

# **MENTALIZING AND PARENTAL REFLECTIVE FUNCTIONING**

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# Agenda

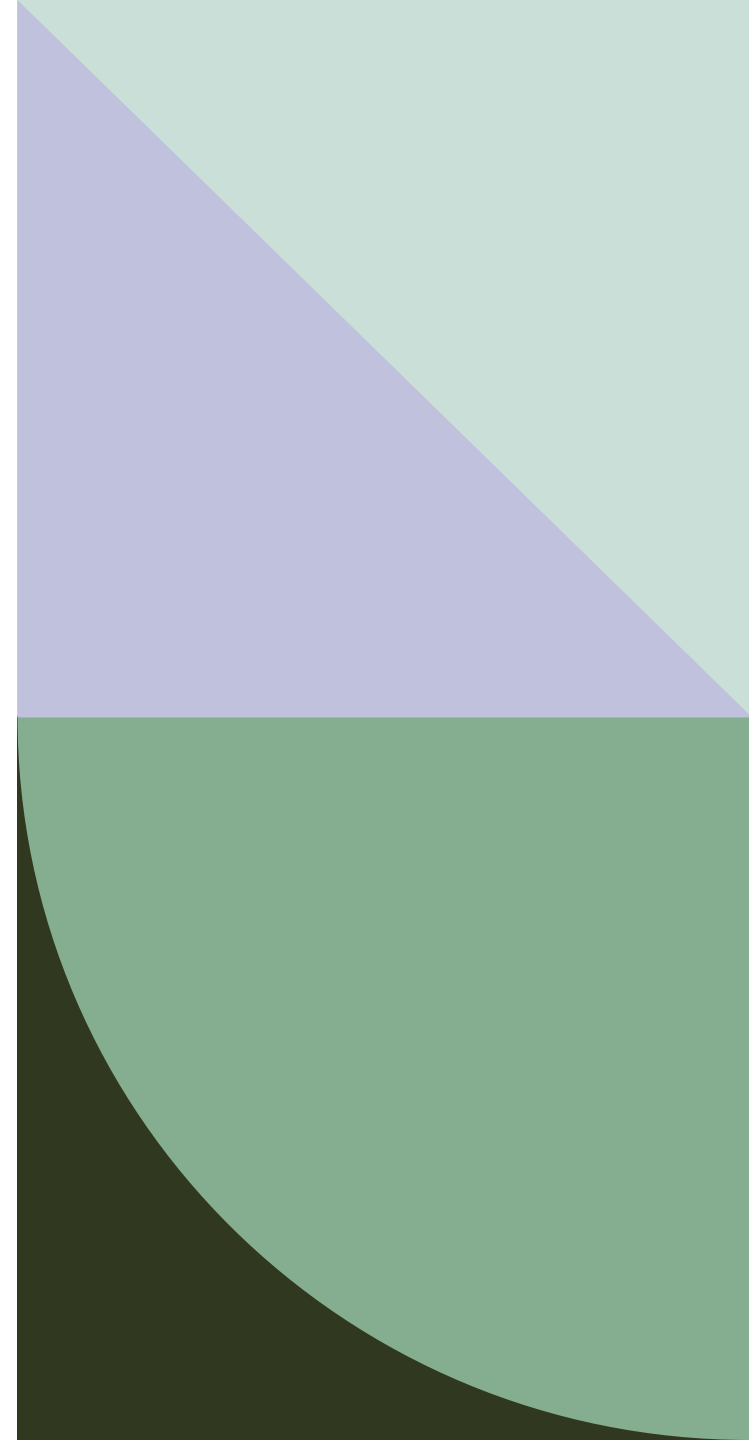
1. Define mentalizing and parental reflective functioning
2. Define non-mentalizing in language and behavior
3. Describe their role in the development of a secure attachment and other positive outcomes for children and adolescents
4. Describe their role in the development of an insecure attachment and other negative outcomes for children and adolescents
5. How is this relevant for you?

