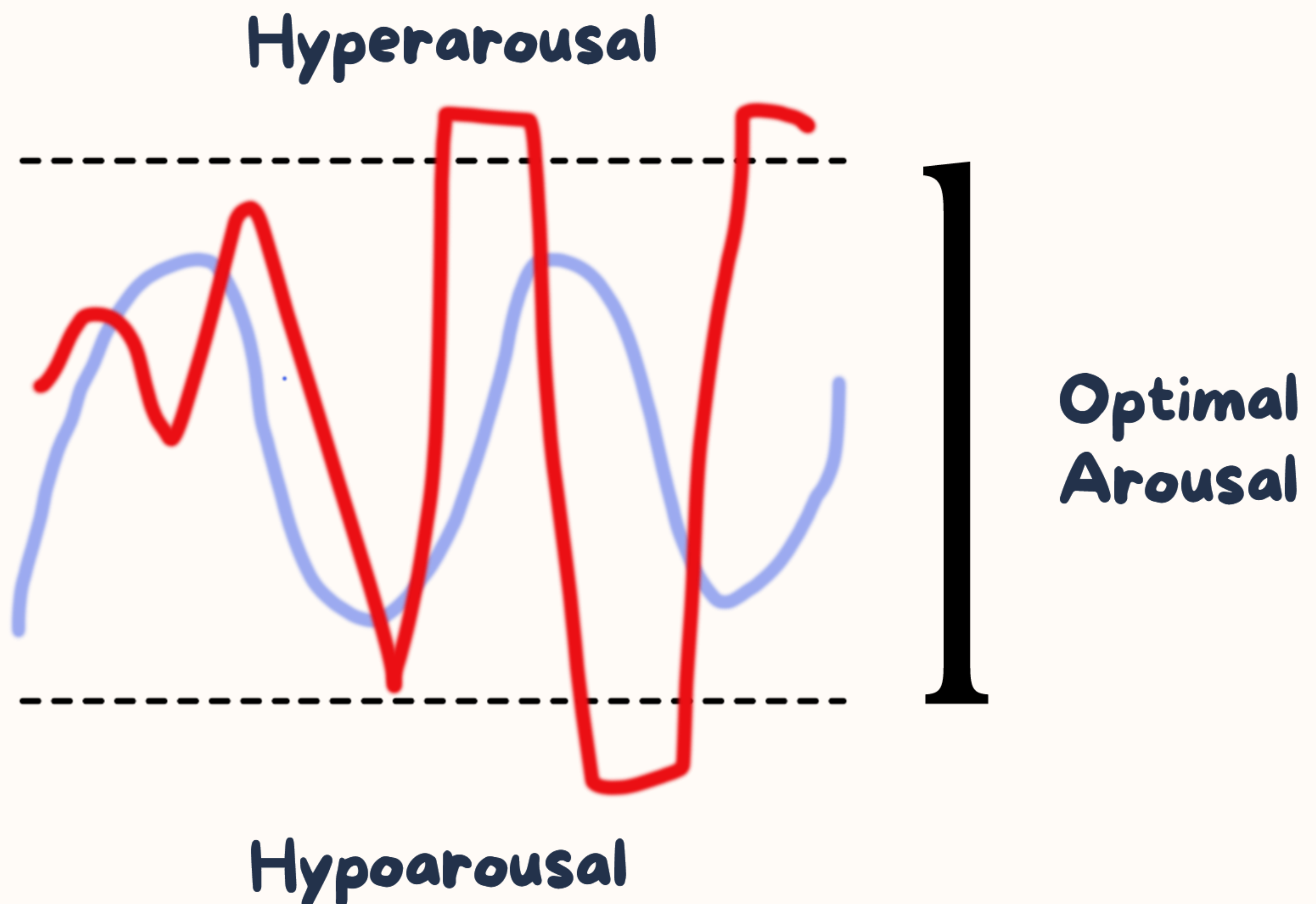
Trauma researchers have many different hypotheses about how it works, one of which being that it is not the current you that's reacting to the event, but the younger version of you that's taking over and reacting in the way they reacted during the traumatic event.

Which is why we often express such big confusion and regret at the ways we acted afterwards, feeling as if we weren't ourselves. Because it wasn't -- it was the past version of ourselves.

