

The ADHD Brain: Why Motivation Feels Different

Tamara Rosier, Ph.D.

What do you hope to learn from this session?

Write specific questions you have about motivation and ADHD.

What have you done that works to motivate yourself? Why does it work? Does it ever stop working?

Dopamine & The Executive Function System

- In ADHD, **weaker PFC activation** makes self-motivation difficult
- The ADHD brain prioritizes interest over importance.
- Interest-Based vs. Importance-Based Motivation

Neurotypical brains: Can engage in tasks because they are important

ADHD brains: Need interest, novelty, urgency, or external pressure to engage

Use of dopamine-seeking strategies:

Problem with using of dopamine-seeking strategies:

- Chasing dopamine is draining

What is your experience using dopamine seeking strategies?

Motivation is emotional, not just logical

- Deficient Emotional Self-Regulation
- Is a central facet of ADHD that carries significant consequences.
- Research confirms the prominent role emotional dysregulation plays in ADHD's appearance and an individual outcome
- The **limbic system (emotion center)** is **overactive** in ADHD, meaning **emotions** overpower logic when making decision

When a task feels boring, overwhelming, or stressful, emotional discomfort leads to avoidance—not action

Many learn to hijack their emotional brains to motivate themselves

Unhealthy tools

Avoidance Anxiety Procrastination Shame/Guilt Self-loathing

What is your experience using negative emotions as a strategy to motivate yourself?

Problems with using negative emotions to motivate:

Regulate Your Emotional State Before Acting

Strategy 1: Window of Tolerance



Strategy 2: Have a meeting with your ADHD monkeys

First, circle the 5 most active monkeys:

- Angry Andrew
- Anxious Amy
- Avoidant Anthony
- Critical Calvin
- Disorganized Derek
- Helpless Hannah
- Impatient Iggy
- Mopey Mike
- Overwhelmed Oscar
- Rejection-Sensitive Rachel
- Thrill-seeking Theodore
- Time-blind Timmy

For each Monkey, explain how they are trying to help you in their naive monkey way. Do any of your monkeys have alliances? Or do any protect the other monkeys?

Negotiate with your monkeys. Write out a dialogue between you and your primate friends.

Strategy 3: Connect to your “aspirational self”

- **Discuss with your future self** – What would “future you” say about getting started today?
- **Visualize the End Result** – Picture how you’ll feel after completing the task.
- **Tie It to Your Identity** – Instead of “I need to write,” try “I’m an author, and authors write.”
- **Connect to your “aspirational self”**
- **Use Identity-Based Affirmations:** Instead of “I need to be more productive,” try “I am someone who follows through on my ideas.”
- **Create a Future-Self Playlist:** Music that reminds you of who you want to become can shift your mindset instantly
- **Place Visual Reminders:** A sticky note with “What Would Future Me Do?” (WWFMD) can help you refocus when stuck.

Which one of these ideas have you tried? What worked? Why do you think it worked?

Next steps:

What is one thing that you learned today?

Why is it important to know?

What is one strategy that you want to try today or tomorrow?

What do you need to do to begin that strategy?

A person's hands are visible in the foreground, framing a sunset over a body of water. The hands are positioned as if holding a camera or a frame, with the fingers pointing towards the horizon. The background shows a calm sea under a sky with soft, orange and blue hues from the setting sun. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

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BEFORE WE BEGIN:

What do you hope to learn from this session?

