THRIVE EMERGE

THE NEURODIVERGENT TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

Why bright teens and young adults get stuck — and how clinicians can help

Rick Silver, MD **Mary Jo Puglisi, LCPC**

THRIVE EMERGE

1. Foundations of Neurodivergence
2. The Transition to Adulthood
3. Managing Executive Dysfunction
4. Family “Stuff”
5. Managing Screens
6. Neurodivergence in the Office
7. Thrive Emerge Resources

Scott

- 21 yrs old
- **ADHD, ASD, Social anxiety, depression**
- Living in parents' basement
- Failed 2 classes at community college
- No IRL social connection
- Lost 3 jobs in the past 2 years
- Daily life: unstructured, unproductive, dissatisfying

THRIVE EMERGE

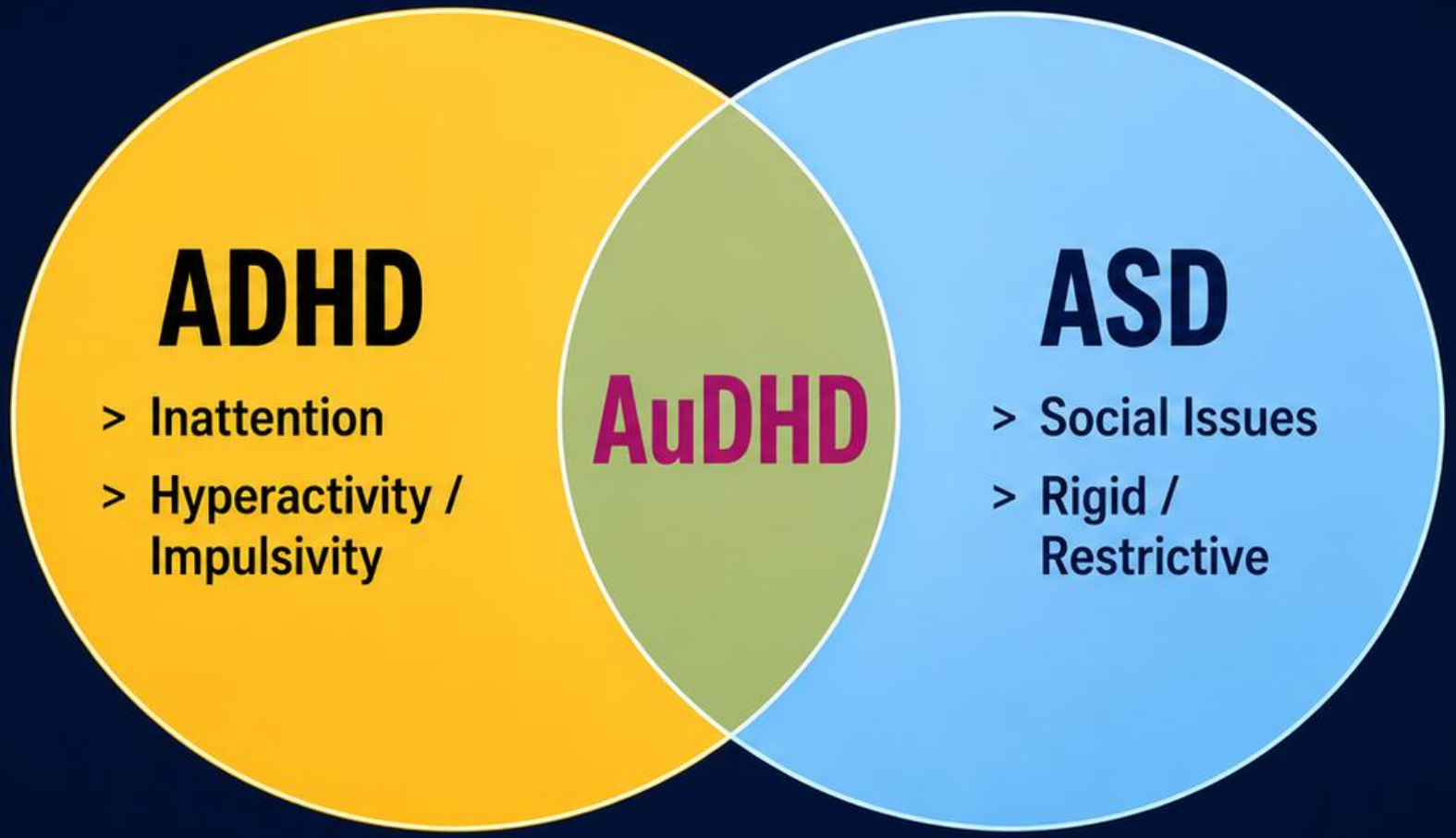
Scott

- Screen Use: 5+ hours per day weekdays, 12+ hours weekends
- Interferes with:
  - Sleep
  - School work
  - IRL social connections
  - Family harmony

What Is Neurodivergence?

