

# FEELING SAFE

## What recent research tells us about the most important needs of Aboriginal children in the Care System

SNAICC National Aboriginal Child Care Conference,

July 2010, Alice Springs

Howard Bath

Board of Inquiry into Child Protection, NT

# Trauma

**“A psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, often involving a sense of intense fear, terror or helplessness”**

Bruce Perry



## **Type 1, Acute or Simple Trauma – from one overwhelming traumatic event**



**Type 2, Complex or Developmental Trauma – from ongoing exposure to fear and helplessness**



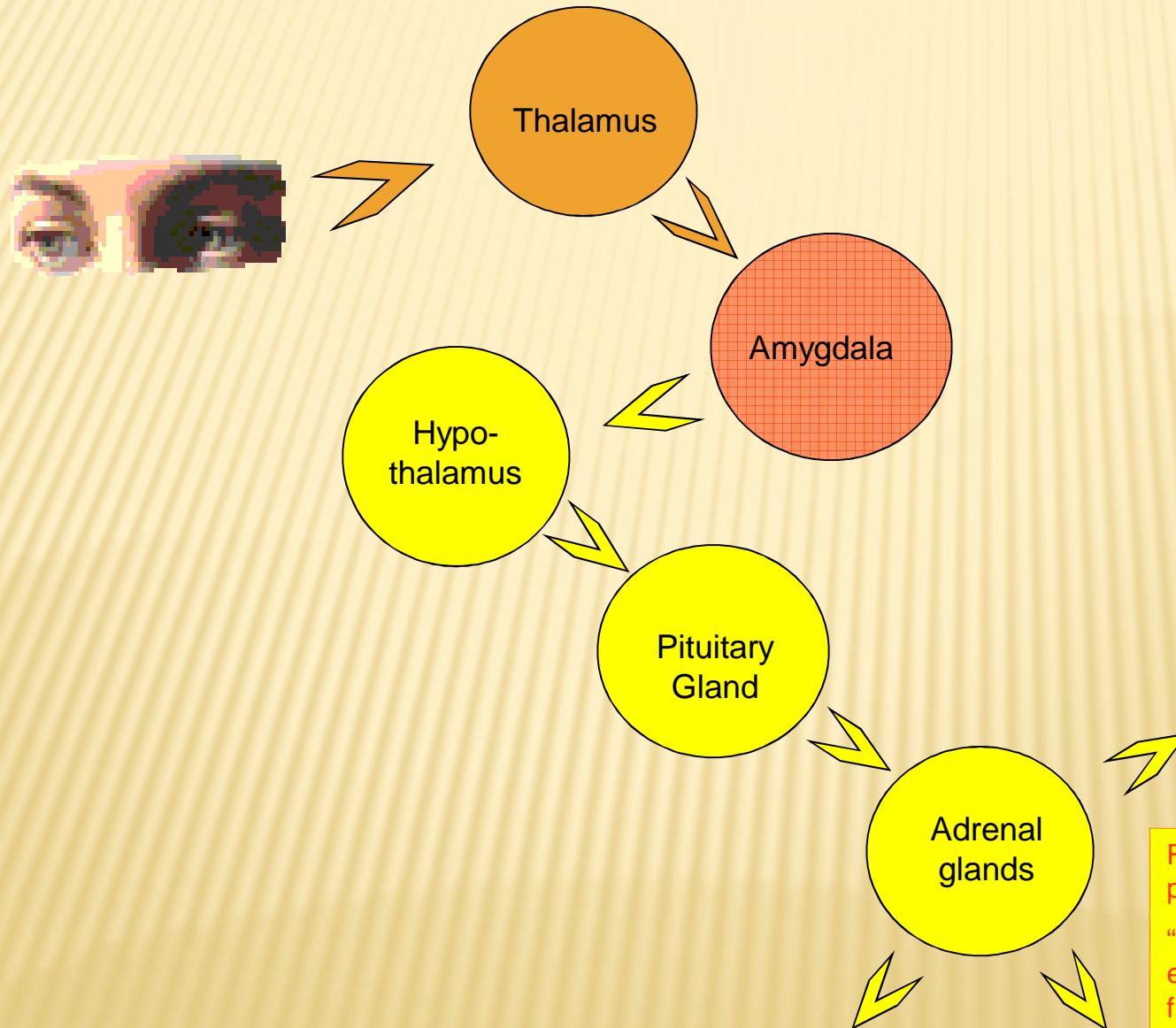
‘complex trauma’  
describes the  
experience of multiple,  
chronic and prolonged,  
developmentally  
adverse traumatic  
events, most often of  
an interpersonal  
nature... and early life  
onset”

