



# An introduction to Emotion Focused Family Therapy (EFFT)

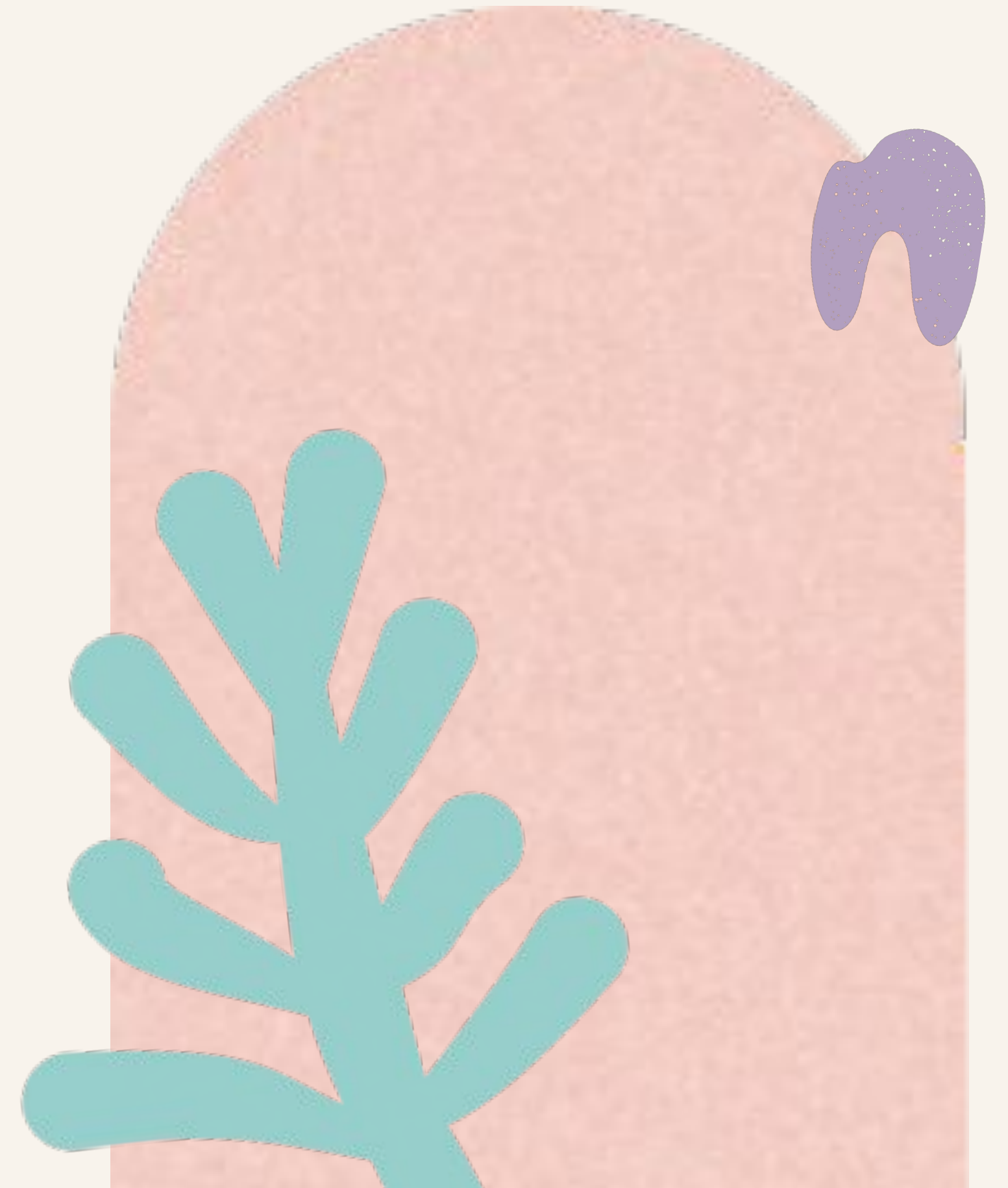
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With thanks to Adele LaFrance and Jen Danby.

