Anxiety and Learning Disabilities:

How to Support Students with Learning Challenges and Worry

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An Introduction

Typical Stress	Problem Anxiety
Reasonable	Excessive
Productive	Detrimental
Manageable	Uncontrollable
Mobilizing	Paralyzing
Specific	Pervasive
Time-limited	Chronic
Age matched	Age mismatched

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Features of Problematic Anxiety

- **Disproportionate**
- **Disruption**
- **Distress**
- **Duration**

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Causes & Contributions

- **Anxiety problems have a complex origin; multiple pathways and "roots of origin"**

- **Evidence of a constitutional/genetic component**
    - Role of temperament
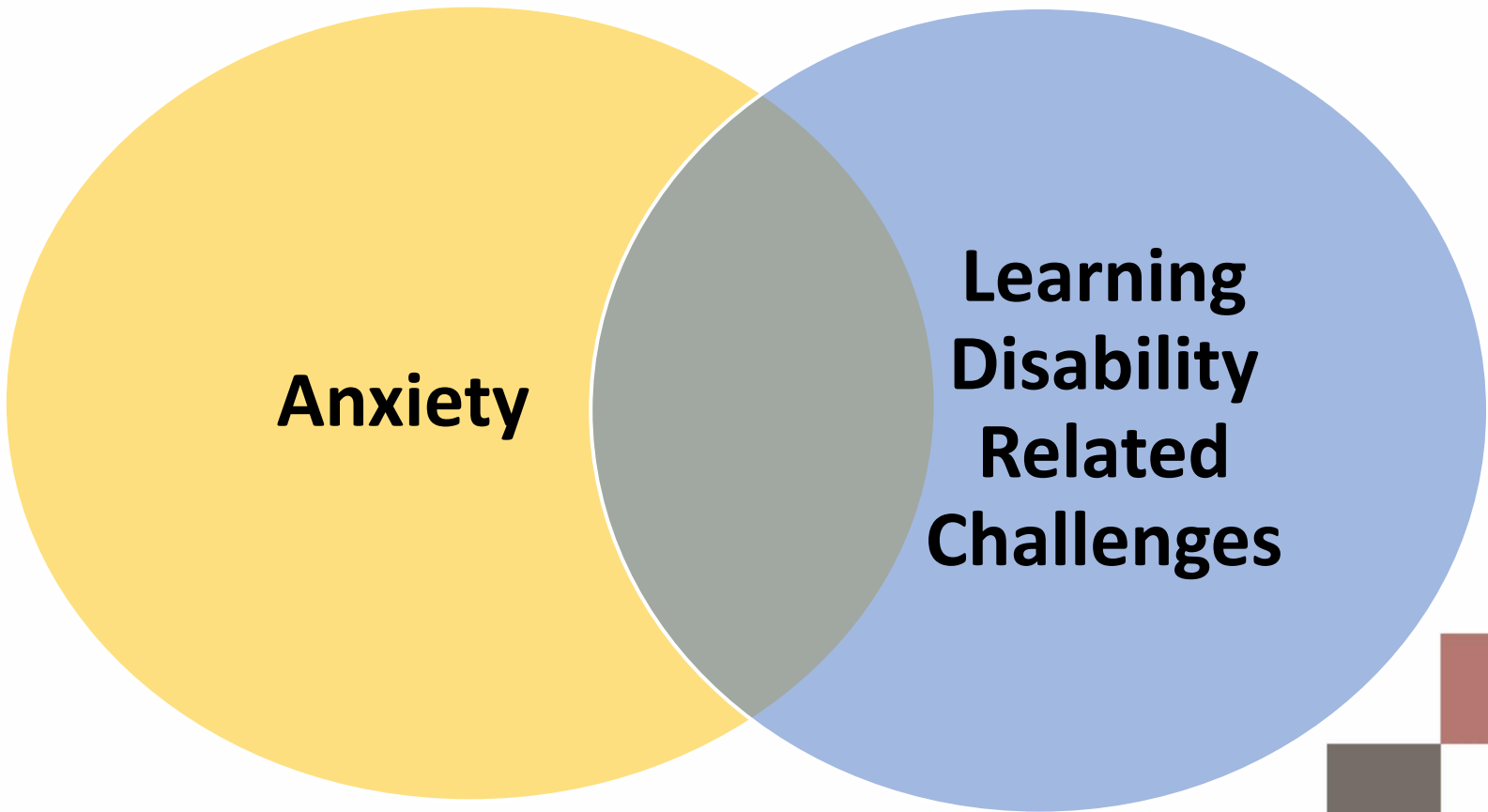   - Jerome Kagan
    - Display perceptual bias to threat
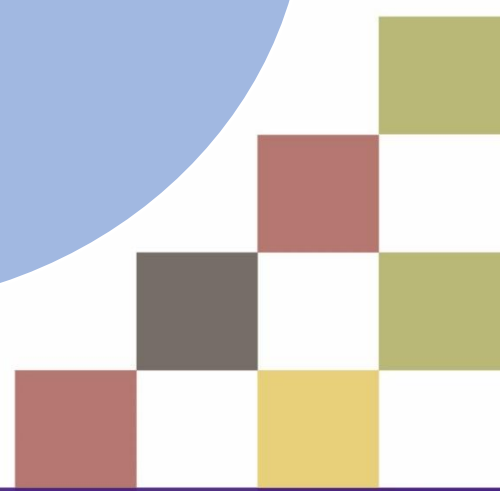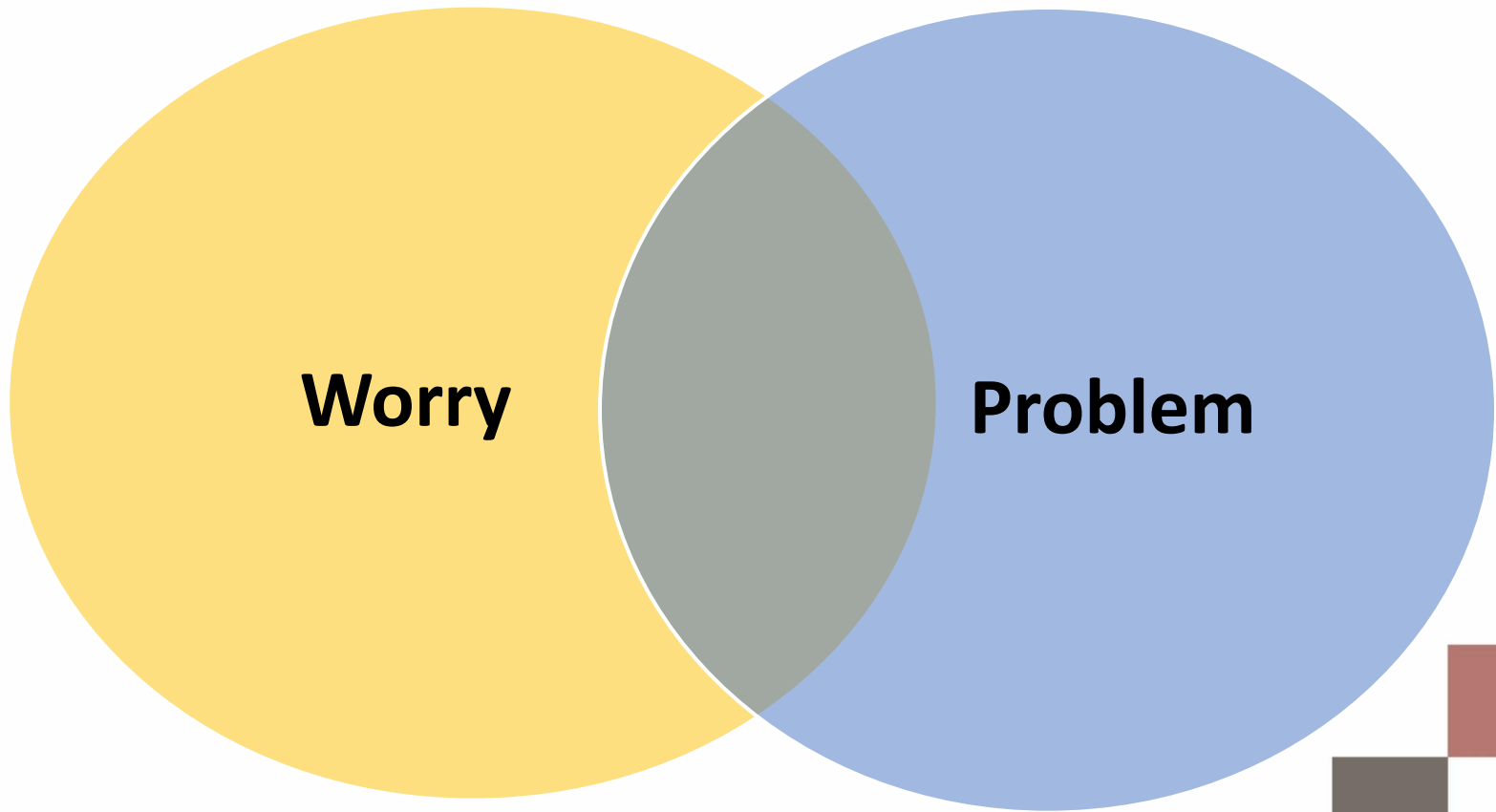
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Threat Detection

