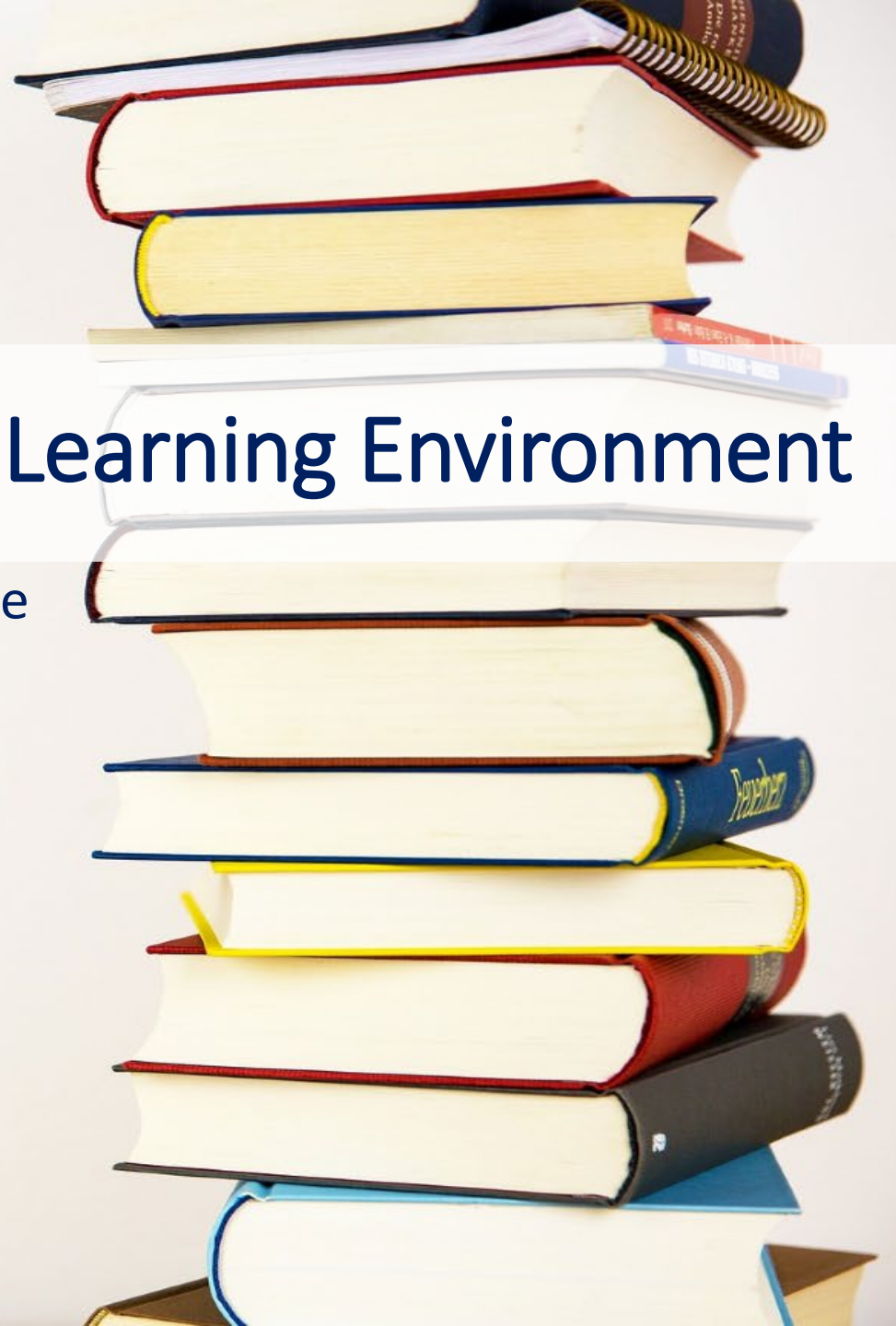


Addressing Defensiveness in the Learning Environment

Presented by: Jenn Mahony, Director, Ombuds Office
Boston Children's Hospital



Disclosures

- The speaker(s) do not have any financial relationships to disclose.