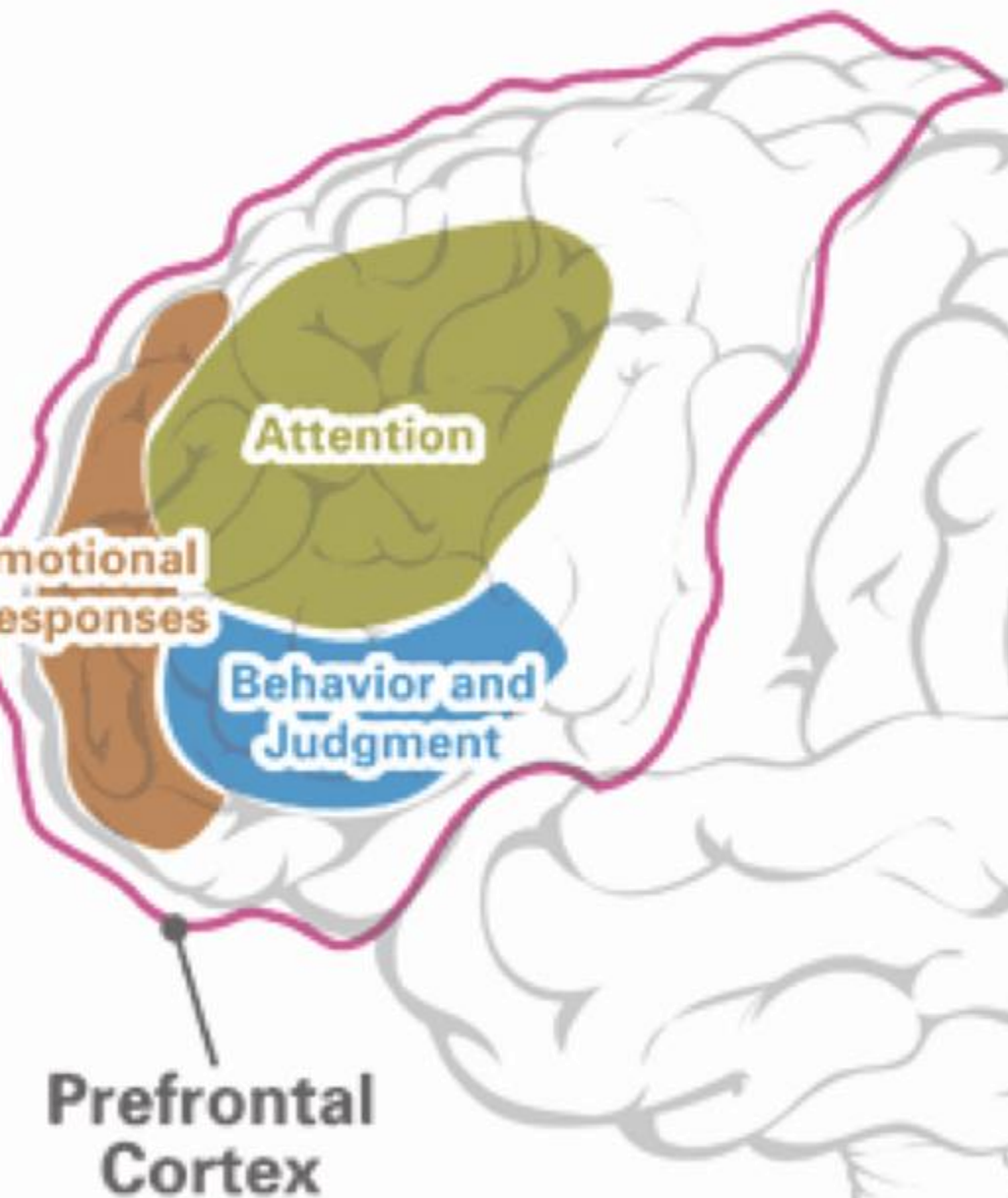
Write specific questions you have about emotions, motivation and ADHD.

What have you done that works to motivate yourself? Why does it work? Does it ever stop working?