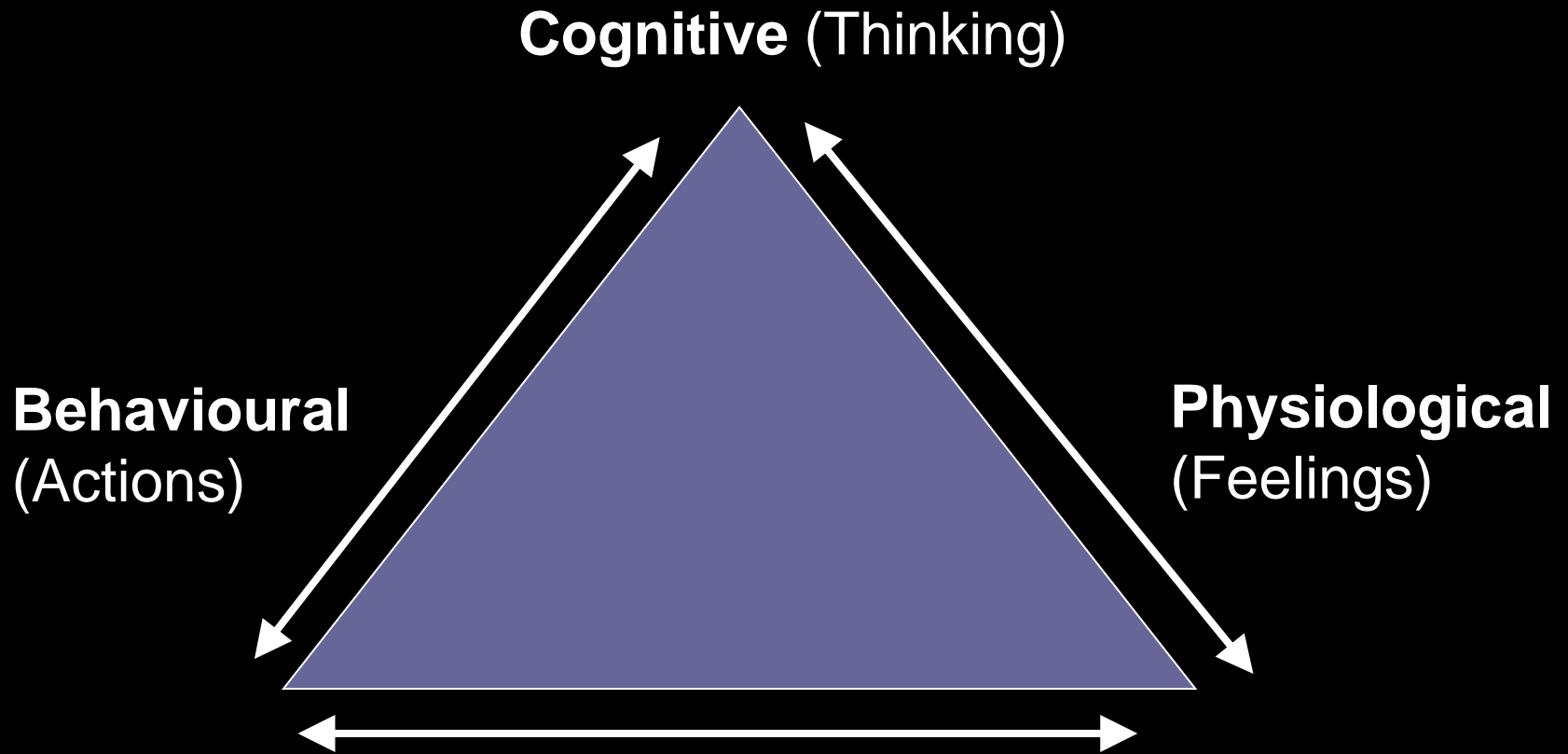Children First for a Stronger Community

Setting the Stage

What are some possible worries or "problems" for students with a Learning Disability?
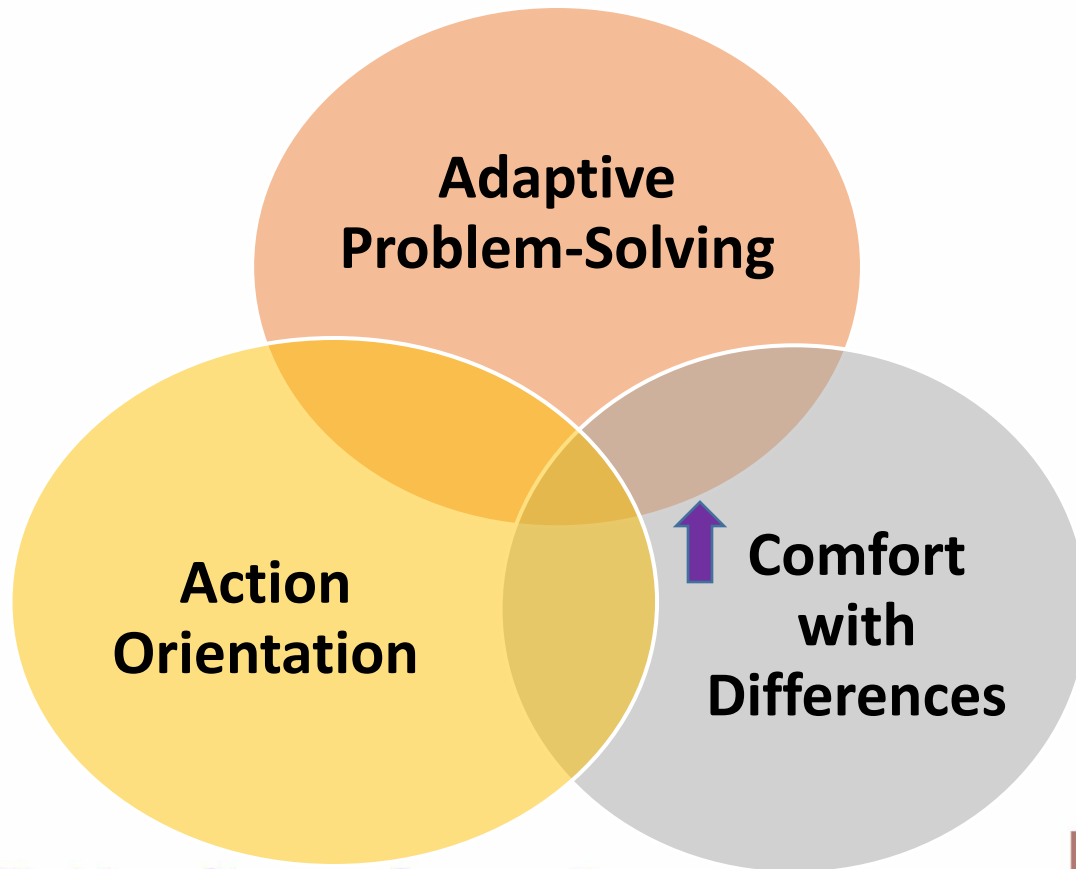
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Components of Anxiety

Cognitive (Thinking)

Behavioural (Actions)

Physiological (Feelings)

Intentional Strategies

Adaptive Problem-Solving

Action Orientation

Comfort with Differences

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Intentional Strategies

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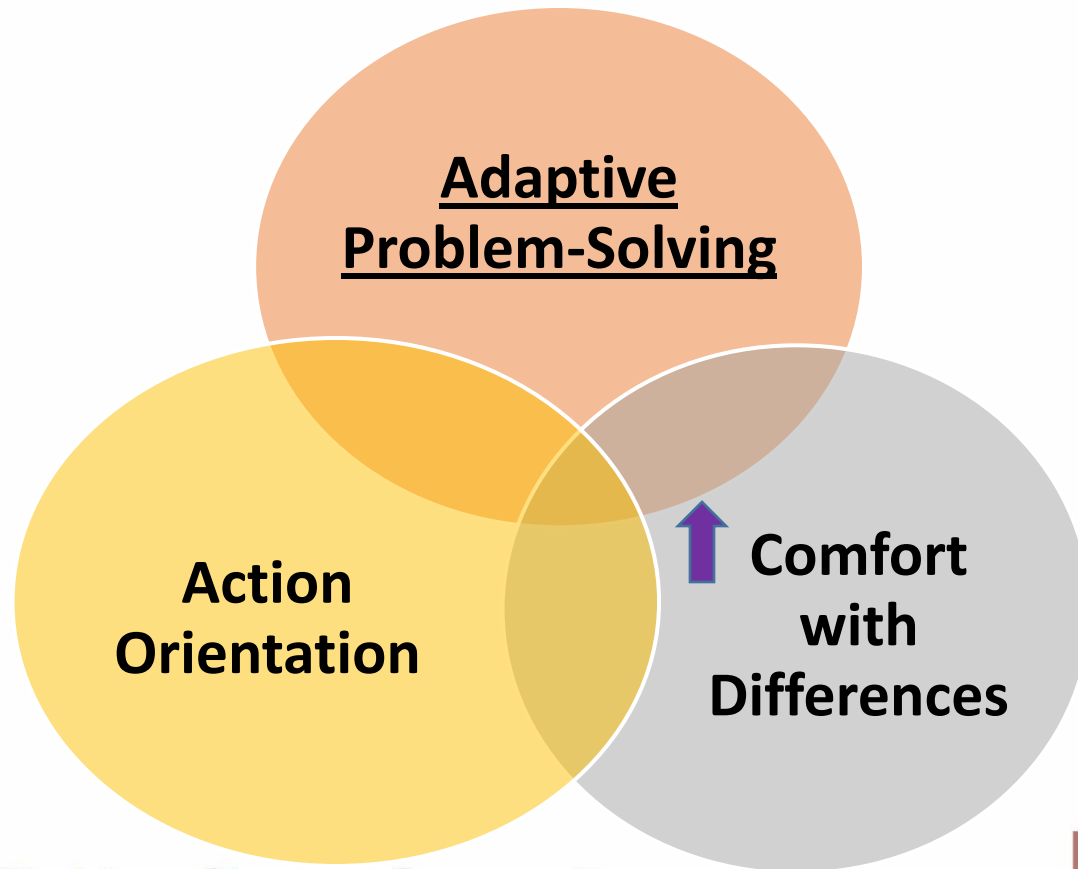
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Worry **Problem**

