

Stop Fixing Teens!

How Systems Create
Safety, Change, and
Lives Worth Living

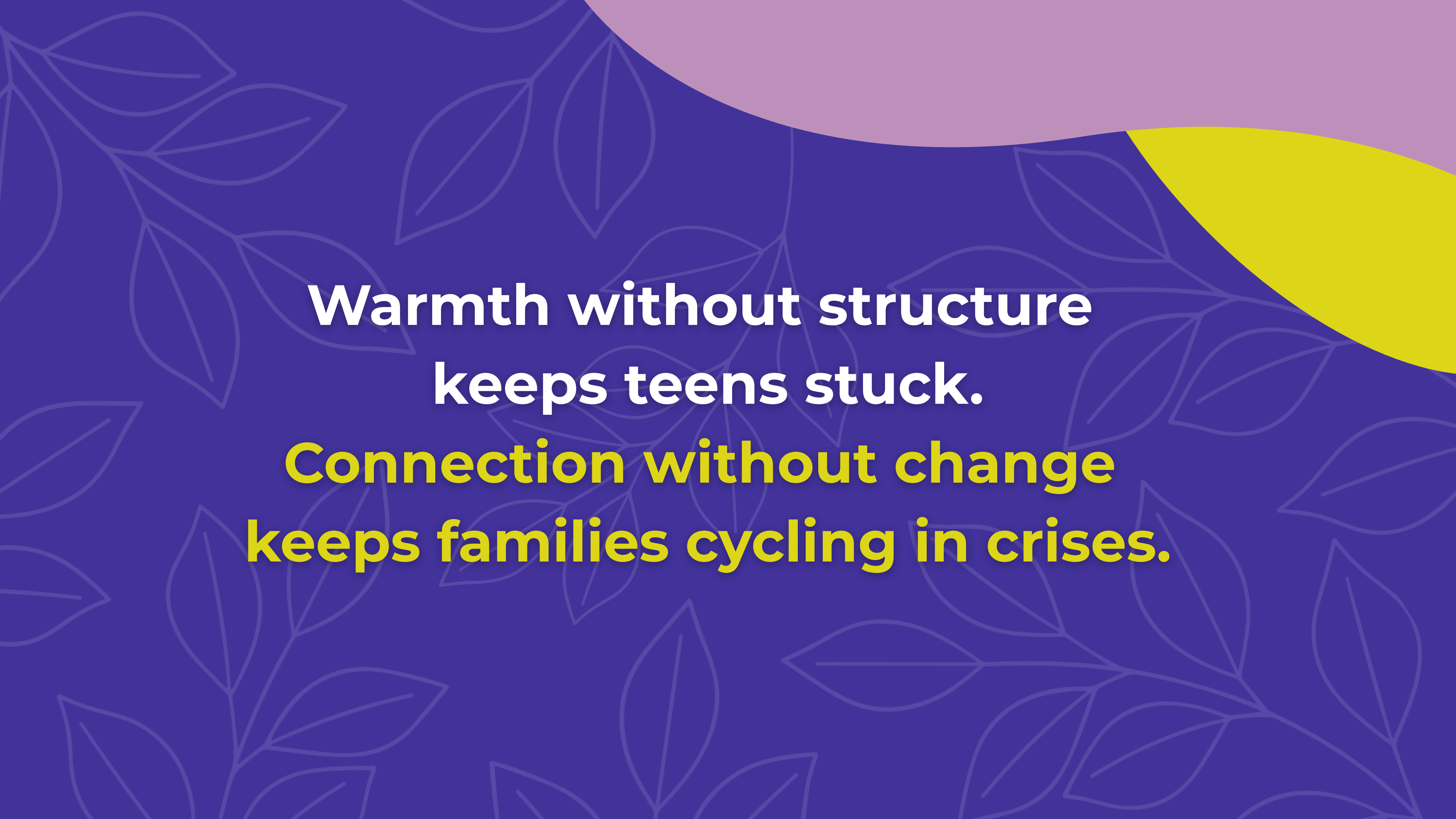
Hi I'm
Katie K May

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I self-harmed for the first time when I was 14...





**Warmth without structure
keeps teens stuck.**

**Connection without change
keeps families cycling in crises.**



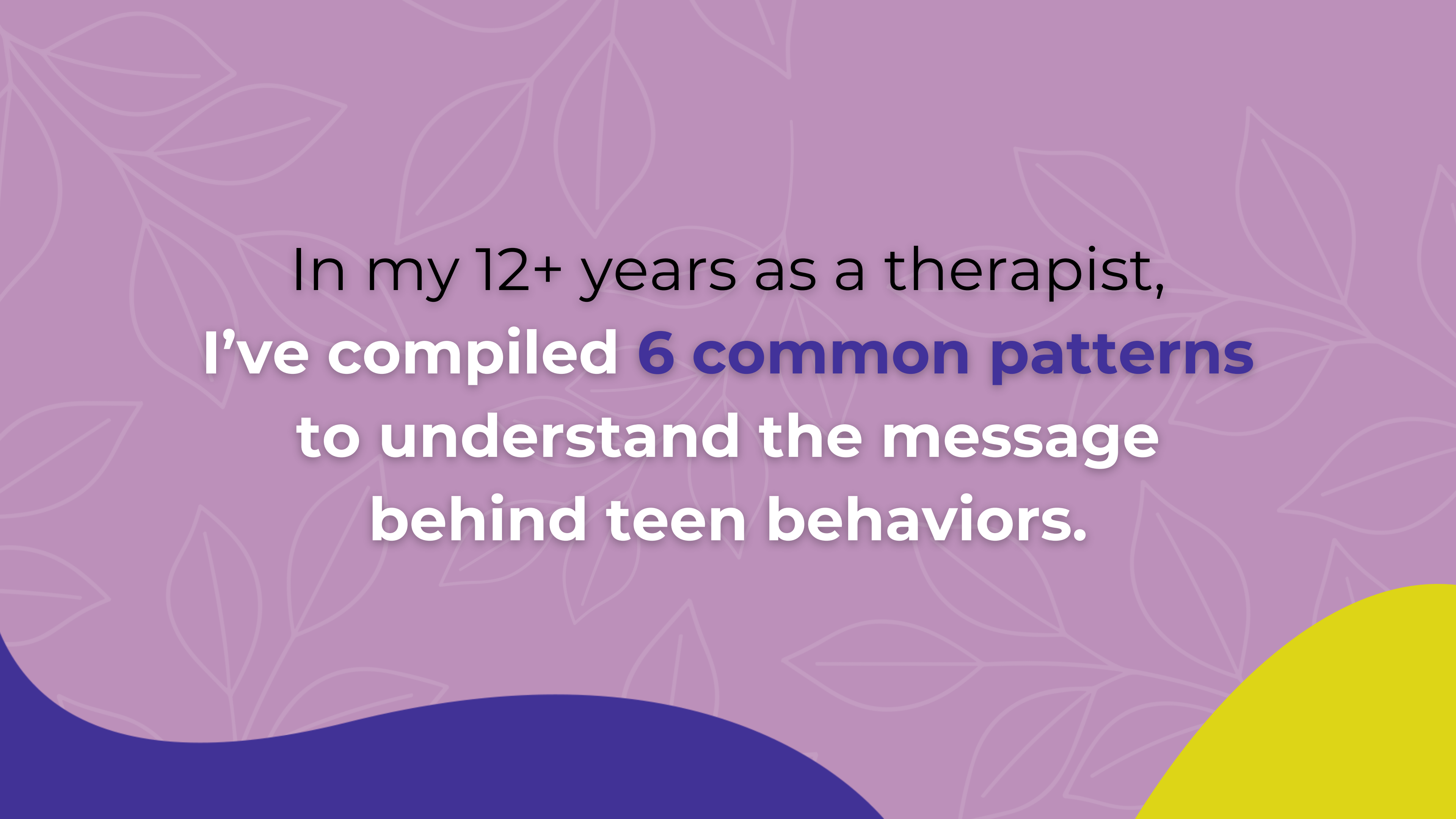
We think teens need

“rapport” and “understanding”

but what they really need

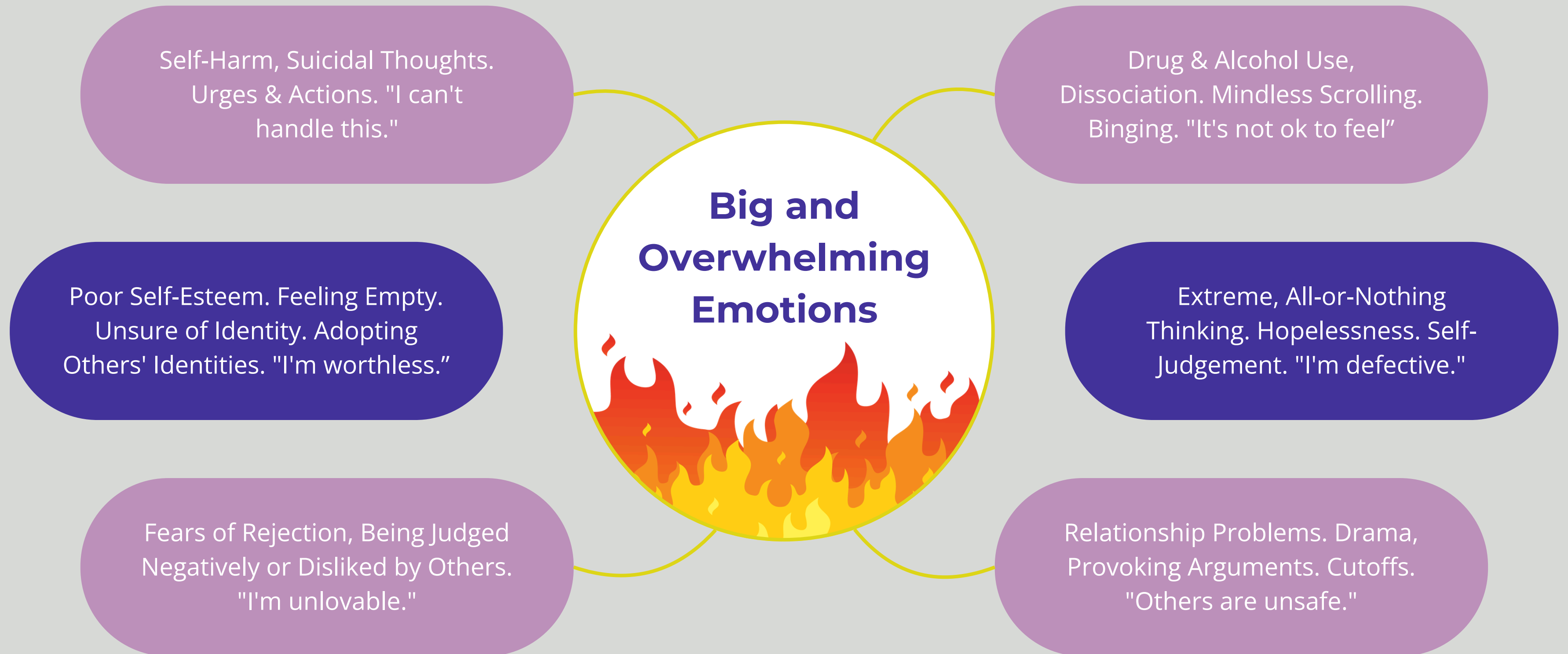
is for us to **decode the message
that’s behind the behavior.**



The background is a solid purple color with a subtle pattern of white line-art leaves. At the bottom, there are two large, overlapping curved shapes: a dark blue one on the left and a bright yellow one on the right.

