

# Complex Trauma for the Homeless Services System

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# The Video was good!

- Traumatized brain tries to protect itself
  - Fight, flight, freeze
- Repeated abuse makes symptoms worse
- Unexpected behavior can come from reminders of the events
- Trauma symptoms are a normal response to an abnormal experience.
  
- We should be wondering “what happened to you” more than what is wrong with you.

# Trauma in people who are homeless

- You know, many people who are homeless have had MULTIPLE TRAUMAS
- For some the trauma started very early, and made them vulnerable to later stressful events
  - Made it MORE likely stress would result in TRAUMA SYMPTOMS
- When people have had multiple traumatic events and develop trauma reactions to these events, we call their condition COMPLEX TRAUMA
  - It can be a bit difficult to know this is the case at first because SECONDARY, TERTIARY, and even QUATINARY problems arise
  - You may be meeting them after a whole series of traumas and behaviors related to trauma have been developed

# Trauma Symptoms

Concentration  
problems

Psychological  
distress

Memory

Physiological  
distress

Sleep

Relationship  
problems

Anger

Fear

Social  
withdrawal

Poor self  
care

Activities to  
reduce  
discomfort

Poor  
frustration  
tolerance

Poor self  
protection

## Associated or Secondary Symptoms of Trauma

Poor  
problem  
solving

Substance  
Use  
Disorders

Self Harmful  
Behaviors

Give up on  
participating  
in Society

Crime

# The concept of “psychological trauma”

- An experience
- A psychological and physiological reaction
  - Overwhelms coping abilities
- Causes neurobiological, psychological, cognitive, and social changes within a person
  - Memory (fear memories), emotional regulation, social interactions with others, blood pressure, pulse rate, hypervigilance, internal working models
- Impact on many functions that causes impairment

# Complex Trauma

- Reaction to multiple traumas without resolving them
- In younger people it is also known as Developmental Trauma, as the traumatic response to these events causes delays and distortions in development (more on this later).

# Relative Risk of developing a Traumatic Response to an event



# The Traumatic Experience

- The Frequency
- Intensity
- Duration
- Injury?
- Perpetrator
  - Stranger
  - Known party
    - Violation of trust
    - Inescapability
    - Complex relationship

# The Vulnerability of the Person

- Age
  - Before 5, elderly (both for physical and emotional vulnerability)
- Prior trauma
- Other issues that diminish a person's "sense of self"
  - Mental illness
  - Learning disability or other impairment in school
  - Substance use disorder
  - Homelessness, poverty
  - Embattled group (Native American, LGBTQ, African American, war refugee, immigrant fleeing danger)

# Presence of Protective Factors

- 40 Developmental Assets\*
  - External Assets
  - Internal Assets
- How many do you need?
- Which ones are the most important?

# Resiliency Gained by the Person

- Experiences have been overcome
  - Success in facing challenges, stresses
- Perspective on the events
- Ability to predict when another challenge will appear
  - Psychological rehearsal
  - Building up one's abilities to face predictable challenge
  - Philosophical/religious perspective on stress, challenges
- Ability to balance deficits with strengths
  - "I may be \_\_\_\_\_, but I am really good at \_\_\_\_\_"
- Resiliency is almost always developed as part of a supportive relationship (many relationships can serve as the platform)