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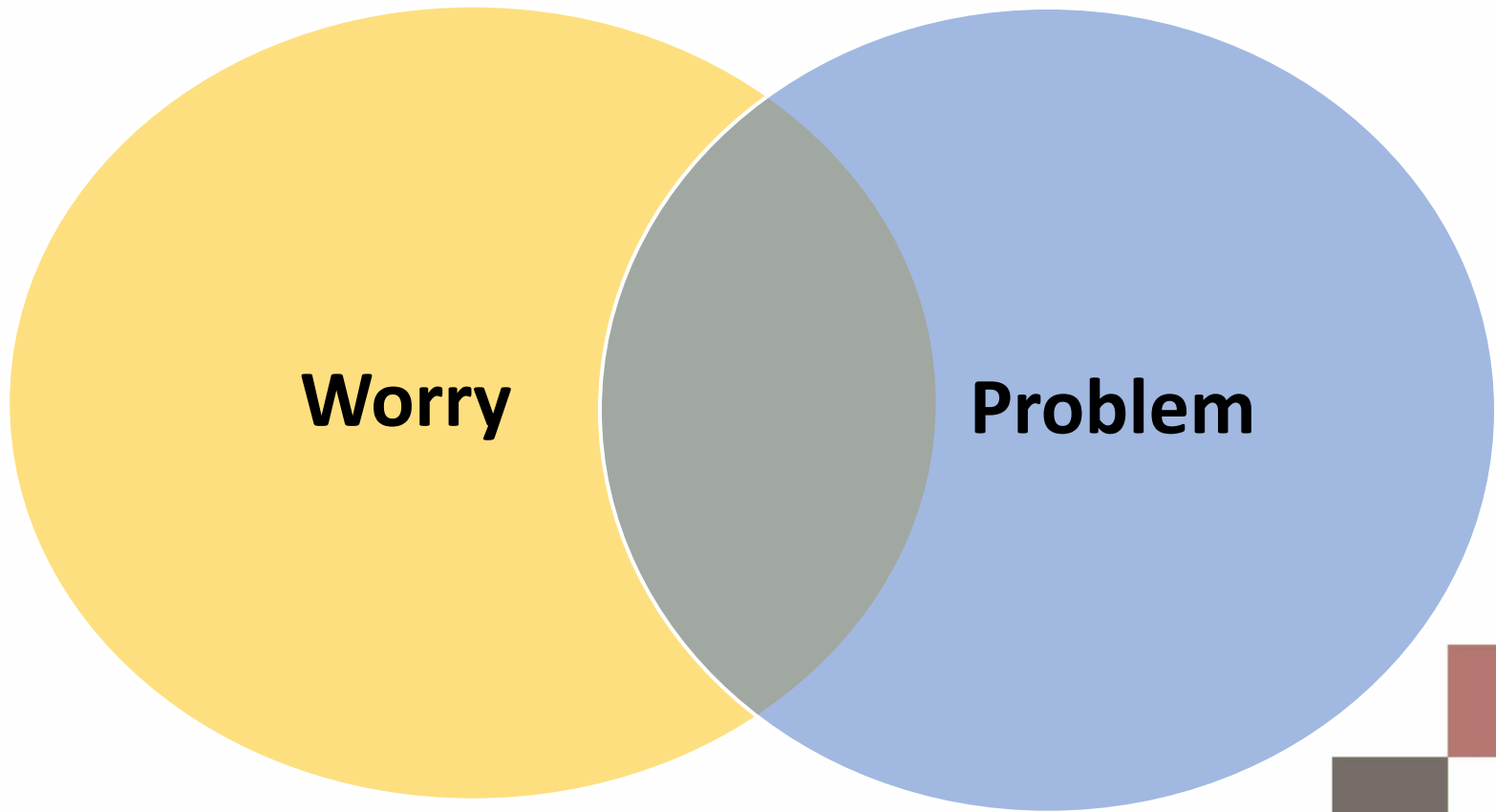
Differentiating Worries vs. Problems

Important Considerations:

- **Use active listening**
  - Seek to understand their experience
- **Be curious – what is hard about that? What is that thought telling you?**
- **Try to dig deeper on the thinking processes**
- **What is going? Is this a worry or a problem?**

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Differentiating Worries vs. Problems

"I can't do this"

Worry Thought	Problem
• I won't finish the assignment! • I am going to fail! • I can't do anything!	• I can't understand the question! • I don't know where to start!

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Differentiating Worries vs. Problems

Telling the Difference between "Problems" (*which can be solved!*) **vs. "Worry" Thoughts** (*which can be bossed back!*):

Where I Was:	Was it a "problem" or a "worry?"		How I could tell it was a "worry" thought
	Problem √	**Worry X**	

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Differentiating Worries vs. Problems

"I can't do this"

Worry Thought	Problem
• **Plan:** Challenge worry thoughts	• **Plan:** Work on problem-solving

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Worry: Cognitive Techniques

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Worry: Cognitive Techniques

Realistic thinking techniques:

- What is the **evidence?**
  - Examining the alternatives
  - What is the best thing that could happen? Most likely thing to happen?
  - What happened when I worried before?
  - How many times has this thing really happened?
- What is a **more realistic or helpful thought?**

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Problem: Problem-Solving

- Effective problem solving is a complex task

- Involves multiple steps

1) Identifying the problem
2) Generating possible solutions
3) Evaluating each solution
4) Choosing the best solution
5) Trying out the solution
6) Evaluating the effectiveness of the solution

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Example: "I am going to fail this test!"

