

# Using the Speed Bumps of Life for Relational Growth

**Peter Janetzki**

Dip.T., Grad. Dip.Soc.Sc., M.Soc.Sc.(Counselling).  
CCAA (Clin), PACFA Reg, MIACN (Cert).













**31%**  
**Solvable**

**69%**  
**Perpetual**

John Gottman (1999, p.129 & 130)



**Criticism**



**Contempt**



**Defensiveness**



**Stonewalling**



# The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Gottman & Silver. (1999)

**Horseman 1: Criticism.** You will always have some complaints about the person you live with. But there's a world of difference between a complaint and a criticism.

A complaint only addresses the specific action at which your spouse failed. A criticism is more global — it adds on some negative words about your mate's character or personality.

**Complaint.** That wasn't the best choice to come this way as we will be really late.

**Criticism.** Here we go again another one of your short cuts. I told you a thousand times stick to the main road, and you didn't. (*Criticism. She's implying the problem is his fault. Even if it is, blaming him will only make it worse.*)

The first horseman is very common in relationships. If you find that you and your spouse are critical of each other, don't assume you're headed for divorce court. The problem with criticism is that when it becomes pervasive, it paves the way for the other, far deadlier horsemen.





# The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Gottman & Silver. (1999)

## Horseman 2: Contempt.

Sarcasm and cynicism are types of contempt. So are name-calling, eye-rolling, sneering, mockery, and hostile humour. In whatever form, contempt — the worst of the four horsemen — is poisonous to a relationship because it conveys disgust. It's virtually impossible to resolve a problem when your partner is getting the message you're disgusted with him or her. Inevitably, contempt leads to more conflict rather than to reconciliation.

Often a person's main purpose is to demean her or his spouse.

Contempt is fuelled by long-simmering negative thoughts about the partner. You're more likely to have such thoughts if your differences are not resolved.

Belligerence is just as deadly to a relationship. It is a form of aggressive anger because it contains a threat or provocation.



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Gottman & Silver. (1999)

**Horseman 3: Defensiveness.** When conversations become so negative, critical, and attacking, it should come as no surprise that you will defend yourself.

Although this is understandable, research shows that this approach rarely has the desired effect. The attacking spouse does not back down or apologize. This is because defensiveness is really a way of blaming your partner.

You're saying, in effect, "The problem isn't me, it's you." Defensiveness just escalates the conflict, which is why it's so deadly.

Criticism, Contempt, and Defensiveness don't always gallop into a home in strict order. They function more like a relay match — handing the baton off to each other over and over again, if the couple can't put a stop to it. The more defensive one becomes, the more the other attacks in response. Nothing gets resolved, thanks to the prevalence of criticism, contempt, and defensiveness.

Much of these exchanges are communicated subtly (and not so subtly) through body language and sounds.



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Gottman & Silver. (1999)

**Horseman 4: Stonewalling.** In marriages where discussions begin with a harsh startup, where criticism and contempt lead to defensiveness, which leads to more contempt and more defensiveness, eventually one partner tunes out. So enters the fourth horseman.

Although both husbands and wives can be stonewallers, this behaviour is far more common among men.

During a typical conversation between two people, the listener gives all kinds of cues to the speaker that he's paying attention. He may use eye contact, nod his head, say something like "Yeah" or "Uh-huh."

A stonewaller doesn't give you this sort of casual feedback. He tends to look away or down without uttering a sound. He sits like an impassive stone wall. The stonewaller acts as though he couldn't care less about what you're saying, if he even hears it.

Stonewalling usually arrives later in the course of a marriage than the other three horsemen. That's why it's less common among newlywed husbands than among couples who have been in a negative spiral for a while. It takes time for the negativity created by the first three horsemen to become overwhelming enough that stonewalling becomes an understandable "out."