DOPAMINE & THE EXECUTIVE FUNCTION SYSTEM

(Volkow et al., 2009; Tripp & Wickens, 2008)



- ADHD brains have **dysregulated dopamine**, making non-stimulating tasks harder to start.
- The **prefrontal cortex (PFC)** controls **task initiation, planning, and impulse regulation**.
- In ADHD, **weaker PFC activation** makes self-motivation difficult. (Arnsten, 2009)

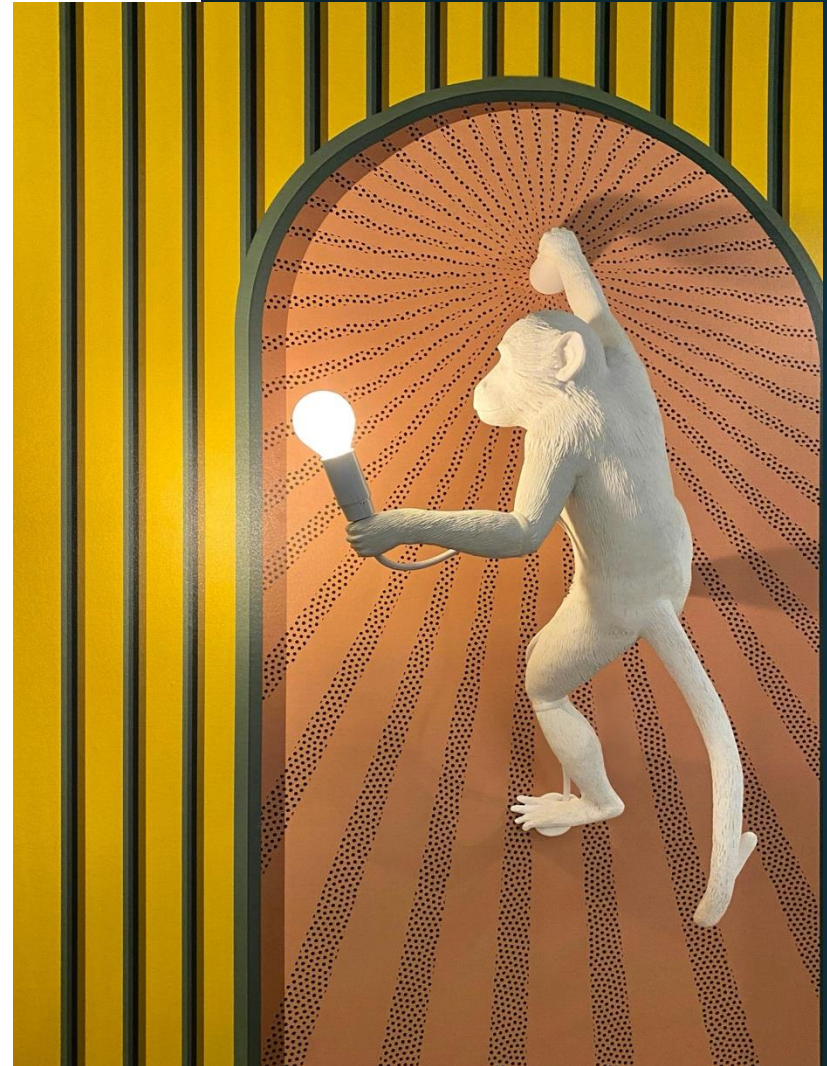


**The ADHD brain prioritizes
interest over importance.**

INTEREST-BASED VS. IMPORTANCE-BASED MOTIVATION

Neurotypical brains: Can engage in tasks because they are **important**.