However, it is pretty much agreed nowadays that trauma is stored, and shows up in, your body. Because your entire nervous system is activated by a trauma trigger, it has many effects which show up physically, not just in your mind.

Researchers have classified this phenomenon as emotional dysregulation, which is when your feelings are so intense that your whole nervous system is affected. The following model is a very important one developed by Siegel, Levine & Ogdon that describes nervous system dysregulation:

- Un-traumatized nervous system
- Traumatized nervous system



This is a very crucial model known as the Window of Tolerance model. Let's explain the various parts, but firstly you must understand the concept of arousal -- this refers to the level of activation of your body's nervous system. This is represented by the two lines.

First of all, the light blue line is one that represents a nervous system that has not been compromised due to trauma. Here, the body's arousal level is within the two dotted lines, in a state known as 'optimal arousal' -- this is where, despite there being stresses that make it go up and down, it still remains in a range where we are in control despite the challenges of life.

In contrast, the red line represents the nervous system of someone who has suffered through traumatic stress. Notice how the red line goes above and below the dotted lines, or the boundaries of the optimal arousal levels. This is because it has gone into hyperarousal and hypoarousal:

Hyperarousal: a state in which your nervous system is over-activated, leading to anxiety, irritability, panic, fear overwhelm and a whole host of coping mechanisms and actions that come along with those strong feelings such as rage, destructive behaviors, addictions and so on. To illustrate this, imagine being lost as a kid and not knowing where to go and what to do -- this is the same type of feeling that leads to that level of confusion, helplessness and panic.

Hypoarousal: in contrast to the hyperarousal state, someone who is hypo-aroused actually displays the opposite reaction of numbness, disconnection and dissociation. Researchers hypothesize that this is a form of defense mechanism in response to traumatic events to protect the person's mind and brain. In this state, memory loss, depersonalization, 'shutting down' and alexithymia (difficulty identifying and expressing emotion) is common.

Different traumatized people have different responses to trauma and can be hyper-aroused, hypo-aroused or both. It depends on the coping mechanisms you relied on in the past. For example, very commonly, children who were very hyper-aroused but found that they could not hide or fight the threat would just shut down in the face of stress, causing them to enter a hypo-aroused state.

How then, do we bring our nervous system back to the optimal level? This is important because there are so many trauma survivors who basically live their entire lives in a dysregulated state (hyper-aroused or hypo-aroused) who don't even know it.