*Acknowledgment of Country*

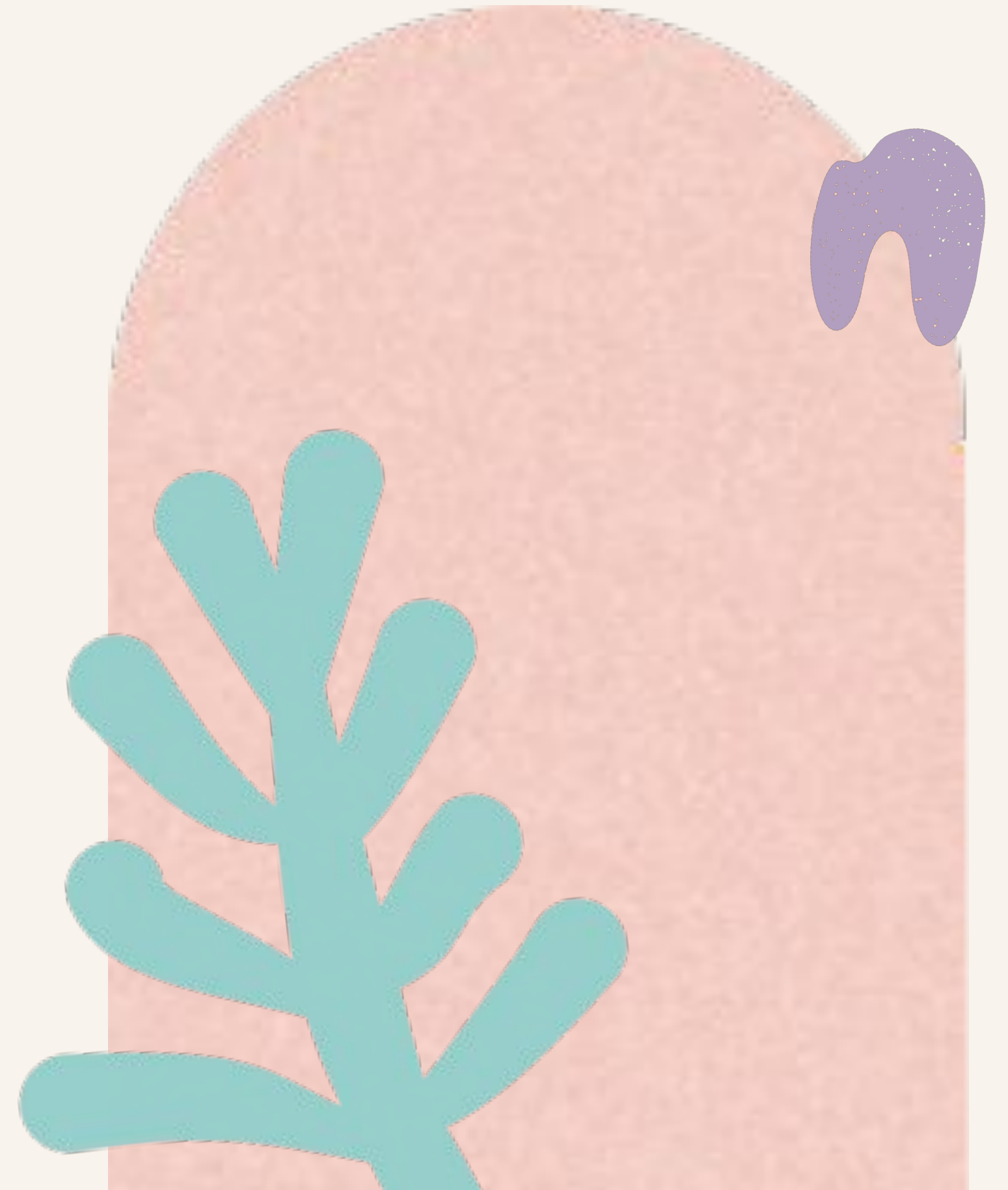
# Topics for tonight...

