Wellness & Workforce Summit

February 18-19, 2026 | Phoenix, AZ

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Who am I?

- Sally Panozzo, RPL
- In-Service Education Supervisor
- 17 years at the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office
- Started as a Communications Officer
  - CTO in 2014
  - Floor Supervisor in 2016
  - Administrative Supervisor in 2021
    - Peer Support Team
    - Communications Special Response Team
    - Public Education Team
    - Mentoring Program
    - Maintain our 14-Section Operations Manual

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Triggered: Acute Stress Response in PSTs

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What is triggering?

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Acute Stress Response

What is Acute Stress Response (ASR)?

The four types of responses:

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze
- Fawn

Brain Mechanisms

- Amygdala
- Hypothalamus
- Central Nervous System & HPA Axis

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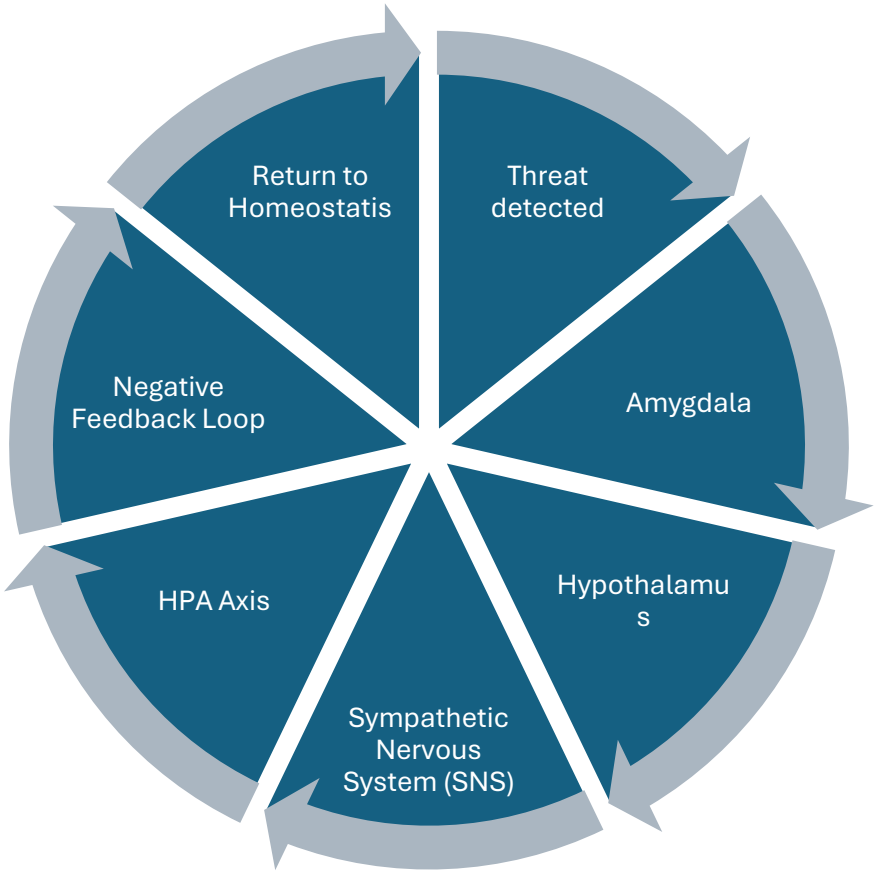
ASR Cycle



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Brain Mechanisms Explained

Amygdala

- Detects threats
  - Automatically – we don't determine the threat, the amygdala does
  - Uses past experiences as one of the criteria
  - Sends a signal to the hippocampus

Hypothalamus

- Command Center of the brain
  - Activates the flight, flight, fawn, or freeze response
  - Through the nervous and endocrine systems

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Brain Mechanisms, Continued

Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS)

- Fast Pathway
  - Releases adrenaline
  - Heart rate and breathing quickens
  - Focus narrows (tunnel vision)

HPA Axis

- Slower Pathway
  - Releases cortisol
  - Sustains alertness and energy
  - Suppresses non-essential functions

Negative Feedback Loop

- Elevated levels of cortisol signal the Hypothalamus to stop additional hormone release

Return to Homeostasis

- Threat is over and the ASR is shut down
- Vagus nerve is activated
- Cortisol levels decline

Two pathways at the same time, the SNS for immediate action and the HPA Axis for sustained alertness