# What is Mentalizing?

**Mentalizing** is the ability to be curious about another's experience and to try to imagine what the other person is thinking and feeling and why. It is the foundation of our ability to regulate emotions and impulses, and to understand our minds and others. It is at the heart of emotional intelligence and the key to interpersonal relationships.

The capacity to mentalize arises out of the experience of EPISTEMIC TRUST - the relationship with the adult figure provides a relational context in which one has the experience of being accurately mentalized

Easily overwhelmed by powerful stress/arousal/attachment



## Mentalization Model Activity

1. Take a few minutes to identify a close relationship you have. What are your feelings about that relationship? What are your needs from that relationship? What are the goals or purpose of the relationship? What are some reasons you maintain the relationship? What are a few specific thoughts you have about that relationship?
2. Now, do the same thing from the other person's perspective, imagining the answers the other person would provide.
3. For group discussion, reflect on the differences between the perspectives (self and other) and what it was like to imagine the other person's emotions, needs, goals, reasons, and thoughts.



# Parental Reflective Functioning

- The parent's capacity to envision or imagine their child's as well as their own mental states – specifically the ability to describe their awareness of the child's thoughts and feelings via language.
- It is the parent's capacity to respond in a curious, playful, open, and sensitive way to the child - all fundamental to mentalizing - that make the child feel loved, valued, safe, and known.
- When a parent is reflective, they can recognize that a child has thoughts and feelings, and -- indeed - a mind of their own.
- The parent can understand that they cannot always know what is in the child's mind, for another person's experience is necessarily opaque and can be disguised.
- The parent understands that mental experience is greatly affected by development.
- The parent can understand how the thoughts and feelings of one person affect those of another, in either a positive or negative way.
- Finally, the parent is able to see the child in an essentially kind and benevolent way (even when there are conflicts)



# Mentalization in behavior

*Mentalization in behavior (MIB)* is to some extent described in the literature on parental sensitivity, as well as the much newer (and helpful) literature on “parental embodied mentalizing”

***Flexibility and playfulness*** are two highly interrelated capacities that are evident in both PRF and MIB.

A parent who is good at mentalizing is able to be behaviorally flexible, and thus shift their behavior in relation to the child’s cues.

Both playfulness, which is communicated nonverbally in posture, vocal tone, facial expressions, as well as humor, are indications of flexibility.

Both humor and playfulness can diminish fear and threat and invite “joint attention” in moments of dysregulation.

Thus, for example, a child who witnessed his parents arguing and came to his mother and said, “Are you and Dad going to split up?” To which she replied, with humor in her voice “No... (Pregnant pause.) But I might kill him!”, at which point both begin to laugh. By making light of her anger, she helped neutralize both the boy’s fear and her anger.

***A secure attachment means to feel safe, loved and supported AND to be heard, seen, and known***

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Associated with a range of parental traits including having had a secure attachment themselves, and lower levels of trauma exposure

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Associated with a range of positive child outcomes including fewer behavioral problems, fewer mental health problems, child reflective functioning