THRIVE EMERGE

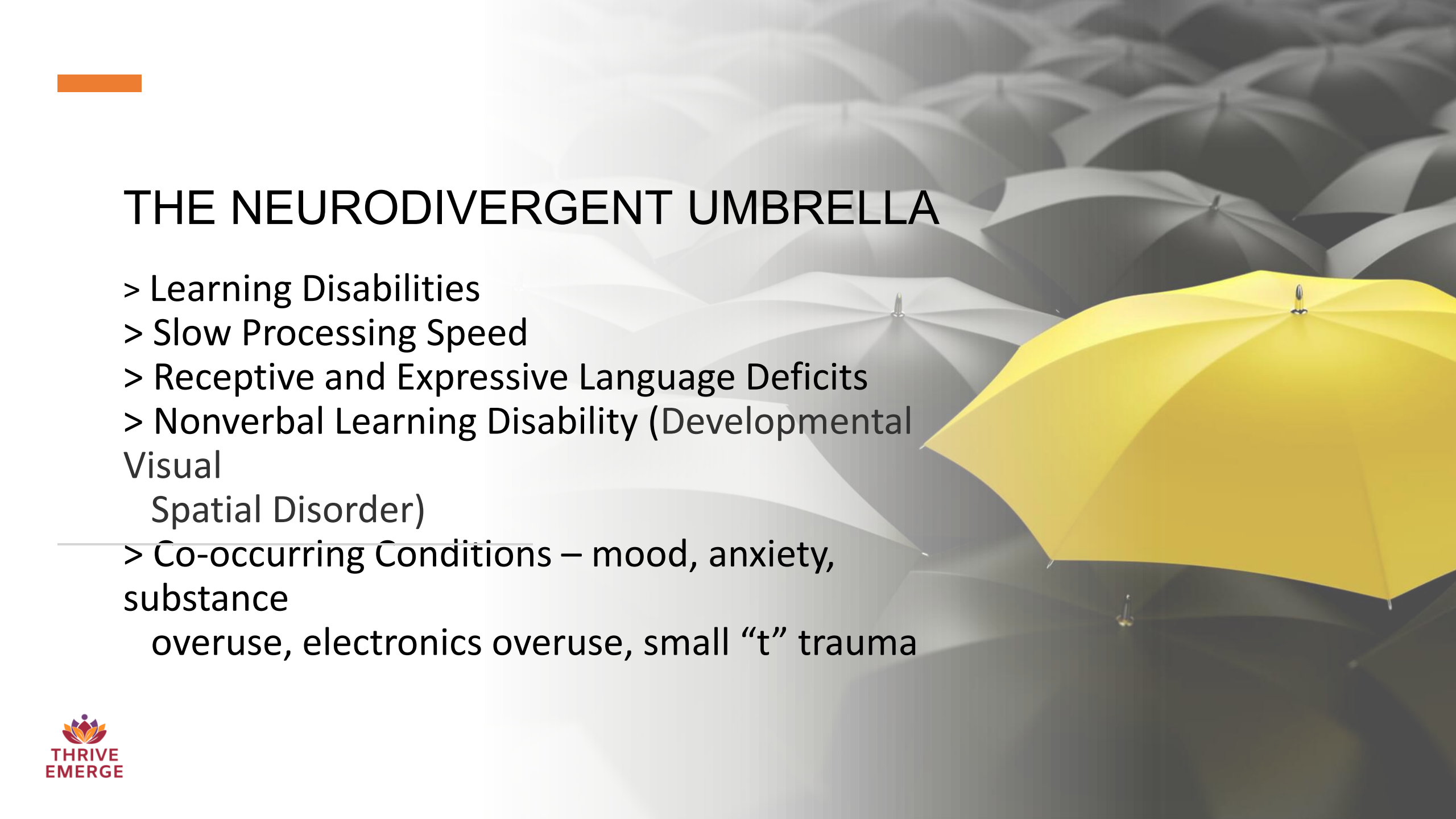
ADHD, ASD, and AuDHD



Thrive
EMERGE

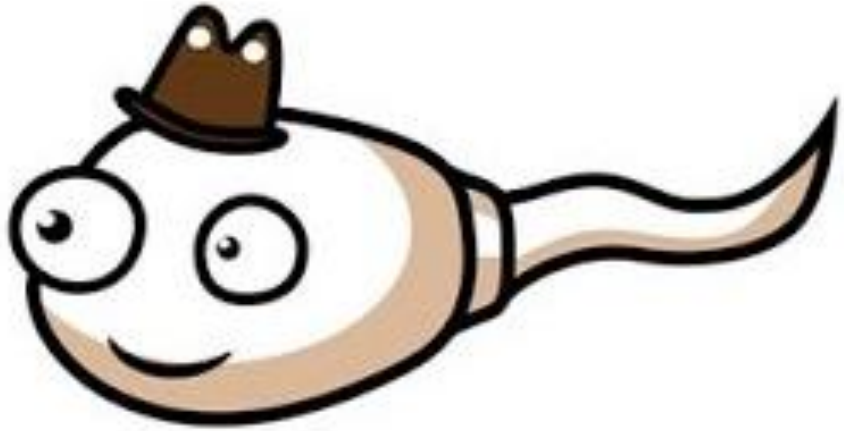
THE NEURODIVERGENT UMBRELLA

> Learning Disabilities
> Slow Processing Speed
> Receptive and Expressive Language Deficits
> Nonverbal Learning Disability (Developmental Visual
Spatial Disorder)
> Co-occurring Conditions – mood, anxiety, substance
overuse, electronics overuse, small “t” trauma