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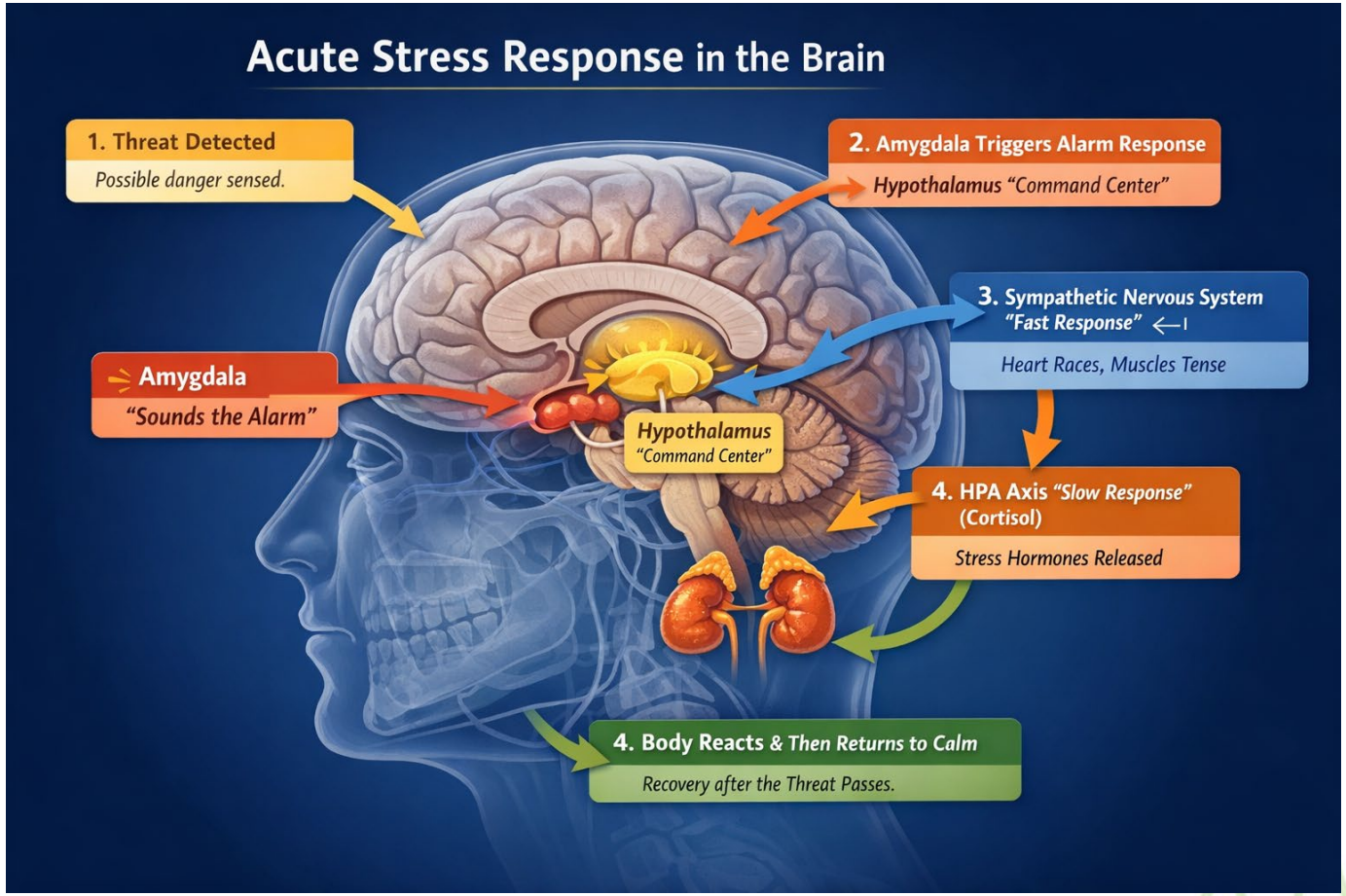
Cycle of Acute Stress Response



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ASR in the ECC

What initiates the ACR in an ECC?

- Incoming 9-1-1 calls
- Radio Transmissions

What is the trigger for receiving a 9-1-1 call?

A radio transmission?

Why does the amygdala consider these things a threat?

- No idea what is on the line.
  - A noise complaint?
  - A parking violation?
  - A shooting?
  - An armed suicidal subject?
  - A unit goes back into service?
  - A unit arriving on scene?
  - Two at gunpoint?
  - Shots fired?
  - Officer down/Mayday, Mayday, Mayday?

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Is all stress bad?

A little bit of stress is good

- Motivating
- Allows us to think and act quickly
- Helps us remember details
- Termed “eustress”

Negative stress

- When our bodies can’t revert back to homeostasis between threats
- Long-term stress isn’t problematic, it’s the build-up of cortisol
- Cortisol can cause numerous health problems, if there is too much of it

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Why does this matter?

Even when we remain seated and calm externally, the hypothalamus activates full-body stress chemistry for physical survival.

So we have high physiological activation without physical release

- Cumulative stress
  - Keeps the body in a constant state of alert
    - Fatigue
    - Immune system suppression
    - Health Issues

One study showed that cortisol levels were measurably higher than average during one shift in the ECC (Bedini, Braun, et al 2017).