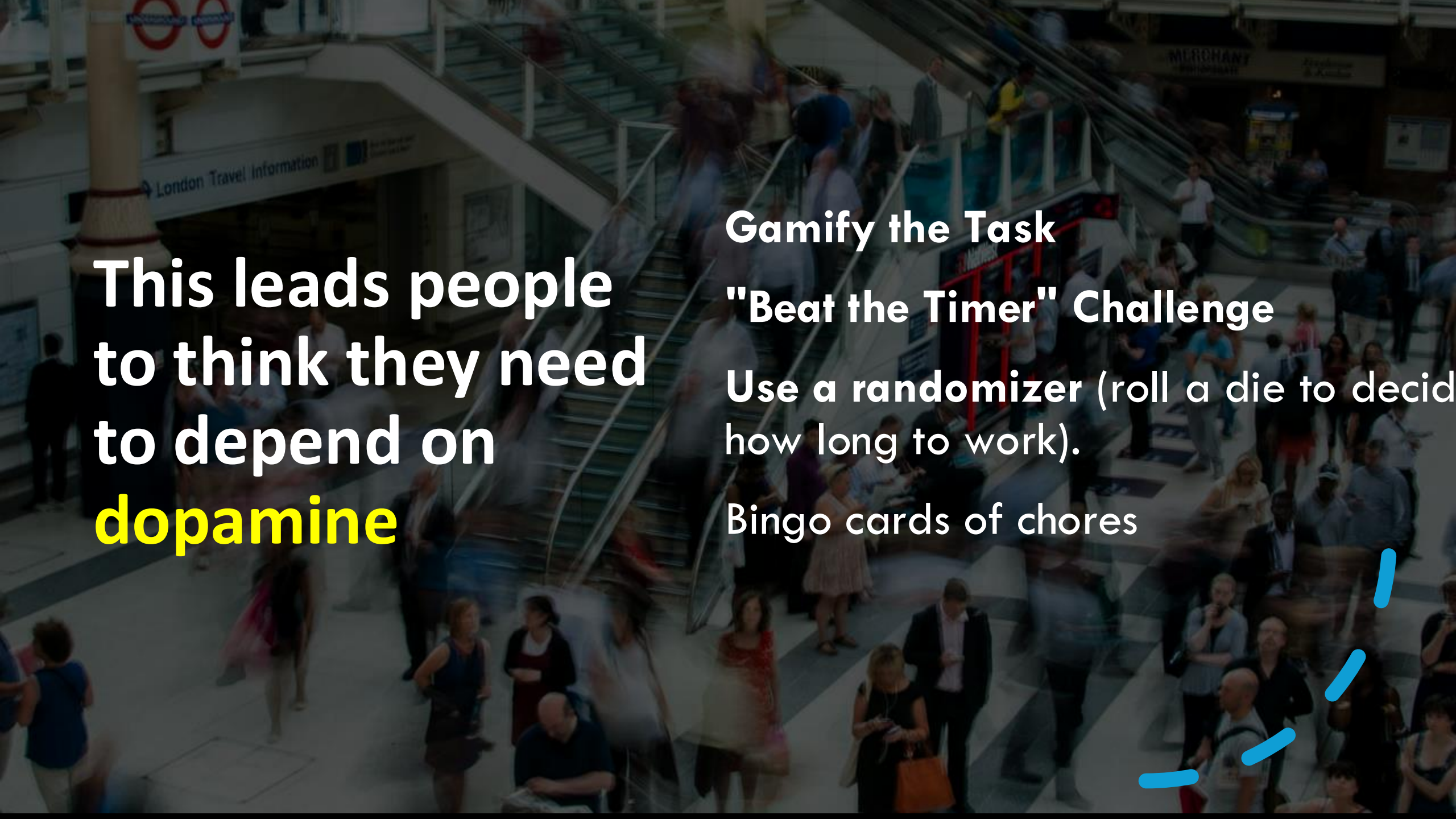
ADHD brains: Need **interest, novelty, urgency, or external pressure** to engage. (Dodson 2024)





ADHD Brains:

Need **interest,**
novelty,
urgency, or external
pressure
to engage.



This leads people
to think they need
to depend on
dopamine

Gamify the Task

"Beat the Timer" Challenge

Use a randomizer (roll a die to decide
how long to work).