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The Ombuds Office

- Is a resource for all
- A safe place to navigate and untangle workplace concerns
- Identifies and surfaces systemic problems
- Provides information and referrals
- Leads workshops on communication and conflict topics



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A quick orientation

- Understanding what defensiveness is and how it shows up in the learning environment
- Some immediate and long-term strategies to mitigate defensiveness in the learning environment
- Defensiveness and mitigation in action
- Summary and questions (keep scenarios general)



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How you've experienced defensiveness

- Giving feedback followed by lashing out or shutting down
- Explaining a new task or process and/or offering correction and suggestion in front of others; asking questions in front of peers
- Inability to see beyond a single perspective in the moment



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What triggers defensiveness



Our defenses protect us when our significance, competency and likeability are challenged

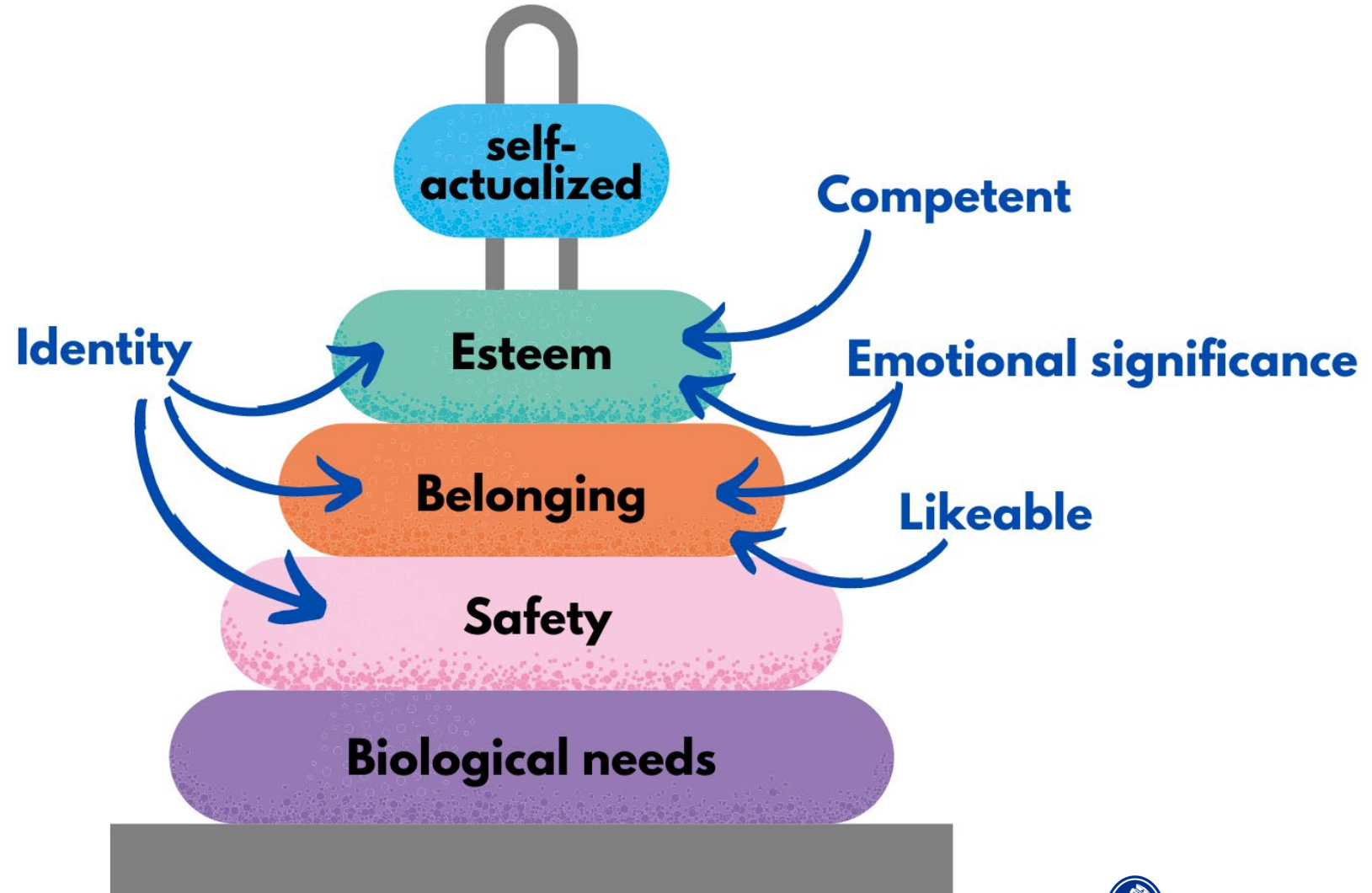
Adapted from *Radical Collaboration: Five Essential Skills to Overcome Defensiveness and Build Successful Relationships*, Tamm & Luyet, (2004), Collins.



