Exercise for Mental Health …and Menopause



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MENTAL HEALTH & HUMAN PERFORMANCE



Introduction

- Who am I and why exercise for mental health and menopause?
- Exercise history and current challenges.
- How do we become lifelong *exercisers*?

What do you think is the biggest barrier to exercise participation?

The Psychological Impact of Fitness Culture…



Social Comparison



Body dysmorphia, eating disorders, exercise abuse



Exercise beliefs



Fitness messaging (i.e., "just do it")



Social media



"Athletic Mentality"



Ultimately, an unhealthy and disrespectful relationship with exercise.

Why Exercise for Mental Health?

Exercise is “evidence based” practice for the treatment of MDD (Heissel et al., 2023).

Research recommends exercise as the approach for managing symptoms of depression over therapy or medication (Sing et al., 2023).

Resistance training reduces symptoms of anxiety significantly (Gordon et al., 2020).

Exercise works in similar ways as Ritalin and Adderall for ADHD reducing impulsivity and increasing focus and mood (Mehren et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2011).

Researchers have identified the supportive relationship between exercise and the autonomic nervous system (Sullivan et al. 2018).



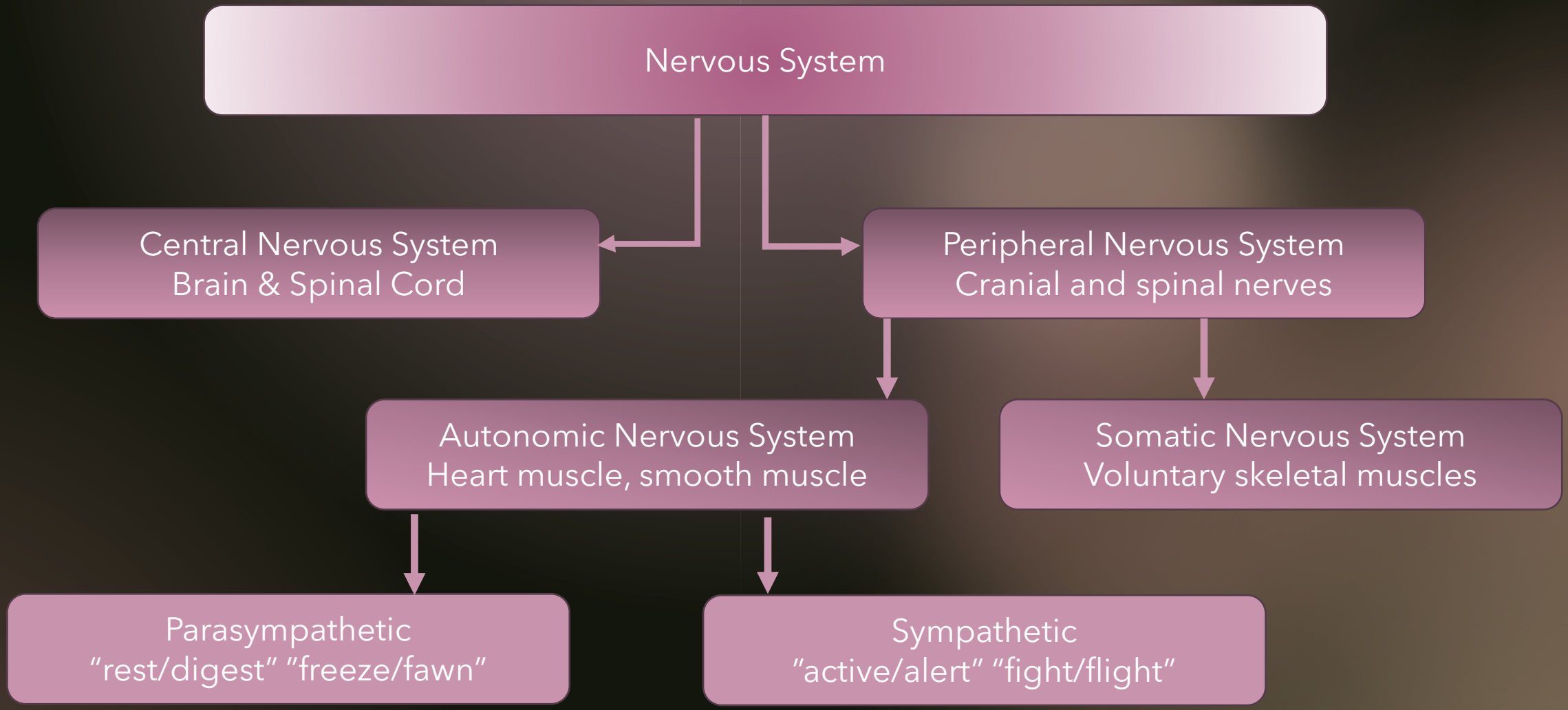
Exercise & Menopause

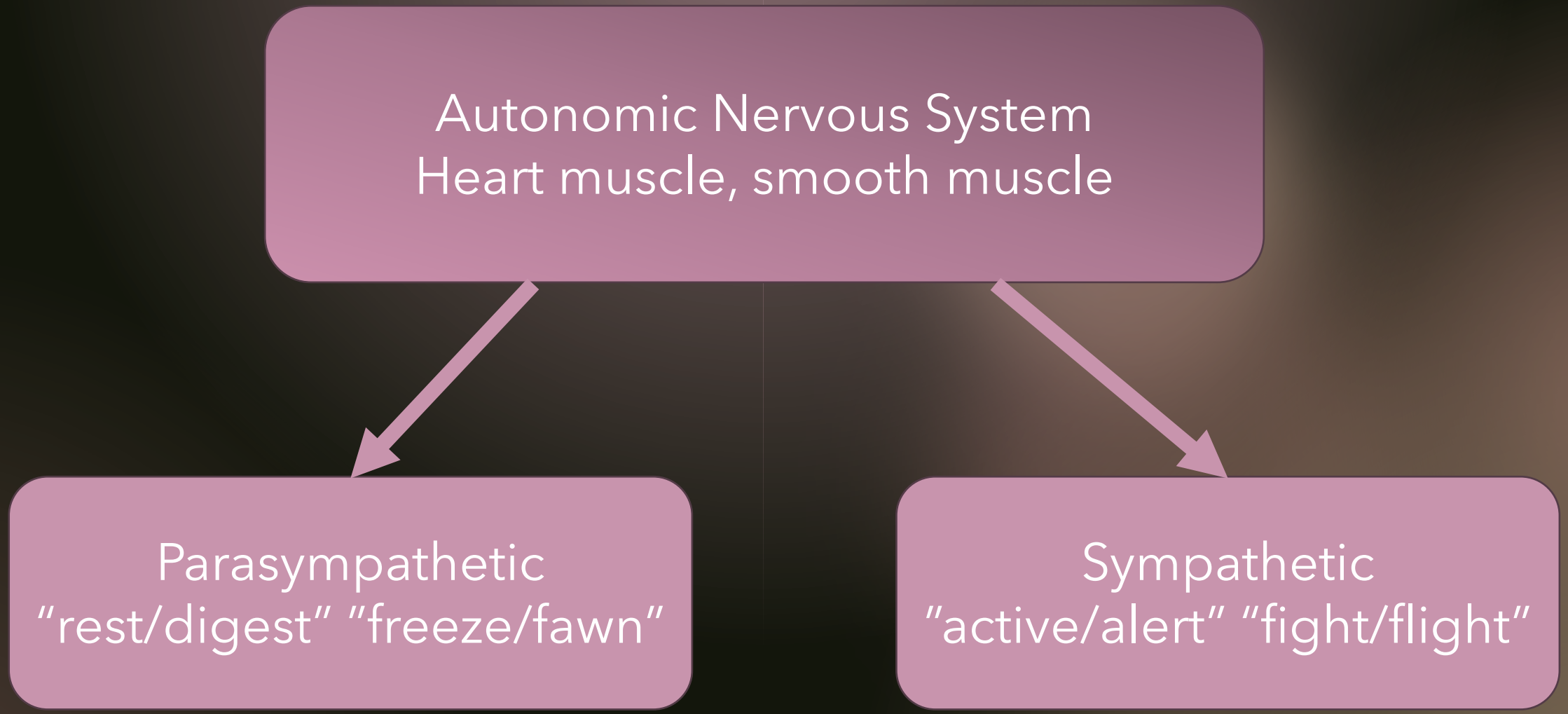
Regular aerobic exercise may offer an alternative to HRT (Shing, et al., 2024)

12-week training program (walking, stretching, strength training) increased QoL in menopausal women resulting in increases in mental health and vitality. (Dabrowska, et al., 2016)

Mind-body exercise among peri/post menopausal women increased bone mineral density, sleep quality, anxiety, depression, and fatigue. (Xu, et al., 2024)

Resistance training is an important factor in muscle / bone strengthening among women in peri/post menopause. (Svensen, et al., 2024)


Nervous System
Central Nervous System
Brain & Spinal Cord
Peripheral Nervous System
Cranial and spinal nerves
Autonomic Nervous System
Heart muscle, smooth muscle
Somatic Nervous System
Voluntary skeletal muscles
Parasympathetic
“rest/digest” “freeze/fawn”
Sympathetic
“active/alert” “fight/flight”


Autonomic Nervous System
Heart muscle, smooth muscle
Parasympathetic
“rest/digest” “freeze/fawn”
Sympathetic
“active/alert” “fight/flight”

Ventral Vagal Engagement (PNS)
(Social Engagement System)

Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS)
(Fight or Flight)

