

# Triggernometry

**Andrew Thomas** developed the Rainbow Map so that clients could better understand – and so better manage – their response to events that trigger survival modes of behaviour

Clients often find it difficult to understand their emotional, intellectual and physical responses, which is why I developed the Rainbow Map. The colours of the Rainbow Map help clients to explore and differentiate their emotions, thoughts and bodily sensations when they trigger into survival-orientated modes of behaviour, perhaps as a result of past trauma.

The Rainbow Map can also help to identify a client's personal trigger flag.<sup>1</sup> A trigger flag is the first physical sign that the survival system is starting to activate into fight/flight and/or hide/freeze modes of behaviour.

The Rainbow Map further enables clients to build their awareness and understanding of their trigger cycle. With this feature of the Rainbow Map, clients can track the nature and intensity of their emotions, thoughts and sensations, from the point their survival system begins to trigger to the point they return to their pre-triggered state.

An awareness of the trigger flag and cycle offers clients a range of therapeutic benefits and opportunities. For example, they are able to more reliably activate restorative resources developed during therapy. The Rainbow Map can therefore complement the work of therapists who integrate mindfulness and/or cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) into their practice.

I drew on attachment theory in developing the Rainbow Map, specifically Bowlby's belief that '...favourable therapeutic outcomes depend on the extent to which these [attachment] insecurities are identified, clarified, questioned, revised, and transformed into more secure representations of attachment'.<sup>2</sup>

*'Clients can track the nature and intensity of their emotions, thoughts and sensations'*

Ogden's commentary on Siegal's Window of Tolerance<sup>3</sup> also offers an insight into the intentions of the Rainbow Map: 'Whereas safety is essential for clients to begin therapy, therapists also have a responsibility to help clients expand their capacities by challenging their regulatory abilities in the face of strong emotion or autonomic dysregulation.'

The Polyvagal Theory<sup>4</sup> and the work of Bessel van der Kolk<sup>5</sup> further informed the development of the Rainbow Map, especially the areas connected with physical sensations and mannerisms.

My research for the Rainbow Map led me to create the reflective mind, reactive brain and reactive body model (Figure 1), which illustrates two streams of neural activity – reactive and reflective – and their interaction with each other and our reactive bodies. The reflective mind, reactive brain and reactive body model offers therapists and their clients a non-technical psychoeducational tool, which complements the use of the Rainbow Map.

Nearly 300 therapists from the UK and abroad, working in all mainstream modalities, have participated in Rainbow Map workshops held over the last year. They are integrating the tools in a variety of ways. For example, eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) therapists are using them to fine-tune the treatment phases for trauma. School counsellors find they act as a catalyst for therapeutic conversations around anxiety and depression. The language of colour can enable some clients to access and express challenging emotions and sensations in a way that is therapeutically useful.

The tools will shortly be included in a training programme for therapists in Beirut, working with people traumatised by the recent harbour explosion. Other therapists are developing ways to integrate them into sex therapy and into work with clients on the spectrum.

The following fictional case study illustrates how the Rainbow Map and reflective mind, reactive brain and reactive body model can be integrated into therapy.

David came to therapy in connection with periods of anger and depression due to conflict with his ex-wife over the care of and access arrangements to their two children. He was not sleeping well and whenever he saw his ex-wife's name appear on his phone, he started to feel angry. He believed his anger prevented him from communicating with her in a way that was in the best interests of his children. He also believed that it was harming his and her physical and mental health.

Friends and work colleagues had commented on how sad and distracted he appeared at times. But David tried hard to conceal his thoughts and feelings, as he did not want to burden others with his problems. He had enrolled in an online mindfulness programme, which had helped, but he could still 'lose it', as he explained when he first called to book an appointment.

