

*Synergy - a novel programme for changing perspectives in  
understanding and responding to 'behaviours of concern'*

*A summary*

Dr Richard Mills

AT-Autism

Riga 2023



AT-Autism



Πανεπιστήμιο  
Πελοποννήσου



Katerina Laskaridou and Synergy team :  
Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, Piraeus: Greece

THANK YOU!



Dr Michael McCreadie : AT-Autism: UK

# Take-home points

- Stress causes emotional responses
- Emotional responses cause bad decisions
- Bad decisions cause stress
- *Switch from emotional to rational responses*



# Introduction

## Why Synergy?

- Life for those with so-called 'behaviours of concern' can be traumatic, restricted and brutal
- Interventions often problematic, unethical and ineffective
- Individuals, families and communities are at risk of exclusion and harm
- Teachers and other professionals vulnerable to stress, trauma and physical harm



Jamie

*two narratives  
two frames*



'If we see 'behaviour', we try to manage it

If we see 'distress', we offer comfort'



*“if you are terrified, self-regulation is impossible”*

*2023*

*Dr Bernadette Grosjean*





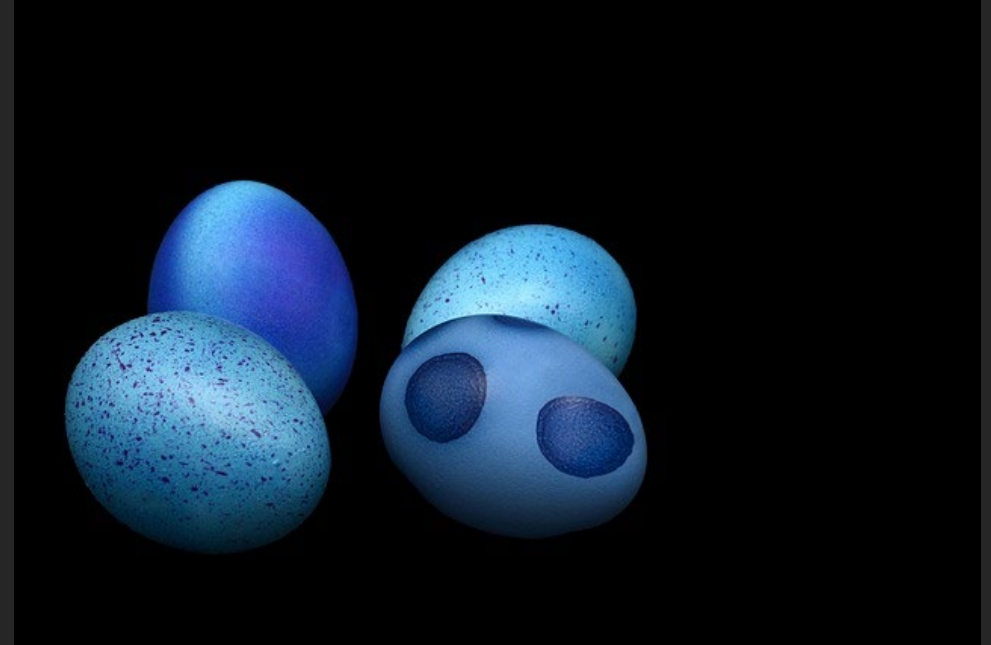


Key points and themes

# Theme

The 'ABC of the emotions' (ELLIS)

- We experience an event (A)
- We interpret that event (B)
- We feel an emotional response in line with our interpretation (C)  
.....and then.....?





Beliefs, mindsets and  
behaviour  
'the framing effect'