**Criticism**



**Contempt**



**Defensiveness**



**Stonewalling**

# The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Gottman & Silver. (1999)

## Turning Away



# Understanding Emotional Flooding

## Turning Away





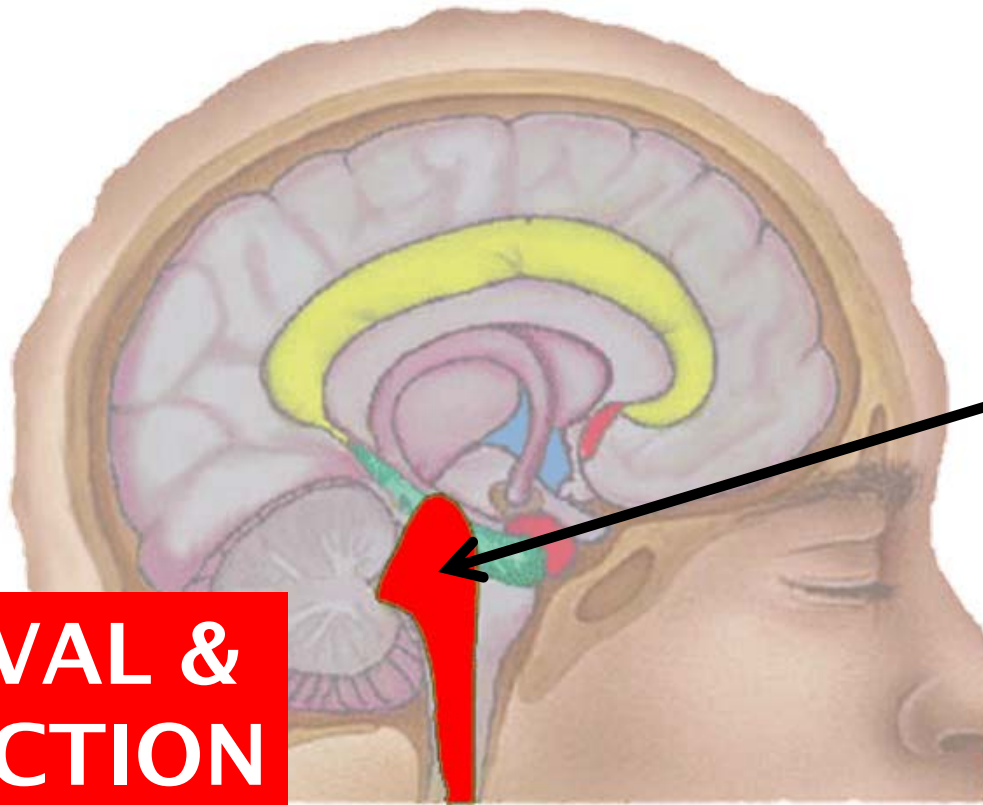


# The Two Tasks of the Brain



**SURVIVE**  
**&**  
**THRIVE**

# Survival Brain – Brainstem

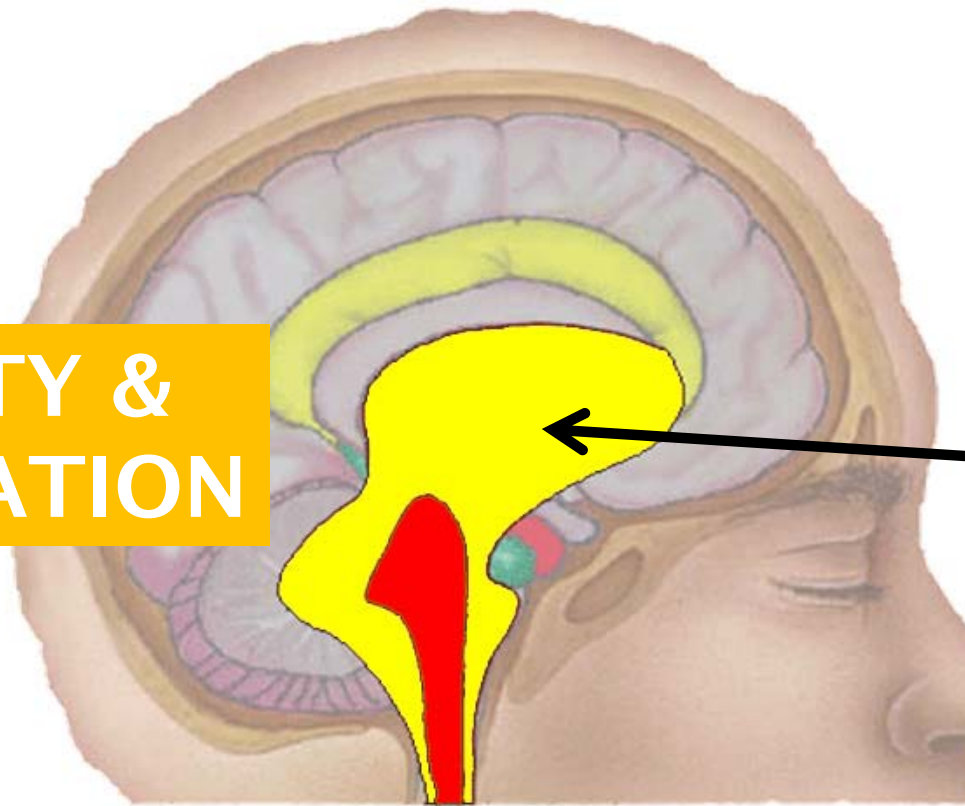


**SURVIVAL &  
PROTECTION**

- The first part of the brain to develop
- Fastest part of the brain
- Runs automatic functions that keep us alive i.e. breathing, heartbeat, digestion
- At birth, it is fully developed & fully functioning
- Its #1 job is our **survival/protection**