- "I am going to do horrible on the test"

- "My marks are going to suffer!"

- "I am not going to pass this year!

- "I won't go to high school with my friends!"

"I have never failed before"
"This is tricky, but I am going to try my best"
"This is uncomfortable, but I can handle it"

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Example: "I am going to fail this test!"

- "I don't understand this idea!"

- "I don't know what to do!"

- "This feels totally overwhelming!"

"I don't know what to do in step #3"
"All of these questions are freaking me out"
"I need some extra practice and help here"

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Cognitive Examinations

Be mindful of our inclinations:

- **To provide reassurance**
- **To dismiss or ignore**

Goal: **To examine and evaluate the thinking (thoughts)**

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Intentional Strategies

ANXIETY

PANIC PEAK

EXPOSURE
Anxiety Climbing

Avoidance (Escape)

Anxiety quickly dropping

Failure to habituate

Return of trigger

HABITUATION
Anxiety Coasting

Mastery of Anxiety

BEGIN EXPOSURE

TIME

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Behavioural Strategies

- Avoidance of feared stimulus <u>strengthens</u> anxiety

Avoidance ➡️

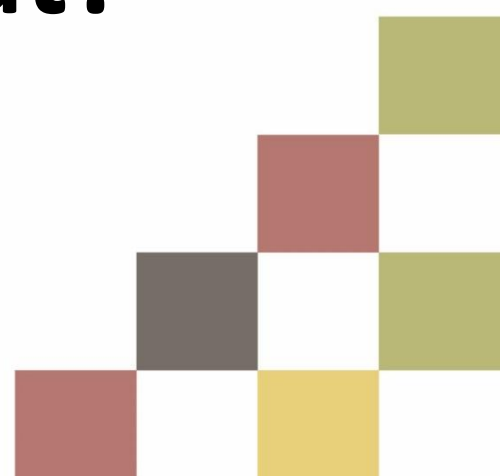- Facing your fear (exposure) <u>weakens</u> anxiety

Exposure ➡️

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Facing Fears
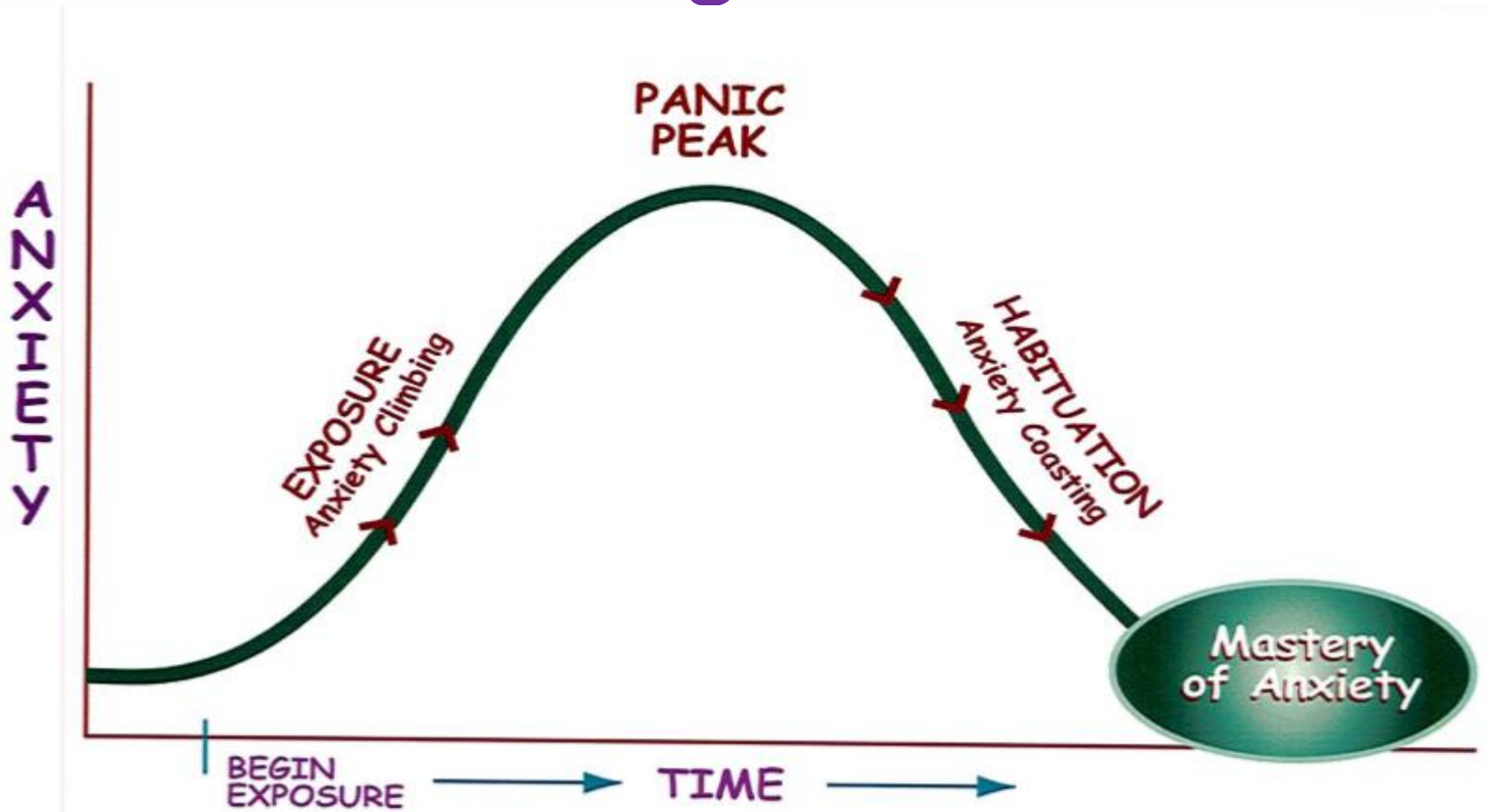
Social Worries and Being Different

What types of social situations might kids with a LD be anxious about?