# How does this equation work for most homeless people?

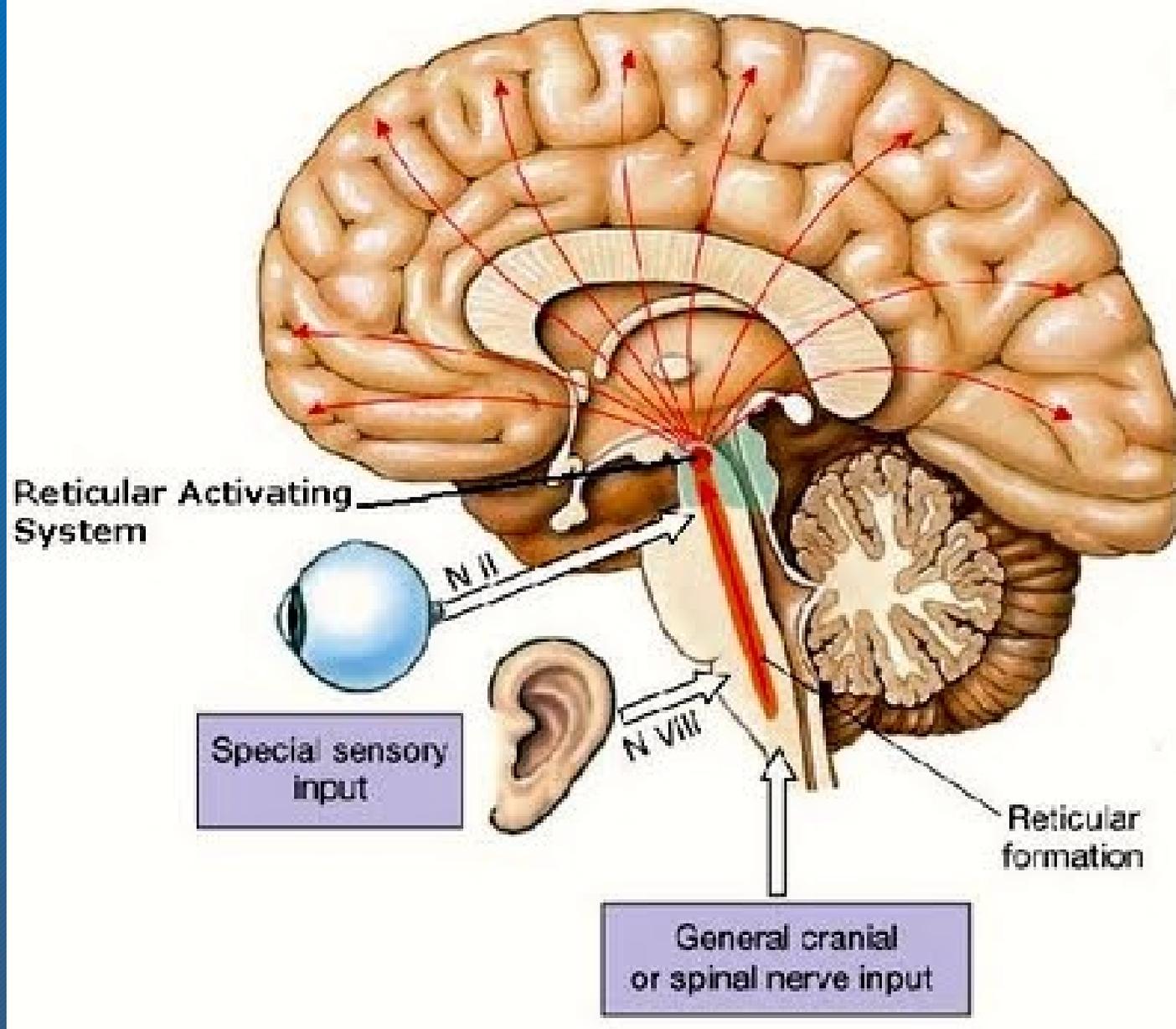
- How many traumas have they had?
- How vulnerable are they to a new trauma?
- How many protective factors do they have?
- How much resiliency have they developed in their life?

# What happens when a person is traumatized?

- Alarm and alert systems are activated
- Memory systems are overwhelmed with intense stimulation
  - If it happens once- the memory can be burned into their brain for many years
  - If it happens over and over, the memory system becomes overwhelmed and has trouble remembering the specific events
- The bodies ability to return the mind to its restful state is impacted
  - If it happens once, it can take a while for the person to recover
  - If it happens over and over, the person may not be able to return to a restful state- its "SET POINTS" are bent