THRIVE EMERGE

A Love Story
When Mr. Sperm Met Ms. Egg



THRIVE EMERGE

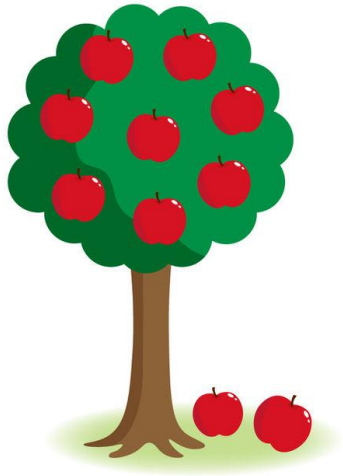
NEURODIVERGENCE IS ROOTED IN BIOLOGY!

TO UNDERSTAND THE NEURODIVERGENT PERSON,

YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND THEIR BRAIN!

THRIVE EMERGE

“THE AuDHD APPLE DOESN’T FALL FAR FROM THE TREE”



BOTH ADHD AND ASD ARE HIGHLY HERITABLE

Attributable to genetic factors:

ADHD: **74% to 88%**

ASD: **64% to 91%.**

THRIVE EMERGE

GENETICS/ EPIGENETICS

BRAIN STRUCTURE

FUNCTIONAL CHALLENGES > STRUGGLING YA

A HIGHLY DYSREGULATED BRAIN

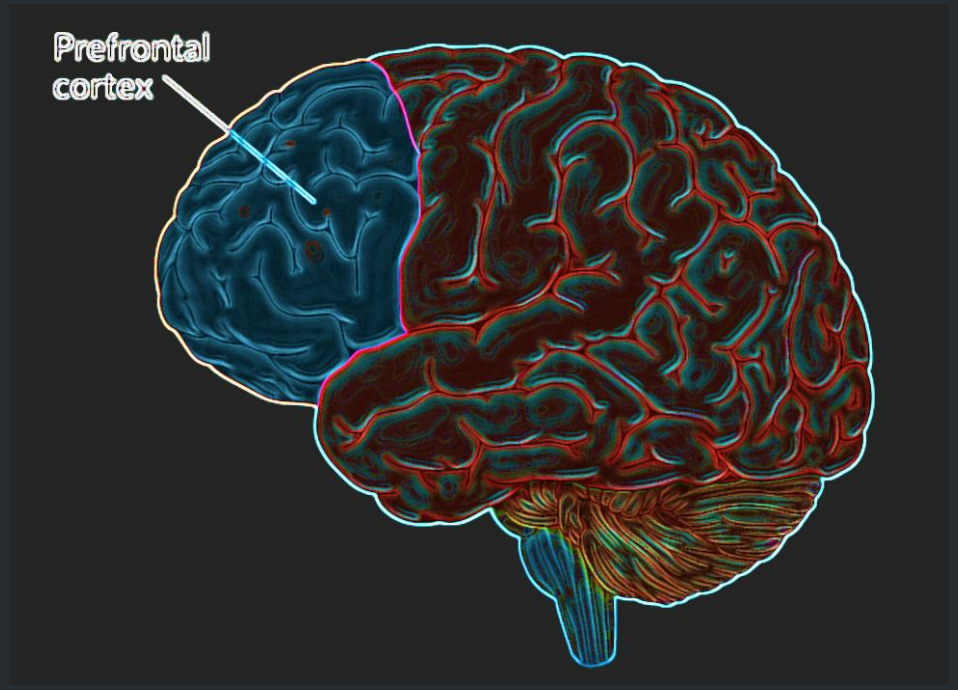
1. Executive Dysfunctions / Emotional Dysregulation
2. Cognitive Rigidity
3. Overwhelming Ruminative/ Intrusive Thoughts
4. Social Challenges
5. Sensory Sensitivities

THRIVE EMERGE

BRAIN = COLLECTION OF SOFTWARE APPS

Prefrontal Cortex

- Executive Functions: create a complex, adaptive response to the world
- Emotional regulation, initiation, focus, planning, follow through, impulse control, foresight



Brainstem

Survival: eat, breath, digest, reproduce

THRIVE EMERGE

THE NEURODIVERGENT BRAIN

Multiple “glitchy” apps

Struggles to self-regulate

Constant fight-or-flight response

Experience: Data overload, dysregulation, small “t” trauma

THRIVE EMERGE

(SOME OF THE) SOFTWARE PACKAGES RELEVANT TO AuDHD

Emotional Regulation/ Energy Regulation	Social Issues	Slow Processing Speed
Sensory Regulation	Cognitive Rigidity/ Concrete Thinking	Working Memory
Initiation/ Motivation	Focus/ Impulse Control	Planning/ Organizing

THRIVE EMERGE

CORE CONCEPT

Executive function: the CEO of the brain

- Planning
- Organization
- Initiation
- Working memory
- Prioritization
- Time management
- Emotional regulation
- Cognitive flexibility
- Self-monitoring

When the CEO struggles, everything underneath becomes less efficient.

