

Upstairs / Downstairs Brain

Think of your brain in two parts; the **upstairs brain** and the **downstairs brain**. The **upstairs brain (cortex)** is the 'smart part' - thinking, planning, learning, decision-making, regulation and reflection.

The **downstairs brain (limbic system and brain stem)** the emotional part - feelings, and our **alarm system** which is meant to keep us safe from danger (like sabre-toothed tigers) by getting us ready to fight or run away.

Most of the time the upstairs and downstairs parts work well together with our 'smart part' keeping a lid on emotional stuff. Sometimes when we experience strong emotions or the alarm system goes off... we can flip our lids. The downstairs brain takes over and thinking / logic go and it's 'react, react, react'.

Sometimes the downstairs brain sets off a **false alarm**. No real danger (like STTs) but that makes us feel under attack; like being asked to tidy your room, speak in public or being told off by a teacher!

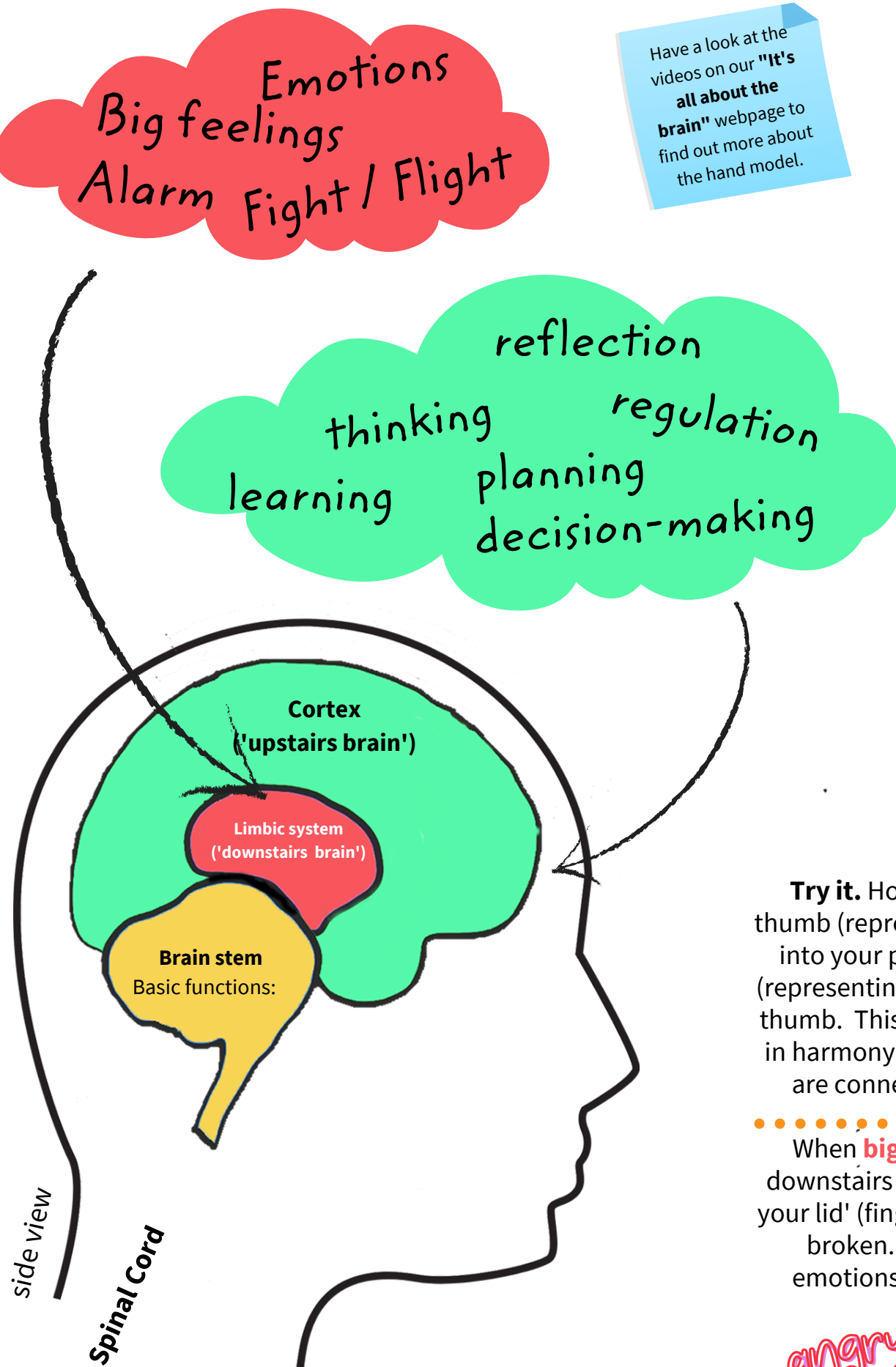
Name it to tame it

Everyone flips their lids. We can learn to "**name it to tame it**" - understand what happens and develop ways to help the 'upstairs brain' to get back in control*.