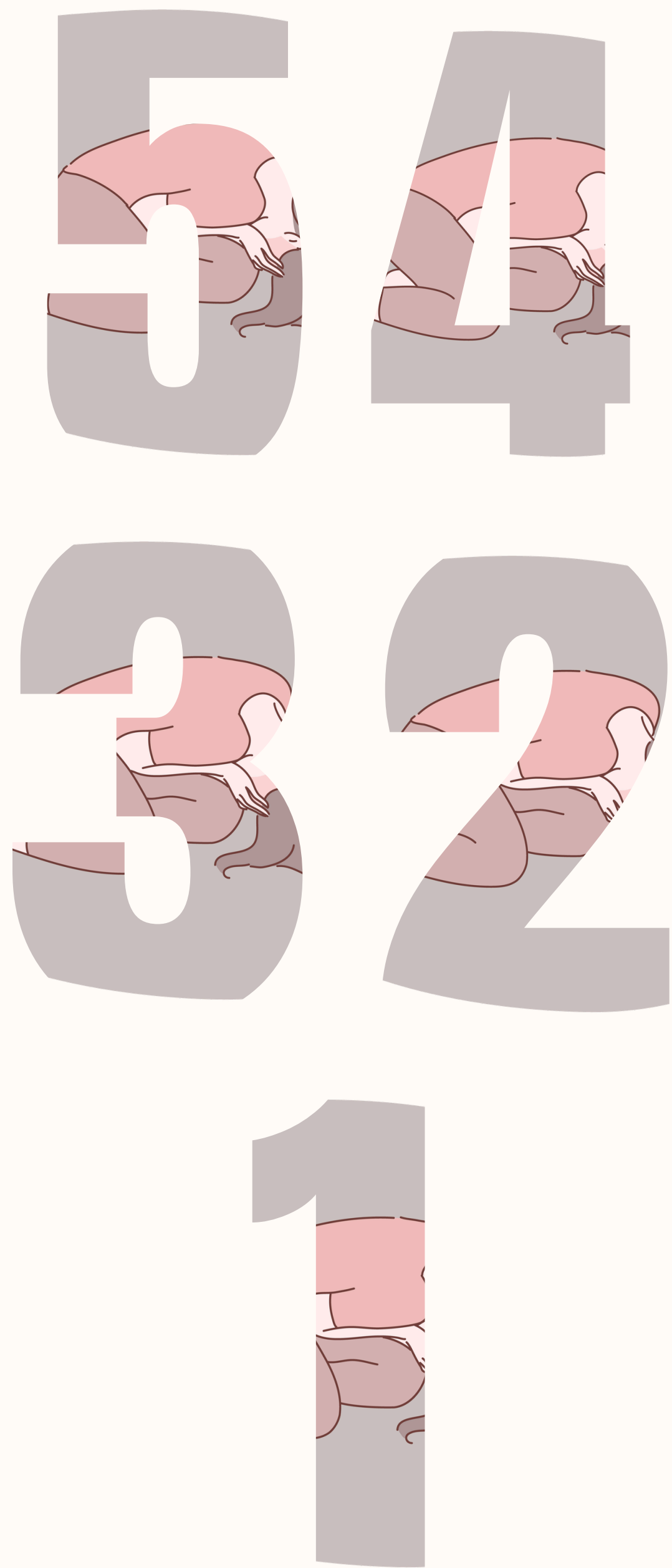
I will repeat to you what was repeated to me in my trauma training and when I was doing my placement with a trauma-informed organization -- any type of therapy is much less effective, perhaps even ineffective, if the traumatized client is dysregulated. This could be why dominant forms of talk-therapy such as Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) were ineffective for you, if you were traumatized and did not learn about emotional regulation (though Trauma-Focused CBT, or TF-CBT, seems to be effective).

The next two sections will focus on grounding techniques and emotional regulation techniques. Grounding techniques are helpful in cases where you are losing touch with the real world, such as during panic attacks or cases of dissociation, derealization, or depersonalization. Emotional regulation techniques are helpful when you know you are feeling a strong or intense emotion such as anger, sadness or disappointment or even suicidal ideation but are not necessarily dissociating -- you just can't control your feelings.

Both of these work by using your physical senses to draw you back into the present moment and the present reality.

Grounding Techniques

Grounding is the technique of bringing yourself back to the present by re-activating your physical senses. It is helpful for panic attacks/when you are dissociating.



5-4-3-2-1 Method

The classic grounding method. Identify:

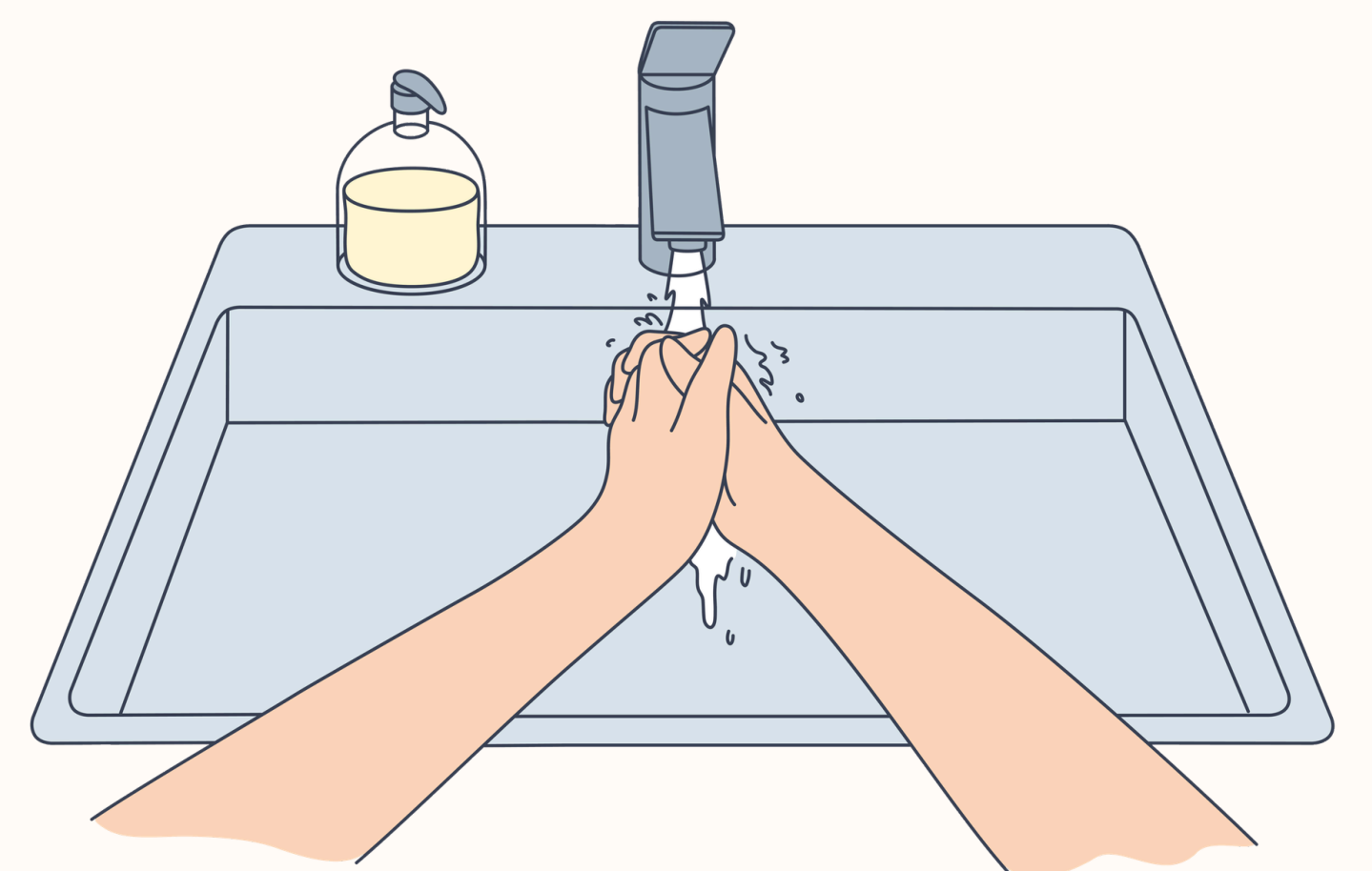
- 5 things you hear
- 4 things you see
- 3 things you can touch
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

Doing this distracts from your anxiety/panic and returns some control over your body and senses.

Varying The Water Temperature

Dunk your face and hands in cold water. This re-engages your nervous system and makes you more alert. Then, swap over to warm water and vice versa. The change in water temperature makes you more aware of how your skin feels, allowing you to regain control of your body.

(Also possible with showers)





———— Categorizing The Items Around You

This makes use of your sense of sight to train your attention away from your anxious thoughts. For example, things which are red, things which are hot, things which are small, etc.

Recite a phrase or poem, or song —————

Give yourself a challenge to recite a common phrase such as a nursery rhyme, popular song, poem or something else a certain number of times (5 or 10, for example).