# We have 3 Alarm/Arousal Systems in our Brain

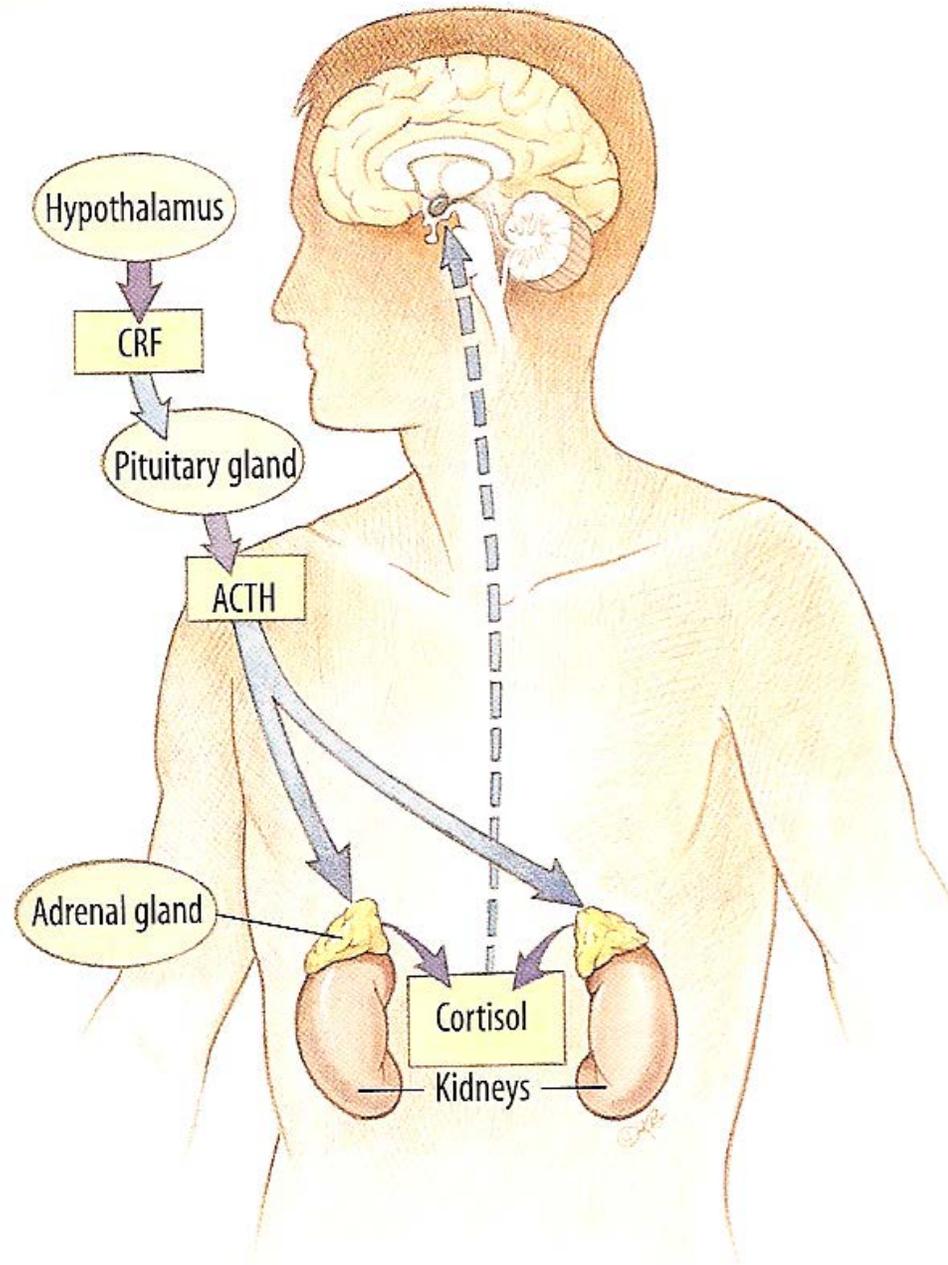
- Reticular Activating Formation (RAF)
- Hypothalamic Pituitary Adrenal system (HPA Axis)
- Sympathetic Adrenal Medullary System (SAM)



The Reticular Activating Formation (RAF) is in place at birth.

It acts as the “burglar alarm” for the brain, notifying the nervous system in sensory input is “known” or familiar or “novel” or new