Some people have had a tough time growing up or have had really stressful experiences in their lives (sometimes called 'trauma'). This means that their alarm system can get 'stuck' in the 'on' position and they can 'flip their lid' more quickly. It's not their 'fault' - their experiences have made them more alert and looking for danger. For those people it is often really helpful if they practice '**naming it and taming it**' with another person like a trusted adult. This is called **co-regulation**.

Have a look at the videos on our "It's all about the brain" webpage to find out more about the hand model.

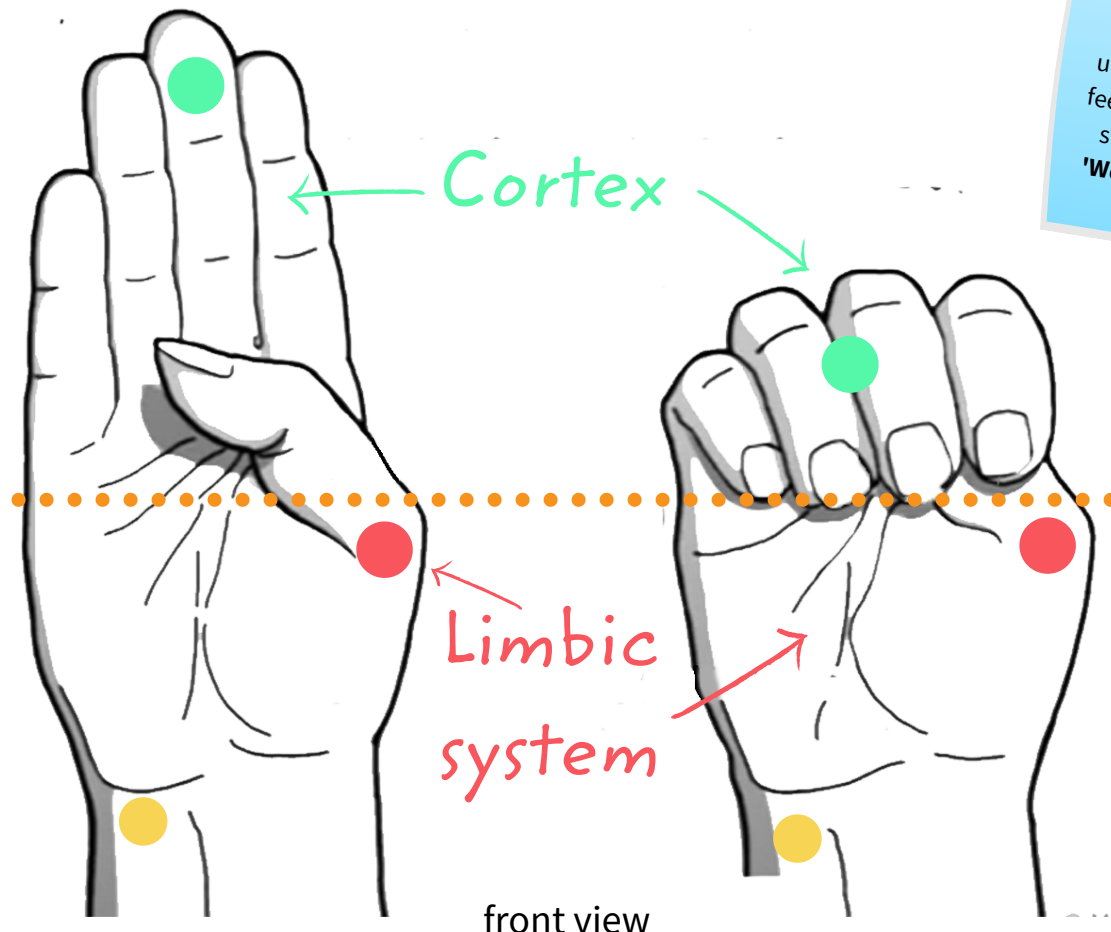
*You can find out about understanding our feelings and coping strategies in the 'Wellbeing Action Plan'.



Try it. Hold up your hand. Tuck your thumb (representing the downstairs brain) into your palm. Now wrap your fingers (representing the upstairs brain) over your thumb. This is a model of a brain working in harmony. The upstairs and downstairs are connected and communicating.

When **big emotions** come along the downstairs brain takes over and you 'flip your lid' (fingers up) and the connection is broken. It can be hard to 'control' emotions and make good decisions.

angry
jealous
scared
sad
anxious



Hand Model of the Brain - Why we "flip our lid"