



DR MIGUEL TORIBIO-MATEAS
Neuroscience for Body and Mind

From Control to Connection:

*A Whole-Mind-Body Approach
to Nutrition and Self-Kindness in ADHD*

Dr Miguel Toribio-Mateas CBiol



Welcome



I see you!

**And, as a neurodivergent person who has grappled with their
relationship with food for 30+ years...**

I feel you too!



First, let's arrive...

A 20-second nervous system reset



A tiny nervous system tuning pause

- 1. Feet on the floor**
- 2. Find one pleasant, neutral or interesting thing**
- 3. Gentle inhale through the nose**
- 4. Tiny second sip of air**
- 5. Long, slow exhale**
- 6. Notice what changed**



Who am I?



Clinical neuroscientist / Chartered Biologist

Gut-brain axis, ADHD, microbiome science,
nutrition and mental health researcher.

Senior Lecturer, University of West London

Honorary Research Fellow, Cardiff University

Late-diagnosed autistic ADHDer

Author of ADHD Body + Mind





What do I do?



In a nutshell:

*I translate science into
kinder, more practical
tools for real life.*

Meet PHOCUS



A practical framework for eating with your nervous system, not against it.

The nervous system layer

- **P** - **P**atterns
- **H** - **H**unger + **Honest** interoception
- **O** - **O**ptions
- **C** - **C**apacity
- **U** - **U**nderlying neurobiology
- **S** - **S**afety signals

The food layer

- **P** - **P**rotein + **P**lants + **P**olyphenols
- **H** - **H**erbs + **H**ydration,
- **O** - **O**ptimum **O**ils
- **C** - **C**olourful **C**arbs
- **U** - **U**nprocessed, **U**nique + **U**mami additions
- **S** - **S**tructure, **S**elf-kindness + **S**ensory **S**afety

We'll get there...
But let's get the backstory first





Most nutrition advice assumes stable appetite cues, enough executive function, tolerable sensory load, predictable energy and spare cognitive capacity.

Or, in plain English:

Most nutrition advice is neurotypical.

Hidden assumptions in nutrition advice



Standard advice assumes

- planning
- shopping
- cooking
- remembering
- noticing hunger
- tolerating textures
- managing cravings
- making calm food decisions

In other words: reliable capacity.

PHOCUS also takes into account

- regulation
- interoception
- reward
- stress physiology
- sensory load
- burnout
- shame
- trauma
- gut–brain signalling

Compassion is part of the mechanism.



Why does this matter?

Because many ADHDers* begin from a different place, so the useful question becomes:

What helps my nervous system feel safe, resourced and able to nourish itself?

*** and other neurodivergent people, plus those with sensitive nervous systems.**

ADHD is a whole body-mind experience



| ADHD does not stop at attention.



| energy



| stress physiology



| digestion



| appetite



| sensory processing



| motivation



| sleep



| emotion



| capacity

So, nutrition support has to meet ***the whole system.***

Eating is not *just* a cognitive choice

Food choices are influenced by the state of the nervous system.



What people assume

*“I know what to eat,
so I should just do it.”*

What may be happening

- My nervous system is tired
- My body cues are unclear
- My sensory system is overloaded
- My brain wants relief
- My capacity is low

The question is not only *“What should I eat?”*

It is *“What is my system able to do right now?”*

Everyday decisions happen inside your body.



Capacity comes before consistency



Pievsky & McGrath, 2018

Review of 34 meta-analyses

ADHD-related differences were seen across multiple domains

Neurocognitive domain

- Working memory
- Response inhibition
- Planning / organisation
- Vigilance
- Reaction time variability

What this may mean around food

- Remembering meals, plans, ingredients
- Pausing before eating for relief
- Shopping, prepping, sequencing
- Staying aware of body cues
- Inconsistent follow-through

If eating depends on these systems, support has to reduce load, not increase pressure.

Eating is a neural process



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Prefrontal cortex

planning
pause
flexible choice

Anterior cingulate cortex

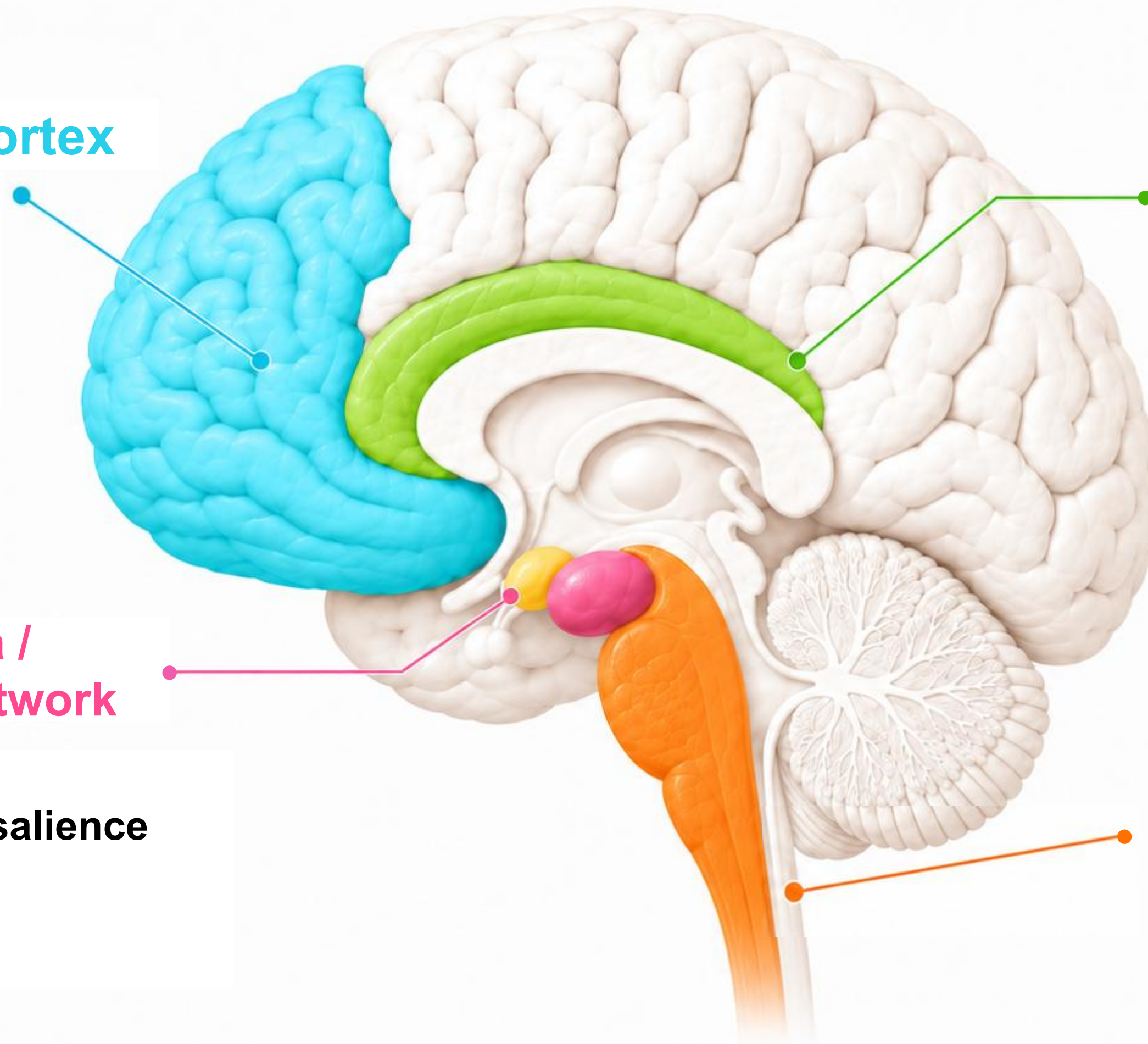
attention
effort
staying on track

Amygdala / Threat network

urgency
emotional salience

Hypothalamus / brainstem systems

hunger
stress cues
arousal
body state



And this matters because...



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Food choices don't happen in a vacuum.

And the evidence keeps pointing to how context changes capacity.

Stress physiology, trauma, early life adversity, emotional regulation, interoception, reward, sensory load and shame can all influence what food feels like and what the brain can access.



So, ADHD nutrition cannot begin with compliance.

It has to begin with capacity.

As a matter of fact...

The nervous system decides what feels possible



Before we choose, we register safety, threat, energy and load.

Regulated enough

- planning feels more available
- body cues are clearer
- choice has more space
- preparing food feels doable

Overloaded, under threat or under-resourced

- less access to planning
- urgency or avoidance increase
- body cues get blurred
- preparing / eating food becomes harder

The same person can have a different capacity on different days *and* at different times of the day within the same day.



And don't just take my word for it...

Trust the science.

The basic neuroscience behind food choices



Stress can reduce prefrontal cortex function, affecting planning, inhibition, working memory and flexible choice.

— Arnsten (2009). *Nature Reviews in Neuroscience*, 10(6), 410–422.

ADHD is associated with differences in task-related heart rate variability, suggesting altered autonomic regulation.

— Robe *et al.*, (2019). *Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*, 99, 11–22.

Psychological stress is linked with changes in heart rate variability, reflecting shifts in autonomic balance.

— Kim *et al.*, (2018). *Psychiatry investigation*, 15(3), 235–245.

Adults with ADHD show greater emotional dysregulation than controls, supporting emotion as part of the ADHD picture.