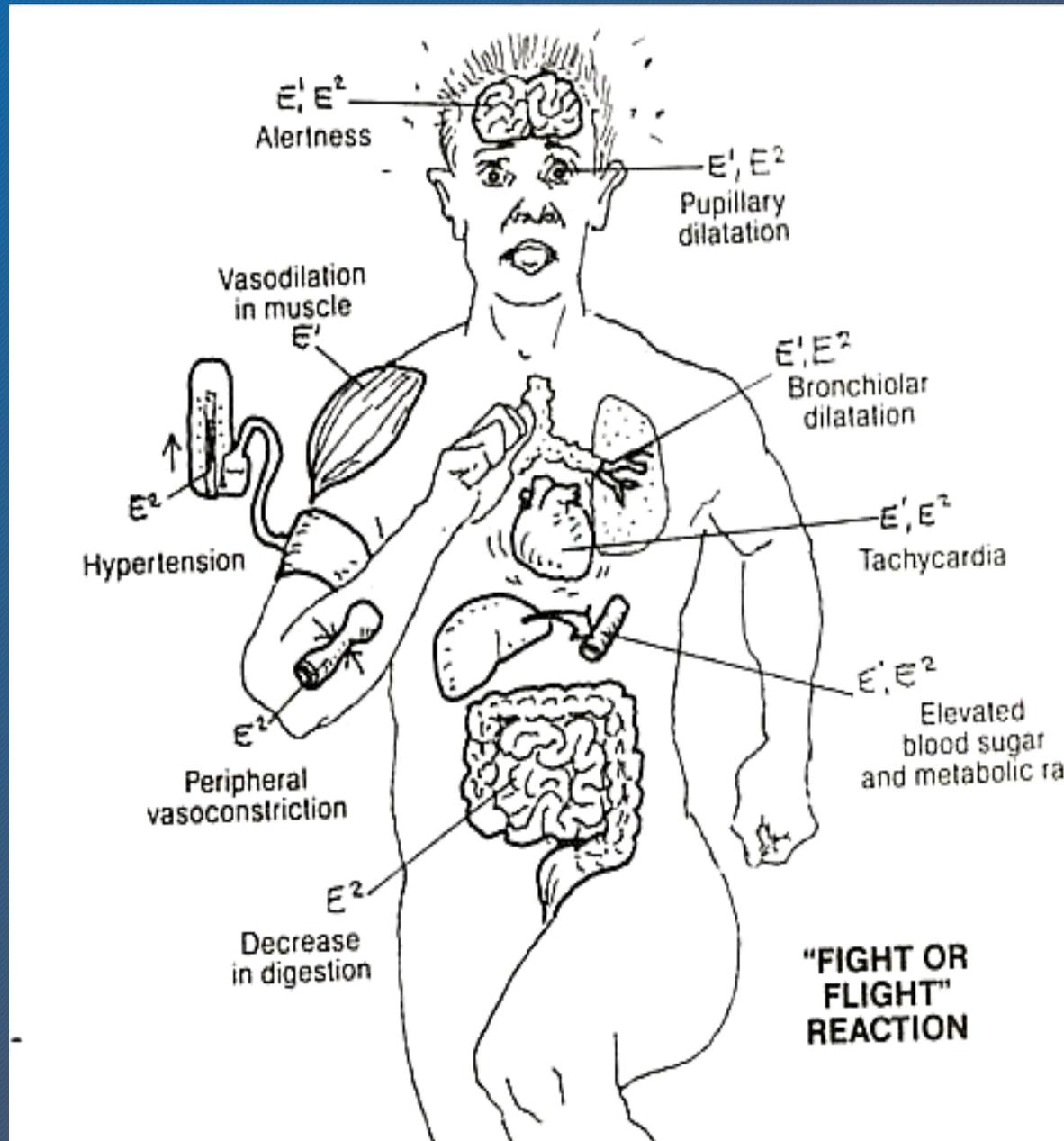
It then sends out alerts all over the brain (including the HPA axis and the Sympathetic Nervous System)



