



## A Night of Self-Reg with Dr Stuart Shanker

By Melissa Raine

Aspergers Victoria hosted a fascinating talk on self-regulation for people with Aspergers presented by Canadian researcher, author and educator Dr Stuart Shanker, Distinguished Research Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and Psychology and the CEO of the MEHRIT Centre, Ltd. There were more than 150 people in the NAB Arena theatre which was generously made available by NAB.

Dr Shanker began by explaining that our ability to function calmly, depends on whether our incoming energy matches our outgoing energy. What makes us burn more energy is stress. Stress is not necessarily bad; we need it to achieve many things that are positive, such as academic and sporting performance, but we also need to replenish our energy supplies effectively. Stuart referred to humans as “glucose-burning furnaces.” When you have too much stress, the brain burns up large amounts of energy to cope, and when we run too low, a very ancient part of the brain shuts down anything that is non-essential to our immediate survival, including digestion, the immune system, cellular repair and the frontal cortex where so much of our reasoning is done -- thinking is an energy-intensive activity! This shutting down in response to stress is known as an ergotropic state. A significant feature of Dr Shanker’s approach is that he

makes the groundbreaking science he is drawing on accessible to the layperson so that we can apply it to our own situations. (The state where those systems are back online is known as trophotropic in case you were wondering!)

Stuart talked in detail about a range of activities and experiences that burn more energy than most people realise, from violent computer games (which cause the body to stay alert to threat for hours after finishing) to eating sugar (producing insulin is extremely energy intensive), to the many things happening in our gut (the “enteric brain”) which can also send us into a state of hyperarousal, to how these states interfere with restorative sleep.

In the age of junk food and adrenaline-fuelled activities, many children in particular, but also some adults, struggle to know what calmness feels like.

Dr Shanker asked what all of this is telling us about living with Aspergers Syndrome. Pointing out that he was wary of generalizations and prefers to think in terms of strengths and areas that need strengthening, one thing that he believes this group has in common is a heightened vulnerability to stress.

To understand why AS individuals have a heightened risk of excessive stress, we need to understand how complex stress is. The Self-Reg method divides our experiences up into 5 domains (see chart). While most people are vulnerable in a few areas, people with Aspergers are vulnerable to stress in all 5 domains, and