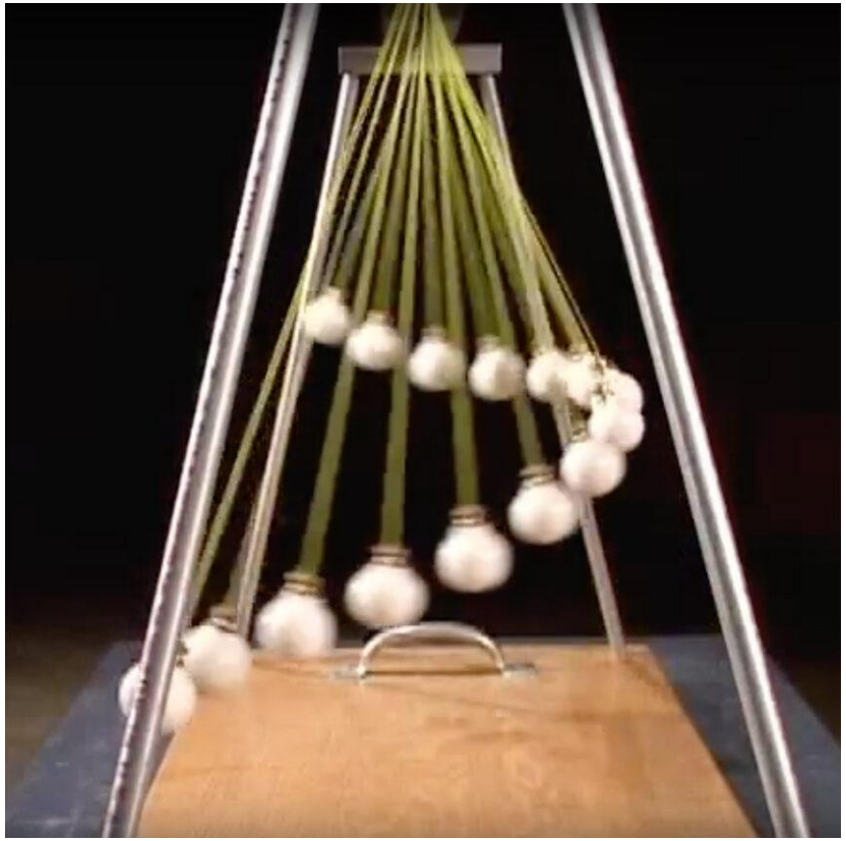
THRIVE EMERGE

THE “EMOTIONAL REGULATION” BASEMENT NEVER FULLY FORMS!

Impaired Foundation

THRIVE EMERGE

ND FROM THE INSIDE:
AN INTUITIVE SENSE OF ***INTERNAL DYSREGULATION***



THE **INNER WORLD** FEELS **UNPREDICTABLE**,

WITH NO SENSE OF A PHYSIOLOGIC HOME.

"A pendulum without the dignity of center."

"My body and brain don't match"

"Not comfortable in my own skin."

"I'm just white knuckling it all the time."

"Feels like I have a lot of cables that don't line up exactly"

"I want to go home."