## HPA Axis-

Hypothalamus  
Pituitary  
Adrenal Axis

Uses  
CORTISOL



## Sympathetic Nervous System

The "Freeze, Fight, or Flight" response

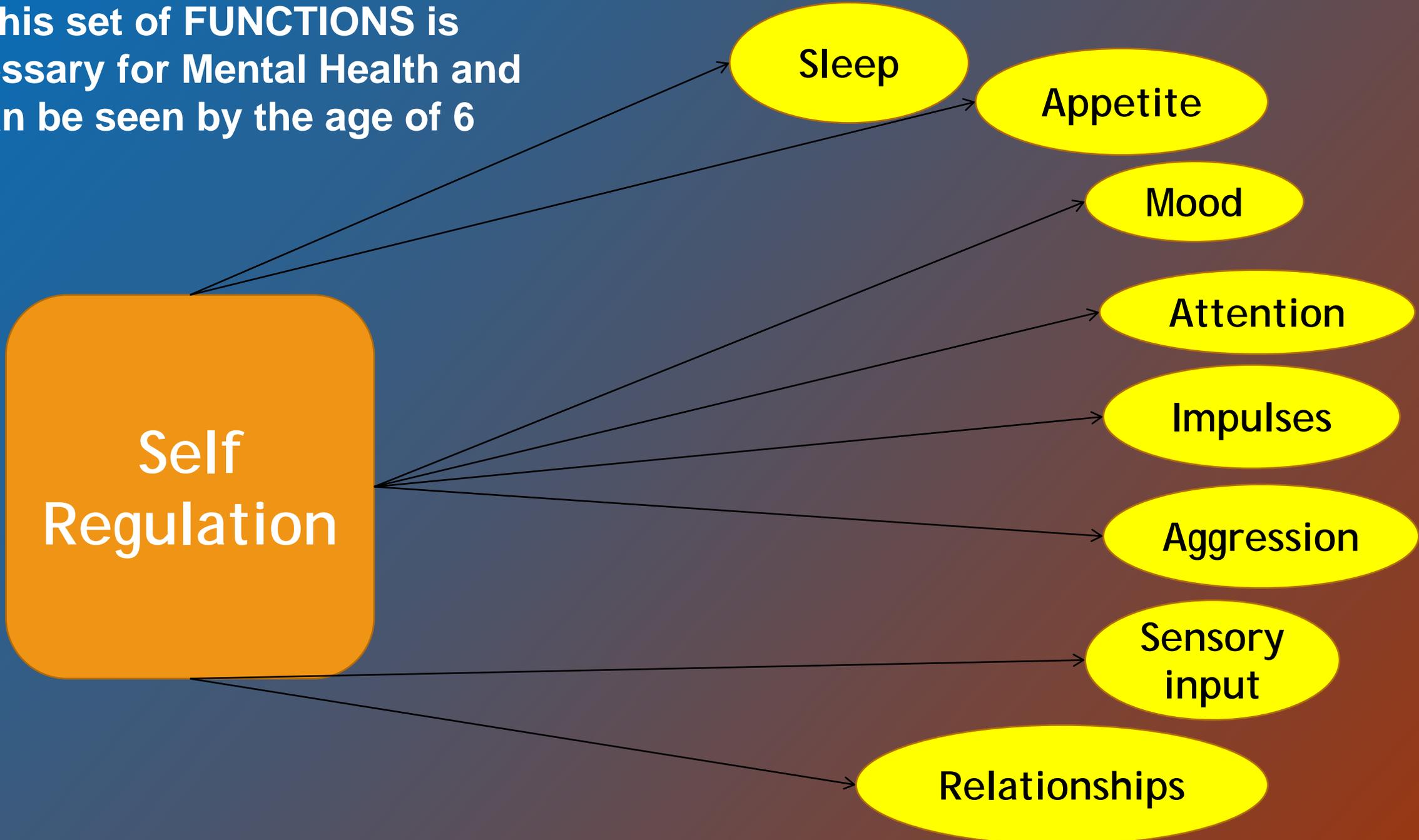
# Arousal State Chart

<b>Sense of Time</b>	Extended Future	Days Hours	Hours Minutes	Minutes Seconds	Loss of Sense of Time
<b>Primary secondary Brain Areas</b>	NEOCORTEX <i>Subcortex</i>	SUBCORTEX <i>Limbic</i>	LIMBIC <i>Midbrain</i>	MIDBRAIN <i>Brainstem</i>	BRAINSTEM <i>Autonomic</i>
<b>Cognition</b>	Abstract	Concrete	Emotional	Reactive	Reflex
<b>Mental State</b>	CALM	AROUSAL	ALARM	FEAR	TERROR