In my 12+ years as a therapist,
I've compiled 6 common patterns
to understand the message
behind teen behaviors.

The Teen Coping Code™



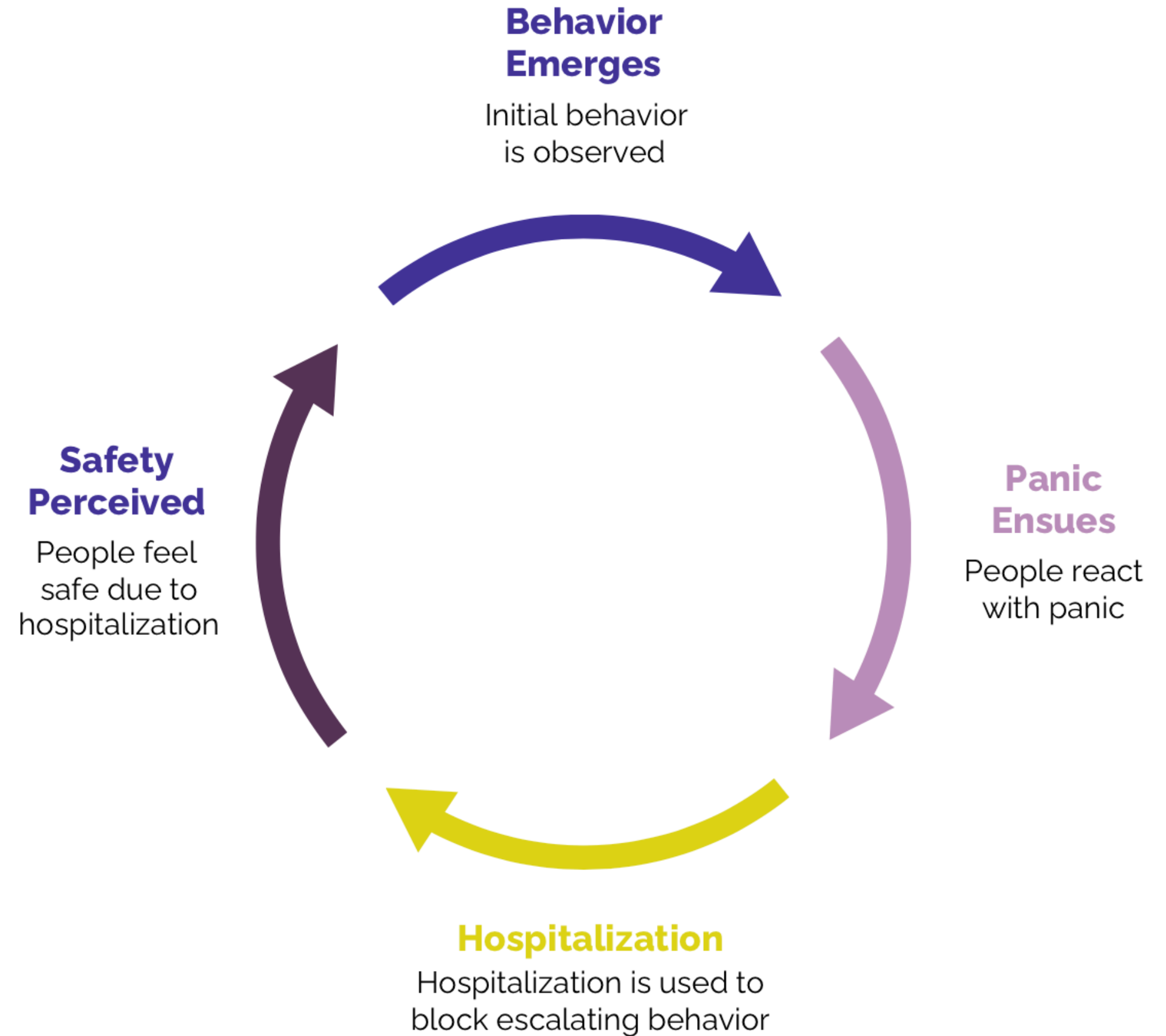
**When you understand
how the fire started,**
you prevent
future outbreaks.



You become **proactive
in safety planning and
support**, not reactive
to crises.

The Revolving Door Problem

We keep treating behavior as something to stop instead of something to understand.



Katie K. May

- Licensed Therapist
- Group Practice Owner
- Author
- Speaker



My Promise to You:

You'll leave with **5 truths** that help you
decode behavior and shift the systems that
keep teens stuck.



We've held 120,000+ sessions...

Escalation Behaviors

- Misread
- Fix fast
- Freak out

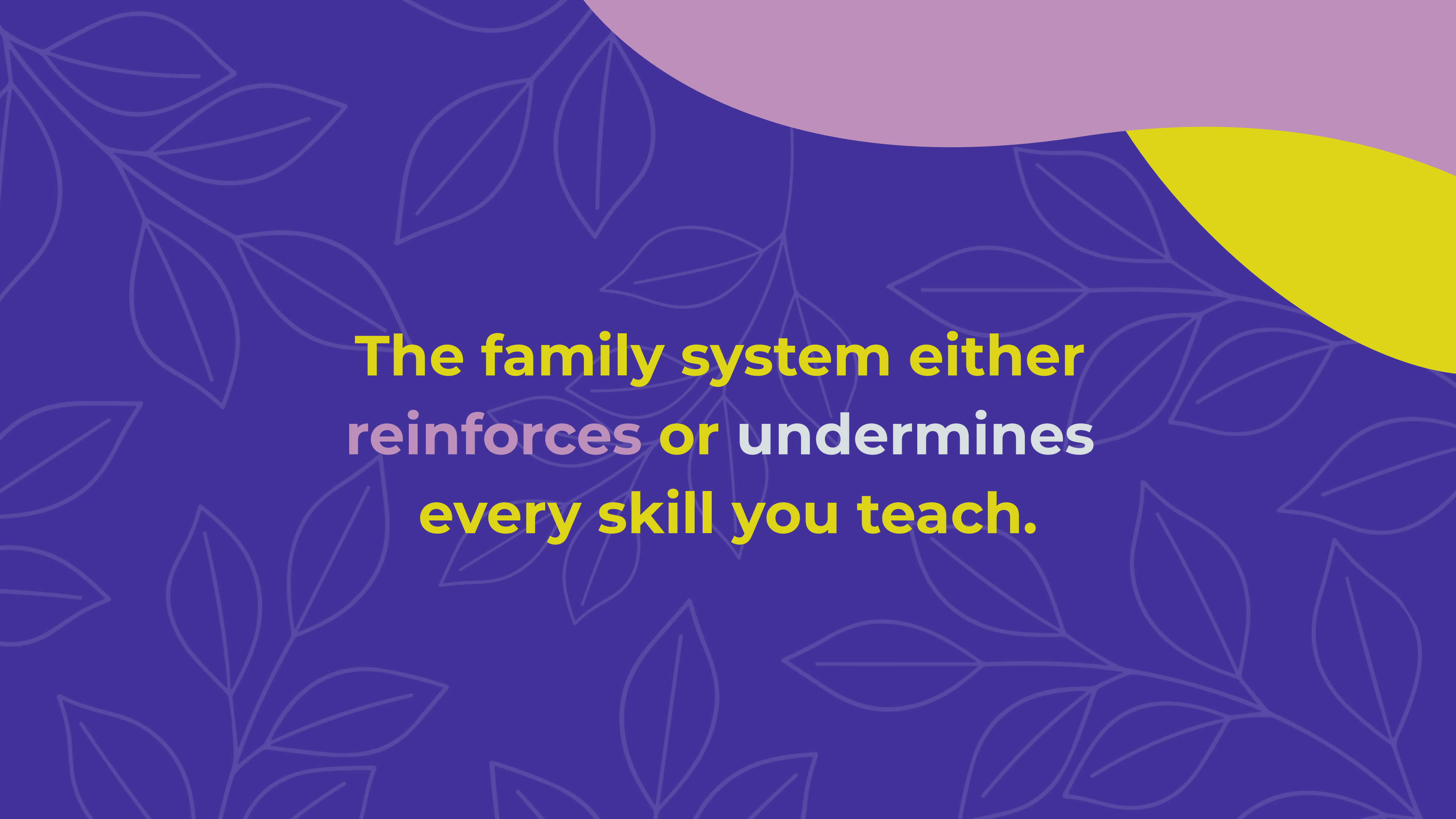
Validation Behaviors

- Assess
- Decode
- Respond

#1 Stop Fixing Teens. Start Clarifying Roles.

We were a teen support center.
We worked with teens,
not parents...