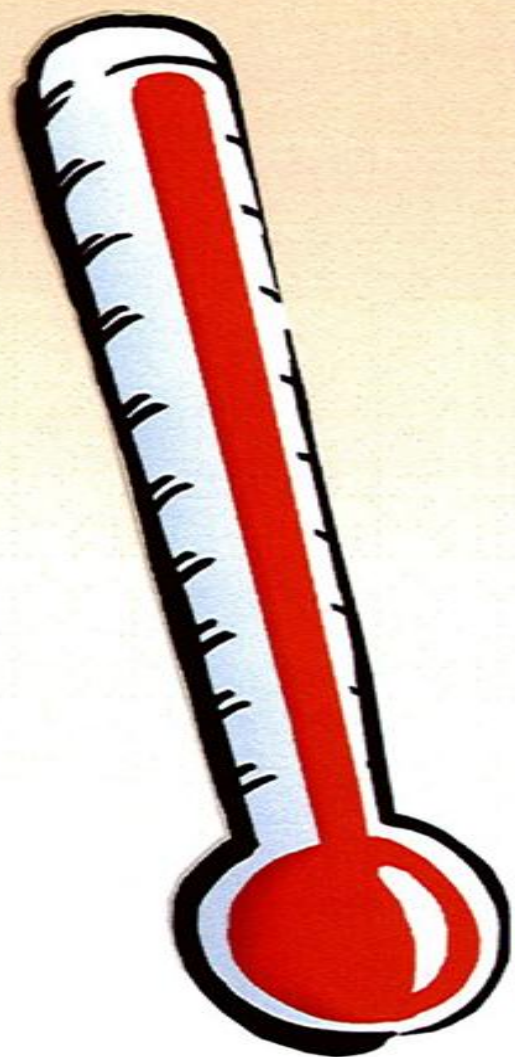Children First for a Stronger Community

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The Fearmometer

10. Out of control! Ballistic!
9. Can't handle it.
8. Really tough.
7. Pretty tough.
6. Getting tough.
5. Not too good.
4. Starting to bother.
3. Just a little uneasy.
2. A little twinge.
1. Piece of cake!

Main Ideas: Exposure

- **Collaborative (with the child)**
- **Break down the task/situation**
  - Find the "right inch"
- **Be flexible and creative**
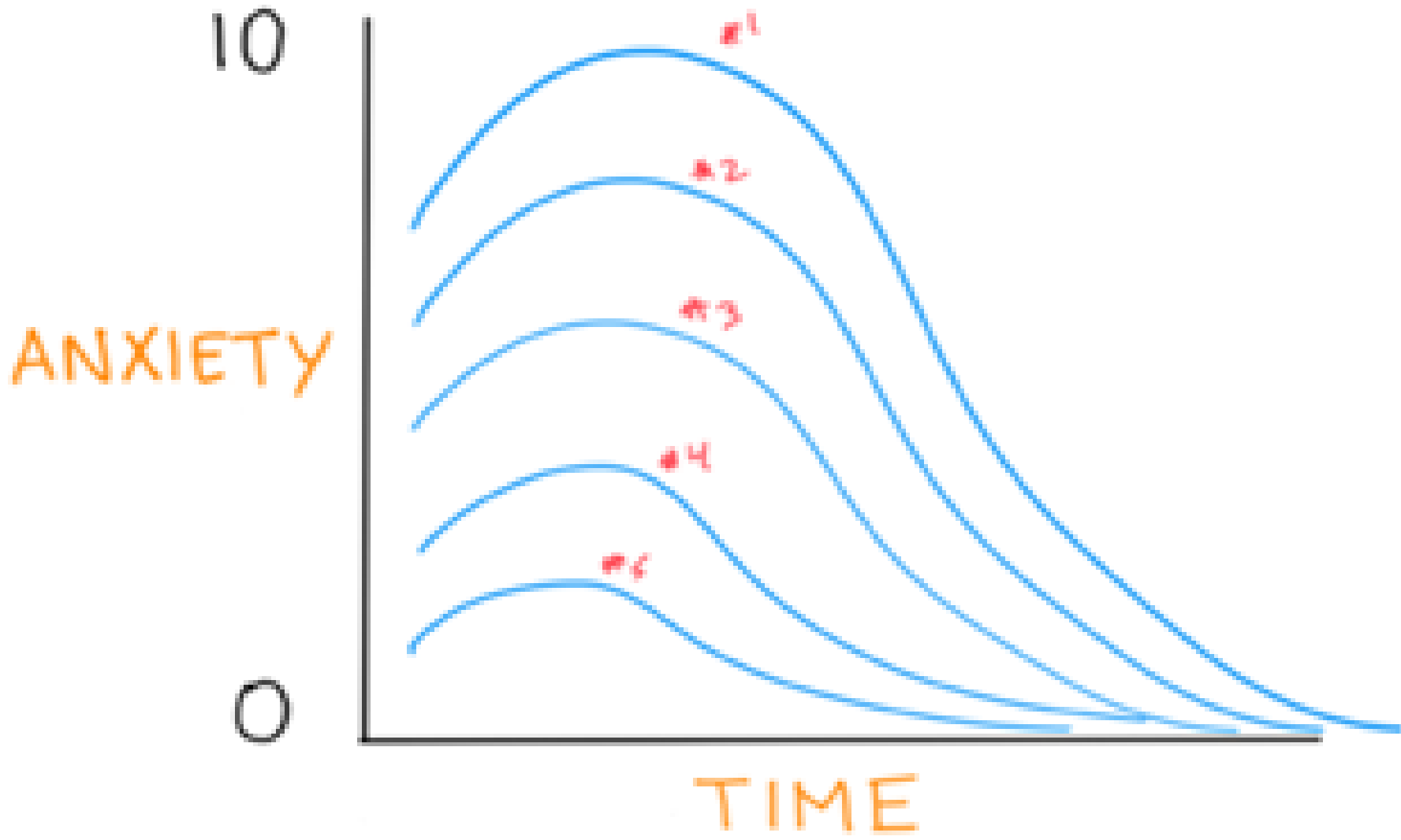- **Practice and celebrate!**