**Automatic Brain**

# Impulsive Brain – Limbic System



**SAFETY &  
REGULATION**

- Second fastest part of the brain
- Runs on past experiences & emotions
- Fear is its fastest trigger
- Fires up our defences
- Learns by repetition
- At birth, it is fully developed & partially functioning
- Its #1 job is **sensing danger & regulating our brain**

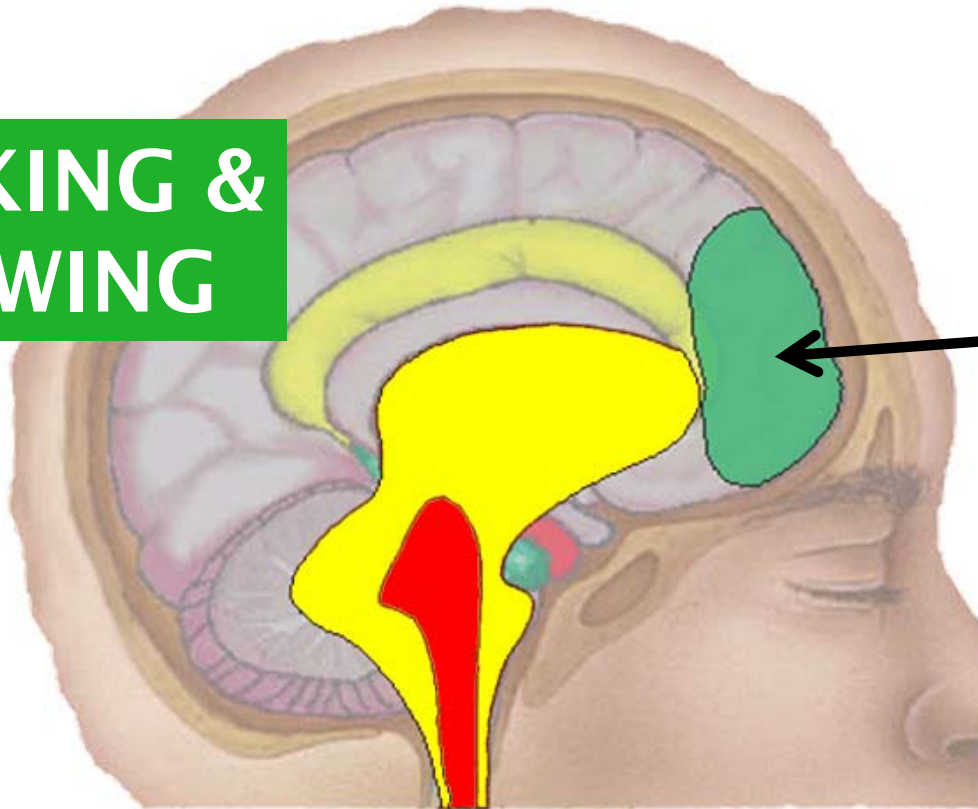
**Emotional &  
Experiential Brain**

Adapted from Rossouw 2016