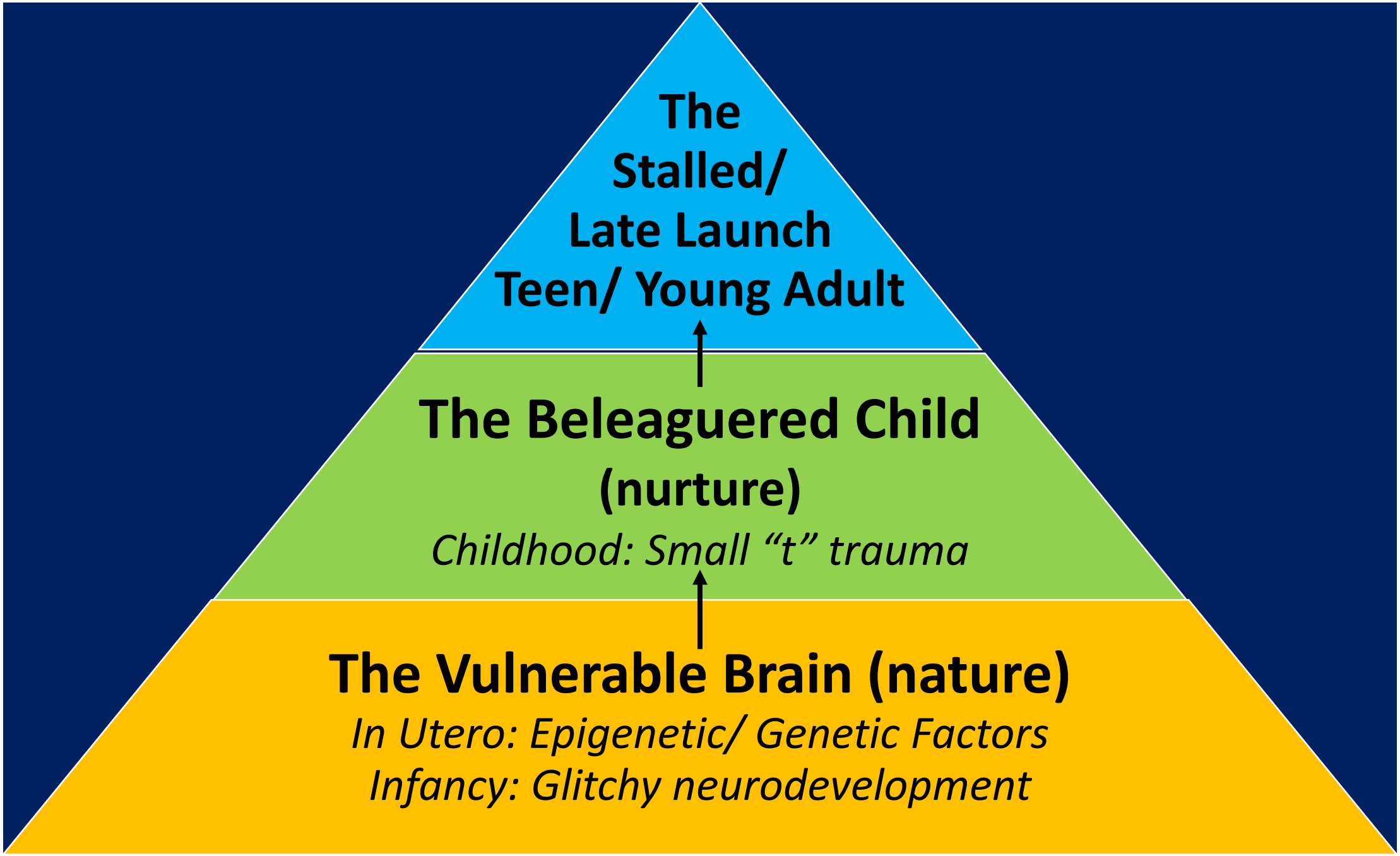
THRIVE EMERGE

EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION: STRUGGLING TO KEEP THE CAR ON THE ROAD

EXAMPLE: NICK IN HIGH SCHOOL

THRIVE EMERGE

WHY THEY GET STUCK



THRIVE
EMERGE

Adult demands exceed current developmental capacity.

NOT

- Lazy
- Oppositional
- Manipulative
- Refusing adulthood

INSTEAD

- Executive functioning
- Regulation
- Flexibility
- Stress tolerance
- Independent self-management

THRIVE EMERGE

UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT: Executive age versus chronological age

Chronological age	**17**
Reading ability	**20**
Vocabulary	**23**
Computer skill	**25**
Emotional regulation	**15**
Executive function	**13**

Ask: “How old is this particular skill?”

THRIVE EMERGE

Key Idea: Point of Performance

KNOWING ≠ DOING

ADHD is often less a disorder of knowing what to do –
and more a **disorder of reliably doing what you already know**.

THRIVE EMERGE

AVOIDANCE HAS A FUNCTION

Avoidance may protect against:

- Anxiety
- Shame
- Sensory overload
- Demand pressure
- Failure
- Loss of control

THE TRANSITION TO YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Best Next Step

- [ ] Community college / commuter college
- [ ] College (residential or out-of-state)
- [ ] Gap year
- [ ] Vocational or technical training
- [ ] Employment / work pathway
- [ ] Supported transition program
- [ ] Hybrid / part-time path

THRIVE EMERGE

The real question parents should ask

COMMON QUESTION

"Where should my child go next?"

BETTER QUESTION

"Is my child ready for what comes next?"

THRIVE EMERGE

The goal is not simply the next step. It is **the right next** developmental step.

Smart ≠ Ready

A teen can be bright, capable, and even college-accepted — and still **not ready** for a high-independence environment.

- Academic ability can hide weak daily-life readiness
- Verbal insight does not always become action
- Independence is built before it is tested
- Assess what they consistently do — not what they could theoretically do

Capability

"They can do it under the right conditions."

Readiness

"They can do it reliably enough when structure is reduced."

THRIVE EMERGE

Post-secondary decisions should be based on **readiness**, not just potential.

The ‘launch → crash’ cycle

When demands jump faster than support, the teen can look unmotivated — but the system is overloaded.