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Pain, threat, and needs



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Common defensive responses

Bodily responses

- Tight stomach
- Stress-eating
- Fast breathing/heartbeat

We often experience a physical response first when our defenses are triggered

Communication Responses

- Withdrawal into silence
- Use of sarcasm
- Flooding with information to prove a point

How we communicate when feeling defensive is what is likely to trigger or heighten the other person's defenses

Emotional responses

- Obsessive thinking
- Magnifying or minimizing everything
- Personalizing everything

Our emotional responses can feed our communication responses in the moment and prolong the moment



Defensiveness in the learning environment

Deny: There is no issue;
the issue isn't with the
learner

Catastrophizing: even
small concerns are seen
as career-ending—
shutting down or
personalizing

Displace: anger with the
educator or other
learners

Forcing control:
dictating how and when
learning occurs

Sublimate: being more
focused on a task or
situation within control

Project: telling educator
that they are incapable



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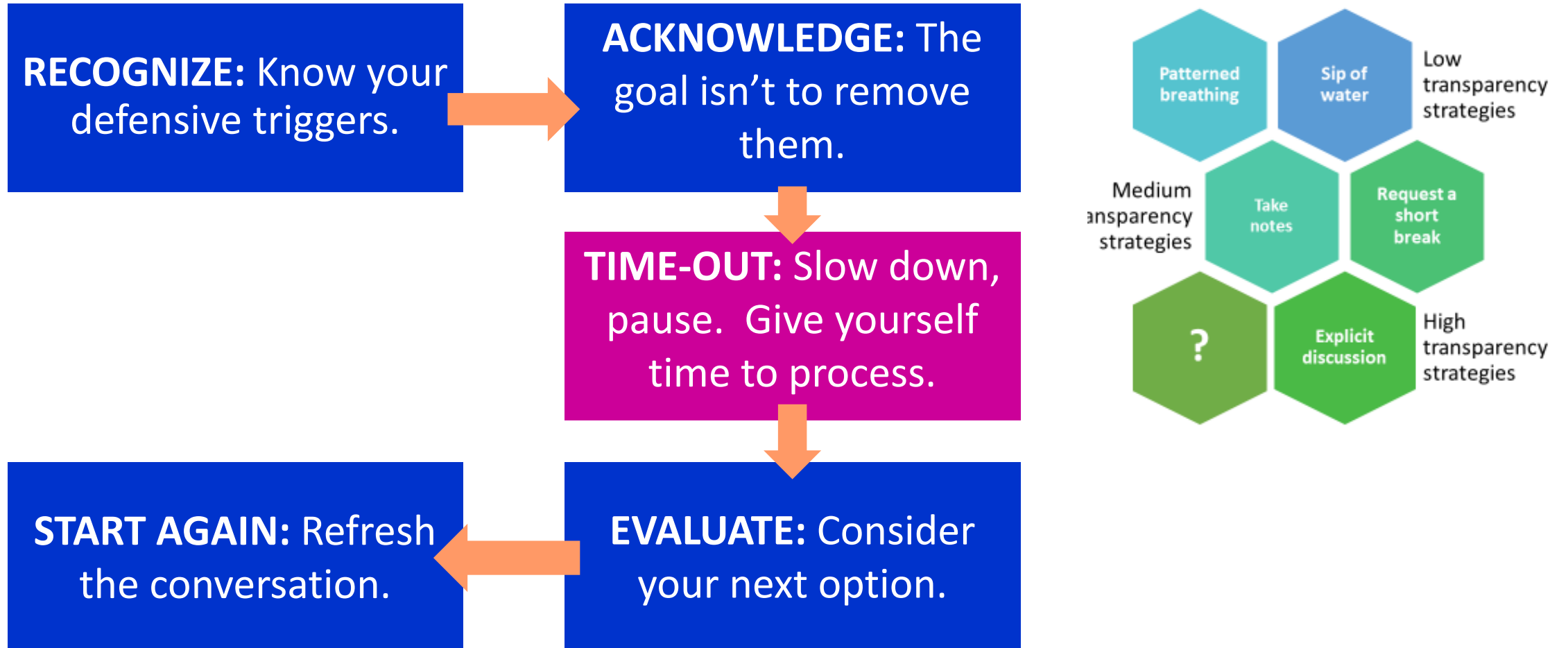
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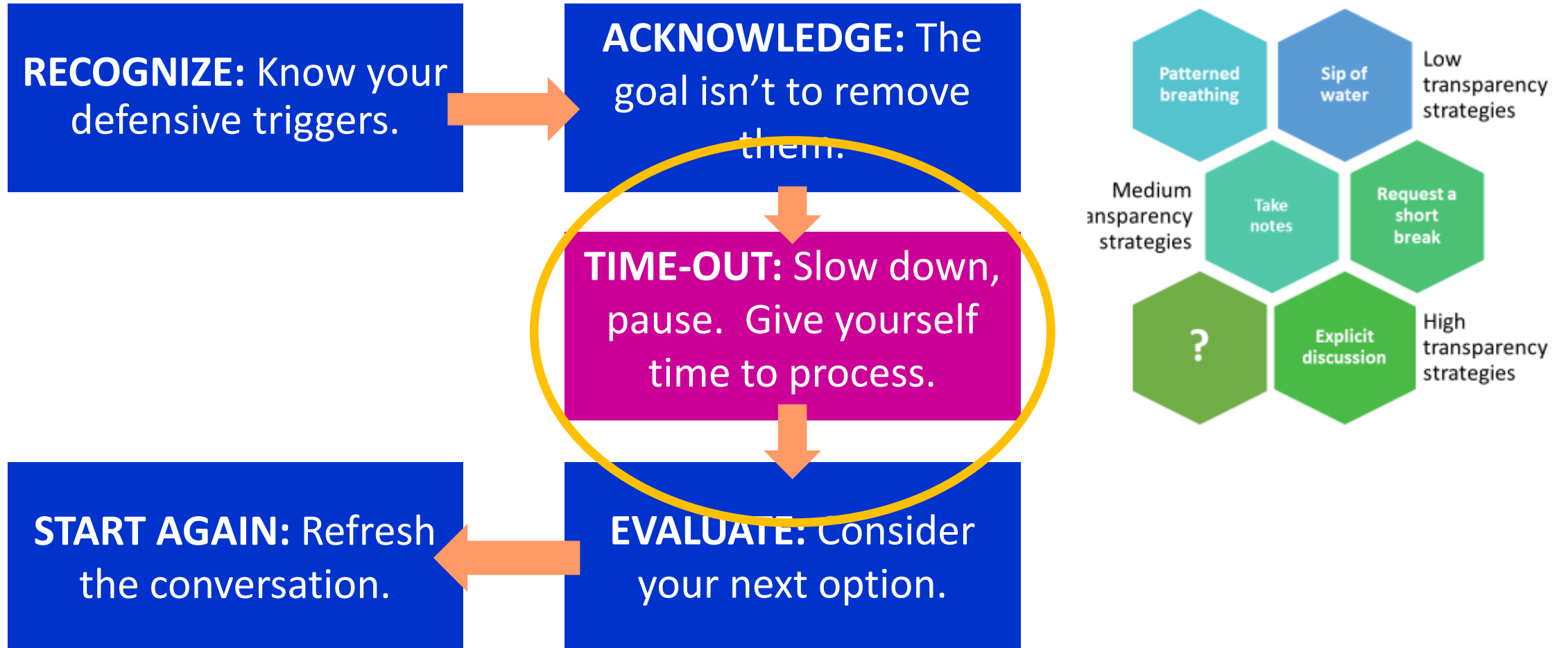
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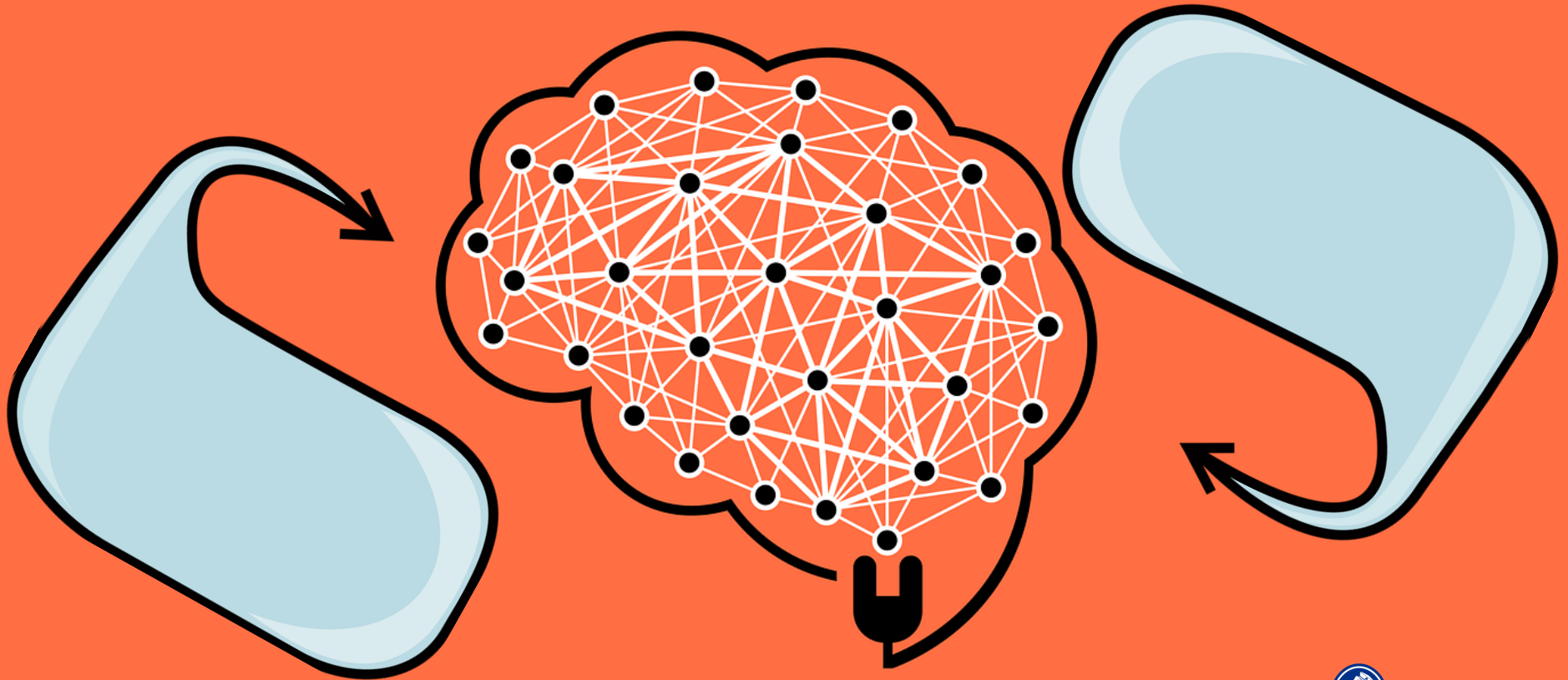
Disrupting defensiveness for ourselves