Bingo cards of chores





Chasing dopamine is draining

Constantly seeking stimulation can be mentally and physically draining



Motivation is emotional

DEFICIENT EMOTIONAL SELF-REGULATION

- Is a central facet of ADHD that carries significant consequences.
- Is not included the disorder's diagnostic criteria.
- Research confirms the prominent role emotional dysregulation plays in ADHD's appearance and an individual outcomes





The limbic system (emotion center) is overactive in ADHD, meaning emotions overpower logic when making decisions

(Shaw et al., 2014)

When a task feels boring, overwhelming, or stressful, emotional discomfort leads to avoidance—not action



Many learn to hijack their emotional brains
to motivate themselves.

***Emotions
motivate
action***

Unhealthy tools

- ✓ Avoidance
- ✓ Anxiety
- ✓ Procrastination
- ✓ Shame/Guilt
- ✓ Self-loathing

Negative arousal is exhausting

*Heightened emotions
demand energy, leaving us
depleted.*

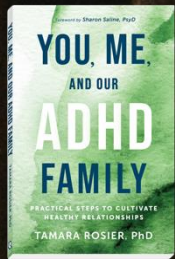


What should I
do then?





**Regulate Your Emotional State
Before Acting**



Window of Tolerance

Hyperarousal

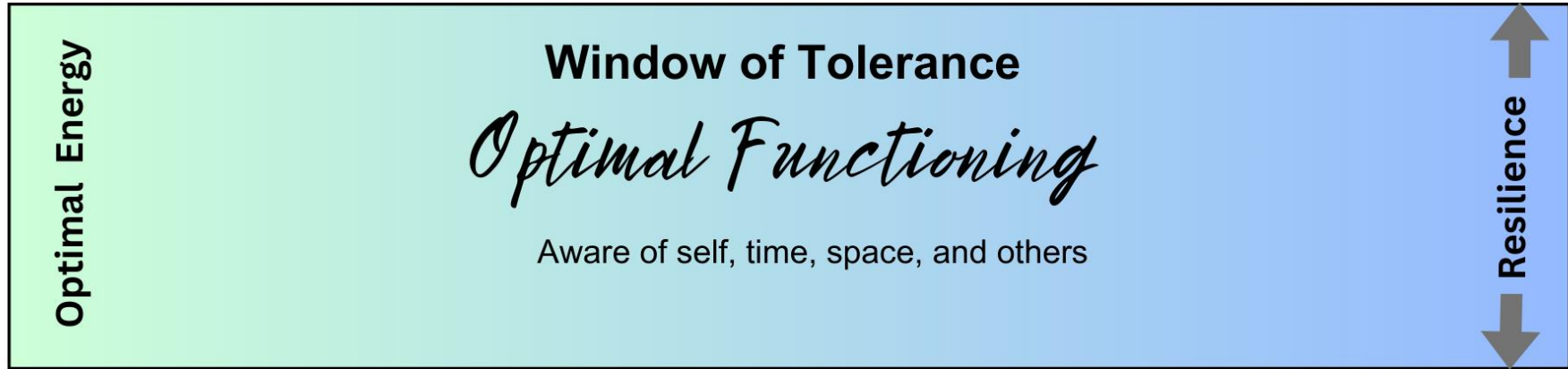
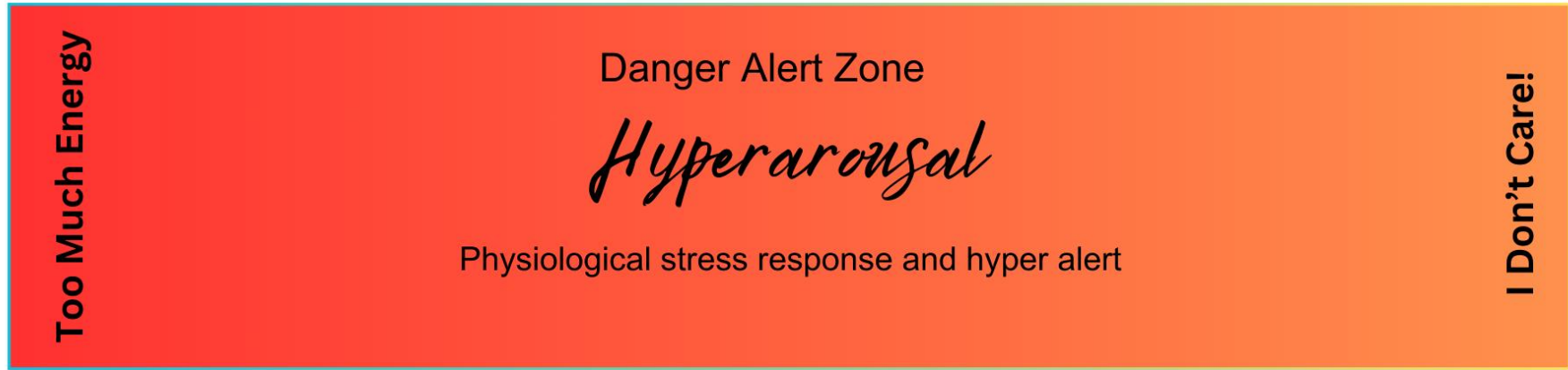
Window of Tolerance
Optimal Functioning