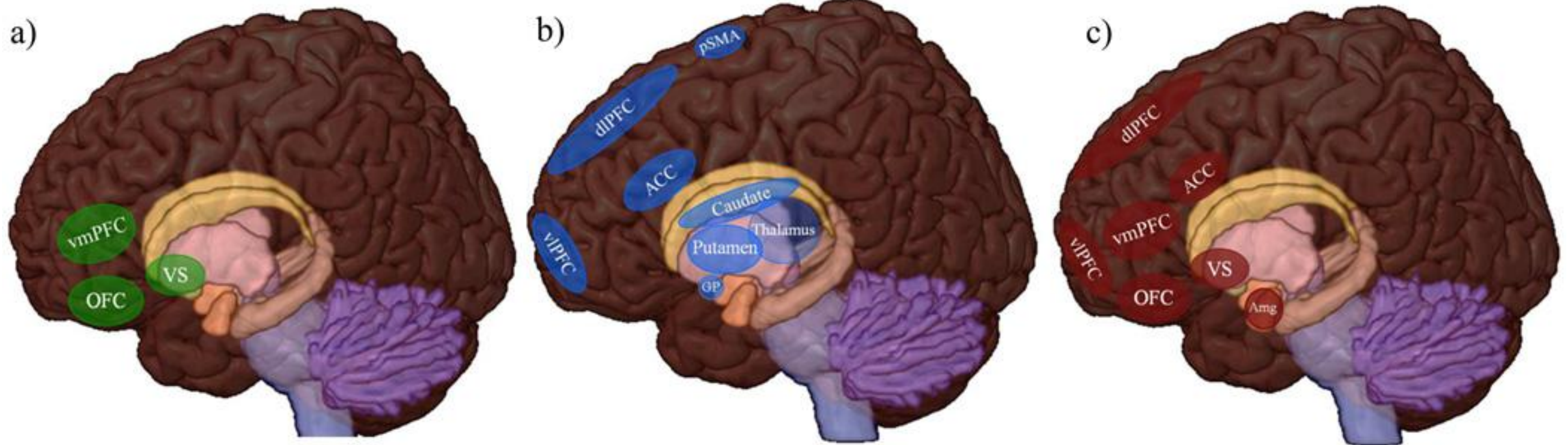
— Beheshti *et al.*, (2020). *BMC psychiatry*, 20(1), 120.

Overlapping neurobehavioral circuits in ADHD, obesity, and binge eating: evidence from neuroimaging research

Published online by Cambridge University Press: 22 June 2015

Karen E. Seymour, Shauna P. Reinblatt, Leora Benson and Susan Carnell

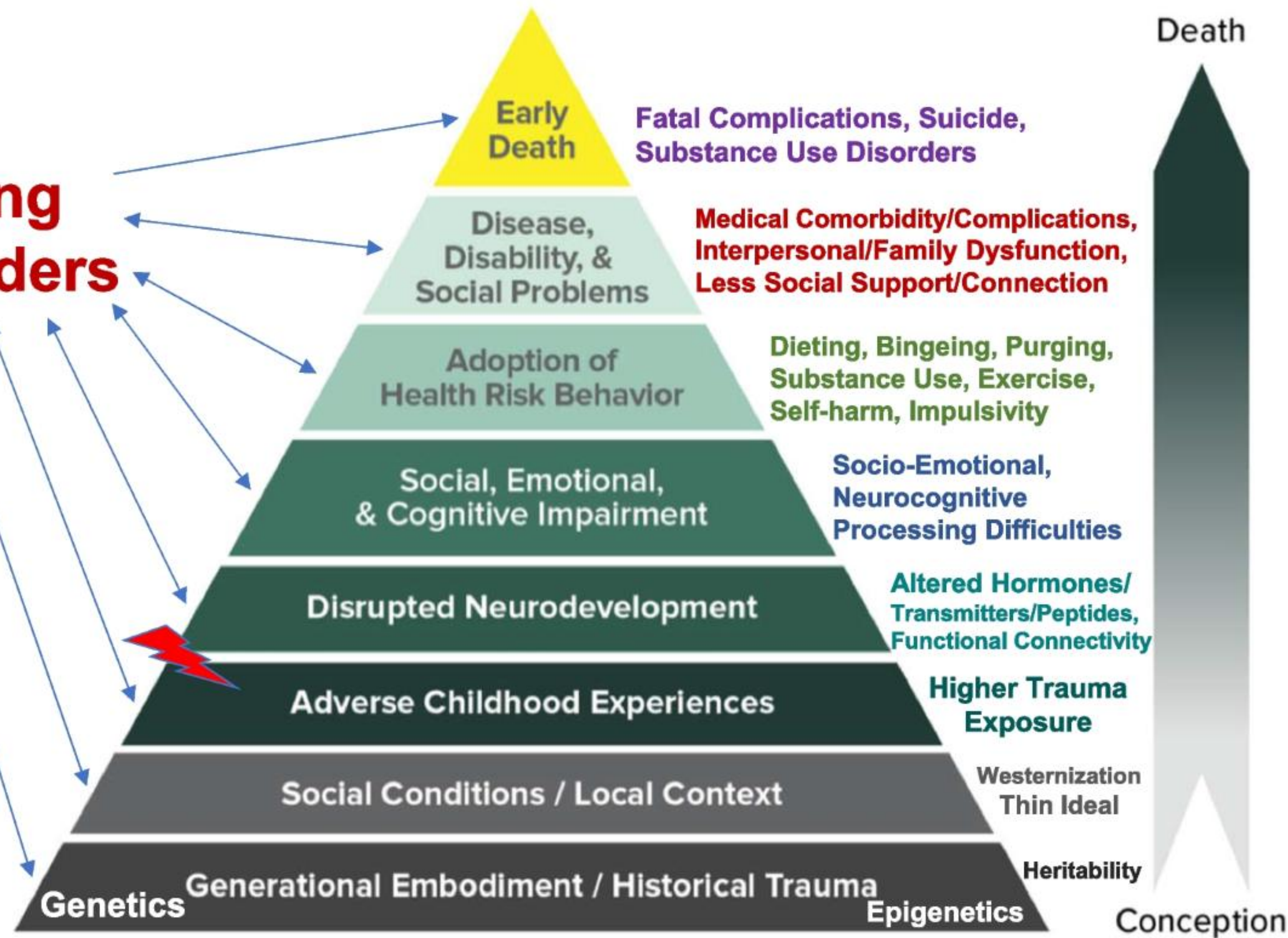
ADHD, obesity and binge/loss-of-control eating appear to share neural pathways involved in reward, inhibition and emotion regulation.



Areas of the brain involved in emotional regulation, reward and inhibitory control (AKA “That’s enough”): ACC = anterior cingulate cortex, Amg = amygdala, dlPFC = dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, GP= globus pallidus, OFC= orbitofrontal cortex, pSMA= pre-supplementary motor area, vlPFC= ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, vmPFC = ventromedial prefrontal cortex, VS = ventral striatum.



Eating Disorders



Mechanism by which Adverse Childhood Experiences Influence Health and Well-being Throughout the Lifespan

And then
there's trauma.