# Non-mentalizing

**Non-mentalizing refers to two types of impaired mentalizing: a *failure* of mentalization, and prementalizing.**

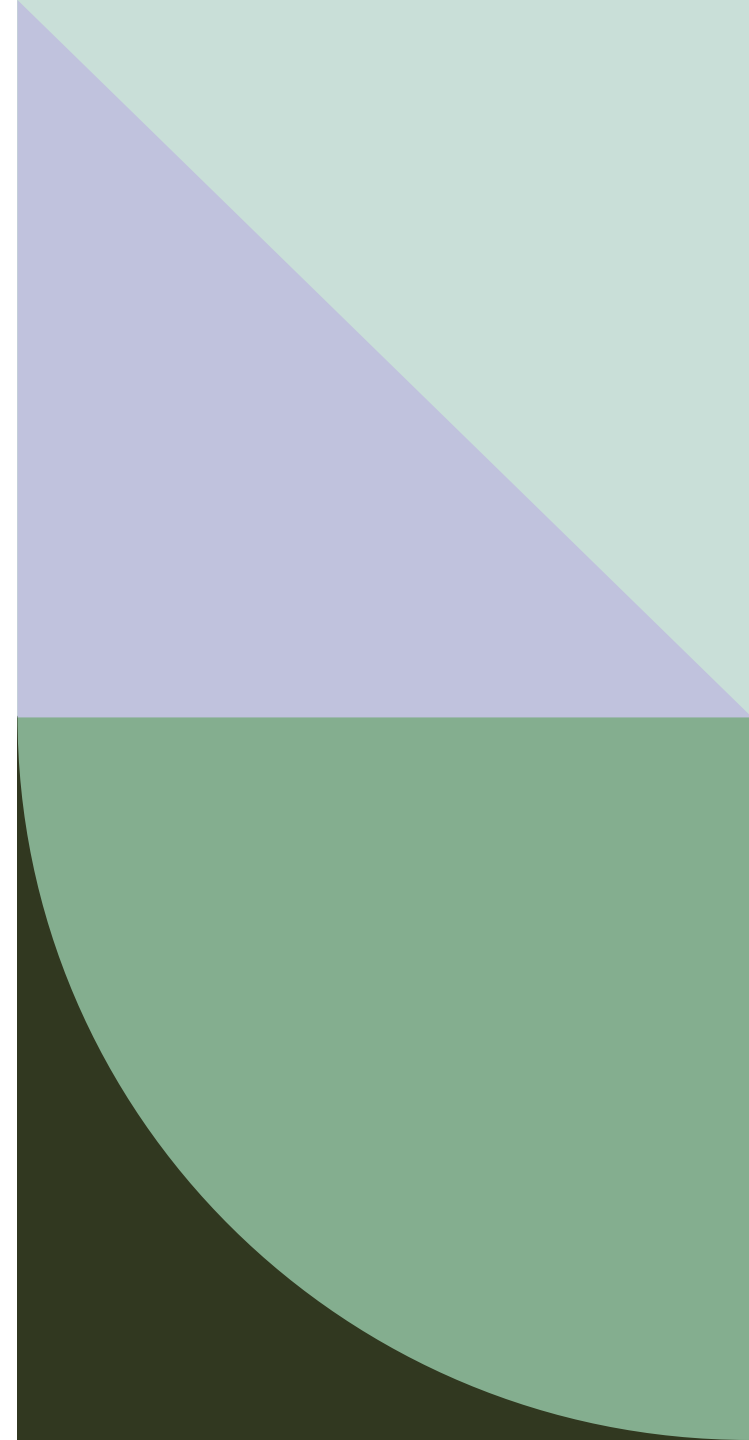
**Some parents can mentalize but fail to do so when they are very upset or distressed.**

- A typical example is a parent who screams at a child who has just run into the street and been narrowly missed by a car. That parent's ability to soothe and comfort the child's distress is momentarily overridden by her own terror/anger, etc.

**Other parents are unable to mentalize, no matter the circumstance, and rely instead on primitive and concrete ways of representing or responding to the child's needs and behavior.**

- Here, we tend to think of mentalizing as absent (hence prementalizing), either because such skills were never developed or because parental psychopathology (or, potentially, substance use, or physical pain) makes seeing the other with any clarity impossible.

Thus, the neutral term “non-mentalizing” actually refers either to failed mentalizing or prementalizing. The latter would likely refer to more chronic patterns than acute reactions to stressful situations.



