

THE NEURORELATIONAL FRAMEWORK'S

Safety-Challenge-Threat Triad



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The first NRF paradigm shift sees behavior through the lens of safety, challenge, and threat rather than through compliance versus non-compliance.

Safety is a person's real or imagined perception of protection from harm. Other conditions can include feeling safe—yet challenged; not feeling safe while experiencing challenge; and a lack of safety with threat. Many people think that all stress is 'bad' or toxic. That is not the case; stress, in fact, is necessary and adaptive. Adaptive stress is important as it builds stress tolerance and stress recovery with the right dose of challenge. Challenge represents adapting to novelty or other changes in the environment, learning a new skill or maintaining effort. Threat is when we experience possible pain, injury, or harm - physical or psychological. When a threat is too intense, too frequent, and/or too prolonged one is more likely to meet criteria for toxic stress. However, when a challenge is mismatched to the person's capacities, this can also create a situation of threat to the nervous system.

In this diagram, the three aspects of the triad are shown as cyclical in nature. Safety often occurs in the context of relationships with others who can calm us, share joy with us, and with others who are responsive to our immediate needs. The 'just right' challenge that is developmentally appropriate is important to our lifelong maturation. We build stress tolerance by adjusting the right dose of challenge to match our children's developmental capacities so that our children can be successful, staying in a modulated stress response. Adults can scaffold activities to support the child's learning.

We need to 'watch for' threat behaviors that look like flitting/frenetic energy, or fight/flight (moving too fast), fright/freeze (anxiety), or flatness (moving too slow). When we are experiencing threat, we need to follow the arrow to the left to find safety in our relationships. We can also follow the arrow to the right to reduce the demand or create a better match with challenge. Remember the 'two way' arrow shows that we work to combine safety with the right dose of challenge. The NRF emphasizes that connection with others, or co-regulation, that can support an optimal dose of challenge that adjusts when the demand is too high.

Another way to walk around the circle is to start with threat and then move to safety and challenge. When you use the threat-safety-challenge triad in this sequence, one has just walked through the NRF's three steps: assess for toxic stress (threat -roots of the tree); establish relational safety by improving the quality of engagement (trunk of the tree); and match the right dose of challenge by understanding individual differences (4 brain systems - branches of the tree).