*All flavours of it,
but especially if
experienced
during early life.*

When stress / trauma show up in eating



Four common patterns around food



FIGHT

**Food becomes
a battlefield**

control, strict rules,
anger, self-criticism



FLIGHT

**Food becomes
escape or relief**

snacking, urgency,
stimulation, comfort-seeking



FAWN

**Food becomes
adaptation**

pleasing others, fitting in,
overriding your own needs



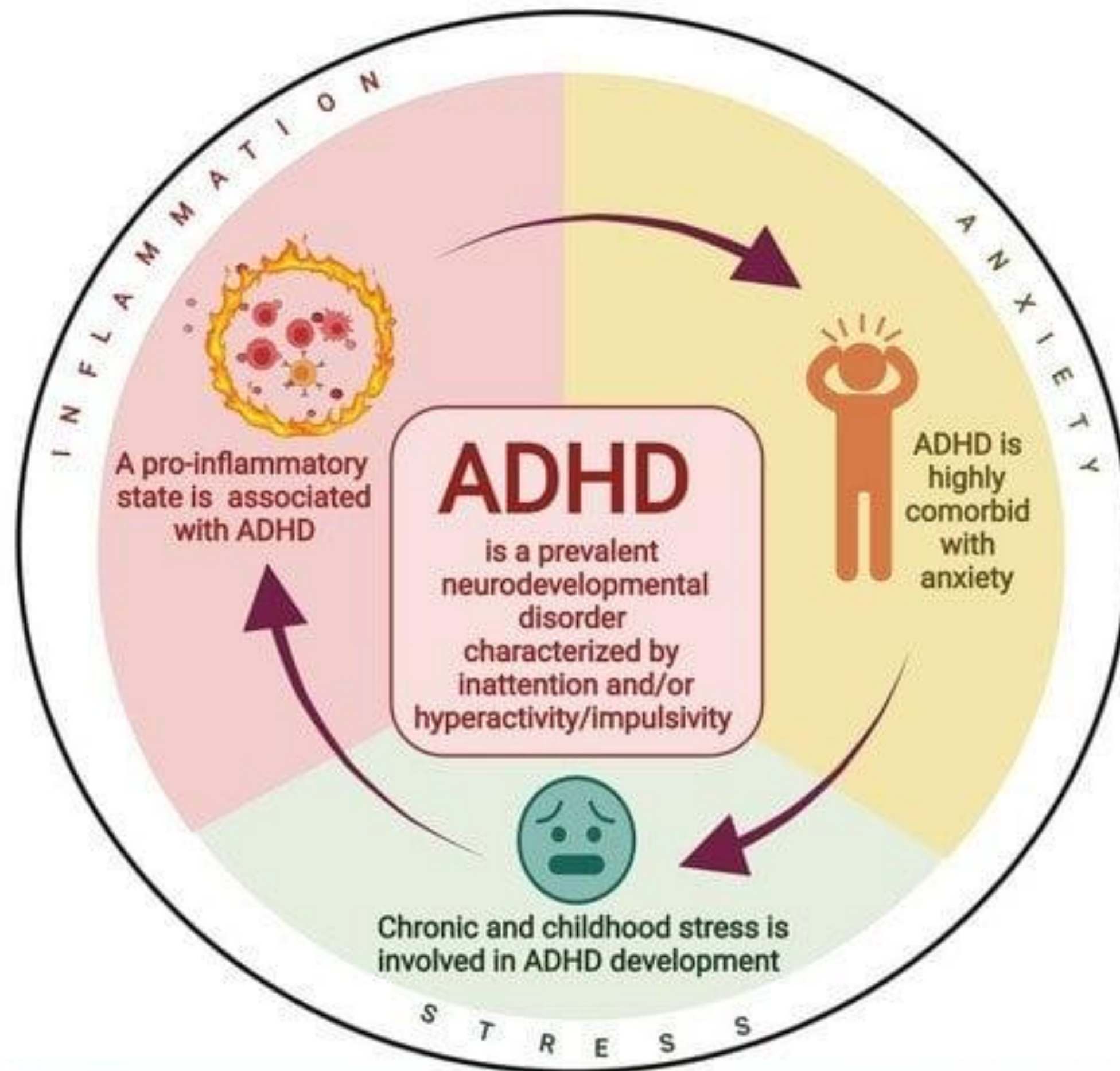
FREEZE

**Food becomes
stuckness**

can't decide, delayed meals,
feeding yourself feels hard



And anxiety



The studies reviewed here support a **multidirectional** relationship between **stress**, **anxiety**, and **inflammation** with ADHD, but how these variables connect to each other has yet to be clarified. **Untangling** these relationships will have **diagnostic**, **therapeutic** and **prognostic** implications for ADHD patients.

When your nervous system is wired to crave safety from an early age, it is much more difficult to make “rational decisions” about food. It is much easier to binge/restrict, feel shame, control, cut things out, *binge again*, purge...

Málaga, 2019

80 kg



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**We binge on people, work,
perfection, alcohol, drugs,
Netflix, Instagram...**

***But there's something about food that
gives you that instant comfort. And once
your brain gets a taste for it, it is difficult
to rewire that feeling...***

The ND + ED overlap



Overlap of eating disorders and neurodivergence: the role of inhibitory control

Bethany Norton ¹, Jade Sheen ², Lewis Burns ², Peter G Enticott ²,
Matthew Fuller-Tyszkiewicz ², Melissa Kirkovski ^{3 4}

Review > [BMC Psychiatry](#). 2024 Jun 18;24(1):454. doi: 10.1186/s12888-024-05837-6.
doi: 10.1016/S2215-0366(24)00186-X. Epub 2024 Aug 15.

The overlap of disordered eating, autism and ADHD: future research priorities as identified by adults with lived experience

Johanna Keller ¹, Moritz Herle ², William Mandy ³, Virginia Carter Leno ⁴

> [Mol Psychiatry](#). 2025 May;30(5):2127-2136. doi: 10.1038/s41380-024-02825-w.
Epub 2024 Nov 14.

The role of co-occurring conditions and genetics in the associations of eating disorders with attention- deficit/hyperactivity disorder and autism spectrum disorder

Gitte Bundgaard Christiansen # ¹, Liselotte Vogdrup Petersen # ^{2 3}, Hannah Chatwin ¹,
Zeynep Yilmaz ^{1 4 5 6}, Diana Schendel ^{1 7 8}, Cynthia M Bulik ^{5 6 9},

Which also matters because food difficulty may reflect executive function, sensory load, emotional regulation, trauma, reward and shame, not simply “lack of control”.

Nutrition advice *has to become* neuroaffirming.

Emotion dysregulation in ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions: a co-twin control study

[Rebecka Astenvald](#)¹, [Matilda A Frick](#)^{1,2}, [Janina Neufeld](#)^{3,4}, [Sven Bölte](#)^{3,5,6}, [Johan Isaksson](#)^{1,3,8}

Descriptive statistics over the distribution of ED across the entire sample and different sub-groups

	ED Mean t-score (SD)	No ED (t-score: < 180) N (%)	Moderate ED (t-score: ≥ 180– < 210) N (%)	Severe ED (t-score: ≥ 210) N (%)
Entire sample	168.40 (21.09)	286 (73.5%)	82 (21.1%)	21 (5.4%)
Sex				
Females	168.48 (23.05)	130 (73.0%)	35 (19.7%)	13 (7.3%)
Males	168.34 (19.35)	156 (73.9%)	47 (22.3%)	8 (3.8%)
ADHD	189.05 (23.00)	40 (37.4%)	48 (44.9%)	19 (17.8%)
Autism	183.49 (21.94)	39 (43.8%)	40 (44.9%)	10 (11.2%)
Other NDCs	183.08 (23.50)	27 (42.9%)	27 (42.9%)	9 (14.3%)
Affective conditions	175.52 (24.18)	46 (61.3%)	20 (26.7%)	9 (12.0%)
ID	184.05 (19.54)	7 (36.8%)	11 (57.9%)	1 (5.3%)
TD	156.56 (10.97)	162 (94.2%)	9 (5.2%)	1 (0.6%)

Emotional Dysregulation



Emotional regulation can be more variable in ADHD and other neurodevelopmental conditions.

This means stress may build faster, feel harder to settle, and make food more appealing as a quick source of comfort, stimulation or relief.

This is important because for many neurodivergent people, eating is not only about appetite. It can become one of the fastest ways the nervous system tries to regulate.

And that's what the evidence is pointing towards.



The fact that being mindful of our body, through simple techniques like breathing before and during eating, can have an incredibly positive impact on our relationship with food.

Research Article

Eat Breathe Thrive: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of a yoga-based eating disorder intervention

Carly Lua Pershyn, Wendy Guyker, Elizabeth Schlant, Ashlye Borden, Chelsea Roff, Esther Ellyn Evelyn Estey & ...show all
Pages 401-425 | Published online: 20 Feb 2024

“Cite this article” <https://doi.org/10.1080/10640266.2024.2312636>



Mindfulness-based interventions for binge eating: an updated systematic review and meta-analysis

[Open access](#) | Published: 20 February 2025

Volume 48, pages 57–89, (2025) [Cite this article](#)

A structured literature review on the role of mindfulness, mindful eating and intuitive eating in changing eating behaviours: effectiveness and associated potential mechanisms

Published online by Cambridge University Press: **18 July 2017**

Janet M. Warren , Nicola Smith and Margaret Ashwell

[Show author details](#) ▾



So what do we do with *all* of this?

Now... PHOCUS!



PHOCUS

ADHD-friendly nourishment
that meets you where you are.

Protein

Herbs, healthy fats
and hydration

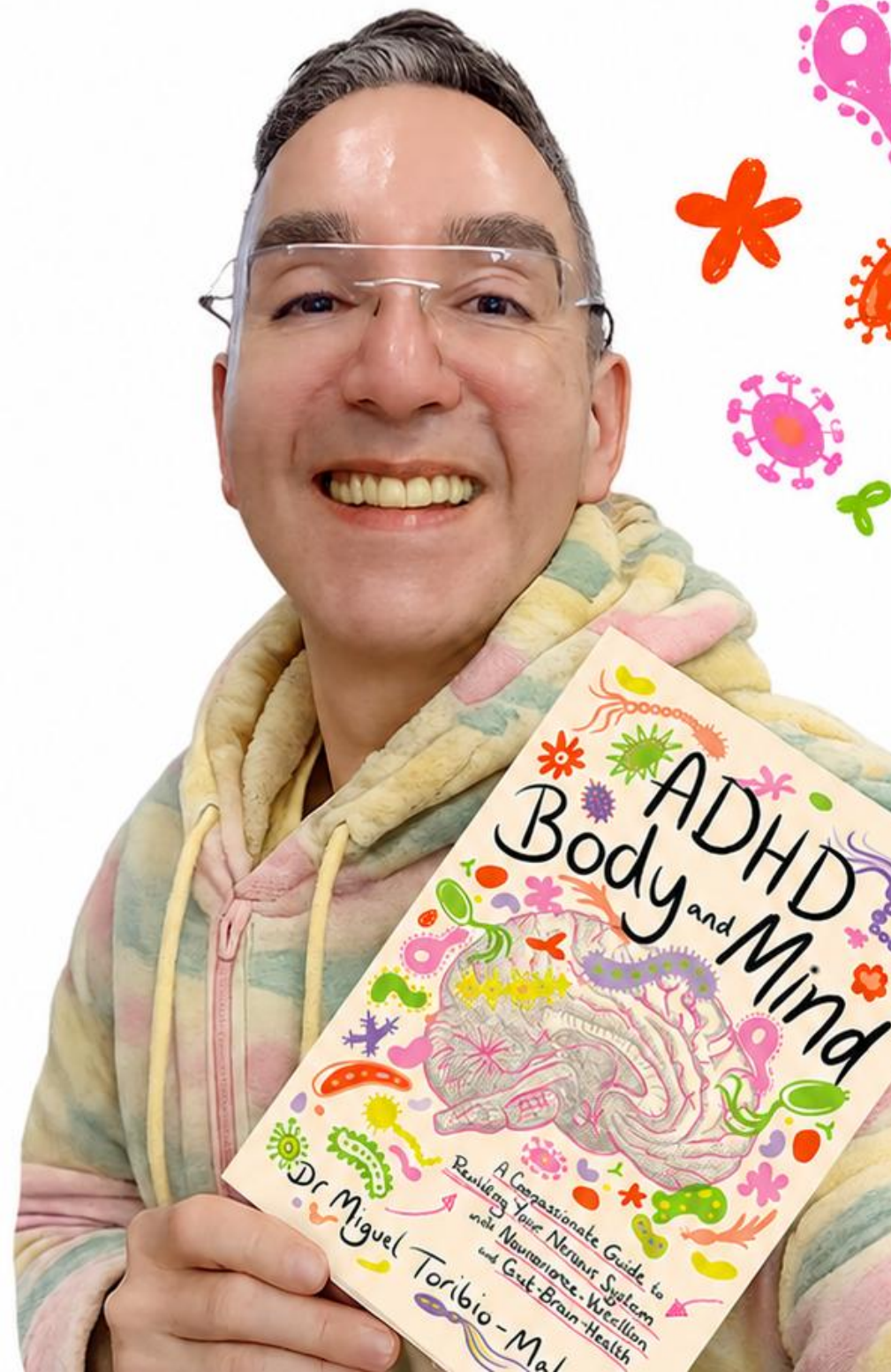
Optimal carbohydrates

Colourful plants

Unprocessed, unique
and umami additions

Self-kindness

A flexible guide to support
focus, energy, mood and
gut-brain health.