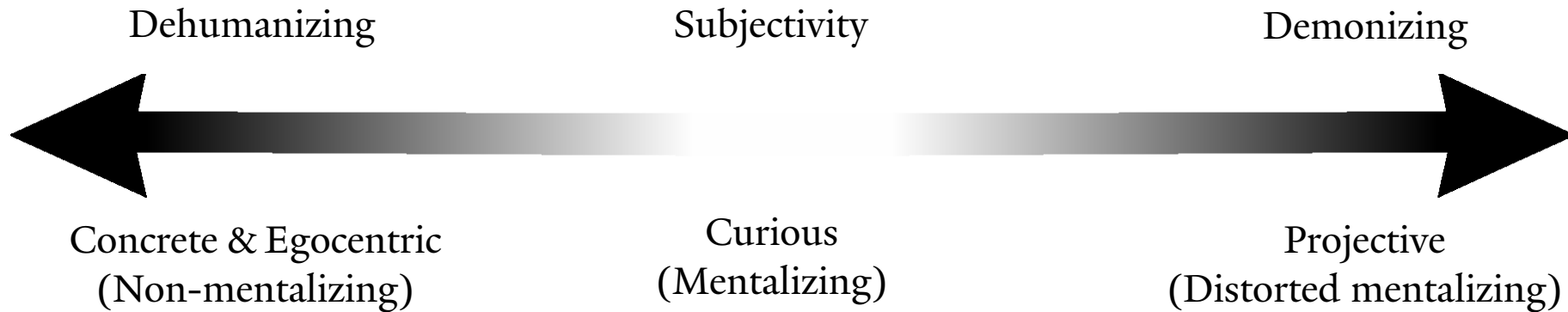


# Non-Mentalizing in language and behavior

*The parent's inability to reflect* is manifest in what might generally be described as a lack of awareness of the child's mind; thus, the parent takes behavior at face value, denies the child's feelings and perceptions, belittles the child's mind by shaming or humiliation, or distorts the child's subjective experience. A non-reflective parent would also represent the child in primarily negative, or aggressive ways: "he's a loser" "I can't stand to be with her."

*Non-mentalizing in behavior (NMIB)* refers to the parent acting in ways that are decidedly in opposition to or overriding of the child's cues. They are also hostile; in that they appear to frighten or distress the child (which the child may express by becoming aggressive or defensive). The parent in such instances can be physically threatening or rejecting, intrusive, or withdrawn from the child.