# Smart Brain – Pre-Frontal Cortex (PFC)

**THINKING &  
GROWING**



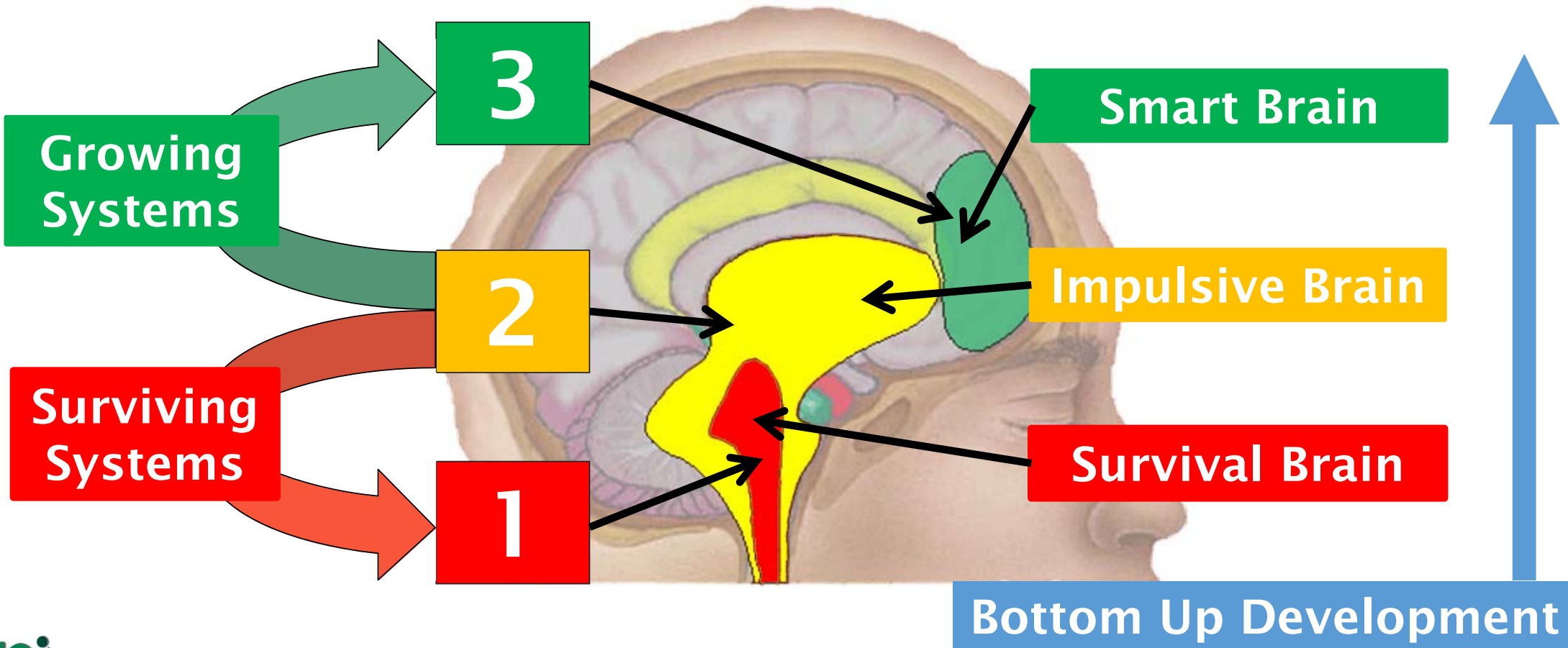
- The last part of the brain to develop
- Slowest part of the brain
- Helps us to think through decisions
- The first to switch off when under stress
- Has the power to override the impulsive brain
- At birth, it is partially developed & partially functioning
- Last part to mature
- Its #1 job is to **think & thrive**