PHOCUS grew from my need
to turn the neuroscience into
something usable.

I was compelled to create something
that could hold both the science and
the messy reality of eating as a
neurodivergent person. It's in my
book, alongside 435 scientific
references.



PHOCUS at a glance



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The food layer

Helps us build nourishment.

- **P** - Protein + Plants + Polyphenols
- **H** - Herbs + Hydration,
- **O** - Optimum Oils
- **C** - Colourful Carbs
- **U** - Unprocessed, Unique + Umami additions
- **S** - Structure, Self-kindness + Sensory **Safety**

PHOCUS at a glance



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The nervous system layer

Helps us make nourishment possible.

- **P** - Patterns
- **H** - Hunger + **Honest** interoception
- **O** - Options
- **C** - Capacity
- **U** - Underlying neurobiology
- **S** - Safety signals

P is for Patterns



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Before trying to eat differently, notice what keeps happening.

- What happens when I'm tired?
- What happens when I'm overstimulated?
- What happens when shame enters the room?
- What happens when I haven't eaten enough earlier?

Recognising patterns reduces blame.

P is for Protein + Plants + Polyphenols



Before trying to eat perfectly, add one grounding anchor.

- Could I add protein to something I already eat?
- Could I add one plant food, colour or herb?
- Could I add fibre without making the meal harder?
- Could this be a snack, not a “proper meal”?

Keep it doable

Toast + eggs + tomatoes

Greek yoghurt + berries + seeds

Beans on toast + herbs

Soup + lentils or chickpeas

Hummus + bread + peppers

Oats + yoghurt + cocoa / berries

Adding support beats adding rules.

H is for Hunger + Honest Interoception

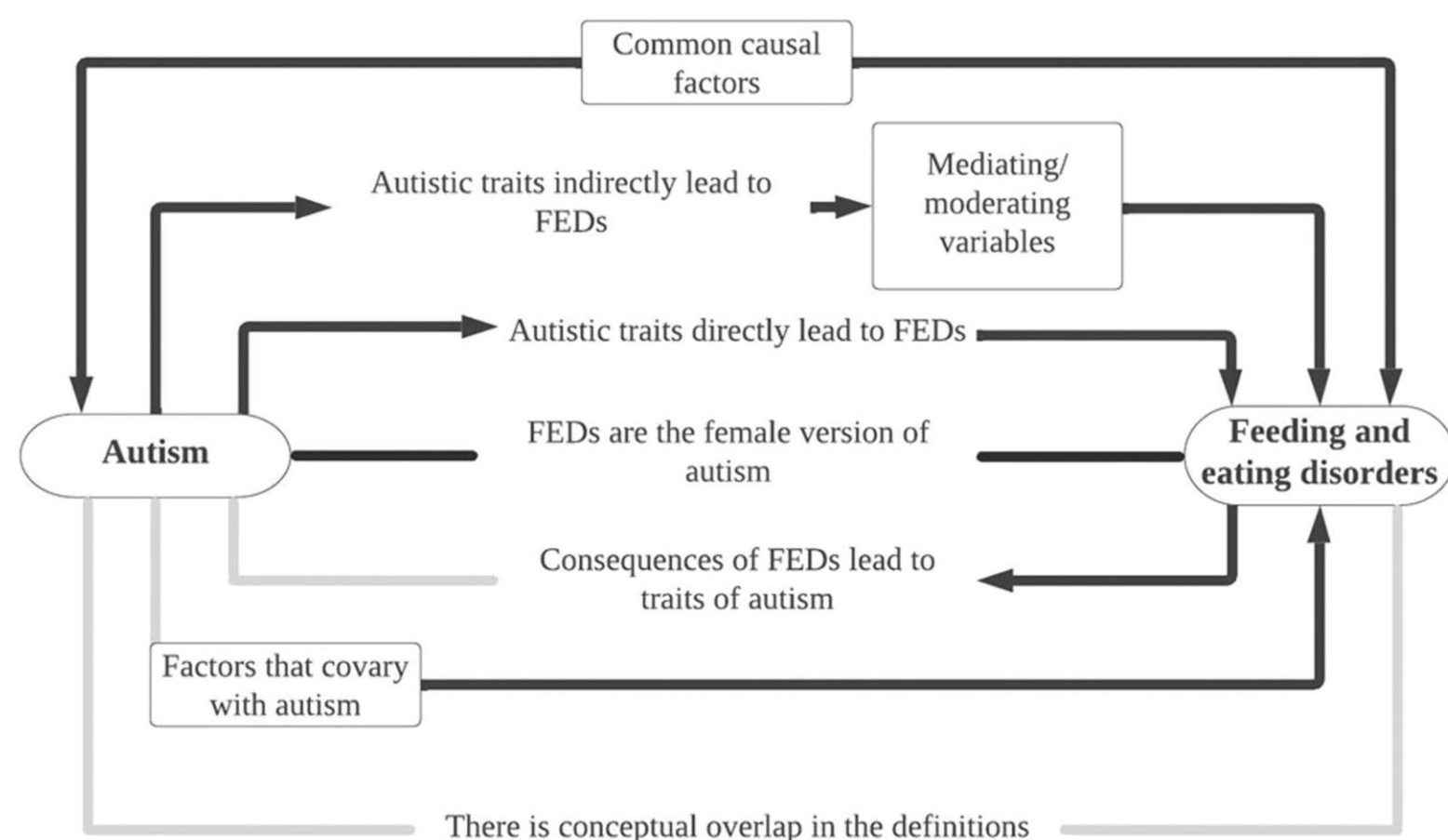


Before trying to eat differently, notice what keeps happening.

- What happens when I'm tired?
- What happens when I'm overstimulated?
- What happens when shame enters the room?
- What happens when I haven't eaten enough earlier?

Potential mechanisms underlying the association between feeding and eating disorders and autism

Kiera Louise Adams ¹, William Mandy ², Caroline Catmur ³, Geoffrey Bird ⁴



Interoception



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Interoception is how we sense what is happening inside the body. When those signals are harder to read, hunger, fullness, stress and emotion can become blurred.

For some neurodivergent people, this can make eating feel unpredictable: hunger may arrive late, fullness may be missed, and emotional distress may be mistaken for a need to eat.

This helps explain why food patterns can become chaotic, urgent or caught in binge-restrict cycles.