Dorsal Vagal Shutdown (PNS)
Immobilization with Fear / without Fear



Overwhelm

Anger / Rage

Worry / Concern

Emotional Reactivity

Anxiety / Panic

Hyper-Arousal (a.k.a. Anxiety)

Stress Behaviour

Lack of Focus

Physically Unsettled

Hyper Vigilant

Insomnia

Window of Emotional Tolerance

No Connectivity

Hopelessness

Isolation

Numb

Hypo-Arousal (a.k.a. Depression)

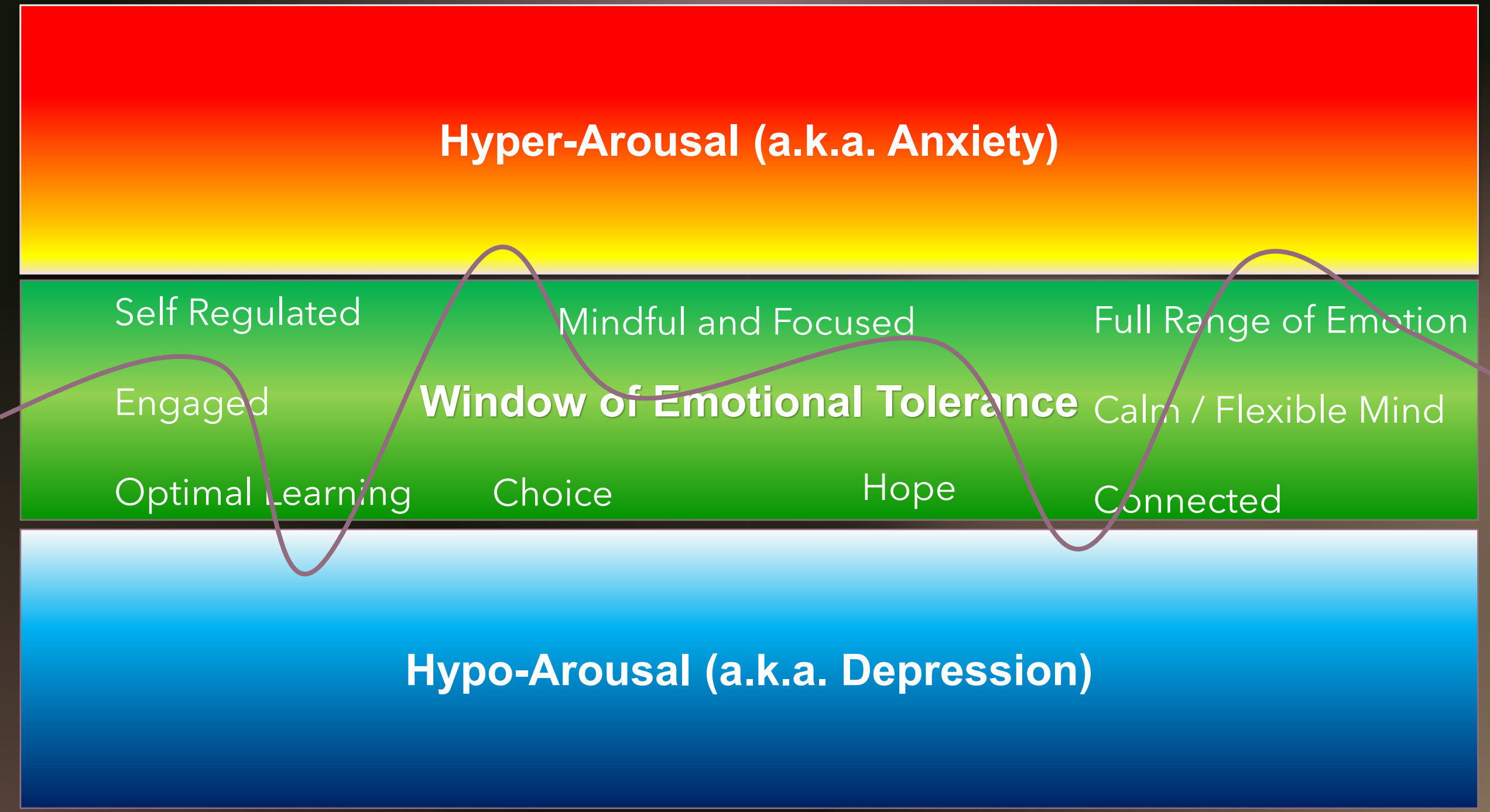
Dissociation

Fatigue

Shame

Increased Pain Threshold

Immobility


Hyper-Arousal (a.k.a. Anxiety)
Self Regulated
Mindful and Focused
Full Range of Emotion
Engaged
Window of Emotional Tolerance
Calm / Flexible Mind
Optimal Learning
Choice
Hope
Connected
Hypo-Arousal (a.k.a. Depression)

How does exercise support mental health?