We had three online sessions, during which David was reticent to talk about anything other than the unreasonable behaviour (in his view) of his ex-wife. It became apparent during the sessions that David's survival system was triggered when he talked about his ex-wife: his eyes narrowed, his posture became more assertive and his voice grew louder. It became even more difficult for him to see things from his ex-wife's perspective, as his behaviour became less reflective and more compulsive, causing him to be increasingly judgmental and critical.

It appeared to me that the divorce had either generated a new, or amplified an existing, behavioural style that held David in a damaging trigger cycle. I felt the Rainbow Map might offer him an opportunity to identify his trigger flag and to notice its effects on his reflective mind, reactive brain and reactive body system. I hoped this would enrich our conversations in future sessions. I also hoped it would offer us the potential to develop resources that might modify or generate new behavioural styles, enabling him to achieve his goal of communicating more effectively with his ex-wife, in the interests of their children.

When we met for a fourth time, I shared a link to an image of the Rainbow Map. The colours seemed to interest him, and we talked about the columns and their meanings. David offered more about his inner life than he had in the previous three sessions. I introduced him to his reflective mind, reactive brain and reactive body system – and we agreed to give the Rainbow Map a go at the next session.

## The reflective mind, reactive brain and reactive body model

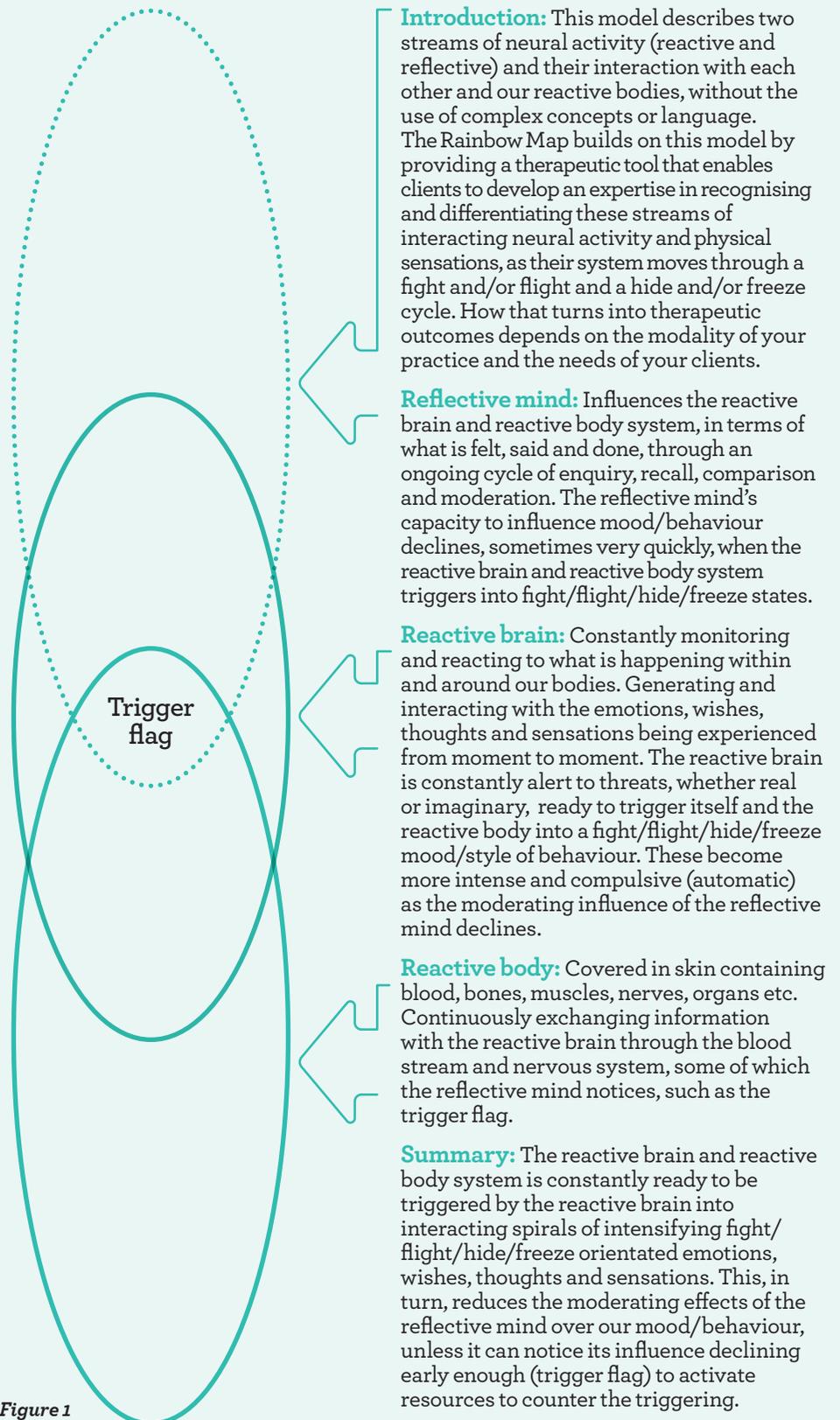
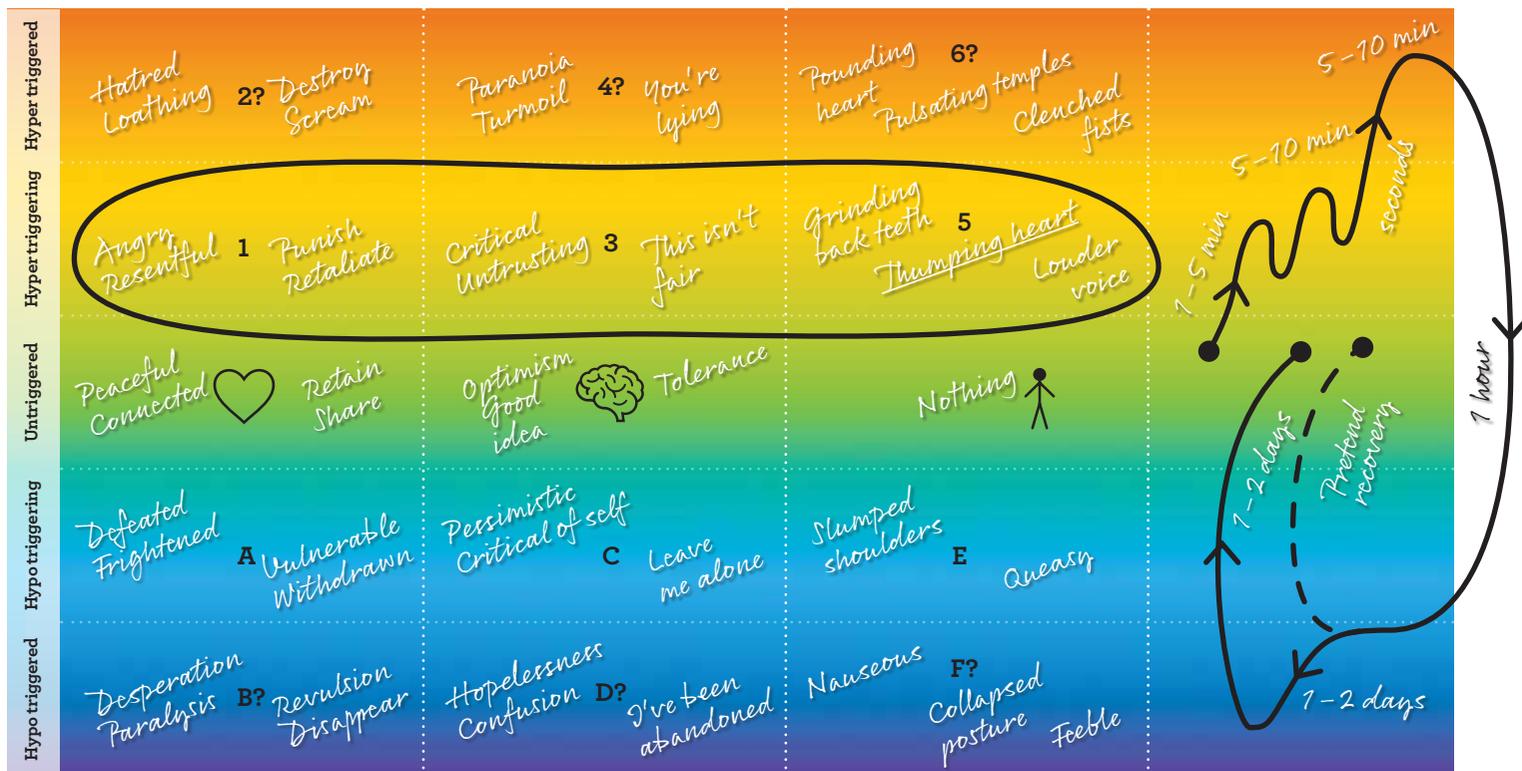