Not an ability problem. It is a ***timing + support match*** problem.

The 5-domain readiness model

A readiness profile is more useful than a vague feeling of 'I think they'll be okay.'

1 Initiation

Can they get started?

2 Persistence

Can they stay with it?

3 Regulation

Can they manage stress?

4 Organization

Can they track life?

5 Help-Seeking

Can they use support?

Rate each domain: 1 = *rarely* • 2 = *inconsistently* • 3 = *mostly with support* • 4 = *independently*

Matching Readiness to Post-High School Options

Option A: Residential or Out-of-State College

Best fit when the teen can manage:

- Sleep
- Classes
- Deadlines
- Help-seeking
- Emotional stress
- Social challenges
- Daily living without parents nearby

Red flags:

- Parents still wake them up
- Parents track assignments
- Teen hides problems
- Teen avoids asking for help
- Stress leads to shutdown or retreat

THRIVE EMERGE

Matching Readiness to Post-High School Options

Option B: Local College or Community College

Best fit when:

- Academic potential is present
- Independence is uneven
- Parents need to remain nearby
- A reduced course load may help
- The teen needs practice using support

Important caution:

Living at home must not simply become extended high school. There need to be expectations, structure, and gradual parent step-back.

THRIVE EMERGE

Matching Readiness to Post-High School Options

Option C: Structured Gap Year

Best fit when the teen needs time to build:

- Life skills
- Emotional resilience
- Work experience
- Direction
- Confidence
- Executive functioning

Important distinction:

A structured gap year can be developmental.

An unstructured gap year can become avoidance, screens, sleep reversal, and retreat.

THRIVE EMERGE

Matching Readiness to Post-High School Options

Option D: Work, Internship, or Vocational Path

Best fit when the teen:

- Learns better by doing
- Needs practical competence
- Benefits from structure and routine
- May not thrive in traditional academics right now

Skills needed:

- Showing up
- Accepting supervision
- Managing correction
- Persisting through boredom or frustration

THRIVE EMERGE

Matching Readiness to Post-High School Options

Option E: Supported Transition Program

Example: The Village at Thrive Immerge

Best fit when:

- Weekly therapy or coaching is not enough
- Parents are carrying too much
- The teen needs structured practice
- Avoidance is entrenched
- The family is stuck in conflict, rescue, or over-functioning
- The teen needs help building daily routines, adult skills, community connection, and confidence

Frame this as:

A bridge to adulthood, not a failure.

THRIVE EMERGE

Improving Executive Function:
Build the Brain Outside the Body

THRIVE EMERGE

EXTERNALIZE: Build the brain outside the body

The goal is not to remember more.

The goal is to need memory less.

If someone has poor eyesight, we do not lecture them about seeing harder.

We give them glasses. 🤔

THRIVE EMERGE

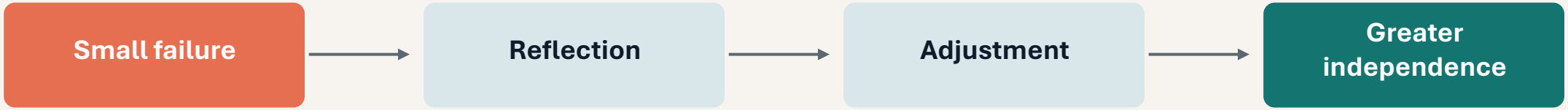
WHAT you can do: The external executive toolkit

- Shared calendar
- Phone reminders
- Visual checklist
- Whiteboard
- One-folder system
- Pill organizer + alarm
- Exit checklist by door
- Weekly planning sheet

The perfect system used twice is less valuable than the simple system used every day.

THRIVE EMERGE

Safe failure



Natural consequences teach. Shame rarely does.

Reflection: What is one safe failure you might allow this fall?

THRIVE EMERGE

Teach scripts, not just concepts

- “I’m kind of confused about what we’re supposed to do for this project. Can you go over it with me?”
- “I think I’m starting to fall behind, so I wanted to ask for help before it gets worse.”
- “I have accommodations for ADHD and executive functioning. Can we talk about how I can use them in this class?”

Confidence comes from rehearsal.

THRIVE EMERGE

ONE FAMILY HABIT

The Sunday Planning Meeting

- Open the school portal.
- Review assignments, tests, and projects.
- Break large tasks into smaller steps.
- Enter deadlines into calendar.
- Schedule work blocks.
- Review transportation, activities, medication, and special events.

15–20 minutes each week. Not a lecture. A planning meeting.

Activity: When could your family realistically hold this meeting?