- The what and the why of EFFT
- It's a little personal
- Harnessing the power of caregivers
- Why focus on emotions?
- Emotion Coaching
- Tips and Resources
- Questions and discussion



# But first ...

Co-regulation ... let's do it together

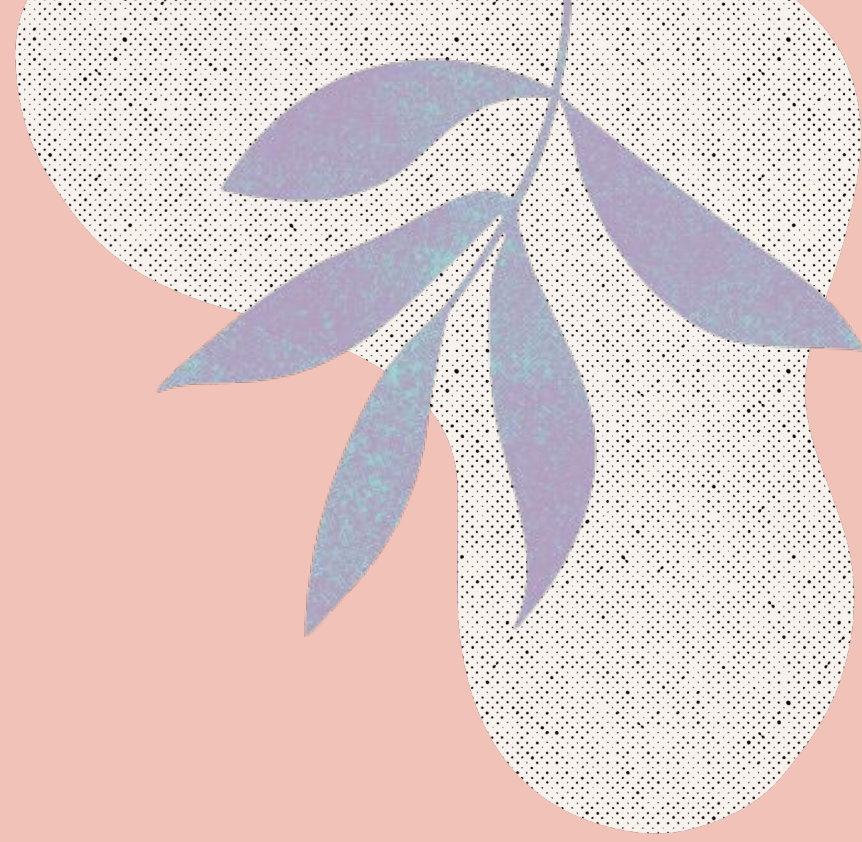


# What is EFFT?

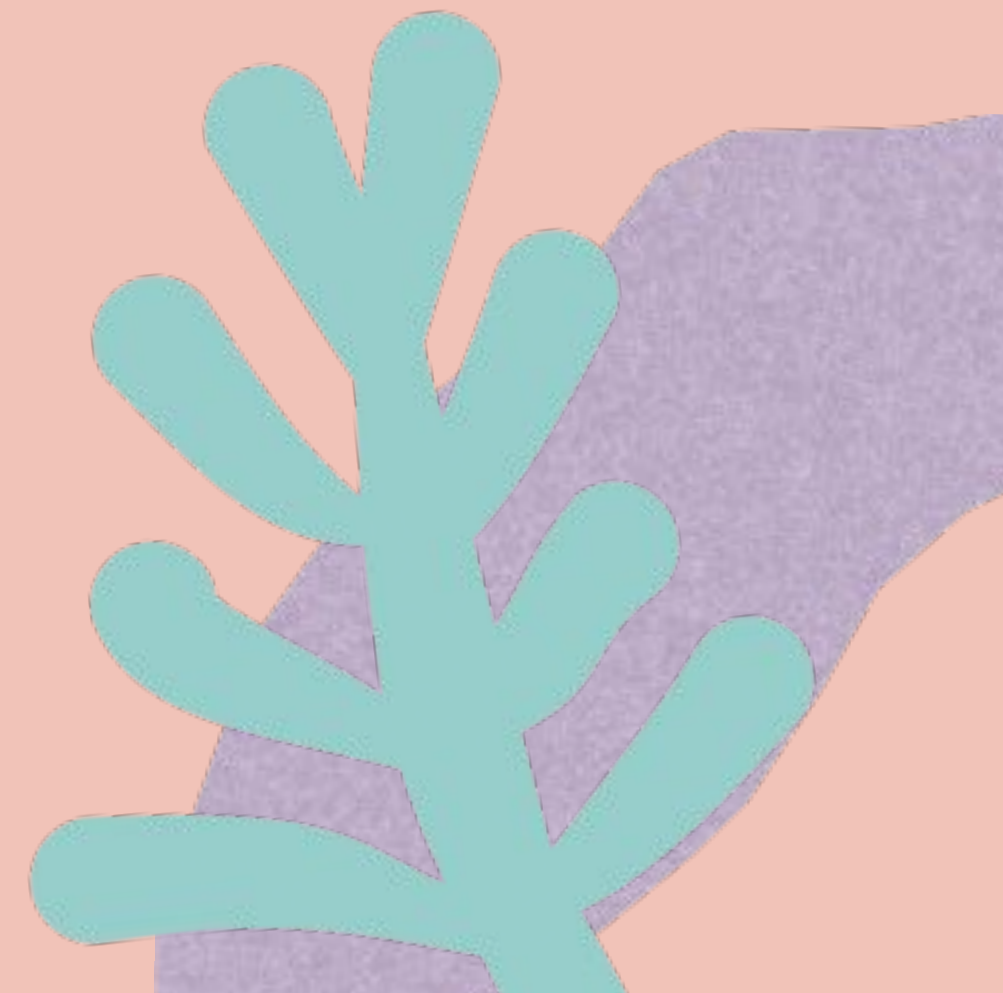
**The fundamentals:** EFFT is a transdiagnostic approach to mental health conditions that centres on the healing capacity of parents and caregivers.