Disrupting defensiveness for ourselves



Check-in: What stood out?



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Strategies for when you have time to plan

- **Consider: can this conversation be accomplished effectively in one go?**
- **Disarming**
- **Intentional honoring**
- **Identify relationship goals**
 - Preferred realistic outcome (Where do I want to get to in this conversation?)
 - Preferred relationship (and be prepared to share it)
 - Possible interference: what's getting in the way of achieving your preferred relationship



Strategies for in-the-moment mitigation

- Check myself first: am I capable of being effective in this moment?
- Check in with situation: have I set expectations/formed relationship previously?
- Change discord into agreement
- Name and tame the thwarting tactic



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Long-term strategies

These strategies reduce defensiveness and increase psychological safety in learning environments:

- Share what you're learning—promote a learning environment at all stages
- Create problem-solving partnerships: frame before you solve
- Share what you are unlearning
- Make learning a priority
- Share past mistakes



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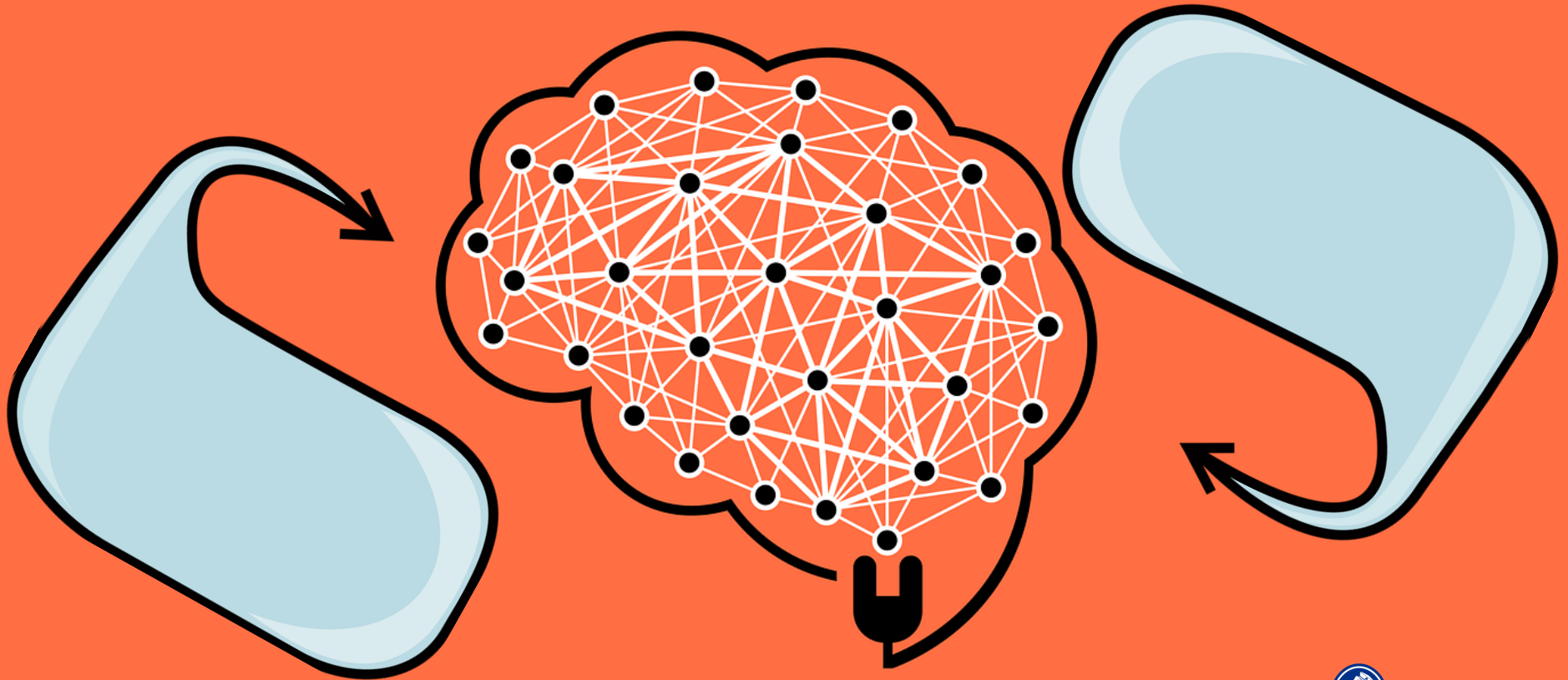
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Reflect on what you need to learn

- What kinds of conversations do I not handle as well as I'd like?
- What kinds of personalities are likely to provoke a response from me?
- Are there specific people, settings, or topics that are particularly difficult?
- What's one technique I think I'm already good at?
- What's one I want to improve?