*"people are not disturbed by things  
but rather by their view of things."*

Albert Ellis 1913-2007

*"men are disturbed not by things,  
but by their opinions about them"*

Epictetus 55 – 135 AD

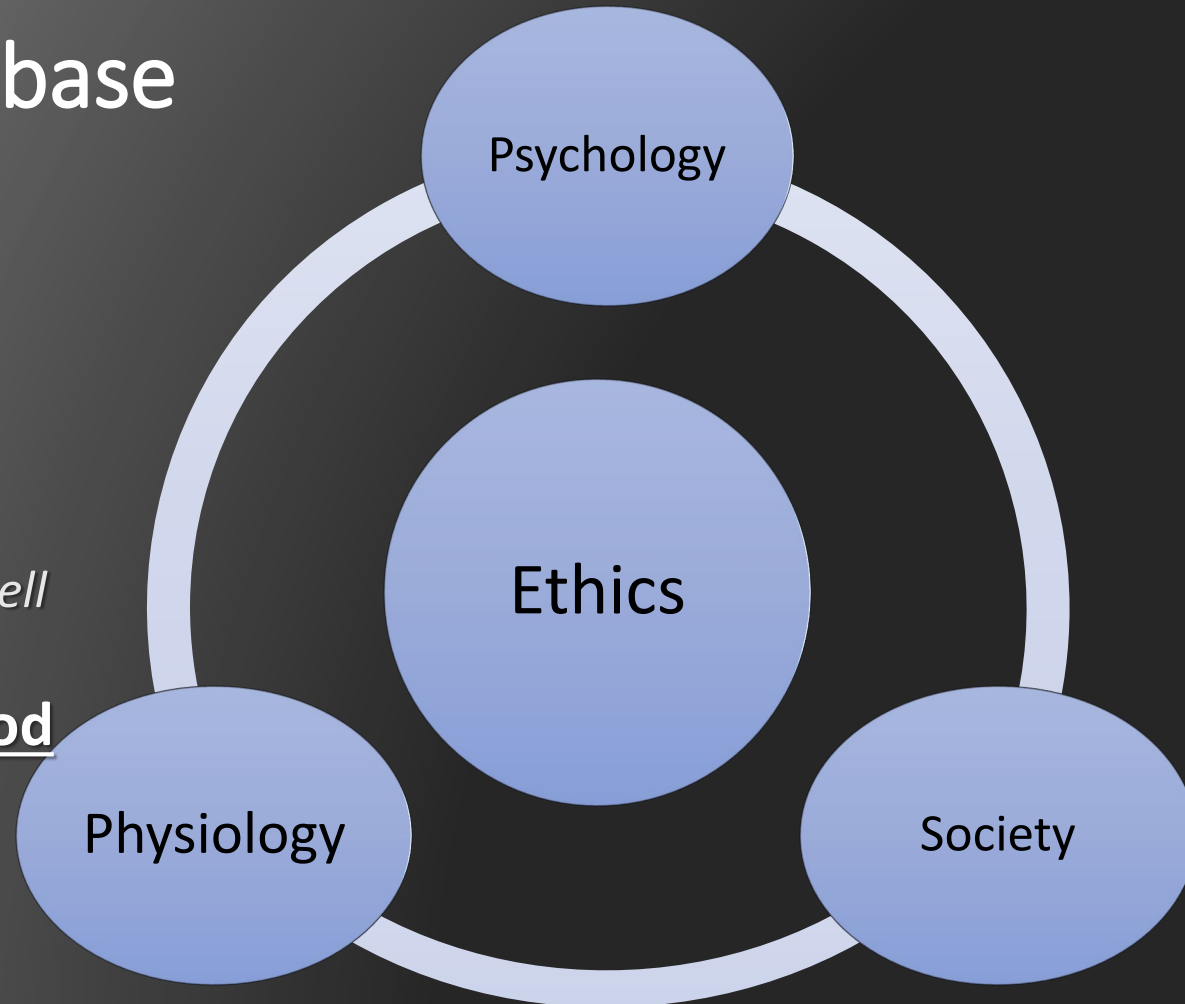


Theoretical base



*Kahneman, Tversky, Bandura , Ellis,  
Rogers, Milgram, Zimbardo, Janis*  
**(individual and group behaviour)**

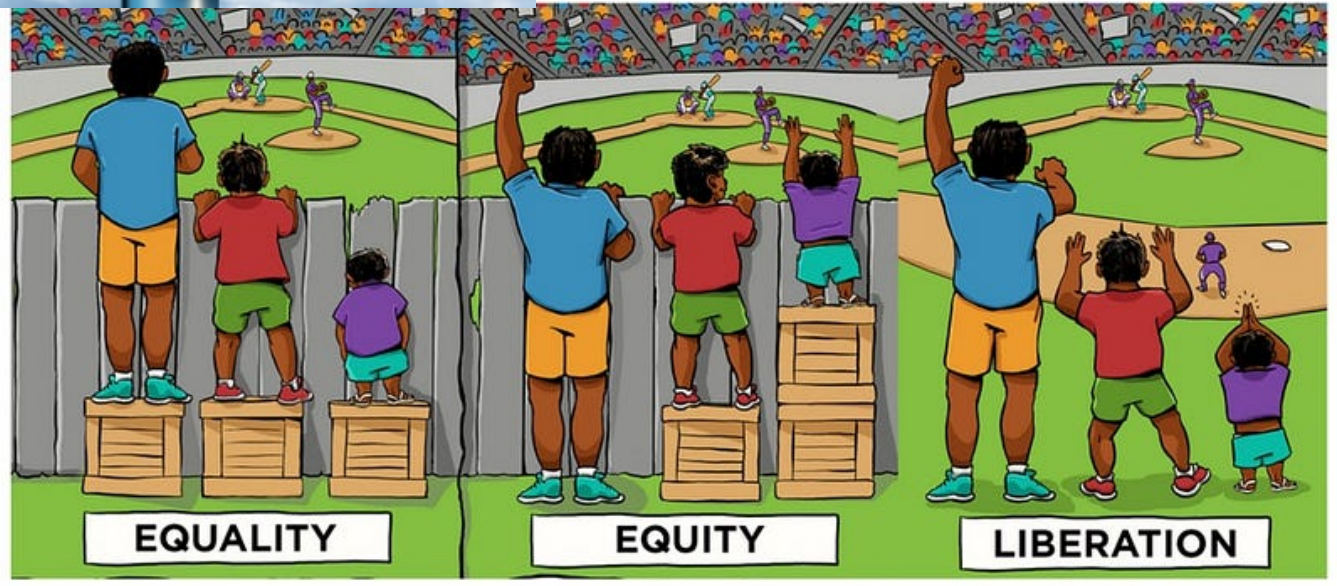
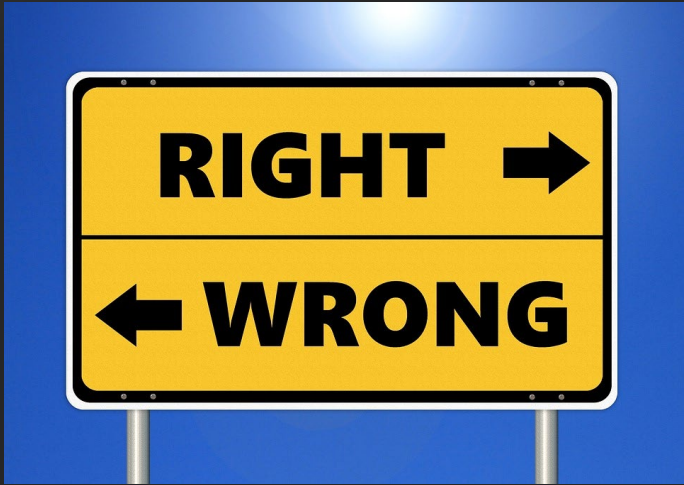
## Theoretical base



