

ISLAND FITNESS CONFERENCE 2026 · KEYNOTE

The Power of Paying Attention

Coaching the room, not just the workout

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Who's in the room?

Teach group fitness	Work one-on-one	Physio, kin, rehab
Teach older adults	Teach spin	Yoga or Pilates
First time here	Ten years. Twenty.	Already worked out today

MY STORY

A bus in Thailand.

I trusted my instinct.

How do we coach people beyond the physical?

What is happening in this person's nervous system right now, and what do they need from me to take the next step?

A STORY

A first responder.

Getting people through the door.
That's what I do.



THE QUESTION YOUR NERVOUS SYSTEM ASKS, ALL DAY

Am I safe?

What could not feeling safe look like in your class?

Fight

Flight

Freeze

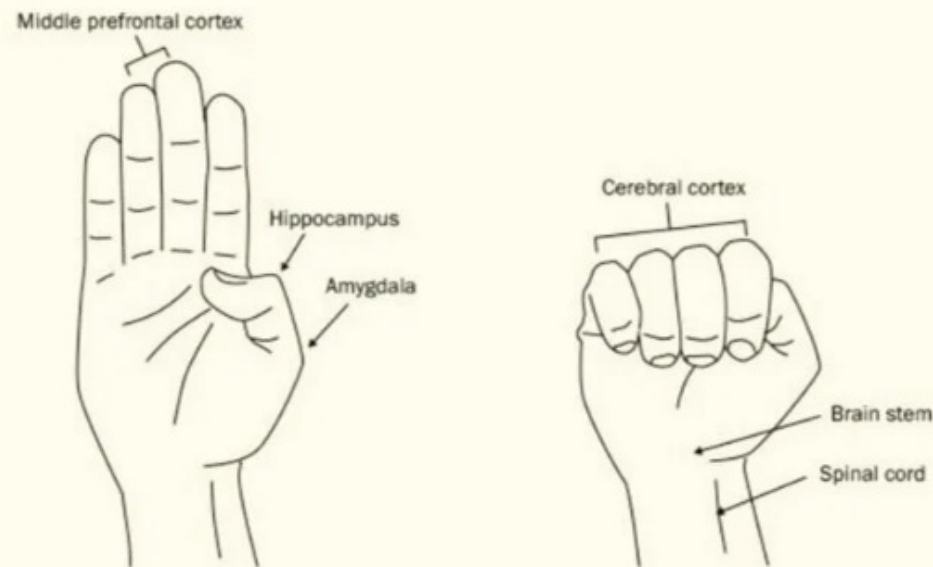
Fawn

It's a nervous system asking: am I safe?

Hold your hand up.

Let's imagine the brain.

Use your hands to imagine your brain



Hand model courtesy of Dan Siegel

Palm. Thumb. Fingers.

Palm

Survival. Breathing, heart rate. Fight, flight, freeze.

Brainstem

Thumb across

The alarm. Fear lives here.