Exercise can shift us into and strengthen our social engagement system (otherwise known as our ventral vagal system).

Exercise increases our heart rate variability resulting in an increase in emotional tolerance.

Exercise helps to regulate our sympathetic nervous system, maintain and lengthen our telomeres, and give us hope (in a molecular way).

Exercise increases circulation of dopamine, serotonin, endorphins, and oxytocin.





What are the components of fitness that impact mental health?

Cardiovascular Exercise…



- Increases circulation of dopamine, endorphin, serotonin, and oxytocin
- Increases focus, memory
- Decreases impulsivity
- Influences breathing
- Increases VO2Max and oxygen circulation
- Increases HRV



Heart Rate Variability (HRV)

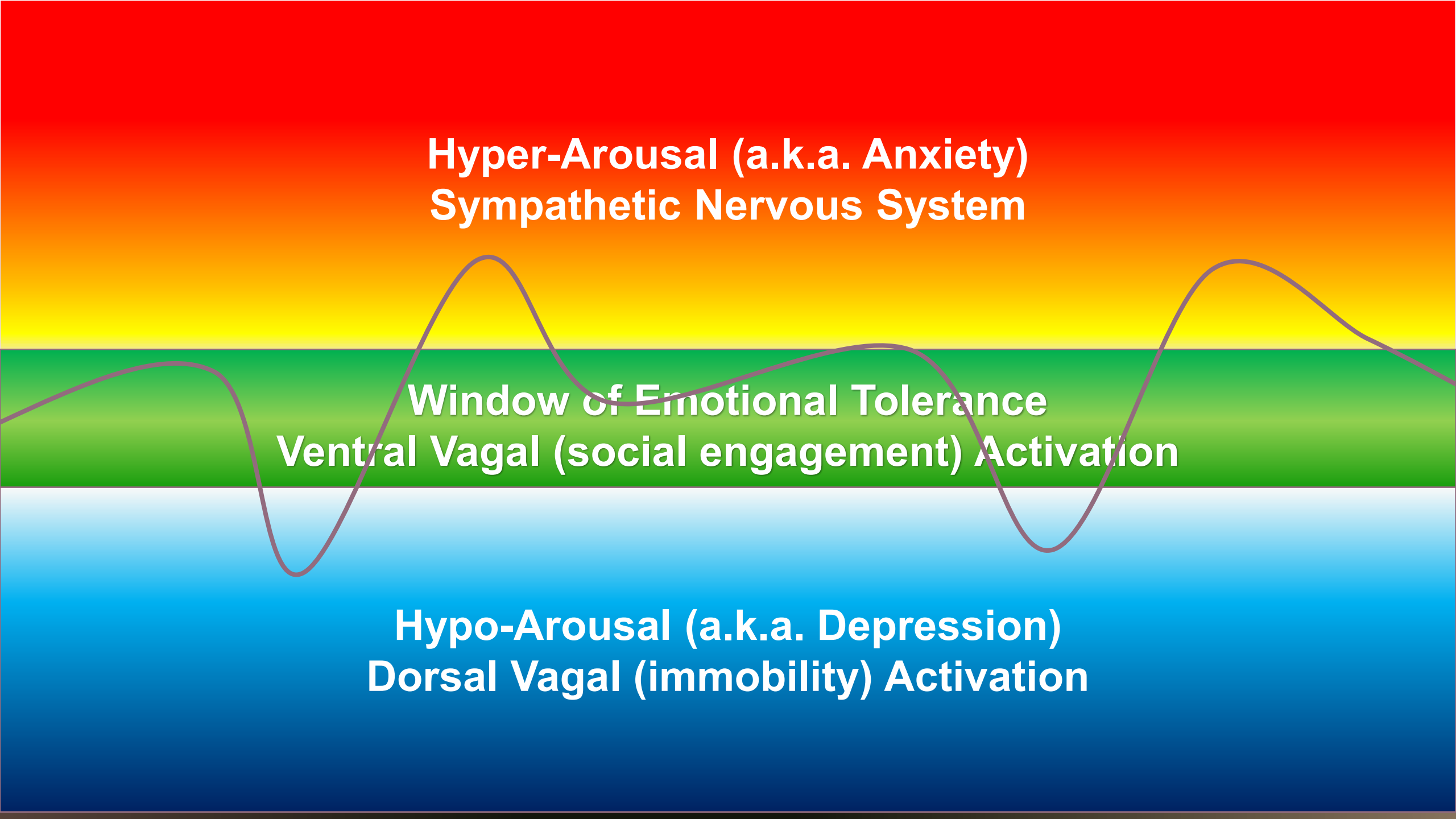
HRV is the measurement of time between heart beats.

