



## Mental Health & Spina Bifida A Guide for Parents

**Adriana Cabrales, B.A. (she/her)**  
*Doctoral Candidate in Clinical Psychology*  
UT Southwestern Medical School

**Karen A. Dorsman, Ph.D. (she/her)**  
*Pediatric Neuropsychology Fellow*  
Children's Medical Center Dallas  
UT Southwestern Medical School

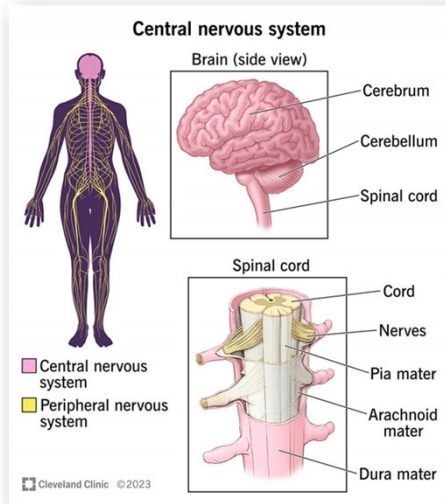


### Neuropsychology studies the brain-behavior relationships

We are dedicated to understanding how conditions of the Central Nervous System impact people's mental abilities (e.g., thinking, learning, emotions), their behavior (e.g., how they talk, play, interact), and their ability to function in their everyday lives (e.g., grooming, caring for their home).

Pediatric neuropsychologists evaluate skills as they are being developed!

**The Central Nervous System is a processing center!  
The brain & spinal cord take in and send out  
information to our bodies.**

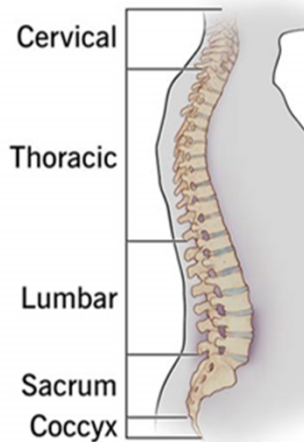


**Your brain regulates your thoughts, feelings and movements.**

- Try bending your index finger
  - Try breathing
  - Try to make your heartbeat
- How does this happen?

- Your brain “texts” your spinal cord
- Your spinal cord “texts” your nerves in the peripheral nervous system

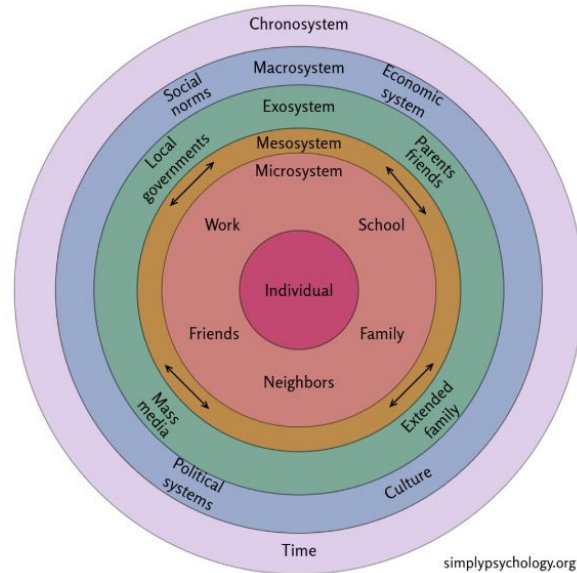
**Parts of the spine**



**What happens when the “messaging system” is disrupted?**



**Children exist within multiple systems: their development and mental health will be shaped by their experiences**



## **Our physical, emotional, psychological, and social well-being impact how we think, feel, behave, and interact with others**

- Most common mental health problems in children and adults with Spina Bifida:
  - Anxiety, depression, and ADHD.
- 26-46% of adults with spina bifida experience symptoms of depression
- What does depression look like?
  - Low energy
  - Defeated
  - Unmotivated
- What does anxiety look like?
  - Nervous --> avoidant
  - Restless
  - Irritable



## If a person is depressed, what does that have to do with their learning or organization skills?

- Anxiety and depression can affect executive functioning skills
- What is executive functioning?
  - Being the "CEO" of your own life
  - Planning
  - Organizing
  - Initiating
  - Inhibition + attention
  - Emotional regulation



Planning,  
organization,  
and  
discipline  
skills are  
learned  
behaviors:  
model, model,  
model

- How do you stay organized?
- **Skills and habits are built slowly:** Atomic Habits, anyone?
- Visual schedules/calendars
- Creating a plan: breaking things down, step by step
- Positive reinforcement (reward charts)
- **Trial and Error**
- Routines & automatization
  - Practice and repeat
- Technology assistance
  - Apps, accessibility features

We all have strengths & weaknesses

The more strategies we learn and use, the more independent we become

## Mental Health is Fostered in Many Different Ways

### Your behavior can be a powerful teacher!

Learn together and model what you want to see.

- Care for your own mental health.
  - Let's move! Physical activity promotes health.
  - Learn together how to live more independently.
  - Routine is our best friend.
  - Find things they are good at: **"Hope is optimism with a plan"**.
  - Practice being in the present moment.
  - Fidget or sensory toys.
- Encourage and facilitate access to mental health professionals.
    - Living with chronic health conditions.
    - Living according to your values.



## Thank You

Questions/Comments?



Caramel

Children's Health Facility Dog