*Pfaff, Cummins, McDonnell  
Schneiderman, Ironson*  
**(Arousal, stress, mood  
and wellbeing )**

*Weber, Dilthey, Goffman,  
Wolfensberger*  
'Verstehen' (deep  
understanding)  
**(Making sense of  
experience- stigma,  
power relationships)**

# Ethics



## Kahneman

- ❑ Two types of brain system – fast and slow
- ❑ The emotional brain and the rational brain

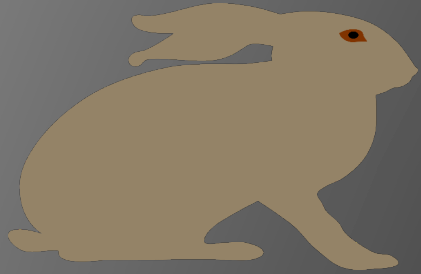




# Our 'two brains' (Kahneman D.)

'Emotional brain' – 'instinctive'

'Rational brain' – 'reflective'



System 1



System 2

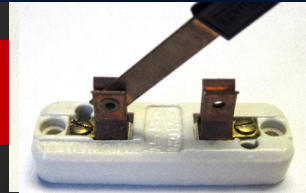


Fast

Automatic- easy  
Impulsive- instant  
Unconsidered

Slow

Reflective- difficult  
Hesitant  
Considered

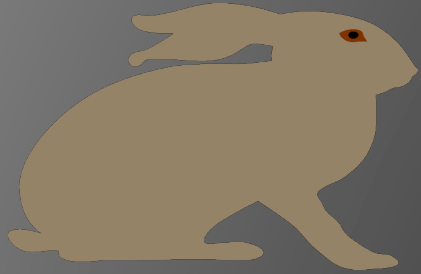


Switch- buys time

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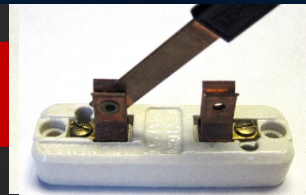


Fast

High stress  
Fight-flight-freeze  
Biases  
Groupthink

Slow

Lower stress  
Pause and reflect  
Planning  
Self-awareness

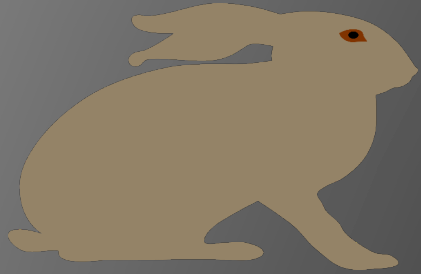


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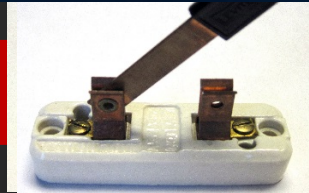


**Fast**

Stressed -Reflexive  
Out of control  
Chaos- panic  
Unplanned

**Slow**

Calm- present  
In control of self  
Managing biases -  
resisting 'gut instinct'  
Plan - rehearse



Switch- buys time

# System 1

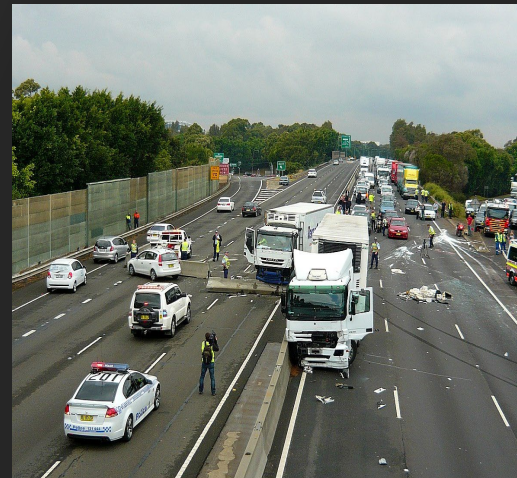
- We need it - Useful
- Immediate
- Available
- Framing effect