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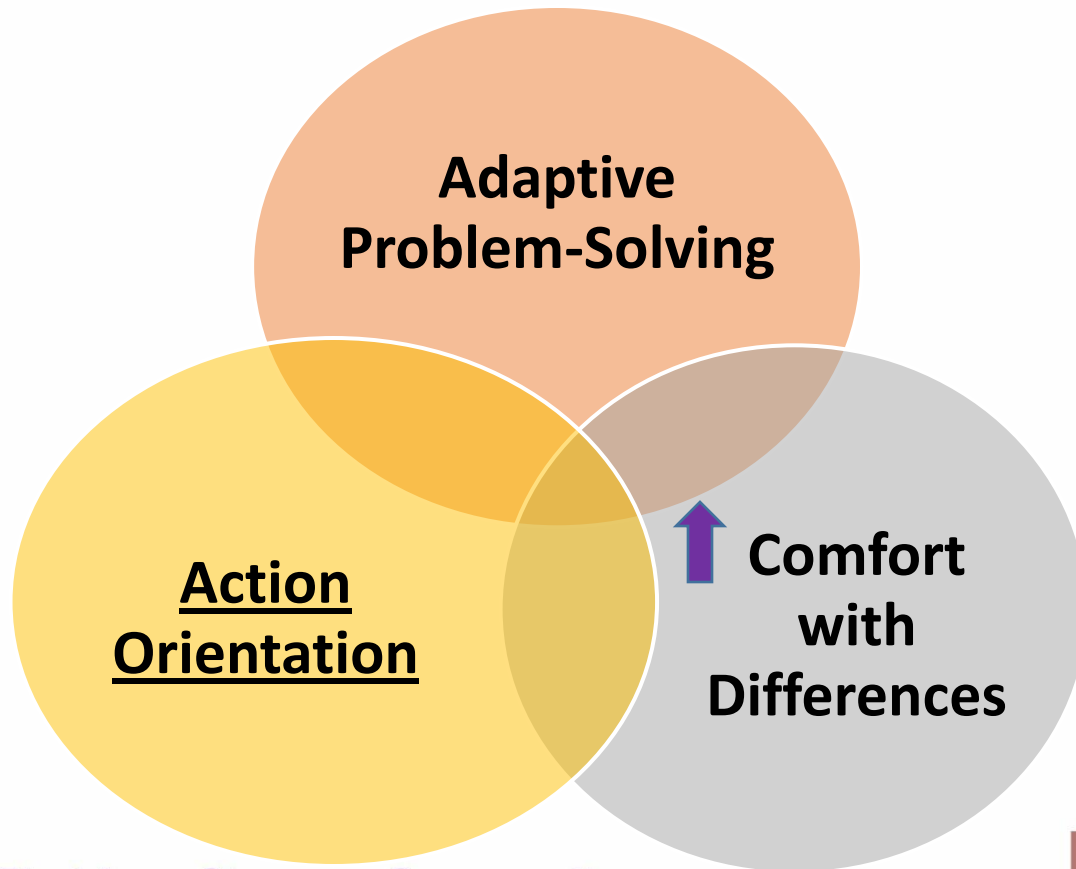
Possible Fear Ladder – Assistive Technology
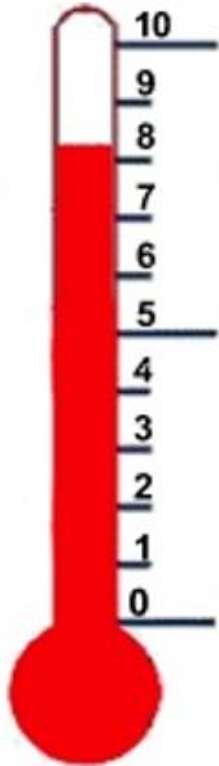
- **Using AT during regular class time**
- **Using AT briefly during class time**
- **Using AT during active "group work"**