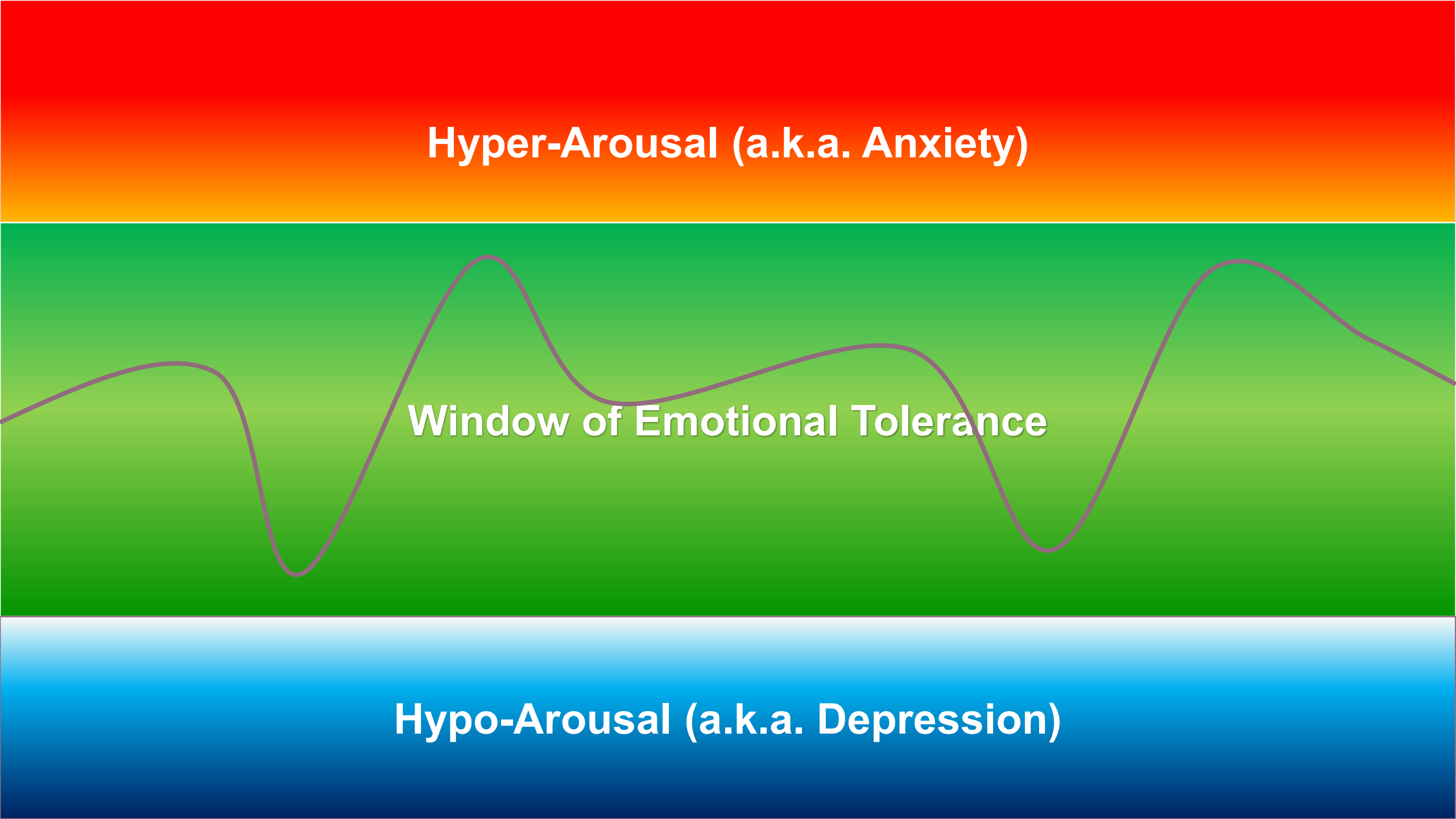
HRV varies depending on age, genetics, fitness level, and environment.

HRV is a good indicator of stress recovery.

Higher HRV relates to a lower symptomology of depression, anxiety, and greater situational awareness

Note: "Normal" HRV can be between 20 – 200 milliseconds.


Hyper-Arousal (a.k.a. Anxiety)
Sympathetic Nervous System
Window of Emotional Tolerance
Ventral Vagal (social engagement) Activation
Hypo-Arousal (a.k.a. Depression)
Dorsal Vagal (immobility) Activation


Hyper-Arousal (a.k.a. Anxiety)
Window of Emotional Tolerance
Hypo-Arousal (a.k.a. Depression)