BUT

Error prone: associated with

- Panic
- Impulsivity
- Poor judgement
- Anger
- Loss of self-control
- Stress





# System 2

- Conscious - in control
- Rational- planned

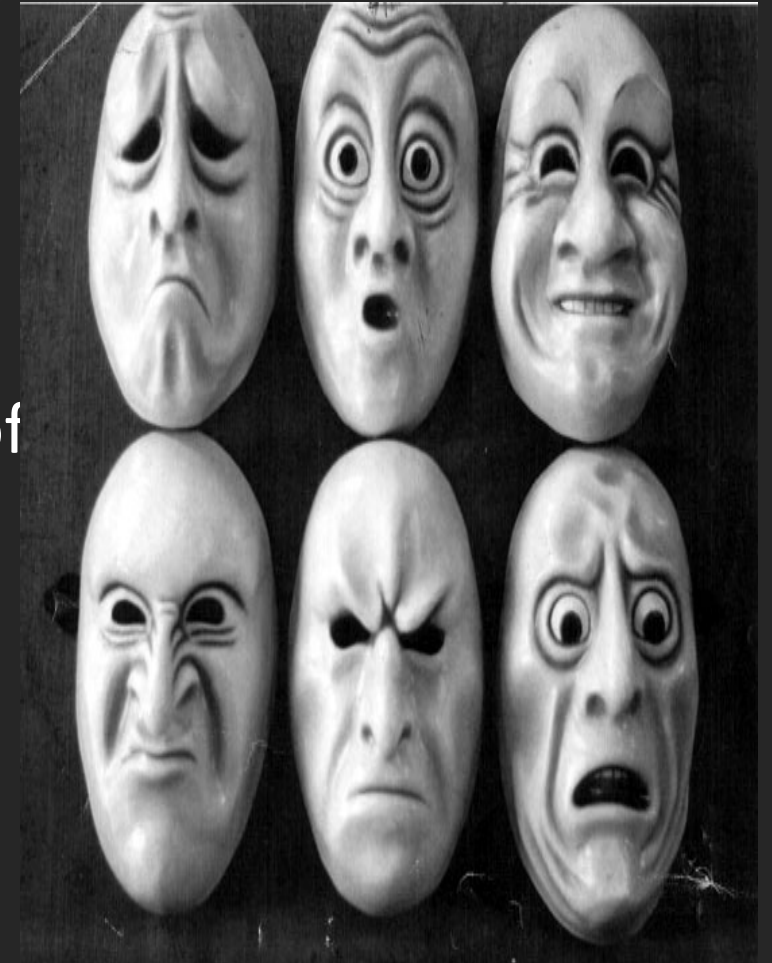
But

- Can take time
- Skills might be difficult
- Requires self-awareness
- With rehearsal /practice can become second nature



# The Subjective Experience of Emotion

- There are a *limited* number of basic emotions
- They are *biologically* determined, the products of evolution, .....influenced and modified by narratives, our biases, stress and culture
- First impressions most powerful – and enduring





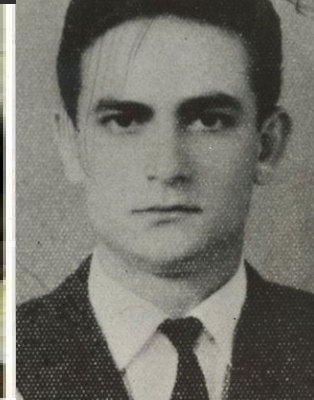








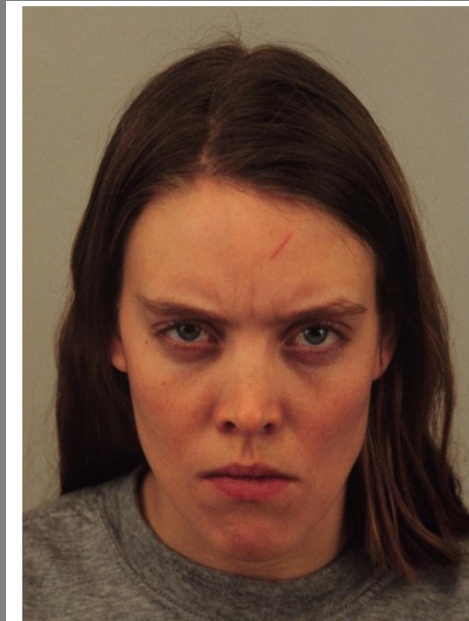




What sort of people?

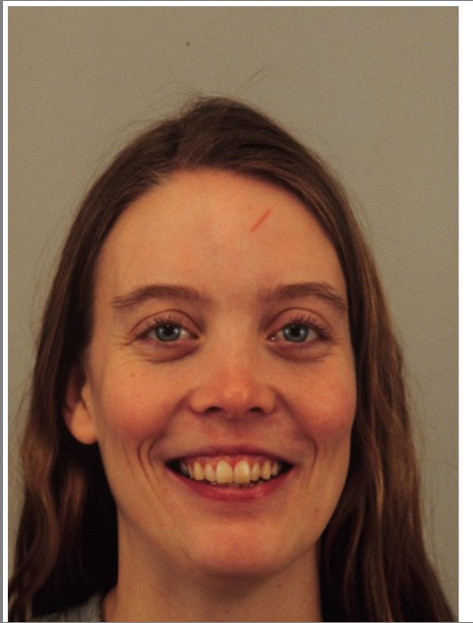
# The framing effect

How our emotions shape our responses



# The framing effect

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# The framing effect

How our emotions shape our responses



Our first impression the most powerful and enduring (Kahneman)

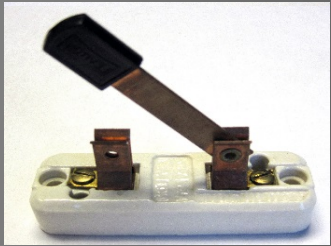


Mind your language

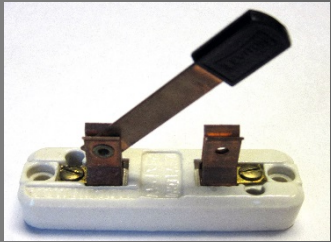


The framing effect





System 1 descriptions	
Complex	
Aggressive	
Unpredictable	
Obsessive	
Repetitive	
Ritualistic	
Disorder	
Low functioning	
Other	



System 1 descriptions	System 2 descriptions
Complex	Human : Interesting: I don't understand yet
Aggressive	Scared: Unhappy: Frustrated: I don't understand yet
Unpredictable	Human: I don't understand yet
Obsessive	Expert: Interested in: I don't understand yet
Repetitive	Human: Anxious: I don't understand yet
Ritualistic	Human: Anxious: Quirky: I don't understand yet
Disorder	Difference - BUT
Low functioning	Needs more help with.....
Other	????



