

Trauma in Real Life: Low Stress Thresholds and Identity Crisis



Stress

The psychological / physical response to circumstances in one's environment that are interpreted as a threat. The difference between the way you think / feel things should be and the way they are.

Homeostasis (dynamic equilibrium)

"The body's successful application of adaptive stress response systems." The biological mechanisms are called "allostasis" - physiological variations that occur to maintain homeostasis. When these variations (allostasis) become disproportionate to the situation, or do not cease when no longer needed - the methods that once served a protective function become pathological. Allostatic load or trigger stacking. **This results in psychological and physiological damage.** It will enhance the organism's susceptibility to many disorders / reactions.

Billy's **STRESS** Threshold (allostatic load)

Obviously, everyone experiences stress. A trauma impacted child without adequate relational mitigation, internalizes that stress differently and ends up with a hypervigilant brain. Its survival mechanisms are "stuck" in the on position. The shows up in the real world as a "low stress threshold." Like a tiny sponge cannot absorb much water before saturation, this child cannot handle very much stress before their fight, flight or freeze mechanism kicks in.

Imagine the following scenario elements for a student with a low stress threshold (stress = **red**):

Billy is awakened by his **parents fighting**. He gets dropped off at school 20 minutes before the bell rings. **Free time** is stressful because it is unorganized and unsupervised. The bell rings, he goes to class and finds there is a **substitute teacher**. The other kids are **extra rowdy** for the substitute. Billy realizes he **forgot his math book** when the substitute asks the class to turn in their assignments. She doesn't know it's Billy's job, so does not ask him to turn off the lights when she uses the projector. **Another student does Billy's job** instead. When it's time to go out to recess, two students **cut in front** of Billy and jostle him in line. Billy snaps and punches (fight) one of the students in the ear. The substitute sees it and tries to restrain Billy. Feeling attacked, he tries to run (flight). She blocks the door and Billy crawls under a desk and curls into a ball (freeze).

All of these events seem insignificant to someone with a normal stress threshold. Billy's behavior **appears to be** completely inappropriate. But his survival switch got flipped. He is operating out of the part of his brain that is keeping him alive. In this moment, he has almost no capacity for logic, reason, or communication.

Billy's Identity Crisis

A caring adult can be the big sponge that helps absorb some of the stress that is overwhelming Billy.



*Billy does not know that he matters or why. He does not feel like he belongs. Every time he tries, his attempts to make friends end up in disaster. He does not want to do homework because when he gets in trouble for doing things wrong he is humiliated and punished. He grabs extra cookies even though he was in time out for doing it last time because he doesn't understand the connection. He struggles with learning because so much of his brain effort is focused on survival. He seeks belonging and significance through extra attention or control. Or he seeks revenge or just gives up. **He can't turn the survival switch off on his own.***