- **Teaching other students how to use AT**
- **Working with a friend to use AT**
- **Observing other students use AT**
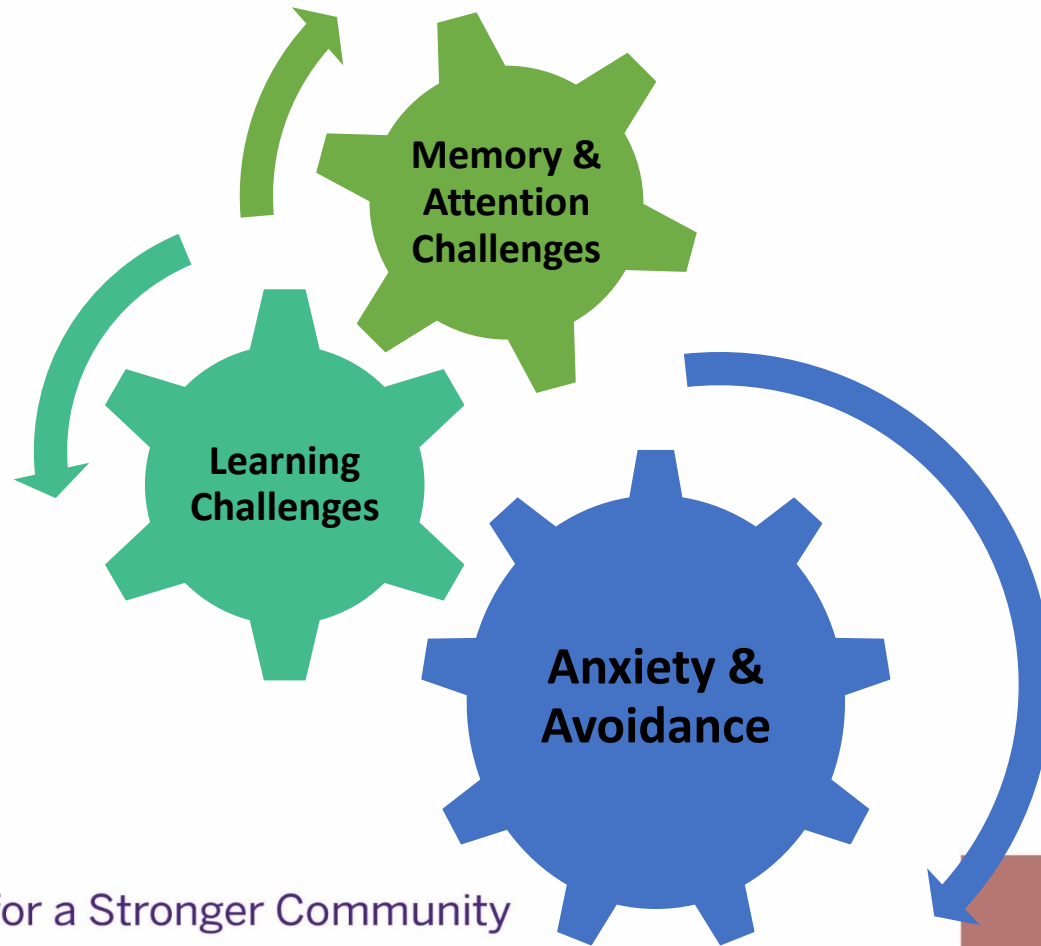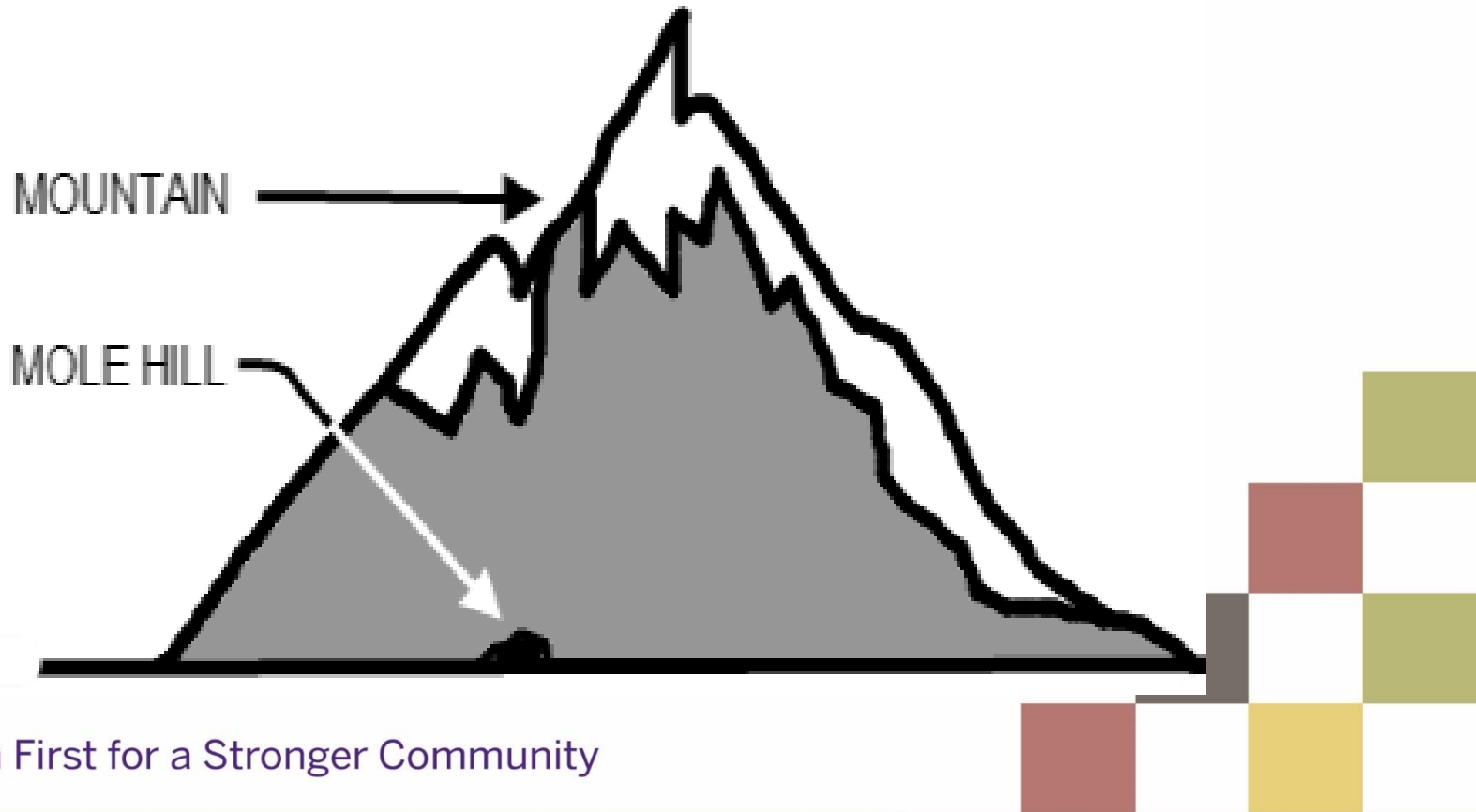
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Cycle of Work Avoidance