## **Influence of our biases and 'hunches'**

### **'The Availability Heuristic'**

Events that are 'easy to imagine'

'.....gut feelings'

'.....Spring to mind'

.....Stereotypes

**The product of System 1 = Emotional**

Practical application

Know what is within your control- and what is not

# What is within our control?

Our

Beliefs

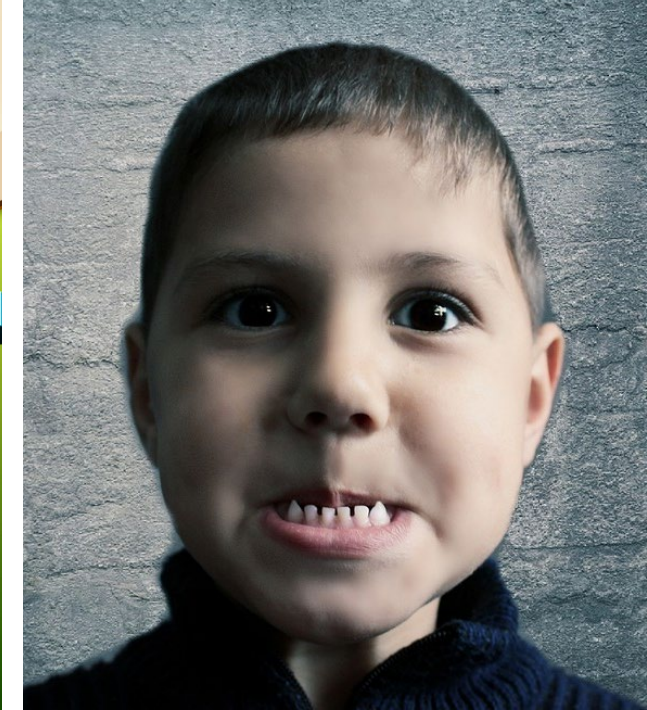
Emotions

Thoughts

Actions

Anger (to a degree)





What is not within our control?

- Everything else

# Recap

## 'System 1' - Emotional ...main focus

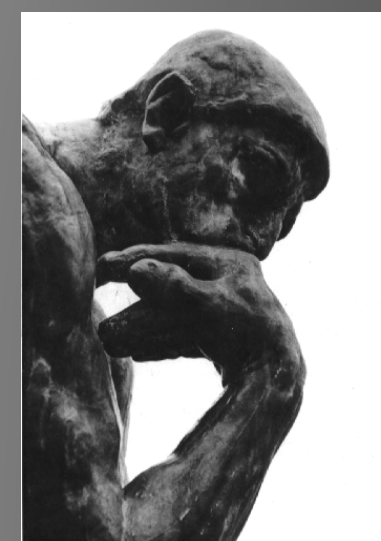
- Respond - Fight/flight/ freeze – maintain 'comfort zone'



Switching from System 1 to System 2 buys time

## 'System 2' – Rational.... main focus

- Reflect – plan – self control – challenge our beliefs





# Remember - Theme

The 'ABC of the emotions' (ELLIS)

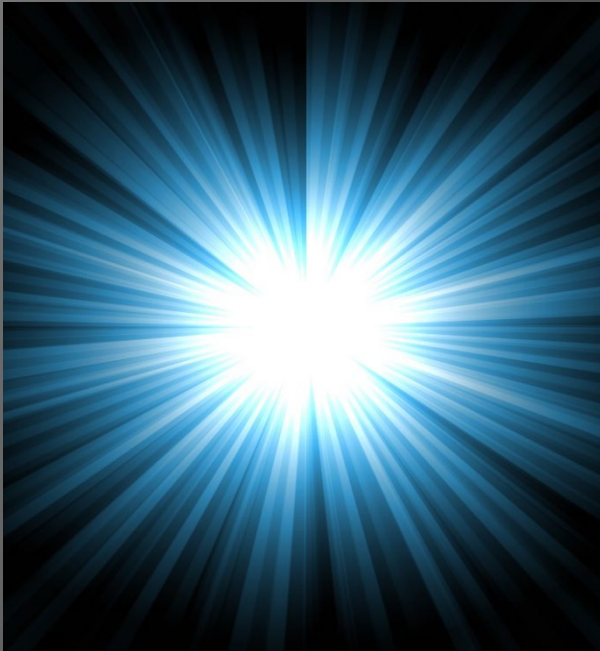
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- We interpret that event (B)
- We feel an emotional response in line with our interpretation (C)  
.....and then.....?



Bringing it  
together

Exercise





- 'System 1' .....to 'System  
-  
'verstehen' )... (deep understanding)



Greek schools experience- focus on teacher – not ‘behaviour’



FOCUS?

Character

Role

- Personal qualities
- Skills
- Empathy
- Motivation

Wellbeing

- Workload
- Relationships
- Vulnerability
- Health

Personal worries

- Fear
- Trauma
- Expectations

Role models

Life experiences

Group

- Ideas, beliefs, ideology, biases
- Culture
- Training
- Support and mentoring

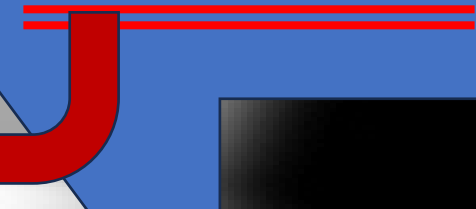
Narrative

Stress

Influences



OR- Here?



THEN....

Identity  
Self-esteem  
Sense of belonging  
Sense of acceptance

FOCUS?