Figure 1

**Figure 2** Emotions and wishes      Styles of thinking and typical thoughts      Physical sensations and mannerisms      Trigger cycle



David and I both started the next session with a blank copy of the Rainbow Map. Figure 2 shows David's completed Rainbow Map at the end of the 50-minute session. I asked him to reflect on what he might typically be doing when he was most relaxed. David felt he was relaxed when he stopped for a coffee with his cycling friends on their regular Sunday morning ride.

First, we worked across the green band of the Rainbow Map. We talked about the sorts of emotions and wishes he noticed during the coffee stop. We then turned to his styles of thinking and typical thoughts, which he found easier to identify. Finally, still in the green band, we focused on what, if any, sensations or mannerisms he noticed when he was untriggered/relaxed. Like many people, he didn't notice any physical affects when he felt calm.

David then took out his phone and imagined his ex-wife's name appearing on the screen. We focused on his emotions and wishes – Area 1 in the yellow, hyper triggering band – as I already knew that David typically got angry (fight/flight) first. Some clients trigger directly downwards into a sad/depressive state, driven by a hide/freeze response to threat.

I also had in front of me the Rainbow Map aide-memoire, with carefully graded examples for each band and column. I

shared a few example emotions and wishes that a person might experience as they move into the yellow, hyper triggering band (Figure 3).

I always reinforce the message that they are examples, not suggestions. Clients also often create their own descriptions or refinements. I then offered a few examples of emotions and wishes from the hyper triggered band – Area 2? – of the aide-memoire (Figure 4). The question mark is intended to show that a client might or might not enter this area. David recognised some of the emotions and wishes, which came as no surprise to him or me, as he had previously described the intensity of his anger.

The Rainbow Map was starting to offer David structure and context, so that he could begin to understand more fully what was happening to him when he communicated directly with his ex-wife. The experience was no longer, therefore, one of undifferentiated anger.

Next, we moved on to the styles of thinking and typical thoughts column, followed by physical sensations and mannerisms. I was careful to be specific in the physical sensations and mannerisms column. I wanted to clarify the sensation he first experienced as his reflective mind's influence declined and his reactive brain and reactive body system triggered up into

the yellow, hyper triggering band. He was clear it was his beating heart, and we labelled that his trigger flag.

I asked him to see if he could notice his trigger flag before our next session. I also asked if he could notice the accompanying emotions, wishes, styles of thinking and typical thoughts. The request was intended to give his reflective mind a task when the trigger flag was noticed. By holding the reflective mind open, the client is more able to resist acting in a compulsive way and instead exert more consideration and choice over what they say and do. For example, they might activate recuperative resources, such as more positive narratives to counter reactive, negative emotions and thoughts.

We then went back to the emotions and wishes column, to see if any of the cues (Figure 5) from the aide-memoire for the blue, hypo triggering band – Area A – resonated. In this way, we could start to understand if, how and to what extent he experienced a period of sadness or even depression following conflict with his ex-wife.