**The family system either
reinforces or undermines
every skill you teach.**

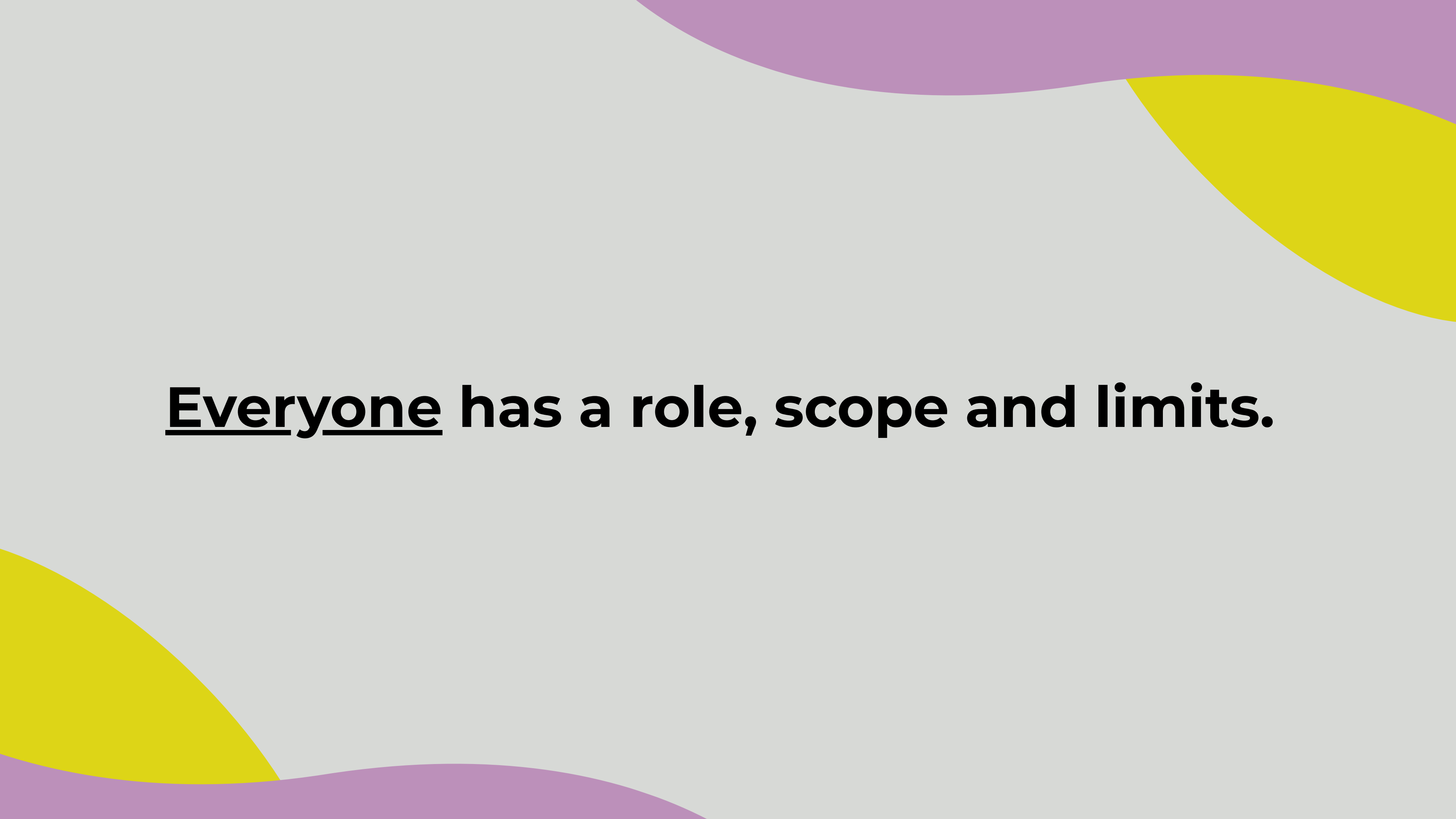
The River Metaphor™



When we include the system in treatment, we create a teen internalized shift from

**“What’s wrong with me?” to
“What support do I need?”**





Everyone has a role, scope and limits.

3 Ways to Maintain Your Role in Teen Therapy

1 Confidentiality with client unless imminent risk

2 ?

3 ?



3 Ways to Maintain Your Role in Teen Therapy

- 1 Confidentiality with client unless imminent risk
- 2 No Secrets policy with parents
- 3 ?



3 Ways to Maintain Your Role in Teen Therapy

- 1 Confidentiality with client unless imminent risk
- 2 No Secrets policy with parents
- 3 Consultation to Client

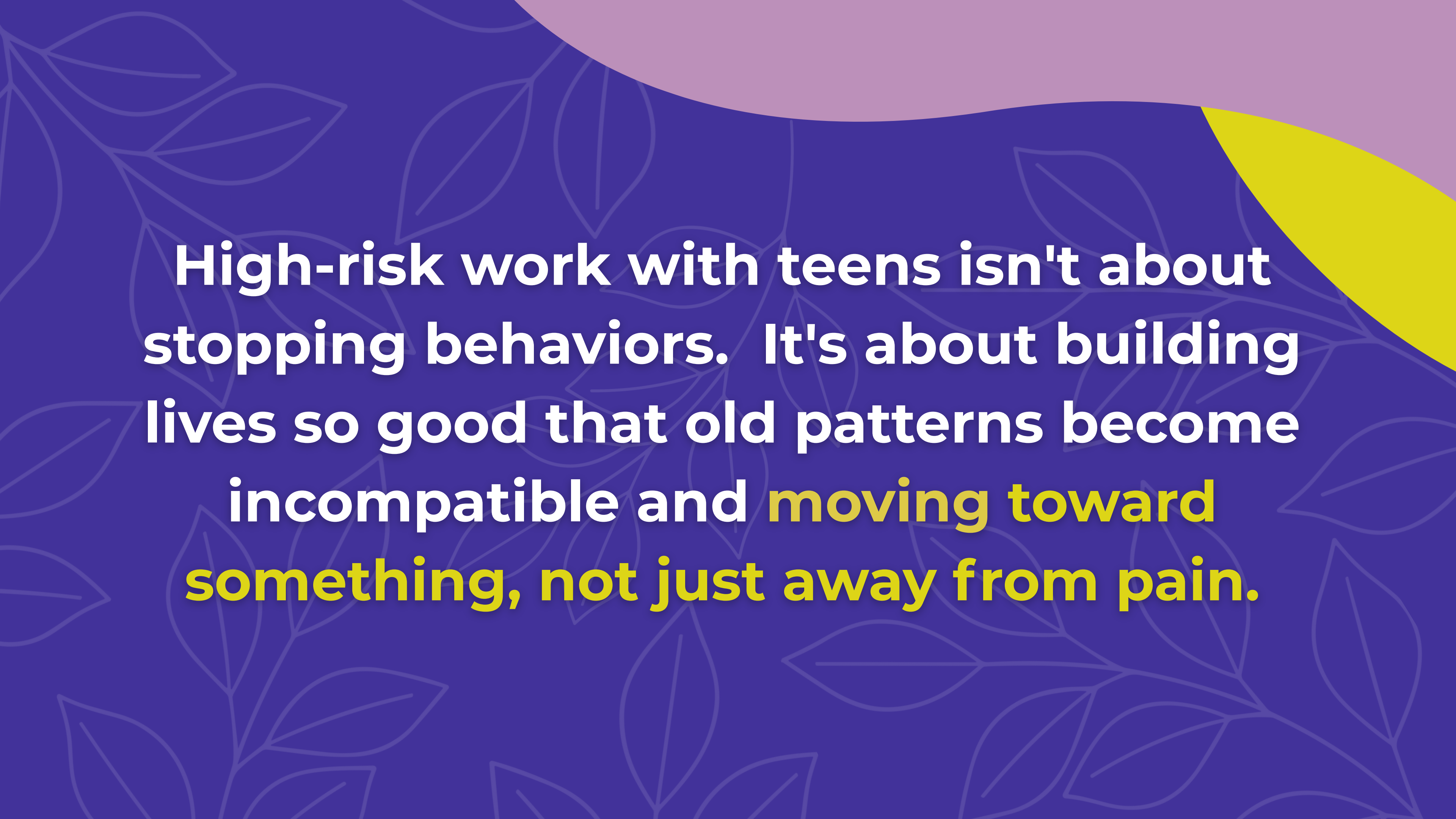


Teen outcomes improve when
we **stop rescuing, blaming, or
controlling teens** and instead
clearly define each person's role
in the change process.

#2 The Future Has to Be Bigger Than the Pain

I spent a lot of years organizing my life around escaping the pain inside...





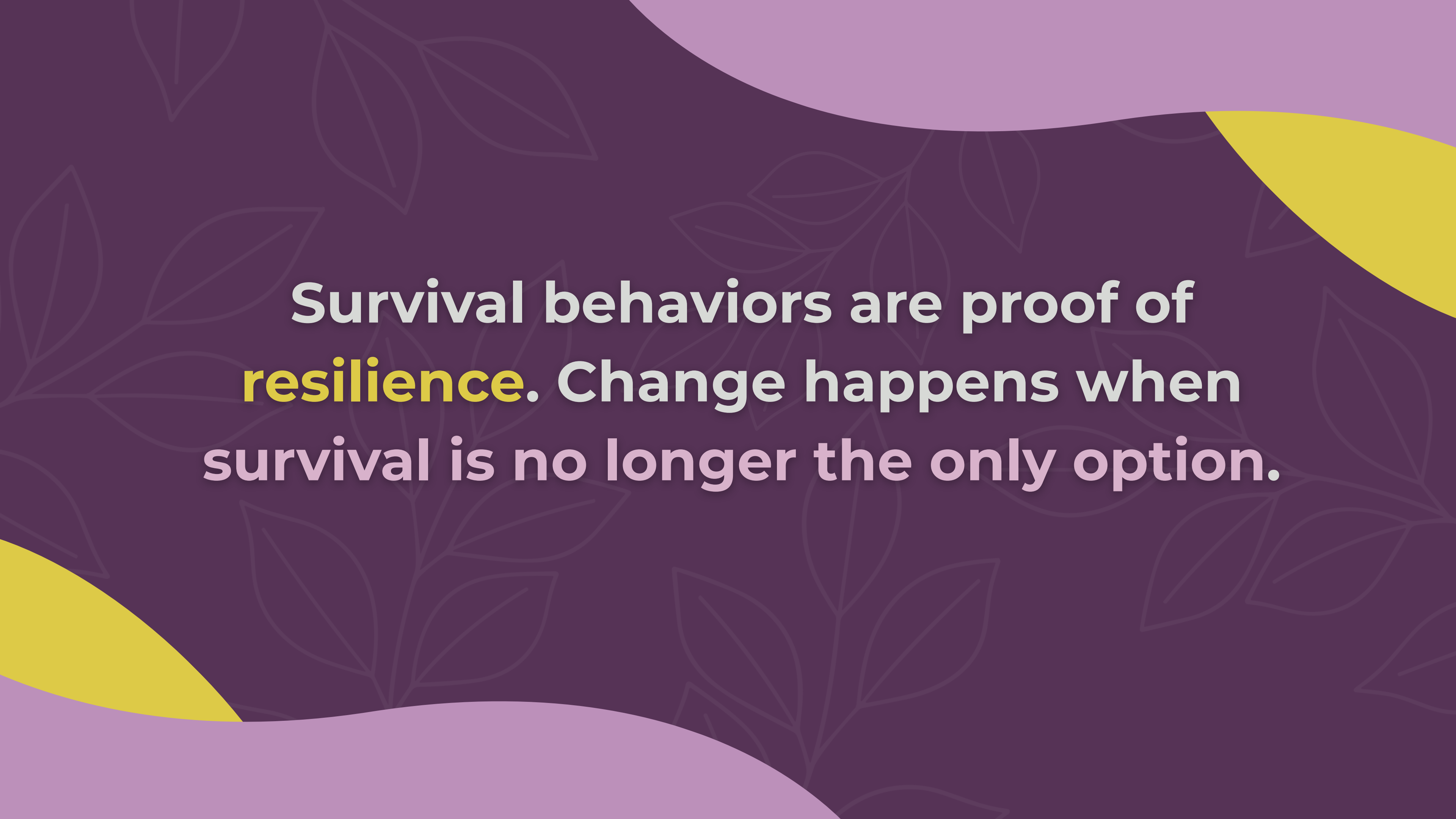
High-risk work with teens isn't about stopping behaviors. It's about building lives so good that old patterns become incompatible and moving toward something, not just away from pain.