Feelings and emotions  
Fear  
Trauma  
The unknown  
Powerlessness  
Helplessness

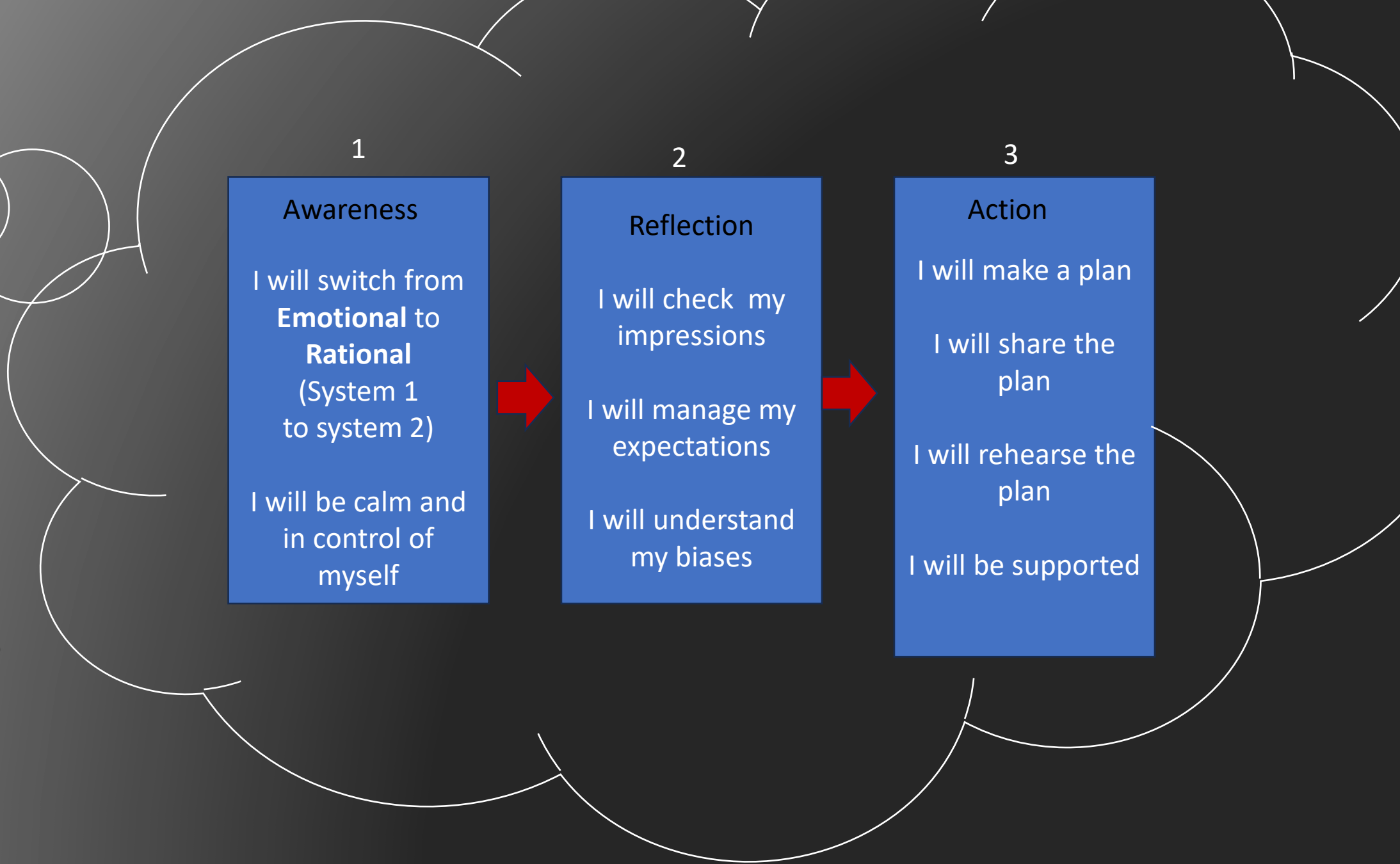
Stress

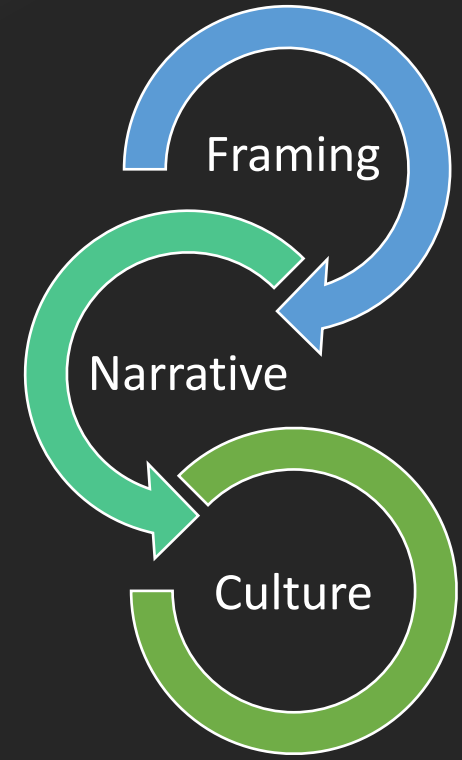
Narrative

Influences

Life experiences  
Culture  
Connections  
Daily experiences e.g., kindness,  
cruelty, care  
Interests  
Support based on empathy