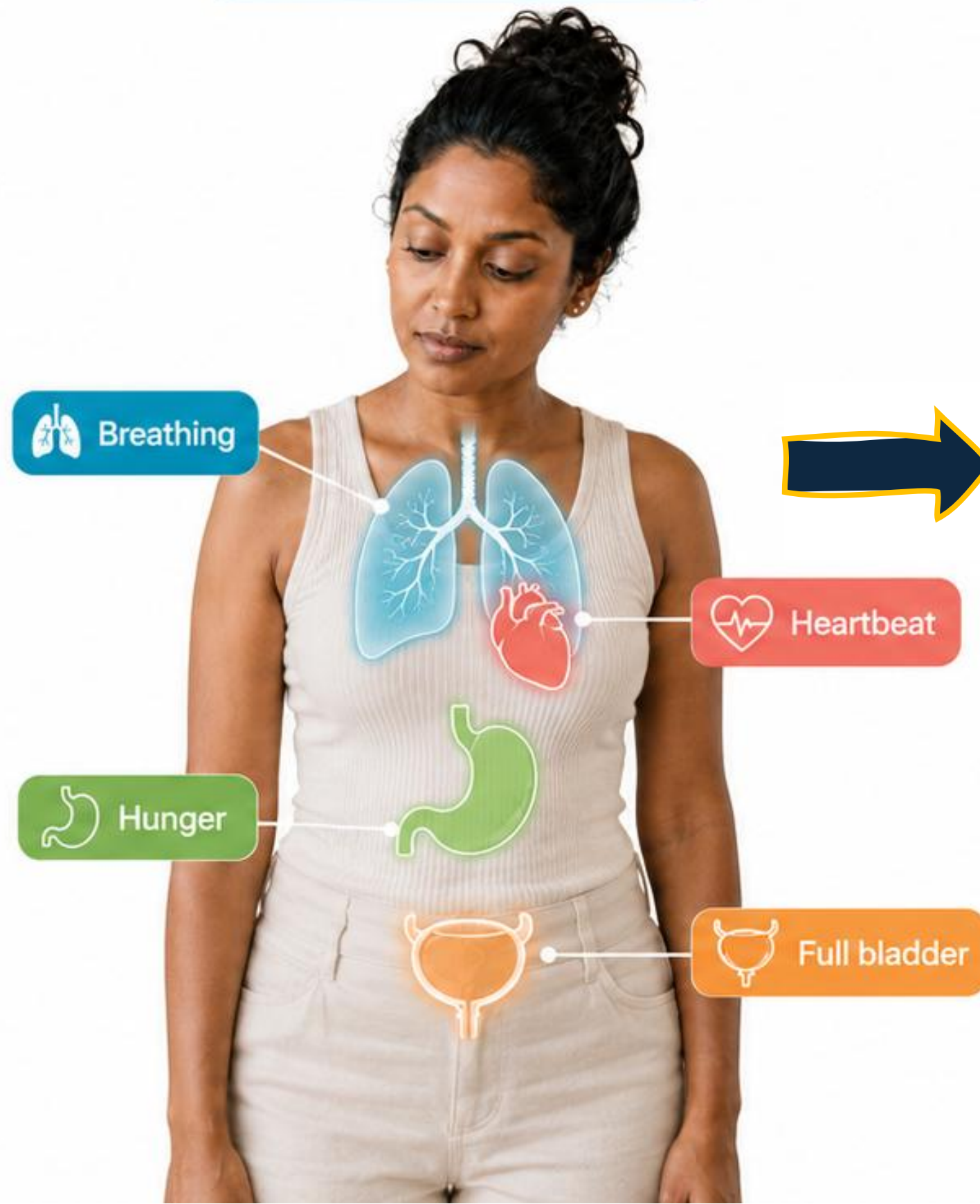
Interoception



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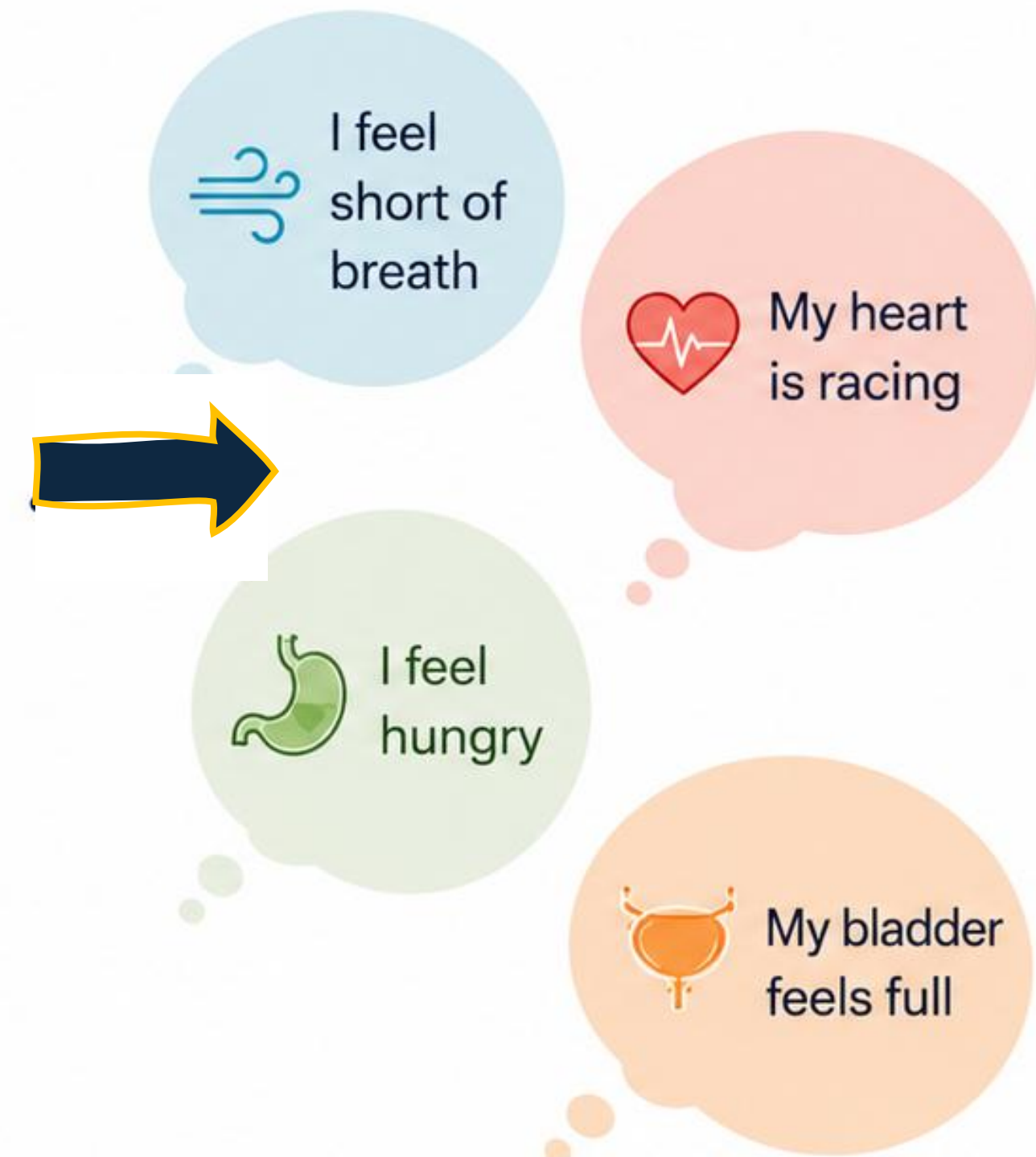
1 Body signals



2 Brain interprets



3 Conscious awareness



Ibiza, 2002, 70 kg

Always on the go



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Being less aware of body signals like hunger or need for rest is “a thing” in ADHD/autism/AuDHD.

It's down to glitchy interoception, the sense that enables us to act on what might be going on in the body...

And this matters because...



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When I talk about “honest interoception” in PHOCUS, I don’t mean listening to the body in some idealised way. I mean learning how your body actually communicates with you, including when the signal is messy, delayed, confusing or very loud.

That changes the question. Instead of asking, “*Why can’t I eat normally?*”, we can ask, “*How does my body tell me it needs support, and how can I make that easier to notice?*”

H is for Herbs + Hydration

**Before trying to drink more or “eat more herbs”,
make it more inviting.**

- Put water where you'll notice it, or “eat your water”, *e.g., juicy fruit + veg*
- Make lemon, mint, ginger, or berries part of your ritual
- Use herbs and spices for flavour and colour
- Make the meal feel more interesting

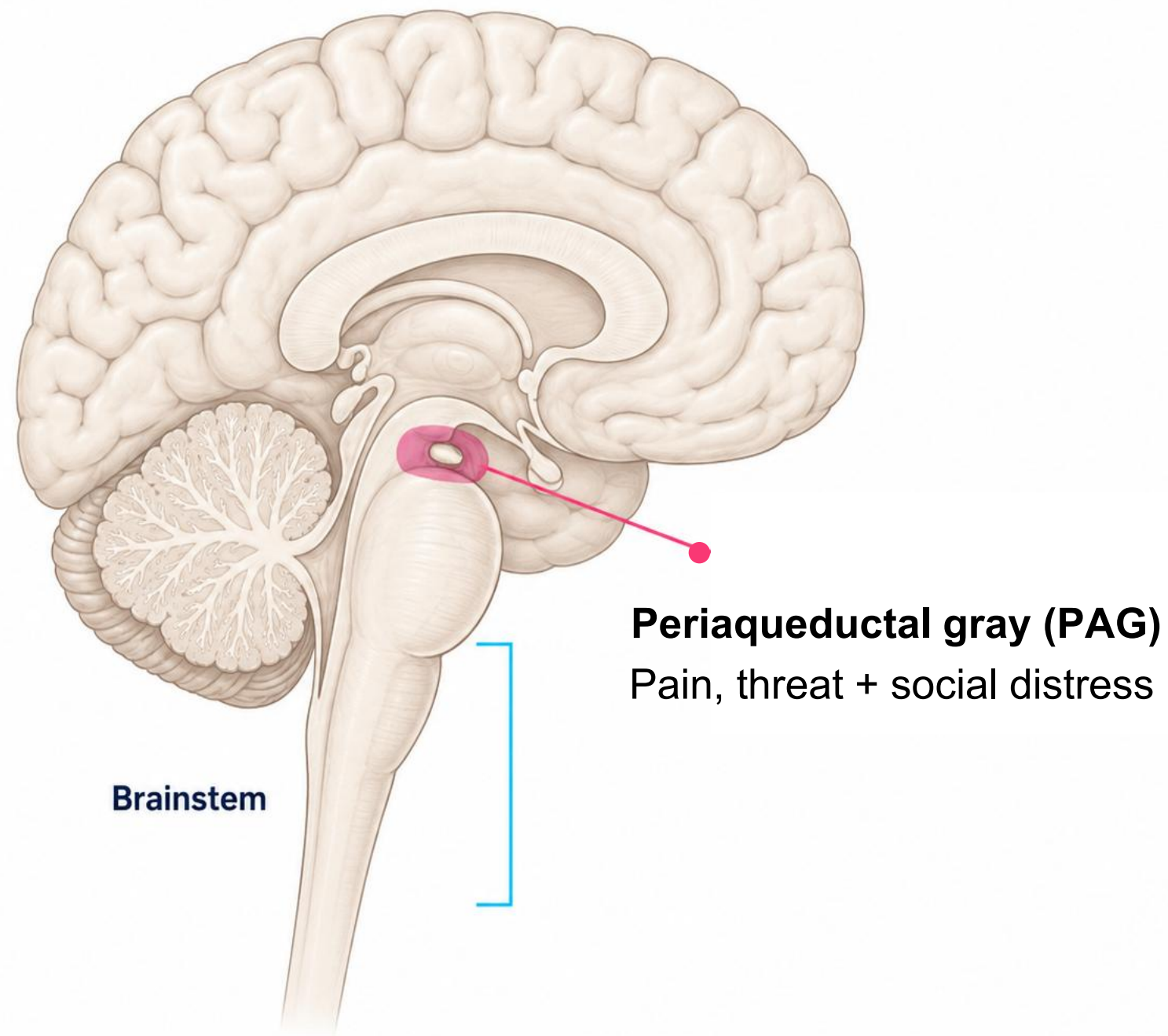
O is for Options

Options reduce pressure.

Before trying to find the perfect food, create a workable choice.

- What is the easiest option that still gives me something?
- Do I need a low, medium or higher-capacity option?
- Could I make this more familiar, less effortful or more sensory-safe?
- What would help me start, rather than spiral?