- Focuses on *emotions* and emotion process (for the “patient”, the caregiver/s, and even the clinicians involved)
- Lifespan approach
- Skills training: emotion processing, behavioural support
- No blame, transparency and collaboration





Why do I work with EFFT?





## A word about the evidence base ...

- Model <10 years old with emerging evidence base
- No RCTs yet
- However body of research is increasing and preliminary research is encouraging
- e.g. Foroughe, M., Stillar, A., Goldstein, L., Dolhanty, J., Goodcase, E. T., & Lafrance, A. (2018). Brief Emotion Focused Family Therapy: An Intervention for Parents of Children and Adolescents with Mental Health Issues. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*.

## Why Involve Caregivers?

- Caregivers know their loved ones the most, and are most invested in their recovery
- Caregiver efforts are more neurologically powerful
- Eating disorders require more intensive support than inpatient or outpatient services alone
- Caregivers' own lives are impacted



*“What is most detrimental to the mental health of a parent or caregiver is to witness a loved one's suffering and feel helpless or ineffective in the face of it”*  
(Monin, 2016)



# Why Focus on Emotions?



# Advanced Caregiving Skill - Emotion Coaching



*"Mum/Dad, nobody likes me."*

What's your first, instinctive response as a parent?



# Advanced Caregiving Skill - Emotion Coaching

Great parents tend to respond to their child's emotions using these skills:

- Reassuring - "lots of people like you"
- Problem-solving - "let's arrange a sleepover ..."
- Distracting - "let's do something fun this weekend to take your mind off it"
- Asking questions - "What did they do/say?"
- Cheerleading - "You are such a good/kind/fun person"
- Focusing on the bright side - "You still have your friends from ..."
- Others?



*What's your go-to response to your child's distress?*



# Advanced Caregiving Skill - Emotion Coaching

Why do we respond in this way?

- Effective and valid strategies in some situations
- We want to free our loved ones from their emotional pain
- We don't want to say the wrong thing or make their pain worse
- We don't understand their pain - it seems irrational or disproportionate
- Their emotional pain causes us emotional pain (and we also struggle with processing our own emotions)
- We aren't taught (through family or cultural conditioning) how to respond to emotional pain and we are taught to privilege some emotions over others

Sometimes our responses to our loved one's distress can **disrupt emotional processing**



# Advanced Caregiving Skill - Emotion Coaching

Why do we need to process our emotions at all?

- Emotions are an adaptive survival strategy that we have as humans
- Emotions are part of our biology.
- An emotion's natural course is to rise and then subside, like a wave.
- When an emotion is suppressed, it leads to physical and psychological consequences, including increased rumination, anxiety, depression, and stress-related physical conditions. In other words, the body and mind "hold on" to the emotion.



# Advanced Caregiving Skill - Emotion Coaching

Emotion coaching is a very structured strategy designed to help your your child process their emotions in healthy and adaptive ways.