I then read out some cues from Area B? of the aide-memoire, to see how low he went at times (Figure 6). Again, the question mark is intended to show that a client might or might not enter this area. Some of the cues resonated with David, showing how intensely sad and depressed he could

**I feel increasingly:** angry, frustrated, resentful, exasperated, unloved, fearful, frightened, insecure, anxious, disgusted, rejected, saddened, let down, deserted, confused, ashamed, humiliated, exposed, incomplete, ignored, foolish...?

**I increasingly want to:** attack, punish, retaliate, endure, avoid, stabilise, contain, double-check, clean, organise, clarify, hide, change, resolve, understand, recover, reconnect, forgive, explain, hold, compromise...?

**Figure 3:** Example emotions and wishes from Area 1 of the Rainbow Map aide-memoire

**I feel consumed by:** fury, hatred, loathing, dread, disgust, anguish, misery, disgrace, pity, insecurity, uncertainty...?

**I feel compelled to:** pursue, control, destroy, annihilate, disable, extinguish, avenge, end, escape, survive, hide, cling, grasp, lock in/out, evangelise, rescue, envelop, swear...?

**Figure 4:** Example emotions and wishes from Area 2? of the Rainbow Map aide-memoire

**I feel increasingly:** rejected, defeated, frightened, vulnerable, lost, lonely, isolated, uncomfortable, avoidant, hidden, distant, listless, dull, dejected, ashamed, humbled, reticent, guilty, dishevelled, forlorn, forgotten, deflated, derelict...?

**I increasingly want to:** avoid, evade, shun, deflect, abstain, recoil, withdraw, retreat, stop, recover, reconnect, be understood, pull away, be noticed, be supported, forget, hide...?

**Figure 5:** Example emotions and wishes from Area A of the Rainbow Map aide-memoire

**I feel consumed by:** apathy, desperation, paralysis, isolation, contempt, revulsion, bereavement, heartbreak, humiliation, disgrace...?

**I feel compelled to:** disappear, disconnect, escape, immobilise, smother, deaden, end, desensitise, surrender, submerge, fade away, be swallowed up, disappear...?

**Figure 6:** Example emotions and wishes from Area B? of the Rainbow Map aide-memoire

become after talking to his ex-wife. We then moved across the Rainbow Map as before.

Finally, using the trigger cycle column on the right of the Rainbow Map, we were able to track David's trigger cycle through the yellow and red bands, before the mental and physical collapse into the sad and depressed, blue and darker purple bands. David also

*'The language of colour can enable some clients to access and express challenging emotions and sensations'*

described how he sometimes pretended to recover quickly to friends and family, which we also plotted in the trigger cycle column of his Rainbow Map.

In our next meetings, we used what we had learnt about David's reflective mind, reactive brain and reactive body system as a catalyst for therapeutic conversations about four main areas:

- ways he could calm himself when he noticed his trigger flag, so that his reflective mind could continue to function
- how he could start to forgive himself and his ex-wife for the events around the time of their divorce
- what he could do to contribute less to her triggering, while still gaining access to his children
- his options when he noticed his trigger flag.

The Rainbow Map and the reflective mind, reactive brain and reactive body model offer therapists two additions to their therapeutic toolbox, which can be used together or independently. Therapists from all mainstream modalities are using the Rainbow Map in their practices in a wide variety of ways. For most therapists, these tools offer a readily accessible way to integrate a reflective mind and reactive brain/body orientation into their work, in support of their practice modality. They also contribute to the sharing of therapeutic expertise and power between therapists and their clients, which lies at the heart of why these tools were first developed.

**Andrew Thomas MBACP (Accred)** gained an MA in Couple and Family Therapy in 2012. In addition to delivering Rainbow Map workshops, Andrew has a private practice. For more details of workshops, visit [www.rainbowmap.org](http://www.rainbowmap.org)

#### References

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