Cycle of Work Avoidance

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Is it a "ABC" Model?

Attitude (Feeling)

Behaviour (Action)

Consequence (Result)

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Or a "BAC" Model?

Behaviour (Action) → Attitude (Feeling → Consequence (Result)

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Main Ideas: Breaking Down Tasks to Support Action

- **Break down complex tasks into very manageable, next steps**

- **"The smallest step that shows you are moving forward"**

- **Don't count the total number of steps!**

- **Set a small unit of time (e.g., 15 minutes) to work**

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Example: Book Report Project

- Find the assignment outline ☑
- Read the assignment outline ☐
- Brainstorm possible book selections ☐
- Select book choice ☐
- Determine if library has book ☐
- Pick up book ☐
- Create reading plan for book ☐

Summary

Important factors to remember:

- ✓ Anxiety for youth with LDs is common
- ✓ Is it anxiety or a problem? Or both?
- ✓ Slow down, listen, and help problem-solve

- ✓ Doing things differently is tough!
- ✓ Break it down, break it down, break it down
- ✓ Success leads to more success

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Resources & Videos

http://www.worrywisekids.org/

"Freeing Your Child from Anxiety" – Tamar Chansky, Ph.D.

www.anxietybc.com - Videos & Resources (Youth)

www.smartkidswithld.org/getting-help/emotions-behaviors/stress-ld-puzzle - Smart Kids with LD

www.livesinthebalance.org – Dr. Ross Greene

Collaborative Problem-Solving

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Websites & Resources

LD @ School
www.ldatschool.ca