Limbic system

Fingers over

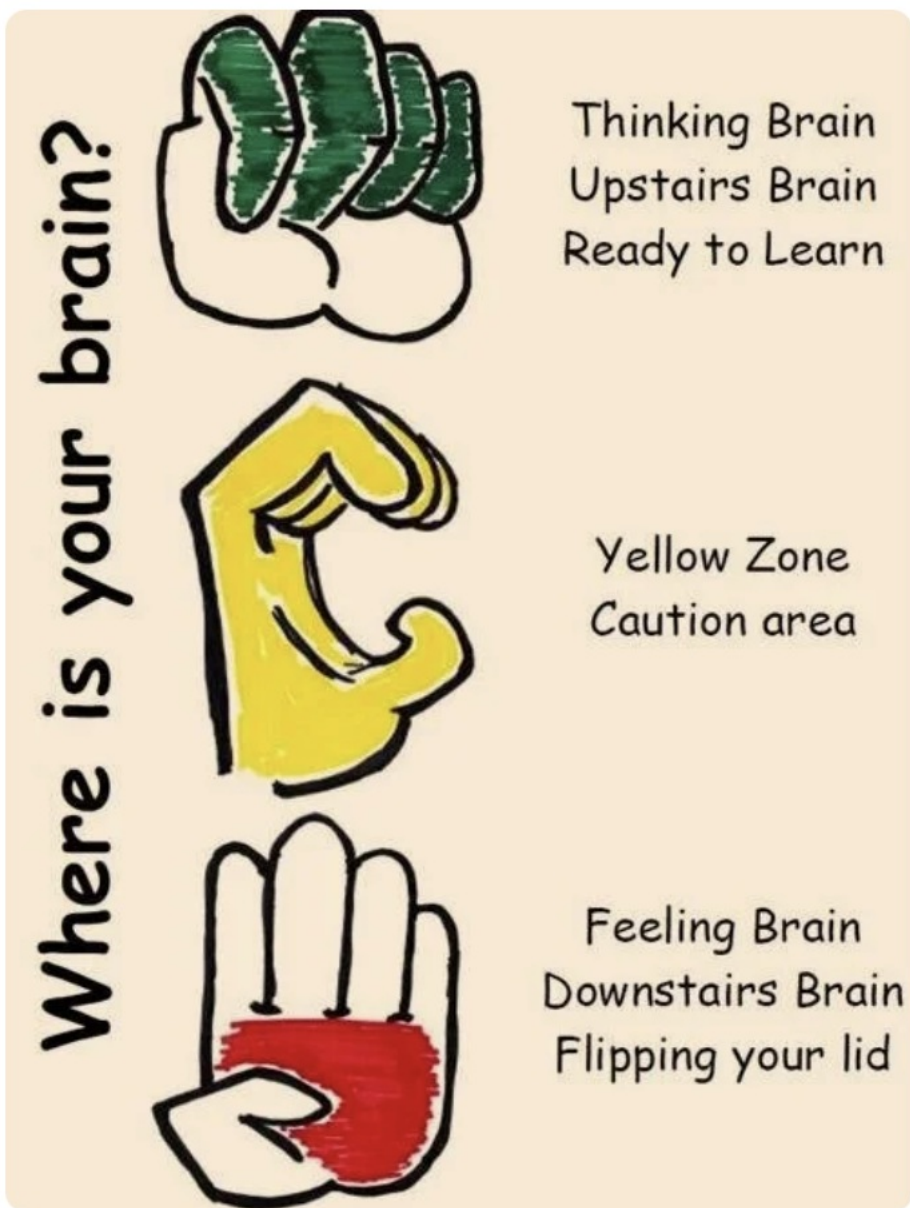
Thinking. Connecting. Learning.

Cortex. Fingertips: prefrontal cortex

Flipping your lid.

The thinking brain loses contact.

Language, learning and empathy go offline. Nothing gets through until the fingers come back down.



Green. Fist. Ready to learn.

Yellow. Half open. Caution.

Red. Flipping your lid. The feeling brain is in charge.

Can you notice it in the room?

**Where is your room right now?
Where is each person in it?**

Pay attention. Then coach for that.

Neurocentric coaching: not just the muscles, the nervous system running them.

What's it like when the nervous system is unregulated?

Regulated

Lid down

Form holds.

They hear you.

They keep going.

Unregulated

Lid flipped

Form breaks down.

They can't hear you very well.

They want to quit, they freeze, or they push past what's safe.

Same person. Same workout. Different brain. Different response.

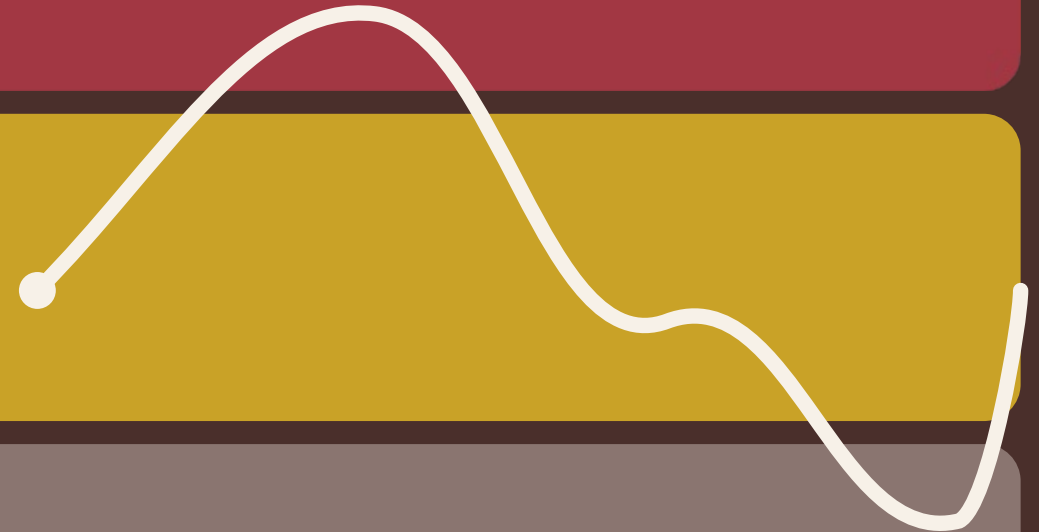
People learn when the nervous system is calm and the brain is connected.