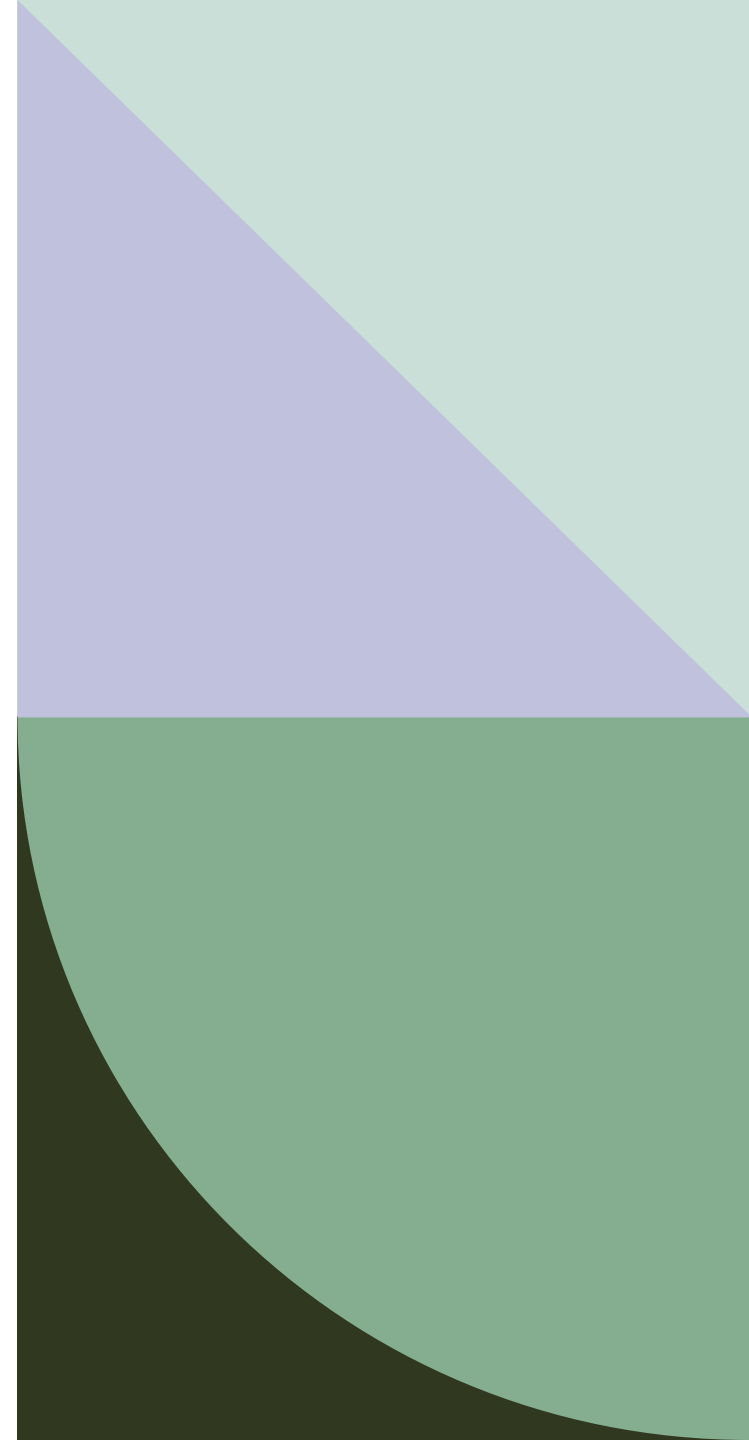
# Mentalizing Breakdowns



Difficulty seeing and hearing the child, particularly