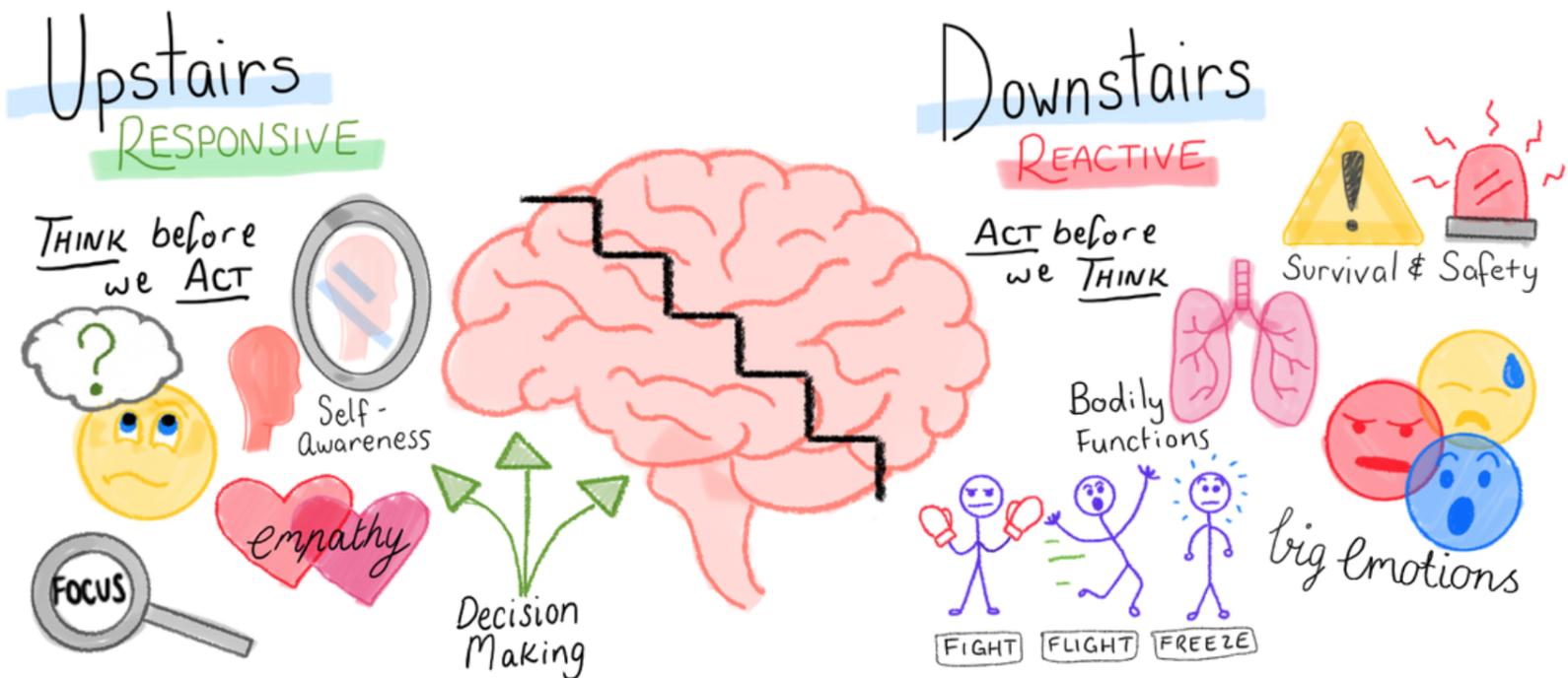


# Understanding the brain and behaviour

The analogy of the upstairs brain and the downstairs brain can be used to understand how the brain works and how this impacts our behaviour:

- **Downstairs brain** = our brainstem and amygdala, which are responsible for big emotions, including anxiety and anger. They are the oldest part of our brain and responsible for survival. This part of our brain activates the fight, flight (i.e. run away) and freeze reactions. This part of our brain is **REACTIVE**.
- **Upstairs Brain** = our pre-frontal cortex. This part of our brain is responsible for paying attention, thinking, planning, controlling our impulses and problem solving. This part of our brain does not reach maturity until our mid-20s and is in the development phase in childhood and adolescence. This part of our brain is **RECEPTIVE**.



Reference: Dan Siegel and Tina Bryson; *The Whole Brain Child*  
Illustrated by: Jessica Angus

## When we are:

- Regulated and ready to play, learn and engage with others, our upstairs and downstairs brain are communicating. The upstairs brain is in charge!
- When we experience stress, anxiety and difficult emotions, our upstairs and downstairs brain becomes less connected. It can be difficult to pay attention, learn and get along with others when we experience stress and difficult emotions.
- Reflect on what happens in your mind when you become stressed - can you think clearly? Do you make good choices? How do you communicate with others?
- Recognizing signs of stress early, allows us to manage this so we can re-connect our upstairs and downstairs brain to understand and manage our feelings, think of solutions and calm down.
- During a meltdown and in high states of stress, our upstairs and downstairs brain are not connected. We may have difficulty thinking logically and switch into a fight, flight or freeze response. Our downstairs brain "hijacks" our upstairs, thinking brain. We may do or say things that are irrational and we may feel out of control.

## So remember:

- When your child is operating in their downstairs brain: KEEP CALM AND CONNECT! By lending them your calm, you help them to down-regulate and move them from a **REACTIVE** to a **RECEPTIVE** state.
- When you are operating in your downstairs brain: TAKE A BREAK, and allow yourself the space to calm down, so you can think clearly and respond rather than react.
- Be self-compassionate! We all make mistakes and experience reactive moments. Offer your child a repair, strengthening your connection and teaching them about healthy relationships.

*"BETWEEN STIMULUS AND RESPONSE THERE IS A SPACE. IN THAT SPACE IS OUR POWER TO CHOOSE OUR RESPONSE. IN OUR RESPONSE LIES OUR GROWTH AND OUR FREEDOM." - VIKTOR FRANKL*