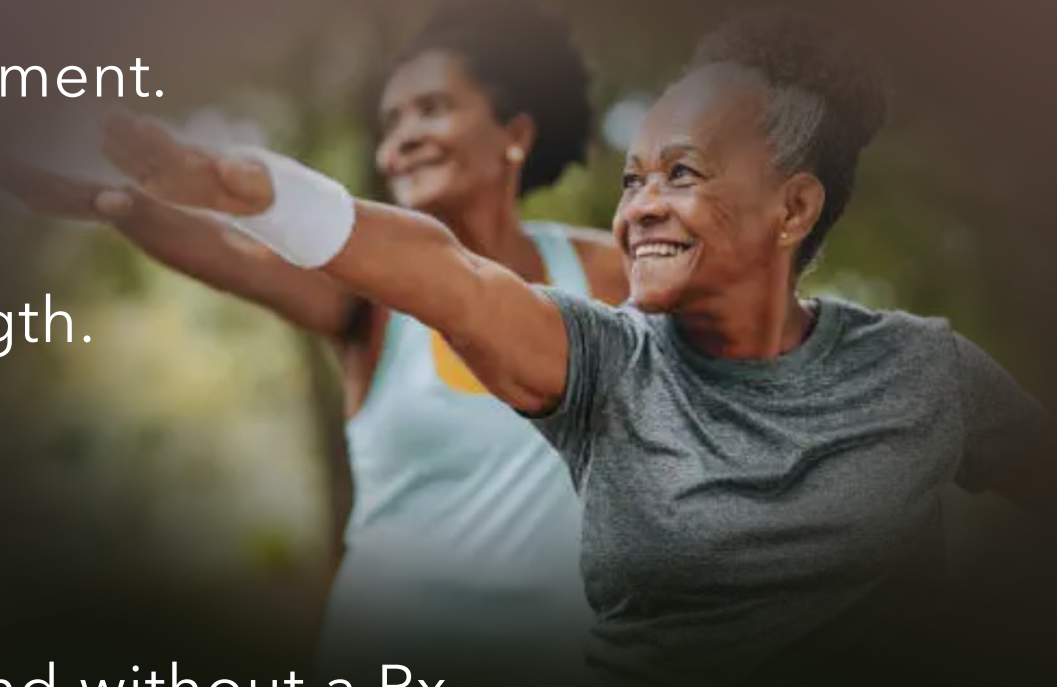
Resistance Training

- Produces the same hormone/neurotransmitter release.
- Produces “hope molecules” (myokines).
- Increases focused attention during exercise.
- Can serve as method of embodiment / somatic therapy.
- Increases self-confidence and mastery.
- Increases balance and coordination.
- Decreases risk of injury.
- Enhances body image.
- Is suggested for those with disordered eating (i.e., Anorexia)



Contemplative Activities (ContActs)

- Includes yoga, tai chi, qi gong, meditation, flexibility.
- Increases and strengthens embodiment.
- Increases memory and attention.
- Increases balance, flexibility, strength.
- Reduces stress.
- Regulates nervous system.
- Can be done anywhere, anytime and without a Rx



Gerritsen & Band (2018)

So what? Now what?

Introduction to FITT'ness



- ***Frequency***:

  How often per week?

- ***Intensity:***

  How hard will it be?

- ***Time:***

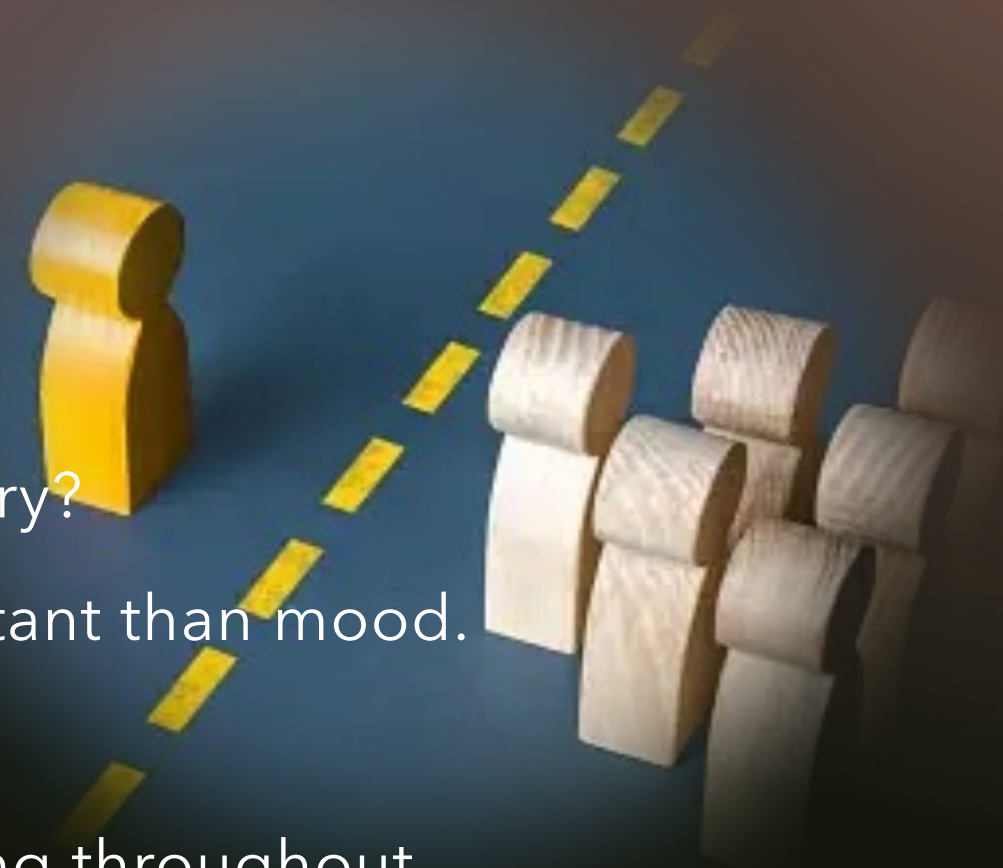
  How long will you do it for?