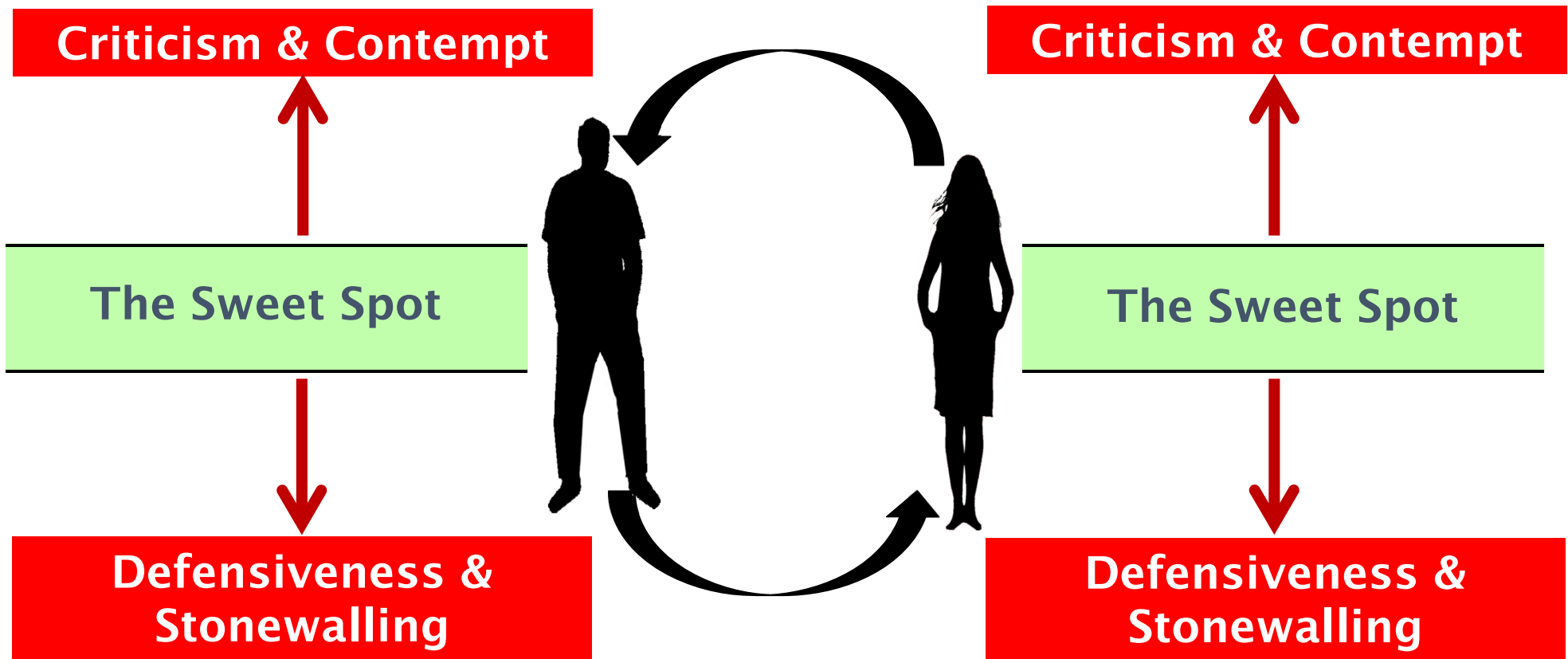
**Logical Brain**

Adapted from Rossouw 2016

# 3 Part Brain - Working as a System

Rossouw 2016





# Understanding Emotional Flooding

## Turning Away





# The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Gottman & Silver. (1999)

## Turning Towards



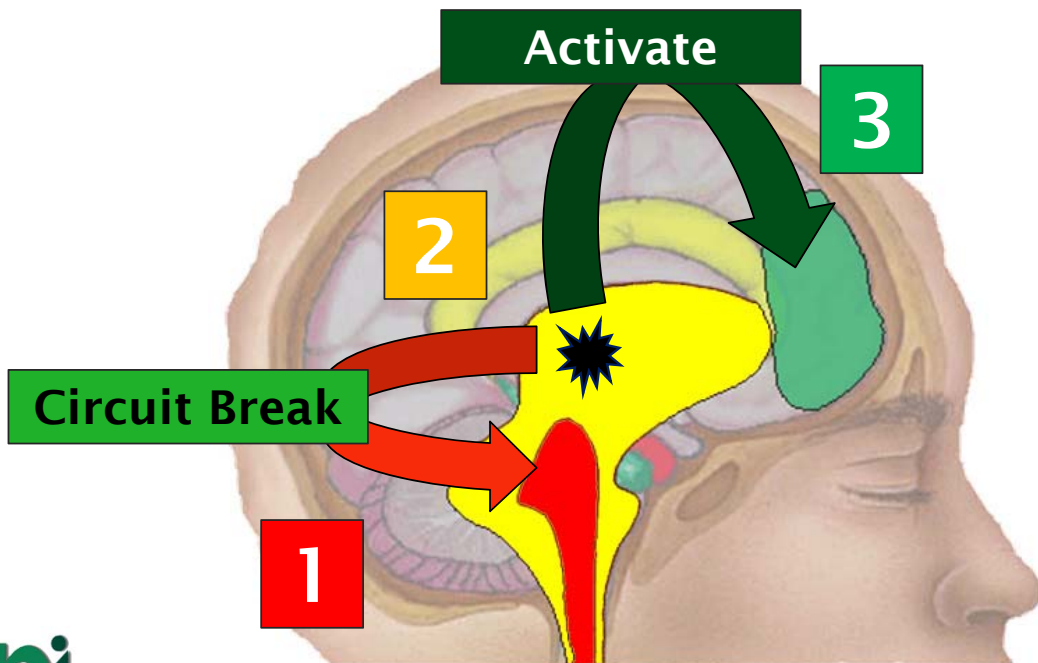
# Soft Start-Ups

## Turning Towards



# Soft Start-Ups

Is about managing my Impulsive/Survival Brain & engaging my Smart Brain rather than being REACTIVE!



- **Circuit Breaking the 2-1 system**
- **Being Calm**
- **Not Reacting**
- **Not Personalising**
- **Being Objective**
- **Activating our 2-3 system**

## Harsh Start-Ups



**Turning Away**

## Soft Start-Ups



**Turning Towards**

**Meaningful Connection**





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