**The starting point is
not the starting line.**



Tool: Life Worth Living Domains

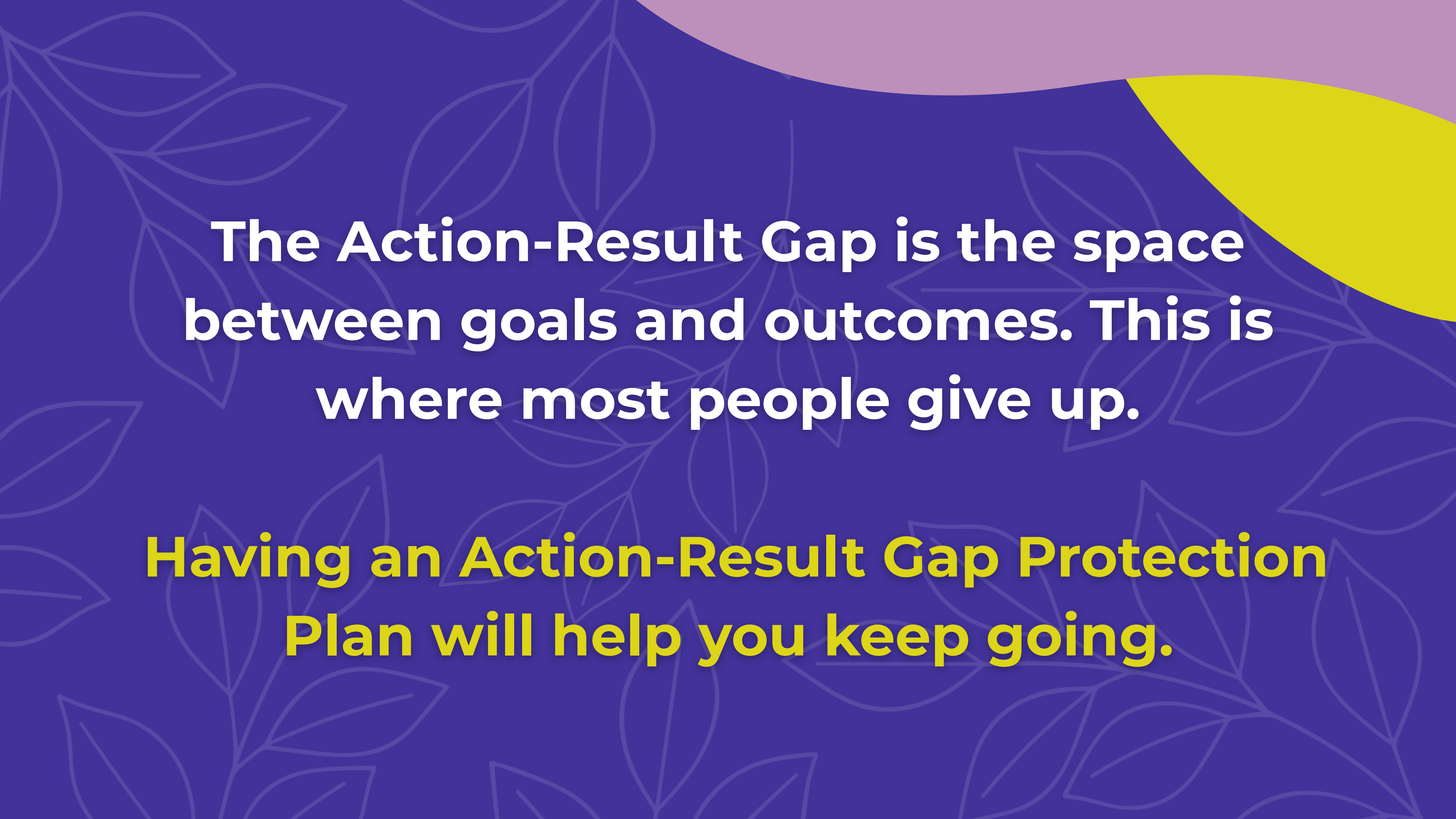




Survival behaviors are proof of **resilience**. Change happens when survival is no longer the only option.



I've trained 100s of professionals and they've all learned:
Change doesn't happen quickly with depressed teens.



**The Action-Result Gap is the space
between goals and outcomes. This is
where most people give up.**

**Having an Action-Result Gap Protection
Plan will help you keep going.**

3 Ways to Manage the Slow Rate of Progress

1 DIF baseline

2 ?

3 ?



3 Ways to Manage the Slow Rate of Progress

- 1 DIF baseline
- 2 Step Goals
- 3 ?



3 Ways to Manage the Slow Rate of Progress

- 1 DIF baseline
 - 2 Step Goals
 - 3 Creative Goal Reminders (phone screen, alarm, stickies)
- 
- A decorative pattern of stylized leaves and branches in a light purple color, located in the bottom right corner of the slide.

Remember why you started

**People don't change by giving up
what helps them survive, they change
by moving toward a life that finally
feels worth living.**

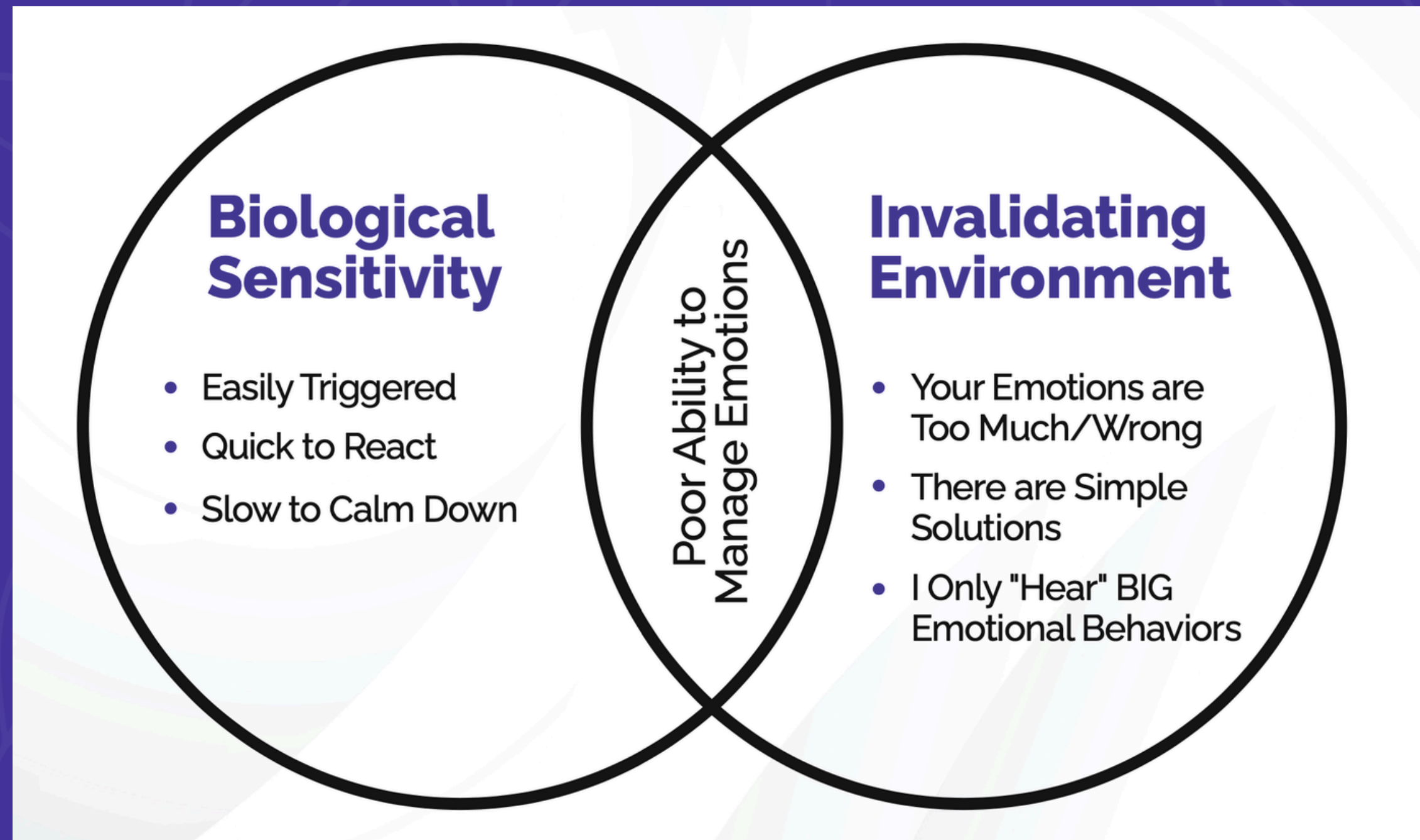
#3 You can't regulate a teen from a dysregulated system.

I stopped being ok when they weren't ok.



When we understand the **capacity and constraints of support people**, we can work to impact *systemic change* rather than surface level change.