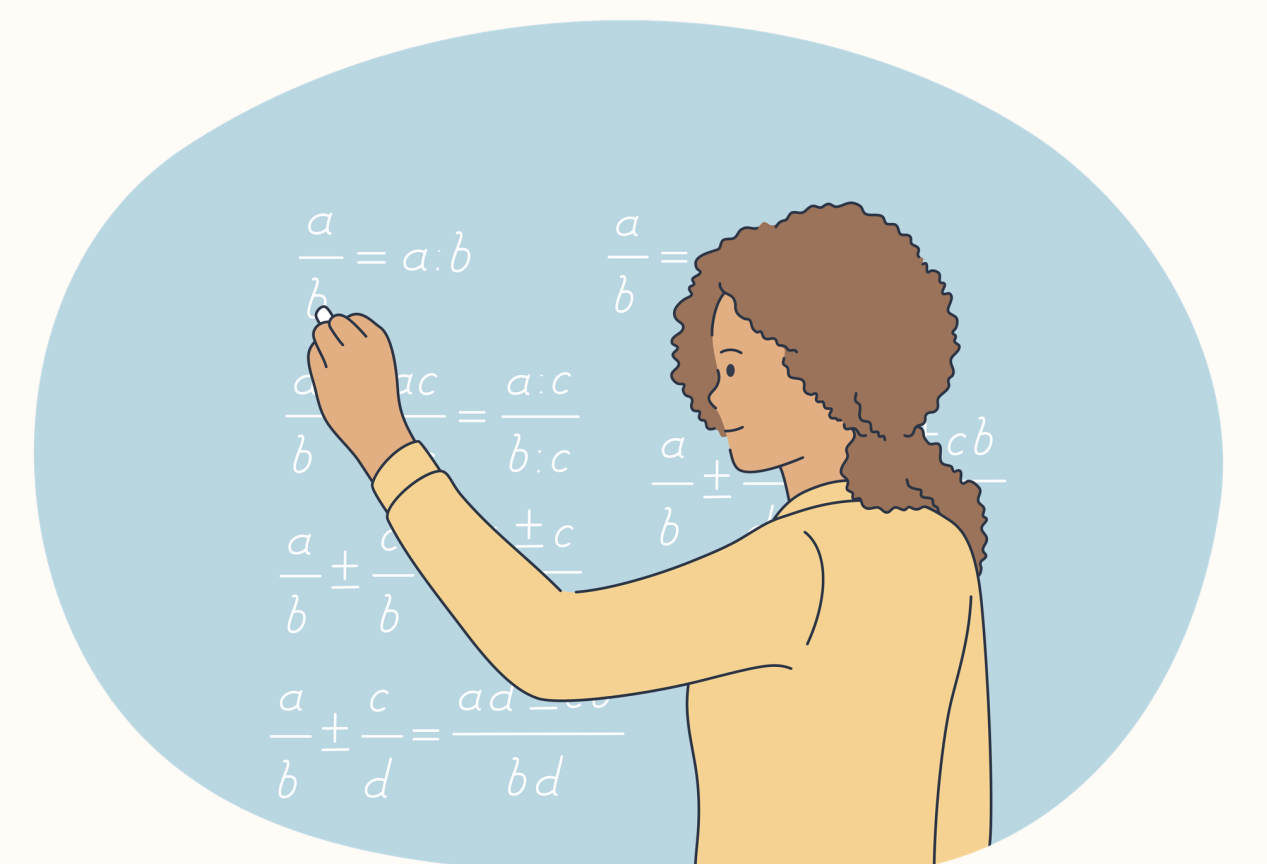
———— Describe the 5W1H of yourself

Also known as an anchoring statement, just to help yourself get back to reality, try telling yourself:

- Who you are (My name is X. I am 32 years old and my hometown is...)
- Where you are at now (I am currently in my office.)
- When is it (It is currently 3.40pm right now.)
- What you are doing (I am finishing up a presentation for my client tomorrow.)

Perform a simple math exercise —————

For example, reciting all the prime numbers or multiples of 12.



Emotional Regulation Techniques

Emotional regulation refers to those actions you can take when you are feeling an extremely intense feeling such as anger, sadness or disappointment and can't control yourself or your actions because of it but aren't necessarily dissociating (losing control of reality).