THRIVE EMERGE

PARENTING CHALLENGES: Overfunctioning versus scaffolding

Overfunctioning

- Parent owns task
- Parent solves problem
- Parent prevents all failure
- Creates dependence

Scaffolding

- Student increasingly owns task
- Parent teaches process
- Parent supports recovery
- Builds competence

THRIVE EMERGE

The Co-Pilot Model

I DO
Parent models

WE DO
Student does; parent coaches

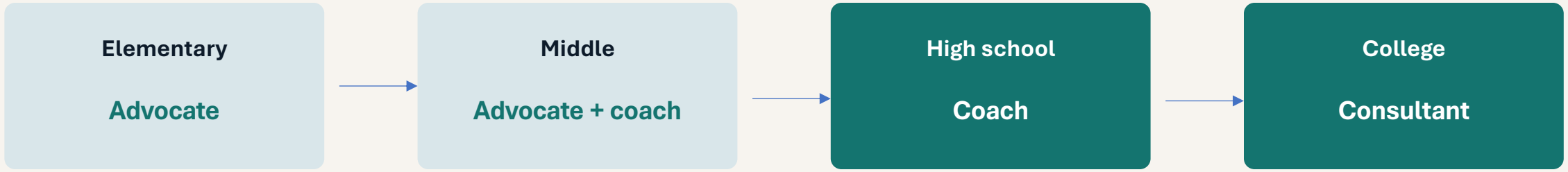
YOU DO
Student owns; parent reviews

Independence is not the absence of support.

It is the gradual transfer of responsibility.

THRIVE EMERGE

The Evolving Parents' Role



Parents do not disappear.

The role changes from spokesperson to communication coach.

THRIVE EMERGE

Family Challenges

- Parents are burnt out – “done giving fucks”
- Parents struggle with limits, consequences
- Fear of escalation – anger, suicide
- Poor emotional regulation – parents, kids escalate
- Intense parental anxiety over loss
- YA lies, manipulates
- YA Rigid thinking/ struggles with transitions, the unknown

THRIVE EMERGE

SCREEN OVERUSE AND ADDICTIONS

THRIVE
EMERGE

NEURODIVERGENT BRAINS (ESPECIALLY) NEED STIMULATION

The ND brain is dysregulated from birth:
emotional, sensory, cognitive

The prefrontal cortex plays a key role in this dysregulation.

Stimulation > dopamine squirt (nucleus accumbens/ reward center) > wakes up PFC > regulated brain

A well-regulated brain feels better to us –
calm, clear, organized

THRIVE EMERGE

Next 3-part series

WHY SCREENS ARE SO COMPELLING – AND NOT JUST “THE PROBLEM”

Screens may provide:

- Predictability
- Control
- Reward
- Escape
- Social connection
- A place to feel competent

Screen use solves problems:
“patches” core neurodivergent vulnerabilities

THRIVE
EMERGE

Building Alternatives #1:
Harm Reduction Strategies

THRIVE EMERGE

Start with the Basics

- Understand your child’s actual use patterns (what, when, why)
- Set clear, realistic limits that can be enforced
- Establish consistent consequences (not emotional reactions)
- Build daily connection time to reduce need for escape

THRIVE EMERGE

Harm Reduction Mindset

This is about progress, not perfection

What is realistic to implement this week?

- Start with 2–3 changes, not everything
- Focus on consistency over intensity
- Adjust based on what actually works
- Stay relational, not controlling

THRIVE EMERGE

Replace, Don’t Just Remove

If screens are reduced, what fills the gap?

What actually competes with screens in real life?

- Offer engaging alternatives (not just “go do something else”)
- Support real-world social interaction
- Build structured routines to reduce default screen use
- Promote movement and outdoor activity

THRIVE EMERGE

REPLACE "FAST FOOD" DOPAMINE WITH "HOME-COOKED" DOPAMINE

- Creating Art
- Woodworking
- Robotics
- Coding
- Exercise
- Music
- Photography
- Volunteering
- Cooking
- Hiking
- Deep Special Interests

THRIVE EMERGE

Next 3-part series

Work at the Family Level

This is not just an individual problem

What patterns in the system reinforce screen use?

- Create a predictable weekly rhythm
- Prioritize shared meals without screens
- Engage in family activities regularly
- Use screens together—not in isolation

THRIVE EMERGE

Protect Sleep First

Sleep disruption is often the hidden driver

What changes here would shift everything else?

- Target 8+ hours of sleep consistently
- Remove devices 1 hour before bedtime
- Use WiFi shutoff if needed
- Reward consistency, not perfection

THRIVE EMERGE

Shift the Environment

How can you reduce overuse without constant policing?

What structural changes would make the biggest difference?

- Create tech-free zones (bedroom, dining areas)
- Establish tech-free times (meals, evenings)
- Remove devices before bedtime
- Use environment—not willpower—as the intervention

THRIVE EMERGE

Redefine “Healthy Use”

Not all screen time is the same—how do we clarify that?

Where can screens actually support growth?

- Differentiate passive vs active use
- Encourage learning, research, and creation
- Limit automatic scrolling and default use
- Shift from habit → intentional choice

THRIVE EMERGE

SECTION 2

HOW THIS LOOKS IN THE OFFICE

WHY WE MISREAD THEM

Neurodivergent stuckness can look like:

- Resistance
- Poor motivation
- Entitlement
- Immaturity
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Addiction
- Family enmeshment

EXECUTIVE DYSFUNCTION IN THERAPY

Common signs:

- Missed appointments
- Late arrivals
- Incomplete forms
- “I forgot”
- No follow-through
- Good insight, poor action
- Parent manages logistics

THRIVE EMERGE

FIND THE BREAKDOWN POINT

?