Eating is social, even when you are alone

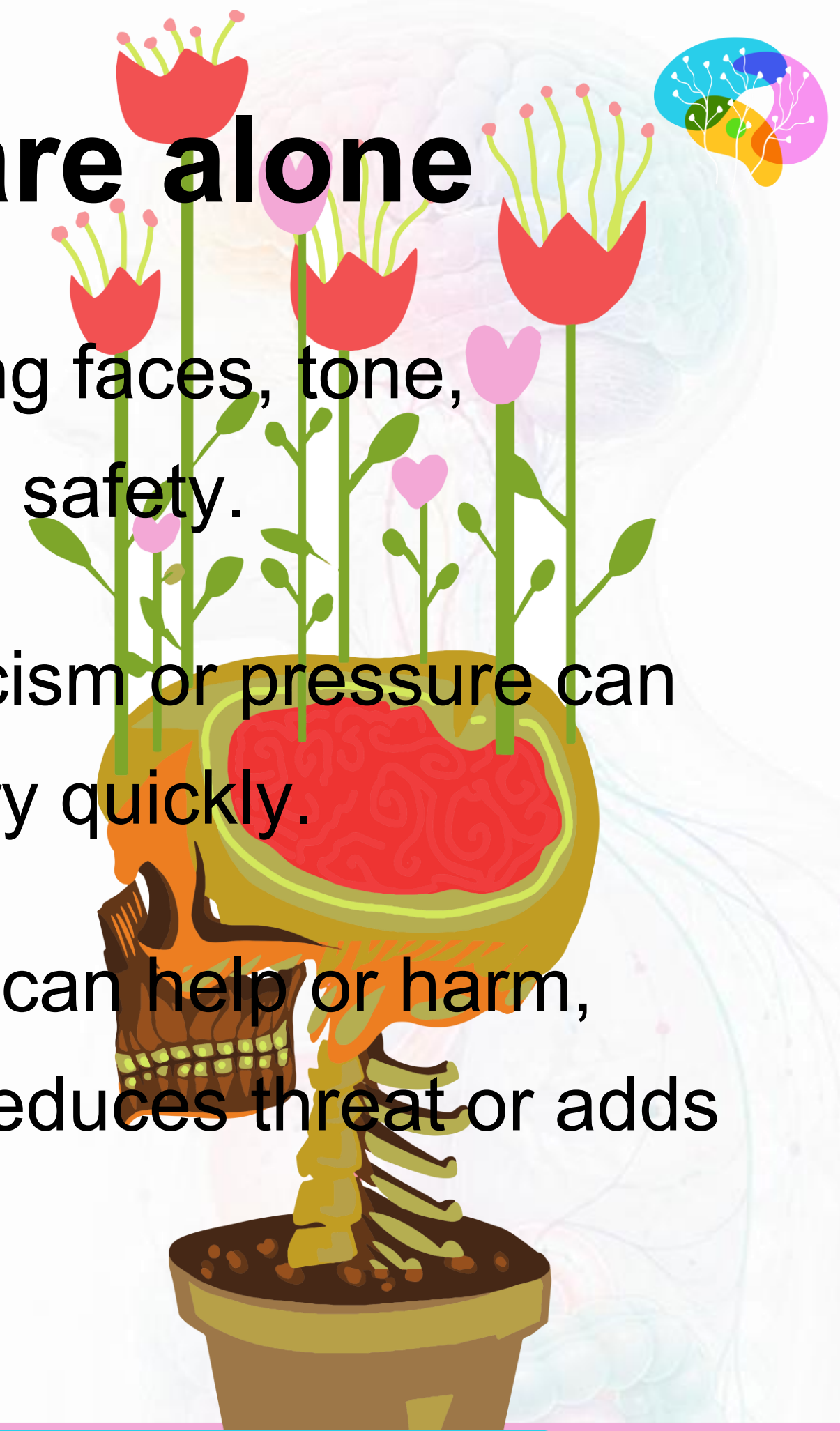


The brain is always reading faces, tone, judgement, belonging and safety.

Around food, shame, criticism or pressure can change the body state very quickly.

That is why eating advice can help or harm, depending on whether it reduces threat or adds more of it.

Shame makes nourishment harder. Safety makes it more possible.



O is for Optimum Oils



Before cutting fat out, choose oils that help the brain feel fed.

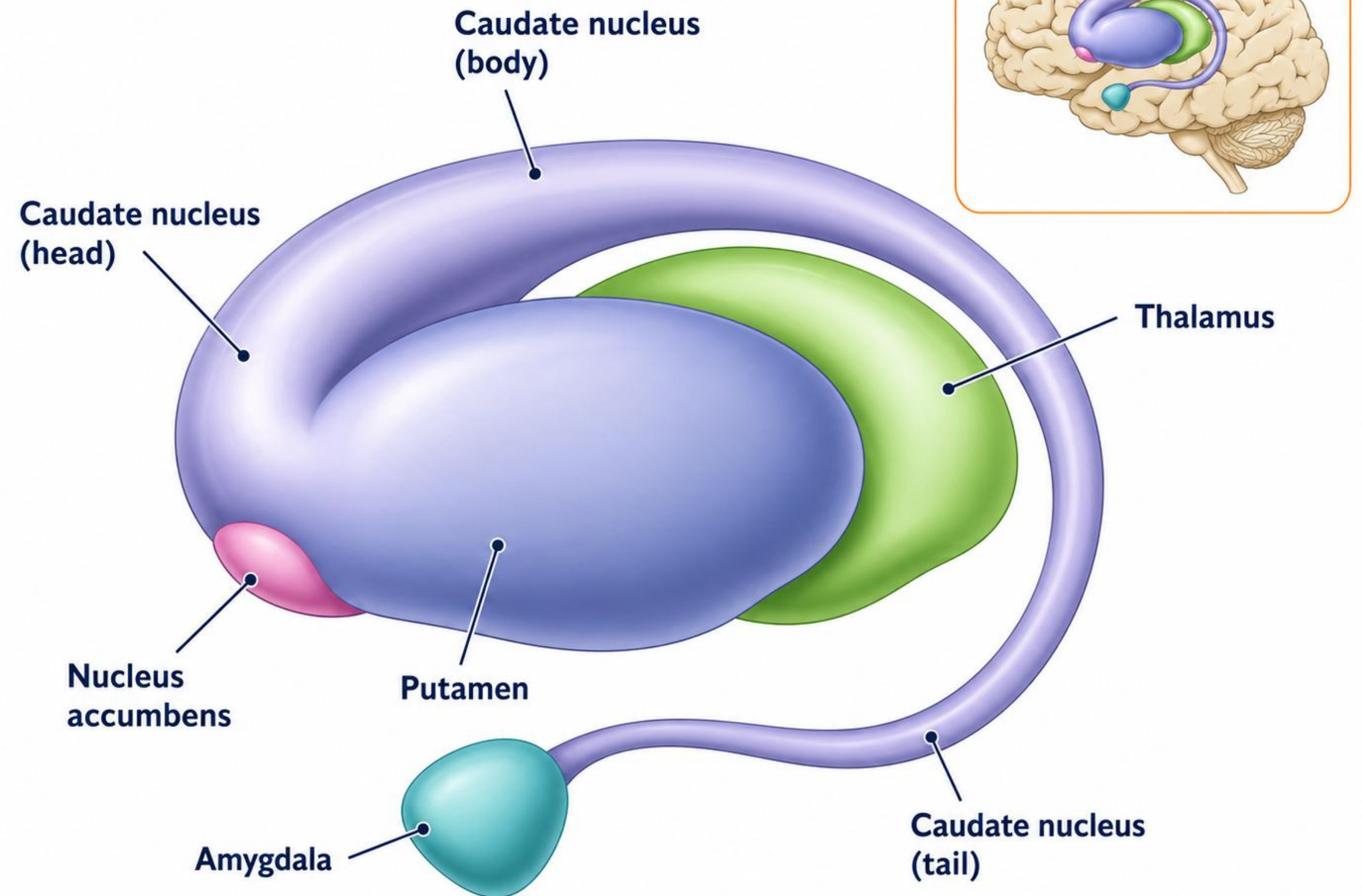
- Could I add olive oil, tahini, nuts, seeds or avocado?
- Could I include oily fish, eggs or algae-based omega-3?
- Could fat make this meal more balanced and satisfying?
- Could this help me stay nourished for longer?

***Fat is
support, not
"fattening",
indulgent or
failure.***

The basal ganglia: habits, effort and momentum

The basal ganglia help us start actions, repeat habits and feel reward.

Around food, they influence the difference between knowing what might help and being able to begin.



C is for Capacity

Capacity decides the size of the step.

Before asking “what should I eat?”, ask what is actually possible today.

- How much energy do I have?
- How many steps can I manage?
- Do I need a lower-effort version?
- What support would make eating easier?

C is for Colourful Carbs

Carbs can be support, not self-sabotage.

Before fearing carbs, choose carbs that help energy last.

- Could I add oats, beans, lentils, potatoes, rice, bread or pasta?
- Could I pair carbs with protein, fat or fibre?
- Could I add colour through fruit, veg, herbs, pulses or grains?
- Could this make the meal easier, steadier and more satisfying?