Hypo-Arousal

- Present, engaged, alert
- Access to creativity and problem solving
- Connected - Safe and Social

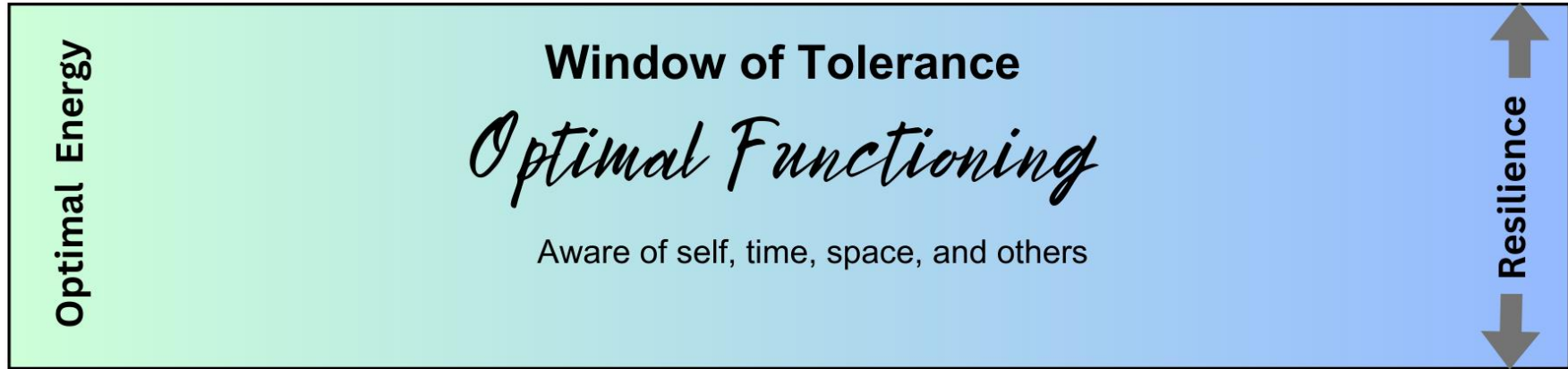
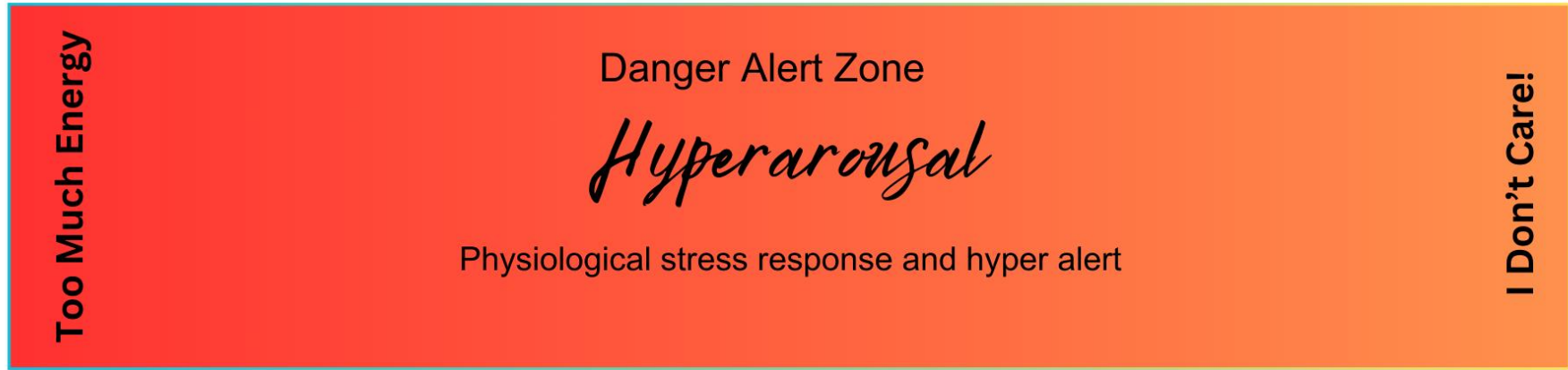
WINDOW OF TOLERANCE