van der Kolk, 2005



# The Threat/Stress Reaction

adapted from Le Doux & Sapolsky

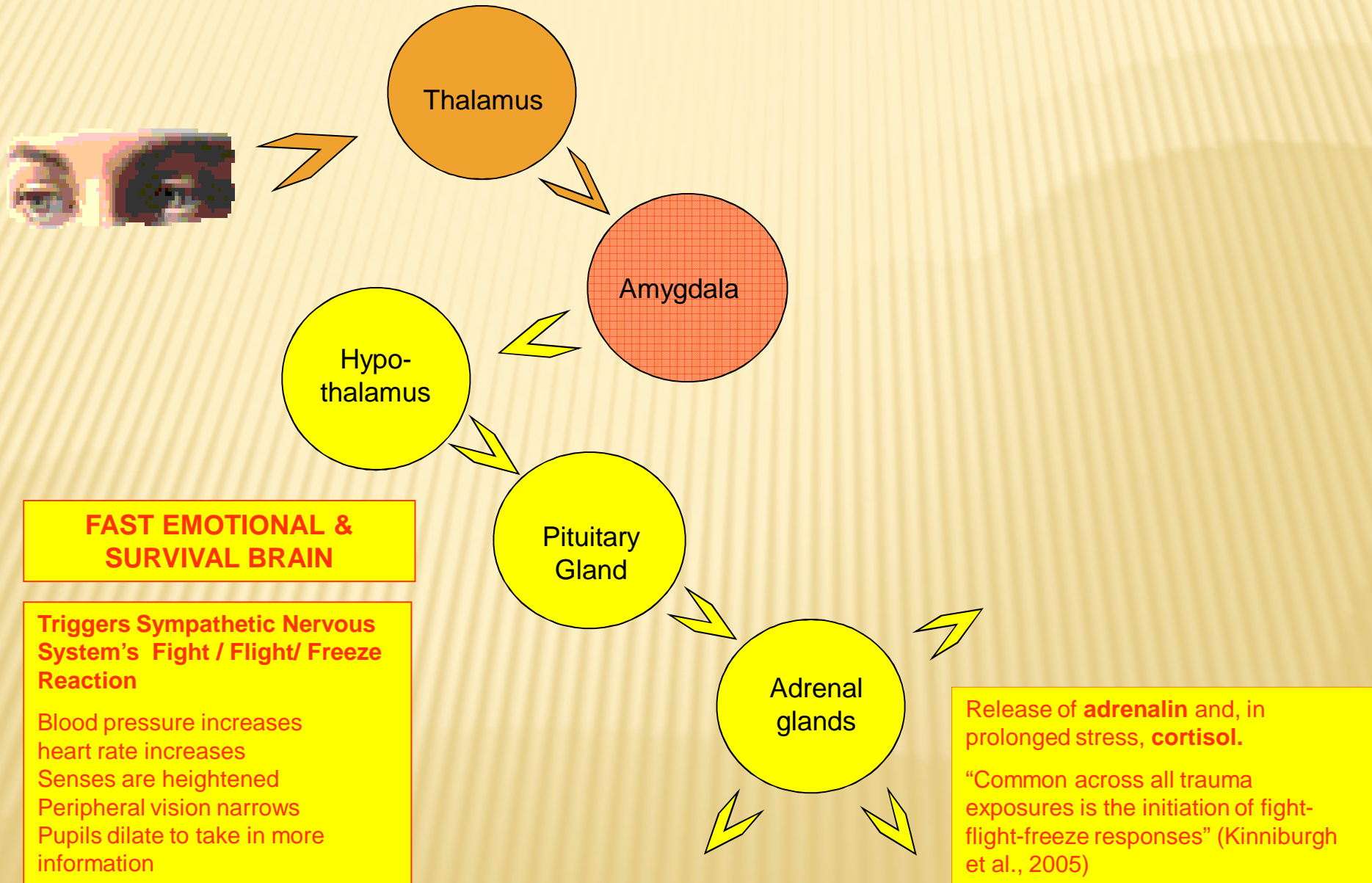


Release of **adrenalin** and, in prolonged stress, **cortisol**.

“Common across all trauma exposures is the initiation of fight-flight-freeze responses” (Kinniburgh et al., 2005)