Hyperarousal

Window of tolerance

Learning happens here.

Hypoarousal



Keep people in the window, and stretch its edges.

We change each other's chemistry.



Cortisol

Stress goes down



Oxytocin

Trust goes up



**Dopamine,
serotonin**

Attention and pleasure go up

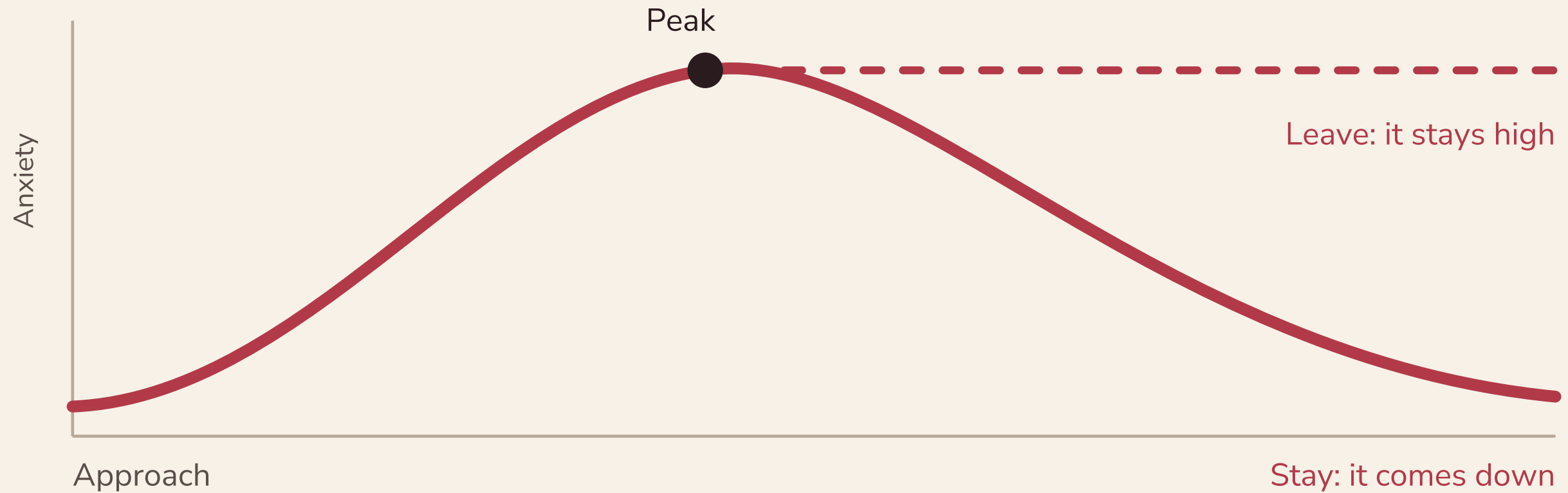
It goes both ways. Your state is contagious, and the vagus nerve knows when it's fake.

CHECK IN ON YOURSELF FIRST

What am I feeling?
What am I thinking?
What am I needing?

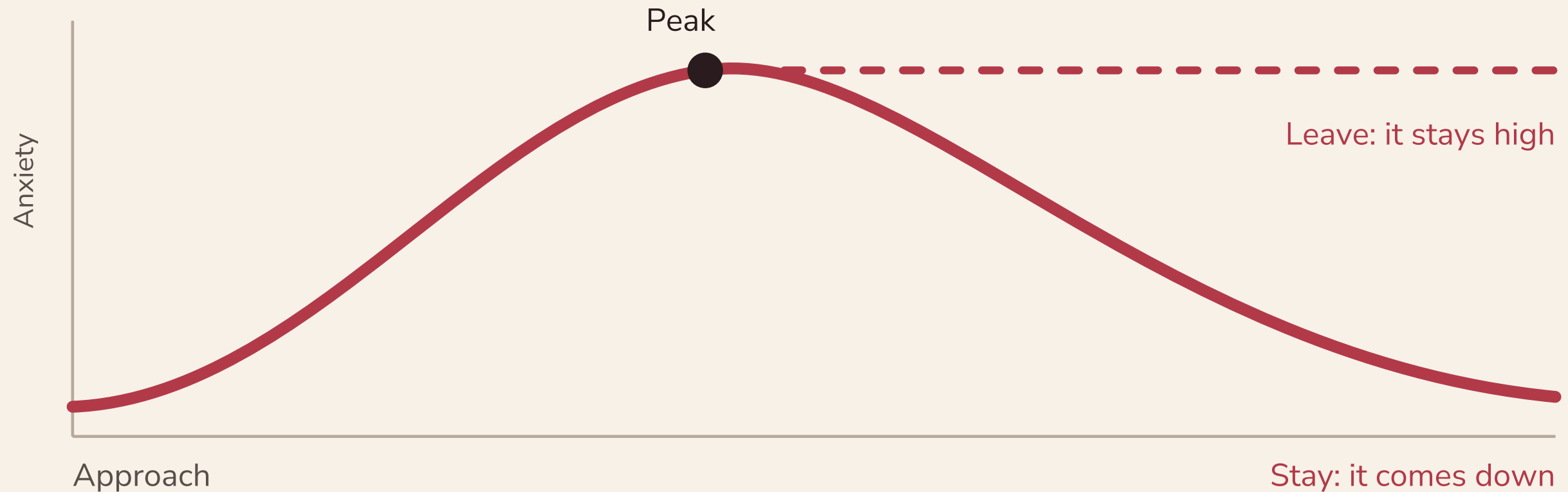
Everything we do is
exposure therapy.