in moments of threat and stress

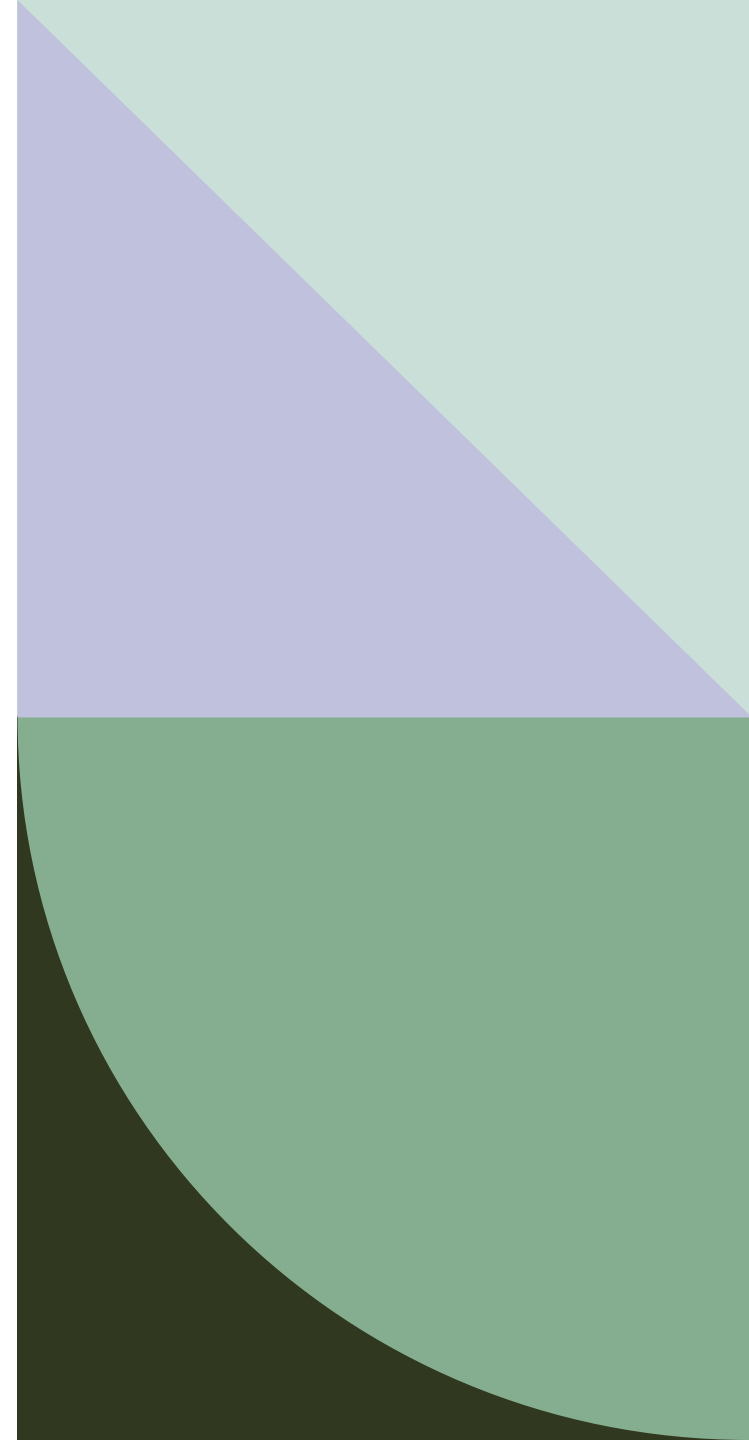
# What are non-mentalizing modes?