TYPICAL CONCEPTUALIZATION



Biology + Misunderstood Behavior = Crisis

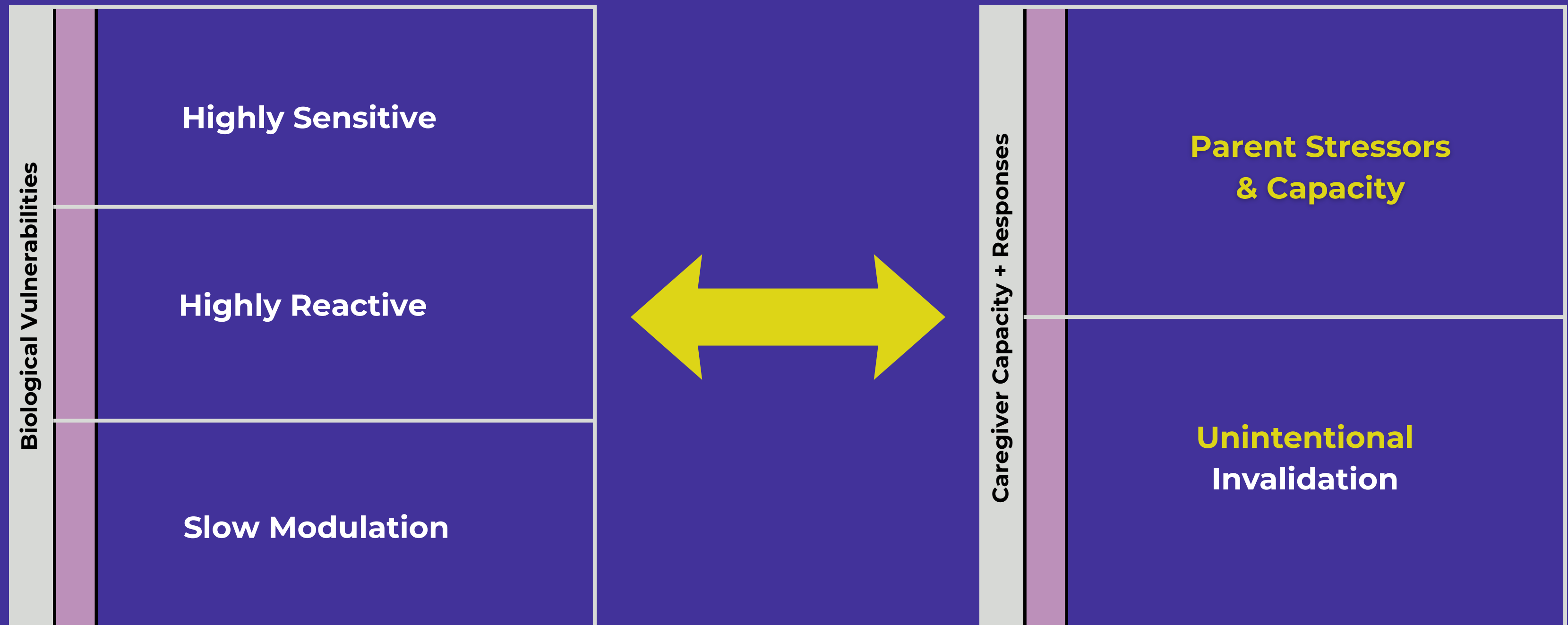


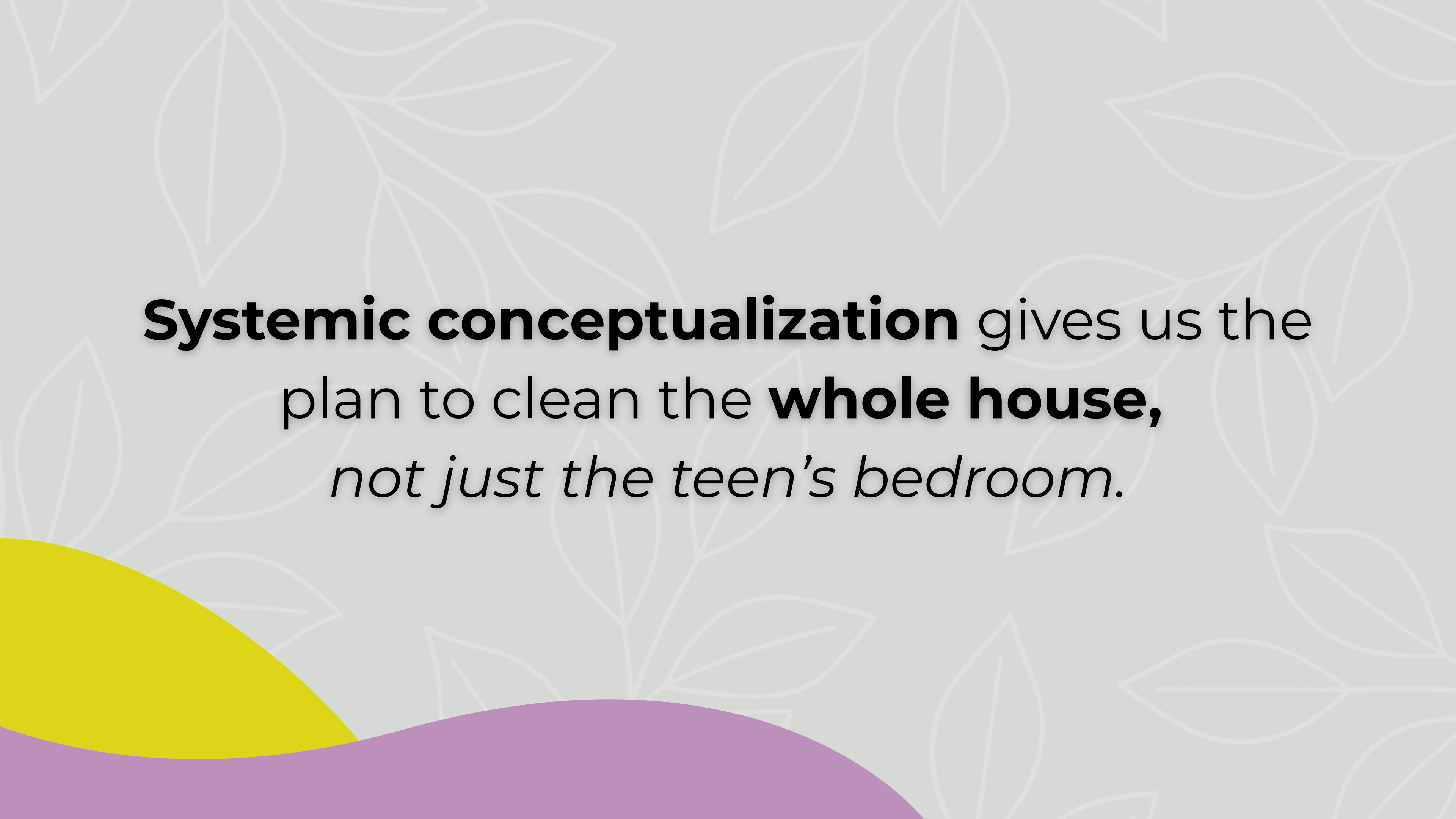
Biology



Environment

Caregiver Integrated Conceptualization



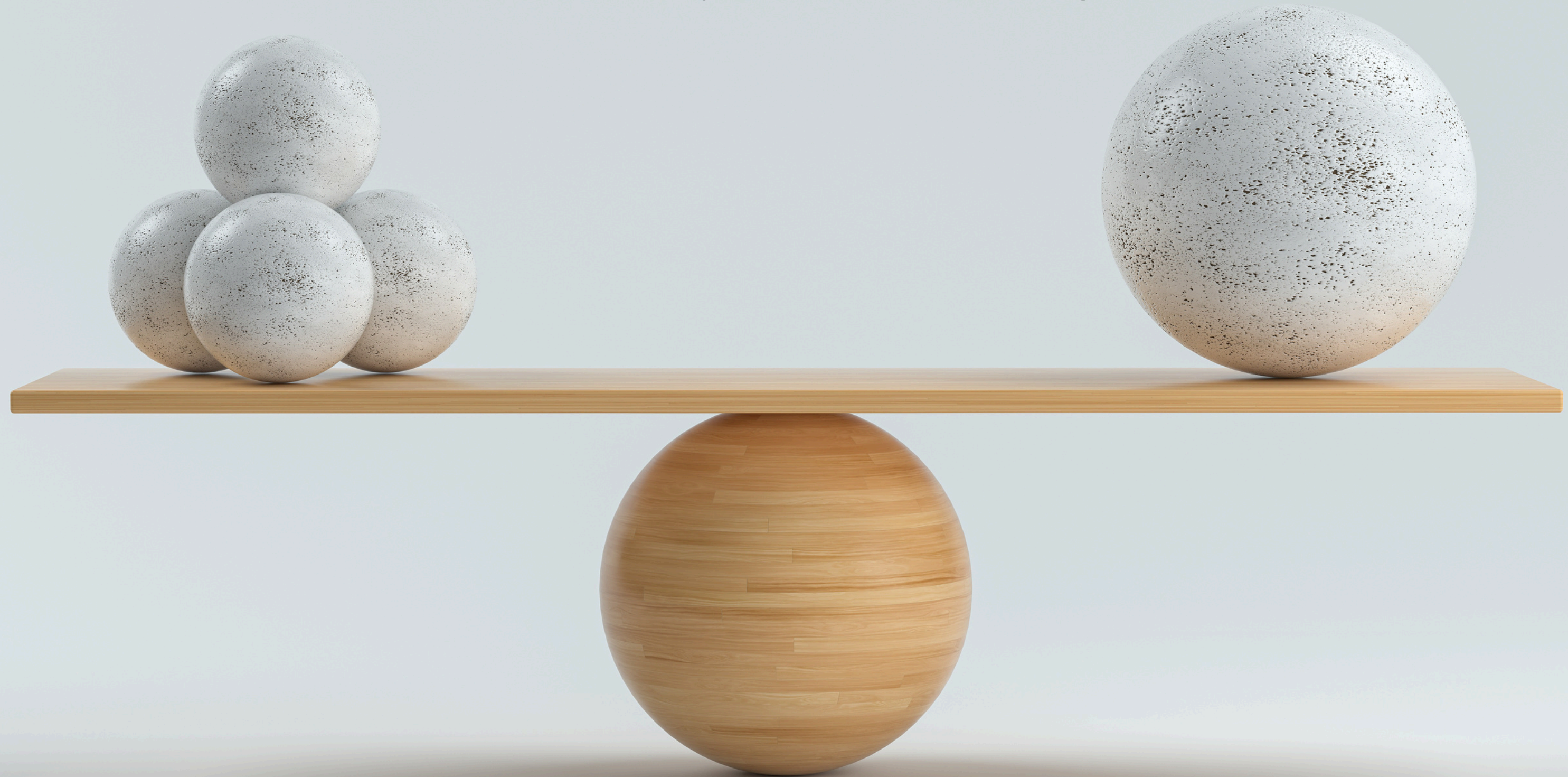


Systemic conceptualization gives us the
plan to clean the **whole house**,
not just the teen's bedroom.

When Progress Becomes Pressure for Professionals...



The entire system needs stability that's separate from the teen's stability, not contingent on it.



The background is a solid dark blue color. It features a repeating pattern of light blue, stylized leaf outlines. In the center of the image, there are three concentric circles of a slightly lighter shade of blue. The text "Circle of Support" is centered within these circles.