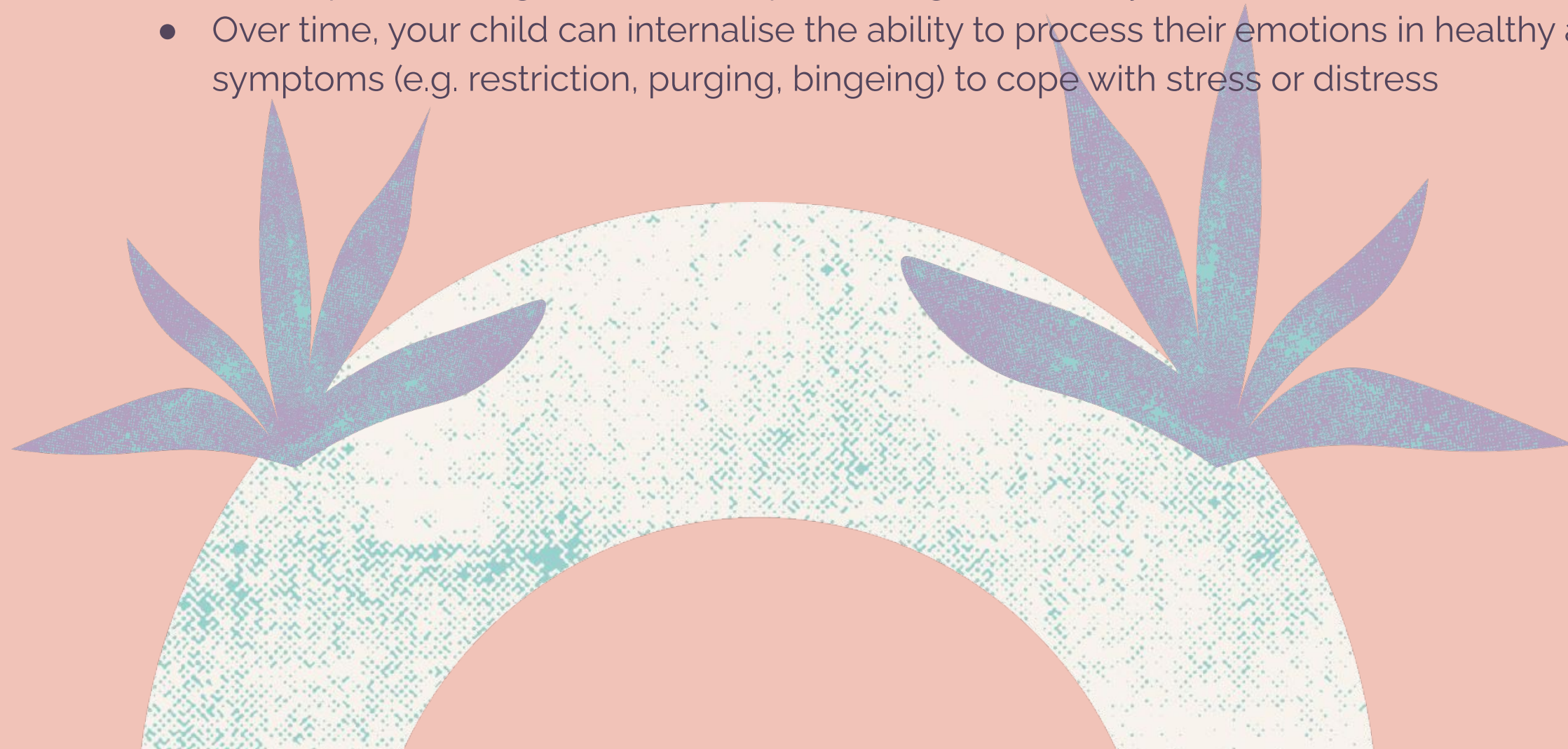
Short-term:

- Decrease in resistance to behavioural strategies
- Decrease escalation of behaviour and emotions

*Even when it doesn't "work" in the moment, it is still helping to ...*

Longer-term:

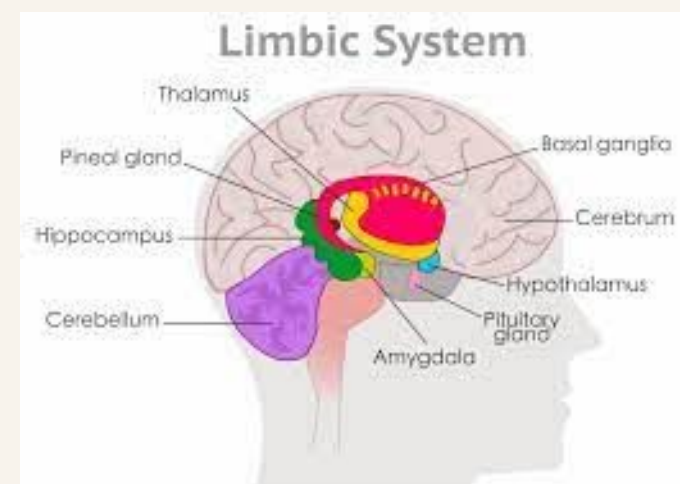
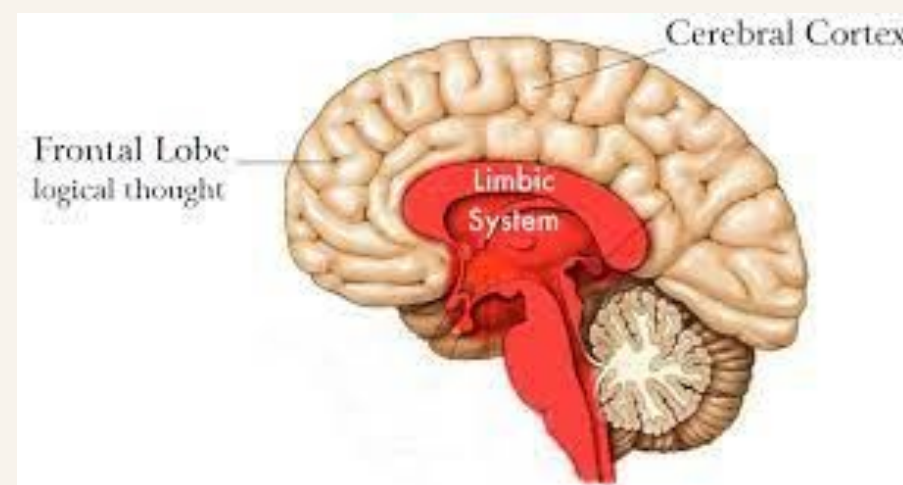
- Develop and strengthen emotion-processing abilities in your loved one
- Over time, your child can internalise the ability to process their emotions in healthy and adaptive ways, which means they no longer need their symptoms (e.g. restriction, purging, bingeing) to cope with stress or distress



# Advanced Caregiving Skill - Emotion Coaching

## Neurobiology of emotion coaching:

- When a caregiver's response (through verbal and non-verbal cues) meets and mirrors the distress of their loved one, these caring signals release oxytocin from the child's hypothalamus to their limbic system, leading to a calming effect (Hughes & Baylin, 2012; Joseph, 1999).
- In the short-term, the caregivers are helping their child regulate their emotions through coregulation
- Over time, this "builds a bridge" between the frontal lobe and the limbic system and the child can develop their own emotion regulation capacities



# Emotion Coaching - how do we do it?

## 3 STEPS:

- 1) **Validate x 3**
- 2) Emotional Support
- 3) Behavioural Support



# Emotion Coaching - Step 1: Validation

## Validating is:

- Conveying understanding of your loved one's perspective and demonstrating that you “get it” *from their point of view*

## Validating is **not**:

- Agreeing with your loved one
- Endorsing their behaviour
- Letting go of behavioural strategies and boundaries
- Validating their perspective quickly before you invalidate it...

Look out for this socially conditioned impulse:

*“I know you don't want to eat that ...”*

What 3 letter word is on the tip of your tongue?



# Emotion Coaching - Step 1: Validation

*"I know you don't want to eat that ..."*

**BUT**

... you need to/you're not well/if you don't you will have to go to hospital ...

In emotion coaching, we move from **but** to **because**

*"I can imagine why you don't want to eat that **because** ... (you haven't eaten porridge with yoghurt for a really long time) ... and because ... and because ... " (x 3)*



# Emotion Coaching - Step 1: Validation

*Let's try this together ...*



# Emotion Coaching - Step 1: Validation

*I can imagine/I can understand/I think I get ...why you don't want to eat that ...*

**because...**

You haven't eaten that kind of breakfast in a really long time and I know dairy is scary for you at the moment

... and because you might be worried about feeling sick or bloated

... and because maybe it's really painful for you to sit with those feelings afterwards



# Emotion Coaching - Step 2: Emotional Support

Communicate to your loved ones that you are there for them, supporting them, and love them no matter what.