- Certainty Mode - in which a person thinks that just because they are thinking something, it is automatically true. When an adult is convinced, they know the intentions behind a child's behavior without asking.
- Fix-It Mode - physical action is seen as the only way to modify someone else's mental state. When an adult tries to "problem solve" a child's feelings.
- Pretend Mode - the mental world is decoupled from external reality. When an adult pretends nothing has happened despite everyone being aware an obvious problem.



# Mentalizing and Distress

- Mentalizing is the most important in moments of negative affect or relational difficulty
- MOST DIFFICULT WHEN UNDER STRESS OR THREAT
- Threat activates danger/fear regions of the brain
- Deactivation of the prefrontal cortex
- Parent is in survival mode – often childhood trauma is triggered
- Can't see the child
- Cannot mentalize



# What impedes Parental Mentalizing?

- Current relational trauma (interpersonal violence)
- Child's needs and emotions become a threat/ child is a trigger or retraumatizing
- Highly correlated with childhood history of attachment trauma and disrupted relationships
- Highly correlated with parental mental health difficulties
- Highly correlated with stress = socioeconomic risk, systemic racism/oppression

# How to assess mentalization/parental reflective functioning

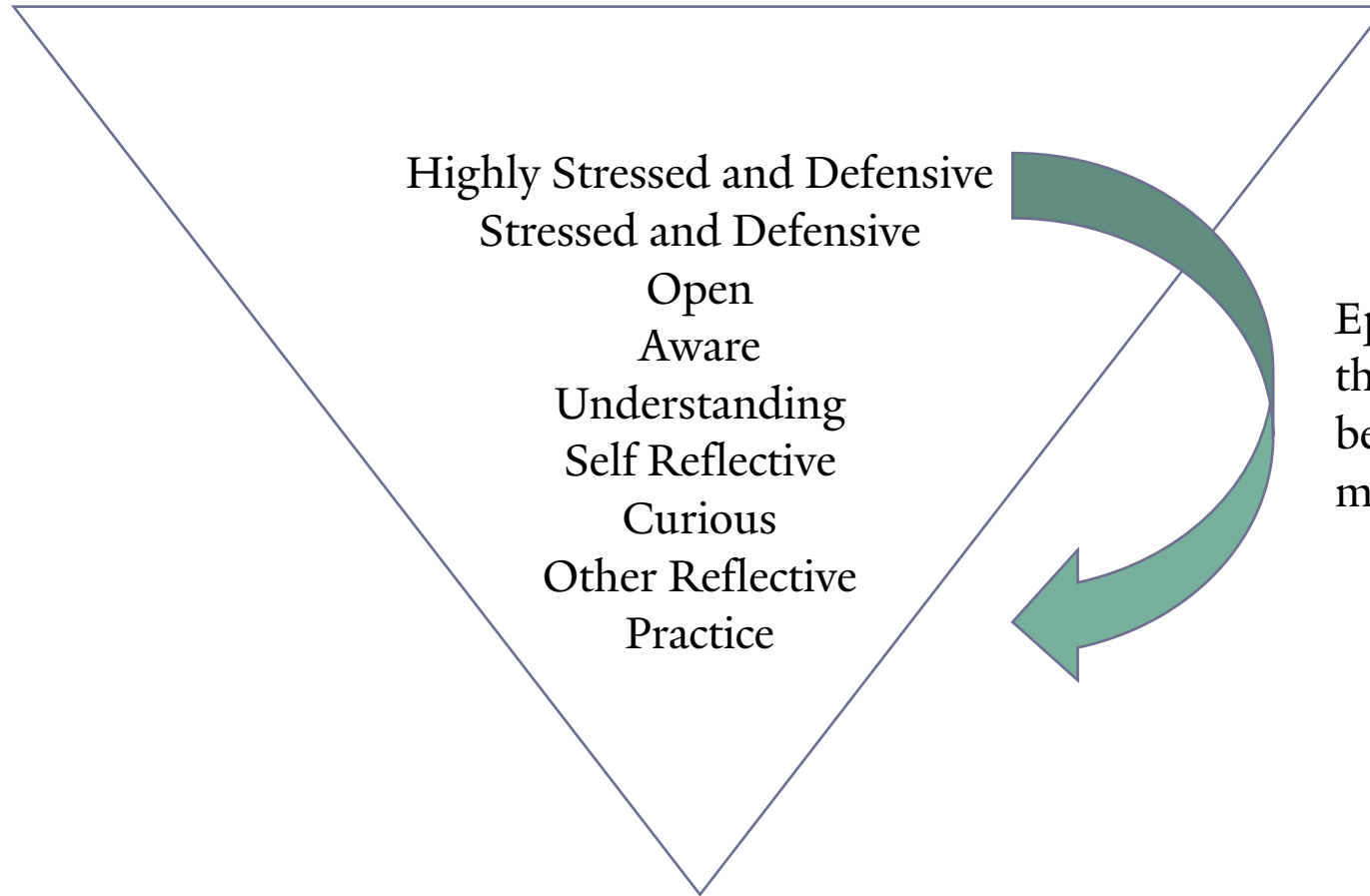
1. Adult Attachment Interview – George, C., Kaplan N., & Main, M. (1985)
2. Parent Development Interview Revised– Slade, A., Abser, J., Berger, B., Bresgi, I., & Kaplan, M. (2016)
3. Parent Reflective Functioning Questionnaire – Luyten, P., Mayes, L., Nijssens, L., & Fonagy, P. (2017)
4. Family Cycle – Stob, V., Slade, A., Brotnow, L., Adnopo, & J., Woolston, J. (2019)
5. Short Parent Observation Tool – Mentalization (Spot-Me) Stob, V., Brotnow, L., Woolston, J., & Slade, A., (Under Review)

# For Traumatized Children and Adults

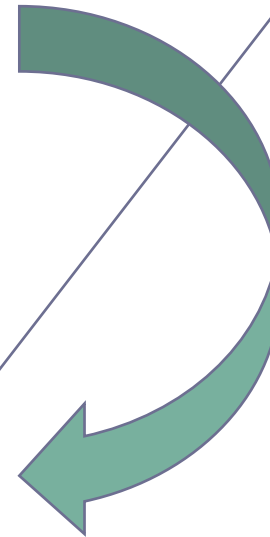
- World is punitive, judgmental, humiliating and blaming
- Control is external, not internalized
- People are unpredictable and untrustworthy
- Defend themselves above all else
- Believe that admitting mistakes is worse than telling truth