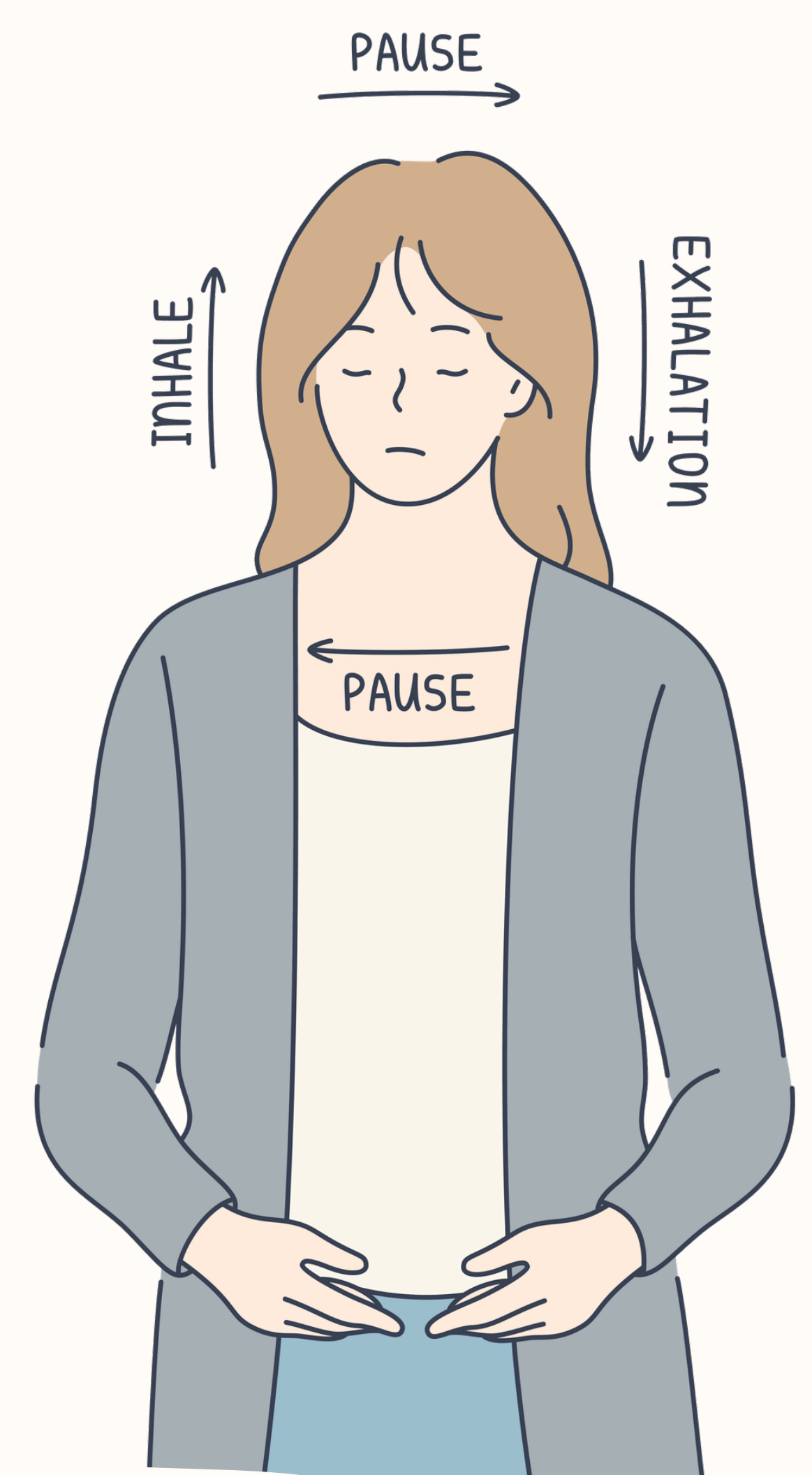


— Movement

A quick sprint, jumping jacks, push ups or even a quick walk helps to shake off the excess 'energy' that your body has stored in preparation for the fight-or-flight response. After expending this energy, your body usually feels that you have escaped from the threat. This works especially well in combination with being in fresh air or nature.

Deep Breathing —

The classic emotional regulation technique, deep breathing works by getting more oxygen into your respiratory system whereas the fight-or-flight system often leads to hyperventilation, or rapid breathing. This can be done through box-breathing (breathe in for 4 seconds, hold, breathe out for 4 seconds, hold, repeat) or any combination e.g. 4 seconds in, hold for 8 seconds, 4 seconds out, hold for 8.





— Music

Soothing or calming music helps to put you in a relaxed state more directly than asking yourself to 'calm down'.

Save a playlist full of relaxing music for easy access!

Physical Touch —

This is also another way to engage your senses in order to regulate your emotions. Physical touch with another living thing has been proven to increase hormones linked to positive mood and calm you down, and this can come from a loved one, a pet or even yourself, by hugging yourself. Many abuse survivors, especially one's of sexual abuse, feel averse to touch from others, so hugging a pet or yourself is much safer for them.