Optimal Function



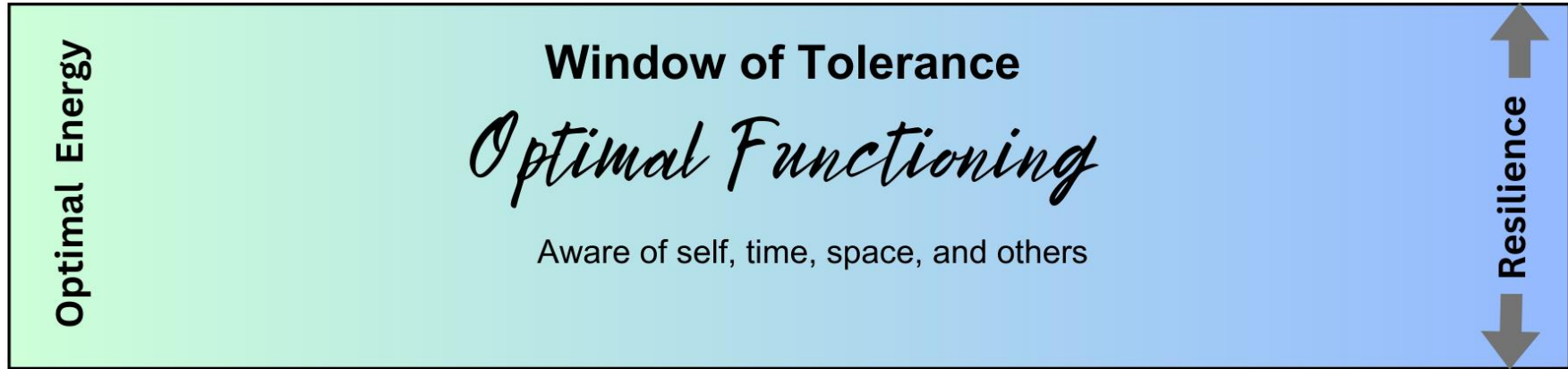
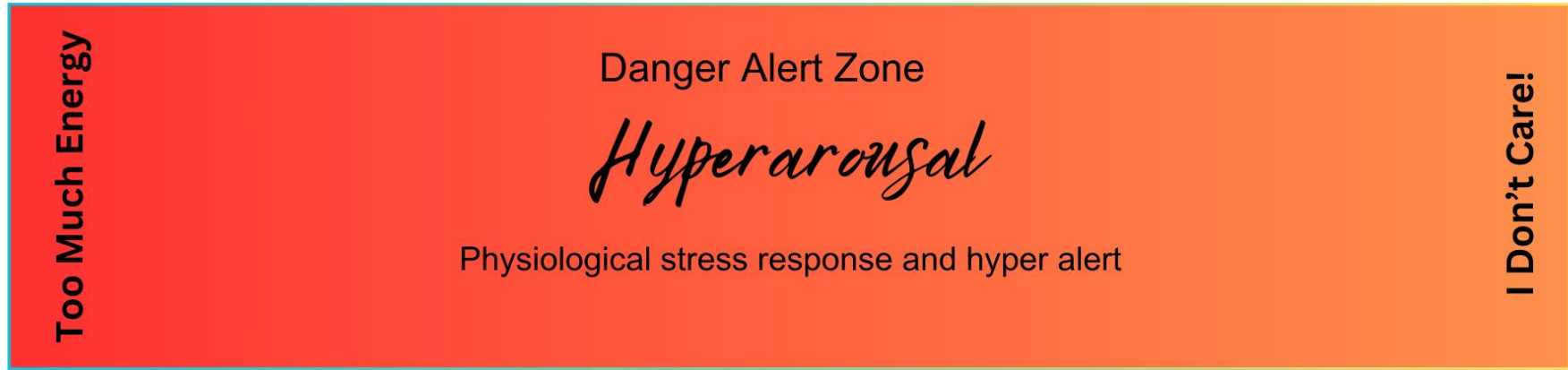
- Physiological stress response and high alert
- Fight/Flight
(sympathetic nervous system activated)
- Anxiety, anger, impulsivity, reactivity, threatened
- Can't effectively connect with other