Food is a gut-brain signal

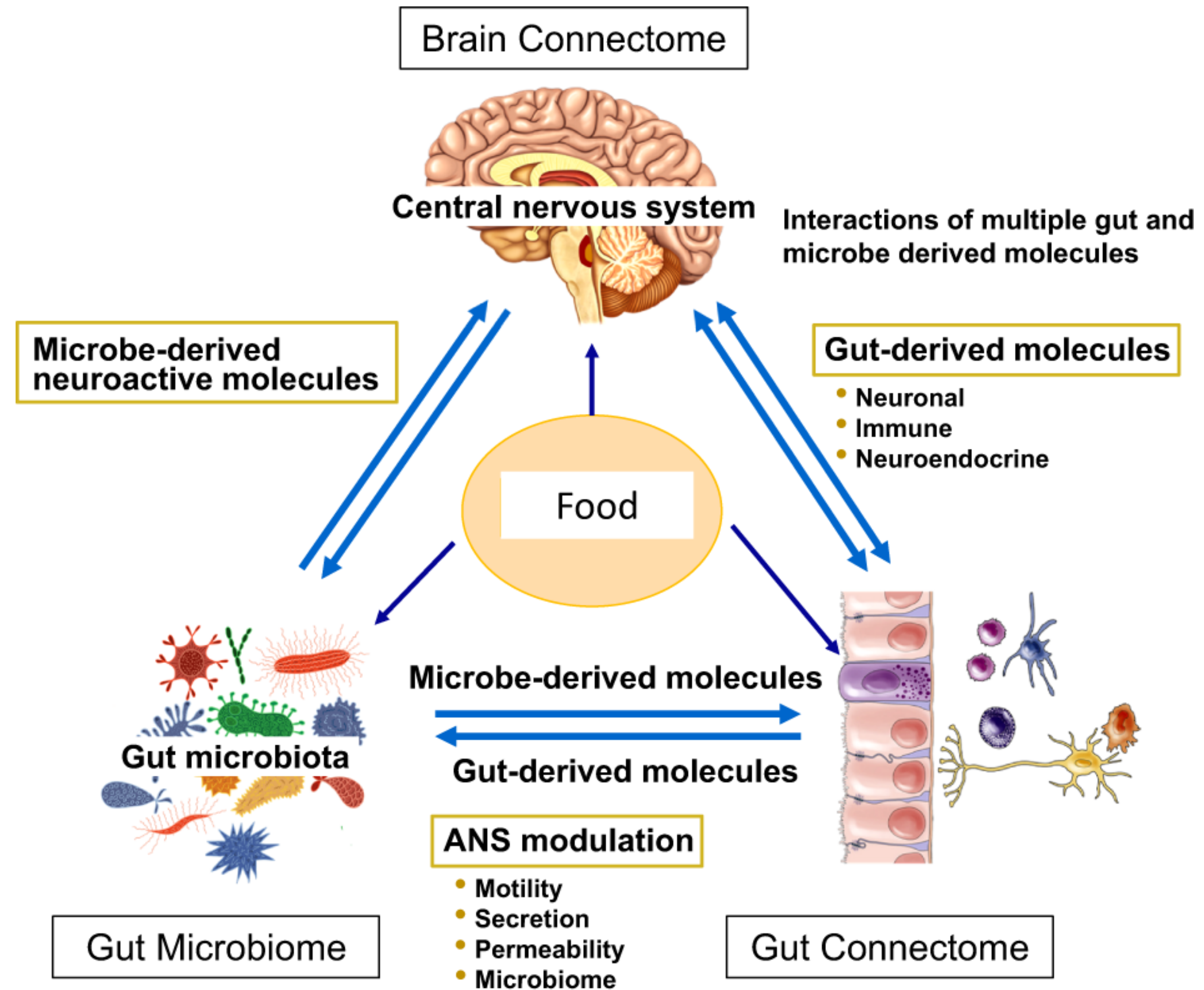


Food is information. It speaks to the gut, microbiome, immune system and brain.

That signalling can influence appetite, energy, mood, stress and body cues.

And it works both ways: the nervous system also shapes digestion, gut function and the microbial environment.

In PHOCUS, this is the U: underlying neurobiology. We support the whole system, not just the plate.



U is for Underlying Neurobiology



Behaviour makes more sense when biology is included.

Before asking “what should I eat?”, ask what is actually possible today.

- Did I sleep well? Has my sleep routine changed? Why?, *e.g. meds*
- Is stress driving urgency?
- What is affecting my appetite?, *e.g. hyperfocus, meds...*
- Do I need steadier, longer-lasting energy, reward or relief?

U is for Unprocessed, Unique + Umami additions



Before chasing “clean eating”, add quality, interest and satisfaction.

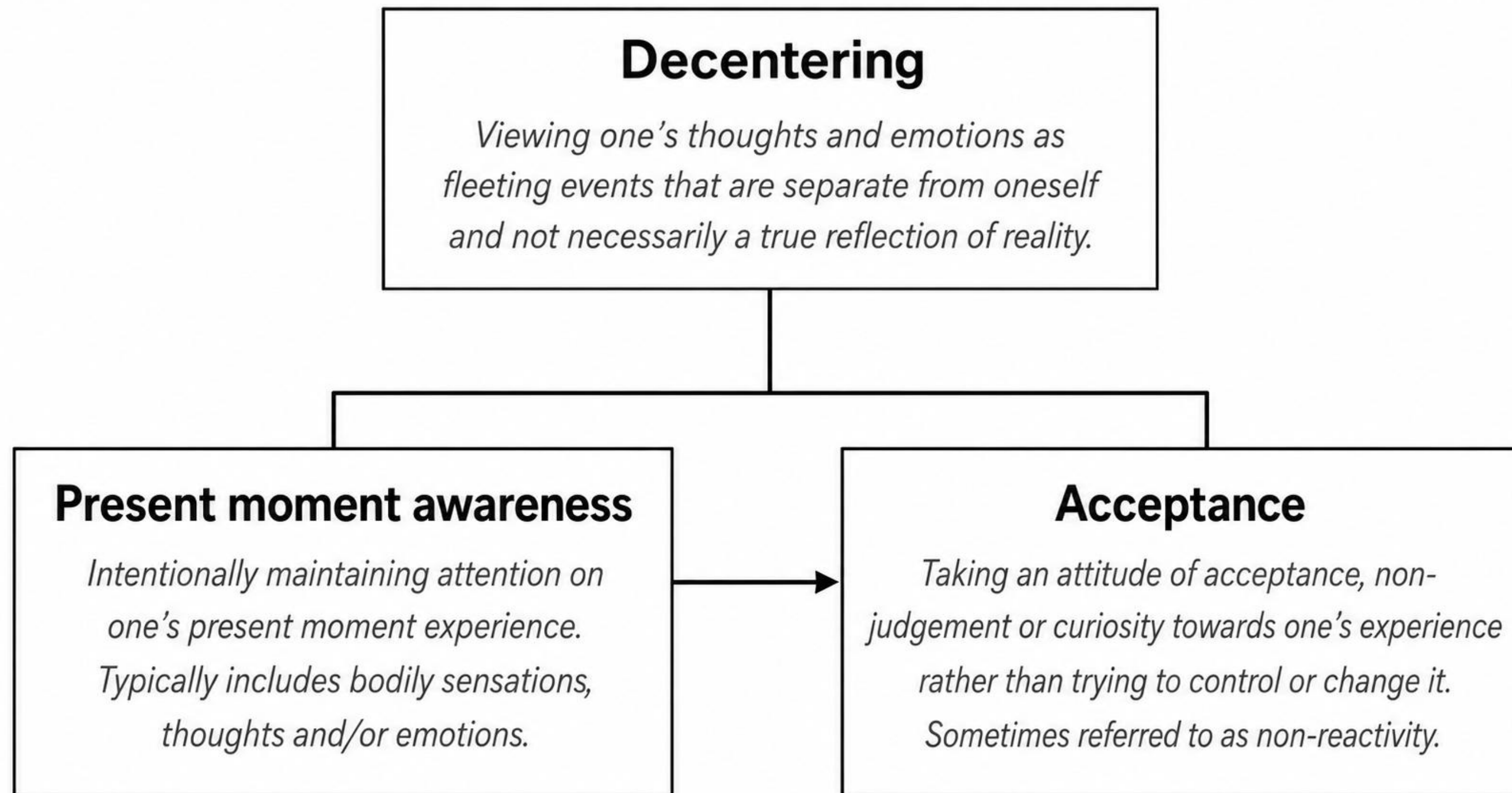
- Could I add something closer to whole food?
- Could I add one new flavour, colour or texture?
- Could I add umami with tomatoes, mushrooms, miso, soy sauce, seaweed or cheese?
- Could this make the meal more enjoyable and easier to repeat?

Satisfaction helps nourishment stick.

In fact, it's not so much about the food itself.



It's more about presence, radical acceptance and self-compassion...





Formentera, 2022

96 kg



Only by appreciating the body for what it does instead of only for how it looks and realising that it is the portal for connection with self and others can we start tapping into how our nervous system affects our mood and emotions.

