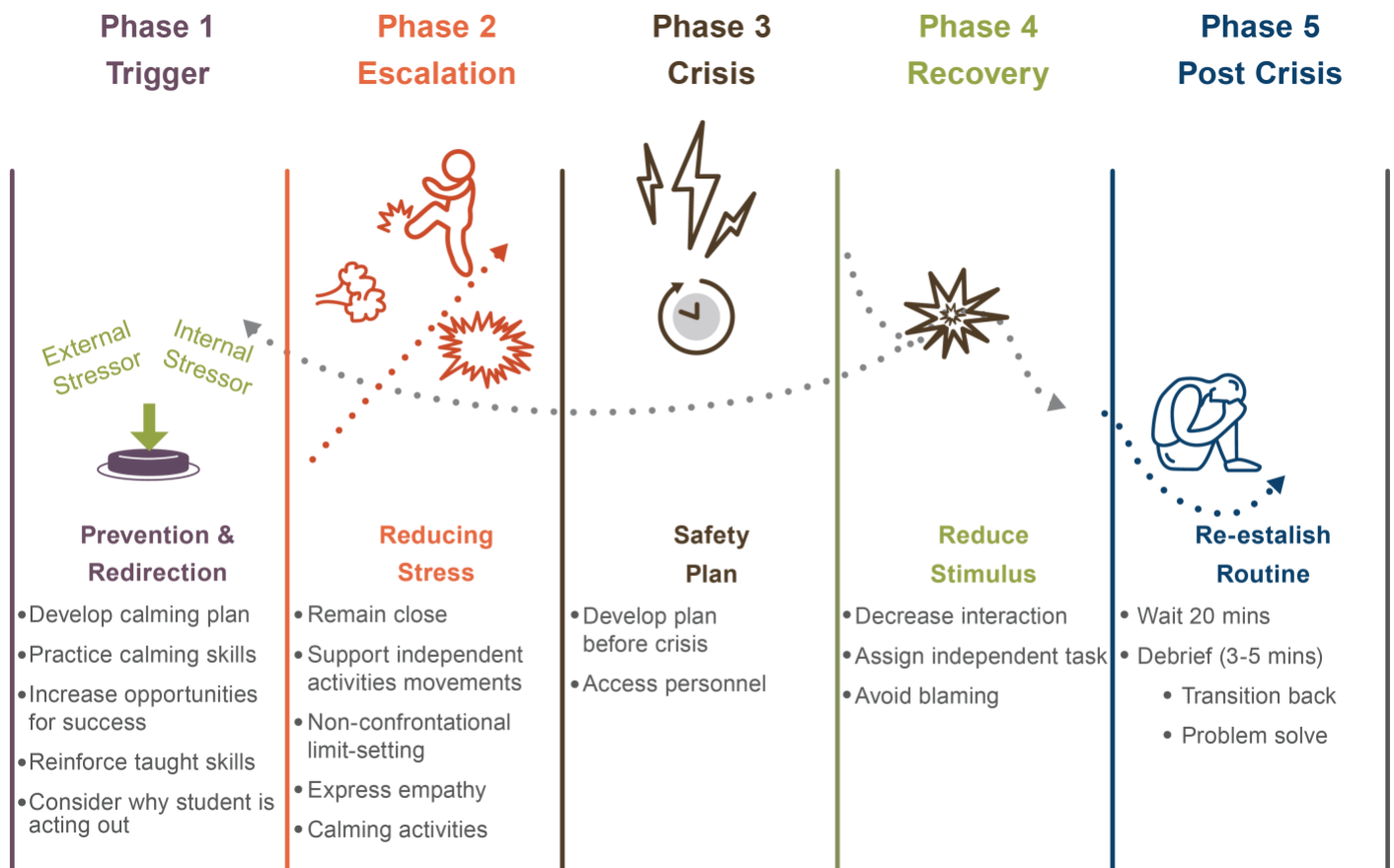




De-escalating a Distressed Student

Student behaviors do not happen in a vacuum. Behaviors are often a reflection of environmental stressors and difficulties in relationships or attachment, and a sign of unmet need. Even when teachers provide extra support and strategies, students may still become distressed in a way that could pose serious risk to themselves or someone else. Preventing and reducing the length of crisis is often done through de-escalation strategies to defuse the situation and bring both parties back to a more neutral state.



The beginning phase, or **triggering event**, begins when a student believes that there is a threat to their safety. A student may not realize that they were triggered. Knowing a student's triggers can be helpful for teachers to anticipate prior to them occurring. During the trigger phase, teachers can focus on prevention and redirection. Try to pre-correct before triggers are present by developing a calming plan and rehearsing relevant calming skills.

Escalation occurs when distress increases, and the body prepares for a fight/flight/freeze response. This can occur very quickly or gradually over time. Students may start to breathe heavily, start pacing back and forth, yell, kick, or throw things. In this phase, focus on reducing distress by remaining close but supporting independent activities and movement. Moving students back to calm is the primary goal. Express empathy by asking "Are you okay? Is there something I can help you with?" and encourage calming activities.

The **crisis phase** occurs when a student engages in aggressive or potentially harmful behavior. This phase is marked by the highest arousal levels; it is unlikely that they student is able to think or care about consequences. Implement a safety plan to keep the student and everyone else safe.

During the **recovery phase**, it takes time for the body to relax. The student is at risk of being triggered and could escalate again, particularly if they believe they are still unsafe. During this phase, reduce stimuli and interactions with others to prevent further escalation; this is an excellent time to use a calm corner. It can be useful to assign independent tasks that are not too demanding and reinforce "starting anew." Avoid blaming and don't force apology. It is OK to follow up with the student at another time when they are calm.

The final phase is the **post-crisis phase**. Prior to emotions returning to baseline, students may feel very guilty, sad, tired, or confused about their aggressive and violent behavior. This can lead to hopelessness, shame, and self-destructive behavior. Students may appear to have calmed down but are still at risk for self-injury and risky behaviors. Try to reestablish routine activities. Debrief only after the student has been calm for at least 20 minutes. Spend no more than 3 to 5 minutes debriefing to facilitate a transition back to the classroom and to problem-solve. Debriefing may include identifying the sequence of events and decision moments during the crisis, evaluating the decisions, and identifying acceptable options for future situations.