Mitigating defensiveness in practice



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Scenario 1:

There is time to plan and the relationship is ongoing



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Scenario 2:

The intervention is instant and there may not be an ongoing relationship

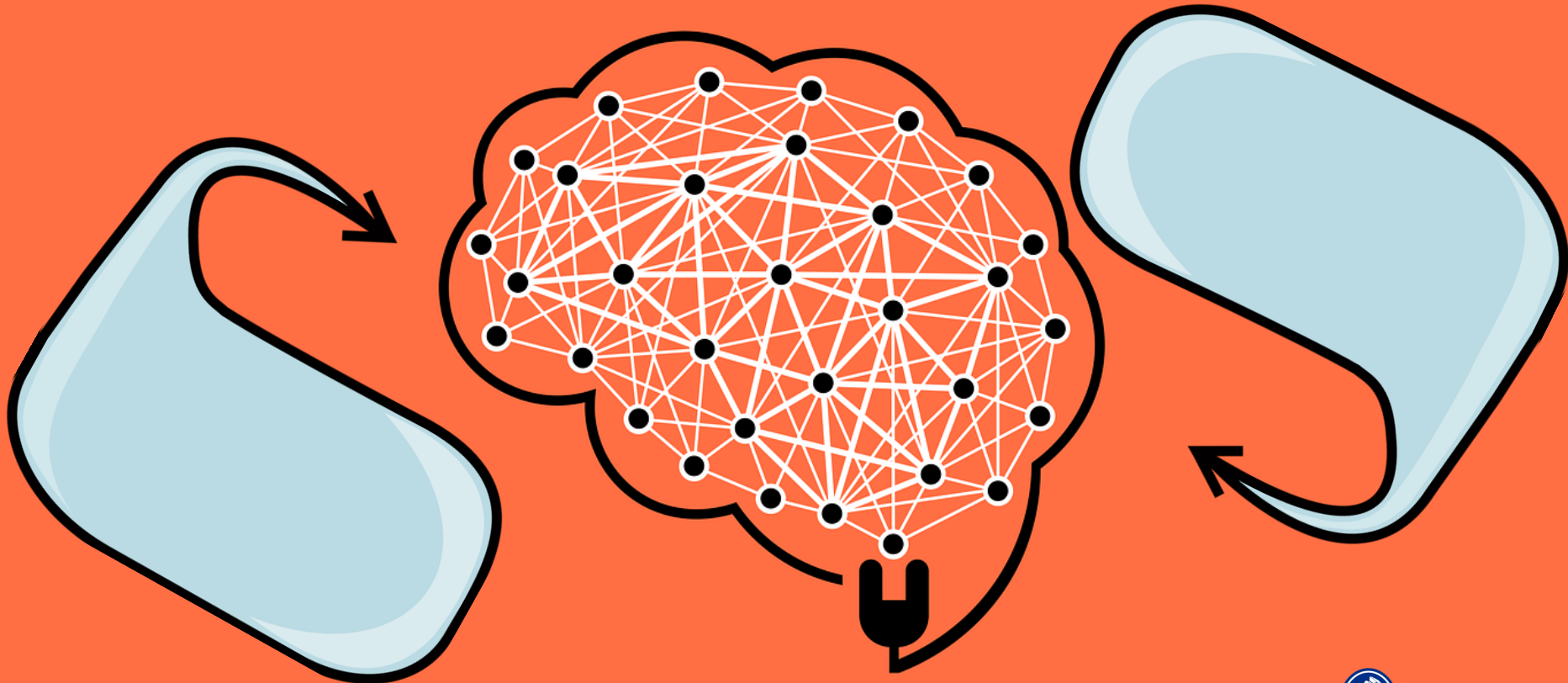


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What questions remain?

Check-in: what is one thing you will take from this discussion and put into practice?



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Takeaways from today

- ▶ Lots of factors affect how and when defensiveness arises
- ▶ Self-regulating our defensiveness can help disrupt unhealthy conflict – for ourselves and for others
- ▶ Specific techniques (like intentional honoring, disarming, turning discord into agreement, setting expectations) can help mitigate defensiveness
- ▶ And remember, don't expect perfection; embrace humanness and grace



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