# Josephina and Kostas

*two narratives  
two frames*

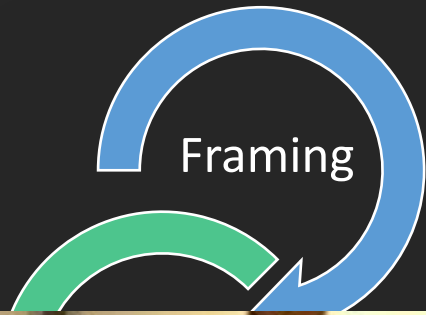


- I am relaxed and calm
- I am well-prepared
- I am positive about Kostas
- The setting is ready (audit and check)
- Plan A is in place
- Activities are clearly defined
- Materials needed are available
- Team is briefed, relaxed and calm
- The team is positive about Kostas
- Plan B is in place
- I am ready to greet Kostas
- I will check how Kostas is feeling
- I will check Kostas knows what will happen today

## Checklist for Josefina (teacher)



*With thanks to Elena Giouroukou  
and Katerina Laskaridou*

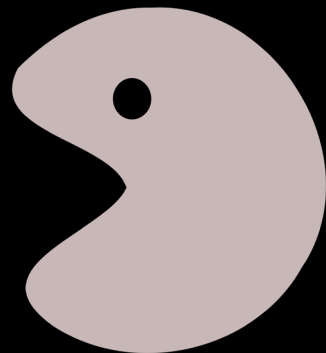


ERIK  
*two narratives*  
*two frames*

# Exercise

- **Being in control. Can you control yourself ?**
- Imagine you approaching a stressful situation
- Practice dealing with this in your mind
- Be mindful of **your likely stressors or triggers** telling yourself that they will not provoke a stressed response
- How will you switch from 'System 1' to 'System 2'?
- **Have a plan FOR YOU**

Reflection and discussion



# Take-home points

- Stress causes emotional responses
- Emotional responses cause bad decisions
- Bad decisions cause stress
- *Switch from emotional to rational responses*



Final thought

Henry James

*“Three things in life are important, the first is to be kind, the second is to be kind and the third is to be kind”*



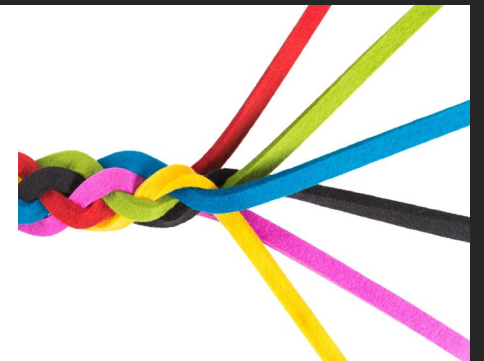


***Thank you!***

**AT-Autism**



*For more information*  
[richardmills@atautism.org](mailto:richardmills@atautism.org)  
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Appendices (for PDF)