# The Threat/Stress Reaction

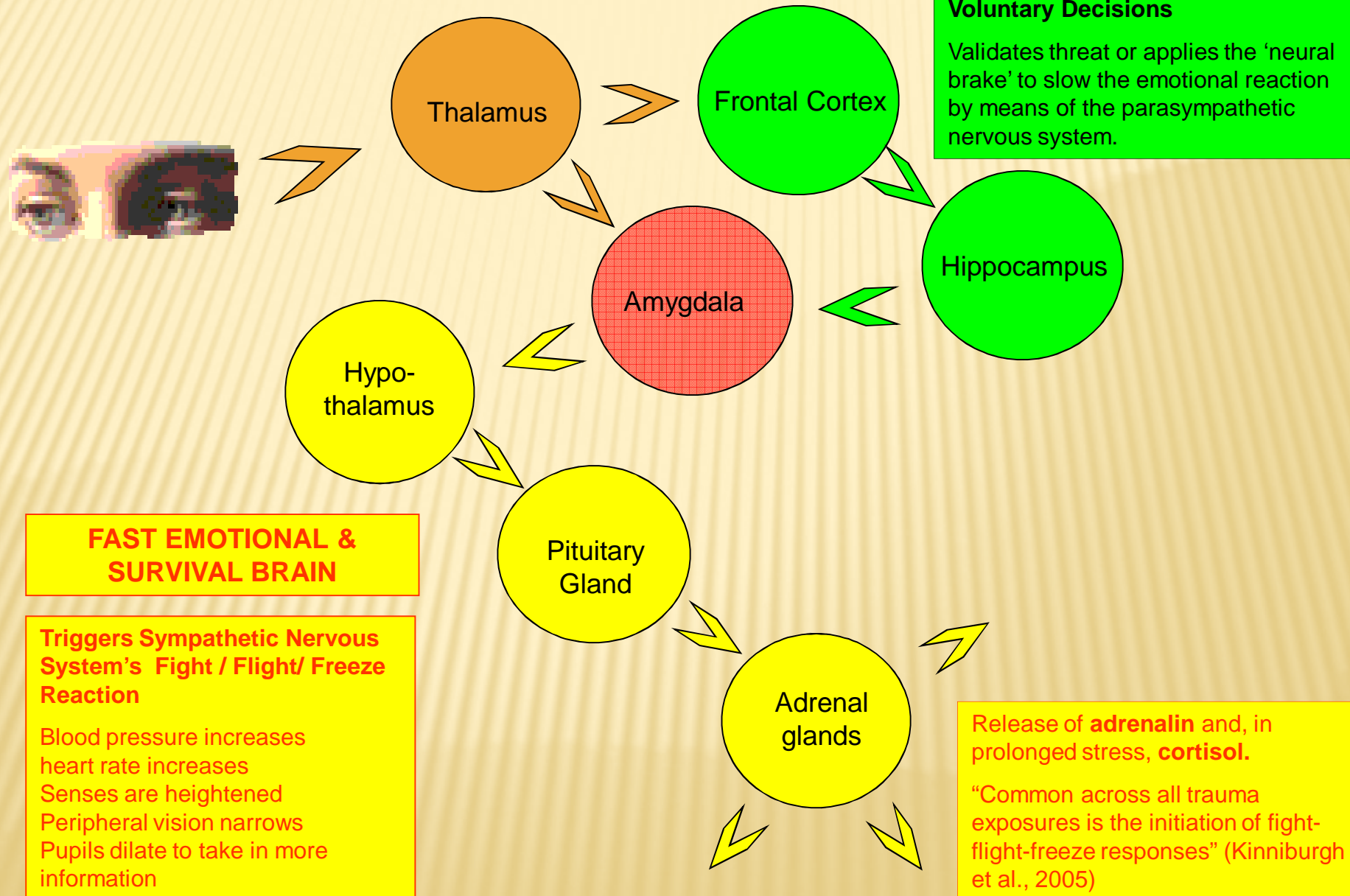
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# The Threat/Stress Reaction

adapted from Le Doux & Sapolsky



# Trauma



Trauma leads to the repeated involuntary triggering of the traumatic stress reaction with feelings of overwhelming fear and helplessness.



The **amygdala** stores memories of threatening situations for future reference. Through a process of *fear conditioning*, it tags specific events or cues as potentially dangerous



Repeated and overwhelming stress  
“sensitizes” the amygdala and it  
becomes hyperalert to danger.

“Traumatized children reset  
their normal level of arousal.  
Even when no external  
threats exist, they are  
in a persistent state  
of alarm”

Bruce Perry



# Dissociation

“The escape when there is no escape”

Physiological and  
emotional shutdown  
and psychological  
separation from  
perceived threat





# DISSOCIATION & AROUSAL

In severely traumatised people there is an “oscillating rhythm” between an intense re-experiencing of traumatic events and dissociative responses that include numbing, denial and emotional constriction

Judith Herman, 1992, p. 47

# The Wounds of Trauma



Complex trauma can impair the development of thinking processes, relationships, self worth, memory, health, and a sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Bessel van der Kolk and colleagues

# More Outcomes of Trauma



Empathy problems

Emotional numbing

Compulsive re-exposure

Substance abuse

Helplessness

Hopelessness

No future orientation



**“The most significant consequence** of early relational trauma is the loss of the ability to regulate the intensity and duration of affects” Allan Schore



**“At the core of traumatic stress** is a breakdown in the capacity to regulate internal states like fear, anger, and sexual impulses” Bessel van der Kolk



(AP PHOTO)











## **Most Frequent DSM diagnoses given to chronically abused children**

1. Separation Anxiety
2. Oppositional Defiant Disorder
3. Phobic Disorders
4. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
5. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

Ackerman and colleagues

Harlow's Monkey clinging  
to the towelling 'mother'





Physical safety  
Emotional safety  
Cultural safety



# Relationships and recovery



“The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change...” Perry & Szalavitz.