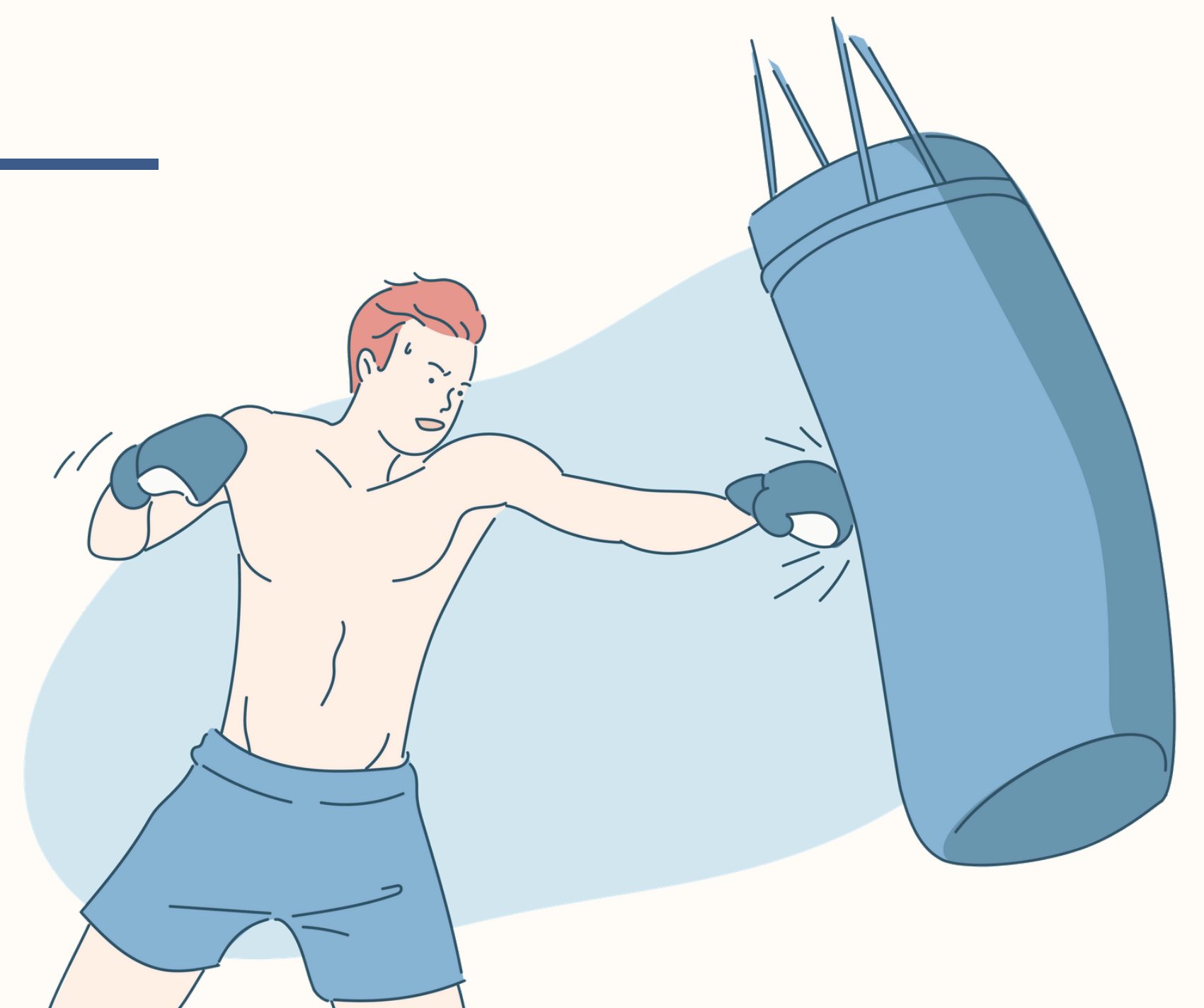
— Meaningful Conversations

Talking to someone you trust and love, and who actively listens to you instead of correcting you all the time, allows you to feel heard and expressed -- helping you feel safe and back in control of yourself. This also includes personal therapy sessions.