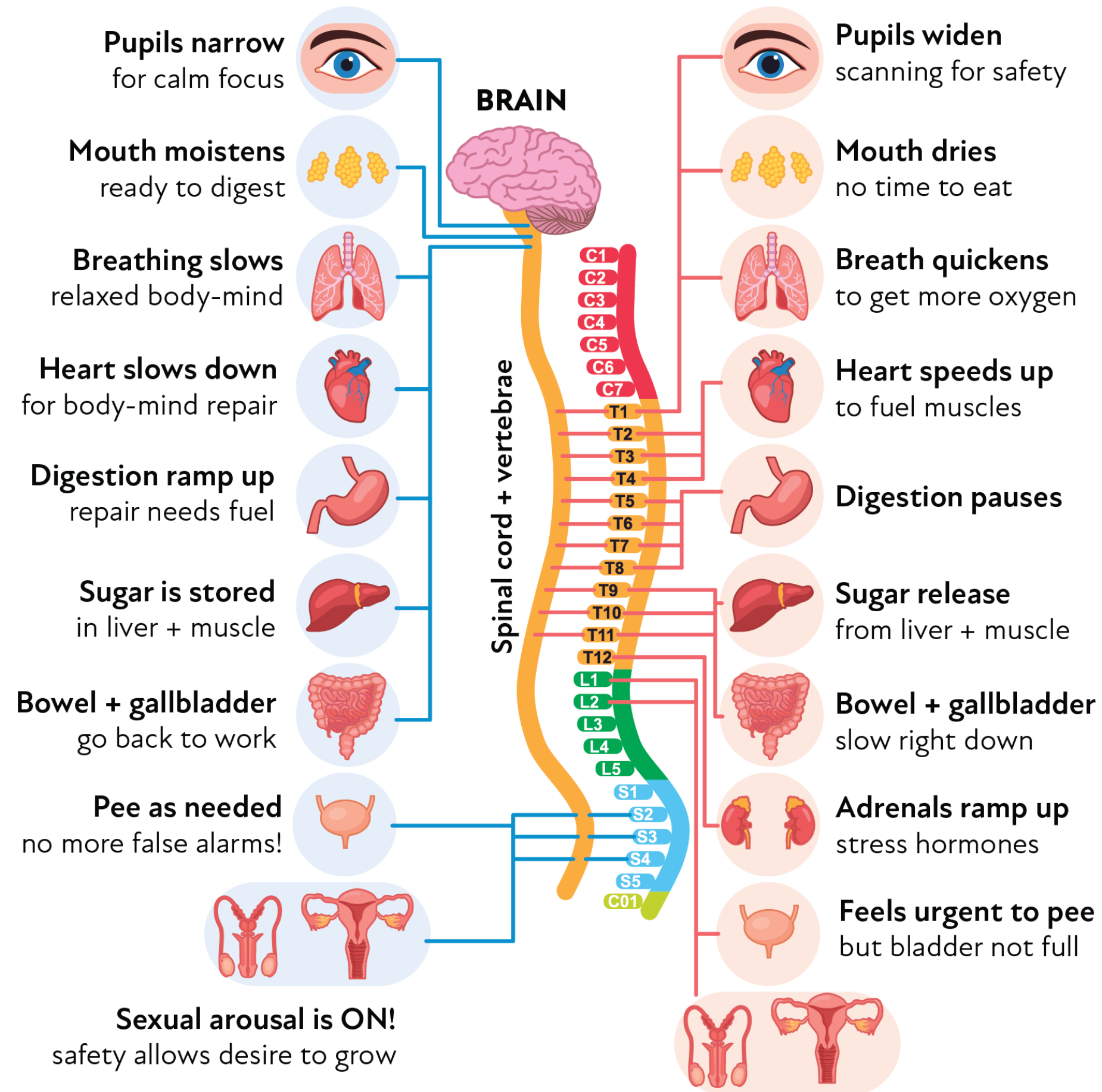
S is for Safety Signals

Safety makes nourishment more possible.

Before asking for change, ask what helps the system feel safe enough

- Do I need fewer decisions?
- Do I need a familiar food?
- Do I need less noise, shame or pressure?
- Do I need a pause before trying again?

PARASYMPATHETIC



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**Our relationship with food
can help us move from
sympathetic to
parasympathetic drive.**

*And being present and in touch
with our bodies is the key to move
that gear switch in the right direction.*



Food is love, safety, comfort.

*So it is only human to use it to
self-soothe, particularly when
we're stuck in a whirlwind of
emotions.*



S is for Structure, Self-kindness + Sensory Safety



Before making food more “ideal”, make it easier to return to.

- Could I use a simple rhythm, reminder or routine?
- Could I choose a texture, temperature or flavour that feels safe?
- Could I reduce the number of steps?
- Could I speak to myself in a way that lowers threat?

Eating gets easier when your system feels supported.

From control to connection

Connection creates the conditions for change.



Control asks

How do I make myself comply?

Connection asks:

- What is my system carrying?
- What does my body need?
- What would reduce friction?
- What would make nourishment possible?
- My capacity is low

Connection is biological and relational

It changes how we meet food, the body, and ourselves.



A 60-second PHOCUS check-in

Before your next food choice, pause and ask:

- What pattern am I in?
- Can I feel hunger or body cues?
- What options are genuinely available?
- What is my capacity?
- What might be driving this underneath?
- What would feel safe, doable *and* kind?

Looking inward for a brief moment might be all you need to change the tone of your choice.

What this changes in practice



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**When food
feels difficult,
ask more
than: *What
did you eat?*
*Also ask...***

- What was your capacity?
- What was your stress state?
- Were hunger or fullness cues clear?
- Did the food feel sensory-safe?
- Was shame in the room?
- What would reduce load next time?

Change is built through repeated care, not heroic biohacking...

Our bodies and minds are nurtured through repeated moments of care. A meal that feels possible, a pause before self-blame takes over, a body allowed to be tired, a nervous system reminded that it is supported.

Change begins when you feel safe enough to try again.



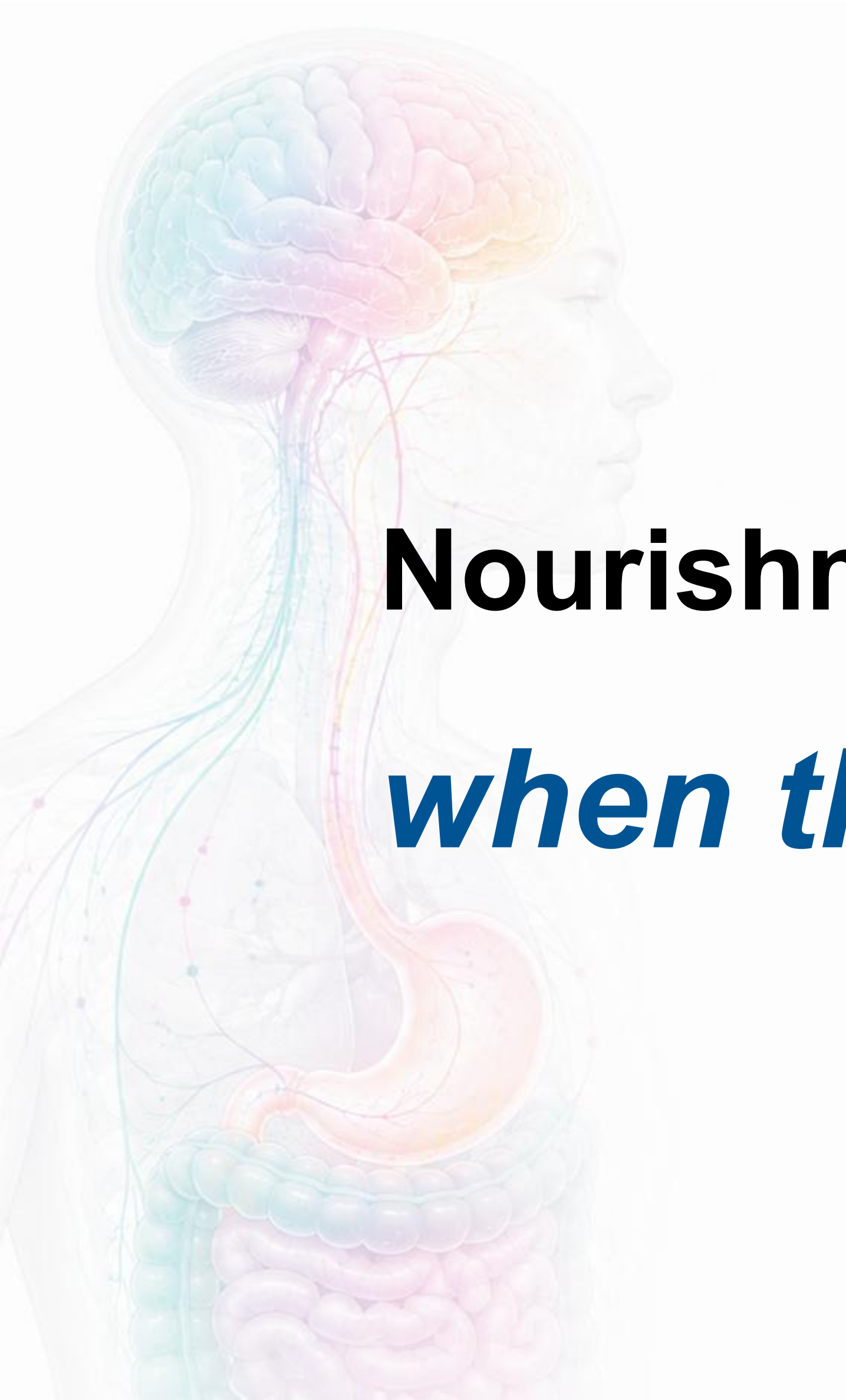


This is where I want to leave you.

Not with another rule or another perfect plan, but with the idea that nourishment becomes easier when the body feels met. Food, connection and self-kindness can support that.

And maybe, just maybe, the most regulating thing in the room is not a nutrient, but the feeling of being safe enough to soften.





Nourishment becomes easier
when the body feels met.



Want to go deeper into PHOCUS?

In my upcoming Masterclass, we turn this whole-mind-body approach into practical food strategies for real life.

We'll look at protein, plants, polyphenols, fats, carbohydrates, hydration, sensory safety, interoception, gut-brain health and self-kindness. **No rigid rules, perfect meal plans or shame.** Just evidence-based ADHD nutrition with kindness at its core.



Wednesday 15th July 5pm



For practitioners, clinicians, coaches

PHOCUS helps explain why nutrition advice can fail when it starts with compliance instead of capacity.

In the masterclass, we explore how to adapt food support around executive function, sensory load, appetite cues, stress physiology, gut-brain signalling and real-life capacity. You will leave with a practical framework, exclusive materials, a PHOCUS food and meal-creation guide, and a workbook for reflection or clinical use.



Wed 15th July 5pm



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Neuroscience for Body and Mind



And if you're inspired by what you've learned today, and want more, please follow me and stay in touch.

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