What exposure actually is



Let's move.

What happened to you?



Did you go toward it? Did your number go up? Did it come down? That's exposure.

Safety.

It's about safety, whether we speak of it or not.

Nobody will say "I don't feel safe." The cues are in the room. You have to pay attention.

A STORY

A veteran.

She built up her tolerance to being in rooms, because she felt safe.



I CALL IT

Neurocentric coaching.

Not just the muscles. The nervous system running them.

It can be really brave for
people to walk into your room.

*Can I meet them? Can I see them? Can I bring their
“fingers” down?*

PRACTICAL TIPS

Coaching the room.

What you can do, and why.

PRACTICAL TIPS · COACHING THE ROOM

Regulate yourself first.

Your nervous system sets the room's. If you're frantic, they feel frantic. If you can be calm, it helps them be calm.

Breathe.

4

seconds in, through the nose seconds hold

4

6

seconds out

Two minutes. Eight rounds. The long out breath can calm the nervous system.

PRACTICAL TIPS · COACHING THE ROOM

Read the whole room.

Take a minute. What's going on? You can influence the room, and it starts by seeing it.

Check it yourself, before they arrive.

The sound

The sound
quality

The volume

The lighting

Give yourself ten minutes if you can. Once the class has started, no one will tell you. But it will influence them.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Warmth and connection.

WARMTH AND CONNECTION

Start of class.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Can you be at the door, or welcome people as they come into the room?

The vagus nerve runs the social engagement system. When people feel socially safe, fight or flight drops.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Can you find them an anchor in the room?

Put the new person beside a friendly regular. That can be a safety signal.

Cue that you're looking out for them.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Nervous system settlers. Things you can say to new people as they come in.

“Is this your first class? Congratulations. That's brave.”

“You do it your way, and that's okay.”

“There are new people in the room. We can all learn what it's like to be a beginner.”

WARMTH AND CONNECTION

During the class.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Humour, on purpose.

A pattern interrupt for a brain braced for discomfort or failure. Lighten the room and the body stops guarding.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Make it easy for them to be seen.

Ask specifically, in the moment.

“Put your hand up right now if you need a change. I'm coming.”

Most people won't ask, especially new people. “Let me know if you need a different weight”.

Be aware of spotlighting names.

For your regulars it might motivate. For a new person it can be intense. Consider going to them quietly: "Hey, you're doing great".

Noticing one person tells the
whole room you're paying
attention.

WARMTH AND CONNECTION

End of class.

PRACTICAL TIPS

Connect with them at the end.
People want to be seen.

“I'd love to have you back. You were brave.”

A STORY

Why I hug people.

Connection. Small c, big C.

Small c connection

In the room. Right words. Not really there.

Big C connection

I'm seen. I matter. The whole nervous system calms.

You can't fake it. The vagus nerve knows.

Professional and authentic.

Have the mastery of your profession, and teach as who you really are. That makes a difference for people.

TURN TO SOMEONE

One thing you'll pay attention to
differently in your next class.

And why you can.

Our attention makes a difference.

Safety. Then risk. Then learning. Then they come back.

THE TAKE-HOME

Coach the room, not just the workout.

*Pay attention to the nervous system cues.
It changes the room.*

- 1 Safety
- ↓
- 2 Risk
- ↓
- 3 Learning
- ↓
- They come back**

LET'S STAY IN TOUCH

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5Rhythms® is a registered trademark. This morning was 5Rhythms®-informed.

Thank you.

You are brave.



SESSION 2

Next 10:15-11:45, right here.

A 5Rhythms Dance | Movement session

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