# Stages of Change



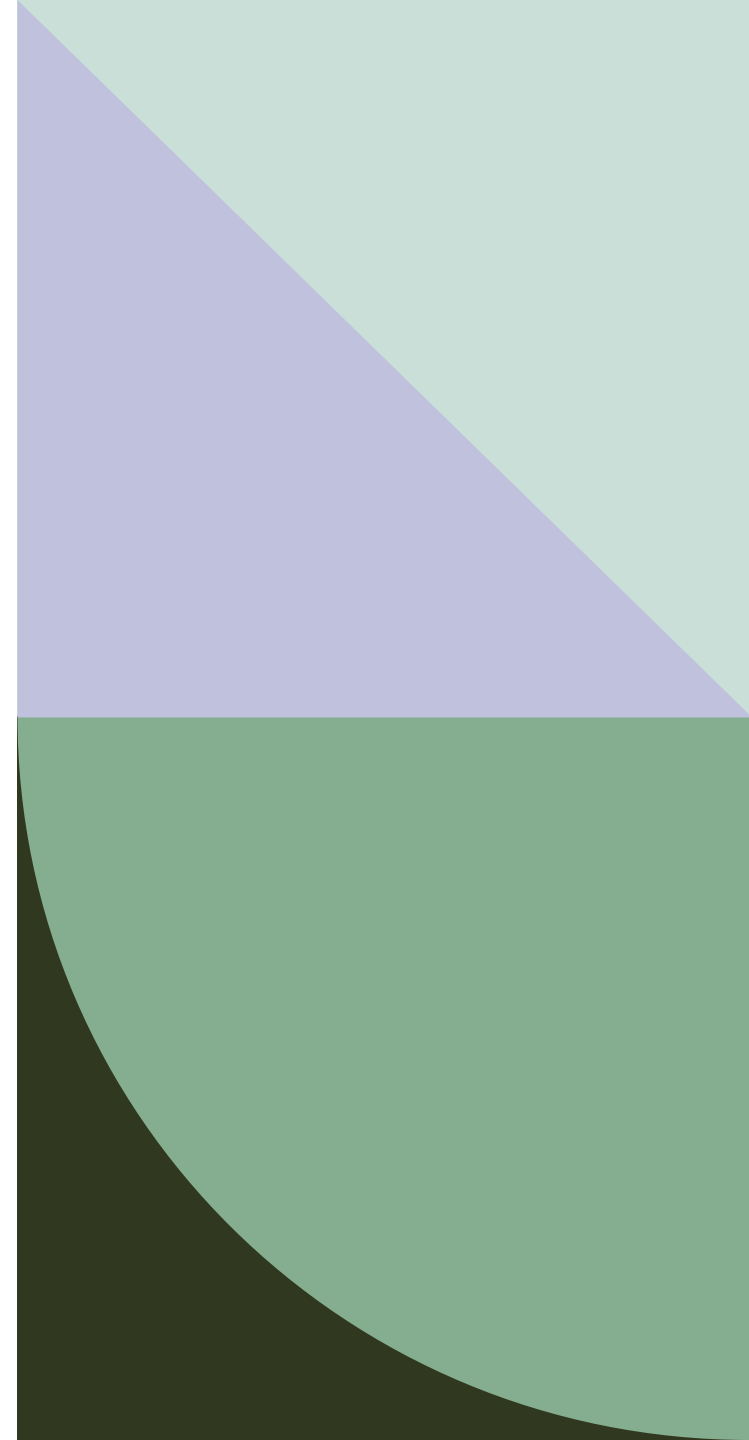
Epistemic trust and  
the experience of  
being accurately  
mentalized





# How to adopt a mentalizing stance

- Wait, watch, and wonder
- Slow down, observe, and be curious
- Adopt a wondering, not assumptive stance (help me understand, how do you see it?)
- Resist doing, unless it is necessary





# THE END

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Stob, V., Slade, A., Adnopoz, J., & Woolston, J. (2020). The family cycle: Breaking the intergenerational transmission of trauma through mentalizing. *Journal of Infant, Child, and Adolescent Psychotherapy*, 19(3), 255-270.

Stob, V., Slade, A., Brotnow, L., Adnopoz, J. & Woolston, J.A. (2019). The Family Cycle: An Activity to Enhance Parents' Mentalization in Children's Mental Health Treatment. *Journal of Infant, Child & Adolescent Psychotherapy*, 18(2), 103-119.