Do not just repeat the plan. Study the failure point.

- Where did the plan break down?
- Did you forget, avoid, freeze, or get stuck?
- Was the first step clear?
- Was the plan visible?
- Did anyone help you start?

EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION

May present as:

- Shutdown
- Irritability
- Tearfulness
- Explosiveness
- “I don’t know”
- Shame spirals
- Dropout after feedback

THRIVE EMERGE

WHEN THE REACTION LOOKS “TOO BIG”

The nervous system may be responding to:

- Overload
- Depletion
- Transition stress
- Sensory stress
- Demand pressure
- Shame from repeated failure

DEMAND SENSITIVITY
(Pathological Demand Avoidance/ Pervasive Desire for Autonomy)

The demand itself may trigger threat.

- “Yes, but…”
- Rejecting suggestions
- Negotiating every step
- Avoiding desired activities
- Escalating when pressured

THRIVE EMERGE

LANGUAGE SHIFT

Instead of:

"You need to apply for three jobs this week."

Try:

"Let's find the smallest step that does not make your nervous system
slam on the brakes."

THRIVE EMERGE

SECTION 3

START WITH CAPACITY

?

Before pushing the goal, ask:

- Is the client regulated enough?
- Is the task concrete enough?
- Is the demand too large?
- Is shame being triggered?
- Is the plan visible outside session?
- Is the family supporting or rescuing?

THRIVE EMERGE

USE DEMAND-SENSITIVE LANGUAGE

USE

- Concrete
- Collaborative
- Non-shaming
- Autonomy-preserving
- Small-step oriented

AVOID

- “You just need to…”
- “Why didn’t you…”
- “You have to…”
- “You’re choosing not to…”

THRIVE EMERGE

STALLED TREATMENT

II

Treatment may stall when it assumes capacities the client does not yet have.

- Homework without initiation support
- Insight without implementation
- Exposure without regulation capacity
- Medication without structure
- Therapy without family-system change

THRIVE EMERGE

REALISTIC PROGRESS

Small progress is still developmental progress.

- Fewer blowups
- Shorter recovery time
- One successful routine
- One avoided task approached
- One rescue behavior reduced
- Client can name the stuck point

COGNITIVE RIGIDITY

Build flexibility concretely.

- Literal thinking
- All-or-nothing conclusions
- “That won’t work”
- Trouble shifting plans
- Difficulty imagining alternatives
- Narrow definition of success

MEDICATION: HELPFUL BUT NOT SUFFICIENT

Medication may improve access to capacity — but it does not create routines, structure, skills, family change, or real-world practice.

MATCH TREATMENT TO IMPAIRMENT

How much structure does this young person need to function?

LOWER STRUCTURE

- Therapy
- Parent coaching
- Medication
- EF coaching

HIGHER STRUCTURE

- Family work
- Group/community
- Vocational support
- Higher-frequency contact

HIGHEST STRUCTURE

- Multidisciplinary care
- Therapeutic community
- Functional skill-building

WHEN OUTPATIENT THERAPY IS NOT ENOUGH

Consider a higher-structure model when there is:

- No school/work participation
- Severe sleep reversal
- Screen dependence
- High family conflict
- Repeated non-follow-through
- Social isolation
- Poor daily living skills

THRIVE VILLAGE

A therapeutic community where adult skills are practiced in real time.

- Executive functioning
- Emotional regulation
- Social connection
- School/work avoidance
- Screen overuse
- Life skills
- Identity and independence

NEXT STEP

THRIVE EMERGE

Invest 15 Minutes Today

A brief consult can help families identify the right support before crisis begins.

Schedule a FREE consultation with one of our senior clinical staff.

CALL TODAY 410-740-3240

Scan for Thrive Parent Resources

or use the number at left to schedule a free consult.

The goal is to identify the right support before crisis begins.

THRIVE EMERGE

School-Year Launch Series

Helping parents move from summer reset to fall readiness.

1

Summer Reset

Rebuild rhythm, sleep, screens, and family trust.

RECOVER

2

Academic Launch

Executive function, supports, and parent step-back.

PREPARE

3

First Six Weeks

Regulation, social stress, and preventing collapse.

LAUNCH

Tonight: Academic Launch

THRIVE EMERGE

THRIVE EMERGE

FAMILY OF NEURODIVERGENT SERVICES AND PRODUCTS

What Level of Support Does Your Family Need Right Now?

- Free 15-Minute Consult
- Free Monthly Newsletter
- Parent Support Group
- Teen Group
- The Village Program

THRIVE EMERGE

410-740-3240

INFO@MYTHRIVE.NET


THANK YOU
THRIVE
EMERGE