Emotional support statements:

- Reassurance ("It's going to be okay")
- Communication of understanding ("I hear you")
- Communication of positive regard ("I know you're doing the best you can right now")
- Communication of belief ("I believe in you"; "I believe you can/we can do this")
- Communication of togetherness ("We're in this together"; "you're not alone, I'm here with you")

Emotional support gestures:

- A soothing hand
  - A hug
  - A back scratch
- 
- Space: "Why don't I give you a few minutes and then we can try this again?"



# Emotion Coaching - Step 3: Behavioural Support

Offering problem solving and strategies as per your parental wisdom, the treatment advice you are receiving

Behavioural support might include:

- Proceed with the plan (e.g. "We'll try it again, just one bite at a time")
- Suggest a distraction activity (e.g. "Play (favourite) music/ watch something while you eat breakfast that you love, etc.")
- Use skills ("Let's try that breathing app")
- Exposure to the anxiety-provoking stimulus (in a gradual way) "We'll make the rest of the day's meals and snacks really predictable and foods you feel a bit safer with because you're challenging yourself this morning"
- Problem solve (Would it help if we put the yoghurt in a smoothie because that's a little easier for you at the moment and then we can try it again in a few days?)
- Set a limit (Once we've done this, we can ... )
- N/A (sometimes, once the other is validated and supported emotionally, no more is required)

\*\*\*\*



# Emotion Coaching - Putting it all together

*"I don't want to eat that"*

Step 1: VALIDATE

"I can understand why you don't want to eat that because you haven't eaten that kind of breakfast in a really long time and I know dairy is scary for you at the moment; and because you might be worried about feeling sick or bloated; and because maybe it's really painful for you to sit with those feelings afterwards?"

Step 2: EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

"I know this is hard and you're doing the best you can right now"

Step 3: BEHAVIOURAL SUPPORT

"Why don't we do some more puppy research together while you're trying to eat that so we can take your mind off it a little?"

# Emotion Coaching - Tips:

- Emotion coaching is NOT agreeing.
- Draw out allllllll the feelings and play whack-a-mole
- We don't need perfection - you don't have to do it right or all the time
- This is not permissive parenting - **limits** are still there, but now they have a better chance of being heard



# Emotion Coaching - More Tips:

- Tentative language
- Be genuine if you can (if you can't, don't do it in that moment)
- Match your nonverbals to your verbals
- "Don't talk to me like a psychologist!"
- **Practice**



# Emotion Coaching - Tricky Responses:

**Anger:** (directed towards you)

- Emotion coaching can help draw out the anger to get to the more vulnerable emotions
- When emotion coaching, match loved one's energy



# Emotion Coaching - Tricky Responses:

**Silence:** (the trickiest of all)

*Silence can be triggering - rejection, disrespectful*

First: Ground yourself (breathing, your own support). Then ...

1. Validate the **silence** (why they are withdrawing or cutting you off) - “guess” the perspective
  - ❑ Validate three layers: your loved one (you), the family context (us), the personal context (me)
2. Then validate the **underlying emotions:** anger, fear, sadness, hopelessness, shame
3. Then your **best guess to meet the need** (emotional support, behavioural support)



# Emotion Coaching - Tricky Responses:

**Silence:** (the trickiest of all)

1. Validate the **three layers of silence**: them, the family/environment, you:

*"I can understand / imagine why you wouldn't want to talk to me about this because ..."*

*... Talking to me about the things that are upsetting you probably feels really awkward, embarrassing, or stressful (**for you**)*

*...And because **in our family**, when we try to talk about this stuff, it often doesn't go so well and someone ends up upset or angry.*

*...And because when you've tried to reach out in the past, **I've** reacted by pressuring you with questions or trying to fix the problem and my responses ended up just making you feel worse rather than better.*



# Emotion Coaching - Tricky Responses:

**Silence:** (the trickiest of all)

Then your **best guess to meet the need** (emotional support, behavioural support)

*ES: "I love you no matter what, and I'm going to try really hard to be there for you in the way you need"*

*BS: "I'm guessing you don't need pressure, so I'm going to give you space, and I'm also going to be here if you need me"*

Remember:

- You don't have to get this perfectly right - your attempts to connect with their experience of silence is powerful
- You don't have to get a response for this to be "working" and transforming their resistance from deep down
- Although it's hard (+++!), try not to pressure for an outcome from your loved one
- And although it's hard, try not to give up after the first attempt but be gently persistent



# Emotion Coaching - Let's try it together:

*"I feel so fat"*

What's your gut response?



