Differentiating the Amygdala Reset Station

As educators we all know, without a shadow of a doubt, that every child is unique, and that this uniqueness extends far beyond their personalities.  It spreads into their life experiences, their learning styles, their needs, and even their brain architecture.  This is what makes our job so complicated, and at times frustrating, because we all know that what works for Joe does not necessarily work for Thomas, and what works for Kayla this morning might not work for Kayla this afternoon.  Our kiddos are unique, plain and simple.  As educators we also know, whether through experience or training, the importance of differentiating our instruction.  So if we know that our students are unique through and through, then differentiation must be applied to every situation through and through.

When thinking about an Amygdala Reset Station, we often default to this idea of a calming corner or designated spot located somewhere within one’s classroom.  But the reality is that our amygdala does not fire only in a classroom but everywhere--in the hall, in the lunchroom, in the bathroom, even at recess.  In addition, we know that emotions are contagious, meaning there is a high probability that more than one student might need to reset their amygdala at the same time, and the last thing we want to do is put two firing amygdalae together!  If the true purpose of an Amygdala Reset Station is to reset our amygdala, then we might want to expand our vision of what this resource looks like, where it is located, and how it is used.  All of these factors can and should be differentiated based on the needs of those who use it.

It’s All in How You Look at It…

There's nothing wrong with an Amygdala Reset Station that fits the default idea mentioned earlier, so if this works for you and your students, by all means keep calm and carry on!  For some students a designated spot in the room with a yoga mat, lavender-scented pillow, and flashcards outlining breathing exercises might not do the trick, so here are some alternate ideas…

* Instead of creating an entire corner or area, think about utilizing a basket or bin.  The materials of an Amygdala Reset Station can be thought of as just that, materials, so don't be afraid to house them as you would other materials, like crayons and markers, clipboards, books, base ten blocks, etc.  If we want students to use these materials as any other learning material, then the way in which we house them should reflect that, too.
* We can also think about the materials in our Amygdala Reset Stations as tools, and where do tools belong?  In a toolbox!  Create an Amygdala Reset Toolbox where students can grab a regulation tool and take it back to their seat just like they would grab a screwdriver or hammer from a toolbox to use on a building project.
* Our brains love imagery and making associations, so for younger students learning about regulation, try creating an Amygdala First Aid Station.  Use a doctor’s bag or first aid kit to house your materials.  By doing this, we communicate to our students that these materials can help and heal us.  In addition, it also communicates that everyone, not just the little guy screaming, can use the Amygdala Reset Station because everyone needs a Band-Aid or an ice pack from time to time.

Location! Location! Location!

Having a designated space in a classroom or even a designated room in a school is a great place to start when creating Amygdala Reset Stations, but don't let that limit you!  As mentioned before, our amygdala might need to reset beyond the classroom, so here are a few ways to make sure that all amygdalae can reset in all situations…

* Since the *look* of an Amygdala Reset Station might not fit all students, *where* we keep these stations might not work for everyone, either.  For some students the act of physically moving to a spot clearly known as a place of regulation might be too noticeable or garner unwanted attention.  One thing you might try is creating mini Amygdala Reset Stations at students’ desks or work places.  That way, they can use the tools in a less overt way.
* The above idea raises another important factor to consider: one Amygdala Reset Station may not be enough!  If you find that a couple of smaller stations are needed, you can place strategically around your classroom.  This is also a fantastic way to model the importance of choosing a regulation strategy that fits with one’s environment.  For instance, you may have a station in your whole-class meeting area and another in your class library, and while thinking putty or a small piece of Play-doh might be appropriate during whole-group instruction, it may not be appropriate for silent reading… Imagine trying to peel dried putty or Play-doh from the pages of a Dr. Seuss classic!
* Let’s say that students cycle in and out of your room each period because you are a specials teacher, middle school teacher, or high school teacher.  You might try having a basket of tools at the doorway where students can grab tools as they walk in and put them back as they walk out.
* Or perhaps you're a special education teacher, a reading interventionist, or another educator who moves from room to room throughout the day.  You may want to create a portable Amygdala Reset Station that travels alongside you.
* It is also advantageous to think about the spaces beyond the classroom, like hallways, lunchrooms, recess yards, etc.  How many of us have sent a regulated student to the bathroom only to have a dysregulated student return?  What if we created environmentally specific Amygdala Reset Stations?
  + For instance, a bathroom Amygdala Reset Station might include a variety of scented lotions with visual instructions posted for hand massages.  Or instead of covering the inside of the stalls with engraved names, numbers, and unmentionable words, we could post a few quick breathing exercises on the back of the stall doors.
  + A recess-friendly Amygdala Reset Station might include rain sticks, balls to bounce in rhythm, or even bubbles.
  + And don't forget about the hallways, which provide one of the richest environments for regulation!  Not what you expected to read, right?  But seriously they do, since hallways tend to have the most powerful regulation tool of all: other people.  Treat your hallways like a giant Amygdala Reset Station where you are the tool!  Remember, emotions are contagious, so use your time in the halls to spread a smile, a laugh, a wink, or even a high five.  This station is not only filled with tools of the teacher variety but includes students, parents, administrative staff, custodians, and any other members of your community.  Everyone can be encouraged to take part in co-regulating one another!

Use it or Lose it!

Just as we might differentiate how an Amygdala Reset Station looks or where it is located, we can also differentiate how it is used.  As we begin to think about the different ways we can use these stations, we must remember one thing: using an Amygdala Reset Station is a personal choice, not a requirement or a place to be sent.  Forcing students to use these stations or even certain tools within them removes the “self” from self-regulation, which is what these stations are designed to promote.

* Keeping this purpose in mind, it's important that we use this space for all types of regulation, not just those viewed negatively.  Just because we need to reset doesn't mean that we're resetting from a “bad” place.  Ever heard the expression “I need a vacation from my vacation”?  Even the fun, joyful, exciting moments of life warrant a little reset afterward.  When we use amygdala resets only to reset negative feelings and behaviors, the space itself takes on a negative connotation.  Emotions are contagious, after all!
* It's also important to remember that these tools aren't just tools for students--they're for us, too!  Fire up those mirror neurons and model for students what an amygdala reset can look like.  We've all done a read-aloud or two in our days as teachers, but what if you tried an amygdala reset think-aloud?  Consider the impact for everyone by using this space for your own resetting, too!  Move past just *showing* how to use it and actually *use* it.  Even the teacher’s amygdala needs to be reset every once in a while.  Monkey see, monkey do, right?
* The last section presented the idea of a mobile amygdala resets, but if the station itself can be mobile, perhaps the tools can be too. Some tools might need to be used at their station but there are plenty of others that could travel within the classroom or even the school.
* Remember, we strengthen neural pathways by utilizing them over and over and over, so if we want those self-regulation pathways to become the road more travelled, we have to use it or lose it!  If you aren't using your Amygdala Reset Station, it might warrant some self-reflection, or a class discussion focused on why the station isn't being used and how you can change it to be more beneficial.

As you create your Amygdala Reset Station, remember to make it your own.  These resets should be designed not only around a general understanding of the brain, but also around a specific understanding of your students’ brains.  Don't be afraid of changing things to better meet the needs of you and your students.  Think beyond the ideas mentioned here, and the sky is the limit!  The power of an Amygdala Reset Station is not in the station itself, but in how we use it.