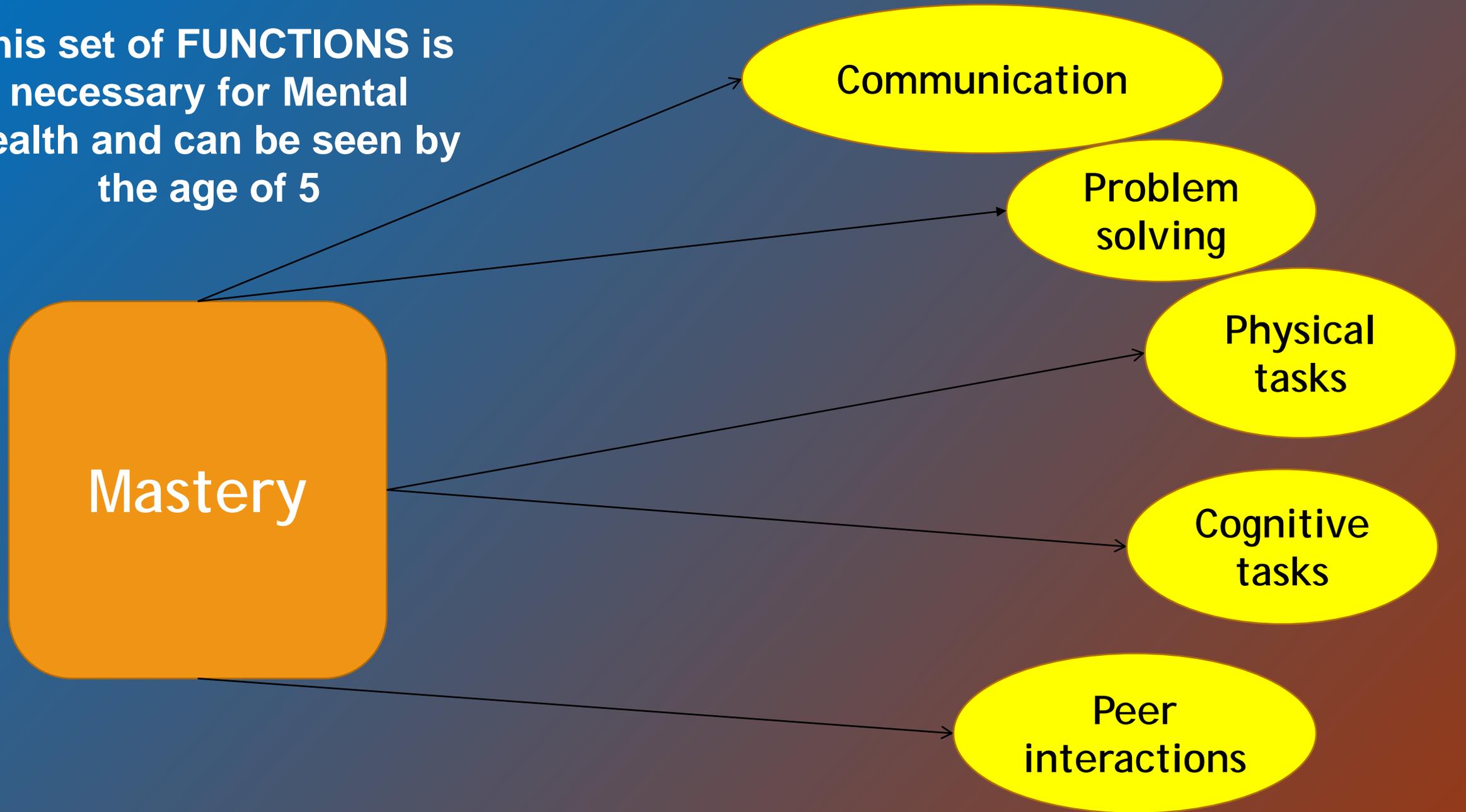
# So, where do you, as a Homeless Services Worker start to understand these folks?

- 4 areas of concern
  - Self-regulation
  - Self-efficacy or advocacy or mastery
  - Executive function
  - Wellbeing

This set of **FUNCTIONS** is necessary for Mental Health and can be seen by the age of 6



**This set of FUNCTIONS is  
necessary for Mental  
Health and can be seen by  
the age of 5**



This set of FUNCTIONS is necessary for Mental Health and can be seen by the age of 6