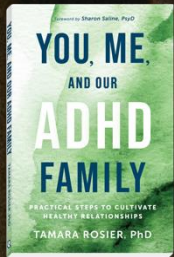
Hyperarousal



- Physiological stress response
- Shutdown Response
- Tired, Slow, numb
- Avoidant
- Lack of motivation
- Freeze response
- Disconnected from self and others

Hypo-A



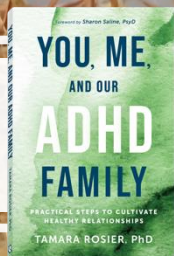


Window of Tolerance

Why this could work for you

- Cognitive flexibility improves, making adapting, shifting tasks, and solving problems easier.
- Regulates hyperarousal & hypoarousal
- Reduces emotional dysregulation



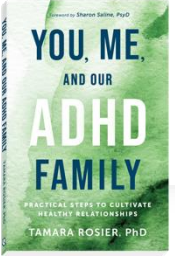


Have a meeting with your ADHD monkeys

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- Rejection-Sensitive Rachel
- Thrill-seeking Theodore
- Time-blind Timmy

First, name the 5
most talkative
monkeys





Negotiate with your monkeys

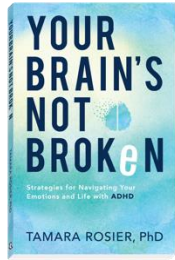
- For each Monkey, explain how they are trying to help you in their naive monkey way.
- Do any of your monkeys have alliances? Or do any protect the other monkeys?



Why this could work for you

- Increases intentional internal dialogue
- Evokes playful problem-solving
- Removes self-judgement
- Promotes self-compassion
- Internal dialogue





Connect to your “Aspirational Self”

- **Discuss with your future self** – What would “future you” say about getting started today?
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Why this could work for you

- Creates an emotional pull that feels **exciting and meaningful**.
- **Provides an internal compass for decision-making**
- Makes the future feel **more real and relevant**, creating a **positive sense of urgency** without triggering overwhelm
- Setbacks feel **temporary** instead of spiraling into shame.
- **Encourages identity-based habits instead of relying on willpower**

NEXT STEPS:

What is one thing that you learned today?

Why is it important to know?

What is one strategy that you want to try today or tomorrow?

What do you need to do to begin that strategy?