# Emotion Coaching - Let's try it together:

*"I feel so fat"*

## **Step 1 - Validate**

I can understand/imagine why you feel ...

When I put myself in your shoes I can imagine that you feel ...

It would make sense that you feel ...

because ...

and because ..

and because ...

## **Step 2 - Emotional Support**

- Comfort (a hand, a hug or loving words)
- Reassurance ("It's going to be ok")
- Communication of understanding ("I understand you"; "I hear you")
- Communication of positive regard ("I know you are doing the best you can right now")
- Communication of belief in the other ("I believe in you; "I believe you can do this")
- Communication of togetherness ("We're in this together"; "I want the best for you too")

## **Step 3 -: Practical/Behavioural Support**

- Proceed with plan
- Suggest a distraction activity (walk, movie, music, etc.)
- Redirect to another thought or activity
- Teach skills
- Exposure to the anxiety-provoking stimulus (in a gradual way)
- Offer solutions to solve the practical problem or take over to solve the problem
- Set a limit
- N/A (sometimes, once the other is validated and supported emotionally, no more is required)



# Emotion Coaching - Last Tips!

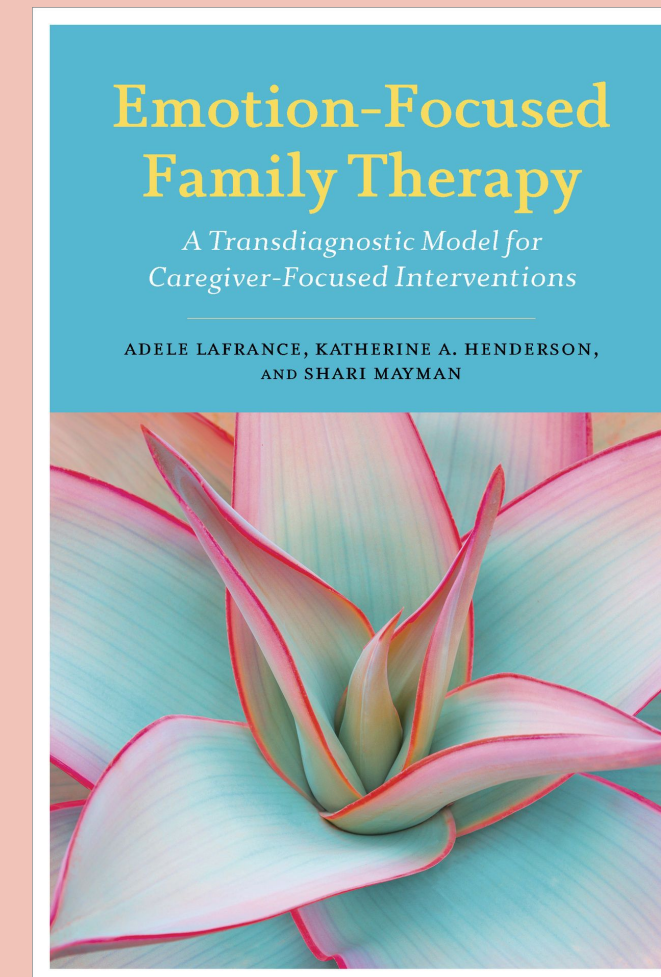
What if I make a mistake?

- Repairs are more powerful than ruptures and can lead to stronger bonds (like muscle fibre)
- When emotion coaching: it's not what happened, it's what happens next



# Resources

- Mental Health Foundations website <https://www.mentalhealthfoundations.ca/resources>
- Emotion-Focused Family Therapy: A Transdiagnostic Model for Caregiver- Focused Interventions (Lafrance, Henderson, Mayman)
- Institute for Emotion Focused Family Therapy (practitioner list) <https://efftinternational.org/efft-practitioners>



Questions?

... and thank you!