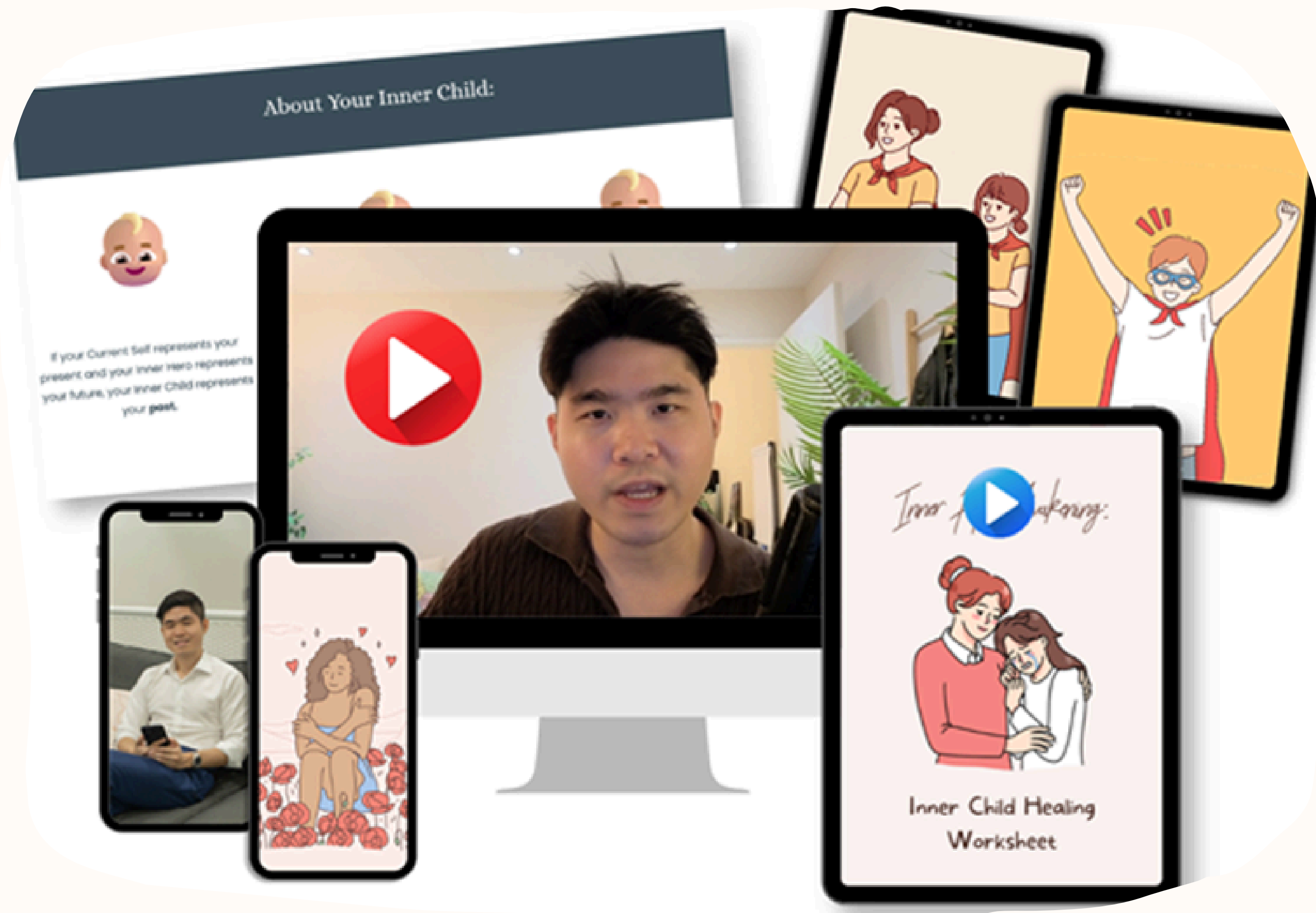


Hitting Non-Living Objects —

Especially if you are angry, try hitting a pillow, bed or punching bag to release energy! Please don't hurt others or yourself though, such as by punching walls. You can also try screaming and shouting as loud as you can in your room.



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