Another study showed that our ASR system started to activate from the anticipation of a 9-1-1 call coming in (Hur, Smith, et al 2020).

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Never-ending Triggers

What happens if our bodies are always in ASR?

- Heightened sympathetic tone
  - The body is spending more time in “go” mode
    - Alert, tense, and ready to respond
- Decreased vagal tone
  - The body’s main calming system is less active
    - Harder to relax and recover after stress

Repeated activation of the ASR without movement or emotional closure, can:

- Keep the sympathetic system activated
- Suppress vagal activity
- Shift the nervous system toward a chronic, on-edge state

This is adaptation, not weakness.

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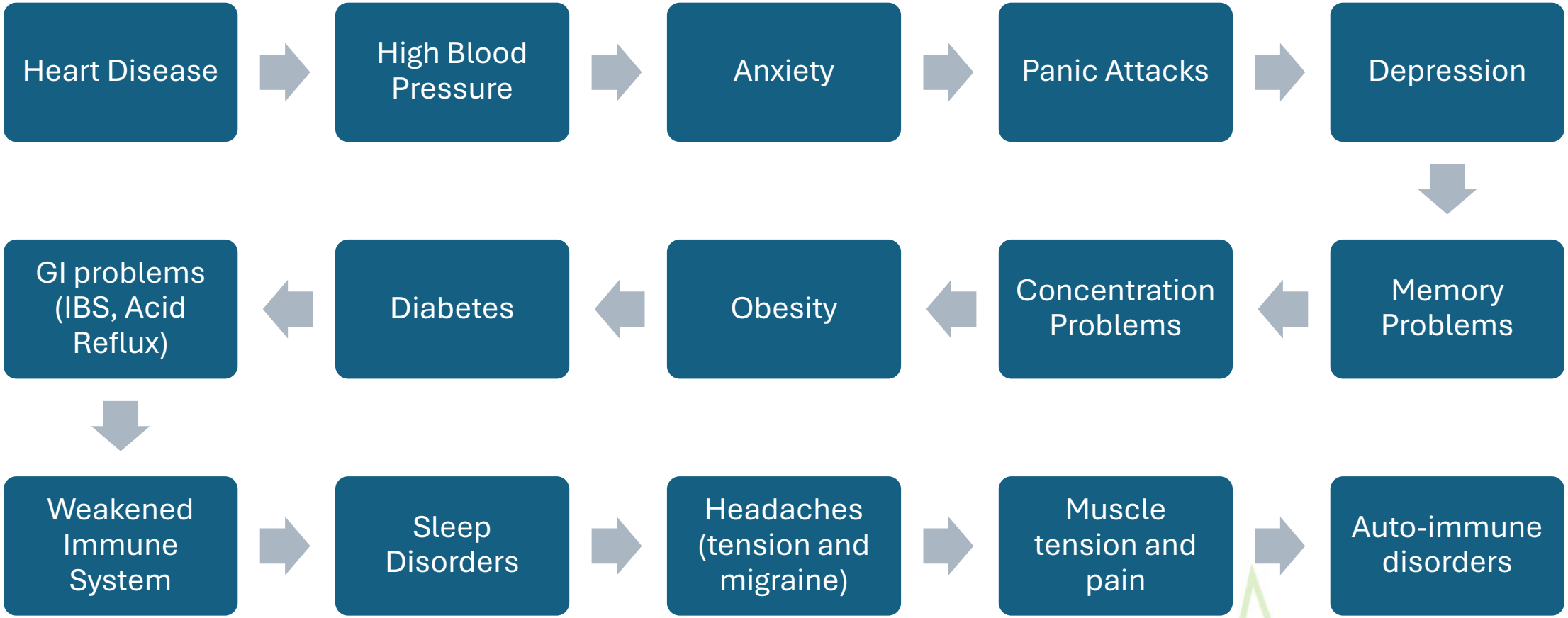
Health Issues



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Regulation Practices

Controlled breathing

- Tactical reset for your nervous system
  - Slow down your exhale, making it slightly longer than your inhale
  - 4-6 breaths is enough to engage the vagus nerve
  - Reduces heart rate

Postural adjustment

- Posture is a two-way communication channel with the nervous system
  - Drop your shoulders
  - Unclench your jaw
  - Sit back fully in your chair

Intentional task transition

- This prevents carryover from one incident to the next
  - One deep breath before the next call or transmission
  - Signals the nervous system that one demand has ended

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What can we do about it?

Get active

- Walking
- Jogging
- Dancing
- Swimming

Get Support

- Social
- Spiritual
- Family
- Peer Support
- Therapy

Relaxation

- Yoga (stretching)
- Meditation
- Breathing exercises

Sleep

- Make it a priority!

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Contact Information