**Executive Function**

**Attention modulation**

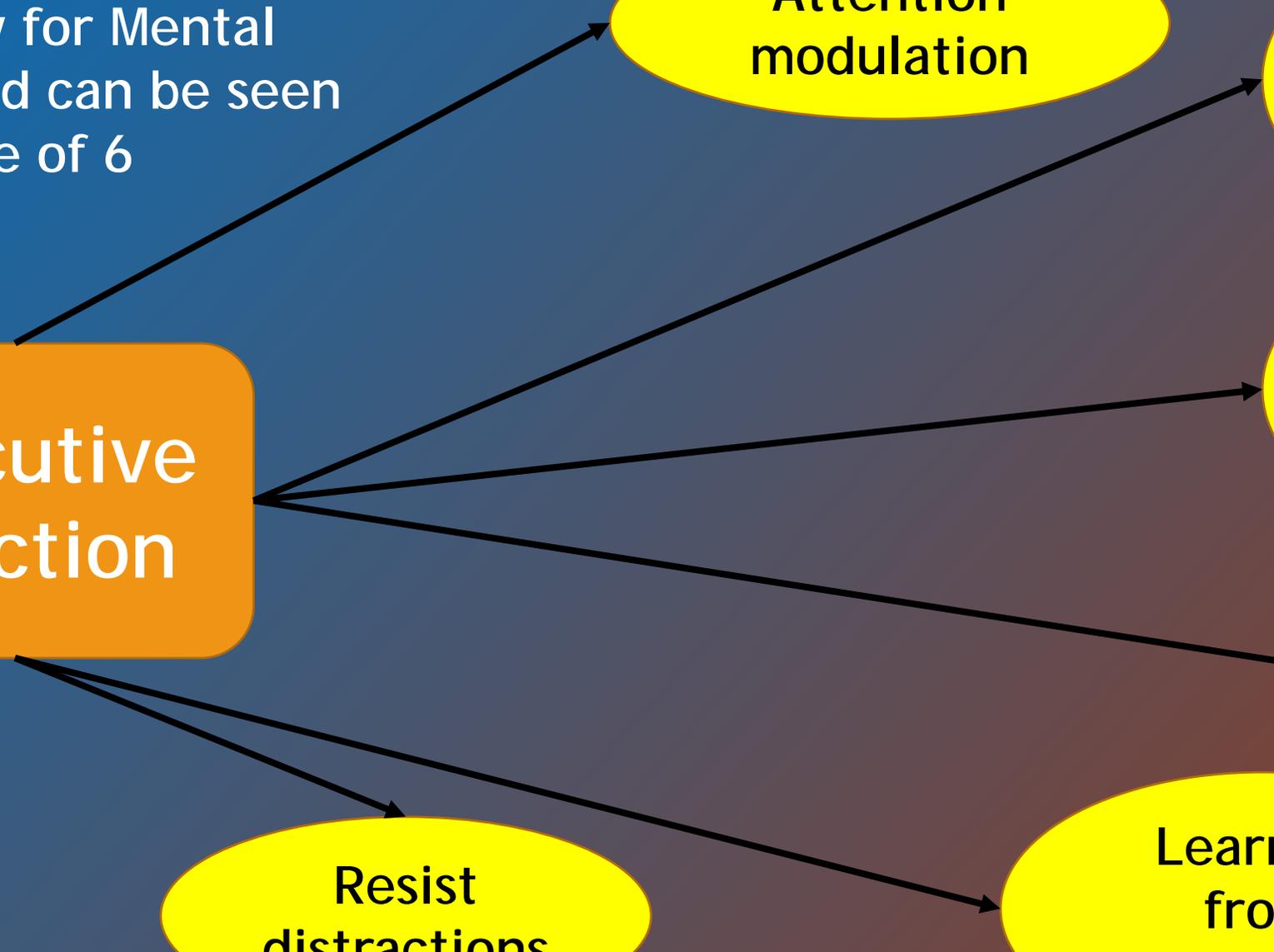
**Hold thoughts in mind**

**Saliency**

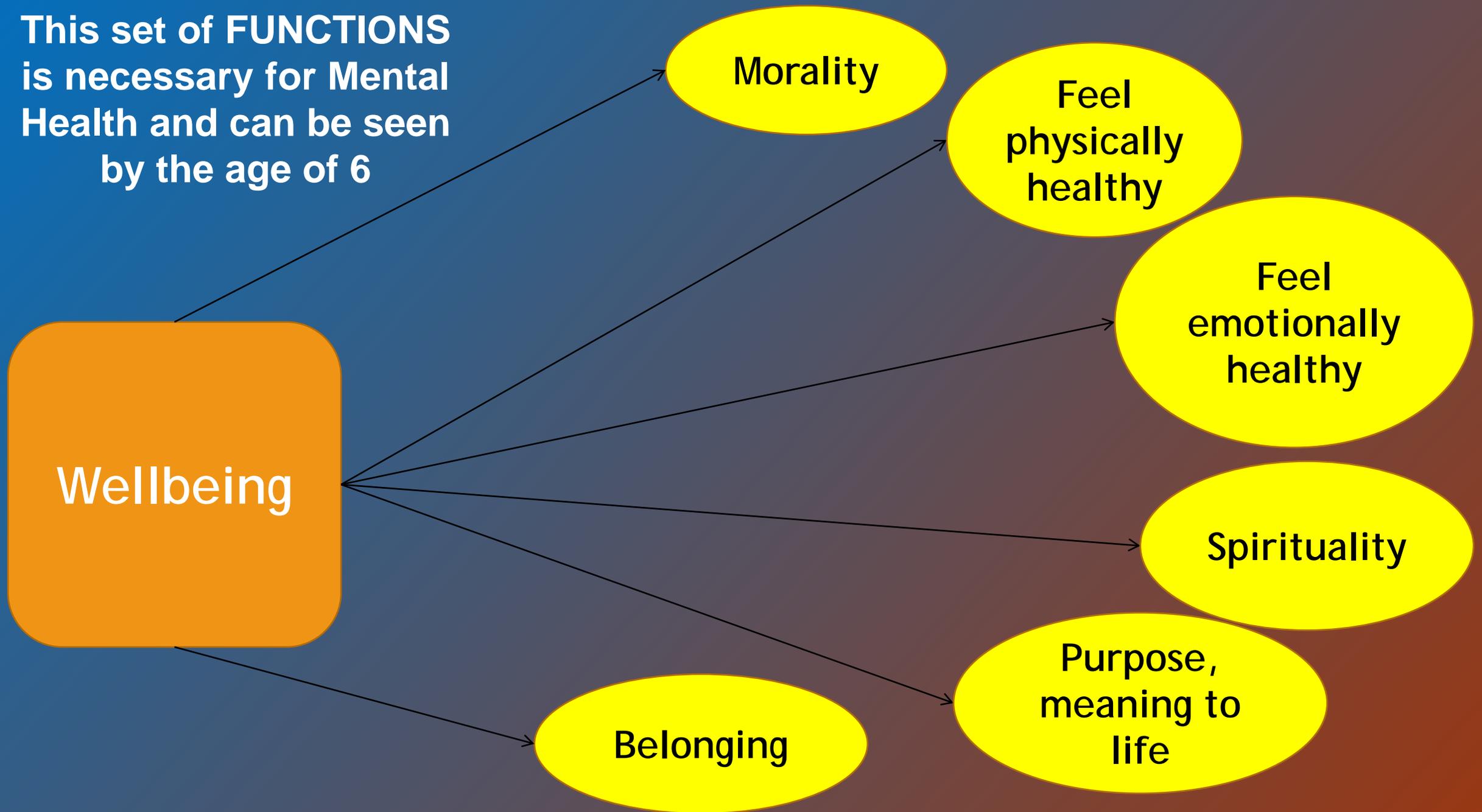
**Planning and Predicting**

**Resist distractions**

**Learning from experience**



**This set of FUNCTIONS  
is necessary for Mental  
Health and can be seen  
by the age of 6**



# Thinking back to what I mentioned before about different types of people who are homeless

- Those who are well developed and have had a sudden unfortunate change of luck
- Those who have had a life long set of bad circumstances
- Those who have complex trauma and have had their brain set points changed because of it

What can happen, before age 6, to interfere with these 3 FUNCTIONS?\*

## Early childhood experiences

Neglect

Abuse

Loss of continuity  
of affectionate  
care

Excessive stress

Genetic  
vulnerability

Temperamental  
Problems

Developmental  
abnormality

Physical Injury,  
Illness

## Functions we need by 6

Self  
Regulation

Self  
Efficacy

Executive  
Function

Wellbeing

There are even things that  
can happen before we are  
born, that impact our  
FUNCTIONS

## Prenatal Risk

Parental Trauma

Maternal illness, infection

Birth trauma

Exposure to drugs, infections

Genetic abnormalities

## Early childhood risk

Neglect

Abuse

Loss of continuity of affectionate care

Excessive stress

Genetic vulnerability

Temperamental Problems

Developmental abnormality

Physical Injury, Illness

## Functions we need by 6 years

Self Regulation

Self Efficacy

Executive Function

Wellbeing

Most of the troubles children have by the age of 6 have to do with difficulties related to these areas.\*

What are the specific functions that get disrupted?

## Prenatal Risk

Parental trauma

Maternal illness, infection

Birth trauma

Exposure to drugs, infections

Genetic abnormalities

## Early childhood risk

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Developmental abnormality

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## Functions we need by 6 years

Self Regulation

Self Efficacy

Executive Function

Wellbeing

## Behavioral Health Problems

Sleep, appetite, moods, aggression, impulsivity, attention, relationship formation, ability to handle sensory input

Cognitive tasks, physical tasks, communication, problem solving, relationships with peers

Attention modulation, planning and predicting, salience, learn from experience, hold thoughts in mind

Physical health, emotional health, spirituality, morality, meaning, purpose

# To Summarize

- People who are homeless have been through some terrible experiences
- Some have been traumatized over and over and are constantly on guard for new traumas
- There are multiple functions that get impacted because of this trauma
- The areas of impact are Self-Regulation, Mastery, Executive Function, and Wellbeing
- Take your time, let folks get used to you, more on techniques later