- ***Type:***

  What type of exercise will you do?

Behavioral Activation

- Movement over mood.
- Identify what got you “here”.
- What behaviors keep you immobile?
- How can you increase a sense of mastery?
- Planning and structure are more important than mood.
- Small changes.
- Consistent and on-going action planning throughout.



Goal Setting Shouldn't Be SMART!

Where do you want to be in 12 months?

Give yourself a year to reach this goal.

Values based.

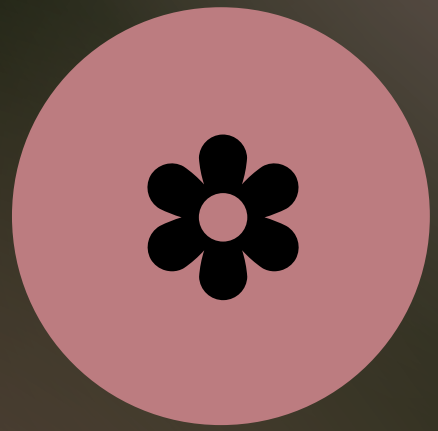
Identify your barriers and create/tweak plans to overcome them.

Underestimate your abilities.

Start a few days per week.

See lapses in behavior as a learning opportunity!

Exercise Enjoyment



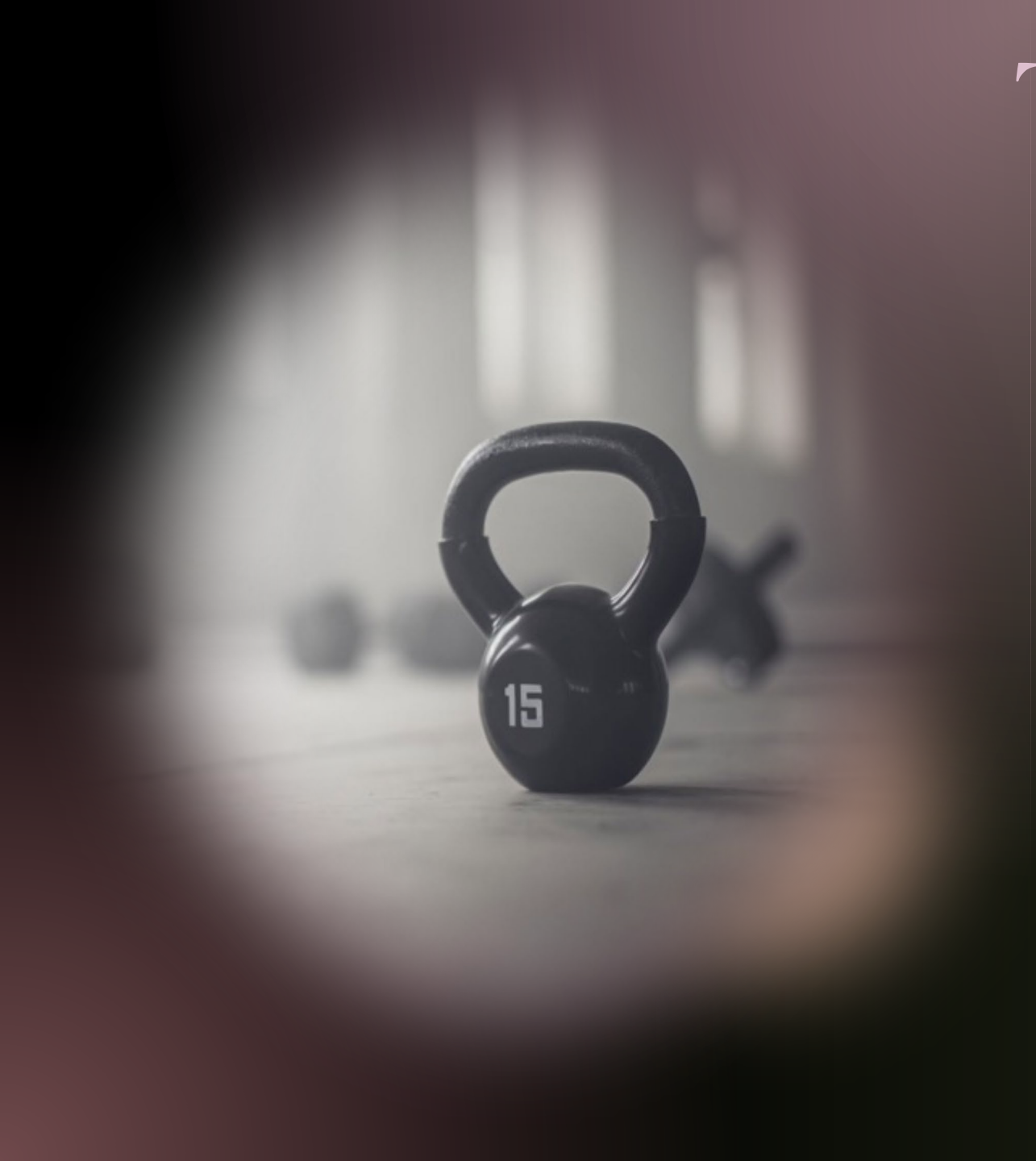