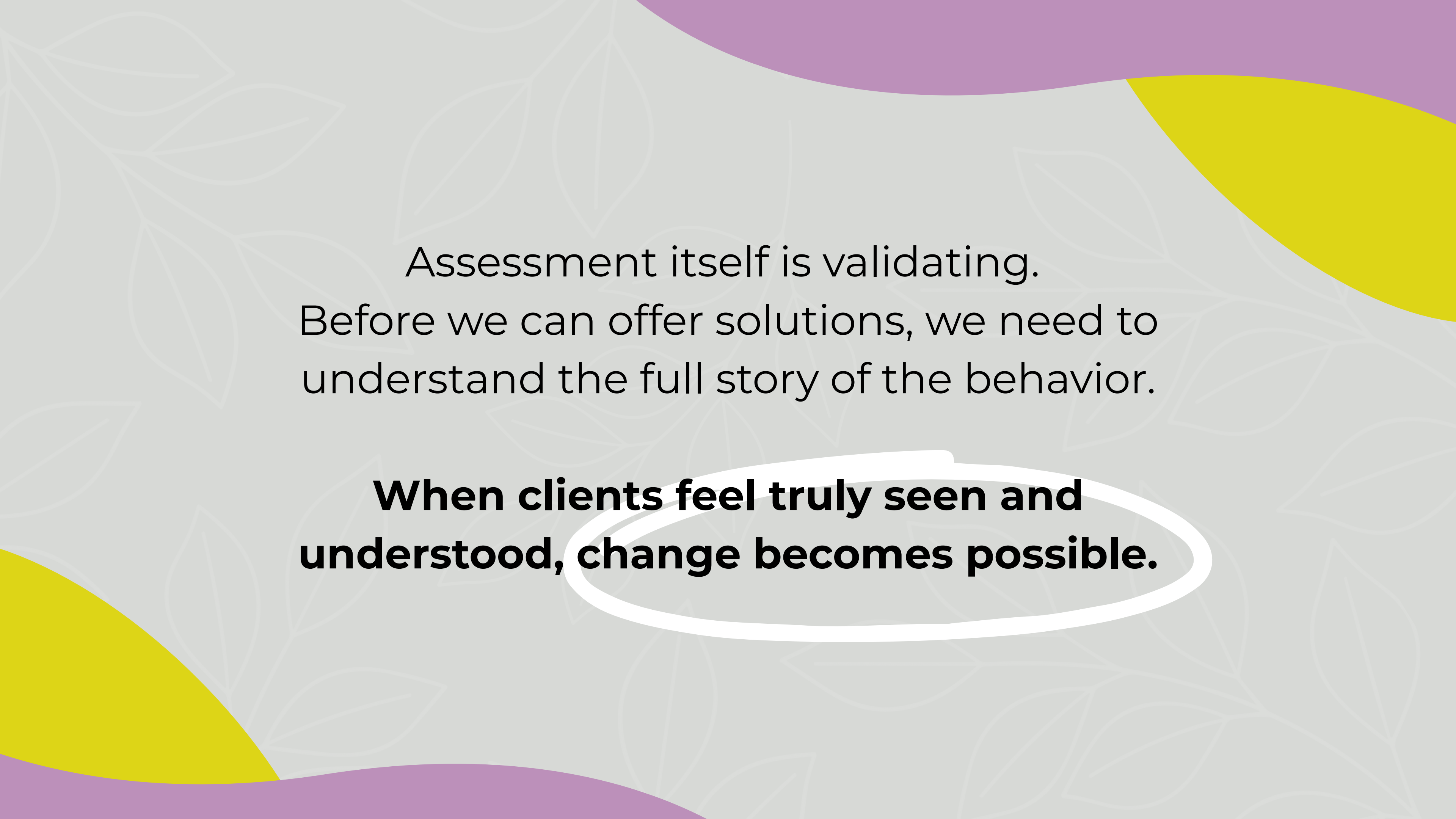
Circle of Support

**Progress stalls when we ignore the
capacity of the support people
witnessing the pain.**

#4 Rushing to Fix Often Makes Crises Worse

As a new DBT therapist, I went back to therapy...



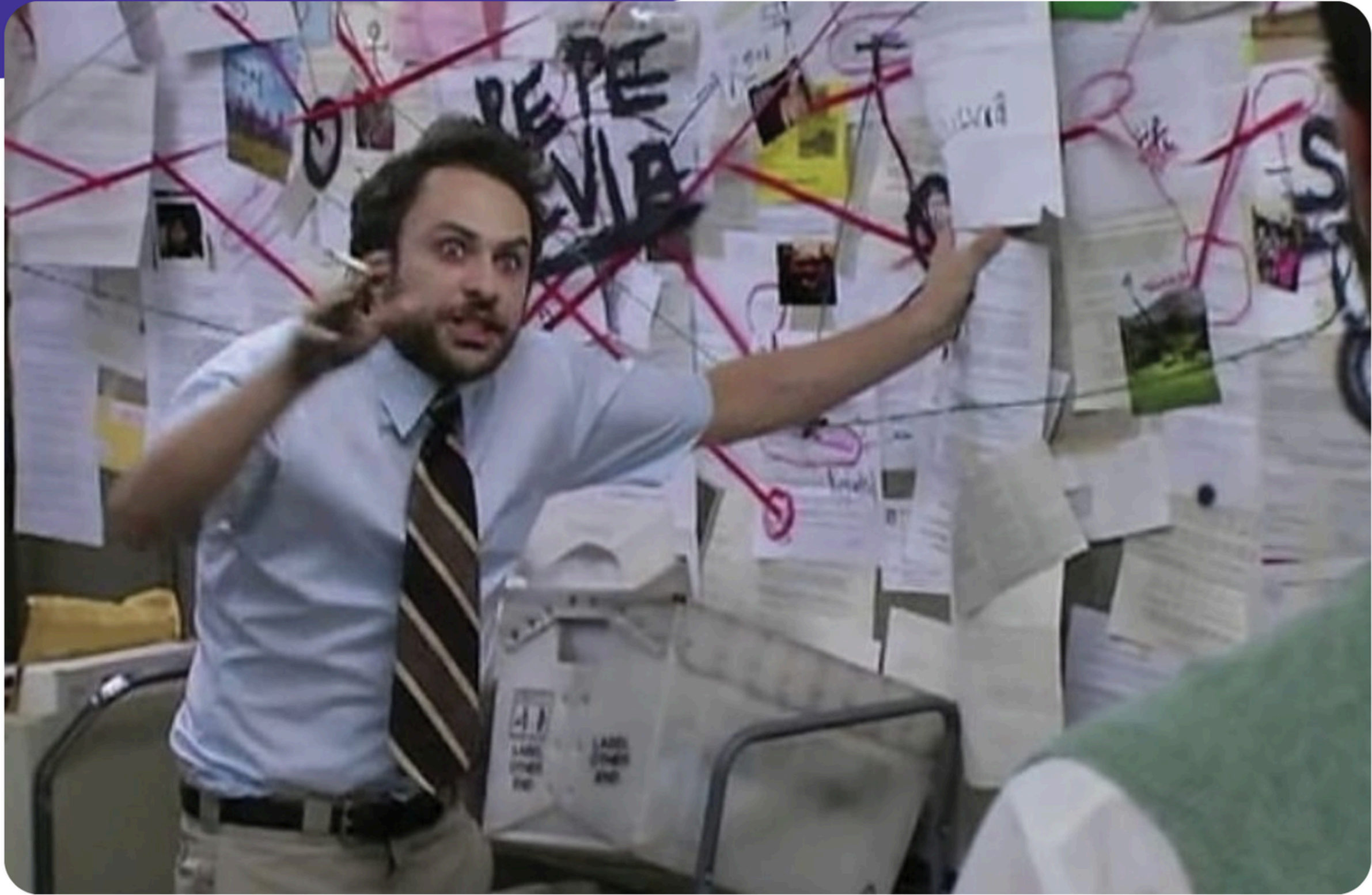


Assessment itself is validating.
Before we can offer solutions, we need to
understand the full story of the behavior.

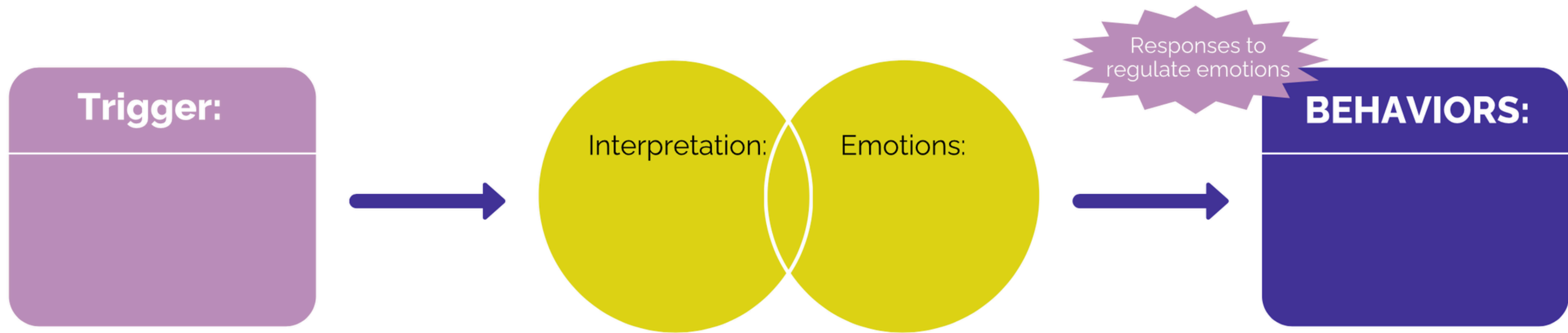
**When clients feel truly seen and
understood, change becomes possible.**

The 3x3 Tool helps identify **patterns, functions, and the intolerable emotion** beneath the behavior