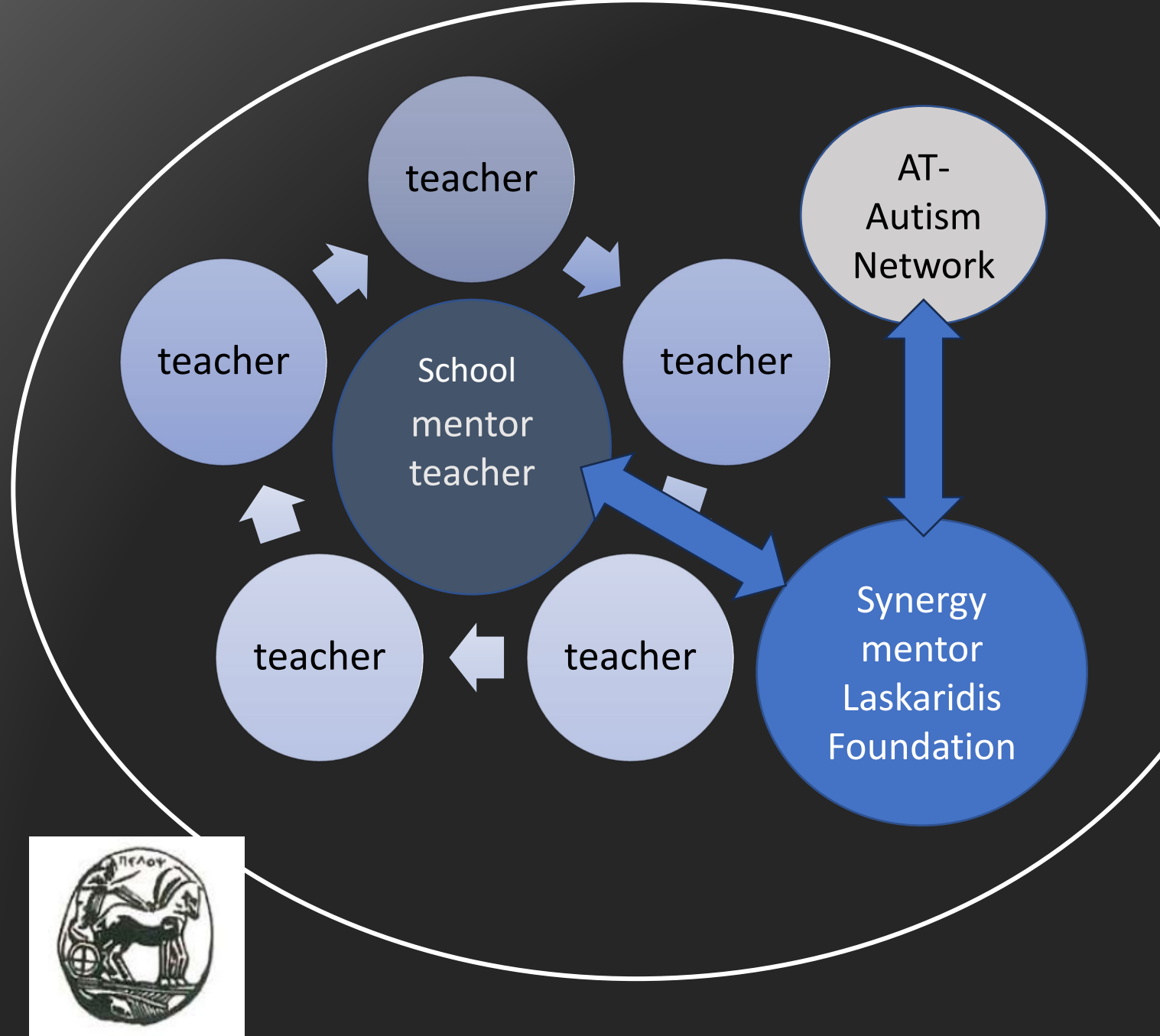
Structure of Synergy

Summary of evaluation



## Model : Synergy (Attica)

- Teachers supported by local school-based mentor
- School-based mentors supported by Synergy mentor
- Synergy mentors supported by AT-Autism network
- Independently evaluated (University of the Peloponnese)



Synergy Independent evaluation

Results summary and conclusions

University of the Peloponnese



Πανεπιστήμιο Πελοποννήσου

**Brief summary of the independent evaluation of the Synergy programme in schools in Attica, Greece (2021- 2022) by Koulis A., & Bagakis G. (2023) University of the Peloponnese**

## Introduction

Synergy launched in Greece 2014  
Collaboration: AT-Autism, London UK and Laskaridis Foundation, Piraeus. Greece.  
Background: EU Erasmus plus (2012)  
Independent evaluation UoP (2023)

## Programme outline

- One CPD accredited workshop (*practice*)
  - One CPD accredited workshop (*mentoring*)
  - Ongoing mentoring support
  - Annual seminar
- 1. Know what we can and can't control**  
*We control only what WE do: Control of our beliefs, emotions and actions*
  - 2. Examine our impressions**  
*Our mindset, biases, and judgements*
  - 3. Anticipate, plan, and rehearse**  
*Calm, kind, rational responding*

## Locations

- Australia (pilot)
- Greece (60 schools: Attica)
- Malta (pilot)
- UK

## Theoretical model (abbreviated)



**Primarily on staff character, understanding (verstehen), self-awareness, empathy, mindset, wellbeing, skills and actions – and the narrative and culture - not 'behaviour' - or the child. Developing skills to plan and respond rationally, not emotionally.**

## Questions

**How does Synergy impact schools?**

- Staff stress?
- Teacher confidence?
- Teacher skills?
- Teacher empathy?
- Teacher competence?
- School culture and capacity? (to accept and maintain students displaying 'behaviours of concern')

## Quotes

*"I realized that the only thing I could change was myself and that was the biggest change"*

*(Athina Sourbi. Laskaris Foundation)*

*"Change in the school "culture" in understanding and managing student behaviour" (Integration: Varkiza school)*

*"Improvement of social relationships between teacher-student and among students" (Teacher: Galatsi School)*

## Discussion

Synergy launched in Attica, Greece in 2014 in mainstream and special schools. Self-referral seen as significant. Initially established to **address concern about student exclusions**, the approach is not limited to children and young people from neurominorities, such as autism, and ADHD. Children with other conditions, and refugees from war-zones were attending participant schools. **Trauma-informed, staff-focused approach** aimed at changing staff and school capacity, narrative and culture. Modelled by mentors from the Laskaridis Foundation. Reducing staff stress, and a focus on their wellbeing, skills, and the narrative, reported as helpful. **Mentoring** seen as a **key factor** in sustaining progress and establishing and embedding practice. Switch from 'emotional' to 'rational' staff responses to 'behaviours of concern'. Piloted in services for autistic adults in UK and homelessness services in Australia (UNE). Application in NHS mental health and education settings in UK, Japan, and Greece imminent. MIXED METHODS EVALUATION.

## Results (summary)

*'Summarizing, we conclude that the program, has decisively contributed to the improvement of teachers in terms of their overall teaching and pedagogical practice, in particular towards the children that either fall under the autism spectrum or face other difficulties in everyday life. Relative actions and activities also had an important effect on the teachers' stress levels but also on their emotional resilience, mainly through their support with all matters relative to stress'. Koulis A., & Bagakis G., Dept of Social and Educational Policy:University of the Peloponnese (2023)*

Evaluation reports **significant change** :

- Increased capacity to accept, keep, and effectively support students described as showing 'behaviours of concern'. No exclusions reported.
- Increased staff confidence and competence
- Increased staff self-awareness of their impact on behaviour
- Increased staff understanding of the nature of the child's lived-experiences (verstehen/empathy)
- Increased staff listening skills
- Reduction of staff stress (mixed results reported in 'out of school' teacher stress).
- Narrative and school culture

## Conclusion

Switching the focus from the child and 'behaviour' to staff working with children, is reported as helpful in reframing behaviour, reducing stress and changing practice and culture. The approach utilises established scientific theory on how individuals and groups behave, especially under stress. The uncomplicated **three-stage method and one-day training format -mentoring model**, reported as important in developing enduring skills, supporting wellbeing, improved outcomes for students, and in reducing risk.

## References

*The Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC). (1993). Depression and Anxiety, 18(2), 76–82*  
*Perceived Stress Scale (PSS 10) Cohen et al (2003)*  
*Syn-Q; (PAR) Laskaridis Foundation/University of the Peloponnese/ AT-Autism (2019)*

AT-Autism



University of the Peloponnese



Synergy

For more information contact [info@atautism.org](mailto:info@atautism.org)

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AT-Autism



University of the Peloponnese



Synergy

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