NATURE



MUSIC



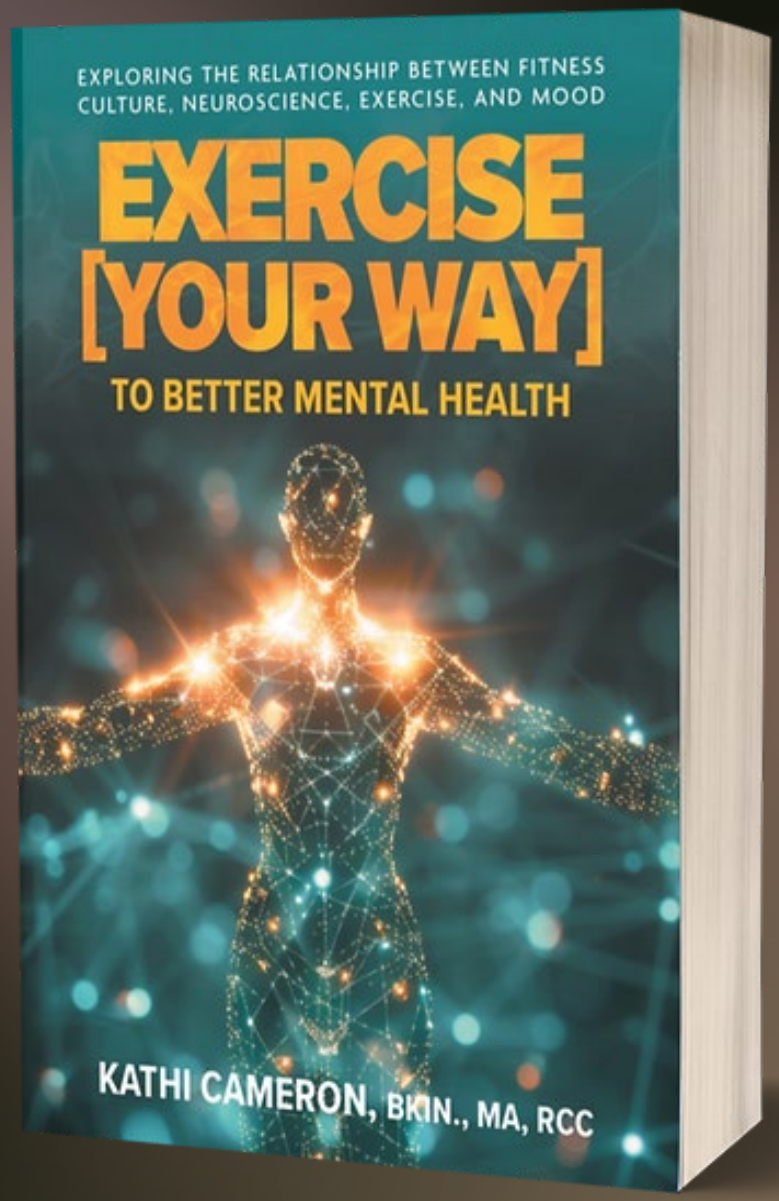
GROUPS



Take Home Points

- Exercise can be prescribed *specifically* for the diverse experiences of mental health.
- Exercise Rx for mental health is based on different expectations vs. for physical changes.
- There is no such thing as “willpower” or “choice” when it comes to exercising, eating a carrot or doing what is “good for us”.
- Go slow, do what you enjoy, do it with others, be good and kind to yourself…please.

For more information, exercise tips, strategies for adherence, and suggested exercise prescriptions (along with hilarious stories that make fun of all of it) check out my book.



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