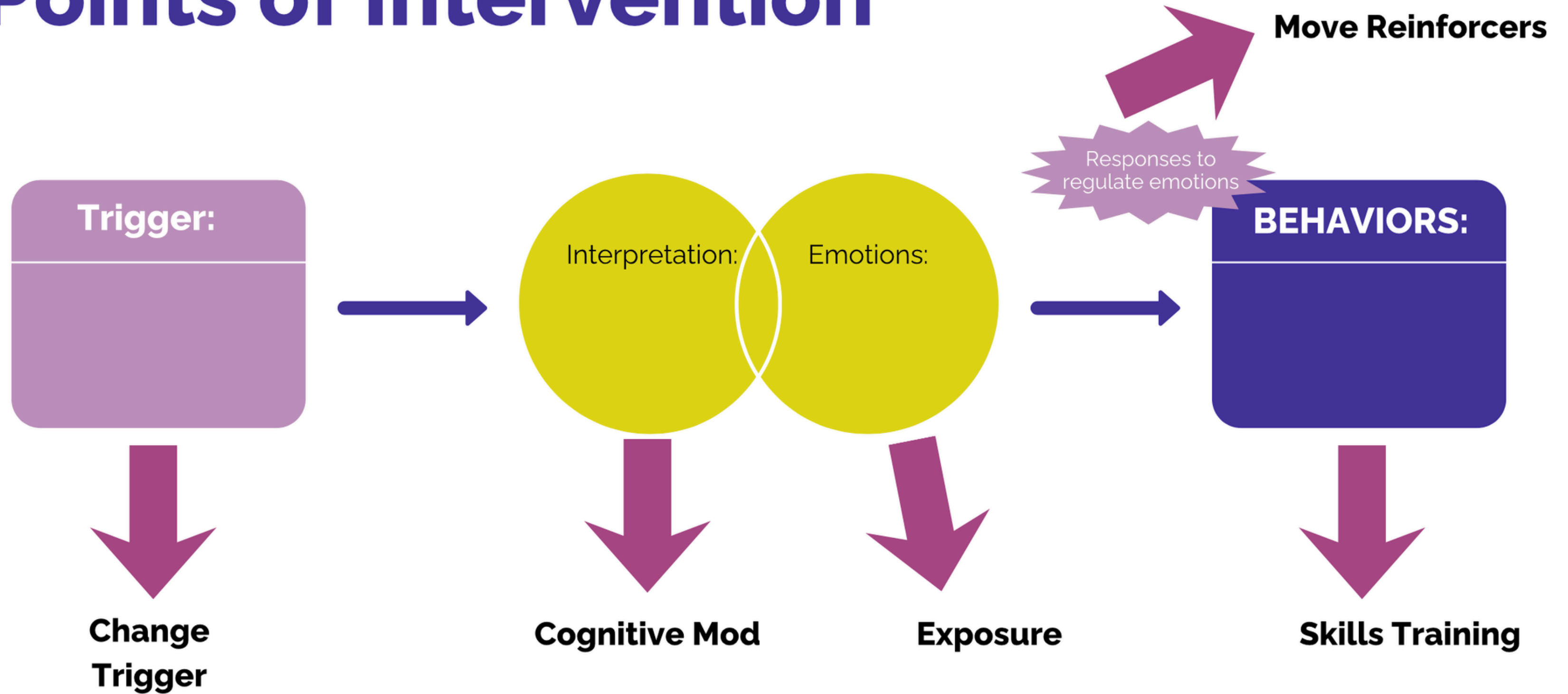
First Incident	Worst Incident	Most Recent Incident
Before	Before	Before
Three Seconds Before:	Three Seconds Before:	Three Seconds Before:
Body Scan:	Body Scan:	Body Scan:
<i>What was the emotion or sensation you felt?</i>	<i>What was the emotion or sensation you felt?</i>	<i>What was the emotion or sensation you felt?</i>
During	During	During
Three Seconds During:	Three Seconds During:	Three Seconds During:
Body Scan:	Body Scan:	Body Scan:
<i>What was the sensation in your body during the behavior?</i>	<i>What was the sensation in your body during the behavior?</i>	<i>What was the sensation in your body during the behavior?</i>
After	After	After
Three Seconds After:	Three Seconds After:	Three Seconds After:
Body Scan:	Body Scan:	Body Scan:
<i>How did your body feel after the behavior?</i>	<i>How did your body feel after the behavior?</i>	<i>How did your body feel after the behavior?</i>
Mind Read:	Mind Read:	Mind Read:
<i>What was the thought or judgment running through your mind?</i>	<i>What was the thought or judgment running through your mind?</i>	<i>What was the thought or judgment running through your mind?</i>
Scene Check:	Scene Check:	Scene Check:
<i>What was happening around you?</i>	<i>What was happening around you?</i>	<i>What was happening around you?</i>
Mind Read:	Mind Read:	Mind Read:
<i>What was going through your mind during the behavior?</i>	<i>What was going through your mind during the behavior?</i>	<i>What was going through your mind during the behavior?</i>
Scene Check:	Scene Check:	Scene Check:
<i>What was happening around you as the behavior unfolded?</i>	<i>What was happening around you as the behavior unfolded?</i>	<i>What was happening around you as the behavior unfolded?</i>
Mind Read:	Mind Read:	Mind Read:
<i>What thoughts or feelings came up immediately after?</i>	<i>What thoughts or feelings came up immediately after?</i>	<i>What thoughts or feelings came up immediately after?</i>
Scene Check:	Scene Check:	Scene Check:
<i>What was different around you after the behavior?</i>	<i>What was different around you after the behavior?</i>	<i>What was different around you after the behavior?</i>



Recurrent Pattern Map



Points of Intervention



**Behavior patterns don't exist in isolation.
Responses shape outcomes.**

**Behavior or
Communication**



**Validation or
Escalation**



**To understand behavior, we have to assess
patterns across the whole system:**

- Teen coping strategies
- Caregiver responses
- Therapist urges and reactions

If we want to model skills and create safety for teens, **we must first learn to notice** and regulate our own emotions, urges and responses.





**When we rush to fix before
we understand, we don't just miss
the problem, **we become part of it.****

#5 If safety only exists on paper, it won't exist in crisis.

I've completed thousands of safety plans with clients...





**Safety doesn't come from paperwork.
It comes from practiced, relational
skills embedded in real life.**

Teen + Support System

Safety Rating Scale

Intensity of Emotion	Body Sensations	Thoughts	What Others See	How I Can Cope	How Others Can Help
0 none					
1 noticeable, but in the background					
2 uncomfortable but manageable					
3 extreme, cannot function					

A safety plan without real context or rehearsal is just a piece of paper.

2 requirements for real world safety plans:

1

Generalized in all environments and relationships

2



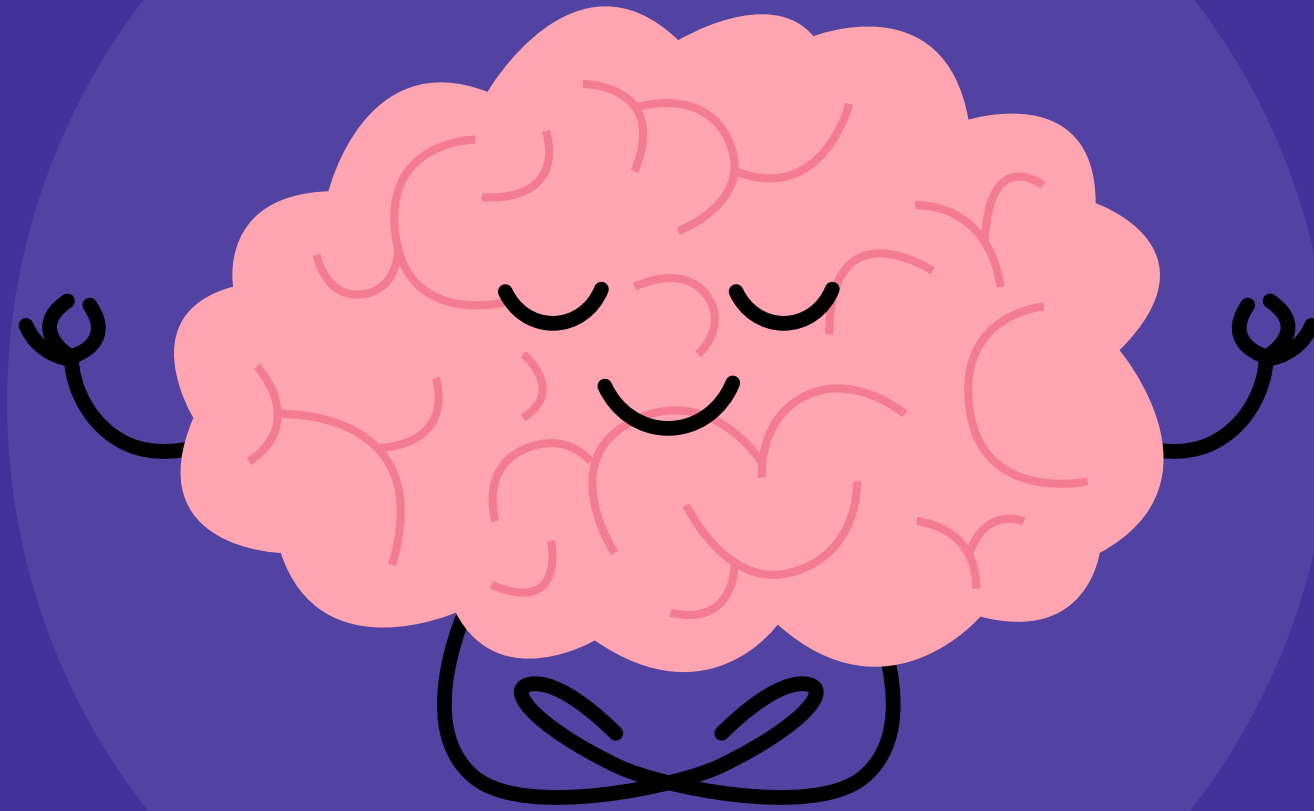


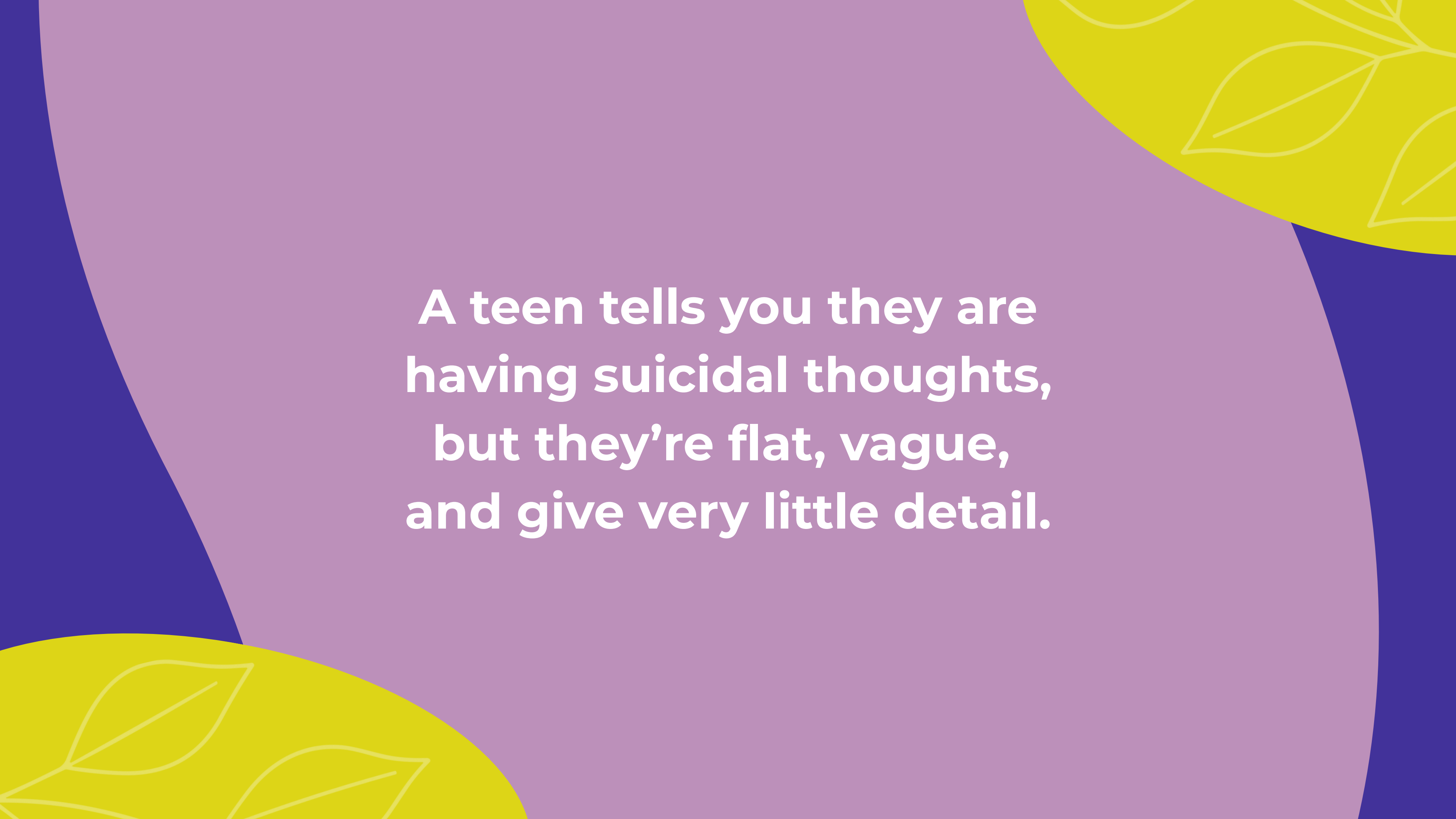
**A safety plan without real context
or rehearsal is just a piece of paper.**

2 requirements for real world safety plans:

- 1** Generalized in all environments
and relationships
- 2** Practiced at peace so automatic
when activated

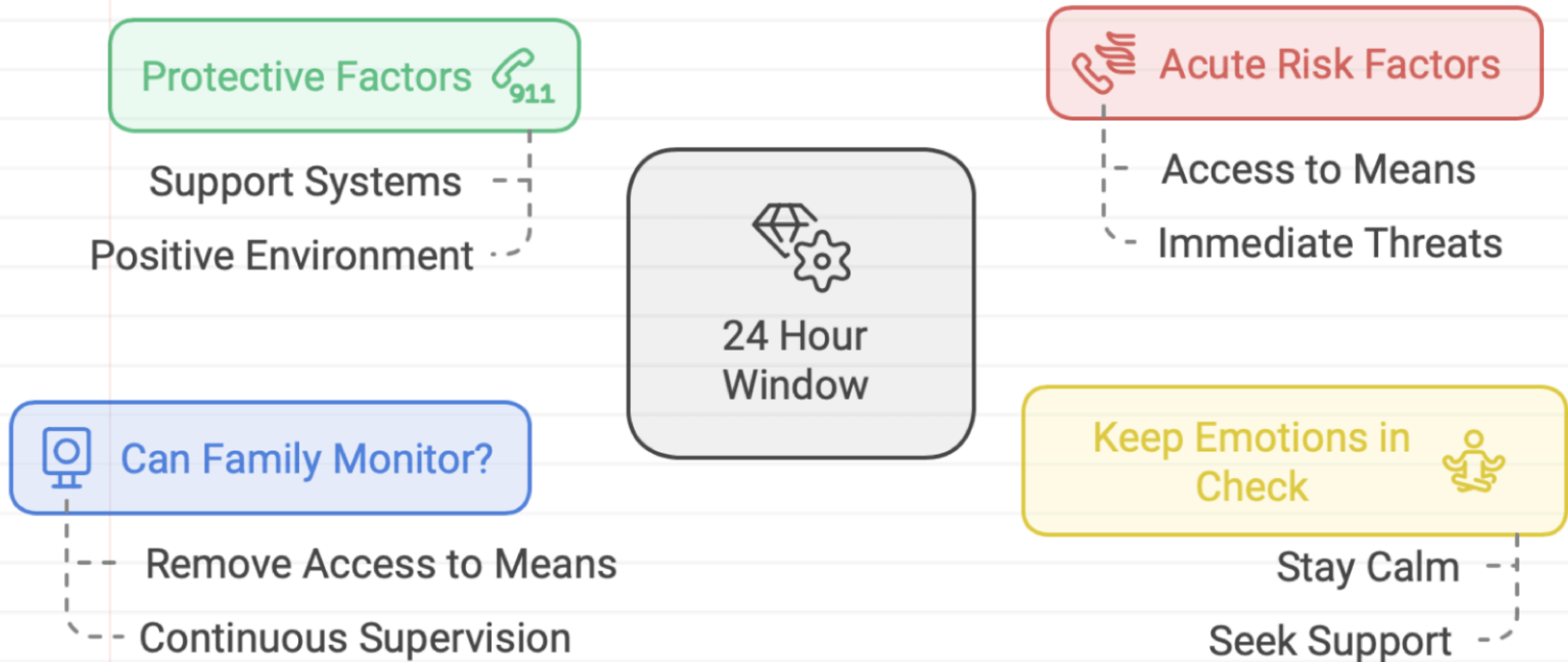
Observation Exercise





**A teen tells you they are
having suicidal thoughts,
but they're flat, vague,
and give very little detail.**

Is it time to PACK?





SAFE Framework



**Speak
Directly**



**Assess
Intent**



**Free
Environment**

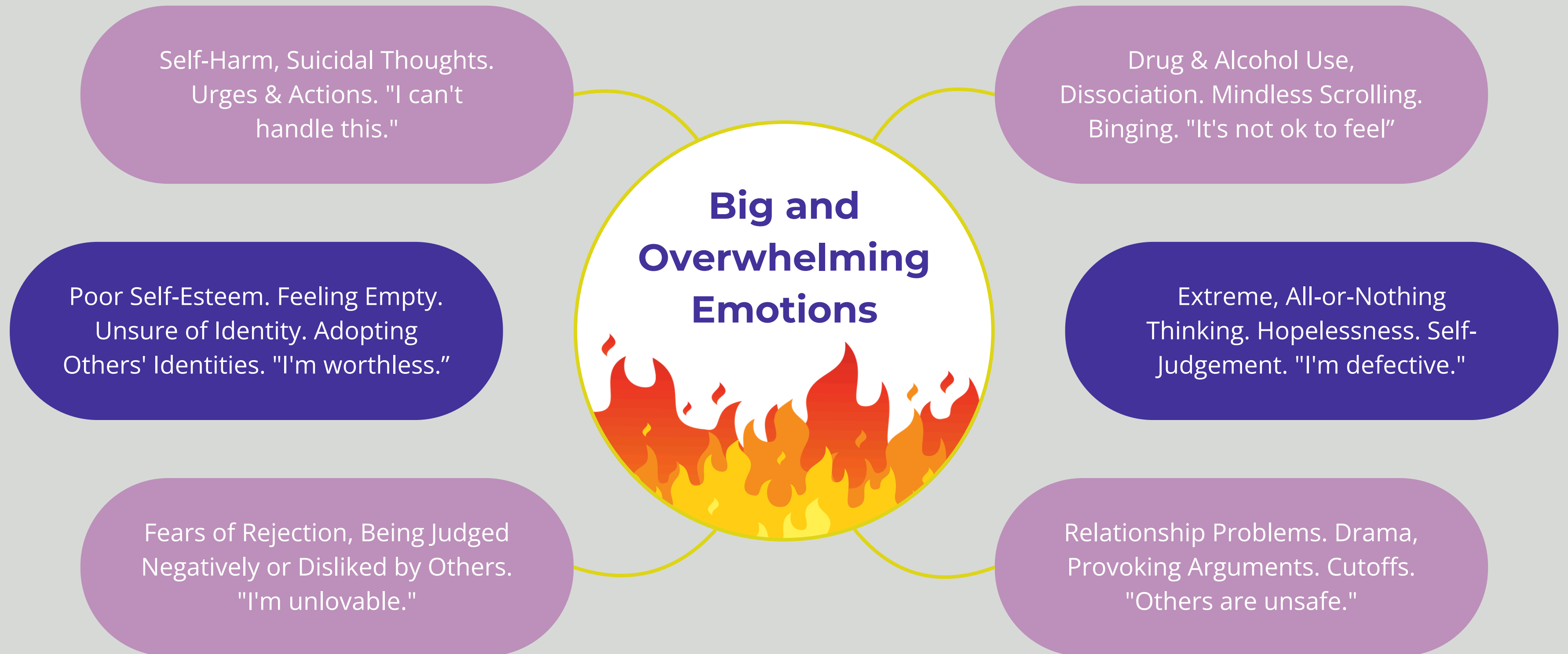


**Establish a
Timeline**



**When everything
feels urgent,
remember this...**

The “Problem” is Actually a Solution



Behavior Emerges
Initial behavior is observed

The **Old Way to
Respond to High-
Risk Teen
Behaviors**

Safety Perceived
People feel safe due to
hospitalization

Panic Ensues
People react with panic

Hospitalization
Hospitalization is used to block
escalating behavior

The Effective Way to Treat High-Risk Teen Behaviors

- Collaborative Foundation (River Metaphor from session one)
- Purpose Creation (Life worth living goals that inspire action)
- System Understanding (Parent capacity and family dynamics)
- Pattern Recognition (Assessment that validates and clarifies)
- Resilience Building (Safety planning that empowers communication)

What I know for sure is this:

When we understand behavior as communication and treat the whole system, safety becomes lived, change becomes possible, and everyone gets a life worth living, including us.

Learn the Full Framework for **Treating High-Risk Teens**

Scan this QR code

